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Alasdair D. F. Macrae

Scottish Poetry 1990-1991

The publication of Edwin Morgan's *Collected Poems* was timed to mark his seventieth birthday. His *Poems of Thirty Years*, also from Carcanet, came out in 1982 and the new volume adds about one hundred and fifty pages of poems to what is available there. The main additions consist of: a dozen "inventions" (things found and things devised) composed between 1965 and 1971; *An Alphabet of Goddesses* (1983); *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984); *From the Video Box* (1986); poems from *Themes on a Variation* (1988); and about fifty previously uncollected poems written between 1949 and 1982. From very early on, and certainly from the 1960s, Morgan has been such a quaquaversal writer that it would be unreasonable and unappreciative if the reader were to look for yet more novelties in the work now added to the opus. But, of course, there are novelties. Who else has written a sonnet sequence covering aspects of the history of Scotland from the beginnings of its geology to times to the future of us? And who but Morgan would have thought of using the video box (a device for recording viewers' comments on television programs) to focus on features of contemporary culture from wildly different viewpoints in different voices? Number 125 of the latter sequence is a wonderful poem about a fictitious program where contestants have to make up huge jigsaws in marathon competitions. The imaginative leaps, deployment of *recherché* information, formal and linguistic innovations—all continue to astound and often delight. In a poem, "Foundation," written in the late 70s, he is asked, "'What would you put in the foundation-stone for future generations?'" After exasperating the questioner with the extravagance of his suggestions he concludes:

"a dozen conceptual universes
laid tail to head like sardines in a tin
and poured all over with lovely oil
of poetry: seal it; solder the key."

His own opus is such a foundation-stone.

In such a comprehensive *Collected Poems*, material previously discarded or uncollected is brought into the open and given a place alongside the established material. Often, poems which had blushed unseen deserve to be on show. Often, particularly from a scholarly point of view, such material can spell out tendencies, demonstrate lines of development, and manifest influences. This is true in the present case and it is interesting to read Morgan's attempt to write a concluding section to Shelley's luminous last poem, *The Triumph of Life*, even if it does not quite catch the excited pace of Shelley. For the reader, however, who is new to Morgan, the inclusion of some previously uncollected material does not improve the volume as a book to be read through. This is a small caveat and is not intended to detract from Carcanet's enterprise in allowing us to see Morgan plain.

Alan Jackson's poems, gathered together in *Salutations: Collected Poems 1960-1989*, are more salutary than salutatory. In the 1960s, his simplicity was his strength. The poems written then echo Blake, nursery rhymes, e. e. cummings and Nietzsche. Statements and imperatives lay down that peace, love, nature, spontaneity and the unconscious are good and competition, guilt, societal systems, industry and reason are bad. The individual is at the heart of creation and should be open to all the surrounding energies:

Give me power
And give me fire
Give me freedom
And desire.

Also, in the earlier collections there are wonderfully sharp, observant poems satirizing entrenched attitudes. They are squibs but very well directed squibs. "Young Politician" is an example:

What a lovely, lovely moon
And it's in the constituency too.

In the 1970s and '80s the simplicity remains but it loses its earlier charm. Jackson seems to become stuck in a self-absorption which, in a frightening way, is the opposite of what he had sought earlier. A sour, defeatist tone takes over, sometimes in a self-pity, sometimes in a vague

denunciation of most things around him. Occasionally, a moment of awareness interrupts the repetitions and we hear an anxious frustration: "Instead of travelling on it, I carried it for years, my/ broken self." The reader is put in the embarrassing position of reading a journal of someone's private desolation. The poetry tends to break down and general formulations weary our sympathies. The talent of the young Jackson has become dissipated.

When Tom Pow's first volume, *Rough Seas*, appeared in 1987, it was well received by critics. His new volume offers continuities rather than departures. There are four sections in *The Moth Trap*: a group of poems set in past periods; a guided tour of his native area around Dumfries; some more immediately personal poems, and a small cluster set in or connected with Russia. Although the standard of writing is high throughout, the most satisfying poems are those with historical situations. Something is liberated in Pow by the ingredients of discovered incidents and his own modesty allows the people and their experiences to breathe and speak more directly to us than Pow can manage for himself. One such poem, "The Gift of Sight," was prompted by the legend attached to a local well which attributes the restoration of sight to the blind to the influence of Saint Medan. She, like St. Lucy, plucked out her eyes because an unworthy suitor admired them. Pow imagines a previously blind person being granted sight and finding the blessing a mixed one:

Now I'm learning the rules
of this new world; its make-up—equal parts
beauty and terror.

