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A CURIOUS EXCHANGE BETWEEN MARION BERNSTEIN AND MARY INGLIS

Edward H. Cohen and Anne R. Fertig

Several recent studies of Victorian poetry have drawn attention to verses published in local newspapers, which increased in quantity decade by decade through the end of the nineteenth century.¹ In Scotland these poems were composed chiefly by amateur versifiers who frequently wrote on topics of local interest and who contributed in both Scots and English to a growing body of vernacular literature. The poetry columns of the papers became essential forums in which writers, editors, and readers addressed issues pertinent to their communities.

Occasionally, the newspaper poets corresponded with one another in their verses, and one example is a curious exchange in the mid-1870s between Marion Bernstein and Mary Inglis. Linked as contributors to the Glasgow penny weeklies, both participated in a local coterie of Glasgow literary figures that included Mary Cross, William Penman, Jessie Russell, James Nicholson, Alexander Strachan, and Alexander Murdoch. Several scholars have noted Bernstein's interactions with other poets on social and political concerns—on women's suffrage, for example, and on

¹ See Kirstie Blair, "'A Very Poetical Town': Newspaper Poetry and the Working-Class Poet in Victorian Dundee," *Victorian Poetry*, 52.1 (2014), 89-109; Kirstie Blair, "'Let the Nightingales Alone': Correspondence Columns, the Scottish Press, and the Making of the Working-Class Poet," *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 47.2 (2014), 188-207; Andrew Hobbs, "Five Million Poems, or the Local Press as Poetry Publisher, 1800-1900," *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 45.4 (2012), 488-92; Andrew Hobbs and Claire Januszewski, "How Local Newspapers Came to Dominate Victorian Poetry Publishing," *Victorian Poetry*, 52.1 (2014), 65-87; and Natalie Houston, "Newspaper Poems: Material Texts in the Public Sphere," *Victorian Studies*, 50.2 (2008), 233-42.

the ethics of strikes in the Clyde shipyards—but her interplay with Inglis appears to have gone unnoticed.

Marion Bernstein (1846-1906) herself predicted that her verses would “crumble to dust” and that her memory would “pass away.”² Almost a century after her death, however, she would be resurrected when Tom Leonard reprinted a selection of her poems in *Radical Renfrew*.³ Others of her works have since appeared in seminal studies of Scottish poetry, and their inclusion in these volumes signals an emerging consensus regarding her significance in the canon of nineteenth-century Scottish literature.⁴ Although little is known of her early life, it is clear from the public records that she was born in London and that by early 1874 she settled in Glasgow, where she lived in Paisley Road and supported herself as a music teacher. Disabled by a childhood illness and often confined to her sickbed, she nevertheless established her agency and identity by submitting witty stanzas to the local newspapers. In the summer of 1876 she published *Mirren's Musings*, a collection of songs and poems in which she addressed a number of contemporary issues, including poor living conditions among the laboring classes and the disenfranchisement of women.⁵

² Marion Bernstein, “Mirren’s Autobiography,” in D. H. Edwards, ed., *One Hundred Modern Scottish Poets* (Brechtin: Edwards, 1880), 52-53.

³ Tom Leonard, ed., *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War by Poets Born, or Sometimes Resident, in the County of Renfrewshire* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), 296-303.

⁴ See Hamish Whyte, ed., *Mungo’s Tongues: Glasgow Poems, 1630-1990* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1990), 141-43; Edwin Morgan, *Glasgow Poets Past and Present: The Story of a City* (Hamilton, NZ: University of Waikato, 1993), 8; Valentina Bold, “Beyond ‘The Empire of the Gentle Heart’: Scottish Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century,” in *A History of Scottish Women’s Writing*, ed. Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 246-61; Robert Crawford and Mick Imlah, eds., *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (London: Penguin, 2000), 367; Florence Boos, ed. *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2008), 337-47. See also Edward H. Cohen, Anne R. Fertig, and Linda Fleming, eds., *A Song of Glasgow Town: The Collected Poems of Marion Bernstein* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2013).

