

# Publisher keeps Christian poetry alive

## New releases continue tradition of excellence

BY STUART MANN

AFTER looking at a computer screen all day, it can be a pleasure to relax with a good book. And that pleasure is doubled when the book comes from The St. Thomas Poetry Series, a small publishing house in Toronto dedicated to Christian poetry.

The books are produced with loving care by David Kent, a member of St. Thomas, Huron Street for nearly 50 years. The slim volumes of poetry are printed on high quality paper and come with beautifully designed covers. They harken back to a time when pages were turned, not swiped on an e-reader or tablet.

"I'm sure I've lost money on it over the years, but it's been very rewarding," he says with a smile.

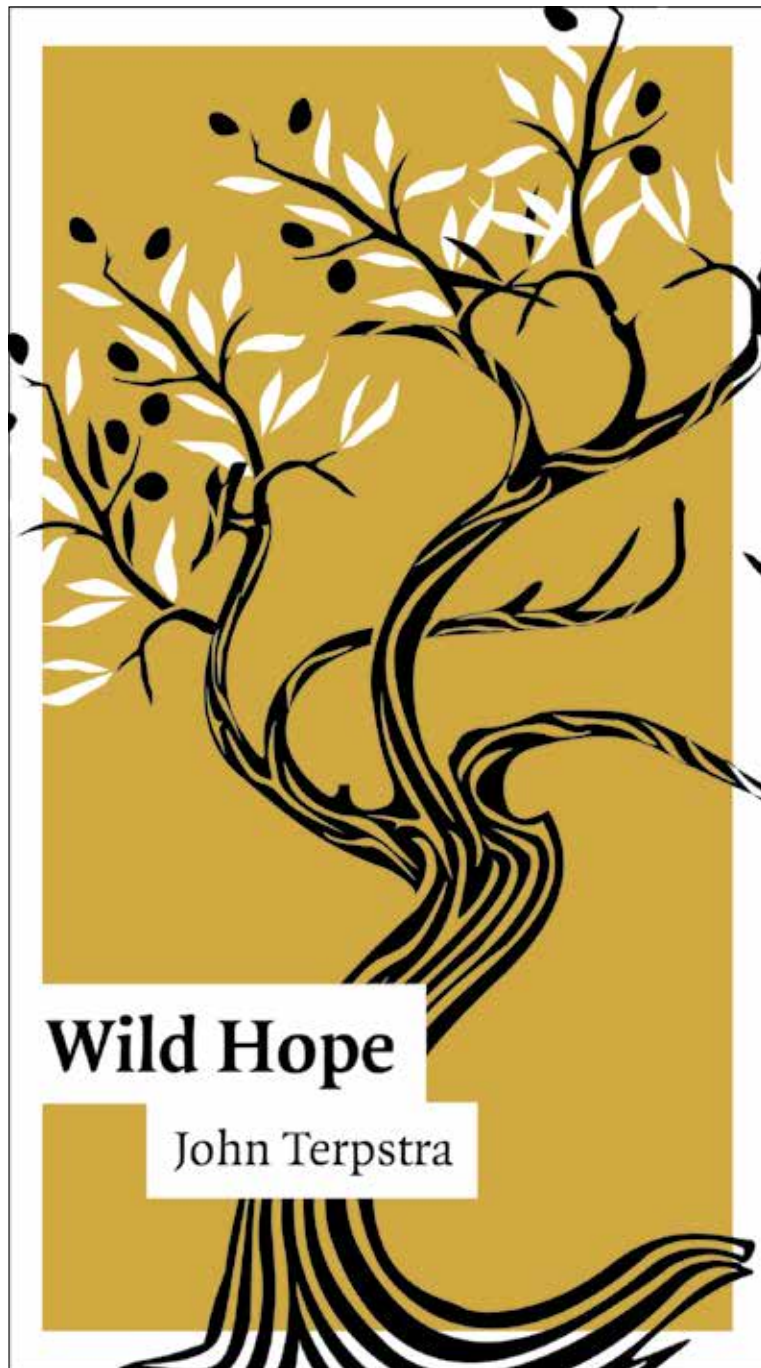
The publishing house has just come out with two new books of Christian poetry – *Wild Hope* by Hamilton poet John Terpstra and *Second Gaze* by Toronto poet Margo Swiss. The books retail for \$20 each and can be ordered through the publisher's website, [www.stthomaspoetryseries.com](http://www.stthomaspoetryseries.com).

