

New & Selected Poems

Fergus Allen was born in 1921; his father was Irish, his mother English. After attending Quaker schools in Ireland and graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, he moved to England during the Second World War. He was Director of the Hydraulics Research Station and ended his professional career as First Civil Service Commissioner. Since his retirement he has published three books of poetry with Faber and one each with Dedalus Press and CB editions. In 2000 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Mary Allen read English at Cambridge, spent her career working in the arts and in the 1990s became Secretary General of the Arts Council of England. Since then she has held various board positions in the arts world.

also by Fergus Allen

The Brown Parrots of Providencia

Who Goes There?

Mrs Power Looks over the Bay

Gas Light & Coke

Before Troy

FERGUS ALLEN

New & Selected Poems

Selected by Mary Allen

Foreword by Christopher Reid

B *editions*

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FOREWORD by Christopher Reid

As the editor of Fergus Allen's first book of poems, I was astonished when eventually I met him and learned his age. The typescript had arrived out of the blue, bearing a name I did not recognise. I was immediately struck by an attitude and tone unlike anything I had read before. Maturity and a wisdom born of clear thinking and honestly scrutinised feeling were among its attractive features. I imagined its author to be about my age – i.e., in his early forties – and so missed the mark by a good thirty years. This made it all the more pleasing to me when I was able to add him as a debutant poet to the Faber list, alongside such bright and recently discovered stars as Simon Armitage, Don Paterson and Lavinia Greenlaw.

Before rejuvenating himself and beginning his second, distinctive career as a poet, Allen had had an unusually distinguished one of a more orthodox kind: first as a civil engineer and then in the higher ranks of the British civil service. This seems to have fitted him well for his new vocation. Those first poems, which in due course emerged as *The Brown Parrots of Providencia*, were the product of a mind disciplined to examine and understand the way things work at both the material and the psychological level; the further discipline of fashioning an artistically adequate response is a more mysterious business, though a delight in firm structure and succinct exposition is an unmistakable part of it here. I don't believe there is anybody writing now who gives us poems more satisfyingly shaped.

'Other', which opens that first collection and which has played on my mind ever since, shows many of Allen's virtues. It could almost be his manifesto, introducing as it does the theme, to which he returns time and again, of humanity's insecure place in a world of abundant wonders and unsleeping threats. From the arresting musicality and oddness of its first line

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onwards, it soars from the immediate and the ordinary – the sight of a horse in a field – straight to the exotic, the primeval and the unknowable. The verbal ingenuity, too, is a joy: the way, for instance, a cliché like ‘impenetrable gaze’ is concealed, transformed and redeemed in the lines about the cat and its ‘incurious eyes’, of which we are told, joltingly, ‘The slits of an armoured car would show more interest.’

‘I tell you naught for your comfort’: the warning in Chesterton’s ballad could be Allen’s motto as he communicates what he sees and knows. Yet there is comfort, or at least brave example, in the very manner of its communication: the resourcefulness and versatility that over twenty years have kept each new poem, each succeeding book, a fresh adventure. The vocabulary and diction have uncommon breadth, from the elaborately mandarin to the colloquial and slangy, and the range of voices extends from what we may – sometimes riskily – assume is the poet’s own to those of some surprising personae. Two of my own favourites, both female, can be heard speaking, with stoical, fate-facing poignancy, in a pair of poems from *Mrs Power Looks Over the Bay*, ‘A Young Protestant Lady’ and ‘Portrait of a Woman from the Fayum’.

This selection has been made by a daughter of the poet and exhibits both filial love and sure taste. It summarises a body of work which is possibly unique in its late timing, but remarkable for much more than that. I hope it will help to give Fergus Allen the prominence he deserves as one of the most clear-eyed, fearless, nimble, inexhaustible and stimulating poets of our day – a function which, as the ‘Twelve Recent Poems’ included here demonstrate, he continues to perform.

Against the Light

Snipped out crudely with metal shears,
The skyline is black, the air sharp
With the scent of flux, as the heated
Soldering iron hovers over
The conjunction-to-be of male
And female pieces of tinfoil,
Making one landscape out of two
Inchoate fragments of topography.

I could close the sitting-room curtains
To exclude this unasked-for scenery
From my centrally heated lair.
If I had a log I could throw it
On to the make-believe coal fire
To short-circuit the whole shebang –
Even trash the national grid
As the winter solstice approaches.

The Oceanographer's Dream

Undulating queasily on the Pacific
We were surveying the Mariana Trench
When our sensitive instruments recorded
Anomalous echoes we took to signify
The presence of two colossal bodies
Down in the chasm (around five thousand metres).