Although the poems are carefully constructed and rhyme patterns are unobtrusively subtle, it may be felt that, in his more personal poems, the "terror" is lacking or certainly muted. "Russian Still-life" contains lines which can comment on Tom Pow's own poems:

Tall birch trees shimmer past.

Lit from behind, they mask
great fields that show no trace
of all the blood that made them.

Nonetheless, many of the poems in this collection do give pleasure and this is a considerable achievement.

Better known, and deservedly so, as a writer in Gaelic, Aonghas MacNeacail has always also written in English. *Rock and Water* brings together his English poems which were before available only in magazines and pamphlets. There are very few public events mentioned and consequently it is difficult to date the writing of the individual poems with any reliability.

Furthermore, the poems themselves seem rather archaic. MacNeacail's upbringing was on Skye in the '40s and '50s, but the poems are often located in the generation before his own. The modern world of machinery, telecommunications, cities and travel seems markedly absent. The language, too, sounds somewhat quaint. There are several elements in the poems which are reminiscent of George Mackay Brown: physical details are stated plainly, there are cycles of nature and occupations, and individuals are made emblematic for general stances. The form of the poems strikes the reader now as curiously dated: no capitalization, minimum use of marks of punctuation, gaps inside lines, free verse—all are orthodoxies of the early 1970s.

Ezra Pound's maxim: "The natural object is the adequate symbol"¹ has been useful in the training of many poets, but, too often, as is the case with MacNeacail, a listing of observations is expected to stand as a poem and the result is limpness not poetry. Towards the end of this collection, the language has more bite and the interaction between the poet and a situation has more complexity. In the poem, "a death," a dead ewe is described:

her neck
stretched out, as if
her slabs of teeth were
reaching out to grasp
that fragrance sweet
beyond all

There are some delightful poems in the earlier sections but the insistence on simplicity itself becomes a mannerism and this extends to poems with an historical perspective.

Born in 1951 in Bannockburn, Andrew Grieg is now almost as well known for his books on mountaineering as he is as a poet. His collection, *The Order of the Day*, is divided into three sections and the opening poems are connected to climbing both in Scotland and the Himalayas. He has a gift for conveying the tension, exhilaration and drudgery of climbing mountains and for using the drama of the activity as a metaphorical equivalent of phases of human relationships. These opening poems succeed in counterpoising the intimate internal with the geological external:

and we believe
the true scale of things
is the entire mountain
hung mirrored in our shades.

¹*Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London, 1954), p. 5.

The sense of discovery in these poems is much more acute than in the later sections of the collection where he runs together aspects of love and politics, and experiments with pastiche and adopted personae. Throughout, he is intrigued by boundary lines, frontiers which he dares himself to cross:

Being torn between moving on
and being left behind, he wavers.

In the "political" poems, he appears restless as if he aims to discomfit any anticipations the reader may harbor as to the direction or prevailing voice in a poem. Sometimes, as in a poem about President Reagan and in imitations of Wallace Stevens and John Berryman, there is a pasted together quality which is very unconvincing. The illustration on the cover is in comic-strip style and the poems occasionally are modish in a similar way. Nonetheless, the book was a Poetry Book Society Choice.

Norman MacCaig's *Collected Poems* originally appeared in 1985. Since then he has published *Voice-Over* in 1988. This new edition of *Collected Poems* includes the poems in *Voice-Over*, fifteen poems written later and a small handful of pieces from earlier excluded in 1985. In this new edition the order of poems has been sensibly altered: previously uncollected poems now come after MacCaig's selection from published volumes, not before. All but the fifteen late poems have been reviewed in earlier numbers of this journal; but the publication of what is, almost certainly, the definitive edition of the work of Scotland's leading living poet must be noted. MacCaig has given so much pleasure to so many readers around the world and it is deeply satisfying to hold in these four hundred and fifty pages the opus in all its variety and sparkle. The poems of recent years have shown darker shades as MacCaig has lost close friends of his own era, particularly his wife. The vitality, inventiveness and wit, however, remain undiminished. His self-control with a hint of precariousness is a model for younger poets. For about the price of a bottle of blended whisky you can enjoy a wonderful collection of pure malts.

