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ALEXANDER SCOTT

Scottish Poetry in 1972

On 11th August of this year we celebrated the eightieth birthday of our greatest living poet, Hugh MacDiarmid. That day, the B.B.C. broadcast part of his Scots masterpiece, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), and a Scots poem in his honour composed by the present writer, while on the following day *The Scotsman* newspaper published three celebratory poems in English by MacDiarmid's wife Valda Trevlyn, by Robin Fulton, editor of our oldest poetry magazine, *Lines Review*, and by the author of this article. The latter also edited, with MacDiarmid's son, Michael Grieve, *The Hugh MacDiarmid Anthology: Poems in Scots and English* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston), a volume on which the talented Hebridian poet Iain Crichton Smith commented, "I cannot remember when I was so impressed by a book of poems. This anthology makes very clear indeed how great a poet MacDiarmid is and great in so many strange ways. One sees very clearly that the *Drunk Man* is a central and unmatched achievement except for other more isolated sections and the early lyrics . . . What one is aware of in him is an extraordinary richness and combined with that, a quite frightening insight into and expression of both the horror and glory of life."¹ MacDiarmid himself, for the same occasion, was commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council to write a poem which was published in the August issue of the poetry magazine *Akros* along with the prize-winning entries in a poetry competition organised in his honour by the magazine's editor, Duncan Glen, while an extended essay on the relationship between the Founding Father and his various disciples, "The MacDiarmid Makars," by Alexander Scott, appeared in the same number.² Also edited by Duncan Glen was *Hugh MacDiarmid: A Critical Survey* (Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh and London), a wide-ranging collection of essays by sixteen critics of differing degrees of distinction.

With all those tributes being paid to one of our very greatest poets in Scots, it was all the more appropriate that the year should see the appearance of the best all-Scots collection for two decades, *Clytack*

1. *The Glasgow Herald*, 7 Oct 1972.

2. Reissued separately as *The MacDiarmid Makars 1923-1972* (Akros Publications, Preston, 1972).

(Akros Publications, Preston) by Alastair Mackie (b. 1925). Although Mackie has been publishing all-too-occasional poems in Scots since the middle fifties, it was only after the appearance of his mainly-English pamphlet *Soundings* (1966) that he began to achieve print with the frequency his talent deserves. An Aberdonian, possessing a bred-in-the-bone intimacy with the rich Scots spoken in the North-East during his youth (which he expresses in the touching tribute to his grandmother, "Chateaux en Ecosse"), Mackie has an idiomatic command of the medium which has given him mastery over a wide range of themes, from the local to the universal (and the universal-in-the-local). In "Drappit," where a footballer relegated to the touchline watches his successor succeed, Scotland's surrogate religion finds its sardonic prophet ("The goalie's like a bloke that's crucified, / And even Jesus couldna stop that shot"), but the theme of supercession is relevant to more than soccer, and the tone of mingled regret, envy and admiration is not only cunningly controlled but exactly suited to the mixed motives of humanity. Where the picture presented in "Drappit" may be seen any Saturday afternoon anywhere in Scotland, the sketch drawn in "Pieta" is archetypal, the portrait of a woman, maddened by grief, holding a slain child in her arms and howling in agony ("It's the cauldest grue i the universe / yon skelloch. / It niver waukens the deid"). That shudder of desolation gives way to the exultant cry of creation in "Through the Deid-Chack," with its affirmative concluding couplet, "Though I hear the deid chack / I mak."

Colloquial comedy in "Scots Pegasus" ("The hert o the nut is this — / naeboddy, damnt, kens the horseman's wurd"); acrid wit in "Dirtengab" ("The muckle erse-hole / o his mou farts"); imaginative celebration of the novel achievements of space-flight in "The Cosmonaut: Hero-Three" ("In a wey we're like the trinity / three persons, ae instrument"); the introverted image of youthful pain in "Adolescence" ("cut gless lookin at cut gless"); the grim religious—or irreligious—irony of "In Absentia" ("We've no heard frae God this while, / said ane o the angels")—for all of these Mackie finds the form which best matches the finely-patterned march of his phrases. His style can encompass both naked statements ("Her face was thraved. / She wisna aa come") and dazzling imagery ("The menace o hemmert bress ower the sea. / The sun is smiddy in a targe"), and his strong individual rhythms reinforce the power of his personal vision.

