

A SENSE OF HISTORY

Author: John S. Hatcher

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This inviting book of poetry runs through the materials of personal and collective history with an astute hand at the poet's craft and art. First of all, the orchestration of the nine sections of the work create an overall symphonic effect so each segment works like a movement.

Starting with "Theories of History" and moving toward the final section, "A Sense of History," John Hatcher covers a great deal of ground. From the first moment of evolutionary progress when humans were able to use their thumbs, to a meditative poem at Green Lake, Wisconsin, reflecting on the future of the new race of humans, Hatcher has created a self-contained matrix for thinking about notions of progress, mortality, and immortality—all in historical context.

A striking moment when these forces come into focus occurs in the poem "Hemingway's House in Key West" in which Hatcher poignantly describes the suicide of the Nobel Prize-winning novelist. "The big toe" on the trigger "only punc- / tuated Papa's art/ and who are we/ to question precision/ in the feet of such/ an artist?" (89).

Here, time and mortality are much larger issues than are the usual considerations of right and wrong. There is an individual feeling in Hatcher's poetic treatment of what was the right thing, the proportionate thing for this person, this life as a whole.

In his foreword, Hatcher notes that "it is not the fact of history that interests me, but the sense of it" (xi). So we are treated not to a doctrinaire view of Bahá'í history but to a personal journey of discovery in which a Bahá'í sensibility informs the poetry. Hatcher, like all other good poets, is wrestling with values. Hatcher is writing with his eyes open, willing to learn, ready to question, willing to revise his opinions. His poems are more explorations than prejudgments of historical fact.

The Green Lake poem is especially evocative of this spirit, "I stroll the shores of this,/ the deepest lake in all Wisconsin,/ exploring correlatives/ for inexorable truths about ourselves/ that in these moments we might forge poems/ from the tangle of our lives;/" (183). And again, "to creep out of the chrysalis of our becoming,/ and a new race after all" (185).

A Sense of History explores personal history in such sections as "A Rite of Passage" and family history with a Civil War backdrop in "Great-Grandfather's Curious Letters." Extensive notes in the back of the book assist the reader to follow the train of allusions that enfold the book in a web of narrative, set off by an unusually evocative use of quotations. An example of one of these quotations is from H.G.Wells, beginning Part One of Hatcher's book with this: historians "dread the certain ridicule of a wrong date more than the disputable attribution of a wrong value . . ." (1).

Hatcher's work would sit nicely on the shelf beside other high-quality works of sustained writing in poetry of the twentieth century. One thinks of T.S.

Eliot's *The Wasteland* and *The Four Quartets*, Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, and John Berryman's *The Dream Songs*. Hatcher's book is a sequence, not a book-length poem, but so are some of the other above-mentioned works. This is good solid writing, avoiding the problem of obscure writing that is popularly thought to characterize much modern poetry. It is true that Wallace Stevens said, "A poem should not mean but be"; however, most poems since World War II in the West have been moving toward a creative middle where the poems have clarity and complexity, accessibility, and intellectual challenge. This is also true of Hatcher's poetry. There are humorous moments, here, reflective, tragic, mordant, and a range of other emotions that show us who we are or might be.

There are a handful of weak poems and a tendency to take a "dip in the wing" toward the simpler lines, but what peregrine falcon fails to look earthward on occasion? Hatcher holds his own among those writing poetry today in English and among the few published Bahá'í poets to date in the West. This is serious, readable poetry that expands the way we think about matters of faith, values, and our mindscapes, in time and outside time. Boundaries become more flexible here, and where there could be dogmatic didacticism, Hatcher opens out toward a spiritual poetry engaged with humane values.

When one considers Hatcher's other work in prose, fiction and non-fiction alike, one is reminded of Wendell Berry, a cutting-edge, progressive writer who also does a wonderful job in poetry. One also thinks of Thomas Merton, for his non-fiction and poetry that made for ground-breaking work in the Catholic tradition. More than that, one thinks of the crucible that wrought these tender, hard-won visions of our world, and one is grateful.

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