⁵ Marion Bernstein, *Mirren’s Musings: A Collection of Songs and Poems* (Glasgow: Bernstein and McGeachy, 1876).

Even less is known of Mary Inglis (1828-95). She spent her first thirty years in Berwickshire, where her father was the minister of the United Presbyterian Church in rural Stockbridge. In 1858, after a succession of family tragedies, she relocated to Springburn and thereafter devoted herself to performing charity work and to composing poetry described by one editor as “a heartfelt embodiment” of the past and by another as “beautiful in humanity and in the material universe.”⁶ Like Bernstein, she published her verses in the local papers, and early in 1876 she collected the best of them in a slender volume titled *Croonings*.⁷

On 11 September 1875 Bernstein published a lyric poem, in two twelve-line stanzas, in the *Glasgow Weekly Mail*:

Oh, I Wish I Were a Swallow!

Oh, I wish I were a swallow!
 I would know no winter time;
 The sweet summer I would follow
 In her flight from clime to clime.
 How I love the summer flowers,
 And the summer skies, so blue,
 And the cheering sunny hours;
 And the birds' sweet music, too!
 Oh, I wish I were a swallow!
 I would know no winter time;
 The sweet summer I would follow
 In her flight from clime to clime.

When I see the leaves all shaded
 With dull tints of brown and red;
 When the blossoms all are faded,
 And the singing birds are fled,
 Then, how mournfully recalling
 Summer's sweetness passed away,
 'Mid the wreck of beauty falling
 Into darkness and decay,
 Oh, I wish I were a swallow!
 I would know no winter time;

⁶ D. H. Edwards, ed., *Modern Scottish Poets*, 10th ser. (Brechin: Edwards, 1887), 55; W. S. Crockett, ed., *Minstrelsy of the Muse: The Poets and Poesy of Berwickshire* (Paisley: Parlane, 1893), 339.

⁷ Mary Inglis, *Croonings* (Glasgow: Marr, [1876]). For assistance in establishing the publication date of this book, we are indebted to Dr. Graham Hogg, Senior Curator, Rare Book Collections, National Library of Scotland.

The sweet summer I would follow
 In her flight from clime to clime.⁸

In these lines Bernstein celebrates the swallow's seasonal migration. She creates images of "shaded" leaves and "faded" blossoms to acknowledge the "darkness and decay" of winter—a conventional trope for a period of poetic malaise—but she embraces instead an aesthetic of the bird's "sweet music" inspired by "cheering sunny hours."

On 16 October 1875, also in the *Glasgow Weekly Mail*, Mary Inglis published a poem composed in response to Bernstein's. Rather than depict the swallow as a species that migrates in order to survive, however, she treats it as a "feckless" creature that "coolly" comes and goes as it pleases:

I Wadna Be a Swallow

I wadna be a swallow,
 A flichty feckless thing,
 That comes in summer weather,
 Then flees on coward wing
 Whene'er he sees the yellow leaves
 Fa' flickerin' frae the trees;
 I wadna be a swallow
 By ony bird that flees.

The swallow has aye been the type
 O' cauldribe heartless friends,
 That share oor joys in summer hours
 Then flee when summer ends;
 Who smile upon us when they see
 Oor fu' cup brimmin' ower,
 Then coolly turn their back when e'er
 The wolf draws near oor door.

O' a' the birds that wing the air
 I lo'e the robin best,
 For oh he bears a leal wee heart
 Aneath his scarlet vest;
 When cauld winds blaw, and snaw-flakes fa',
 And ither birds are gane,
 He sits and nods his feathery paw
 In at the window pane.

The mavis and the mizzlethrush

⁸ *Glasgow Weekly Mail*, 11 September 1875, 7; in *A Song of Glasgow Town*, 63.

Sing in the early spring,
 And next the blackbird tunes his pipes
 And makes the wild woods ring;
 But robin keeps his sweetest sang,
 And lilts it oot wi' glee,
 When icicles hing like a fringe
 Frae ilka bush and tree.