Equally appropriate, in view of MacDiarmid's enrichment of the Scots tradition by his many striking translations of European poems, was the publication of a volume of "Mayakovsky in Scots," *Wi the*

Haill Voice (Charcanet Press, South Hinksey, Oxford), translated from the Russian by Edwin Morgan (b. 1920). The fruit of some twenty years of professional practice—"Mayakonferensky's Anecdote," the most remarkable *tour de force* in the collection, first appeared in the magazine *Lines Review* as long ago as 1954—these are the finest translations of Mayakovsky's powerfully provocative works into any of the languages currently written in Britain, not only because (as Morgan suggests) the Scots tongue is better able than contemporary English to combine the colloquial and the aureate, as any version of this particular poet's work must try to do if it is to approach adequacy, but also (and at least equally importantly) because the present translator is the best poet to attempt the task. His impeccable ear, no less than his keen intelligence, enables him to match every swiftly-changing nuance of the original, creating re-creations which are themselves creations in their own right. Yet irony is never entirely absent from the Scots literary scene, and there is much of it to savour in the contrast between Morgan's introduction to this volume, in which he pays tribute to MacDiarmid's creation of a "synthetic" literary Scots and acknowledges himself as a practitioner in that tradition, and his article on "Scottish Poetry in the 60's"—published from the same press at almost the same time³—where he belittles the achievements of the MacDiarmid school in comparison with some few recent attempts at writing in a Scots confined to the patois of Glasgow.

No less ironical is the fact that while Morgan the translator has such consummate command of Scots, Morgan the original poet confines himself to English (except on the comparatively infrequent occasions when necessities of subject-matter require the introduction of Scots speech). In *Instamatic Poems* (Ian McKelvie, London), he is—paradoxically—at once at his most and his least original, for the contents are presented as the verbal equivalents of camera shots which might have accompanied paragraphs published in the press. In subject, then, the poems are 'twice-told tales;' but only an author of Morgan's unusual inventiveness could have conceived of re-telling them in quite this way. Yet the novelty of approach wears rather thin over no less than fifty-two separate (but technically-related) items, and the poet's concentration on the bizarre leads to a certain repetitiveness of mood which plays against the interesting variety of the source-material, for too many of the verses give the impression of having been penned by that ubiquitous contributor of letters-to-the-press, "Disgusted, Glas-

3. *British Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey*, ed. M. Schmidt and G. Lindop.

gow." As against this pervasive sameness, however, Morgan can also range from the wickedly witty ("London, June 1971") to the appalling ("Campobasso Italy Undated Reported March 1971"), from the obliquely disillusioned ("Translunar Space March 1972") to the brutally direct ("Glasgow 5 March 1971"), and the power of visual imagination in the poems is as remarkable as their knife-edged economy of style.

Also bilingual in Scots and English is Morgan's contemporary and colleague, the present writer (b. 1920), in *Double Agent: Poems in English and Scots* (Akros Publications, Preston). That this, too, was perhaps a not inappropriate volume for MacDiarmid's eightieth year may be gathered from the comment of the poet George Bruce, Creative Writing Fellow in the University of Glasgow, on "the radical tradition of Scots verse as practised by MacDiarmid in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and continued through to Alexander Scott's *Double Agent* . . . in which some of the blows struck are formidable."⁴ A co-editor with Bruce on the *Scottish Poetry* anthologies, Maurice Lindsay, was equally generous.

Alexander Scott's new collection ranges widely. There are poems which, in the best sense, come into the category of wit-writing; a series of epigrams called "Scotched," where wit is all; and some of the most strongly emotionally-charged and technically-energised poems he has yet achieved. In the first category there is "Sabbath," an infidel's vivid camera-snap glimpse of a wealthy church congregation assembling, with its amazed vision of "gentle Jesus/ kicking camel-fat backsides/ through a needle's eye." The overblown wonder-world of film-land gets amused, ironic treatment from Mr. Scott in more than one poem. "Kong was King" is in the poet's most heavily-alliterative Scots manner; "Beast Fable" is a lighter and, I think, defter look at the cratur in English . . . Remaining with the world of pop-vision, though only dubiously comic (depending on the age of the reader/viewer), there's a neat piece of Scots word-play in "Top of the Pops."

