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The publication of Norman MacCaig's *Collected Poems* bears witness to almost thirty years of creativity from Scotland's best loved and most widely read contemporary poet. This handsomely produced book contains a major selection from every collection between *Riding Lights* (1955) and *A World of Difference* (1983) -- some thirteen titles in all, with a new one appearing every two or three years. The poems have been reprinted book by book and in the same order as in the original collections, with only a few omissions from each volume. More than a hundred hitherto uncollected poems have been added, distributed in chronological order of composition, and listed in italics at the start of each successive collection.

The result is an indispensible text for lovers and students of MacCaig's poetry. It is also a testament to the extraordinarily consistent lyrical impulse of his muse, and to the difficulty of discerning any major shifts or changes --whether in subject matter or in style -- during the course of a long and distinguished career. Of course there was the move to free verse marked by *Surroundings* in 1966, and MacCaig's first two collections have been omitted altogether. (*Far Cry*, 1943, and *The Inward Eye*, 1946, belong

to a more rhetorical and obscure "Apocalyptic" period which the poet disowns with a favourite story about a friend who asked him when he was going "to publish the answers.") -- The fierceness of MacCaig's modesty, and his scathing distrust of critical jargon and/or modernist experiment, is legendary. Paradoxically, it is that fierceness which also makes him the most gentle and private of men.

MacCaig's poetic persona is a familiar and good humoured friend as we read these pages. His wit and his playful fluency with metaphor, (on occasion I think it is too fluent) have given us literally hundreds of apt and entertaining poems. Yet there seem to be few "central" poems, or creative statements of intimate autobiographical force. In fact we have to accept that this would be contrary to the innate temper of the poets's mind, (he often refers to himself as a classicist), and to the consistently outward-looking and life-affirming eye which he turns upon the world. Two longer poems do take a biographical line, however. -- "Inward Bound" reflects on his upbringing in Edinburgh and on his mother's roots in Scalpay, Harris, in the Outer Hebrides; while "A man in Assynt" deals with his love for the north-west mainland of Scotland, and the historical and social changes which have come to this remote place where the poet and his family have spent their summers for so many years. Even so, these poems, autobiographical as they are, still remain typically reticent.

It is a central tenet of MacCaig's art that the possibility of confessional intimacy *should* dwindle, when faced with such as the Assynt landscape and the universal perspectives of time and change which it evokes. His achievement as a poet lies in the fact that these larger perspectives are always present in his best work -- however "small" the poem -- and yet they are never strained or grandiose. MacCaig has a famously affectionate eye for the idiosyncrasies of the natural kingdom, especially the animal world of pigeons "at their knitting," and toads "looking like a purse." Yet these, too, often operate in a wider landscape and the existential perspective is never far away:

> Up there the scraping light
> whittles the cloud edges till, like thin bone,
> they're bright with their own opaque selves. Down here,
> a skinny rosebush is an eccentric jug
> of air. They make me,

somewhere between them,
a visiting eye,
an unrequited passion,
watching the tide glittering backward and making
its huge withdrawal from beaches
and kilted rocks.
("A man in Assynt")

This trick of perspective (except it is no "trick," of course), was recognised from the first, in an early poem called "Summer Farm," in which the world appears as a series of concentric boxes in which the poet lifts the lid to see "farm within farm, and in the centre, me." That "me" -- so well loved for its playful image making -- has always known about the terror of scale in the wider universe, and the inevitablity of mortality, although it makes no fuss about it.

This darker side has come to the fore with a markedly barer and effective style in recent collections -- notably *The Equal Skies* -- in response to the poet's own advancing age and the death of close friends. But the vision was there from the first, and always as an unforced part of the natural world. Consider, for example, the closing image of "Wet Snow," from *Riding Lights*, where the poet's "visiting eye" turns away "in terror, not to see / A tree stand there hugged by its own ghost." Poem after poem in this 1955 collection recognises the beauty and the delight of the world, which is all that is ever given to us, without any solace from religions or their various afterlifes. Thirty years on, MacCaig's celebration is still in full song, driven by that single brave understanding:

Only a beauty with no rouge of myth
Walks plain in the plain field. Her decent hand
Will give you a meaning you can wrestle with;
Something to die of, not to understand.
("The rosyfingered")

