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Roderick Watson

Scottish Poetry 1981



It is good to recall the wider influence of the late G.S. Fraser: as the balanced and unpretentious author of *The Modern Writer and his World*; or as arbiter of poetic practice, according to Donald Davie, among the "Movement" poets in London in the 50s; or as Reader in Poetry at Leicester University where he spent his later years in the active encouragement of students and little magazines. Now Ian Fletcher and John Lucas have edited *Poems of G.S. Fraser* (for Leicester University Press, appropriately enough) and the collection offers a valuable overview of Fraser's achievement as a poet in his own right, particularly from his two most productive periods, during the 40s and then from the late 60s and the 70s when a new urgency seemed to move him. Samples of the poet's work as a translator are included, but the editors agree that many fine translations have still to be collected, perhaps in a future volume.

Despite his critical interest in writers like Ezra Pound and Dylan Thomas, Fraser was never himself an innovator or a modernist, and although Auden and MacNeice appear as early influences (along with his much admired Yeats), he did not take to the political confidence of the 30s either, being, perhaps, too sensitive to doubts bred from "An ache in the heart...At the sight of the world's decay." This sense of distance, civilized and wry and speculative, and often self-

mocking, is the one recurring note in all of Fraser's best work. It can be found in "Social Pleasures," the very first poem in the collection, from a Poetry London pamphlet of 1943:

The Orchestra starts, slowly, I crush my stub,
I rise and I wait till the others
Have chosen their partners, and awkwardly
I smile, I say, "May I?" she smiles faintly,
We move off stiffly, and...

These lines describe Fraser's life-long relationship with his muse, although there is never any "stiffness" in his mastery of various metrical and musical effects.

Fraser's persona, first glimpsed in "Social Pleasures," seems most suited to a humane and considering self, sometimes a little awkward according to whether it finds itself in the presence of smart and talented society, or powerful passion, or world events, and it tends to view these manifestations from the sidelines. The pattern may have been set early as a Scot away from Scotland--"knowing how London melts us to her style"--but still aware of the "stony virtue" of a grandmother from Caithness ("The Death of my Grandmother"). So it is that Fraser can respect and half admire MacDiarmid's *furor* and his "angry poet's joy" ("To Hugh MacDiarmid"), but he cannot share it and remains more sympathetic to Edwin Muir and "an art that distances," however unfashionable that may have appeared:

Sturdy, mild poet, it is your distinction
To wear dumb goodness as a speaking style
("On the Playground, for Edwin Muir")

Fraser himself seems happiest with this informal "speaking style," and when he leaves it for a more "committed" and public utterance, his verses adopt a note of rhetorical inflation and Augustan pomp seen in an early address to Yeats, or a poem on the children drowned when the SS *City of Benares* was sunk in the war, or later lines on the assassination of John Kennedy. By comparison, his best poems are most true to the classical tradition when they adopt a lower and more personal key, as in "Christmas Letter Home," where humble values like a taste for Cole Porter and tea parties are set against the destruction of war and "all the unloved and ugly seeking power":

...to the luckless must the lucky give
All trust, all energy, whatever lies
Under the anger of democracies:
Whatever strikes the towering torturer down,

Whatever can outface the bully's frown,
 Talk to the stammerer, spare a cigarette
 For tramps at midnight...oh defend it yet!
 ("Christmas Letter Home")

The modulation in these lines from large abstractions like the "anger of democracies," to an act of simple charity with tobacco, defines plain decency in a way that would have delighted Pope: "The guns and not our silliness were mad." Indeed, an unpretentious and neo-classical practicality lies at the heart of a later poem, rather dauntingly called "The Human Situation," in which Fraser accepts his own limitations and the limitations of literature, but utterly rejects the then current vogue for silence or incoherence or modernist despair:

The case for the poetic word
 Is not, then, perfectly absurd;
 It is against self-righteous rant
 And ever-broken promises
 That a slow argument like this
 May fill a really long-felt want.

I promise nothing. But I say
 That we can know a better way
 And may have grace to follow it.

From time to time, the "slow argument" of that "dumb goodness" can seem a little flat, but for the most part Fraser's reflective "speaking style" works best in his epistolary poems, a mode he discovered early in his career, shared with Auden, and sustained and practically made his own well into the 1970s. Of course, Fraser also wrote finely musical lyrics, like "The Traveller Has Regrets," but, for me at least, his best and most characterful contribution as a poet was through the informal epistle.

Fraser's letter poems and letter-type poems--imagined dialogues and conversations with himself--provide the perfect vehicle for his preferred stance as a wryly balanced observer:

And there over behind the bar
 A mirror showing my own face
 That shows no love, that shows no hate

That cannot get out of its own place
 And must hear me talking at night:
 I drink to you, long-sufferer!
 ("Three Characters in a Bar")

His war service as a non-commissioned staff writer for the Ministry of Information saw him posted to Cairo and Eritrea, and dozens of the poems from this period take the form or the tone, appropriately enough, of "letters home." Yet the actual geographical distance which prompts these poems is really only a happy accident in the end, for what is essentially the correlative for a more personal and vulnerable sense of gentle separation. The wistfully isolated young writer of "Social Pleasures" has moved from the dance floor to the edge of a larger and grimmer theatre of operations. Fraser met and befriended many writers during the war, but Lawrence Durrell's version of cafe life on the frontier is closer to the Horatian spirit of the Scot's heart than Keith Douglas's more Spartan commitments:

I write to you from the high air, from the shabby
Colonial town that laid Ethiopia dead,
Mountains romantic in Prokosch's geography
But not to a Sergeant with a Sunday morning head,

And if I had ever cared for the properties,
The evocative names that make poetry go with a swing,
Gura, Nefacit, Ambulagi, Keren,
I have had my fill this year--but I look at the thing,

At the "dying Empire": Fascism sits unshaved
Drinking its morning bibita in the cafe,
("Letter from Asmara, May 1943")

It could be said that these Horatian letters home, honest, skeptical and charitable, are perhaps the most effective and sophisticated of political statement against the rigors and the *enthusiasmus* of rigid ideologies. Indeed, for Fraser, the role of the poet in general has often seemed to be a kind of civilized and gently weary exile, a condition described in verses like "Exile's Letter" and "Monologue for a Cairo Evening." On the same theme, "A Letter to Nicholas Moore" explores the deceptions of the creative ego ("I was the man, for poetry and not love, / To whom disaster is a kind of show"), or "Paul Valery" meditates on the elusive, delusive nature of all expression, and even of perception itself:

Stare long enough, the world itself can seem
Like some word children will go on and on
Repeating--"Oh, a dream, a dream, a dream!"
Is that word found in any lexicon?

Is it a word we have made up ourselves?
 Perhaps we have made up the self with words,
 There are too many books on all our shelves:
 O self, my multiple conceptual birds!

Fraser's humane skepticism prevails in other poems, like "The Landscape" or "Tribute to the Legendary Heroes" in which a donnish and paradoxical vein derives, perhaps, from his acquaintance with I.A. Richards and *The Meaning of Meaning*. "The Insane Philosophers," on the other hand (from *Conditions* published in 1969), ends with a most un-donnish sense of desperation. In fact, this new note appears in several of the later poems, surprisingly, perhaps, for a poet whose younger despatches from the violence of the war in the East had managed to sustain a comparatively worldly *sang froid*. Nevertheless, when writing in his mid fifties, Fraser's Horatian optimism has a wilder and almost painfully unbalanced sense of strain to it:

I want the bloody human race to run
 Over the hurdles of its tinny cars
 Until that black star pops, that dying sun
 We imitate in our preposterous wars:
 Murders, lies, wars! And yet I like my sort,
 Because I am the sort of clot they are:
 Come Judgement Day, and what is my retort?--
 "I loved that session in a public bar and
 I loved a pussy, loved a little bird;
 One ate the other, in a natural way;
 I served up misery in a tasty word;
 I never wasn't glad to greet the day.

("On the Persistence of Humanity")

Equally directly, "Barrington in 1798" confronts the historical face of anguish, while reminiscences of utter despair (derived, perhaps, from a nervous breakdown in his own recent past) inform "Speech of a Sufferer," a powerful poem which contains once more that disturbing image of cat and bird. The sharp edge of this response to pain is continued in "For Tilly, Sick, With Love," but here the poet's equilibrium manages to reassert itself, along with a wry affection and his lifelong talent for friendship. It is our gain that such friendships are recorded in so many poems, and most especially in those letters and monologues which G.S. Fraser sent out over so many years--"like smiles through smoke in public houses," to "reassure us of a warmth we know" ("Autumnal Elegy").

Although G.S. Fraser was early associated with the "New Apocalypse" poets, his work rarely ventured into that mode of mythic and surreal images. J.F. Hendry has remained closer to his beginnings and potent echoes from the hoofbeats of the White Horseman can still be discerned in *A World Alien*:

Autumn, an old lady talking in her coffin of a
 wooden wedding and bridal in the corn
 black and gold as the flag of old Kossovo,
 tidal as the wrinkles round an acorn,
 memorial-wheat or sweet loaves for the Christ-born,
 rides the world in a drop of water.

("The Cailleach")

Here and in other poems Hendry charges his lines with staccato intensity and then counters the effect with a consistently intellectual response to the world and a diction which is almost impersonal in its coolness despite the pressure of images. In fact this unusual voice found its ideal subject in the long title poem from Hendry's previous collection (*Marimarus*, Caithness Books, 1978), which was a meditation on polar exploration and that creative moment when defeat turns into myth. The effect then was crystalline, at once precise and yet abstract, and it appears again in this new collection in poems like the response to a Braque still life, or witty pieces on "Erasmus in London" and "Le Roi Soleil." Sometimes it seems to me to fail, however, and to slip into a curious emptiness, like "The Middle Ages" or "A World Alien," a subjective drama loosely based on the Manuel murders which counters its grisly subject by remaining oddly passionless despite its short and insistently urgent lines. In other poems, like "Christine in Camera," "Death in the Shaws" and "Love's Winter," Hendry's epigrammatic clarity is warmed by a welcome and more personal intimacy, and in all its brevity, "Thought" is a splendid poem which speaks volumes:

FISH WEIGH LIGHT IN WATER.

Flies weigh air.

I weigh the future in my daughter.

She weighs her hair.