Authors usually launch their books at a public reading at St. Thomas, Huron Street, located in downtown Toronto, but this year that was cancelled due to COVID-19. Instead, Mr. Kent has posted videos on YouTube of the poets reading from their new books.

Mr. Kent's interest in Christian poetry dates back to the later 1970s, when he was a graduate student at York University. "Although I was doing English literature, I was in a room full of Canadian literature specialists," he recalls. "I was unusual in that I was a member of a church and most of the others weren't. But I was interested in Christian poetry. I had studied it in the English tradition and I wanted to look into whether there was a Canadian tradition as well."

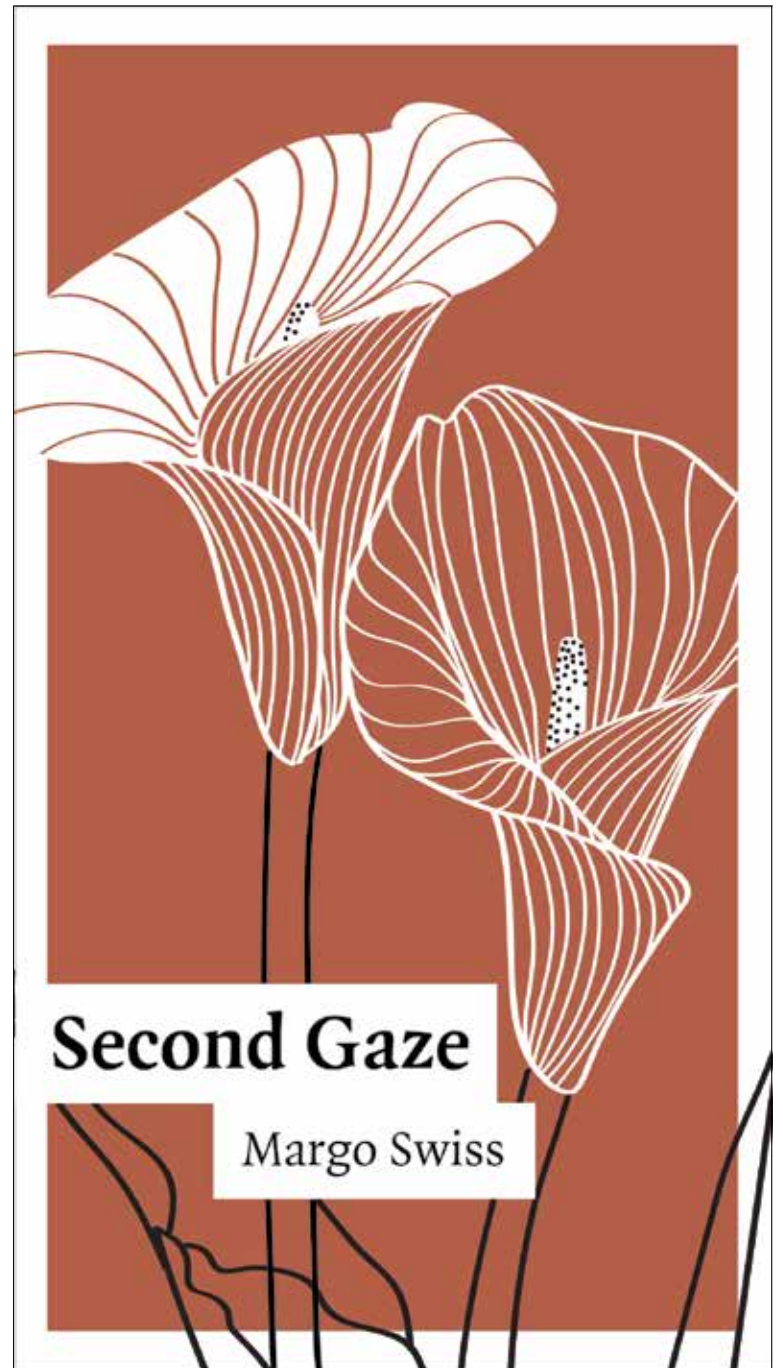
He eventually put together an anthology, *Christian Poetry in Canada*, that featured the works of more than 60 Canadian poets. It was published in 1989 and was reprinted in 1993 by the now defunct Anglican Book Centre. Around the same time, he organized poetry readings at the church that featured many well-known poets. The spring and fall readings continued for several years.