Perhaps the other most talked about title of 1985 was Douglas Dunn's *Elegies*, a collection of poems in memory of his first wife Lesley Balfour Dunn, who died of cancer in 1981. This little book is truly moving, not least for its unhysterical, unconfessional dignity -- ranging over happier memories of good health, onto the last week by a loved wife's

bedside, to memories of happier times, or to that lonely confrontation when calendar time and memory come together to mark another anniversary. It is sometimes difficult to separate the power of art from the frisson of empathy which must be felt by any reader when confronted by such poems, and by the inescapable biographical voltage which they still contain. Yet Dunn's control never leaves him, not even in poems of almost unbearable intensity. "Sandra's Mobile," for example, ends with the image of three wooden gulls -- a mobile brought by a friend to hang above the bed:

> . . . On her last night,
> Trying to stay awake, I saw love crowned
> In tears and wooden birds and candlelight.
> She did not wake again. To prove our love
> Each gull, each gull, each gull, turned into dove.

The poem is a sonnet and, however difficult the subject, Dunn never loses perspective and restraint. How tragic the circumstance, and how fortunate the gift which can translate, transform and ultimately transcend particular pain to make poems of such power.

When art works at this level we are moved beyond the particular to recognise that a collection of elegies -- however intimate their first beginning -- moves us towards an understanding and a reconciliation with the end which awaits us all. "Home Again" and "Writing with Light" and lines from "A Summer Night" make the point:

> . . . My floating life
> Borrows its fortitude from a cool silence
> Composed of green, from two trees, from the tingle
> That was the touch of us against the world.
> It left its lived heat everywhere we'd been,
> A small white cry, one last wild, stubborn rose.

In the same way, Dunn's familiar domestic poetic voice is re-energised by these difficult circumstances, and in such a context his decent concerns with the modest details of ordinary life -- those rituals of cooking preparation ("a kitchen pilgrimage") and countryside walks -- have never seemed more potent. Thus "The Butterfly House" assembles all the bric-a-brac of middle class home ownership, the shopping lists, the bills, the furniture, the weather report on TV,

the fruit in the bowl, pictures, ornaments and books, to make a prophetic statement about the loneliness that is to come -- personally to the poet -- and ultimately to his readers. The best of these poems are very fine indeed, and this book was Whitbread book of the year and a Poetry Book Society Choice, since reprinted (perhaps the most telling accolade of all) six times.

There is strong-lined Augustan confidence to the voice and verses of William Neil in *Wild Places*, his largest and, I think, best collection of poems to date. Indeed, he is proud to acknowledge a prejudice in favour of satire and its models -- somewhere between Burns and Byron:

> Those bards who used to carp in five-stressed lines
> are out of favour in our clever times:
> image and symbol in free verses clashing
> put Pope and Dryden's manner out of fashion.
> Wild George, Lord Byron, that reluctant Scot,
> gains scanty laurels from this modern lot.
> Yet still I'm tempted, when compelled by rage
> to crambo-clink out venom by the page:
> through rhyming couplets may be out of style
> they're much the best mode for satiric bile.
> ("Sawnie's Complaint")

He can afford the comparison, too, for his skill with couplets is spiced by good humour and more than a dash of *saeva indignatio*. In previous collections I have thought that there were moments when Neill's sturdy neo-classical common sense has led him into mere grumbling about the modern world. For this reason I have often preferred his work in Scots, because that language cannot help but deflate pomposity by granting a saving injection of breadth, warmth and vulgar delight. There are a number of Scots poems in this collection ("Scotia est divisa in voces tres"; "Drumbarchan Mains" etc.), and the poet's vernacular skill and broad gusto has not diminished. But the bulk of the collection is in English, and I think that it is here that Neill has made further advances by finding his true voice in this language too. The strong line and the strong mind behind it are the key, and when the poet reflects on age, death or decrepitude (frequent themes in this book), he achieves what is very much his own unique balance between morbidity and downright cheerfulness:

> Scenting my sweat run free in the still heat
> as if I were a corpse the flies buzz round;
> by them, it seems, no difference is found
> between my flesh and the moor's carrion meat.
> ("Flies")

In this vein, it is characteristic of Neill's sensibility that it move towards an unsentimental reconciliation which pivots around the word "still," bringing us to the poem's close: "Still, the road's grand under this July sun . . ./ Maggots can wait until my meat turns worse/ than it's gone under my lifetime's rot."

