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ALEXANDER SCOTT

Scottish Poetry in 1973

Many (perhaps most) twentieth-century Scottish poets have been what is called "late developers" in educationist jargon. Some who started to write in their teens and twenties have reached their thirties or forties before beginning to produce fully-achieved work, and others have not even started to apply themselves to poetry until their heads are either balding or grey. But of course there are exceptions to every rule, particularly in the arts, and especially in Scotland, where all rules and regulations tend to be regarded as having been made in order to be broken, and in the past half-century the country has witnessed the emergence of a few marvellous boys and/or *enfants terribles* alongside the hoary veterans and the middle-aged novices. The present year provides examples of all three of those categories.

The doyen of Edinburgh makars, J. K. Annand (b. 1908), has been publishing verse in Scots since the later twenties, when he was one of the first disciples of Hugh MacDiarmid, but did not bring out a collection until 1965, with *Sing it Aince for Pleisure*, the best book of Scots bairn-rhymes since William Soutar's *Seeds in the Wind* (1933; enlarged edition 1943). *Sing it Aince for Pleisure*, which has also gone into a second edition, showed that Annand was not only a clever contriver of verse for children but a poet who, on occasion, could combine complete simplicity of style with considerable power of passion. There is rather less of this power, but no lessening of humour and invention, in his current bairn-book, *Twice for Joy* (Loanhead, Midlothian: M. Macdonald), which Scottish children will find joyous on many more occasions than merely twice.

Only a year younger than Annand, Robert Garioch (b. 1909) started to publish highly individual and idiosyncratic poems in what he has called "artisan Scots"¹ in the early thirties, but he has never

¹ *The Big Music* (Thurso: Caithness Books, 1971) p. 6.

been a very voluminous writer, and his first considerable volume, *Selected Poems*, did not appear until 1966. Its successor, *The Big Music* (1971), was a disappointment, for some of its contents gave the impression that they had been omitted from *Selected Poems* because they had failed to come up to scratch, while others trod too closely, but less memorably, in the footsteps of successful contributions to the earlier work.² To a lesser extent, his new collection, *Doktor Faust in Rose Street* (Loanhead, Midlothian: M. Macdonald), suffers from the same faults, with a number of minor pieces dredged up from the forties which ought to have been left lying in the limbo where the author should have been glad to see them lost, and some which once again are "the mixture as before" but with the original potency diluted by the drip-drip-drip of routine. Fortunately, however, there are also others which show Garioch still discovering novel and original ways to "make it new" in Scots poetry.

In the past he has shown himself a master of set forms, the sonnet and the "Christ's Kirk on the Green" stanza, and now he displays an equal command of free verse, combining colloquial liberty with impeccable rhythmical control. "Perfect" has craftsmanship in the working of wood as its central symbol, and contrasts this with modern mechanical methods of production in a way that is at once witty and sad. "Cooling-Aff," a surrealist study of the "het air . . . escaping frae St Andrews Hous," makes that metaphor literal in lines which are both ridiculous and horrific in their application to the centre of Scottish government (or lack thereof). "Lesson," although more diffuse than those, has a fine combination of feeling and restraint in its melancholy acceptance of change and its unemphatic celebration of unconquerable human vitality, in whatever odd guise it may appear (in this case, a go-go dancer prancing prettily in the unlikely environment of a pub in Leith).

While Garioch's humour is often genial, his "Twa Festival Sketches" are etched in acid. The first pictures a poet being arrested for "sellin broadsheets o poems" outside a concert-hall where the official Edinburgh Festival presentation is a reading of the works of that earlier itinerant vendor of verses, William McGonagall (ironically entitled "the Great"). In the second, we are present at

² See "Scottish Poetry in 1971," *SSL*, ix, 4, 251-52.