The Other Country is Carol Ann Duffy's third collection and marks a progression in her poetic skills and widens her scope in subject matter. Born in Glasgow in 1955, she has lived in England since she was a child but a recurring concern in her poetry relates to various senses of belonging and identity. The title can refer to a geographical place or the past or even, perhaps, the "undiscovered country" as Hamlet describes death. There is no title poem but the final poem, "In Your Mind," begins: "The other country, is it anticipated or half-remembered?" Class differences, shifts of linguistic register, awareness of foreignness, prompted memories of covered-over experiences, dreams—all are explored with a striking sensitivity and verbal dexterity. She is fascinated by slang and tribal systems of communication.

One of the most appealing features of this collection is its variety. The reader does not turn the page and feel: "Here's another typical Duffy poem!" She writes in many voices, and in many devised personae. Comic poems, tender poems, political poems, act as comments on each other and the personal jostles with the public, the childhood with the adult. This is an exciting, stimulating volume and Duffy is a poet to whom we can look forward.

Robert Crawford is a person of extraordinary intellectual energy. A lecturer at the University of St. Andrews, he edits the magazine *Verse*, anthologizes other poets, organizes collections of essays on writers, writes academic books and composes poetry. He has become a moving force in contemporary Scottish culture and deserves congratulations for his initiative. His first full collection of poems, *A Scottish Assembly*, has been applauded by many reviewers and it is certainly an exciting and intelligent debut. The titles intimate a wide catchment area of subject matter: "The Saltcoats Structuralists," "Henry Bell Introduces Europe's First Commercial Steamship," "Kyoto," "Mr and Mrs William Mulock in the Museum of Ethnology" and "The Scottish National Cushion Survey." Erudition, humor, odd combinations and the outré are pushed together and surprise is everywhere.

In a poem on the inventor of television, John Logie Baird, he uses the phrase "Only a trick of perspective." The poem's title itself "Man of Vision" is a kind of intellectual pun and many of Crawford's poems work as a series of sophisticated maneuvers. Sometimes the tricks of perspective are stimulating or amusing. For example, in "The Railway Library" he locates famous books according to where someone happens to be reading them: "Rochester met Jane Eyre/ At Falkirk High." Unfortunately, the poems tend to be unrelentingly clever and straining to make an impression. It is not that there is an absence of emotion but rather that emotions, too, become material for clever maneuvers.

In *Sharawaggi*, Crawford and W. N. Herbert join forces to write in a devised Scots. In some cases they provide glosses of unusual Scots and comic words; in others they provide parallel translations. They have certainly dug up some fascinating vocabulary and have employed it in a weird range of poems. The blurb (written by themselves?) suggests that the volume "first-foots the nineties with intellectual scope and demotic zap." Well, perhaps, but I find the poems, by both poets, so head-heavy that they topple over and lie on the page without mobility.

In almost every poem in *The Larch Plantation* there is some reference to death. Angus Martin was born in Campbelltown in 1952 and his poems do not stray far from there; if they do stray it is to go back in time. The future is rarely mentioned and even the present seems a depleted version of some

more lavish past. Perhaps "lavish" is too big a word for, like Alasdair Maclean further north at Ardnamurchan, Martin is nostalgic for a minimal style of life practised by his forebears on the Mull of Kintyre. As with Maclean, the reader sometimes wearies of the necrophiliac hankerings and begins to suspect a special form of sentimentality. There is scarcely a poem which does not refer to death. Even a boat's mast can not be allowed simply to fall into disuse, it must be commemorated as something which has died. In the poem "Tonight the Fleets" (and he is talking of sailing boats fishing for herring) the final stanza begins:

No one saw—no one remained
to see, and every light was out.
There was an end of culture, history,
and an end to the burial of the dead.

Although the poems are elegiac and lament the passing of close-knit fishing and crofting communities, there is a kind of relish, a sense of martyrdom, that he alone is left to tell the tale.

Martin is aware that his intensity to his locality will be queried by some. In "Parochial" he replies:

I'm sorry, but I don't want to 'see the world'.
It's too big, and I'm content to remain
here on this sliver of its bulging
totality

Even if the collection is somewhat monotonal, the poems are often carefully and pleasingly made and some of them are extremely fine, for example, "Orphan," "Place-Names" and, best of all, "Limpets."