For All I Know is Ken Morrice's third collection and it contains some of his most musical work to date, not to mention an entertaining and gently savage little poem about poetry recitals called "Measure for Measure" ("After the dry sherry, the small sausages on sticks..."). There are other measured poems here, in which Morrice's fluent tone reflects gravely and lovingly on landscapes and on members of his family

("Colombo," "Saying and Believing," "To Julie Growing"). He has an eye for sexual discomfiture, too, and poems like "While We May" and "Envoi" focus on the awkwardnesses, and the kindly lies and the unspoken truths between men and women. His poems in Scots reveal a less tender voice, full of the thravn humor and the accents of the North East, and sometimes this grimmer wit appears in English, too, as with these closing lines on a suicide:

"He jumped over the balcony," says an officer.
 "Complained of being depressed. A sex offender,
 a stot-the-baa."

Kneeling beside him
 I think, "This time he forgot to stot."
 ("Sex Offender")

The poem comes from a number of pieces which stem from Ken Morrice's work as a psychiatrist in Aberdeen, and perhaps that experience has fueled some of his best poems, even indirectly, as if a professional awareness of the roots and branches of insecurity were to give added force to verses from private life like "Spider Years" and "The Chase." But works like "Clinical Demonstration" and "The Unforgiving" come straight from the world of hospitals and patients and the latter poem in particular is outstandingly and tenderly penetrating and well supported by a subtle rhyme scheme (ab cb dc). In other pieces, like "Russian Doll" and "Full Tilt for Camelot," Morrice's voice can show an epigrammatic and donnish wit, sometimes a little dusty, and yet the echoes of this dry assurance are exactly what give his poems on insecurity and madness a special, compassionate force. It may seem like a paradox, but the poet's articulation can be precisely modulated just above a more relaxed and colloquial mode and this calculated and subtle holding back lends itself surprisingly well to the depiction of states of unease and disquietude. Of course, this only works because Ken Morrice has a commendable empathy with these states in the first place--witness "Forger" for example, which is written in the first person--but it is the diction which makes the art, and it makes it with a barely discernable, ever so subtle rage, quietly and entirely without sensationalism:

There they sit, the anguished and inconsolable,
 trapped in the tight idiom of childhood,
 longing (dying) to be loved.
 Waiting for time to turn, they brood
 on past hurt, gaining no sanction

to be themselves and proved.

("The Unforgiving")

That well-known photograph of the St. Kilda's parliament-- a hardy group of men in their remote and stony island community--inspires the opening poem of Douglas Dunn's new book. The poem is subtitled "The photographer revisits his picture" and this focus suits Dunn's eye, for there is a sense in which he revisits the topics in many of these poems with a calmly descriptive verse, full of felicitously expressed ordinary detail. This mode serves him well, with a detachment which is welcome for its lack of pretension and cant, but sometimes, perhaps, it favors a kind of accomplished blandness. This note threatens to dominate in several of the poems which might be called occasional pieces--like "War Blinded," "Savings," or "Courting," or "Monumental Sculptor." Such relaxed professionalism makes for well-turned work, witness the wit of "Ode to a Paperclip" and the careful literate competence of "Tannahill" and a long poem on "John Wilson," but these particular poems also suffer from a lack of imaginative or lyrical or linguistic pressure. In other poems, however, Scotland and the poet's ambivalent feelings towards the place make for much more animation. Here Dunn's observer's sense of separation--especially in the fine poem "The Local"--is organically appropriate for a writer who favors "good nature and a scent of fruit at dailygone" in preference to "quick links forced from character to climate" or the Scottish intelligentsia's perennial obsession with "drunken decency and sober violence, / Our paradox of ways." These lines from "The Apple Tree" establish Dunn's support for the more fruitful side of Scotland's heritage, in place of a constant harping on Knox-ism, and they are greatly to be welcomed. "Ratatouille" makes a more light-hearted, but equally serious plea against the grip of dogma and those who "invade Afghanistan / Or boycott the Olympic games in a huff," and in this Dunn shares an unforced brotherhood of spirit with G.S. Fraser. Perhaps "Washing the Coins," a finely subtle poem, goes a bit further than Fraser would to expose the nature of the social and political status quo as seen via a boyhood job with Irish tattie howkers. "An Address on the Destitution of Scotland" also finds a tighter diction (and the use of a persona) to convey a sense of rage held under control, and "Green Breeks" takes another stance on behalf of the underdog, as personified in one of Walter Scott's childhood adversaries, although here the literary topic and its discursive style is less trenchant than the understated symbolism of "Washing the Coins." A wryly documentary reflection on contemporary literary life in London ("Remembering Lunch") effectively re-asserts Dunn's distrust

of mock sophistication or naive enthusiasm alike, and establishes once more that sense of civilized separateness, even from his friends, which G.S. Fraser would have understood. So the composed mood of that visiting observer is not often broken in *St. Kilda's Parliament*. Perhaps this is why two more dramatic and cinematically terse exercises in the "poem-film" seemed intriguingly different ("La Route" and "Valerio") along with "The Deserter" in which a set of surrealist-inspired vignettes is offered in homage to Robert Desnos. It will be interesting to see if these poems will take Dunn into freer and more elliptical territory in his next collection, to regain, perhaps the more sustained intensity of observation which animated *Terry Street*.