Neill has made a number of fine poems with the ruefully abrupt and grim playfulness of this tone, now well and fully realised in his English verse. He still grumbles about "Modern Architecture" and "Modern Biography," and the Government, but poems such as "A Walk on the Hill" and "Dead Poet's House" have a new assurance, a more personal context, and an unforced commitment to clarity, craft and public utterance. Neill's goliardic moments keep the mixture properly improper, but a poem such as "Envoi to the Dean's Book" reminds us of his real learning, and indeed he has fine poems in Gaelic as well, including "Airgead is Ardan"/"Money and Pride," which could have come straight from the great eighteenth century tradition itself. This is an attractively produced book, well introduced by Alan Bold. It confirms Neill's place in the library of Scottish letters, and it deserves to be widely successful with the common Scottish reader -- politically irreverent, but conservative, perhaps, in his or her literary tastes -- whom this poet is not afraid to address, lyrically or polemically, but never condescendingly.

Alan Bold's own work in Scots is much less successful. *Summoned by Knox* is written in what seems to be a largely constructed Scots -- and there's plenty fine precedent for this -- but the author's grasp of the language's idiomatic cadences is not up to the task of making it flow, speak or sing with any degree of conviction. Without this musical tact the poems keep stalling, clotted by metrical ineptitude and an eccentrically and sporadically dense Scottish vocabulary which never hesitates to switch straight to English for the sake of a quick rhyme

Ane likes his malt an' meal, ane lo'es his fung,
Ane's dinkie in a dibble-dabble tae,
But the music halts afore the sangs are sung
An' the lauchter is dispersed an' locked away.
("The Auld Licht o' Scotland")

Lines like these (and there are many more) are neither street Scots nor literary Scots, but a species of confected haggis-babble. Such utterance is all the worse (or perhaps peculiarly apt) for embracing every tired rag of the bar-room Scots persona, stuffed with the pathetic assurance that passes for "gusto," in the face of implicit violence, booze-culture boasting and arrant male sexism. "The fudder made her sark lift / Exposing her choop / An' eftir yin gliskie / I fancied a moop. / Man I felt randy: / Ma mollan [gloss: 'long straight pole'] an' me / Longed for an 'oor / O ramplosity/" ("Wee Lament"). This particular stereotype should have been laid to rest long since, and for a poet and critic of Bold's ability I'm afraid it's doubly disappointing stuff.

Carcanet are to be congratulated on two fine volumes of *Selected Poems* from Iain Crichton Smith and Edwin Morgan. Both are well selected, with an eye on establishing anthology pieces as well as a choice of less familiar poems -- some previously uncollected pieces from Morgan include a long sequence "An Alphabet of Goddesses" inspired by an exhibition of Pat Douthwaite's drawings. Uniformly produced at a low price in the "Poetry Signatures" series, both these volumes will prove indispensible as teaching texts and as an overview for the general reader of two of Scotland's most exciting and well established poets.

Ron Butlin's voice continues to gain assurance, and *Ragtime in Unfamiliar Bars* is his best collection yet. The title poem assumes the persona of a composer condemned to earn his living as a piano teacher. In manner and diction this is not unlike W.S. Graham's "Joachim Quantz" poems, for Butlin also uses the setting to meditate on the aspirations of art and the compromises of life. The stanzas are rhymed aabbab and here, as in his free verse too, the poet embraces a lightly formal and distanced diction, as a matter of self-recognised strategy: "I argued love and metaphysics through / by sound, resolving dissonance into / a line of formal spontaneity: / a passionate description of, let's say, / the falling snow" ("Descriptions of the Falling Snow"). -- These

cadences are well achieved but they are scarcely "passionate." Butlin recognises this, of course, for it is against such skilful light control that he deploys the moments of recognised pain or loss which make up many of the poems in his book.

A number of love poems demonstrate Butlin's interest in a kind of tender alienation, for this effect is central to "Elegy," "This Embroidery," "Before Leaving," "This Evening," among others, and most notably in "The Gods that I Know Best." In such poems it is as if ending and parting were already implicit in every kiss.

