

Jim Kacian, Philip Rowland, and Allan Burns (eds.). *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*. New York, NY: Norton & Co., 2013, 368 pp., hardcover, 5 x 7.25. ISBN 978-0-393-23947-8. US\$23.95.

by Lee Gurga, Champaign, Illinois

The 100th anniversary of the publication of Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" is the occasion for this retrospective of and on English-language haiku (ELH). The book includes an editors' foreword, an introduction by former U.S. poet laureate Billy Collins, and 681 poems by 235 poets. Back matter includes a 70-page "Overview of Haiku in English" by Jim Kacian and an "Index of Poets and Credits." Included are poems by many mainstream poets as well as by the best-known names in the ELH community.

The number of poems included ranges from a single example (100 poets) to ten or more for Nick Virgilio and John Wills (14 each), Raymond Roseliep (13), Jim Kacian and Marlene Mountain (11 each), and Cor van den Heuvel, Robert Spiess, and Gary Hotham (10 each). It is a great pleasure to shake hands with old friends as well as to see new poets introduced whose work in recent years has brought them well-deserved recognition.

There is a curious note in the acknowledgments concerning the introduction: "Billy Collins helped us reach one of our goals for the volume by providing his useful introduction. His association with this project is sure to spark much interest in haiku from the poetry mainstream." This seems slightly ungracious, something like inviting a boy to a party because he has a cute sister. (Perhaps the thought expressed in the note had been best left to e-mails between the editors.) Whether useful or not, Collins's introduction is sure to provide pleasure to his many fans and perhaps, as the editors hope, "spark much interest."

Collins's introduction is a brief and helpful reader's guide for those new to haiku. He discusses the traditional haiku of

juxtaposition, addressing such issues as the 5-7-5 form and the seasonal image. He demonstrates how juxtaposition induces dislocation, misperception, emptiness, absence, and silence to make a haiku that asserts existence through paradox using nonexistence to validate existence. The best haiku, he writes, “offer resistance to the remorseless powers of forgetfulness.” Beautifully stated.

The foreword begins by stating the editors’ nonintentions: “This is not a collection of all the good haiku ever written in English. Nor is it a gathering of every poet who has ever written good haiku in English. . . . It’s not even an exhibit of all the best work produced by those authors who are represented.” They then state their goals and their method:

Our purpose from the outset of this project has been to tell the story of English-language haiku, to identify its most singular accomplishments in its century of existence and place them, in their context, before our readers. We felt, for instance, that the order of presentation was of particular importance. You will find here the first instances we can discover of the subjects, techniques, forms, and allusions that have come to guide haiku to its present practice, and, when subsequent poems realize an even greater accomplishment, you’ll find those too.

To tell the story of English-language haiku—a noble aim. The order of presentation seems particularly felicitous—it makes good sense for an historical volume to present work in a chronological arrangement. One wonders, though, whether it might not have been possible to tell the story of ELH by simply presenting the *best* ELH written over the past century.

One can applaud the editors’ intention of recording the first instances of notable haiku subjects and techniques, giving us the opportunity to put the technical aspects of haiku in some historical perspective; and I believe they have been successful in doing so. That said, one can’t help but wonder why some notably influential poems have been omitted. Perhaps the most puzzling omission is Bernard Einbond’s “frog pond . . . / a leaf falls in / without a sound,” winner of

the 1988 JAL haiku contest, a haiku that stimulated impassioned debate in the haiku community for years. Surely it is a key poem that has helped “guide haiku to its present practice”?

In its attempt to provide a legitimate poetic pedigree for haiku, the anthology presents quite a few poems never claimed by their authors to be haiku. This includes a substantial percentage of the poems by the more famous poets in the volume, such as Charles Reznikoff, E.E. Cummings, and Kenneth Rexroth. Also puzzling is the inclusion of translations of haiku that were not originally written in English, by Dag Hammarskjöld (Swedish), Günther Klinge (German), and Ban'ya Natsuishi (Japanese). One could certainly argue that the Natsuishi haiku has had significant influence on the practice of ELH, but the others? Kacian's historical essay addresses this issue to some extent, but fails to differentiate between works that influenced the direction of ELH by being notable work and poems that served simply to “popularize” haiku because of their high profile, regardless of their quality.

Everyone will notice that some notable haiku poets are absent. Anita Virgil, for one, though her contribution to haiku is elucidated in the historical essay; another is Kenneth Yasuda, whose 1947 volume, *A Pepper Pod*, contained a number of original haiku and was an important milestone in the development of ELH. And given the inclusion of some rather questionable haiku ancestors, one wonders at some of the mainstream omissions, such as Aram Saroyan's minimalist poems.