More formal and without a trace of modernist influence, Maurice Lindsay makes a confident commitment to laughter and the craft of light verse as an antidote to what he sees in the preface as a world of inhumanity and "false and oppressive dogmas, foolish superstitions, tawdry values." *A Net to Catch the Winds and Other Poems* is offered as a "coda" to the *Collected Poems* of 1979, and by far the most substantial part of it is the 40-page title poem. This entertaining autobiographical canter in *ottava rima* is pleasingly achieved, but despite its author's modesty about following Byron's favorite verse form, the ghost of that mercurial and incisive mind still crops up from time to time to make Lindsay's lines seem a little too comfortable and self congratulatory in places. Byron's wit operated out of a fleeting interplay between insecurity and sardonic assurance; Lindsay's is a nicer and happier temperament without that division in the spirit, and closer, perhaps, to the enjoyments and the skeptical acceptance of Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat*.

Like Maurice Lindsay, William Neill has a proper respect for the craft of verse making and his strong lines and regular rhymes inform numerous poems on the landscape and history of the country round his home in Castle Douglas. He favors rhyme royal and an eight-line variation on it, a form well-suited to the harsh romanticism of his reflections on "Threave Castle," "Island Abbey" or "The Dead Country" ("This is the land where a blind harper sings. / Diner and drinker do not listen; they / display a taste for more material things, / indifferent if the singer go or stay"). These lines, like the title poem "Galloway Landscape," say much about Neill's characteristic interest in the points where history and tradition meet the present day. Although the poet claims to be uncertain in the face of contemporaneity and its conflicting ideologies ("Search for Wisdom"), this is not his usual condition and for the most part

he comes across as pretty firm in his distaste for propertied materialism and fashionable ideas. Sometimes the targets are too easy and predictable, however, as with "Absentee Landlord" and "On a Church Turned Bingo Hall," or a hint of pique creeps into his distrust of free verse or the literary establishment and this can compromise the force of his critique ("Mr. Grubstreet's Advice to Beginners"). In fact the quieter tones of "Galloway Landscape" and the fine compassion of "Sermon" show that Neill can write well in free verse when he chooses. It is when he turns to Scots, however, that his voice seems to come most clearly into its own right, and the sheer zest of poems like "The Power of Advertising" or "Toombodie on Freedom" show his disaffected affection for the Scottish scene at its best: licensed by humor to sting freely and fiercely.

Eddie Linden's poems need humor, and a fierceness in the craft, perhaps, to alleviate the unrelenting and deliberately achieved flatness of the work in *City of Razors*. There is no doubting the determination of Linden's spirit nor the magnitude of his achievement as editor of *Aquarius*, but little of this is conveyed in these very loose free verse poems. The collection's broadly confessional intention is supported by prose excerpts from Sebastian Barker's biography of the author. Barker refers in the Foreword to the honesty of Linden's bare and desolate vision, but the spirit of the book seems closer instead to the unforgiving veracity of self exposure. If that was Eddie Linden's goal then it is, indeed, achieved, and one must grant it a kind of respect. But despite manifest conviction it rarely offers insight or illumination, and its artless insistence spares neither the writer nor the reader.

Olive Fraser's poems recount their share of pain, too, for their creator died after years of mental and physical illness. Helena Shire's sympathetic biographical introduction describes how this girl from Nairn, one of Aberdeen's brightest graduates, suffered and recovered from bouts of schizophrenia only to die of cancer in 1977 at the age of 68. Shire's selection, mostly from the later poems, allows Fraser's debt to the English lyric tradition, but suggests a move away from early literary influences towards *The Pure Account*, at the end. When prefaced by such biographical knowledge some of these poems are, indeed, moving, yet their force is lessened because the poet's voice almost always chooses the conventions of an older poetic diction--a speech of "thees" and "thous" and "werts" and an aureate or romantic landscape of birds and trees and dark mountains and "hurtless sunbeams." Perhaps Olive Fraser depended on this well-established territory precisely because

of the sad mental isolation which she must have felt, so that her poetic lexicon, at least, offered her the comfort of friendly echoes, familiar landmarks and touchstones. All the more reason to value the few poems which do achieve a braver and more direct articulation--"Prayer to a Tree," perhaps, and "The Unwanted Child" which begins so simply and strongly: "I was the wrong music / The wrong guest for you / When I came thro' the tundras / And thro' the dew."

Tessa Ransford's muse is more closely aligned with its own time--she favors a freer verse (as well as stricter forms) and she consistently links her liberal Christian, social and ecological convictions with those overtly feminine aspects which she finds in herself and the world around her. Sometimes these connections get over-heated in their insistence on all feeling as an unreservedly passionate experience of almost religious intensity, whether in church ("Grief"), or in a poem for a girl killed in Belfast ("Mother Forgive") or a love poem ("Poetry of Persons"). These pieces did not work for me because (perhaps by temperament) I am chary of the supplicant confusions which correlate any human emotion with either love or pain (or love *and* pain), and I resist the point of view which characterizes "Woman" as "acute angles of feeling; wires exposed to the world, connected at the womb. / Wild circuit--sending charges through / the reasoned running of mankind, / which seizes up and shocks." These lines seem to me to carry alarming (but maybe unintended) undertones and implications--not least of torture against either sex--according to how you see the current flowing. A much better balanced art is to be found in the poems of natural description like "Purity" and "Buddhist Lizard" and more compassion without preaching in the fine feminist rage of "In the Fishmonger's" and in the unforced caring of "Hospitalisation" and "Old Folks at a Funeral."