The same delicately academic diction -- walking on the eggshells of potential personal desolation -- appears in poems such as "Inheritance" and "Claiming My Inheritance," both of which titles speak to a continuing theme in other poems too. In fact "My Inheritance," the last piece in the collection, sums up the concerns discussed so far, and places them all in what seems to be an autobiographical context. Here the writer is struggling to come to terms with that moment when we must accept the death of the father and a sudden loneliness in the world. Butlin has done well with this theme, even if it is rather held at bay by the self-conscious refrigeration of iambic style. It's a curious and effective voice -- another struggle perhaps, with the Scottish difficulty in letting go:

> Since my father's death I've managed to disgrace
> a dozen hearts and beds, making each a court
> where I might love and talk of love, yet still support
> whatever sinecures most pleasantly debase
> that love into allegiance.
> . . . I needed nakedness
> to show my feelings, even to myself -- to let
> myself go.

At other times Butlin's verses can offer images of surreal intensity ("Indian Summer," "Restorations of a Painted City," "The Colour of my Mother's Eyes"), and these are all the more striking for the prevailing formal balance of his tone. "My Grandfather Dreams Twice of Flanders" is a very fine poem, and here at last, as in "Poem for My Father," the imagery manages to release the feeling that Butlin has held under such tight rein in so many of the other poems.

> After he died my father performed miracles.
> He walks before me with his eyes closed
> guiding me to other hills, other forests and cities
> where I haunt those who live there.
> ("Poem for my Father")

Liz Lochhead has produced a number of songs, dramatic monologues, and sketches for the reviews, plays and public readings she has written or been involved in over the last ten years. These have been collected in *True Confessions and New Cliches*, with three brief prefaces to explain their provenance and to make a modest disclaimer about how they seem when divorced from music or their original setting. The disclaimers aren't needed. While it's obvious that some of these pieces belong to live performance or a topical context, there remain others which are as fine as any of the author's more formal poems. Liz Lochhead has always been alert to social, sexual and literary cliches, and her verse often shows a talent for revitalising them, by transferring or inverting their terms. The monologues and sketches in this collection allow her satirical eye a new freedom, and mark a kind of bridge between her work as a poet and her increasing commitment to serious dramatic writing for the theatre. Actually, it should be a satirical *ear*, for Lochhead excels at those moments in everyday discourse when characters "by being deadly serious, would give themselves away." This satirical method begins with her comic characters as recognisable social stereotypes, except that their identity is made fresh and convincing by the devastating accuracy of her ear for popular speech. There is Sharon the schoolgirl smitten by the Brontes and her English teacher in equal measure; or the frightful Mrs. Abernethy, culture vulture and stalwart of the Women's Guild; or Verena, caught between the freezer shop and legwaxing, whose husband is "up there on the Rigs." These little worlds are developed in a hilarious accumulation of domestic details, and every nuance is at once surprising and absolutely convincing. This is not simple realism, however, for Lochhead overlays her characters' words with a fine and witty mesh of unconscious puns, or verbal collisions, which add a further layer to the comedy:

> Well I was just tidying myself up, och just a wee lick of lipstick and a puffa blusher *basically* when I noticed that my mascara was on its last legs so . . .

("Verena: Anklebiters")

Liz Lochhead has never moved so surely and entertainingly between the truth of cliche and the cliche of truth as she does in the best of these dramatic monologues. Even so, beyond their hilariously mixed registers of speech --swervingly demotic between would-be educated and the predigested nuggets of advertising jargon -- we still, sometimes, glimpse the pathos of unlikely hopes and real loneliness.

William Montgomerie's voice is pared to the bone. Editor of *Lines Review* in the late seventies, and perhaps best known (with his wife Norah) for their collections of Scots bairnrhymes and folklore, Montgomerie writes free verse in the simplest and plainest of narrative styles. *From Time to Time* is the first book of his own poetry to appear since the thirties, and it has been arranged to look over his own long experience (he was born in 1904), with each section speaking to different stages in his life. Poems on his childhood in Glasgow include passages in that city's demotic Scots, and subsequent sections relate to his passion for hillclimbing, a spell in Dundee, the war in which two brothers died, and a career which took him to Berlin and Spain before his return to Edinburgh. The collection is clearly marked by this biographical progress and so consistent is the style and the way that one poem leads into another that the final effect is that the whole book is a single act of autobiographical recall, indirectly told by resting on the fragments of memory or key moments of emotional experience. In fact I think that *From Time to Time* reads best in this light, for the measured plainness of Montgomerie's style accumulates across poems (and his life) in a way that makes up for what might at first seem to be a lack of linguistic tension or expressive force in individual poems. Classical reference and imagery drawn from the stars make a further unity throughout a collection of serious intent and often moving simplicity.

