

POEMS OF LOVE AND DEATH BY PROFESSOR JOHN WALKER-SMITH

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REVIEWED BY ANNE-MARIE PAPANIKITAS

John Walker Smith, Emeritus Professor of Paediatric Gastroenterology in the University of London, was well known as a medical author and authority on the history of medicine. Here, in his first anthology of poetry, he writes mainly on the varying forms of love and on the subjects of medicine, terror and war. His poetry, as he states on the back cover of his this volume, was triggered by the tragic death of his second daughter at the age of 29. The works include a series of touching meditations and lamentations, mostly autobiographical, which provide a dramatization of his own personal experiences in and out of the world of medicine. Many of his meditations are concerned with regret and acceptance and engage us in a deep sense of loss.

As well as identified characters the book is haunted by ghost-like figures who sail along with the poet. Absent yet omnipresent they represent the loss of loved ones who played central roles in his life. Vividly describing the onset of spring, bringing with it new life and ablaze with its emerging colours, he is constantly wistful for the losses of the past. In his short poem entitled 'Butterfly' the poet likens the butterfly to the loss of a close love 'So ephemeral, so short the time with us, but your beauty shines with light, golden wings with opals bedecked'. Though haunted by the losses of past lives he is alive and excited by the new.

Well travelled, with a passion for history and art, the author vividly brings to life the settings of many of his poems. He transports the reader to foreign lands setting the scene and evoking sensory experiences. His powerful and moving poem entitled 'In Paradisum' is set in Saint Mark's Church in Venice. Here within the empowering ambience of the ancient church, standing in the high gallery accompanied by his grandson, he experiences the link between heaven and earth, 'So close to the vault of San Marco Church. As those ethereal tones, our hearts do touch, above the arch of paradise we stood'.

Bringing to the forefront emotional issues Walker Smith addresses many themes. His concerns with contemporary society are pre-eminent. Duty, family, war and the changing face of our hospitals are on his agenda. He laments for those who lost their lives in the Second World War in his poem 'Death and Resurrection in Dresden' and closer to home expresses his sorrow for the July 2004 London bombings by writing his poem entitled 'Tavistock Square'. The reader is drawn into the narrative through the conversational device which permeates between prose.

The poems are full of ideology. Walker Smith is honest in expressing his values and basic ideas of the world throughout. On a continual quest for reform and as a medical doctor he is someone who wants to make things better. In his poem 'Closing Casualty' He expresses his anger on inadequate hospital management and at the closure of the Casualty departments at The Queen Elizabeth and St. Bartholomew's hospitals in London, in areas where the need was great.

John Walker-Smith's poetry relates to the human condition and has a special resonance for all of us. His metier is in his tender personal lyric, underpinned by his strong underlying Christian faith, aiming to provide comfort and counsel for his readers. It presents an eclectic collection of sincere and heartfelt poems on life's metamorphosis.

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