Less at the mercy of unresolved and complicated feelings in her work, Liz Lochhead's voice is at once bolder and more subtle, and in *The Grimm Sisters* she has found a unifying theme which is exactly the right vehicle for her most characteristic interests. The book takes three sections to explore different aspects of womankind. The title section makes a wry contemporary reassessment of the problems of maidens in all those ballads and fairy tales, while "The Beltane Bride" presents a series of honest monologues on the pains and insecurities of love affairs in their beginnings and endings. If the last set on "Hags and Maidens" seems less convincing as a whole (although it contains fine pieces like "Everybody's Mother" and "Poem for my Sister") it may be in part because there are several outstanding successes earlier in the book.

Liz Lochhead is mistress of a bright and direct speaking tone, colloquially convincing and artistically pleasing, too, in its command of breath pauses and the rise and fall of rhythmic patterns. She has a wickedly accurate sense of the bitter-sweet constrains of youth and inexperience, in a language often derived, appropriately enough, from popular culture and the ideas to be found in magazines for teenagers and young women. Witty and disturbing things happen when these values are made to meet the less secure adult world or the darker realms of legend and fairy tale. So the "Grimm Sisters" turns out to be "the grown up girls next door" who were such experts in preparing a younger narrator in all the arts needed to attract and keep men, until times changed and left them marooned "who'd been all the rage in fifty eight":

For each disaster
 you were meant to know the handy hint.
 Soap at a pinch
 but better nailvarnish (clear) for ladders.
 For kisscurls, spit.
 Those days womanhood was quite a sticky thing
 And that was what these grim sisters came to mean.

"You'll know all about it soon enough."
 But when the clock struck they
 stood still, dropped dead.
 And they were left there
 out in the cold with the wrong skirtlength
 and bouffant hair,
 dressed to kill

It is typical of Liz Lochhead's punning wit to place cliché idioms like "dressed to kill" in a freshly ironic context. Sometimes it fails, however, and in poems such as "Last Supper" and "The Ariadne Version" the juxtapositions are made so relentlessly and so heartlessly that they become merely slick, with "cooked goose" for a last meal together, or Ariadne "applying more Ambre Solaire" and thinking about her "moonstreaked mother...gone blonde again, / mincing around in that rawhide trouser suit, / all silicone and facelift." Quieter and much more effective is the imaginative force which describes the contents of 1960s handbags:

In those big black mantrap handbags
 they snapped shut at any hint of *that*
 were hedgehog hairbrushes
 cottonwool mice and barbed combs to tease.
 Their heels spiked bubblegum, dead leaves.

At one level the wit is as broad and extrovert as ever and the "Grim sisters" are seen as bizarre witches with dead beasts in their reticules. But the lines do more than this, and the natural life of the hedgerows is also evoked, until we are brought to that final discomfiting juxtaposition between high heels, with their claims to sophistication, and two kinds of detritus, both different but both symbolic of passed time and passed youth: "dead leaves" and "bubblegum." The result is oddly poignant and compassionate, and it occurs for the best in many of these poems where Lochhead deals with the comic and painful moments when schoolgirl ingenuousness, would-be sophistication and maturing reflection all surface within a single sensibility in response to the spells and "disenchantments" of emotional and family ties. "My Rival's House" charts the meeting with a lover's mother, and "Stooge Song" provides a puzzled present-tense monologue on how we get involved with each other, as if "he" were a pantomime conjurer and the speaker his female volunteer fated to be sawn in half once again. "Midsummer Night" ("Was that a donkey braying in my dream?") and "Tam Lin's Lady" reflect that the perils of shape-changing need not be confined to magical beings, when time and our own natures are fickle enough. In this version the lovers are married after Tam Lin gets his lady pregnant: "You're not the first to fall for it, / good green girdle and all - / with your schooltie rolled up in your pocket / trying to look eighteen." This should be a happy ending, after various trials with family and in-laws, but the real ballad has only just begun, the roles are bitterly reversed and it is the girl who must thole a transformation:

But how about you, my fallen fair maiden
 now the drama's over, tell me
 how goes the glamourie?

. . .
 How do you think Tam Lin will take
 all the changes you go through?

It was a splendid insight to use the spells and transformations from such traditional tales as poetic metaphors for everyday emotional entanglements, and the fact that they are familiar communal property perfectly matches Liz Lochhead's own talent for catching and transplanting colloquial speech and the idioms of popular culture. Thus stock figures are conjured up, like "The Mother" and "The Other Woman," but when Lochhead is working at her best they achieve a disturbing subtlety and an almost psychoanalytical penetration:

The other woman
lies
the other side of my very own mirror.
Sweet, when I smile
straight out for you, she
puts a little twist on it, my
right hand never knows what her left is doing.
She's sinister.
She does not mean you well.

