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Roderick Watson

Scottish Poetry 1987-1989



In *The Intelligent Observation of Naked Women*—an arresting title—Frank Kuppner offers five long poems, including the title piece, which have been made by assembling unrhymed four-line verses, often heavily end-stopped, in numbered sequence. The form, and something of the voice too, is familiar from *A Bad Day for the Sung Dynasty*, and perhaps it is just a little too familiar by the time we have finished this latest collection. Yet there is wit and poignancy here, and Kuppner's deliberately prosaic tones can have a deceptively moving force.

He is a detached "reader" of signs rather than a "maker" of signs, for his poems deal with photographs ("An Old Guide-Book to Prague"); absences ("The Intelligent Observation of Naked Woman"); closed doors ("Passing Through Doorways") and tantalizing glimpses from other lives ("Movements in the Crypt"). Even in sequences such as "Five Quartets," which deal with a more direct personal relationship, there remains a curious sense of analytical separation by which things are defined as much by their absences or the spaces between them, as by any more physical or erotic presence:

ii.

I sit watching fictional horrors,
And turn when she enters the room
Seeking out something needed for the kitchen.
She exclaims, "Is that still on?" and leaves.

iii.

Soon I get up and switch the set off.
I return to my seat, and sit quietly
In a room now grown preternaturally peaceful.
The pictures on the wall reassume their former existences.

iv.

From the kitchen every so often there drifted in
The sound of one plate clicking against another...
("III")

Kuppner's characteristic stance is that of an observer, a lonely persona or perhaps a kind of critically trained voyeur, who expresses himself in ironically pedantic tones by decoding snapshots from his own and other people's lives. The numbered stanzas (used in every poem throughout the volume) are a formal recognition of this distance, and yet the sense of separation they evoke is also the emotional subject of his poetry.

"An Old Guide-Book to Prague" offers literal photographs of people, statues, architecture and light, and these images from the crowded streets (taken just before the second war broke out), seem to open vistas of almost cosmic scope: "A long straight busy street reaches for minutes into the page; / More life within it than in a thousand books; / Even to count the dots is an insuperable task;"—yet the "dots" are human beings, and the poet's distance from them is honest, disturbing and sad. ("That dot runs his eyes over a newspaper; / That dot seems to huddle wearily against a huge building").

Kuppner is moved by the gulfs of time and experience which lie between us, and although he engages in acts of intimate imagination and speculation about what he sees, he also recognizes that his interpretations can never be verified, and even the texts themselves may be unreliable: "It seems from the captions there is a notable building in this picture: / The problem is, I am uncertain which it is." Of course history may always have been too big to speak about (the rise of Hitler, or the possibility of nuclear holocaust), but the poet seems equally baffled before the minutiae of everyday life and love.

Kuppner lives in a "world of light and textbooks" in which life-stuff made by the stars themselves can "sit down on my chair in the morning, to put on her tights." Yet this sense of wonder does not bring life closer, for he goes on to observe, in a typical moment, that "within touching distance is also infinity." Thus despite their references to domestic interiors or banal street scenes, Kuppner's poems keep coming back to *le silence eternal* which so dismayed Pascal: "So much space around us, and yet we lie to

each other; / So much silence, and yet we add silence onto it." Under a gaze like this the poet and his lover, too, can only be "brief interruptions in the blackness."

Frank Kuppner has written some memorable poems from this point of view, and he can show us images of tenderness and beauty from his ironically pedantic vantage point in the library reading room, or among the dusty shelves of some second-hand bookshop: "Some of my German relatives must be here or hereabouts; / Oh, silver nitrate, silver nitrate, how much I have loved thee."

Despite its title, Tom Pow's *Rough Seas* makes for smoother sailing in a poetry which is more conventionally cultured (as in "grown, cultivated, crafted" and also "artistically learned") in both style and outlook. Pow's work links personal feeling, memory, and the objective world with a fine eye for congruous and incongruous detail—chintz roses like blood, an overripe plum, butter melting through "tiny combs of bread"; "dandelion clocks in the waste ground . . . blown to blind button-eyes"; or "a moped, clogged with rust" on a favorite stretch of disused railway line. He takes us from childhood memories and small traumas (in the first section of the collection), to mature reflections on history and landscape from around Dumfries where he lives, to observations brought back from a more recent visit to North America and especially New York.

There is a real craft here, with technical balance and clarity which hardly ever lets the writer down as each poem moves towards closure in a succession of concluding lines and images, sometimes oblique but always apposite. "I read 'The Wreck...', / let the language break over me, but all / seems rhetoric to the plain salty truth— / that for some people Rough Seas can never be / metaphorical: nor words enshrine their pain" ("Rough Seas: Three Postcards").

These images of water - life - pain recur in other poems too, but their impact is moderated by Pow's adopted stance of benign retrospective narrative control. In the end, with some of these poems at least, I found myself wishing for a little less control and a greater sense of technical and emotional risk. The shifts of image and imagination in "Natural History," for example, show that Pow can make these wider and wilder leaps to great effect, as he links memories of stuffed elephants in a museum with a friend's liking for iced tea, all in a scorching summer haunted by dreams of freedom and loss:

Meanwhile, in your obsolescent white freezer
with its sticky door, four tea-bags float in darkness.
Screwed down in a litre glass jar, like drowned mice,
their labelled tails trail down the damp neck.

Each bleeds it own tangy spores, billowing
down like smoke, till the clear water grows brackish
and the flavour full of a slight bitterness
I can never get quite used to.

Certainly Colin Mackay's first collection, *Red Ice*, is not given to Pow's measured control, nor does it have much time for the very contemporary reflexive "literary" awareness of writers such as Kuppner. By comparison, Mackay's work is passionately idealistic. There is conviction and risk-taking here, in an elevated exclamatory style which moves from (acknowledged) echoes of Ginsberg's "Howl" to the loping balladic polemics of Hugh MacDiarmid. These affinities are all the more striking because the title poem in particular is a long and hotly rhetorical attack on what it sees as MacDiarmid's willed blindness to the horrors of the Gulag archipelago. Cornford and Sartre and other heroes of the Left are found equally wanting. Mackay's arguments can be alarmingly simplistic: "We were fools or liars every one"; and "The luxury of not knowing / is one a poet cannot afford." I can't help thinking that the indignantly youthful certainty of this is something of a luxury in its turn, but the case is there, and Mackay's vividly projected anguish on behalf of the terrible suffering endured by millions of anonymous prisoners is rough, powerful and convincing, and requires an answer, especially in literary Scotland where the mythology of the Left is so rarely challenged.

Mackay's first novel *The Song of the Forest* won an Arts Council Book Award for its poetic power. In poetry itself, his imagination is unabashedly romantic, with an almost religious exaltation of landscape and apocalyptic images reminiscent of early George Mackay Brown. (See for example, "On St Margaret's Day"; "Star of the Sea"; "Rune Stones"; "On a Moonlit Night".) He writes historically about Mary Queen of Scots, Falstaff and "A Covenanter's Prayer," and with unselfconscious feeling about his own loves and pains ("White Sails"; "My Father"). Such romanticism makes a curious marriage with the heated polemic of "Red Ice" (backed up by its extensive apparatus of footnotes), but the combination works well I feel, if not always evenly, and to memorable effect.

