My review copy arrived on the day National Radio were playing the third of the 2013 Reith lectures featuring the potter, Grayson Perry, speaking in Londonderry on the role of art in society with the title, “Nice Rebellion: Welcome in”. The introduction focused on the role of shock and rebellion then he commented on the nature of pluralism, marketing and attitudes. He said:

“...detached irony has become the kind of default mode of our time in the art world... it was dangerous when art became synonymous with shock, which it did for a while in the sort of 1990s. There was so much art that was seen as shocking that it became what people looked for when they went to art, when in fact you know art can be lots of different things.”

In recognising that multi-role function, Grayson was able to extend the discussion beyond the simplistic “art as shock” motif. That became clearer in a response to a question where he said:

“Art does have a very powerful thing that it can offer you and that is you know when you get involved in making something, you kind of forget yourself for a moment as well; and you also, in little ways you are affecting the world. You know if you feel powerless and depressed or something, if you’re making something you are in a small way changing the world. You do have that power, you do have that opportunity.”

Goroncy understands that the essays are “birthed upon the premise that artists and theologians can help us to see and hear better”.

This collection of papers from the symposium all offer approaches to this second view of art. They traverse a range of the arts looking at poetics, aesthetics, literature, painting, architecture, multimedia worship and song. Some offered a more theological perspective, others philosophical, while two contributions were self-reflective with a quite personal approach.

Goroncy’s introduction provides an excellent overview of the theme with pointers as to how each essay fits into place, as well as some commentary as to where the idea of “tikkun olam” has developed from, namely the Mishnah and its revival in the 16th century by Rabbi Luria (p 14). Goroncy builds a framework for us using W H Auden and Rowan Williams as points of intersection. The theme leads “with unconstraining voice” the way towards healing in a world which is dislocated by its hurt and “busy griefs”. (p. 2)

Goroncy understands that the essays are “birthed upon the premise that artists and theologians can help us to see and hear better”. (p. 5) Underlying such a claim is the idea that there is a truth about the world and that truth telling reveals both present condition and future possibilities, and that for Christians, ultimately that truth telling is grounded in the divine revelation which illuminates human lives and concerns. Goroncy concludes with a description of a leitmotif that runs through...
most of the essays; that of the question of beauty and its place in the search for the justice of which the kingdom speaks, and responses to the various answers given to that and the hope for the world that is engendered.

I found I responded to the essays in different ways. The most accessible were the offerings of Libby Byrne and the conversation between Joanna Osborne and Allie Eagle. Each used images by the artist that gave the reader a sense of where the journey of each has taken them, as well as allowing an appreciation of the imagery used and how it illustrates the theme. I have always appreciated having commentary with titles for works of art so that I can reflect on what I am looking at and these two pieces of work provide that. I found myself clearly engaged with Libby’s story and her exploration of the wounds in the world through her own work and that of Anselm Kiefer. In her conclusion she speaks of having chosen to live close to the wound so that she is “open to the possibility of being transformed, made more whole than [she has] been before”. (p. 111)

Essays using architecture and music written by Murray Rae and Steven Guthrie were also included. Rae’s exploration of Daniel Libeskind’s work in Berlin and his approach that won the competition for redeveloping the ground zero site in New York was enlightening. It showed how the work of architects is also to be included in this mending of the world through what we build and how we build it to “reveal the extent to which the Spirit is at work” (p. 150). In a quite different way, Guthrie’s exploration of our contemporary environment, drawing from both the Psalms and from Pythagoras’ idea of the music of the spheres, offered a new way to understand the act of communal singing, both choral and congregational. Each of these essays gave the reader something to hang their understanding on.

Carolyn Kelly and Jonathan Ryan both take as their focus the Markan story of the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus. Carolyn explores how aesthetics has become lost from theological discourse particularly in the Protestant sphere, while Jonathan explores notions of beauty and extravagance using this story as the vehicle to address the issue of poverty and injustice. Each adds something to our reading of the text as well as inviting the reader to explore how art might have a role to play in our wider understanding of mending the world.

Julanne Clark-Morris explores the role of multimedia in worship. As she used two video pieces in her presentation that cannot be accessed through the medium of print, the essay becomes something of a taster with the promise of more behind it.

The last group of essays – by Bill Dyrness, Trevor Hart and John Dennison – all use literature and come across as more academic pieces. I found John Dennison’s essay on Seamus Heaney’s prose poetics heavy going and will need careful re-reading. I was unsure of which voice I was to hear – Heaney’s, the critics’ or Dennison’s; yet Heaney’s faith and his understanding of the role of poetry and the poetic imagination in the world certainly address the theme of the book.

Most of the essays give very good bibliographies that enable the reader to explore their own responses to each presentation. This has been a rich experience exploring a side of the world that I don’t often appreciate. And as one whose personal world is in need of mending, I found in Byrne’s essay something that, for me, makes the whole collection a worthwhile addition to my library.

Bicultural Church