the annual Tattoo, where the Duchess of Gordon, recruiting for the clan regiment in an historical tableau, gives every man who enlists "a blue-bluidit kiss . . . the Kiss o Daith." The cutting-edged economy of the style here is matched in "Calling All Hypocrites," a sly slap at a universal human failing which even "thon great Scotch scotcher o hypocrites" who is singled out as "the brawest o them aa" can scarcely fail to appreciate.³

Alongside those, the many verses in stanza form seem too formal altogether. In particular, the title poem, which presents a pub in Rose Street, Edinburgh, as "the warstest neuk o Hell," is too long, and too reminiscent of music-hall patter, and the "Scunner" sequence of three poems is too jaunty in rhythm for adequate expression of the proletarian hatred-and-despair to which Garioch seeks to give a voice. Others, like the ode to Professor Gregory Smith (inventor of that tartan-red-herring, "the Caledonian antiszygy"),⁴ are merely jokey, and yet others, like "The Nostalgie," are too slight and too local in interest for readers from outside Edinburgh.

Throughout his career, together with his own poems, Garioch has also produced some notable (and some not so notable) translations into Scots, and the present volume is no exception. The versions of Apollinaire are as near-contemporary in style as their originals, and Goethe's "Prometheus" has a timeless power in keeping with its protagonist. But both the pre-classical Greek Hesiod and the nineteenth-century Italian sonneteer Belli are presented in a mock-medieval guise which goes against their nature. Ironically enough, the best poem in this section of the book is not a translation at all but a work of Garioch's own, "Proem and Inscription for a Hermes," which incorporates four lines of a Greek inscription into a dazzling evocation of the more-than-dazzling heat and light of a Mediterranean summer, a creation of superb sensuous energy and joy.

Such sensuous energy has always been a major element of the poems in English written by Norman MacCaig (b. 1910)⁵ over the many years, and the many distinguished volumes, of the outstanding

³ See Alexander Scott, "Scotched," *Double Agent* (Preston: Akros Publications, 1972), pp. 30-32.

⁴ *Scottish Literature, Character and Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1919).

⁵ See Alexander Scott, "Norman MacCaig: Sensuous Energy," *Akros*, III, 7 (March 1968), 30-36.

career which began with *Far Cry* in 1943 and started all over again—after his repudiation of Apocalyptic rhetoric and rhodomontade—with *Riding Lights* in 1955. His present collection, *The White Bird* (London: Chatto and Windus and The Hogarth Press), is the ninth in succession from the latter, and it shows that another quality which he possesses in at least equal measure is the ability to break new ground. In the title-poem, where economy of style enhances intensity of controlled emotion, the poetry is in the pity as seldom (if ever) before in MacCaig's verse, where hitherto even compassion has been touched by the sardonic—while here the ironies are as sorrowful as the poignant (yet exact) images. But this pity never becomes self-pity, never self-dramatisation, for he laughs at himself (as in "Milne's Bar") while mourning the agonies of others, and even while celebrating his own lifetime's experiences (as in the evocative extended poem, "Inward Bound") he takes care not to claim too general a significance for the colourful antitheses in which he embodies the contradictions of time and place and personality.

The mastery of metaphor and the control of cadence in this volume are as seemingly-effortless as ever; the human sympathy, and the consciousness of flaws in his own humanity, are expressed with an unemphatic eloquence unmatched in the earlier work. Paradoxically, as the range of MacCaig's subjects, themes and responses has widened over the years, he has stripped down his style to the barest essentials, and yet without any sacrifice of witty grace and unexpected novelty of vision. His impeccable poetic tact, which ought to make him the despair of his many imitators, has resulted in much emulation, but he remains without rival among contemporary Scottish poets whose work is entirely in English.