George Bruce's first poems were much, much barer—no less from the heart, of course—but stripped to the bone under the searching light of his native North-East coast. *Perspectives* is a new collection of poems from 1970 to 1986, a welcome successor to the *Collected Poems* of 1970, and there is a mellower, more reflective voice at work in many of these pieces. The sense of metaphysical exposure which he found on the sea coasts of his youth is still there, but it is modified now by a more generous social feeling. In some poems this leads to an uneasy balance between nostalgia and moralizing ("Moon Men" doesn't quite cohere I think), but at its best

Bruce's work has lost none of its ability to penetrate us by (apparently) simple statement. Poems such as "January Haiku" combine tenderness with strength—seen also in "Tree," "Earth Song," "Under the Moon" and "Craftsman," which last deserves quotation in full:

His being is at the pace
 given by stone, wood, clay
 to wrists, hands and fingers,
 nor may be moved from this.

The world blazes and cries,
 is shattered. He puts his hand
 on clay, stone, wood,
 or writes words to stay,

while the stone stars stay.

Despite its punning title, "GB on the Rocks" (not to mention "Old Man and Sea" and "Under the Moon") reminds us that Bruce has never lost the unsparing edge of his earliest work, but he's more darkly witty now:

The facts of time sit on my balding head,
 while the permutations of water affront the rock,
 water day and night on it. Speculation will not
 alter its longevity, nor mine. I consult my drying skin.

"Sonnet on my Wife's Birthday" reflects tenderly that "our children's children now take up the songs," but this collection also shows that the poet has retained his own boy-like enthusiasm for new experiences and new places. A visit to Australia, for example, produced "In the Beginning" and "Aborigine with Tax Form" which celebrate strangeness itself in the names and the noises of that strange place. Bruce's lifelong interest in music and painting has also produced excellent poems on Chopin, Barbara Hepworth and William Burns, while "Poetry Circle in a Square Room" and "Why the Poet Makes Poems" show a more surreal and unrespectable humor, entirely to the credit of a makar in his eighties: "That's what's going on. The grass is jumping for joy, / and all the little fishes are laughing their heads off."

An equally welcome volume, also from Aberdeen University Press, is Alastair Mackie's selected poems *Ingatherins*, which contains work from *Clytach* and *Back Green Odyssey* (reviewed here in volume XVII), as well as "Early Poems," "Miscellaneous Poems," and other sequences. Among these sequences there are paraphrases and expansions into Scots from the

Gospel of St. Mark, and a brooding reflection on the state of modern Scotland, called "At the Heich Kirkyaird." Here Mackie's method is familiar enough—he compares myth with reality and past with present—and one might expect the result to be equally familiar, not to say predictably shrill or sentimental. But "At the Heich Kirkyaird" is much better than this would suggest. What saves it is the quiet and unforced plainness of Mackie's diction, and a sense of space and peace which he finds in our wild places and describes so well:

I sit on the ashet-rim o this broun pool
its shallas fu o clood shapes and the lyft.
A Hieland coo stand stock-still
in its black seck o shadda.
I feel my heid gantin like a joug
that drap by drap fills up
wi aa the silence I could haud.

This voice is Mackie's great strength and its oddly-paced and gritty rhythms are unique to his poetry. His diction lulls us with what I can only call an unforced colloquial flatness, only to startle us with images or references which could come straight from a Russian futurist. Yet there is never anything pretentious or overtly "literary" about these shifts, and Mackie never loses the inspiredly plain authenticity of his own working-class, or perhaps lower middle-class, Scots utterance. This voice is effectively recognized in the title of a section of poems called "Plainsangs," which offer beautifully judged and often disgruntled reflections on the world we live in. The "Miscellaneous Poems" have the same force, and once again the stance is familiar: in the same vein as some of William Neill's poems, or after Garioch's speaker in Princes Street Gardens. But Mackie's voice—flat, wry, straight-faced and darkly humorous—has its own unique music. Lines from "My Late Spring" say it all:

Speugs hae been at the ingan sets,
the fog-horn stounds,
a lane bird sings a dreepit solo.
Aathing's ahint.

It's my kinna spring
caulder in Lallans
than in Latin...

Donald Gordon's Scots is more traditionally familiar. He writes in a North-East voice after his mentor Charles Murray, and the poems in *The Low Road Hame* are satirical, cheerfully irreverent or melancholy by

turns, often genuinely funny, and all very skilfully crafted. This collection contains all the poems published in his first collection, *The Gangrel Fiddler and Other Poems* (1984), plus those he wrote in retirement before his sudden death in 1985. Gordon was an Aberdeen man from a farming family. The parallel with *Hamewith* is clear and entirely to his credit, for without being imitative, Gordon's metrical technique and his ease with Doric are up to the best dialect work from the North East, and he would have been happy to be seen as part of that tradition.

There are poems of nostalgic longing and exile (he finished his career as Ambassador to Vienna), poems which satirize contemporary failings of manners and planners in his native city, and lively *jeux d'esprit* such as "Wee Jaikie's Sang" in praise of "strippit ba's" (humbug sweeties). A group of eerie ballad-like poems and melancholy love lyrics are reminiscent of Marion Angus or Violet Jacob. "Mains on Hitler" (from 1939) invites comparison with "Dockens Afore His Peers," but in the end it is more comfortable and less disturbing than Murray's great poem. For me, Gordon is at his best with his wonderfully comic retellings of Noah's problems with the weather, or Adam's with Eve, and these more than hold their own with classics such as "Gin I Was God." Gordon writes within the tradition, certainly, but he has humor and a sharp tongue of his own: "Although in civic life, I wot, / Advancement may be sudden, / The rank is but the guinea stamp: / A pudden's aye a pudden."

Traditions change, of course, or rather our notion of who belongs in them does. The late Alex Scott recognized this in *Voices of Our Kind*, which is no less than the third revision to be made of his 1971 anthology of modern Scottish poetry "from 1920 to the present." This new edition has updated some of the work of established writers and added several younger poets to the list. The book now also contains the Gaelic originals to poems which had previously appeared only in translation, and this decision also speaks for a properly changing sense of priorities in what we have understood in the past to be "Scottish" literature. The scope is wide, and work in Scots is well represented too, from Charles Murray's "Gin I Was God" on the first page, to Tom Leonard's "The Good Thief" and poems from Donald Campbell, Christopher Rush and Raymond Vettese. The MacDiarmid selection is almost exclusively lyrical (the exception is the fine opening to *A Drunk Man...*), and entirely in Scots. I think it's a pity to have left out some of MacDiarmid's shorter, tougher work in English, but the overall tendency of Alex Scott's selection has been towards a wide and perhaps a conservative choice of lyrical, satirical or biographically accessible poetry. He has succeeded in this and *Voices of Our Kind* has sustained its place as an entertaining collection of forty-seven voices

from modern Scottish poetry, speaking in all three of our country's languages.