Gerald Mangan has had a varied career as artist, illustrator, reviewer, writer in residence and poet. His poetry is well known from his appearances in magazines and anthologies but *Waiting for the Storm* is his first collection. Like his career, it is varied and some poems work much better than others. Possibly his gifts as a cartoonist and illustrator encourage him to attempt something similar in verse but the results are not so striking. In fact, his best poems are more straightforward. Examples such as "Aberdeen," "Birch Bark," "Wood Axe" and "Wasp Nest" are meditative and beautifully turned. He shows an inventiveness of image and a nimbleness at moving round a subject to see it from different angles. Some of the lesser poems convey an impression that they were written too close to the event; occasionally the comic ones sound as if they were funnier at the time in a local situation than they are now in a book. He has a poem, "Deadlines," in which he speaks of the frustration and desperation of writing on demand and he concludes:

He envies the snow, which has no editor;
And his dreams fall into its shapes.
He restores the white between the margins.
He dictates an Arctic of silence.

Luckily for us, the snow does not take over and half a dozen of the poems here are excellent. Even the weaker poems serve a function as foils to these half dozen. It may be that his next collection will be more consistent and display his exciting talent more fully.

The material for Valerie Gillies's poems comes from cosmopolitan sources and from different historical periods. However, in her latest collection, *The Chanter's Tune*, there is a tendency for the different material to be processed in a homogeneous way. Not that the poems are in one kind of verse but, rather, a certain attitude of decency emerges, whatever the starting-place. The collection is arranged in three main sections: "Sequences," "Lyrics" and "Translations"; the middle section is subdivided into seven groups. One of the sequences consists of a version of "The Ship of Women" by the bard MacIntyre (date unknown) which has come down to us in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* of the early sixteenth century. This is an extraordinary, mysterious piece and we cannot know whether or not it is complete. Was it a dream fantasy or a satire against women or what? The artist Will Maclean, one of the best currently working in Scotland, provides five illustrations for the collection and Gillies wrote her translation to accompany his construction, "Bard MacIntyre's Box," reproduced on the cover.

Gillies's translations from Gaelic and Italian are enjoyable and give a solidity and enlargement to *The Chanter's Tune*. Some of her own poems are weakened by a lack of punch in the phrasing. The passages from Dante, even in translation, have an ability to shock and thrill which her own poems seldom show. Some of her poems are intended to be sung or performed and a quicker quality might emerge in a live performance.

Thinking of translation and the stimulus it gives to many poets, it is worth mentioning how open Scottish Gaelic has been to infusions from other languages. In *Bardachd Na Roinn - Eorpa An Gaidhlig* twenty-five modern Gaelic poets have translated work by fifty-five poets writing in over twenty other languages. These translations make available to Gaelic speakers a range of poetic experience and also widen the horizons of Gaelic poetry.

A poet more unlike Valerie Gillies than Graham Fulton would be difficult to find. In his collection, *Humouring the Iron Bar Man and Other Poems*, he keeps to the present, a grubby urban present of consumerism and the mass media; there are no references to myths, traditions, history or literary precedents. Nothing picturesque, nothing from a romantic view of nature, appears although occasionally a crumb or inkling of something romantic sneaks in. Even in the poem called "Romantic Interlude" (and it is

only an interlude), the speaker is unable to accept romance comfortably but insists to the woman: "I have a deprived street inside my head." The river in his district and in his mind is "full of trolleys and tyres." Although the poems can hardly be described as likeable, they have an integrity, a precision, and a lack of slogans and glib political emotion: these qualities give solidity to the collection and command respect. To describe Fulton as a "grunge" poet is to underestimate seriously his skills in choice and arrangement of items in the poems and an obvious pleasure taken in the writing. He speaks with familiarity of the "deprived street" in his mind but the street is presented dispassionately, even humorously (in a grim way), not sentimentally.

Donald Campbell has not published a volume of poems for some years and, through the 1980s, has been much more prominent as a dramatist. His *Selected Poems 1970-1990* offers a chance to re-view twenty years of his poetry. In his Foreword he seems to intimate that he will explain how his selection was made but, in fact, he talks only of how his views on the printed presentation of Scots have changed. The selection is divided into five sections but no explanation is offered for the divisions and no indication is provided of the dates of composition.

The second section is the most entertaining and it is perhaps a pity that Campbell has not written more light, comic verse. There is more excitement in these pieces. They have a rambling, random, slightly drunk forward movement but a point is being made even when the logic reminds one of Rab C. Nesbitt. Many of Campbell's other poems accept a rather easy, formulaic phraseology on too many occasions. There is something poetically second-hand in lines such as "A hairt like yours, sae guid and kind" and "When I was young in years gane by." The fourth section consists of songs from his plays. The best is "The Lily of St. Leonards" from his version of *The Heart of Midlothian*. A group of poems dedicated to women show Campbell's generosity and sympathetic acceptance of people. What I criticized earlier as slack diction can be defended in these poems as straightforwardness and lack of contrivance.