The Grimm Sisters deserves to do well for Liz Lochhead and the book is priced right and strikingly presented between stiff boards with a spiral back. But publicity and distribution remain the single most neglected and unsatisfactory factors in literary life in Scotland--especially for younger writers, who could be forgiven for feeling at times that they are struggling to breathe (much less speak) in a vacuum. Bookshops and arts centers *must* do more to bring new writers and new readers together, and *Seven Poets* from the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow shows one of the ways it can be done--even if it is limited to already well-established authors. The book commemorates an exhibition of portraits by Alexander Moffat, with photographs by Jessie Ann Matthew; it is lavishly supplied with color and half-tone reproductions and supported by a selection of poems by each poet, including several published for the first time. The writers in question are Hugh MacDiarmid, Norman MacCaig, Iain Crichton Smith, George Mackay Brown, Robert Garioch, Sorley MacLean and Edwin Morgan; there is an essay on them by Neil Ascherson, six concisely pointed interviews by Marshall Walker, bibliographies are supplied by Hamish Whyte of the Mitchell Library, and the volume begins with a substantial interview between Timothy Hyman and the artist Alexander Moffat. The whole project is splendidly presented and, at the very least, there should be copies of it in every school library in Scotland. Of course schools and colleges are not the only important marketplace, but they exert a powerful influence on the reading and buying and dissemination of books and the key factor there, as any teacher knows, is the availability of suitable texts. In this context the unavailability of *Penguin Modern Poets 21* is a disappointment, for this little book with a selection from MacCaig, Crichton Smith and Brown seemed to go out of print quite quickly after its appearance in 1972. As a result, in terms of classroom familiarity, it is probably Crichton Smith's work which has suffered most by default, and so the appearance of a large new selection of his poems is much to be welcomed.

Selected Poems, 1955-1980, edited by Robin Fulton, is not a book to be digested easily, all the same. The paradoxes and tensions of Iain Crichton Smith's empathetic muse make for a complex poetry, as befits a man so marked by island isolation and the early influence of the Free Kirk, and yet so determined as poet and social being to resist complacency and simple answers. So it is not always easy to perceive the man himself behind these poems, particularly when the images are so prolific, or the clash of images (which his imagination prefers) produces ambiguous or opaque lines. Yet much is said by accumulation and by the recurrence of favorite themes, and the book contains many fine poems which stand alone and many others which gain strength by the light they throw on each other and on their elusive creator. One could start with the poem called "What is Wrong," for example, which is short enough to quote in full, as translated by the author from its original Gaelic. (Unfortunately the Gaelic texts are not included in this selection, but even through translation Smith seems to speak more openly about himself than he can usually manage in English. Thus Fulton's decision to include a substantial selection from *Biobuill is Sanasan-Reice* [1965] and *Eadar Fealla-dha is Glaschu* [1969] is much to be commended.)

Who can tell what is wrong? I went to doctors and doctors. One of them told me, "It's your head," and another one, writing small with a pen, "It's your heart, your heart."

But one day I saw a black pit in green earth, a gardener kissing flowers, an old woman squeaking in her loneliness, and a house sailing on the water.

I don't know whether there is a language for that, or, if there is, whether I would be any better breaking my imagination into a thousand pieces: but one thing is certain, we must find the right that is wrong.

The conversational plainness of the first verse paragraph contrasts most strikingly with the terse progress of the second where isolated and vivid images are imbued with symbolic undertones of death and beauty and isolation and distance and yet retain their identity, too, as a list of everyday things--as if seen almost by accident. The poet's task is to find "a language for that," but the cost of fragmenting his imagination in the process is not underestimated, and the gnomic conclusion (like the assumption that something was "wrong" in the first place) actually offers much less comfort than the deceptive confidence of its tone might at first suggest.

Crichton Smith's characteristically pained wariness in the face of the various world and his distrust of the claims of easy feeling, and of intellect, too, appear in several other poems from the 1965 Gaelic collection--called *Bibles and Advertisements*. Thus he reflects on the difficulties of holding Lewis and Uist and Hiroshima and Belsen in the same frame--the inescapable frame of modern experience: "Beauty is dangerous enough and as for the mind did it not spoil the glittering cities of Europe?" He longs for "the fine bareness of Lewis" and acknowledges that his roots go deep there--"I am tied to the Highlands. That is where I learnt my wound." The wound is not specified, but Smith's love and his pain are never far from the Free Kirk and its influence on his early life--a creed that told him that "the world was lost when I was still a child," a creed whose harsh polarities infused so many of his early poems, even down to the titles of his books--*This-tles and Roses* (1961), *The Law and the Grace* (1965) and *Bibles and Advertisements* (1965). Here is a poet whose focus, directly or indirectly, is never far from fundamentally serious first causes--the world, and what is wrong and whether there is a language for that.