In academic terms, the most notable publication of the year was Kenneth Buthlay's fully annotated edition of *A Drunk Man*. Long promised as an annual volume for the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, this book must be the definitive edition and readers will at last be able to recognize the full density of reference and allusion to be found in MacDiarmid's great poem. *The Waste Land* has been well served by commentators, and now Buthlay has done equal justice to *A Drunk Man*. Indeed, in my opinion, *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land* and MacDiarmid's "gallimaufry" are the three great modernist masterpieces of our time, and I can only hope that this edition will help to make that claim more clearly felt among literary historians south of the border. Kenneth Buthlay's own scholarship in MacDiarmid studies is indisputable, and he has drawn on the work of other MacDiarmid critics to assemble an excellent introduction to the poem and an indispensable commentary on the text.

There are three lines in Norman Kreitman's poem "Victorian Sampler" which could speak for most of the poems in his collection, *Touching Rock*: "Neutral as a lens / the glass shows both the scene and a way of seeing / —all objects as formality, motion as a pose." There's an admirable coolness, and precision, but also a certain judgmental distance to Kreitman's work which these lines both embody and describe. It's tempting to suppose that his profession as a doctor or a therapist (if I read one of the poems aright) might have something to do with this, but of course the imagination has its own laws, and they needn't have anything to do with our working lives—think of young Eliot in his bank, or Wallace Stevens in the insurance office, after all. There are good descriptive details in many of Kreitman's poems about travelling in Tuscany, or observing a lizard, or stoking a bonfire with the detritus of one's past—observed and scrupulously recounted in characteristically lucid style: "A week of work unfinished / and our guests arriving soon. All day / you have been as tense as a swarm of bees. / Your urgency shuts me out" ("White Gladioli"). I felt, however, that there's also a tendency to offer a further commentary on experience, and that this produces something like a moral, or a shift into abstraction, or a too complete closure, especially in the final lines of a number of these poems. When the experience is left more open and allowed to speak more for itself, the poet's personal engagement (paradoxically) becomes much more powerful—though the tone is still closely controlled—as it is in the fine poems "Walking Together at Lyne Pool in Winter" and "It is not Vivaldi."

It is difficult to let landscape speak for itself and yet it must be allowed its own integrity in any poem that purports to deal with it. On the

other hand, the eye's lens is never really neutral, and the hills out there will be colored by it, however impartial we hope to be. It seems that the best we can do is to strike some sort of balance between the two horns of this particular dilemma, but it's never easy. These familiar thoughts were prompted by *Touching Rock*, and especially by Tessa Ransford's *Shadows from the Greater Hill*. Ransford took the brave decision to make an entire collection of poems on aspects of Arthur's Seat, as the subject of her observations and meditations through the changing seasons of a full year. The poems are accompanied by Edwin Johnston's excellent photographs (rather dimly reproduced, alas), which are, of course, equally incapable of "objectivity."

This theoretical preamble is not irrelevant, I trust, because it has to do with my own marked preference for some poems, and my dismay at others which persist in reading swans as emblems of "ambition," "emotion" and "The third swan [which] keeps the balance." Tessa Ransford's imagination often seeks to anthropomorphize or to spiritualize in this way, but lines such as "I grow stems of thought / to flow as poems," make me wriggle with embarrassment. So the pieces in this collection which work best for me are those which come closest to the detached spirit (not the form) of haiku, and there are indeed a number of beautifully clear poems, especially on the winter scene—"December 12th," "February 1st" and "February 24th," for example. Hokusai's hundred studies of Mt. Fuji aren't mentioned in these verses, but his swift art does seem to haunt the best of them.

William Neill's poems are equally alert to the perennial marriage of landscape and weather, and there are a number of short pieces in *Making Tracks* which have a haiku-like purity to them: "Gallowa Spring," "Hill and Cloud," "Berries." Neill follows the Gaelic tradition in that these poems seek a kind of objectivity in celebration of the essence of the place or the plant concerned. His Galloway spring is not a Romantic metaphor for the poet's own state of mind, and Neill's art in this respect is social, professional and creatively conservative. Thus it is that in most of his poems, landscape acts as a social touchstone—an inhabited or an inherited place to be lived in and put to work with due respect for traditional values. Small wonder, then, that he finds himself depressed by the state of modern Scotland: with cartwheels in suburban gardens, and mock tudor country pubs, all as empty of their original value as the surrounding grouse moors or the prairies of agro-business.

Poems such as "Sealltainn thar Chluaidh" ("Looking Over Clyde), and "De a Thug ort Sgrìobhadh Ghaidlig?" (What Compelled You to Write in Gaelic?) and "Cart Wheels," all speak very powerfully of Neill's sense of continuity and inheritance: "when I was on the shore between my father

and grandfather / who had a tight grip on both my hands"; later he feels a historical debt to the Carrick Gaelic of Walter Kennedy (famous for the flying between Kennedy and Dunbar); or he recalls boyhood memories of working with Clydesdale horses at the plough. These pieces and others like them are a firm and convincing testament to what Neill values, and often to what he feels has been lost. "De a Thug ort..." mixes Dunbar's Scots with its Gaelic and there's a certain poignancy in the English version which renders both down to the same tongue and then goes on to draw attention to what cannot be translated at all by using parenthetical insertions:

b'e Cinneide a nochd an rod dhomh;
le *sic eloquence*, mo thruaighe,
as they in *Erschry use*, mo thogair
is set my *thward appetite*

it was Kennedy that pointed the way;
with some eloquence, (Gaelic exclamation)
as Gaelic poets use, (Gaelic exclamation)
to set my capricious (literary) taste.

Of course these (apparent) failures are another kind of rhetorical device, but with these two texts and the gaps between them, Neill produces a memorable final effect—a subtle taste somewhere between sadness, bitterness and laughter. The pain and the truth of what these poems say cannot be denied—and the costs are told again in "Claonaig," a fine piece in memory of George Campbell Hay: "My foot went on the sand / of the country you knew / where now it is seldom / one hears a phrase of Gaelic."

Neill's broader and more overtly satirical poems continue the case by having good fun at the expense of weekend sailors, "white settlers" and the "golden boys" on waterskis who disturb the fishing in a favorite loch: "fun you shall have, excitement; never fear. / We're stoking up the lake with crocodiles." These poems bite neatly and effectively, and they demonstrate another side of Neill's conservative nature, namely his professional pride in being able to turn out witty and well-crafted sonnets. In this respect *Making Tracks* is a generous collection from a writer who takes pride in his craft, and indeed there's hardly a single poem in the book which fails to communicate a robust and witty point of view with a high standard of technical skill.

