

# *The Literary London Journal*

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**Chris McCabe and Jeremy Reed, *Whitehall Jackals*,  
paperback, 90 pages, Rugby: Nine Arches Press, 2013. ISBN:  
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Reviewed by

Simon W. Goulding  
(Freelance, UK)

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Jeremy Reed has over forty books to his credit; he has been writing poetry, novels, criticism, biography and translation ever since the early 1970s. His influences include Rimbaud, Artaud and Genet as well as Ballard, Bowie and Sinclair. Reed has even been described in *The Independent* as British poetry's answer to David Bowie. Chris McCabe's poetry appears in anthologies by Bloodaxe, as well as in three collections from Salt Publishing. He currently teaches at the Poetry School, and Iain Sinclair is an admirer.

Jeremy Reed's introduction does little to make the reader immediately warm to the collection that follows. He and McCabe met at Red Snapper Books, a 'cutting-edge counterculture bookshop [Reed] fronted with inimitable style' (11). It sounds like an insiders' scene, but it is a lot more open than that. And the material really was cutting-edge, with no attempt at Faber and Faber style canonisation.

Setting out to write a collaborative two-book collection, Reed and McCabe wrote this volume between January and April 2011. The published work alternates between each writer with the days of creation recorded. Written on the fly, with minimal revision, this is poetry from the street. Reed writes his material 'in public spaces—cafés, outside in the street, sitting at the foot of the Seven Dials needle ... done by hand' (12). If this sounds like the work practice of a charming eccentric, then so what? Who would not want such a figure, an urban(e) Puck, engaging in a kind of anti-career rather than being fixated on the need for publication or media attention. In his poem 'Seven Dials' Reed writes:

at this dysfunctional take-no-prisoners site.

I use the way the city uses me  
indifferently—we lose in giving lose  
defiantly—I'd like to write it down  
over and over what I've lost and won  
in every poem fired-up in this town.

Chris McCabe describes the site of the new East End in 'Execution Dock', where once  
'low-key corpses swing like marrow-packed jute' now

the future laid out in converted Three Beds

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In '*Docklands, That Tory Creation*' McCabe lets his anger a little more off the leash:

through Dead Man's Hole landmarked  
with a bile-black oval to the pooled courtyards of Ivory House,  
International House, Tower Hotel, Commodity Quay,  
where the lichen huts trade tartan cardigans: this is where  
the Apartment Trolls reside, their genitals spiteful anemones  
each buttock tanked with cellulite

Reed and McCabe may be experienced London watchers but neither of them is a Londoner. They have the perspective of the outsider, and they can respond to the geography and to the people with new eyes and with eyes concentrated on the city. They look for the new and search out the hidden across the city. Not beholden to anyone or anything, they focus on what might pass by every day and look for a deeper story hidden behind the railings or boarded-off sites. Poems about Blake and Blake's London are here as the modern poet in Peckham Rye desperately hopes for a vision, but each stanza ends with the phrase 'NO VISION'.

In his prose pieces 'Ham Yard W1' and 'Mods, Hoodlums, Guttersnipes, Punks', Reed takes a forensic look at our subcultures. Ham Yard W1 was the location for Ronan O'Rahilly's Mod club in the mid-sixties, and it has been a venue for Jazz, Skiffle, R&B and Blues. It is now a vacant lot soon to be transformed into a luxury hotel, and Reed offers a requiem to a lost space of transgression and challenge to gender preconceptions. In 'Mods, Hoodlums, Guttersnipes, Punks' two players of the seventies are seen in their embryonic stage—Marc Feld and David Jones on the Soho stage circa 1965. Feld (aka Bolan) is the 'proto-glam...dandified maladjusted fourteen with extensive wardrobe earned selling himself down the Dilly, either on the concourse or the Wimpy's'. David Jones (Bowie) is still looking for the 'quantum wave-form piggyback ... because he hasn't yet learnt how to hijack a persona and project it like cosmic wormholing into a short cut'. And there in the background is that 'sensitive

hoodlum' Ray Davies about to write 'Waterloo Sunset', 'the protein building block of [London] pop'.

The title, *Whitehall Jackals*, comes from Reed and McCabe's disgust at the Blair era with its war atrocities in Iraq and 'oligarchical political regime of czars, spin, deception and pathological lies'. No punches are pulled in 'The Right Hon. Jackal Blair':

The guilt lodged like a bullet in his brain  
he can't extract, a toxic leak  
like slow-dose polonium.  
His look's impassive as an army truck  
an explosive self-propeller howitzer

But much of the collection is about ordinary people going about their lives, which allows Reed and McCabe to produce some very interesting and occasionally very beautiful verse on that singular state of mind we call London.

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