Kacian's “Overview” is a fine essay on the development of ELH and its poets. Its historical content includes an account of the actual first haiku in English, written by Yone Noguchi in 1903, a decade before the first haiku the book celebrates in its poetry section. Considering the poor quality of the poem (Bill Higginson once referred to Noguchi as a “third-rate poet”), it is probably best that Kacian relegated Noguchi's haiku to the back of the book, though some might think it slightly shabby to absent it from the main part of the book while presenting Pound's ten-years-later “Metro” as the foundational English-language haiku. Sort of like hanging an oil portrait of one's

rich uncle in the front parlor while letting a sketch of one's sweaty, smelly father gather dust in the closet. The essay also presents biographical/critical information on notable haiku poets of the 20th and 21st centuries.

That many of the poems included in the volume were not written as haiku is admitted in the historical essay. Further, some statements in the essay appear to be more wish than fact. For example, W. C. Williams is said to have "adapted haiku to his own purposes"; of the famous "The Red Wheelbarrow" the essayist concludes that "it is suggestive of Williams' familiarity with haiku," though without citing any evidence to support the claim. Of Amy Lowell we read, "Lowell was ELH's first champion, composing hundreds of such pieces and publishing entire books of them." A footnote directs us to her *Pictures of the Floating World* (1919) which, as far as I can determine, is not an entire book of haiku; at most it contains one or two haiku-like poems out of some 135. Her later *What's O'clock* (1925) does contain her well-known "Twenty-Four Hokku on a Modern Theme" of which one, "Last Night It Rained," number XVI of the sequence, is quite appropriately presented in this anthology.

For the sake of readability, the historical essay might also have kept more to the order of the poets as presented in the poetry part of the volume. I found it rather distracting to have to keep skipping forward and backward as I read the poems pertinent to each part of the essay.

The minimal treatment of concrete (visual) haiku is also a disappointment. Only three are presented and of these, two, those by Larry Gates and André Duhaime, somewhat unhaiku-esquely each take up half a page. The book might have further engaged with mainstream poetry by including such obvious candidates as Saroyan's canonical "eyeye" and others, and anything by Geof Huth. In addition, the editors missed playful opportunities to bridge the gap between mainstream and haiku by including poems such as LeRoy Gorman's "alas / t" which could have engaged in an entertaining haikai-conversation with E.E. Cummings' contribution to the volume, "a leaf falls."

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Layout decisions, undoubtedly the mandate of the publisher, disappoint somewhat. The poems of all of the 100 poets who are represented by a single haiku are rather forlornly presented one to a page. One can't help but wonder whether in some cases these poets might have had another worthy haiku to share all that blank space. Bernard Einbond, mentioned above, for example, or Robert Grenier, only one of whose 500 "Sentences" is included. Alternatively, some of the "single-haiku poets" might have been permitted to keep each other company. This one poem to a page seems a little precious, and I suspect it will seem so to readers from outside the haiku community. Further, this layout definitely dissipates some of the poems' energy as one reads, as if one were walking down a row of tombstones reading the epitaphs.

Like all anthologies, *Haiku in English* is sure to raise some eyebrows both because of who and what were included, as well as because of who and what were not. (I avoid the word "excluded" because some poets may have chosen to withhold permission.) But that's part of the fun of it—and one of the excuses for anthologies. They give us the chance to flex our own critical muscles in a contest—a Bloomian *agon*, if you will—with the editors. Generous inclusions will also permit the reader to reassess the work of such neglected poets as

Jerry Kilbride, Paul O. Williams, Charles B. Dickson, and Caroline Gourlay.

The decision to pursue other goals than that of exhibiting the poets' best work has made for a missed opportunity that is to be regretted. A book that could have made a significant step in creating a canon for ELH has curiously chosen to avoid doing so. This is particularly disappointing given that the non-haiku community of poets is specifically targeted as a primary audience for this book. Speaking of Cor van den Heuvel's *The Haiku Anthology*, Kacian states that "the influence of the volume cannot be overstated," and that it "could offer an argument for what was excellent, distinctive, and likely to last." I wholeheartedly agree. Wonderfully stated and exemplary goals for the editors of any anthology. One wonders that the editors of this anthology didn't themselves follow these goals, focusing instead on the influence of individual poems. Nevertheless, while the three editions of *The Haiku Anthology* (1974, 1986, 1999) will remain the standard for those interested in the development of haiku as such and in the development of a canon of contemporary ELH, *Haiku in English* does succeed in providing a refreshing reassessment of the past and an enticing glimpse of the future.

Whatever its blemishes, *Haiku in English* is a major milestone in the development of ELH. Celebrate it with me. Buy it. Read it. Ponder it. If you are a lover of haiku, the book is full of pleasures that you should not deny yourself. It is an absolutely essential resource for every haiku library.

*Due to an error during the publication process of HIE, the Cummings poem was printed incorrectly. The poem is set here in its original form.



Lee Gurga is the former editor of the journal Modern Haiku. He is currently editor of Modern Haiku Press.