If MacCaig made a false start in the forties by plunging into the apparently aimless welter of Apocalyptic imagery, he was by no means alone in that error, and he made a faster recovery than most of the other White Horsemen who attempted to gallop through the same turgid swamp. Among these was Maurice Lindsay (b. 1918), whose early career constitutes an Awful Warning on the dire fate awaiting the apprentice poet whose enthusiasm for prevailing fashions misleads him into adopting modes with which his own talents are entirely at variance. After attempting Apocalypticism in *No Crown*

for *Laughter* (1943), Lindsay fell under the influence of the "aggrandised Scots" written by Hugh MacDiarmid and his forties' disciples, the so-called Lallans Makars. Half-a-dozen Scots pieces from this period appear in Lindsay's *Selected Poems 1942-1972* (London: Robert Hale), but they are very far from being among his best work. Unlike MacDiarmid—or Garioch and some others—Lindsay was not a native speaker of Scots, and his poems in that tongue are marred by an imperfect ear for the movement of the language. Even the most subtle of them, "On Seeing a Picture of Johann Christian Fischer," lacks a necessary syllable in the concluding line, and elsewhere he is unable to prevent Anglification from breaking incongruously in. But Lindsay had sufficient talent to be able to learn from his mistakes, and since the late fifties he has been a "lucky poet" in that his work shows a continuous—and continuing—improvement.

He began to emerge as an accomplished craftsman in some of the poems first collected in *Snow Warning* (1962), and all but ten of the seventy-one poems in the current volume date from that occasion and later. At first he continued to use the traditional verse forms in which his earlier verse had been shaped, but there is a new colloquial ease and force and brevity in "Epitaph for a Farmer," a new economy of evocation in "Travellers' Tales," a new tact in the witty melancholy of "At Hans Christian Andersen's Birthplace," and there and elsewhere he is able to resist the temptation (to which he was earlier all too prone to succumb) to try to give deeper significance to moments of insight by tagging on to them conclusions which are perhaps philosophical but are certainly otiose. In "School Prizegiving," dramatisation is complete, with thought and feeling embodied in action, and in "Picking Apples" and "Early Morning Fisher" (from *One Later Day*, 1964) the controlled sensuousness of the style is at once vivid and vibrant.

With *This Business of Living* (1969) ⁶ he begins to move away from set forms. "A Ballad of Orpheus," a subtle exploration of the ambiguities of love, cunningly plays the paradoxes of its freely-moving emotions *against* the restrictions of the iambic quatrain, and "At the Mouth of the Ardyne," his first poem in free verse, presents a stark yet stunning sequence of images evoking brutality and guilt.

⁶ See "Scottish Poetry in 1969," *SSL*, vii, 4, 218-19.

Other free verse poems, from *Comings and Goings* (1971),⁷ are no less impressive. The satirical wit of "The Vacant Chair," the beautifully-balanced emotional control of the "Elegy" on his father, the wry humour of "A Change of Fashion," the fine blend of pity and self-depreciation in "Feeling Small"—these demonstrate a range of subject-matter and feeling which shows a praiseworthy openness to new experiences and an equally admirable ability to find new ways to express them. Later poems still, collected here for the first time, "The Devil's Elbow" with its unemphatic irony, "Blow-Up" with its clever playing-down (and crying-up) of a contemporary horror by the employment of a central image of the most everyday ordinari-ness, "Toward Light" with its deliberately understressed antithesis between past and present, are equally masterly.

As a lyrical (and occasional) poet, Lindsay is frequently fine but by no means flawless. When he is off form, he tends to try to pack too much detail into his poems, until they fall over their own feet in all the litter of adjectival verbosity; and he juggles parts of speech with a kind of desperate ingenuity which all too often lands flat on the floor (a particularly appalling example is his description of a sheep-dip as "a trough of bleat"). But the way in which he has worked to win command of his art, and to control his own more eccentric mannerisms, deserves the greatest respect. He may have reached the upper levels of achievement comparatively late, but of the achievement itself there is no doubt.