Sensed also by sideways-scanning sonar
These specimens of an unheard-of genus
Or class of sea creature circled around
And could be seen to extend what might possibly
Have been tentacles, one towards the other,
Though whether for mating, combat or reassurance
Only an ethologist could determine.

There followed a gap in the recording,
But when it resumed the two monstrosities
Seemed to have new intentions and be heading
In contrary directions.

Out of Touch

The old poet brachiates round the house
Like a senile gibbon, hooting at cousins
In distant trees,

And from Borneo the cousins are answering –
But out of earshot, and many leaps beyond
His understanding.

On Repic Beach

The feather-headed palms bless Repic beach,
The yellow parasols parry the sun,
The parts of life are not the parts of speech,
The perfect past is what has not been done.

The perfect present (an ironic tense)
Takes peaceful shape beside the tepid brine,
The young and beautiful make love and sense,
Even the less well favoured look benign.

Aleppo pines protect me while the boys
Scorch to the faro on their motorbikes;
They and their girls are ravished by the noise –
A noise that only adolescence likes.

The perihelion passes and the sun retires,
The tourists start to gather on the wires.

Tango

In the Café Buenos Aires
At that elbow in the road
There I see two teenage schoolboys
Drinking Spanish orangeade.

With a blasé sigh they tell me
'Life's a desert sown with salt
Stretching far into the future,
All the odds against revolt.'

Past the Café Buenos Aires
Tourists in their rented cars
Go insouciantly racing
To the beach and its allures.

Here the wind sighs round the corner,
On the wall the pin-ups fade,
Empty are the café tables,
Houseflies wander overhead.

'Place an order with señora
As we've got a little cash
For a gin and Orangina –
One between the two of us.'

Cyprus and All

The after-sunset sky lies west-south-west
Coloured like the tail feathers of a Leghorn,
Claret and cyan, wine-stains on a napkin,
A backdrop to Famagusta's citadel
Masquerading as Othello's tower,
Unswep, deserted, all the carved stones looted.

Rising like horseflies out of Akrotiri,
Military aircraft tear the sky like silk
And night shows through between the ragged edges,
An inky cyclorama, across which blows
The vapour whirling from their afterburners
To the water cycle of the Levant.

Out of the blackness a receding star
Stares at a telescope in California
And sends a valediction to us all
As it streaks to the outer edge of space
And the zone where truths are nothing but numbers
That cannot be stroked or rubbed behind the ears.

Magic

Today I was given an electronic gismo.
It is very beautiful, with its black glass,
Concealed switches and beguiling music,
But I do not know what it is really for.
There is no book of instructions to explain
Its near-miraculous capabilities
And how they can be harnessed to please me.

Hearsay has it that it can see through walls
And eavesdrop on the carnal imaginings
Of my upright, puritanical neighbours,
But that is to exaggerate its power.
It more resembles an enchanted mirror
Into which I can shortsightedly peer,
Asking 'Which is the fairest one of all?'

Coral Island

To our surprise the island was well watered.
The fishes were strangely easy to catch
And the little pigs that gambolled around
In the interior provided nourishment,
As well as fun for my fellow castaways.

The weather was persistently benign,
Stroking our hair and murmuring white noise.
Though my spyglass had suffered from the sea
I could still use it for scanning the waves,
Hoping for a sail or even a monster.

Meantime I memorised our days in paradise
And the little that happened, looking forward
To the book I should write when we were rescued –
A more or less truthful tally of events,
Spiced up or embroidered as need might be.

At night the land crabs rattled round the palms
And the waves were bored by the same old beach.
Peterkin snored guilelessly in our hut
While Jack dreamed in silence about his pig-sticking
And I stared out to sea with an empty mind.

That was before the coming of the cannibals
And our unforeseen arrival at manhood,
When things that should not be seen were seen
And could not be unseen, and our green Eden
Receded into a book for small boys.

Cargo

Swung inboard on the ship's derrick, the crate
Descended into the cavernous hold,
Where it was manhandled by stevedores
Into the berth allotted for the voyage
To this less than sophisticated colony.

Once anchored offshore in Anchovy Bay
We could display the contents of the crate
To the assemblage of local dignitaries,
Settlers and aboriginals we hoped
To seduce with our bargain-basement wares.

As well as whisky, knives and coloured beads
The crate held Western diseases of affluence
That we knew were difficult to resist.
When we had infected their simple souls
They would go laughing all the way to Queer Street.