Anthologies tend to carry a bundle of questions and problems. Who's in? Who's out? How do you define that? Where do you start? What are your criteria? And so on. *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets*, edited by Catherine Kerrigan, certainly prompts some queries. In the first place, it seems strange that Kerrigan is credited as the sole editor but a third of the volume has been the responsibility of someone else, Meg Bateman. The main division in the anthology is linguistic and it is excellent to have Gaelic poems (with translations) in the same volume as poems in Scots and English. Kerrigan has made a decision about the Ballad Tradition and she tries to explain in her introduction why she attributes certain ballads to women, but I

find her argument rather muddled. She quotes G. L. Kittredge's introduction to the 1904 edition of Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*: "A great number of [ballads] . . . have been derived from women," and goes on to credit tradition bearers and singers with authorship. At the same time she acknowledges that "the ballad was communal and that proprietary rights—male or female—were never part of the folk tradition." Surely the sensible procedure would be to include representative ballads and insist on the multisexual nature of Anon. What Kerrigan does, in an anthology of poets, is to give certain ballads to Jeannie Robertson, others to Lizzie Higgins, and other women singers and informants. There is one further point I wish to make on Kerrigan's editorial policy. In her ten-page Introduction she uses the words "tradition" and "traditional" about fifty times. The trouble with thinking in terms of a tradition is that an obligation results to prove the tradition and show its continuity. This is a serious problem not just with "the women's tradition" but with any alleged tradition. In this case, however, Kerrigan is forced, in my view, to find women poets in some barren periods, particularly the nineteenth century, and justify the inclusion of very feeble poems by claiming that they demonstrate "the women's tradition."

This is a very substantial anthology and interesting poems are given a hearing. Janet Hamilton (1795-1873) is new to me. It is also good to have authors for songs which were previously in a rather anonymous repertoire; examples of such songs are "Ca' the Yowes to the Knowes" and "O where, tell me where." Of course, there are omissions and disproportions according to taste. I consider that there could have been a better or bigger choice from Mairi Mhor nan Oran and I regret the absence of Carol Ann Duffy and Elma Mitchell. The glossing, annotation and information (for example, on dates) are very uneven but this is a worthwhile compilation of poetry by (or related to) women in Scotland.

Tom Hubbard has done a mighty job in editing *The New Makars*, the Mercat Anthology of Contemporary Poetry in Scots. Sixty-five poets are included. "Contemporary" is taken to mean "living" and the dates of birth range from 1900 (Flora Garry) to 1968. It is a mark of a new confidence in Scots that Hubbard aims the anthology beyond a Scottish market and the glossary provided is sufficient to allow non-Scots readers to tackle the poems with some confidence. It is also a mark of something—I am not sure what—in Scots poets that so many poems are translations, transcreations or adaptations of poems in other languages. Hubbard welcomes openness rather than exclusion: "The anthology is intended to celebrate diversity rather than exacerbate division." Indeed, his introduction is eminently broad-minded.

Who stands out in Hubbard's selection? My list would include William Neill, Ken Morrice, Roderick Watson, Sheena Blackhall, Janet Paisley, Harvey Holton, Raymond Vettese and Matthew Fitt. This is not the place to

detail the individual virtues of these poets but they each have the ability to grip the reader by the lapels and command attention to their specific voice. Perhaps, too, their use of Scots in verse sounds careful but uncontrived, artful but natural. In some other cases, language is offered like a conundrum or shibboleth, a test with which to ascertain the reader's ethnic commitment rather than as a mode of communication.

There are two oddities in this anthology. The first stems from the notion of contemporary as living. Although specific dates are not provided for poems, some poems were written quite early in the century and others in the late 1980s. If a reader were to assess poetry in Scots across the century on the evidence provided here, the result would be all wrong. Is Garioch less contemporary because he is dead? The second oddity is that Hubbard does not explain why he includes or excludes poets. Why is Tom Leonard not represented? Or Liz Lochhead? or Stephen Mulrine? Surely some explanation is needed.