Like Lindsay, Sydney Tremayne (b. 1912) began his career in the forties, but there is nothing in his *Selected and New Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus) earlier than his third volume, *The Rock and the Bird* (1955), in which he found his own voice for the first time. The twenty-seven poems from that collection included here are (unfashionably for their period) simple, sensuous and passionate. He sees the world as being lovely, mysterious and tragic, and this vision he expresses with such aptness of imagery and appropriateness of rhythm that the poems give the impression of having written themselves, so inevitable do their word-patterns appear. Neither a reporter nor a philosopher, he broods over the object of his concern until his senses have distilled its essence. He is least successful when he attempts to rationalise from experience, most successful when content

⁷ See "Scottish Poetry in 1971," *SSL*, ix, 4, 248-49.

to illuminate the mood of scene and incident. This is a poetry of great charm; yet that charm contains an awareness that the beauty of the world is dangerous and that human fate is pitiful as well as brave. Such awareness finds poignant expression in "The Galloway Shore" (from *The Swans of Berwick*, 1962), which has a mastery of metaphor comparable with MacCaig's, a grave melodiousness no less consummate in its unemphatic rhythmical command, and an apparent transparency of apprehension which only the most delicate artistic tact could achieve. At once a study of solitude, a view of communion, an evocation of landscape and a profound comment on the human condition, the poem is the work of a mature talent. No less can be said of its urban companion-piece from the same collection, "Arrival in Edinburgh," and many of the shorter poems are equally felicitous.

In the poems from his next volume, *The Turning Sky* (1969),⁸ the range of feeling is wide, from the desolation of "North of Berwick" to the half-humorous resolve of "The Hare," from the pity and love of "Earth Spirits" to the satirical celebration of necessary ignorance in "A Night Fire Call." The last of these demonstrates that Tremayne is a master of the conversational style as well as the more mannered; and the wit, which is not without an element of brutality, is extremely witty in its point in the five-line sketch of his father "Riding, erect and solemn, his twenty-six-year-old bicycle." Other parental poems, however, are moving elegies for the loss of love, expressed (as in "Stone Walls") with telling simplicity. Throughout his career, Tremayne's control of form has always been notable, and he handles the extended meditation ("Details from a Death Certificate") with as much dexterity as the brief lyric. The five new poems in the present selection show that he can write Skeltonics with no less passion and intelligence than were expressed in the less technically-demanding forms employed in the earlier volumes.

Technical virtuosity is also a feature of the work of Edwin Morgan (b. 1920), who first attracted attention as a translator with his *Beowulf* in 1952, although his first full-length collection of original verse, *The Second Life*, did not appear until sixteen years

⁸ See "Scottish Poetry in 1969," *SSL*, VII, 4, 217-18.

later.⁹ His new volume, *From Glasgow to Saturn* (Cheadle, Cheshire: Carcanet Press), follows two 1972 publications, *Wi the Haill Voice* (versions of Mayakovsky in Scots) and the often-bizarre *Instamatic Poems*¹⁰—not to mention a succession of pamphlets which have been added together to constitute much of the present book. Here, once again, there is frequent conscious exploitation of the bizarre, but with a greater range of subject, theme, mood, form and style than in the "Instamatics," from the science-fiction horrors of "The Gourds" and "Last Message" to the nostalgic maritime fantasy of "Shantyman," from the ironic reversals of language in "The First Men on Mercury" to the comic incomprehensibilities of language in "The Loch Ness Monster's Song," from the savage farce of "Letters of Mr. Lonelyhearts" to the verbal wit of "A Jar Revisited" and the broadly-comic word-play of "Itinerary." But there is ample human sympathy in the book too, sometimes deliberately (and bitterly) underplayed, as in the first and most effective of the "Glasgow Sonnets," sometimes (as in "Saturday Night") offset against an accumulation of macabre detail from the urban wastelands of Glasgow, sometimes presented in terms of the surrealist landscape of Far Eastern war ("Afterwards").

Some of these poems are composed in the same Whitmanesque free verse as most of those in Morgan's first major original collection, but generally there is far more formal variety in this later book, and the forms are usually admirably functional. A poet as open as Morgan is to the challenge to try something or (one occasionally feels) anything different is not only risking failure, as every poet inevitably must in whatever he writes, he is positively courting it, and there are more than a few unfortunate times when that courtship ends in disaster, with cleverality conquering the significant and intellectualism suppressing the sensuous. But the wide scope of Morgan's frequent successes makes him a poet of considerable breadth of appeal, while his technical expertise demands (and receives) admiration.