Mr. Scott's "Scotched" has been fairly widely circulated already. It doesn't seem to me to have anything to do with poetry; and indeed, he doesn't claim that it has. But a few nails are tapped neatly on the head. "Scotch Poets," for instance: "Wha's the/ T'ither?" Or "Scotch Education": "I tellt ye/ I tellt ye." And "Scotch Passion": "Forget/Mysel." To me, the poems that matter most are those in which musicality and emotional pressure combine to produce a kind of inevitability. There is the poem "Cry," for instance, in which Orestes, Orpheus, Tiresias and Oedipus are interpreted in personal terms. There's also "Bal-lade of Beauties," in which a rather artificial traditional form

4. *The Scotsman*, 11 August 1973.

associated with trifling love-verse is made to carry the weight of the contrast between "Miss Israel Nineteen-Sixty-Eight" and "Miss Warsaw Ghetto Nineteen-Forty-Two" with considerable effect. I have remembered these poems since I first read them, just as I find I have remembered "On World," a reflection on the extent to which we are all responsible for each other, and "Glasgow Gangs," since I first heard them read at a Clyde Fair poetry session. In an age when most of the poetry one reads is totally unmemorable, four poems out of one collection isn't bad going! *Double Agent*, with its variety of subject and treatment and its forsaking of the writer's earlier fondness for pounding alliteration in favor of a new expressive flexibility, is strongly recommendable. It certainly gave me both amusement and satisfaction.⁵

A younger bilingual poet, Donald Campbell (b. 1940), has produced his first full-length volume in *Rhymes 'n Reasons* (Reprographia, Edinburgh), bearing out the comment made here on the contents of an earlier pamphlet, "Their energy and contemporary concern suggest better work to come when those qualities are combined with greater self-criticism and technical care."⁶ While some of the poems in the present collection are still juvenilia, with as many technical flaws and over-rhetorical flourishes as the least successful of their predecessors, the fully-achieved creations are as individual as they are striking in their emotional, intellectual, formal and rhythmical scope. The characteristic Scottish expression of delicate tenderness through the medium of darkly-ironical apparent callousness is a difficult mode to master, but Campbell brings it off with fine panache in "Vietnam on My Mind," while in another political—or anti-political—poem, "Bangla Desh," he accomplished the even trickier feat of expressing sympathy through its seeming denial. This command of ambiguity finds a subject in itself in "Ye say 'Glass'" ("I think 'gless'"), where discussion of that almost-hackneyed modern theme, the meaning of meaning, is conducted with a comic liveliness of metre and rhyme which still expresses doubt and difficulty; and a love-poem, "You're the Worst," ends a series of amusing paradoxes by becoming a savagely-serious hate-poem too ("Ye tell me ye love me—syne spit in my face!"). A battle-of-the-sexes poem, "Twa Pairties," builds up through a firework display of images to a crackling exchange of insults-by-pun, while the quiet restraint of style in "At a Pairty" is gently appropriate to the desolate theme of lovers failing to meet "in the dark lobby o our common want." With "Cruivie and Gilsanquhar"—based on two characters from MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man*—Campbell becomes a

5. *The Glasgow Review*, Vol. IV, No. 1, p. 46.

6. "Scottish Poetry in 1971," *SSL*, Vol. IX, No. 4, p. 252.

savage critic of the common Burnsian, adding insult to injury by his use of the so-called Burns stanza; but elsewhere he shows both understanding and sympathy for the common man, whether in isolation ("Keelie") or in the mass ("Communion at Dunkirk," where that sympathy suddenly blossoms into unexpected—but not undeserved—admiration). All the above poems are in Scots. The half-dozen in English have a promising rhythmical delicacy.

"Delicacy is not enormously the style" of William Neill (b. 1922), who writes in all three of our languages, Gaelic, Scots and English, in *Despatches Home* (Reprographia, Edinburgh), where he shows himself to be more patriotic than poetic, relying too often on the appeal of nationalist sentiment to persuade the reader to overlook conventionalities of phrase and image and infelicities of rhythm and rhyme. In content, his most interesting work is "Verses from Exile," translated from the Gaelic of John Maclean, 1787-1848, but even this authentic record of the New World experiences of a victim of the Highland Clearances is marred by a lumbering movement which makes its English awkward. Free of those faults is the original poem, "Nausicaa," which appears in both a Gaelic and an English version, and possesses in both a fine colloquial flow and idiomatic wit.