Yet, despite the skill and the humor and, more often than not, the justice of his case, Neill's repeated chastisement of our fallen bourgeois, city-dwelling state can sometimes make you wonder if *anything* from the con-

temporary world could ever please him. It seems significant to me that three good lyrics in this collection (none of them social satires) all seem to privilege the past over the present. "Truer Vision" prefers a remembered tree to the space where it once stood, and however *understandable* this might be, I can't see how it becomes *truer*. "Grian as Gealach" (Sun and Moon) prefers "the splendid moon of yesterday" to "the bright day"; and the title poem, "Making Tracks," favors horses over tractors.

This is all very well, but truth and true vision (using "vision" in a different sense, of course) are also simply to do with that which is; and I believe that good poetry ignores this ground rock, however bare it might look, at its peril. And Neill is a good poet (if perhaps of an unfashionably public sort), equally fluent in English, Scots and Gaelic. The epigrammatic wit of his reflections on age and death—"Aghaidh ri h-Aghaidh" (Face to Face), "Last Race," "Carrion"—have a timeless classical strength to them—"traditional" and "telling" in every good sense of those words.

Tri-lingual Scottish poets are rarer than ospreys, and William Neill offers a poem in honor of one who might almost have been his mentor, dedicating "Claonaig" to the late George Campbell Hay: "My foot went on the sand / of the country you knew / where now it is seldom / one hears a phrase of Gaelic." Hay's voice is often more personally anguished, lyrical and philosophical than Neill's, but his poem *Seeker Reaper* is an openly public celebration of a ring-net herring boat—a praise piece from the Gaelic tradition written in boldly rhythmical Scots with passages in Gaelic and Icelandic. "She's a seeker thon boat. She's a solan's hert... She's a reaper, she's a river, she's a racer, / she's a teerer thon." *Seeker Reaper* would make wonderful performance poetry, or it would go well as a short film for TV. The Saltire society are to be congratulated for producing this slim hardback volume in a large format limited edition, with watercolors by Archie MacAlister and a fine introduction by Angus Martin. The book is dedicated to the ring-net fishermen of Tarbert and Loch Fyne, and its publication was supported by the Clyde Fisherman's Association.

Landscape and community are among the central themes of Douglas Dunn's *Northlight*, but most of the poems in this collection fail seriously, I think, to give any account of the *haecceitas* of either. He has done this well in other books, and there are some fully achieved poems here too, but I have to say that I think this is Dunn's weakest collection for some time. Why? Well, my own bias in poetry is towards recognizing what Joyce called "the individuating rhythm" of things—an expression which will somehow catch whatever it is that makes the subject unique. In contrast to this ideal, much of Dunn's diction strikes me as merely "poetical"—a balanced and conscious diction, with measured rhythm and rhyme, but decorative rather than dynamic in the end: language as *vocabulary* as op-

posed to articulate *energy*, perhaps. (I'm well aware of the modernist implications in what I say, and equally aware that Dunn doesn't share them—which is why I began this discussion by declaring my own tastes and prejudices.) A very few examples will have to suffice. The poem "Abernethy" begins as follows:

Air-psalters and pages of stone
Inscribed and Caledonian
Under these leaf-libraries where
Melodious lost literature
Remembers itself! A white
Dove climbs on its Columbian flight
In the botanic radiance,
Northlight's late druidic rinse
Lapping against time and earth
In this root view of Fife and Perth.

I'm sure that Dunn is aiming here for a kind of aureate diction—for this effect is sought in other poems, too—but somehow the experience (whatever it was) has escaped. A bird at a bus station in "Broughty Ferry" becomes: "A one-legged pigeon hopped between the queues / With messages from Orphic pauperdom." In "Love-making by Candlelight," what would seem a frank enough experience becomes equally crusted in lapidary ornamentation:

...A molten vividness
Dismantles gender and the way it moves
Identifies a married venery
Timeless in the bedroom of the species—
A Pictish smile, a medieval kiss,
A whispered pre-industrial draught
On our contemporary bed.

I understand the choices behind this deliberate abstraction, and it is reflected in Dunn's predilection for personifying inanimate objects in many of the other poems in *Northlight*, but speaking for myself at least, it failed to move or to interest me. Other pieces, such as "An Address to Adolphe Sax in Heaven," "Here and There" and "December's Door" (a poem in memory of Philip Larkin) show a wealth of cultured reference, but a kind of literary cleverness, too, which (like the rhyme schemes) never quite allows us to forget its presence.

These comments read more harshly than I am comfortable with, given my admiration for Douglas Dunn's writing, but *Northlight* just didn't work for me. The few poems I really liked were all ones which allowed him to speak more plainly and less like "literature." Among these, "The War in

the Congo," "The Country Kitchen" and "Apples" are equally distinguished by the undecorated strength of their opening and closing lines. The last four lines of "Apples," in particular, have a more stirring physical immediacy than the whole of "Love-making by Candlelight":

I don't know why I should remember this—
Perhaps the pippin was enough to do it
With its hard flesh, delicious, bitten kiss.
I sit tonight and it is very quiet.

Norman MacCaig has long been a master of understatement in this vein, and equally notable for the wilder flings of an imagination which can stop readers in their tracks with lines which describe a curlew "trailing bubbles of music / over the squelchy hillside" ("Curlew"); or a man's face in which "His eyes are two teaspoons / that have been emptied / for the last time" ("Neighbour"). Yet despite these familiar treasures, *Voice Over* is rather stark collection, reflecting indeed the darker implications of its title—which might refer to the off-screen voice of a taker who is heard but not seen, or to a premonition of final silence. Both possibilities are there, and they are equally displaced from common human contact.

MacCaig's imagery has a darker cast, too, even in those poems which make familiar use of his epigrammatic wit and his light touch. Thus "Memory" equates the act of reminiscence with the return to the Ark of Noah's dove: only it flies over "the turbulence of the world" and sometimes comes back with "a thorny twig without blossoms." "Thinking of contradictions" finds the "certainty" and the "peace" of Heaven (a place without contradictions) to be intolerably boring—a familiar and comfortably antiszygytical thought. But the poem concludes its case by citing "the darling gifts / of rage, jealousy, cruelty, lust," not to mention the "truly godlike" power of "destroying our own creations." These last five lines genuinely reverse the reader's expectations, nor is it easy to estimate whether their tone is one of irony or despair.