Published in 1986, Iain Crichton Smith's *A Life* adopts the same strategy as Montgomerie, in a verse autobiography even more clearly divided into chronological sections. As an act of conscious recollection, it, too, takes a quieter and more uniform tone and style than one might expect from a volume of independent poems. Smith is a poet whose earlier work has always had a powerful autobiographical charge and,

in the light of this, *A Life* must be an essential document. At the same time I think that the most forceful imaginative truths about this poet and his love-hate relationship with his Lewis origins, Scotland in general, his career as a teacher, and his calling as a poet -- all these have been told already, in both English and Gaelic. Furthermore the earlier poems have unforgettable images which speak for the poet's self declared interest in a poetry of "fighting tensions and not a poetry of statement." As a matter of conscious choice, *A Life* is closer to a poetry of statement, and the imaginative impact of its poems is correspondingly reduced. What we gain as readers, on the other hand, is a more reflective account of times and places and, most significantly I think, the book begins and ends with images of an island -- as if to re-inforce the inescapable centrality of that symbol and its implications for Smith's life, and everything that he has subsequently discovered in the dark and shining exile of the imagination from which his best poetry has always sprung.

Coming from Skye and commited to writing in Gaelic, Aonghas MacNeacail can be no stranger to thoughts of linguistic and cultural exile, for he makes his living in the cities and broadcasting studios of Central Scotland and publishes his poems in dual text Gaelic/English format. Yet his poems rarely deal with this state of affairs, or the mundane world in general, for he has found the confidence to go back to a symbolic utterance to write about what concerns him from the standpoint of a poet who carries his sense of identity with him -- and for MacNeacail that means first and foremost his sense of being a poet -- wherever he goes. Not for him the anguish of separation and loss that characterises Derick Thomson's work, nor the dark roots of Calvinist doctrine that colour so much of Crichton Smith's poetry. In this sense the younger man has gained confidence, I think, from the achievements of these writers before him, and above all from the work of Sorley Maclean. *An Seachnadh agus Dain Eile / The Avoiding and Other Poems*, is MacNeacail's best and most substantial collection to date, and it contains "The Great Snowbattle," separately published and previously reviewed on these pages. The connection with Maclean is challenging, for like Maclean and Yeats before him, MacNeacail adopts no less than a bardic voice to what experience brings him, boldly stated in the very first short poem, "bratach" / "banner", which reads as follows:

your voice crying
reveal yourself

friend i am
the holy fool
the bard
observe and listen

This is nailing your colours to the mast with a vengeance, and in fact MacNeacail does resist the request to reveal himself as he says above, for the typical stance in this collection is at once "poetocentric" (if there is such a word) and yet curiously impersonal. This is, as I say, a consciously bardic voice for whom all things become emblems, and so history, geography and relationships of the heart are consistently depersonalised and set outside specific time and place. Such abstraction lays considerable emphasis on the music of a line, and MacNeacail's commitment to free verse does not lessen the challenge that this implies. It's exciting to see free verse in Gaelic, and there's no doubt that some of its musicality must be lost in the English versions. At the same time, if these poems are innovative in form, their use of epithet and imagery has many traditional echoes. Thus the poet is fond of incremental repetition, or he personifies the Gaelic language with "oak in her arms" and "a bright lasting star on her breast" ("the gaidlig beo" / "gaelic is alive"); or he begins a poem: "i rested a while at the well of pain / the herdsman of wounds was there lamenting" ("gabh mi tamall aig tobar a' chaidh"). MacNeacail's commitment to a world of folk, mythic, or symbolic timelessness is a brave thing. It is a specially privileged view of art in the face of modern experience, but cut off from it too. The challenge remains to make the two meet.