With the help and encouragement of fellow parishioners Hugh Anson-Cartwright and Pat Kennedy, Mr. Kent launched the publishing house, The St. Thomas Poetry Series, in 1996. It was – and continues to be – self-financed. Although the church provides space for the readings and book launches, it



**Wild Hope**

John Terpstra



**Second Gaze**

Margo Swiss

New books of Christian poetry by The St. Thomas Poetry Series. At right, publisher David Kent.

doesn't fund the venture. Whatever profit Mr. Kent makes, he plows it back into the books.

Since it was established, the publishing house has produced 32 books of Christian poetry. In the early years, it produced three chapbooks a year. The chapbooks – small volumes of about 48 pages – featured attractive wood engravings by Nancy Ruth Jackson on their covers. In 1999, one of the books – *Benedict Abroad* by Richard Outram – became the first poetry book to win the Toronto Book Award.

In addition to the chapbooks, the publishing house has produced two anthologies, longer books and three pamphlets. All of them have been printed by Coach House Printing, which is located beside the church. A collection of the books is on display in a glass cabinet at the church.

One of the hallmarks of the books is quality. From the poems themselves to the paper and binding, every volume feels like a collector's item, something to be read and kept in a prominent spot on

the bookshelf or desk.

"The quality of Christian poetry should not be any different from the quality of secular poetry," says Mr. Kent. He doesn't accept unsolicited manuscripts. Instead, he works by word-of-mouth or contacts established poets, who have come from all denominations and worship traditions.

He explains the difference between Christian poetry and secular poetry. "What you don't get in much secular poetry is something redemptive, that is, hope. A lot of secular poetry is depressing and self-obsessed, and has no overarching meaning beyond the self. Christian poetry doesn't mean that people don't suffer or experience doubt, but there is some hope and the possibility of redemption and salvation."

He says a lot of people associate Christian poetry with messages on greeting cards, but it is much richer than that. "They seem to forget that the English language tradition features many important Christian poets, including TS Eliot and WH Auden. There is much

superb Christian poetry."

He says finding audiences for his books has become more challenging than ever. "Poetry has always appealed to a minority of people, and Christian poetry an even smaller minority, and as we have declining literacy and skills with language, that audience is shrinking even further. It's a hard sell, so one has to appeal to its fundamental richness and challenge and spiritual reward."

And the rewards are great. Not only do *Wild Hope* and *Second Gaze* provide hope, but they offer a refreshing and inspiring view on life and the Christian story in this time of pandemic. Both Mr. Terpstra, a Presbyterian, and Ms. Swiss, an Anglican, are rooted in their faith and that comes through on almost every page.

Throughout its history, the publishing house has produced books that have enriched the lives of Christians. "One reader told me he had the books right by his bed and he used to read them and re-read them," recalls Mr. Kent. "That's the thing about poetry. One reading



is not enough. You have to come to know the poem by revisiting it. Poetry reveals insights beyond a single reading. It's rich; it has multiple meanings."

Despite the challenges to publishing in this day and age, Mr. Kent says has no plans to stop. He's already working on other books and manuscripts. "There are Christian poets who want an audience and it's difficult to find publishers who will do it," he says. "I wanted to have an outlet for good quality Christian poetry, and still do. It has been wonderful meeting and working with so many people."

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