

Shara McCallum's *No Ruined Stone*. Alice James Books, 2021. 73 pp. \$18.95 (Paperback).

In *No Ruined Stone*, Shara McCallum once again creates a body of poetry that leaves us breathless as she scales the colonial walls of history. Behind these walls, the poet re-gathers fragments of memory that defy definition as speculation and myth. The titular poem "No Ruined Stone" is the poetic persona's foreword to the collection of poems. It sets the stage for the imaginative encounter between the poet and Scotland's beloved bard, Robert Burns, as she seeks answers to questions that are explicitly unanswerable. This poetic foreword also deftly introduces the *raison d'être* behind the collection of poems that emerge out of this encounter.

By McCallum's own admission in her "Author's Note" (59), on a journey to Scotland in 2015 she learned of Robert Burns's plans to migrate to Jamaica in 1786, and of his foiled attempts to do so not once, but three times. The account fueled McCallum's poetic imagination, and she wondered why he did not make the journey. The seeds of *No Ruined Stone* were sown as she speculated on what might have happened had the Scottish Bard made the planned trip to Jamaica and worked as book keeper to a notorious plantation master, Charles Douglas. Why would Scotland's beloved bard, lover of liberty, make such a harsh deal with life? As McCallum worked through her poetic encounter with Burns, her collection creates visible reminders for readers that Scottish plantation owners shared complicity with the English in colonizing the island. History has it that they were among the most brutal in the island's history.

Each poem in *No Ruined Stone* is a dramatic monologue reflecting an ironic perspective of events which, arguably, affected ordinary individuals of both European and African ancestry under the forces wielded by colonialism. Through the poetic processes of *re-memory*, or *re-member-ing*, McCallum re-gathers fragments of memory she culls from books and newspapers, family and personal history made public property. With such materials in hand, she weaves together a mythopoetic creation that speaks to the evils of slavery and colonialism. The poet uses this collection to create poetry that is politically incisive in its confrontation of the historical archive. It asks readers to acknowledge the lived history of invisible women, enslaved African women, whose human rights were violated by the sheer avarice of those who had the power to violate them with impunity.

In her poetic collection, McCallum offers a timeline of events starting with 1786, the year Burns arrives in Jamaica, and ending in 1826,

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the year his enslaved granddaughter, Isabella, arrives in Scotland. The timeline itself makes a flash forward to 1833 and beyond, as a reminder that the journey into the past is a direct link to the readers' present. The poetic timeline opens the collection and repeats at intervals throughout the collection, and again at the end, providing competing historical context for the poetic account. The timeline is therefore a call for readers not to lose sight of the important period in history during which the poetic narrative is set. McCallum grounds her mythopoetic creation of *No Ruined Stone* by staking claim for its authenticity as she closes the collection with a final timeline that interlaces myth, imagination, and history.

Working with the poetic timeline is a creative family tree mapping the interrelationships that exist between actors within this poetic docudrama. The family tree comes conveniently at the beginning of the section that introduces Isabella to the readers. Here, McCallum creates a realistic family tree for the mythical Burns and uses it to give visibility and a voice to the enslaved women whose lives he engenders when he fathers a child by Nancy, an enslaved African woman ten years younger than he, with whom he has a long relationship lasting many years. Nancy and Burns's enslaved daughter, Agnes, is later forced to submit to the attentions of Charles Douglas, the plantation master, with the outcome that she gives birth to their enslaved granddaughter Isabella, who is significantly born in 1806, ten years after Burns's death and one year before the historical Slave Trade Act of 1807.

*No Ruined Stone* opens with a section entitled "The Bard," the monologues reflecting Burns's consciousness of the events unfolding in his life as he faces the challenge of a relationship with the enslaved African named Nancy by McCallum. Nancy has given birth to a fair skinned child named Agnes, and Burns is at a loss how to go on. The monologues reflect on his struggles with a guilty conscience, with his desire to publish his poetic works, and with the challenges of making a living on the plantation. The closing section of the poetic collection, simply entitled "Isabella," is entirely guided by the girl's consciousness of events in her life. The poems are made to reflect on her disturbed consciousness as she is whisked away from Jamaica to Scotland by poetic *tour de force* made plausible by historical documentation. Accompanied by her enslaved grandmother Nancy, Isabella is forced to come to terms with the social dilemma of what it means to "pass for white" in a society that would destroy her at once if they were able to sniff out the darkest secret of her African heritage.

McCallum was deliberate in her structure of *No Ruined Stone*. It opens with Burns's voice, his consciousness guiding the first section of the poetic collection entitled "Bard," but it is Isabella who gets the

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last word. In the final of this two-part collection, hers is the haunting voice that plays and re-plays memories of the dead: the Scottish grandfather she never knew, the African grandmother whose sacrifice she can never repay. She struggles with the unnaturalness of her relationship with her husband, a Scotsman like her grandfather, simply named “Husband,” whom she must never tell the secret of her parentage. By the end of the collection, readers are made to recognize that the identity crisis Isabella faces is a product of a society that disregards truth and honesty in exchange for social values and mores that prove to be corrupt and corrupting in their influence.

Through Isabella’s consciousness of events, McCallum has set in motion a process that offers a deeper psychological reflection of humans made co-conspirators in the colonial enterprise that still contributes to the destruction of the very fabric of human society today. The “Author’s Note” with its final Timeline at the end of *No Ruined Stone* places the seal on the poetic intent to defy History as the sole purveyor of truth.

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