Petter Butter's edition of *The Complete Poems of Edwin Muir* is a solid achievement. The volume is pleasingly produced and Butter explains his procedures in a foreword. Basically, he restores the previously printed poems discarded by Muir when he prepared *Collected Poems 1921-1958* for publication (1960), and Butter adds in an appendix about twenty previously uncollected poems. Some sixty pages of notes are provided, mainly of a bibliographical, textual sort, or pointing to a connection between a line and some other utterance by Muir. It is stated that this is not a variorum edition and that the cited revisions are limited to "only a very selective list of significant revisions." But how is "significant" gauged? Judging by some earlier versions I have checked, it would not be wise to use Butter's notes as if they tell the whole story of how Muir arrived at his final version. The notes are interesting, helpful up to a point, and accurate as far as they go; they do not try to explicate difficulties or to offer a rationale for Muir's alterations.

Does this enlarged edition enlarge our view of Muir? It does not. By having more of his early, rather clumsy poems, we can see more obviously how much Muir improved during his career. There are no swathes of poems eccentric to Muir's main lines of development. He himself was aware that he kept trying to write much the same poem throughout his life and we now have more evidence to support his view. There are two poems, "Pastoral" and "Industrial Scene," both extracted from *Scottish Journey* (1935), that suggest possibilities in subject matter and language which Muir chose not to develop. Muir was deeply shocked by the degradation of poverty and unemployment in the 1930s and a satirical anger bursts out in the mock "Pastoral":

A Scottish bullock has a look
About him that you will not see

In workless men shuffling their feet
Outside some public W.C.

An apocalyptic note is sounded in "Industrial Scene":

Incandescent burners' arctic glare
Strikes dead a thousand families as they sit
At high tea in the tenements. The air
Takes at the tidal corner of the street

The hundred-horse-power pub's wave-shouldering boom
And thickened voices babbling Judgement Day.

The very physical language here and the direct social awareness are, unfortunately, according to many readers, largely absent from Muir's poetry.

It may surprise some to see how few poems by Muir were previously uncollected (compare with Norman MacCaig's one hundred and twenty). Butter does not explain how many poems may exist which, in deference to Muir's wish to be represented only by poems with which he was satisfied, he has left out of this *Complete Poems*. Concerning the poems which Muir himself chose not to reprint, several points arise. For a poet who, when he began to publish, was bashfully aware of his amateurish qualities, it is obvious why so many of the very early poems were dropped. Their restoration does allow the reader to see more clearly the models Muir used, particularly the ballads, and to locate Muir in his cosmopolitan reading and travels. When we look at the poems he shed from his final collection, *One Foot in Eden* (1956), it appears that he found some of his work too explicitly Christian. Professor Butter has given us a fuller version of a poet whose excellencies were apparent before; for readers who admire Muir's life-long adventure but feel that the poems have, to use Muir's own phrase of another, "a radiant monotony," there is no change: Butter has not uncovered any hidden Edwins. It has to be added that the cost of the volume (£50) is preposterous; I suspect the greedy hand of publishers who hold the copyright on the dead poet's work.

John Burnside's first collection, *The hoop*, was very well reviewed when it was published in 1988. His new volume, *Common Knowledge*, continues in a similar, eccentric mode. Despite its title, the collection often deals with uncommon knowledge and Burnside appears to eschew public, sociopolitical subject matter. Although one of the five sections of the book is called "Suburbs," the suburban area he deals with has little connection with inner industrial or commercial cities or with wild, rampaging nature beyond. The suburban house with its garden operates as a hermetic compartment, curiously sealed off and rather airless but with ripples and draughts of anxiety implicit in its confines. The foliage and ponds are groomed and safe but

"could be populated with creatures from Grünewald or Richard Dadd." In fact, a sinister element often lurks in Burnside's poetry, "sequin teeth behind a velvet smile."

The epigraph to the collection is a quotation from Karl Marx: "It is common knowledge that the forest echoes back what you shout into it." There are no shouts in the poems: Burnside's poetry works with echoes, hints, glimpses. Some of the poems read like meditative exercises, as if he had been given an object, an effect of light, or even a word, and had to explore its penumbra. This he does with remarkable acuity and subtlety. Of the five sections, two are entirely composed of prose poems and one has alternating verse and prose poems. In both verse and prose he practices an odd syntax or punctuation. For example, sentences begin, as it were, in the middle of a sense unit, and he uses colons and semi-colons to hold the various parts of a sentence in a suspended, uncategorical relationship with each other. A prowling sensibility feels its way tentatively but also surely (like a skilled rock-climber) along a route.

Behind the sensibility and the ordering tendency lies some Catholic spirituality which I sometimes find intrusive and frowsty. The section entitled "Annunciations" brings this side out into the open but mystery, obedience and something immaculate are seldom far away in any of the poems. Nonetheless, the religious is part of Burnside's peculiar and powerful perceptual apparatus which enables him to trace impalpable things:

a probe

to find the memory that gives the eye
its purchase on the covenant
of monochrome: the rainbow sheathed in air,
a distance that declines to bring us storms.

