A Hundred Mile Walk—Rik Wilkinson

Acumen Occasional Pamphlets 12, Acumen Publications, 2008 £3.50www.acumen-poetry.co.uk

I like maps. The author of this pamphlet draws on his experience as an ordnance surveyor, revising ‘One Inch’ maps (although that’s only one of the things he’s done), and this appealed to me, especially in the title poem and the associated ‘Take Five’, the final two poems in the collection. What’s going on in these poems is quite complicated. The poet is not only reacting to visual artist Richard Long’s response to a map of Dartmoor, but also (using the persona of the original surveyor) reacting to the experience of creating the original map, especially to the aspects that “maps do not show”. There is a little joke going on here too: the surveyor is “fortuitously Porlocked” by the artist.
There seem to be deliberately sinister undercurrents in the Dartmoor poems. The list of what maps do not show includes “sunless blackness”, a “gun-shot hawk”, “the rabbit’s spleen”. But the final poem ends with the scattered Ordnance Survey team “converging at the famed White Hart” (I particularly liked the way this was described). After the jovial drinks, the lonely surveyor lies in a “lonely guest house” listening to Dave Brubeck. The ending has a lovely lift:

Maps do not show the Seasons’ change; the trees
Undressing—the lovely Cirrus chased by sun. None
Reveal the visceral joy of traversing through time;
The old maps loved—the new imagined
when the Survey’s done.

One has the sense that the poet is enjoying this, and it is enjoyable in turn for the reader.
The pamphlet as a whole, though, struck me as uneven. In places I found the language over-heavy and had to fight the impulse to strike out adjectives as they proliferated (‘the molten-green, albescent sea”). At other points, I couldn’t help being aware of language techniques—repetitions, metaphors, alliteration. They got in the way for me, as though Wilkinson was simply trying too hard to say it effectively, instead of just ... saying it.
But I’ll come back to that surveyor. With the map poems there was something I liked very much. No need to try too hard. Facts and names can work the magic, as in this stanza from ‘Thames Source’:

From Thames Head Bridge the snuffling river wends
South-east, lapping at trickles from the fields
‘til joined by Flagham Brook, Swill Brook,
Derry Brook and Churn.

I think that might be worth reading a hundred miles for.
Helena Nelson