Morgan's other 1973 item, *The Whittrick: A Poem in Eight Dialogues* (Preston: Akros Publications), was written between 1955 and 1961, but only a few of the dialogues achieved publication at that time. It is not difficult to appreciate the reason. The pastiche

⁹ See "Scottish Poetry in 1968," *SSL*, vi, 4, 199–203.

¹⁰ See "Scottish Poetry in 1972," *SSL*, xi, 1–2, 14–16.

of the styles of such writers as Joyce, MacDiarmid and the Brontës is frequently brilliant, and the conversations between such characters as Marilyn Monroe and the once-celebrated Soviet ballerina Galina Ulanova have wit and point, but elsewhere the writing is often flat, the poet's own view is seldom (if ever) explicit, and the theme remains as elusive as the symbolic beastie who provides the work with its title. A curiosity rather than an achieved creation, *The Whittrick* is of more interest as a relatively early effort by a writer who has reached his full stature comparatively late than as a poem in its own right.

If Morgan's name is no stranger to readers of these annual articles on Scottish poetry, neither is that of Alasdair Maclean (b. 1926), whose occasional poems have already received favourable notice here.¹¹ As long ago as 1969, the present writer commented elsewhere that that name, until then unknown, was

bound to loom large across the landscape of contemporary Scottish letters. Earlier this year, Mr. Maclean, who is a "mature student" at Edinburgh University, won first prize in an undergraduate poetry competition organised by the BBC. . . . Now the editor of *Lines Review* . . . presents no less than 21 of Mr. Maclean's poems . . . [in] his own individual voice, a tone of quiet desperation which testifies to personal solitariness in a largely inimical world with an unstressed intensity far more moving than any "song and dance." As in "On Holiday in Ardnamurchan" . . . combining a spare directness of style with the ability to make metaphors which are at once strikingly unusual and illuminatingly appropriate, Mr. Maclean expresses human agony in poem after poem which blow down all the wind-breaks that we build between ourselves and the chilling gales of chance.¹²

Unfortunately, Maclean's first full-length collection, *From the Wilderness* (London: Gollancz), is a far less individual achievement, far less expressive of his own personal voice, than the poems published four years ago in *Lines Review*. All too often, in work after work about the life and landscape of the Highlands and the beasts of its fields and the birds of its incomparable air, one sees the face of Norman MacCaig peering quizzically over Maclean's left shoulder, the face of Iain Crichton Smith looking mournfully over his right, and the face of Ted Hughes looming satirically over his head. Pastiche upon pastiche upon pastiche—all of them beautifully presented, but all composed to the recipes of other master chefs.

¹¹ See "Scottish Poetry in 1970," *SSL*, vii, 4, 235.

¹² "Around the Arts," *Scots Independent*, 29 November 1969.

Maclean would seem to have been misled into wearing other men's sprigs of heather as borrowed plumes by the resolution to make his first full-dress bow to the public as a kind of inspired Celtic aborigine, warbling all-too-native woodnotes wild from the bottom of a peat-bog, "a peasant who writes poetry" (as he describes himself in "Home Thoughts from Home"). Whether that resolution was self-determined, or whether it has resulted from his acceptance of interested advice, the unfortunate effect is that only the more picturesque aspects of his complex character and experience are represented in this book. For if Burns is not simply the rustic bard, the so-called "heaven sent ploughman," who postures in the preface to the Kilmarnock edition of the poems written by the lad who was born in Kyle, Maclean is not simply an aboriginal rhymer who can be associated with Ardnamurchan.