If Neill is a Highlander by adoption, having learned Gaelic in his mature years, Iain Crichton Smith (b. 1928) is the real Mackay, a native speaker of Gaelic who is also a master of metaphor in the other tongue. But neither of his two current volumes, *Love Poems and Elegies* (Gollancz, London) and *Hamlet in Autumn* (Lines Review Editions, Loanhead, Midlothian), is vintage work. In the first, the twenty-two poems occasioned by his mother's death seem to have been written too close to the event, when the poet was still stunned by it, and consequently they lack illumination, while the love poems "for S" have too little significance for any reader other than the recipient, only "At the Scott Exhibition, Edinburgh Festival" transcending the merely personal in experience. In the second collection, too many of the verses are "litterachewr" rather than poetry, crowded with learned references to Francis Bacon, Pericles, Apollo, Creon, Frankenstein, Homer, Hector, Troy, Hamlet, Ophelia, Portia, Shylock, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tchegov, Lenin, Brahms, Scandinavian films, Westerns, Chaplin, Napoleon, Dionysus, Ulysses, Athene, Achilles, Aphrodite, Ajax, Brutus—a screen of scholarship erected disabblingly between the poet and the fact. A change occurs with "Five Gaelic Poems" (which are, in truth, English prose translations of Gaelic originals), for there is the fact unscreened and lit by vivid shafts of imagination; but all

too soon the references begin to recur—Lowell, "The White Swan," Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll, Hans Andersen, the substitution of other authors' insights for the writer's own. It is to be hoped that the regrettable failure of nerve indicated by these arty-crafty verses will be of no great duration.

There is no lack of nerve in the work of Tom Buchan (b. 1931), but a growing tendency to expend too much of it in quarrelling with others, rather than with himself, makes too many of the contributions to his *Poems 1969-1972* (The Poni Press, Edinburgh) appear as rhetoric rather than poetry. His best work is in poems of ironic pity, as in the superbly-controlled slow-motion picture of a Vietnam war victim, "The Flaming Man," the beautifully understated horror of "Katyn," the detached self-satire of "Ulysses"; but when pity gives way to rage Buchan becomes a kind of forty-year-old adolescent, substituting verbal fornication for emotional energy, and consequently losing shaped force in a welter of over-conscious obscenities. His notion of replacing the letter "t" in "bureaucrat" with the letter "p" shows fair comic invention, but the device is spoiled by being done not only to death but to decay and dissolution, with no fewer than seven separate variations on the same disgusted theme. But it may be that in this volume Buchan will have got rid of enough bile to enable him to avoid further outbursts of self-defeating hatred and blaming-others despair. It is a good sign that his ear for the music of language remains unaffected by his rage.

The control which Buchan seems to have mislaid meantime is seldom absent from the work of Stewart Conn (b. 1936), who keeps his talent on so tight a rein that *An Ear to the Ground* (Hutchinson, London) catches the rhythm of the sedate canter more often than that of the exhilarating gallop. The great virtue of these poems—most of them domestic, on family friends and familiar places in and around Glasgow, Ayrshire and the Highlands—is that they never claim too much, that their concern with an individual past is almost puritanically disassociated from the vice of nostalgia, that their expression of present experience proceeds by means of understatements which impress in their integrity. Yet when Conn writes of "the trout . . . being secretive enough for my style," he indicates how the less successful of his poems fail, through a constitutional restraint so strict as to inhibit complete communication between writer and reader, leaving the latter to wonder (in vain) about the significance to the poet of persons and scenes drawn in strokes too slight, or too scanty, to present a clear picture to other eyes. But there is nothing either slight or scanty

about some of the last poems in the book. "Message from an Island" finds in the image of the marooned mariner a moving symbol of the difficulty of sending messages from man to man; "At Coruisk" expresses the ambiguities of experience through a shifting series of vivid double-edged visions; and "Marriage a Mountain-Ridge" blazes its age-old truths upon the eyes and the mind in a sequence of novel similes which are provocative as well as evocative of the perils (and the prizes) of wedlock. No such felicities enliven the verse of Douglas Dunn (b. 1942), whose *The Happier Life* (Faber and Faber, London) is written in a style of such sub-Larkin strengthlessness as to be indistinguishable from prose even when it rhymes. It is sad to see the work of a once-promising poet diminished by a pursuit of the merely fashionable which has become so deliberate that it looks like pastiche.

Much more than promising is a first volume by Liz Lochhead (b. 1942?), *Memo for Spring* (Reprographia, Edinburgh), for she has an ear for verbal music and a wryly-pretty wit as well as a painter's eye for significant detail. Like Conn, Miss Lochhead is mainly an autobiographical poet, but she is much less reluctant to give herself away, and this—together with her puckish humour—makes her work more immediately appealing, even if it is ultimately less profound. Her experiences—growing up, becoming aware of "the generation gap," falling in and out of love, beginning to realise the strangeness of other people than herself—are seldom unusual, but her keenness of sight, her self-deprecatory comedy, her punster's way with words, and her dexterity with rhythm and rhyme are all markedly individual. As is to be expected of a first collection, some of her poems fail to sustain their opening impetus, and in some that first energy is itself too slight for the work to travel far enough to hit the target of significant success, but in general her verse has a sparkling swiftness of movement, allied to a refreshing openness to actuality, which stimulates and retains the reader's interest to a high degree.