Even poems which are much less barbed still contain images of rain, disorder, isolation, and age—"Inside and out"; "Backward look"; "Dark centre"; "April Day in November, Edinburgh"; "Wild snowstorm"; "Crofter"; "A room and a woman in it." Then there are a significant number of other poems and phrases which confront the difficulties of making contact and even the impossibility of saying anything: "Of the rest of space / I can say nothing" ("Chauvinist") or:

Have I taken all I can from you,
books of the masters, printed on the yellowing years?
I know you've hung songs on constellations

I can't visit and under my feet
your minerals are glowing that I can't reach,
dig as I might, furiously, in my midnight room.
("Plea not to be deserted")

Somehow the poet feels at a distance from the world around him, alone in his room, watching the street or the television; or standing in Assynt now felt to be only a "little plot of ground" amongst "flags and tombstones." These moments are all the more poignant because MacCaig's poems most usually manage to celebrate the world as an open and approachable place, rich with its own free and delightful variety. Of course MacCaig has never been unaware of the darker side of existence, but it seems closer in many of these poems, as with "On the pier at Kinlochbervie," in which he longs for "an extreme of nearness. / I want boundaries on my mind. / I want to feel the world like a straitjacket."

It is impossible not to connect these themes with the poet's own recent experiences, and indeed two of the poems in the book refer directly to his wife's brave struggle against cancer. There is something beyond the personal, however, in *Voice Over*. It is a disturbing and important collection, but it is oddly discomfiting, too, and it may not prove to be a popular book among those readers who prefer the sunnier MacCaig to the brooding autumnal presence who speaks here: "And silly hope greets us, She says / *What a beautiful Spring day* / and smiles charmingly / among the falling leaves."

William McIlvanney's is a more public voice, for his is an observing, social, novelist's eye, not so deeply or personally implicated in the poem in the way that a more lyric writer would be. He is quick to coin ingenious phrases to catch the detail of a scene, and quick to turn them to a commentary on how we live today. *In Through the Head* contains a number of effective poems in this vein, for the volume is a generous selection of all his poetry to date, from *The Longships in the Harbour*, with the whole of *These Words: Weddings and After* (reviewed in volume XXI), and some new poems, too, all re-ordered into thematic sections: "Boy into Man," "Out There," "Men and Women," etc.

For many of these poems the poet's preferred stance is that of an observer-commentator on the streets and the pubs around him. His preference for regular meter and the clinching effect of rhyme tends to emphasize, too, a certain moralizing and dramatizing distance. Now this point of view is well suited to satire or comedy, but when McIlvanney wants to convey sympathy for the lives of others, as he often does, his chosen mode seems to me to bring him dangerously close to condescension instead. Thus "Incident" describes the confrontation between a ragged urchin and a bourgeois car-owner, without effectively evoking the truly in-

ner experience of either. And without that empathy (Keats called it "negative capability"), McIlvanney's account of the pair has echoes of just the sort of educated and easy assessment that marks the middle-class mores you might think he would despise. "Incident" just fails, I think, on these grounds, yet another poem, "Replay," has all the intensity of a personally felt experience and a final image (with memory as an action-replay of the guilty mind) that leaves the poem open at the end, cruelly revealed but without overt judgment: "Time's the machine the machine's within."

The poems I liked best were in this vein, or those which seemed to have the most direct autobiographical source, "In the Library," "One Day" and "Grandmother," for example, which also manage a more intimately direct way of speaking:

By the time I knew my grandmother she was dead.
 Before that she was where I thought she stood,
 Spectacles, slippers, venerable head,
 A standard-issue twinkle in her eyes—
 Familiar stage-props of grandmotherhood.
 It took her death to teach me they were lies.

Other poems relate to the world that McIlvanney has made especially his own in his prose fiction, a working-class world of little hope and inarticulate male integrity which gives away nothing unless it speaks, perhaps, in the physical eloquence of a way of standing or smoking or the sudden movements of rage or violence. Consider "Odd Uncontainable Men," for example, or "Brothers" in which there is "Nothing to say" and we are asked: "Imagine if you can / A place so far past human landscaping / That clouds connote just clouds and rain means rain, / Where nothing ought and everything just is—." Here again, perhaps, echoes from McIlvanney's more private fears or feelings make for a more powerful expression than he can find in his role as social commentator and explicator.

William Soutar's work clearly springs from the more impersonal voice of ballads and songs in the Scots canon, and certainly W. R. Aitken's edition of *Poems of William Soutar, a New Selection*, brings us a wealth of bairnsangs, riddles, comic verses and fine Scots lyrics, many of which might almost already be mistaken for part of our oral tradition. Aitken has given us an indispensable book, and readers and students of Soutar owe thanks to the scholarship with which he has introduced, selected and edited these poems. This is not a complete Soutar, however, for such a volume would contain a fair amount of frankly occasional and often downright ephemeral pieces. Aitken's choice is more than generous all the same, and although he doesn't publish the poems as they appeared in Soutar's first published collections, he does follow groupings that the poet

had been assembling before his death. Within each category, too, ("Bairnrhymes," "Whigmaleeries," etc.), the poems are given in chronological order, with each poem dated by order of its composition.

Aitken's selection gives renewed insight into the many cheerful and robust poems which Soutar wrote as occasional pieces, or as "character" pieces in the Scots domestic idiom. But the core of the collection is to be found in the "Poems in English" and the "Poems and Lyrics" in Scots. In this respect it's interesting to compare the cool, sad and accepting compassion of those English lyrics from the 40s (prompted by the second world war), with the more traditionally lyrical fatalism of the songs and ballads in Scots, which look further back to a centuries' long tradition of lost battles, missed assignations and absent lovers. Soutar's voice retains its characteristic reserve in both English and Scots poems, but their recurring tone does point to a sense of evanescence and loss, and yet also a sense that art endures, which is as close as Soutar gets, I think, to expressing the tragic nature of his own personal condition. Compare, for example, the well-known last lines of "The Tryst": "Sae luely was she gaen / And wi' her a' my simmmer days / Like they had never been."; and the last stanza of "Summer Evening 1942": "The iron scatters from the sky; / And upon earth the stone: / Kingdoms in their confusion die: / The nightingale sings on." This sense of a threatened frailty—in our feelings and in our values—which yet endures, lies at the heart of Soutar's muse.

Robin Bell's three *Radio Poems* speak for themselves as middle-length narrative monologues designed for broadcasting, with the aid of music and sound effects. With these requirements in mind, Bell favors a verse form based on six-line stanzas, most often rhyming abcba, and explains in a note at the end that these verses are designed to allow some expressive room for the actor to play his or her own timing against the loping but regular pace of the verse.

"Chasing the Bear" tells how NATO pilots from Leuchars intercept Russian surveillance bombers as a matter of routine in tense encounters over the North Sea. "Melville Bay" describes a shipwreck during a whaling expedition from Dundee in 1838. "The Other Thief" places the listener in the role of a silent accomplice, as a burglar returns to rob what used to be his family house, and to confront once again a violent family trauma which he himself precipitated in his youth.

These are well-crafted, professional pieces, and the last two broadcasts must have made for effective listening. ("Chasing the Bear" has not yet been produced.) Bell has chosen to set the first and last poems in the continuous present tense so that his speaker has to give what amounts to a running commentary on the locations, the physical action, and his own memories and motivations. It's a hard task, and it doesn't always come off.