MacDiarmid welcomed polarities and the combination of opposites in his work, in order to celebrate the play of contradictions in the universe and to open our eyes to wider and more vital modes of being; but for Crichton Smith the "Caledonian antiszygy" is a more painful thing--a probingly intimate exploration of all that he admires and hates in the world and his background and himself. In "Poem of Lewis" his people "have no time for the fine graces / of poetry" and yet, especially in the early collections, Smith was personally compelled to make poetry out of that landscape--the "windy sky" so inimical to "the great forgiving spirit of the word" and the "cramped graves" and, in "Sunday Morning Walk," the "tall black men and their women walking / over the tight-locked streets." The poet's love-hate relationship with his sense of place is never more clearly seen than in his numerous poems about the stoic courage of old women--key figures at the hearth and the heart of Scottish family experience. Indeed, these poems also have counterparts in verse which show a delicate empathy with young girls--unconsciously graceful, self absorbed and unaware of what their future holds for them. Perhaps it is his premonition that their future will be a hard one that fuels the poet's tenderness, for he is especially aware of the loneliness of generations of island women--grandmothers, widows, maiden aunts or the aging mothers of exiled or migrant and absent sons. In one way he admires their stoic courage, and in another he dreads their influence as repositories of Calvinist oppression and social conformity--owners of

that "set mouth" who "never learned, / not even aging, to forgive / our poor journey and our common grave." Even so, he still belongs to the culture and when its intransigent and reductive sense of mortality manifests itself in a different guise he admires it and longs for it, too. Thus "There is no Metaphor," he concludes firmly in "Deer on the High Hills" (1962), "The stone is stony. / The deer step out in isolated air...Winter is wintry, lonely is your journey"; and "A deer looks through you to the other side, / and what it is and sees is an inhuman pride." The same hard assessment (and the same pride in hard assessments) informs a much later poem from *Love Poems and Elegies* (1972), in which it is death itself that is seen as "unavoidable and beyond your choice / and therefore central and of major price." The poem even begins with a similar mistrust of metaphor as one of those "fine graces of poetry":

This is a coming to reality.
This is the stubborn place. No metaphors swarm

around that fact, around that strangest thing,
that being that was and now no longer is.
(*"On Looking at the Dead"*)

Death, old age and the importance of dignity, "which is what we crave / when all else has been pared away" ("Old Woman," from *Orpheus and Other Poems*, 1974), these fundamentals have moved Crichton Smith from the start of his creative life. Indeed, one of his earliest "old woman" pieces, the poem which begins "And she, being old, fed from a mashed plate," must be one of the best crafted and most moving poems on this subject in all modern literature. Seven years later, the elegies to his own mother in *Love Poems and Elegies* (almost all of which is included in Fulton's selection) marked a more openly autobiographical expression of the theme in question, just as earlier poems like "For My Mother" and its Gaelic counterpart (here given as "To My Mother") had confronted the delicate webs which bind together filial love and duty and guilt:

You were gutting herring in distant Yarmouth and
the salt sun in the morning tide rising out of the
sea, the blood on the edge of your knife, and that
salt so coarse that it stopped you from speaking
and made your lips bitter.

I was in Aberdeen sucking new courses, my Gaelic
in a book and my Latin at the tiller, sitting there
on a chair with my coffee beside me and leaves

shaking the sails of scholarship and my intelligence.
Guilt is tormenting me because of what happened
and how things are.

The same internal division and a witty pain animates "The Fool," another Gaelic poem, this time about the writer's mother tongue (although the idiom has a doubly special force for him):

In the dress of the fool, the two colours that have
tormented me--English and Gaelic, black and red,
the court of injustice, the reason for my anger...

In the guise of a jester the poet promises to mix these two colors together until "the King himself will not understand my conversation," and such a gesture is, indeed, characteristic of Smith's wit, which often moves him to elude pain with a wry line at the very moment of its most poignant admission. Thus the splendid elegy "The Earth Eats Everything" reflects on his mother's death and on the unread marble of her tombstone which "stands up like a book," until the poem concludes by observing ambiguously that "Life is explainable only by life," and then adding, in the final line, "I have read that on paper leaves." In another context he meditates on Duncan Ban McIntyre as "poet laureate" of the deer, a poet elected by the deer themselves, but one who shot them, too:

And the clean shot did not disturb his poems.
Nor did the deer kneel in a pool of tears.
The stakes were indeed high in that game.

And the rocks did not weep with sentiment.
They were simply there: the deer were simply there.
The witty gun blazed from his knowing hand.

("Deer on the High Hills, VI")

The endless complexities of tone, and hence of attitude in such lines from poems such as these are entirely appropriate for one who admits to being haunted by Freud and Calvin--a daunting enough pair who "come together like black angels and devils about my skies" ("Predestination"). In fact, despite the black dog and the Free Kirk, many of Iain Crichton Smith's poems possess a subtle and delightful wit. In his English verse this humor sometimes seems almost fey or Chekhovian, and yet the roots of this mood belong just as convincingly to the poet's Gaelic spirit as it appears, for example, in many of the poems which he translated as *Between Comedy and Glasgow*. (Perhaps this is another of those favored antitheses?) Se-

quences like "Six Haiku" or "The TV" or "Gaelic Stories" play lighthearted and delicately impudent native variations on the modes of Imagism or Japanese verse, and yet every now and then they throw up moments of startlingly succinct poignancy:

A croft.
Two brothers.
A plate with potatoes.

The same wit informs Crichton Smith's delight in literature, from a hilarious "Chinese Poem" ("To Seamus Macdonald") in the style of Pound's "Exile's Letter," or the calculated "Chekhovism" of "Russian Poem," to Homer and Orpheus and Hamlet, and a poem sequence from 1975 called *The Notebooks of Robinson Crusoe*. The moody Danish prince is an equivocal figure for Smith and the poems in which he quite frequently features tend to contain their author's considerable reservations about heroism and fame and intellectuality, not to mention his doubts about the value of "literature" in the first place and the point of "teaching" it as his profession. By comparison Robinson Crusoe may seem to be a less likely model, but for Smith he represents a quintessential poet/maker--a practical figure, but a man of isolation, symbolically a man on an island, compelled to possess the wilderness of experience by naming it and expressing it: "This landscape is my diary. / I inscribe the day on it. / I invest it with grammar." Nor is his "rescue" and a return to the "communal inferno" of the twentieth century an unmixed blessing: "Language," he reflects after Sartre's epigram on hell, "is other people," and he must confront both if he is to survive as a writer.