If Burnside's poems are based on a solitary, contemplative sensibility often removed from human attachments, Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers* is busy with people and public issues firmly treated in identifiable contemporary situations. Almost half the volume is occupied by the title sequence which is a dramatized version of Kay's own family history. In ten chapters she recounts events and feelings involved in her adoption, a child of mixed parentage, by a married, working-class couple in Glasgow unable to have children of their own. This verse-play has been performed on the radio and it is much easier to follow with the help of different voices than it is on the page where the different type-faces for the three characters are difficult to distinguish quickly. The story is movingly and often amusingly told and has been rewarded with plaudits and prizes, but I am not entirely persuaded of the poetic persuasiveness of the piece. As a drama it is not very evenly proportioned and the presentation of the sequence of events is extremely partial.

In the remainder of the volume, seventeen poems, Jackie Kay explores aspects of public attitudes to debated issues. As in "The Adoption Papers" she often writes from within a devised (or adopted) persona, and some of these confessional monologues are very telling. For example, "The Underground Baby Case" voices the feelings of a woman who abducts a baby and cares for it as if it were her own child. Or, is the whole poem a fantasy? We do not find out, but Kay writes in a blend of registers—nursery rhymes, straight statement, fantasy—which catches the detachment and practicality of the woman. Some of the poems are not so successful and depend rather heavily on a complicity with an assumed audience. It will be very interesting to see how Kay will develop beyond or through her own psychological causes.

A new breed of Gaelic poet has been emerging over the past few years. A troubled loyalty to the village or island of one's upbringing seemed endemic to an earlier generation. Crisdean Whyte is urban and urbane, cosmopolitan in where he has lived and what he has read. The two longer poems included in *Uirsgeul: Myth* are "An Sgoilear a' Sealltainn air Ais" ("The Scholar Looks Back") and the title poem. They are autobiographical, it seems, and deal with his development first into adolescence and then as an adult. In the first, Whyte mingles imagery suggestive of youth itself and the dawning of poetry, sexuality and awareness of nature in the growing boy:

Latha siubhal mòintich dhomh,
rudeigin a' teannachadh na mo chliabh
ag iarraidh an rathaid suas,
mar bhuilgean o ghrunnd an locha
'g ionndrain a leigeil mu sgaoil.

(One day I was walking the moorland,
something tightened in my chest
looking for a way to rise,
like a bubble at the bottom of a loch
waiting to be released.)

"Uirsgeul" continues the exploration and Whyte, although he learns from such myths as the Annunciation and the examples of such poets as Hölderlin and Mandelstam, has to find or make his own myth. Even in translation, this is an impressive piece of writing.

Individual, shorter poems move over a range of territory. Whyte spent almost ten years in Italy and poems are set there and in Yugoslavia and Greece. There is a lively interplay between physical, sensual concerns and emotional, spiritual ones. He writes touchingly on love lost and love won. Although Whyte's poems have been appearing in magazines for some years, this is his first book of poems. It should gain him many admirers.

Some poems emerge after a careful process of distillation, some seem to jump ready-made on to the page and some act as a running commentary on situations as they develop. The poems in Donny O'Rourke's *Second Cities* are extreme examples of this third type. In 1990, he spent some days in Chicago preparing material for a television program about the city and he kept a "verse journal of the trip." They were intended as "first impressions" but now we have them as a published collection. There is an obvious parallel between O'Rourke's work for television and the wandering camera-work in the poems.

The title poem makes an interesting comparison between Glasgow, where O'Rourke lives, and Chicago as cities with their own pride but also, in the eyes of the metropolitan center, as second to London/Edinburgh and New York. Chicago is described as modelled on Victorian Glasgow. In the sequence of poems, the perspective keeps shifting, sometimes historically, sometimes geographically, sometimes culturally. The poetry occasionally tightens as O'Rourke's mind snags on some point of interest but there are, as is almost inevitable in his method of composition, some duller passages and some cross-referencing which is too immediate or personal to convey much to the reader. One is reminded of Frank O'Hara but without his zany humor. The collection is fresh, engaging and journalistically easy on the brain but only some of the poems achieve durability. This lack of durability is itself an aspect of America in the poet's eyes:

That's what

America asks of us, that we leave our wagon
always hitched, our horses foddered,
bridled for the plain.