These are directly dramatic stories, after all, and yet there have to be moments of "story-so-far" or "now I do this" which do come to seem rather stilted when isolated on the page. Within the original context (and the speed) of a radio broadcast, however, they would call far less attention to themselves. Andrew Greig and Kathleen Jamie's *A Flame in Your Heart* undertook a similar narrative challenge, but they chose a more lyrical, meditative and impressionistic approach which created fewer problems of this sort. Of the three poems "Melville Bay" works best in this respect I think, because it is a retrospective narrative which makes fewer demands on the suspension of our disbelief. The other two monologues have an undeniable pace to them, but the inner voice and its potential for psychological depth eventually takes second place to the plot and the poet's considerable descriptive skill.

There's a dramatic bias of a different sort to the concluding poems in John Glenday's *The Apple Ghost*. Called "From an Occupied Country," these poems offer a series of surreal images of a world in decline—some medieval, or perhaps some future place where plague has broken out, where refugees wander the roads, where the poet's grandfather collects broken pottery, where men give birth to cancerous tissue, where the last rubber hot-water bottles have decayed, where freed guide dogs howl at the moon. These poems don't offer a connected narrative as such, yet the oddness of their vision holds them together—often with a light touch, too, despite the apparent grimness of some of the topics.

Glenday's intriguing vision can be found throughout this excellent first collection, for he has a penchant for linked images and themes. Memories of his father and his family intermingle with a boyhood fascination with flying ("A Dream of Gliders"), or fishing and the sea, or the past as it manifests itself in old radios, old photographs or return visits to old places as if they were locations already eons distant ("A Guided Tour"). Glenday fully understands Pound's dictum that the natural object should be the adequate image, for his poems are full of well-observed everyday details which become pregnant with slightly slant meanings, without ever being reduced to mere "symbols." This estrangement can be slightly forced at times ("Waiting" and "Coal"), but for the most part the understated tone of these poems is mirrored in an entirely lucid and economical free verse which rarely puts a foot wrong:

In the late afternoon, I opened
 Shallow cupboards where the sunlight leaned on
 Shelf over shelf of apples, weightless with decay.
 Beneath them sheets of faded wallpaper
 Showed ponies prancing through a summer field.
("The Apple Ghost")

Then the poet's eye adds that original cast of its own, without ever striving for effect, to produce lines which are often memorably witty and grave in their response to the strange world of objects and feelings in which we live. "In Praise of Wireless," "The Apple Ghost" and "The House of Boreraig" are fine pieces, difficult to quote from in brief, so dependent is Glenday's art on the overall control of tone, pace and a slowly developing wider significance. An accomplished first collection.

Kenneth White's collected longer poems, *The Bird Path*, are almost one long poem. They gain by being read together, so consistent is the ethos they reveal in what amounts to a slow evolution towards what he will call a "white world," whose essence is caught in the following fine lines from "The Gannet Philosophy":

All poetry comes
from facing loveliness

all love comes
from living in nakedness

all naked life
comes from the nothingness

Indeed, later poems such as "The Ocean Way" and "Broken Ode to White Brittany" take such an understated and fragmented form that they can scarcely be understood or appreciated without a grounding in what has been said before. White expects us to have such a grounding, for his poetry is almost exclusively concerned with an all-encompassing and spiritual vision of what is important to him in this world, and so his images, too, are equally consistent (although evolving slowly) from poem to poem.

White's idiosyncratic vision has to do with that "nothingness," and the images he prefers are those of the Atlantic coast—recreated as a largely imagined space occupied by cold wind, bare sand and wheeling gulls:

White-blow of the waves
 confused beginnings
 dissolution and amplitude
 the emptiness is plenitude

and the gulls
 raise their spontaneous cries
 ("Cape Breton Uplight")

The poet's search for emptiness, for what MacDiarmid called the word by which silence speaks its name without breaking it, brings him to the insights offered by Zen, and commits him to using a poetic language which seeks something of that "nothingness," a transcendental transparency, in it-

self. This can work very well (if the reader gives it time to work), and at its best, White's consciously low-key, cool utterance makes a fine match for his theme, although it takes time to unfold, with few overtly striking metaphors or memorable phrases for quotation. This selflessness is how White would have it.

Having said all this, there are also times when White adopts an overtly shamanistic persona which seems at odds with his best reticence, not unlike the perhaps inescapable pun which haunts every reference to a "white world." There are other times when his fascination with "always the meta-physical landscape / but more and more abstract" ("The Region of Identity"), seems to bleach too much of the particular from his world, and one longs for that other side to the Zen tradition, which is to focus on the absolute, burning existence of specific, unique, individual things. So it is that after a few too many "bare stones / gulls crying in the mist" ("The Bird Path"), the reader welcomes the rural richness of Ardeche in "Remembering Gourgounel," or the chaotic energy of Hong Kong evoked in "Scenes of the Floating World," or White's own memories of Glasgow in the early piece "The Ballad of Kali Road." The striking eroticism of "The House of Insight" finds an equally striking linguistic expression, and poems such as "Crow Meditation Text" and "The Eight Eccentrics" are a needed reminder that White also has a sense of humor.

White's debt to MacDiarmid is acknowledged in the long piece "Walking the Coast," which echoes *The Kind of Poetry I Want* in its aims, and also in its use of botanical and geological references, with quotations from Kokoschka, Kandinsky, Munch and Rilke, and more than a hint of *On a Raised Beach* at the end. Indeed, White's "pelagian space" and his sense of a "strange poetry hidden / in the cold streams / of these barbarian lands" ("Ovid's Report"), reads very much like MacDiarmid's evocation of the islands of Scotland in the book of that name, and not least the "luminous air [and] the gleam of distant ice" which MacDiarmid found in Shetland—the spiritual birthplace of *On a Raised Beach*. MacDiarmid's aim (also expressed in *The Islands of Scotland*) was to "get back behind the Renaissance" to move our point of view away from the Mediterranean by returning to the North, with a language "de-Graecized, de-Latinized, and de-Frenchified..." Now of course White's poetry has been very successfully translated into French, but he has been equally keen to move behind the Mediterranean, with his interest in China, Japan and India, not to mention more remote cultures from the Scythians or the Inuit. Thus White's vision of "*atlantica*" is of a place that stems from "what was left out and behind / when the roads were built" ("The House at the Head of the Tide"). In this respect it has much in common with MacDiarmid's hopes for the Gaelic or Celtic "Idea" in which Wales, Cornwall, Brittany, Ireland and Scot-

land—"Atlantic" shorelines all—would offer a new outlook from the "periphery": an outlook quite at odds with the centralizing values of Western imperialism and capitalism. White doesn't share MacDiarmid's specifically political focus in these matters, however, for his Atlantic quest favors a rather abstract spirituality which is closer to the inner withdrawal of Buddhism. Nevertheless, the link between the two poets remains a stimulating one, not least in White's sense that as an artist he must move "from an accumulation of data / to the plural poem / beyond the generality" ("The House at the Head of the Tide").

