

***Graphis scripta*/writing lichen. Clare Goulet. 2024. Gaspereau Press, Nova Scotia. 112 pp. ISBN 978-1554-47265-9.**

This whole anthology is just a delight – the more I dip into it, the more I want to read. Clare has a completely fresh way of looking at – and thinking about – lichens, and sharing the way that she relates to lichens. There is a genuine fondness and passion, yet curiosity with respect to the strangeness of the lichens, and trying to unravel the way lichens have been recognised and described by mankind over the centuries.

There are some poems that I can comfortably relate to and empathise with, but some others I have struggled with, a bit like looking at lichens. For example, one I like is:

Evernia mesomorpha – boreal oak moss: “The odds are not in favour of existence.....” and the small quote which prefaces the poem “The two prime movers in the Universe are Time and Luck”, by Kurt Vonnegut.

I detect that in some of the poems, there is also some slight mockery? Is that the right word or should it be satirical comment, about how perceptions and efforts to understand, categorize and refine, and redefine ‘what is a lichen’? How have lichens been altered over time and been perfected? As well, there are further efforts to make the lichen fit to current concepts. I am thinking of her poem:

‘Mr. & Mrs. *Japewia tornensis* – hidden’; the quote that prefaces the poem is from Trevor Goward ‘*Nameless little things*’. And Goulet’s finishing lines of this poem are:

“In the rain on the oak tree on Peel,
That grey-blue sheen, the green: it’s all them. Trebouxia.
Trentopholia, Collema. Nostoc, Myrmecia by any
Other
Measure.”

I feel that she is saying, don’t let’s lose sight of ‘the lichen’, the entity that sits in the rain on the oak tree.

Yet, science, and the urge to explore, to look deeper, and discover will always lead us to continue, just as long as we don’t forget to stop and see. And we always seem to need to put ‘a name’ to an organism. When taking people to show them plants, butterflies or lichens, the first question is always – “what’s that called?”

“*Lobaria pulmonaria* – lungwort” is another good example. Goulet plays with words, senses and perceptions, quite cleverly following the ways and whims this lichen was perceived, from medieval times to fit in with God’s purpose, and she includes in her preface the quote from the 1597 Herball Vol., 5: “*it taketh his name Pulmonaria of the likeness of the form which it hath with lungs or lights, called in Latin Pulmones*”. So, it falls within the Doctrine of Signatures, and the belief that the universe is created just for us and man has dominion over everything on earth. And then, she takes the story to today, where perhaps ‘God’ has faded into the background, but ‘Man’ is still bent on exploring and developing nature to benefit ‘Man’. Clare writes:

“Meanwhile Science accelerates, outruns its Generative algorithms.....”

I admire Goulet’s clever juxtaposition of using the “doctrine of signatures” and comparing it to today’s advancements in science and maths. Is AI any stranger than what *God hathe written haere*? And again, she writes “Meanwhile *Lobaria* drapes itself soft over oak”, just to remind us.

She clearly loves not just lichens, but the way they are studied, the whole paraphernalia, almost the obsession that can absorb the studying of these organisms. She uses descriptions of laboratories, herbaria, manuscripts and libraries, early literature and lichenologists, but I think overall she has a genuine fondness for the whole gang; it is wonderful stuff, full of fun and humour, and not a little wry comment. The poem entitled “*K – potassium hydroxide*” starts:

“Deep in the forest
Of the laboratory, love
Expresses itself in a line
Of labelled paper packets
Each waiting their turn
Under the microscope’s unblinking gaze
To be, for a moment,
The One.....”

The poem continues with what happens after the microscope. There is testing with K, then dissection, and finally Pd. She finishes with: “*Now we think you’re mine.*” Almost, almost ‘possessing’ the lichen. Perhaps a bit harsh – I guess most of us carrying out these procedures

are following up a desire to know, a sort of tracking down using clues and tests to arrive at an answer. I do not consciously think that I possess the lichen after ‘running it down’. Just a sense of quiet satisfaction, perhaps something to share with other like-minded friends.

I see throughout that Goulet refers to ‘*The Vanishing Lichens*’ by David Richardson. She has obviously got a lot of inspiration from it. I particularly like the way in the poem ‘*Can you be more specific*’ that she has brought together a random selection of facts from the book about lichen locations, niches or ways they are used, jumbled them together in a delightful way, so they read like ‘poetry’!

Apart from her own experiences, Goulet has really read around the subject of lichens and her references are quite wide-ranging. She obviously likes Trevor Goward’s ‘Twelve Readings on the Lichen Thallus’. Then there is the poem “*Lecania hutchinsiae* – bulb, glow-dish, eye” prefaced with a quote from a letter from the Irish naturalist, Ellen Hutchins to Dawson Turner (5th January 1810). Ellen Hutchins, (1785-1815) was regarded as Ireland’s first female botanist; she is celebrated in Bantry Bay with an annual festival in August, promoting botany and botanical art. Lichenologists are familiar with *Enterographa hutchinsiae*, named in her honour. There is a website dedicated to Hutchins, under the auspices of The Botany of Bantry Bay. ellenhutchins.com/.

Coincidentally, in November 2024, I was asked by *British Wildlife* to write a book review of “*Lichens of Ireland and Great Britain: a visual guide to their identification*” by Paul Whelan, 2024; two volumes, 970 pages, £75. It was quite a daunting task. My review is by-the-by, but included in Whelan’s mammoth volumes was one of Clare Goulet’s poems, the one about *Lecania hutchinsiae*. It is most appropriate. So, in a roundabout way, coming across that poem while reviewing Whelan’s *Lichens of Ireland* book, was my first introduction to Clare Goulet. And for those who want to know more about Clare Goulet, there is a web site: writers.ns.ca/author-spotlights/author-spotlight-clare-goulet/.

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