The next two collections face a similar challenge in their attempts to express in poetic form the larger events of recent history. In *The Dirty Business* Tom Scott favours an epic and didactic mode. The first half of this long poem sequence recounts the campaigns of the Second World War in largely prosaic form -- a "dirty business" in which our leaders (like accountants) balance their books with numbers which must always be numbers to them and never living suffering beings. Against such deliberately factual

reportage, Scott's rage, pity and disgust spill over in the second half of the book, with accounts of torture, rape and destruction visualised (not without a certain grim negative relish) at the personal level. The moral is crudely expressed -- simultaneously banal and inescapable -- "We must think people, not statistics."

It's possible that art may never really transform or reconcile such history, and Scott undoubtedly recognises the problem. Yet his vision of human nature is so pessimistic ("Nothing I find in Darwin, Marx or Jung / accounts for the ubiquitous fact / of humankind's ferocity to its own"), that when he does come to evoke "the unity of humankind / beyond all divisions," the effect is short-lived and unconvincing. The poet's Old Testament rage and shame at what we are capable of -- like the ugliness of what he has been describing at such length -- has come to dominate the poem. In the same way, Scott's characteristically long term view (in which such matters are seen as a matter of evolution and the slow overthrow of "capitalist commercialism") offers nothing in the way of new insight, comfort or relief at a personal level on behalf of the poet, the readers, or the victims and their oppressors.

By comparison, Kathleen Jamie and Andrew Greig choose a lyric voice to make their dramatic sequence of meditative or "letter" poems which recreate the pain of history at a more personal level. Two young people of different backgrounds -- a lower-middle-class fighter pilot and a better educated girl working as a nurse -- fall in love during the period of the Battle of Britain, and each poet writes from an appropriate character role. The setting is already archetypal, and the book's title, *A Flame in Your Heart*, openly acknowledges the sentimental and mythic power of such a subject. There are dangers here, and at times the reference to *Picture Post* and aircrew slang, ("Had a bit of a shakey-do yesterday"), serve to evoke stereotypes only. In fact, I'm not sure that the subject can be tackled at all without also conjuring up the 1940s nostalgia industry as seen in a dozen film and television productions. Yet the sequence is better than this, and the imaginative skills of the two poets make for a number of memorable passages, doubly effective when first broadcast, as this piece was, on radio. Thus the vocabulary of aerial combat is wittily or touchingly transferred to other contexts -- as when the pressure of a thumb on a postage stamp "is all it takes to kill a man."

Then again, the mythic quality of the summer of 1940, and of their fated love affair is openly acknowledged in a powerful imagery of burning and falling. In such a context, and under ever-increasing personal stress, we know that Len will soon die. The myth must be acted out and these verses do it rather well. Even if they do leave the genre pretty much unchanged, there are flashes of real power here that go beyond the fond haunting of old photographs.

Tom Leonard's little booklet, *Situations Theoretical and Contemporary*, is very much less accomodating to our cultural and political preferences for comfortable myths of every sort. In thirteen concise captions he offers a series of situations which make their own comment on a world in which such hypothetical scenes are possible, or even probable. His studies, rarely more than ten lines each, vary from radical epigrams of a grimly Blakean sort, to the *faux naif* diction of a children's picture book: "The schooner *The Mother of Parliaments* has anchored in the bay. / The first British ship has reached your land. / See the row-boat, pulling to the shore. / See the ballot-boxes, glinting in the sun! / Run and tell your fellow-tribesmen. / We are going to have a referendum! / Shall we join the British empire?" -- These little bombs demand to be quoted in full or not at all. Their effect is inimitable, caught somewhere between mild irony and a Swiftean rage.

The power of Rayne Mackinnon's *Northern Elegies*, his first collection for some time, lies in the achievement of its poetic voice. Written largely in blank verse, these poems are linked together in sober and stately progress, moving as if in meditation through the seasons of the year, and enlivened by an outstanding eye for landscape and weather description. The poet's base is "Ward 10" of a hospital in Edinburgh -- derived from Mackinnon's own experience of illness and depression -- but his imaginative point of view operates as if he could see the whole of Scotland spread out below him. The core of these poems is to be found, I think, in the quiet night watches of that hospital ward, or any other "trusted walls", where --

> Calm lies all
> Around, and in the dark one is alone
> With Bach, and with a single violin,
> That claims all space in which to mould and move . . .
> ("Eternity")

From this still point, the poet reviews the landscape of his native country, and however wild and bare and stormy it may be, his inner eye will reclaim it in a vision of the unifying mesh of roads across it, or through the passage of winds over it, or in the shared community of sleep and night, or with the arrival of dawn each day or the seasons over the course of the year. In this way the material world enacts what Mackinnon sees as the spiritual wholeness so essential to his Christian faith. I think it's a pity that his closing lines sometimes slip into overt moral conclusions, for the true force of his conviction has already been so well established, in poem after poem, by the sureness of his tone and his gift for landscape description.