It's good to see this work available in print again, and Mainstream are to be congratulated on the very fine production values of *The Bird Path* and *Travels in the Drifting Dawn*, a companion volume of prose travel pieces which White calls "a way book." These books, and the forthcoming collected shorter poems, have prompted a reevaluation of White's standing in Scotland, and indeed an examination of his status at large. White has won *Le Prix Medicis Etranger* (1983), *Le Grand Prix du Rayonnement* (1985) for his work as a whole, and *Le Prix Alfred de Vigny* (1987) for poems from *Atlantica* included in this collection. *Le Nouvel Observateur* has gone so far as to call him "the foremost living English language poet," but I would have to say that I think such an assessment is far too generous. Such claims should never be taken too seriously anyway, for how could one possibly rank rival contenders such as Seamus Heaney, Les Murray, John Ashbery, and others? Nevertheless, *The Bird Path* is a good book, and it's valuable to be able to see it take its place in a line which would include MacDiarmid's later poetry, W. S. Graham's own fascination with whiteness and silence, Gary Snyder's Zen engagement with the emptiness of the "back country," and those collages of documentary fact to be found in later works by Carlos Williams and Charles Olson. Add (among others) Nathaniel Tarn and Jeremy Kitchen, Gael Turnbull, Tom Buchan and Alan Jackson, and there's a nexus of English, American and Scots poets here who represent a different voice within the English tradition ("Atlantic" in another sense perhaps), which has been sadly underrated or neglected by the essentially Neo-Georgian tastes of many critics and reviews in the current poetic climate.

If we needed any further reminder that there is more to poetry than what bourgeois taste or the "Eng.Lit." establishment knows, Sorley MacLean's collected poems would set the balance right. *O Choille gu Bearradh / From Wood to Ridge* is a substantial dual language collection—the most complete yet seen from MacLean. It contains all of *Spring Tide and Neap Tide* from 1977, plus a further 25 poems, including most of the epic "An Cuilthionn" / "The Cuillin," parts of which have ap-

peared in *Chapman* in recent years, but which has never been published at this length in book form before.

In a brief preface to "The Cuillin" the poet tells how it grew from his passionate engagement with what Communism seemed to offer in the late 30s. He felt, too, that modern poetry must attempt more than the lyric, even though his own muse was not so comfortable with the longer modes advocated by MacDiarmid. But publication was delayed for one reason or another, and by 1944 MacLean was disturbed by the oppressions of Stalinism and subsequently lost faith in his poem. Certainly it's a long and demanding piece, pitched at an unremittingly high level, as steep and stony in its way as any of MacDiarmid's poems from the same period. (Indeed, MacDiarmid's presence can be felt within it, including references to *Second Hymn to Lenin* and echoes of *On a Raised Beach*.)

"The Cuillin" may be strenuous, but it is an essential text, not least for its consciously epic scope and for the way in which it highlights the centrality of Skye's most famous mountain ridge in MacLean's imagination and all his subsequent work. Those towering black, sharp and stony crags become a potent metaphor for the terror and the beauty of the existential world. And yet, despite such desolation, the poet is not alone, for unlike MacDiarmid on the raised beach, the Skye landscape is steeped in history for MacLean. Thus every glen and pathway on the island is eloquent with names and stories from the past. These can be images of heroism or images of shame from the time of the Clearances, but in either case, even the barest of the rocks can still speak to him of family and race:

On Sgurr Dubh of the Two Hills
a voice came to my ear singing
Patrick Mor and his music mourning
all the children of mankind;
and an evening on the Garsven
there was another music that came,
"Maol Donn" and its theme of love-fullness
breaking the hearts of lovely tunes.

Such ties are all the stranger and the stronger when so many other modern writers have found the world to be wasted or merely blank.

In the end the Cuillin is more than local, for these mountains offer a universal challenge to the heart of humankind. Thus the poem moves towards a conclusion in which the poet's socialism brings him to an imaginative identification with the oppressed of all countries and all times:

I am the Clio of the world:
I worked my passage on the Ship of the People,
I was at the Battle of the Braes

and in Leningrad in the stir
about the Palace when a stream
of the Bolsheviks came running....

I am the Clio of the world:
my wandering is eternal, and chill with death.
But often there rises the flame
that kindles brain, heart and soul.

Here Clio, the Muse of History, becomes a figure of Christ-like pain and triumph in an identification very similar to that which overtook the socialist idealism of young Ewan Tavendale in Grassie Gibbon's *Grey Granite*. The comparison is a telling one, and it emphasizes how indispensable this poem is to any study of MacLean's work in particular, and more generally, too, of Scottish literature in the late 1930s.

Some of the additional poems in *From Wood to Ridge* (including part of "The Cuillin") had in fact already appeared, in *Poems 1932-1982*, published in 1987 by the Iona Foundation in Philadelphia. This edition printed its poems in English translation only, but it included useful essays by John MacInnes, Iain Crichton Smith and Donald MacDonald. All the same, it's much better to have the Gaelic texts as well, and the Carcanet edition is a welcome book with an excellent Preface by the poet himself and some of his own notes at the end. Later editions will correct some of the Gaelic typos, I believe, and an index of titles would be helpful, too.

The strength of modern Scottish poetry has always been its willingness to look from the particular to the universal, so that MacDiarmid's "timeless flame" really might be found in Auchtermuchty, and the mountains of Skye can truly stand for the terror and exhilaration of all human experience. *European Poetry in Scotland* speaks for the same outward-looking impulse. Here are 219 poems from 15 languages, translated into either Scots or English by 42 modern Scottish writers and—the onlie begetter of it all—Gavin Douglas. Edited, glossed and indexed by Peter France and Duncan Glen, this book is an invaluable testament to the early ideals of the modern Scottish Renaissance, and living proof of the continuing vitality of Scots—curiously alive and ever more effective in the special category of translation.

The introduction to Robin Bell's selection of modern Scottish poetry is as contentious as the title turned out to be, when a number of reviewers took issue with its claim to be *The Best of Scottish Poetry*. Certainly Bell shakes up established ideas by deploring any talk of "renaissances" in modern Scottish poetry because it only leads to "mannerism" in which everything is "packaged up into designed themes." He regrets, too, the "persuasive personality" of Hugh MacDiarmid who did so much to pro-

mote Lallans, which Bell dismisses as a "synthetic" language like Esperanto.

Bell's is an enjoyable and stimulating anthology, and despite the sound of sacred cows stampeding, I think that the introduction does well to remind us of the dangers of adjusting what we see before us to fit into pre-conceived cultural theories. It's a fair warning, and a bit of coat-trailing on such matters is always fun. Nevertheless, the editor's critical position is theoretically naive, since of course his own selection of which poets to include constitutes just as much of a "designed theme" as any other. Moreover, his lively tone conceals one or two other unwarranted assumptions. Thus for example Bell assumes that Lallans is simply a matter of using an uncritically vast vocabulary culled from far and near, whereas what really matters, he says "is not the size of a poet's Scottish vocabulary but its integrity." I would have thought that this was a truism, and to dismiss the case for Scots by imagining only bad examples of its use is no more than tricky footwork.

