Guiding light for a fair trial

Expanding on the original edition published in 1998, Amnesty International’s new Fair Trial Manual provides a detailed, comprehensive and accessible guide to the right to a fair trial, one of the universally applicable guarantees recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948.

There is an excellent introduction to the various international human rights standards relevant to fair trials and to the bodies that give authoritative guidance on how such standards should be interpreted. Universal treaty and non-treaty standards are succinctly explained and there is reference to instruments not yet formally adopted and other principles drawn up by international experts.

Regional treaty standards of the African Union, the Organisation of American States, the League of Arab States and the Council of Europe are set out and reference is made to the UN thematic mechanisms such as the work of Special Rapporteurs as they pertain to fair trials.

Broken into three broad sections covering pre-trial rights, rights at trial and special cases the main body of the manual then explains the relevant legal framework at every juncture, using extensive footnotes and separate cross-references in the text margins to the key treaty and non-treaty sources.

The manual will therefore be an invaluable resource to those seeking to further their understanding of the relevant principles in general and will be of specific interest to journalists, activists and lawyers alike if tasked with trial observation or reporting.

Embedded in Amnesty’s work is the struggle for the abolition of the death penalty worldwide and the chapter covering capital cases contains enlightening references which will also signpost readers who wish to deepen their knowledge of that particular issue.

Fair trial rights during states of emergency, in armed conflict and the use of special and military courts are also explained. These sections will be of particular interest to those reading through a political lens in the post-9/11 context which saw the United Kingdom derogate from the European Convention on Human Rights in a manner deemed disproportionate and discriminatory regarding the indefinite detention without trial of foreign nationals.

As well as being a practical resource, the manual is a reminder of the importance of Amnesty International’s credible and comprehensive work which consistently nurtures and encourages the movements to defend human rights and the wider struggle for deep-rooted social change across the world.

John Hobson

Conscious and witty poetry

Acapulco: New and Selected Poems
By Nicholas Murray
Melos Press

Acapulco is the fourth such collection of poetry by Nicholas Murray, a freelance writer who splits his time between London and Wales and who, aside from poetry, has written two novels and several acclaimed biographies on figures such as Franz Kafka, Aldous Huxley and Matthew Arnold. Acapulco is broad in its scope, presenting 30 new poems by Murray, followed by work drawn from his earlier poetry collections, Plausible Fictions and The Narrators, and concluding with Get Real!, a satire on the Coalition Government, first performed in 2011.

The collection opens with poems that exemplify Murray’s honed brevity and precision in lines like: ‘Your silence grows in us, / expands like rising dough, / until we reach the street / and find ourselves, altered, / in an exalted elsewhere’, from his poem The Bedroom.

While Murray does a good line in terse, unsmilng poetry, better still are the poems which follow, full of everyday details: ‘bulldozers, hard-hats, high-viz tabards’ in Culture Capital and ‘the white table and chair are waiting for the man / in a garish shirt and the knobbliest of knees’ in Acapulco.

Murray writes best when he is having fun, and the title poem of this collection, Acapulco, is of this order, being unpretentious and quietly charming. It presents the familiar image of a beach resort and a tourist, each waiting in anticipation of the other, only to be playfully uprooted by the threat of a pelican ordering drinks, a surreal symbol of competition and natural order.

Other new works like Courage and Food speak of social unease, revealing a community unable to heal itself because it sees only its terraces’, it is easy to see why he could not resist the impulse to re-print.

By contrast with these timeless poems, Acapulco’s conclusion with Get Real! lands us squarely back in 2011. Originally published as a pamphlet, this irreverent verse satire broken into five parts works best as a historical document. Murray’s reproach of austerity still rings true, if not louder than ever.

Murray’s is a collection in reverse, neither a chronologically faithful anthology nor a thematic catalogue of his work. Rather you get the feeling of the poet looking back over his work with you, having written new poems but not, perhaps, having the conviction to let them stand alone.

Indeed this is the central issue with Murray’s collection, which while stuffed with pathos, humour and a social conscience, doesn’t quite work together as a whole. It is because of this that the potency of Murray’s rich images, deft phrasing and wit disperses and fades, much sooner than it should.

Natasha Lloyd-Owen