Not only was Burns born in Ayrshire, he grew up there, got an education in its folk customs as well as in books, and experienced the environment out of which all his best poems sprang. But while Maclean's ancestral roots may lie in Ardnamurchan, he was born in the Lowlands, he has travelled far and wide in and out of Scotland, his education has been as much academic as otherwise, and many of his best poems—excluded from *From the Wilderness*—derive from the urban environment and experience he shares with the majority of his readers rather than from the Highland scene where his family originated and to which he returned for a while before his recent departure to London's home counties. The title "*On Holiday in Ardnamurchan*" [italics mine] is a significant one; and it is at least equally so that this poem, which appeared in *Lines Review* in 1969, is conspicuous by its absence from the new collection. Its inclusion, of course, would have blown the gaff on the character-part of inspired crofter which Maclean has been deluded into playing.

His most idiosyncratic works, featured in the *Lines* selection, are poems of distrust and terror—"Tests for Aloneness," "The Roar," "Question and Answer," "Visiting Hour," "Screams," "Fire," "Things Get Heavier," "Pigeons," "Village Idiot"—and once again it is significant that only the latter, with its local habitation in rurality, appears in *From the Wilderness*. Instead, we are given far too many Crichton Smithian poems about miserable old folk, Hughesian poems on the savageries of the animal kingdom, MacCaigish poems about the subtleties of identity in a Highland setting. Most

of these are written with considerable skill, metaphors springing from keen individual observation, cadences as musical as they are conversational, but yet they are ventriloquist performances rather than personal statements.

Few poets of Maclean's ability have ever misrepresented themselves as drastically as he does here. Yet all is not loss, for in addition to "Village Idiot" and a few other poems which are "gruesome and witty at once"¹³ the book contains a poem which is a new departure for this author, a flyting which is both individual and in an old-established Celtic tradition, "Eagles," a superbly satirical riposte to the medieval Scots libel, "How the first Hielandman of God was maid of ane turde." In Maclean's fable, a gigantic eagle

once, for a joke,
picked up a stunted Highlander
and flew him south, witless from the journey
but fertile still.
Hence your race of Lowland Scots.

But Maclean himself is not "a stunted Highlander," and his own journeys south (and elsewhere) have left him very far from witless, as his best poems show. It is all the more unfortunate that so few of them have found places in *From the Wilderness*.

The one "marvellous boy" (and/or *enfant terrible*) among the year's poets is the young Glaswegian, Tom Leonard (b. 1944), with *Poems* (Dublin: E. and T. O'Brien Ltd.). He possesses a command of irony which is effectively combined with self-mockery in the religious/irreligious parable "The Good Thief" (his most searching work written in the patois of Glasgow, featuring the Crucifixion expressed in terms of Scotland's surrogate religion, football), "The Voyeur" (a satire on Scottish parochialism effectively given voice through a comical kind of Scots/English), and "A Priest Came on at Merkland Street" (where the horror of solitude experienced by a lapsed Catholic is anguished enough to persuade the reader to accept the all-too-Joycean stream-of-consciousness technique). Leonard is an elliptical writer whose brevities are sometimes too laconic to make as much impact as they should, and too much of his verse is marred by gimmickry of a merely fashionable kind. But in his best poems the

¹³ Norman MacCaig and Alexander Scott, "Introduction," *Contemporary Scottish Verse 1959-1969* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1970), p. 20.

emotional penetration and the intellectual energy are as notable as the economy, and this is a collection which shows considerable real achievement as well as the promise of a great deal more.

That other *enfant terrible*, the younger—and better—of our Scottish poetry magazines, *Akros*, edited by Duncan Glen (Preston: Akros Publications), celebrated its coming-of-age with a twenty-first number in April, and here as in the two succeeding numbers displayed its usual editorial absence-of-prejudice in its balance between work in English and work in Scots. The latter continued to be excluded from *Lines Review* (Loanhead, Midlothian: M. MacDonald), which its expatriate editor, Robin Fulton, has succeeded in changing from our most respected quarterly into a publication almost totally irrelevant to the Scottish poetry scene. Oh what a fall was there, my countrymen!

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