> Somewhere the flowers will toss up petals, leaves,
> While far below Carnethy, all the world
> Will grin and then get on with life. Scald Law
> Will hear the plovers casting seeds of song
> Into the air's thin soil, and Castlelaw
> Will scan the villages alive and fresh,
> And the old pits rise stubbornly from earth.
> ("The Song")

The grimness and the beauty of such lines, make for a truly "northern" voice, and provide the best testimony to Mackinnon's faith and to the renovating power of art.

As a practising psychiatrist, Ken Morrice also knows about the darker watches of the night, and poems such as "The Institute," "Times Eleven," and "Our Necessary Gods" deal with his own moments of professional or personal self-questioning. But the prevailing voice of *When Truth is Known* takes a more cheerful outlook on life. Many of the poems in this collection belong to the occasional mode, in which the author's breezy and urbane wit responds to his workaday world by transferring epithets from its different categories into less familiar contexts. Thus his lines take their focus from gardening, waking in the morning, shaving or commuting: swans are seen "galoshing awkwardly" on a frozen pond; spring mounts a "March Offensive" with snow for "flak"; and traffic jams, like heart attacks, speak of arterial congestion. This cheerful image-making can be a little disconcerting, however, when it is carried over into some of the more introspective poems. Thus a line such as "the rear-view mirror of my days"

has a rather too smooth ring to it in a poem about the pangs of jealousy ("Echoes"); and just occasionally I'm puzzled by the final effect of lines which speak about his own or other people's mental pain with such metrical confidence and all the epigrammatic closure of regular rhyme: "Am I half awake, half in a dream / caught in a fault in the computer? / Is this a stutter in the brain's machine / and I destined to be a late commuter / forever fated to just miss his train?" ("Incubus").

G.F. Dutton's passion for sea and river swimming informs the closing sequence of poems in *Squaring the Waves*, his second collection. Metaphors of cold water and the salt darkness in our blood are well matched by the cool austerity of his free verse lines: "You are out on the ebb tide, / replete, / asking no more / than this peace of no decision;" ("evening"). In fact, this existential nakedness in style and outlook is characteristic of all the poems in the book. The result is refreshing and chilling in equal measure:

> . . . a bare sun
> on a bare day
> dropped into winter.
> no sound.
>
> no birds about.
> and a hazel tree
> in the hazel nut
> on my bare hand.
> ("hazels")

Such passages can seem thin, but Dutton's severe economy of gesture gains a kind of eloquence as we move from poem to poem. Even so, I found a preference for the slightly longer pieces ("hero," "echinus") in which he allows himself a little more scope to develop a relationship between tone, setting and subject matter.

By comparison, Douglas Dunn's work has always been generously full of people, places and things. He has made good and serious poems about lamp-posts, ratatouille and paperclips, without a hint of condescension or literary archness. His beginnings, in *Terry Street*, were plainer, with a poetry or wryly low key social observation; subsequent collections have seen a broadening technique and outlook, and a growing confidence in his voice. As a compassionate

observer of the social world, Douglas Dunn is one of our most notable writers. *St. Kilda's Parliament* (reviewed in these pages) marked a conscious return to questions of his Scottish roots, and last year's *Elegies* produced individual poems of quite outstanding power. *Selected Poems 1964-1983* gives a generous selection from these and earlier collections, a particularly fine achievement over twenty years from a poet still in his mid-forties.

Stirling University

SCOTTISH POETRY

1985

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Morgan, Edwin. *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet).

Neill, William. *Wild Places* (Barr: Luath Press).

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Leonard, Tom. *Situations Theoretical and Contemporary* (Newcastle: Galloping Dog Press).

MacKinnon, Rayne. *Northern Elegies* (Edinburgh: Netherbow Arts Centre).

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Smith, Iain Crichton. *A Life* (Manchester: Carcanet).