So recent is Miss Lochhead's arrival on the poetical scene that she appears as "Elizabeth," not "Liz," on making her first bow in the "annual" anthology, *Scottish Poetry 6* (Edinburgh University Press), which is edited, like its predecessors, by George Bruce, Maurice Lindsay and Edwin Morgan. Owing to a year's delay in publication, this volume in the series, although the largest, is far from being the most satisfactory, for too many of its contributions had already appeared in individual collections during that last twelvemonth. Again, too many of its "established" contributors show fatal signs of repeating their various mixtures-as-before, and too many of its newcomers lack Miss

Lochhead's individuality. However, since the most extended work in the anthology, the present writer's twenty-one poem sequence, *Greek Fire* (Akros Publications, Preston, 1971),⁷ was already out of print before its reproduction in *Scottish Poetry 6*, and since the appearance there of five poems from Alastair Mackie's *Clytach* and two from Duncan Glen's *Fiers* (Akros Publications, Preston, 1971)⁸ may serve to direct readers to those volumes, the long delay in publication may not be an unmitigated disaster, however much it is generally to be regretted. But the collection's other faults would seem to indicate that, after six volumes over the years since 1966, the anthology's editorial board would be none the worse of a reshuffling.

The three-man anthology by George Mackay Brown (b. 1921), Norman MacCaig (b. 1910) and Iain Crichton Smith which is No. 21 in the Penguin Modern Poets Series (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth) follows so closely in the respective footsteps of those three authors' *Selected Poems*, all of which were noticed here on their first appearance, the first two last year⁹ and the third only a year earlier,¹⁰ as to require no additional recommendation to admirers of those three widely-known and much-appreciated writers. Published in 'trio', however, their work unfortunately suggests a view of Scotland as a kind of Caledonian Arcadia which, however appealing to the non-Scottish reader, is far from being in accordance with the fuller facts of the Scottish situation, either past or present. Although any such view is a good deal less than fair to each of these poets individually, its emergence from this triple selection is as inevitable as it is unhappy.

Of our two poetry magazines, the elder, *Lines Review*, celebrated its twenty-first year of publication with a double number which contained work by no less than twenty-three poets, ranging from the doyen of contemporary Gaelic poetry, Sorley Maclean (b. 1911) to a number of undergraduates at Glasgow University, whose work was selected by that institution's Creative Writing Fellow, George Bruce. In the course of its not undistinguished history, *Lines* has had no less than six editors, all of them poets of some distinction, Alan Riddell (the founder), Sydney Goodsir Smith, Tom Scott (one issue only), J. K. Annand, A. D. Mackie and Robin Fulton, but only the issues presided over by the last, who has occupied the editorial chair since 1967, receive

7. *SSL*, Vol. IX, No. 4, pp. 250-1.

8. *SSL*, Vol. IX, No. 4, p. 253.

9. *SSL*, Vol. IX, No. 4, pp. 243-7.

10. *SSL*, Vol. VIII, No. 4, pp. 231-2.

any notice on this anniversary occasion. This editorial egocentricity would seem to reflect the attitude which has led Fulton, himself a poet who writes in English only, to deny any space whatsoever to the younger makars who employ Scots. Not that Fulton ignores Scots altogether—there are two poems by Goodsir Smith (b. 1915), and seven (two of them translations) by Robert Garioch (b. 1909), in the twenty-first birthday issue, and six by the present writer in the number which preceded it—but these three veterans are the only Scots makars to be represented with original work in *Lines* since 1968. Such a degree of editorial blindness to native talent goes at least some way towards explaining why Fulton has had to fall back on whole issues entirely devoted to verse translated (largely by himself) from other European languages.

Antithetically, Duncan Glen, editor of *Akros*, is if anything even too catholic, producing a "visual poetry" (!) issue with No. 18, an issue in honour of MacDiarmid's eightieth birthday with No. 19, and a "General Poetry" issue, including no less than thirty-nine contributors in either (or both) Scots and English, with No. 20. Among Glen's "discoveries" there may be as many geese as there are swans, but the number of the truly talented who have first reached the wider public through his pages is impressively large, and an editor who can claim to have provided an outlet for both the young Donald Campbell—in Scots—and the even younger Tom Leonard (b. 1944)—in English—is owed the gratitude of readers as well as that of the writers concerned.

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