The paradoxical nature of language was the central subject of a Gaelic sequence called "Shall Gaelic Die?" first published in 1969. Here words were considered on the one hand as a system of intrinsically meaningless but conventionally accepted signs, while at the same time recognizing that their cultural value--especially for Gaelic speakers whose mother tongue is under threat--is absolutely priceless.

"Shall Gaelic die?" A hundred years from now who
will say these words? Who will say, "Co their?"
Who? The voice of the owl.

Crichton Smith has questioned the plight of the Lowlands, too, with several ferocious attacks on the dilution of Scotland to a matter of Highland Games, seaside gentility and bed-and-breakfast materialism. The long sequence *From Bourgeois Land* (1969) developed this vision of small town Presbyterian desperation where the cramped spirit keeps its books and awaits

its retirement watch, but Fulton has selected very few poems from it--perhaps because they fare less well out of context. This stage in Smith's development is better represented by extracts from "By the Sea" and from "The White Air of March" which delivered a hilariously apposite vision of cultural banality and then juxtaposed it with passages dedicated to the Cuillins as symbols of the most rarified and demanding remoteness and excellence:

This is the land God gave to Andy Stewart--
 we have our inheritance.
 There shall be no ardour, there shall be indifference.
 There shall not be excellence, there shall be the
 average.
 We shall be the intrepid hunters of golf balls.

Have you not known, have you not heard, has it not
 been reported that Mrs Macdonald has given an hour-
 long lecture on Islay and at the conclusion was
 presented with a bouquet of flowers by Marjory,
 aged five?

.

The Cuillins stand and will forever stand.
 Their streams scream in the moonlight.

It is an amusing jump from "The Scottish Soldier" to the Cuillins but the mountains remain abstract and, in fact, disconnected from *any* human life--cold and somehow unhelpful. Edwin Muir felt that the combination of opposites in such antisyzygies was always bound to result in a sterile impasse. I believe he was wrong, but in this case I can see what he meant, and "The White Air of March" remains an impressive, but a complicated and ultimately a painfully unresolved, poem.

More often than mountains Crichton Smith's poems are full of islands and the sea and the sky around them, and above all, the penetrating light from the North that "strikes...like a gong," the "white air" that is the perfect element for those deer on the high hills. In contrast to this lies the sea in its role as a symbol of death and the unconscious mind, and from these connections the poet can produce a fine love poem like "You are at the bottom of my mind" or a eulogy to "Freud" (both Gaelic poems), or a terrifying identification with the drowned men of "The Iolaire," or a vision of a girl who once read "Lycidas" and now sits at a supermarket cash desk--"Pupil's Holiday Job":

Lycidas is floating in the sea
 among bouquets and the eternal monsters
 with strange names, so Greek, so salt with brine.
 Down the slope the bread and cereals pour,
 they pour eternally with Lycidas.
 He's turning over and over with the cartons
 in the sea of everyday with all its monsters.

These lines provide an excellent example of the fineness of Iain Crichton Smith's sensibility, with its capacity to make bitter-sweet discriminations without crude judgments or the all too predictable ironies which, say, Philip Larkin might have imposed on any such meeting between classical values and supermarket convenience. "It is possible," reflects the poet, "that there are many worlds."

"Pupil's Holiday Job" comes from *In the Middle* (1977), the last book to be included in Robin Fulton's selection, which draws to a close with uncollected pieces from various magazines. In several of these later poems Smith achieves a plainness of statement which compliments his calmly domestic subjects ("Morning," "The Chair," "My Brother")--something carried over from his Gaelic poems, perhaps, and something borrowed, too, from early imagism and the Japanese and Chinese translations of Pound and Waley. (See "Chinese Poem" and "The Red Horse," for example.) In either case a lightness of touch in these pieces comes as welcome release for a poet whose earlier work has drawn such pained intensity from the isolations of his internal island life and his own ambivalent feelings about the spiritual rigors which have so bound him to that "fine bareness of Lewis."

The problems of selection remain--especially with such a prolific poet and one given to writing linked sequences of shorter poems, not all of which operate satisfactorily when seen on their own. On the whole Robin Fulton has sustained a good choice (with the cooperation of the poet himself) although some familiar anthology pieces have been left out--probably because they *are* so familiar. Yet readers do like to find their favorites in any more comprehensive account of a poet's work. Dr. Fulton has arranged the poems more or less chronologically in ten sections, including many excellent but previously uncollected pieces, especially those from *Lines Review*. However, the layout does make it difficult to identify which poems come from which books and that is always, I believe, valuable information, not just for the student, but for the general reader, too. The last selection from Iain Crichton Smith's work was published ten years ago and so it seems likely that this generous volume--with over 250 poems--will serve the public and the poet admirably well for quite a

few years to come.

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NOTES

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