Having said that, the anthology scores because Bell came up with a brilliantly simple idea: why not ask 45 poets to select the poems they like best from their own work, with a few words on what is important to them about these pieces in particular or their calling in general? The chosen writers are arranged in alphabetical order, with a maximum of three pages each, and Bell notes that his method has the virtue of treating everyone the same, while making for some unlikely and stimulating bedfellows. He's right. It's an excellent anthology, and if there are omissions then there are also inclusions, with good poems from G. F. Dutton and Elma Mitchell, and a welcome guest appearance from Midge Ure, umquhile of Ultravox.

Tweed Journey is a different kind of book—an attempt to bring together "poetry, photographs and history" via the poems of Valerie Gillies, a commentary from Judy Steel, and photographs by Shelley Klein. There are excellent photographs and good poems here, but it is a bit of an "occasional book," all the same—a pleasant record of the 1989 Borders Festival of Ballads and Legends, for whose exhibition the work was commissioned. The book remains in three parts, really, and Steel's introduction to the Borders starts it off with the conventional coinage of Kings and Queens and war and wool. However, the poems and the photographs are regularly interleaved on facing pages, and the tendency is for the special force of one medium to interfere somehow with that of the other. Poems arising (however obliquely) from the photographs would have made the most of this arrangement, perhaps.

As "an anthology of poetry by Scottish women" *Fresh Oceans* brings us back to a "designed theme" of a different sort, and it's a book with plenty

of interesting "inclusions" too, as many of the poets in it have scarcely been published before. There's an interesting consistency of tone in much of their work, and of style, as well. (I'm thinking of simple and effectively observed pieces such as Mary Gladstone's "Miss Currer Bell" and Mary McCann's "English teacher.") This may have something to do with the fact that a number of these poets have come from writing groups, with a sound emphasis on such an approach, and then of course editorial choice enters the equation as well. In any case there are many good poems here which speak truly about unpretentious things that each writer knows, especially about people and the relationships between them. Age, loneliness, childhood, the daily darg of living, laughter, landscape and animals, love and jealousy, physical change, physical oppression—what else is there? Valerie Gillies, Kathleen Jamie, Dilys Rose, Rosalind Brackenbury, Naomi Mitchison and the Gaelic poet Meg Bateman contribute fine work, but less established names do equally well. Otilie Hainsworth is one of the best, with a strikingly uncomfortable sense of the physicality of things—notably of animals—and her poem "Earth Monster" approaches the surreal intensity of Peter Redgrove's work: "Everyone stared at / the strange face of Earth, / the blushed clay jowls, / the roselips / slippery with fresh rain..." Thelma Good makes equally good use of a grumpy persona and the minutely observed details of people and places in "Unspoken words of a North Uist woman, 1901." With the contributors alphabetically arranged and given almost equal representation, *Fresh Oceans* makes a good case for the cooperative bias of writing groups, and the wide distribution of creative talent in and around them.

Olive Fraser's is a more anguished and consciously "poetic" voice. Born just outside Aberdeen in 1909, and haunted by an unloving childhood, Olive Fraser grew to be a gifted scholar at Aberdeen and Cambridge before the traumas of the second war and her own mental and physical illnesses led her to spend more and more time in mental institutions. *The Pure Account* (reviewed in volume XIX) offered the first selection of her work, largely unknown until then, although she never completely stopped writing. Now her complete poems are available in a fine edition, *The Wrong Music*. The collection is edited by Helena Shire—a friend and fellow student of Fraser's who has dedicated her own considerable scholarly skills to retrieving and ordering poems from the 20s to the 70s, when Fraser had a creative revival after it was found that her disfiguring hyperthyroid condition could be cured. Shire tells the story of Fraser's life and work in a long, sympathetic and invaluable introduction, with extensive biographical and critical notes on individual poems provided at the back.

There are some good poems here, especially one of her best known pieces, "The Unwanted Child," with its key lines: "But I was the wrong music / And why I never knew." Many other poems, not least those from the creative revival in the 70s, are deeply melancholy in similar vein. Fraser's art brings us movingly close to her condition and to her own feelings of abandonment and isolation, but I don't think that it manages to transcend them often enough. Here, too, she is not helped by a preference for very conventional lyric forms. She relies too much, I think, on a poetic diction which makes full use of "thee," "ye," "unto," "thinkst" and "did'st"; and her imagery is replete with almost always unspecific references to wine, embers, candles, birds, stars, moonlight and mountains. Many of these poems remain individually touching, but I have to say that, for me, the cumulative effect is self-consciously "poetical" and rather depressing in the end.

Deborah Randall's language is much, much tougher. She writes with a racy contemporary tone—quick, witty, bittersweet and surprising in both her choice of images and the twists and turns of her imagination. Yet her poems are deeply rooted in the physical particulars of the actual world—a world which is made even denser in her art by the syntactic density of long lines and sentences. "Nightwatchman" is a poem of 40 lines in 8 stanzas and only one sentence.) Part of this world has to do with the fact that she lives in Orkney now, although she was born in England, and her poems are full of the sea and the rough edges of the shore, with images of loneliness, humor, lovemaking and sudden panic all drawn from that source. This location, her use of personae and a certain religious awareness of sacrament and sin, is sometimes reminiscent of George Mackay Brown's work ("Gavin"; "Longships and Lovers"; "Reasons for falling.").

But Randall's eye is rowdier and more worldly wise, with striking poems on the pains and pleasures of making love and being a mother ("Maelstrom," "Sea Cow"), and others which adopt the personae of men, boys and different women to speak of other places and other times. Not all of these work, and some Irish poems at the end of the collection slip into unintentional parody. But at her best, Randall's lines (not just the ones about love-making) can generate a compressed energy of almost sexual force.

"Don't Smack Me Again" is a gem of suppressed wit and pain, running, Edwin Morgan fashion, on a permutation of the opening lines: "Tomato hurt. / Tomato tight in hurt skin. / Hurt tomato red with held breath...." Longer pieces such as "Grandfather," "Houndspeak Forever" and "Danda with Dead Fish" herald the arrival of a genuinely fresh and powerful voice:

Danda's jumper unravelling, coming out
in sympathy, his nose is never cleanly,

dripping brine all the time, scales under
his nails, always flexing, finding, bringing
in, a wind slaps hard on him singing up and
down his ribs, Danda has no colour
except of grey, the colour of
the day he lost his fiery ginger dad
to the sea, except, his dad really went away
with a woman not his mother;
never mind our Danda, pass it over
have your supper.

Randall only started writing in her 30s. Her work met early recognition via Bridport and Bloodaxe poetry competitions, and this, her first collection, is a Poetry Book Society recommendation. I look forward to the next one.

Stirling University

Scottish Poetry

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