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## HISTORIES OF DESIRE

By Ron Butlin. Bloodaxe Books, £6.95.

## BUILDING INTO AIR

By Lawrence Sail. Bloodaxe Books, £6.95.

## LEADING THE GUIDEBOOK ASTRAY

By Neal Mason. Salzburg University.

These books map out diverse territories; geographical, historical and personal. While their approaches are broadly similar, each poet adopts quite distinctive methods of addressing his chosen topics.

Ron Butlin's work is the most immediately appealing. *Histories of Desire* consummately highlights the boundaries, and possibilities, of landscapes ranging from East Coast Scotland to Africa. As a tourist at home he is particularly astute. "Near Linton Burn Foot" (in a way which recalls John Clare's enclosure poetry) dryly comments on how "Tarred roads, metal cattle-grids and wheeltracks merge / so tightly no land can escape." Places, for good or ill, are equated with memories of their inhabitants. "Edinburgh: A Place of My Own" wryly parodies "If" with a dead woman vagrant as counterpart to Kipling's ideal, well balanced man:

If the post-code for where I'd been begging  
were tagged to my foot—

That post-code would have to stand for my name  
when, at last, I'd been given a place of my own.

Butlin suggests personalities as convincing, elusive, silhouettes. "Ryecroft," for example, is movingly pervaded by the presence of the poet's deceased mother. "Don Juan at Forty" is Byronic pastiche, sympathetic in outlining a static masculinity. The middle-aged Don Juan is "a virtuoso doomed to solo on / and on towards the loneliest harmonic." The statement is typical of Butlin's elegant style and lucid self-confidence. As the poet declares, in "One Life": "I am the fire I'm reaching into now."

Sail's work, like Butlin's, exhibits technical excellence. *Building into Air* is planned with precision. A tripartite structure is used to explore urban territories. Places here have literal and metaphorical qualities; they are simultaneously realistic and spiritual. The volume as a whole, building from imagined foundations upwards, has an increasingly optimistic tone. It brings to mind prestigious allegorical precedents, notably *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Part 1, the most disturbing, deals with urban pasts. Its leitmotiv, from Robert Junck's *Children of the Ashes*, is the "naked, hairless and eyeless horse" seen in the ruins of Hiroshima. Like a spy, the observer moves restlessly from a "First City" of "exquisite addictions" to the moonless "Second City" with its "bright attempt to build / the city's simulacrum into high air," chillingly, "to roof in the clouds." A "Third City" is "fruited / into strange newness" as horse's hoofbeats grow "louder, drumming / our haunted futures." This section reads like an extension of Muir's cathartic "The Horses," in *One Foot in Eden* (1956).

Part 2 presents the poet, in the less distant past, as lover, moving from parting to separation to being reunited with the beloved. "A Spell against Parting" is typical of the mood here. Rapturously incantational, it expresses the hope that the lovers will stay "Safe as one, under African heat / Or the drench of the monsoon rain." An exuberant Part 3 contains the most identifiable landscapes of the sequence. Eskdale provides a neo-romantic, stormy backdrop to the tempestuous "Unspoken." "Grounded" visits "the orange-growing centre of India," Nagpur, during an almost pre-ordained delay: "The plane, it seems, was struck by lightning." The final piece, "Fanfares at Eger," ends the collection on an enigmatic, and exhilarating, note.

*Leading the Guidebook Astray* is the least controlled of the volumes considered here, and the most uneven in terms of quality. It reads like a versified stream of consciousness, moving from its starting points to ill-defined co-ordinates. Mason's repeated practice is to select an artefact, historical event or figure, and use it as a point of entry into the past. At best, this leads to highly empathic pieces, replete with insightful and entertaining ponderings. A "Muslin Dress, 18th Century," for instance, inspires a series of sensual, and humorous, imagined contacts:

Caressing fine weave, I lead the guidebook  
astray, undo pretty ribbons  
you tied so long ago.

"The Franklin Expedition, 1846" is equally intriguing, moving from a "bleak but pure vista / polluted" by frozen debris to considering the "hermetically sealed" experiences of the dead explorers. Mason's near-archaeological explorations are, unfortunately, less successful elsewhere. "Bakelite Wireless," for instance, offers somewhat lack-lustre comments on a "lump of unloveliness." "Van Gogh" staidly notes the painter's detractors would "cut off / an arm and a leg" for "a brushstroke of your genius."

Despite shared topographical concerns, these poets produce quite different effects. Butlin's work is both likeable and thought-provoking; his emotional involvement wins over the reader whole-heartedly. Sail's well-measured poetry exudes a careful charm. Mason is, perhaps, the most frustrating of the three, as his less appealing pieces detract attention from the finer items in *Leading the Guidebook Astray*.

VALENTINA BOLD