Ah, yes, I lo'e the robin,
 He's like a friend sae true
 That grips oor hand in life's wild storms
 And kindly helps us through.
 I hear his cheery notes e'en now,
 He's chirpin' shrill and loud—
 "There's aye a silver linin' glints
 Oot through the gloomiest cloud."⁹

In the annual proceedings of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club, instituted in 1831 and published throughout the nineteenth century, there are innumerable reports of local sightings of swallows, with special attention to the dates of their arrivals and departures. Inglis, whose poems are replete with allusions to the flora and fauna of her native region, knew full well that swallows migrated seasonally. For poetic purposes, however, she represents their leaving each autumn not as an instinctive behavior but as a deliberate act of abandonment.

Not content to have the penultimate word, Bernstein contributed a third poem to the exchange:

The Swallow

"The swallow has aye been the type
 O' cauld rife heartless friends,
 That share oor joys in summer hours
 Then flee when summer ends."
 —Mary Inglis

Come tell me, pretty swallow,
 What must I think of you?
 Do you good fortune follow—
 A type of friendship hollow
 And hearts that are not true?

⁹ *Glasgow Weekly Mail*, 16 October 1875, 7. Originally titled "I Lo'e the Robin Best," this poem was reprinted by Inglis—as "I Wadna Be a Swallow"—in *Croonings*, 26-28. In the later version she inserted an epigraph: "Written in answer to a poem by Marion Bernstein."

Then said to me the swallow,
 "For answer ask my mate.
 He thinks my heart not hollow,
 His fortunes do I follow
 Through good or evil fate.

We wander," said the swallow,
 "Where sunshine smiles above;
 But human hearts are hollow,
 And know not how to follow
 The summertime of love.

Who ever knew the swallow
 A second time to wed?
 Nay, second love were hollow,
 Mourning we wait to follow
 Our ne'er forgotten dead."

Oh loving, changeless swallow!
 Constancy dwells with you,
 No emblem is the swallow
 Of fickle hearts, or hollow,
 But of affection true.¹⁰

Bernstein's citation of the second stanza of Inglis's poem situates "The Swallow" as a rejoinder to its predecessor. Constructed as a dialogue, these lines counter Inglis's indictment of the swallow as a "fickle" friend. Indeed, the regularity of the ABAAB rhyming pattern underscores the "constancy" of the swallow's relationship with her mate. A speaker addresses the bird in the first and fifth of the five quintains, and the swallow replies in the second, third, and fourth in a voice of her own.

In all three poems the swallow is gendered and personified. For Inglis, writing in Scots, the swallow is a male, and she construes its seasonal disappearance as willful rather than natural; she celebrates the robin as a steadfast "friend" who sings in "cheery notes" all the year round. In Bernstein's poems, written in English, the swallow is a female, and Bernstein legitimates its pursuit of "summer's sweetness" and its folkloric fidelity to its mate. Both poets unpack the natural-historical associations of the swallow, but their dialectical interplay challenges our received perceptions of the poets themselves. For Inglis, whose verses

¹⁰ Published in *Mirren's Musings*, 126-27, with lines 9-12 of Inglis's "I Wadna Be a Swallow" affixed as an epigraph; in *A Song of Glasgow Town*, 114-15.

were said to evince “a gentle, sympathetic nature,”¹¹ the swallow is a “type” of fair-weather friend. For Bernstein, whose poems could be mocking or even caustic in tone, the same swallow is an “emblem” of “affection true.” Their differences notwithstanding, it is noteworthy that both Mary Inglis and Marion Bernstein acknowledge the traditional association of the swallow as a sign of seasonal turn. Their interaction in the public space of the local paper, moreover, exemplifies the role of the poetry column as an arena for cultural exchange.

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¹¹ William B. R. Wilson, “Notable Men and Women of Berwickshire,” *Scottish Notes and Queries*, 2nd ser., 2.9 (1901):136.