Scotland is not quite the same.

The Gangan Fuit is the first collection by the Dundonian Ellie McDonald. It is surprising that she has not brought out a book before because she appears to write easily on a wide range of topics and, as Anne Stevenson points out in her introduction, she has been writing for twenty years. For the reader, the waiting has been rewarded with an extremely enjoyable group of poems. Most are in Scots, easy on the ear and utterly unpedantic; an excellent glossary helps any unfamiliar with Dundonian Scots.

There are love poems, comments on contemporary situations, general thoughts on a variety of subjects, a couple of translations (into Scots) from Shakespeare and one from Early Middle English. The poet she reminds me of is Robert Garioch. She, like Garioch, experiments with verse forms and, like him, writes with a mischievous glint. "Irony" sounds too dry or academic, "cynical" is too strong as is "satirical" but a pawky humor gives a

special flavor to poem after poem. Even on the effort made by some of her contemporaries to write in Scots she offers a sly dig:

Now the makars srieve
translations aneath their poems
sae that edicatit fowk
can jalouse thir implications.

These lines are from a poem called "Widdershins" and many of her poems display a deliciously wayward and contrary turn of mind.

It is difficult sometimes to ascertain why certain poems do not work. A piece of writing can have interesting ideas, decent sentiments, accurate observations, some obvious lineal arrangement but fail to become a poem or even poetic. Linguistic excitement is a basic necessity. Deric Bolton's *August Morning on Tweed* is full of worthy pieces and he comes across as an observant and balanced commentator. The volume, however, lacks linguistic excitement. The poems included were written over a period of some forty years and it is curiously hard to date any of them or to discern a progression in poetic skill.

Bolton is a scientist and his poem "My Uncle Eustace, Maker of Rings" was originally published in the journal *Nature*. On the blurb it is described as "probably the definitive poem *by* a scientist *about* a scientist." There are not many poems, it is true, in this specialized category but I cannot believe that this is the best. It is interesting *but* it does not work as a poem. Too many of Bolton's poems operate according to the nineteenth-century formula: a scene or animal leads to thoughts of spring or autumn which leads to emotion about life or me. The failure in the end, however, is linguistic. It is almost impossible for a poem to survive phrases such as: "I feel within my bones/ the crackling tension you are nexus of" or "Firstly and simply I didn't make myself congenial."

G. F. Dutton is also a scientist, well known in gardening and mountaineering circles, and a very accomplished poet. *The Concrete Garden* is his third collection of poems and it should advance his considerable reputation. His poem "Cold Room" is about a scientist's work and is much more punchy than Bolton's "My Uncle Eustace, Maker of Rings." Dutton's special gift is to take an aspect of nature or a location (usually not specifically named) and offer very exact readings of it in such a way that symbolic possibilities gradually emerge. The symbolism does not burden the ostensible subject but is available to the reader in a subtle manner which allows the reader a sort of double pleasure. One is reminded of one of Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird":

I do not know which to prefer,
 The beauty of inflections
 Or the beauty of innuendoes,
 The blackbird whistling
 Or just after.

Indeed, Dutton's poems often share a spareness and resonance with the poems of Stevens. Parts of "Culture" and "Rains" remind me of Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar." Also, as with his illustrious predecessor, Dutton's poems are often curiously impersonal—not unemotional. As happens with his symbolism, emotional ripples spread from the crisp observations of a segment of nature under his microscope. The emotions, for the most part, are not fixed to himself but are suggestive in a more general context. Sometimes this process can seem reserved or even enigmatic. When the poem succeeds the ripple touches us with a particular freshness:

nights heavy
 with reconciliation
 dawns clean
 with the old bright treachery

These lines are from the poem called "Border" and he is vigilant at crossing-points, moments of transition. The scale of human activity and aspiration is always presented in a daunting perspective of large climatic patterns, rock formations, botanical cycles. However, he retains a curiosity and a struggle to understand:

Just to choose
 a corner of the wilderness
 is to enclose
 it with intent.

Duncan Glen has over many years contributed an enormous amount to Scottish self-awareness and cultural life. Akros Publications and the magazine *Akros* have been an encouragement and inspiration to many over the past decades, and Glen worked indefatigably from his base in exile in Preston. Since 1987 he has lived in Edinburgh as a full-time writer. The poems included in *Selected Poems 1965-1990* are drawn from nine previously published collections.

The poems selected are varied in their settings and subject matter but I feel disappointed to say that they show a lack of quickness, a lack of urgency. Many of the poems are occasional but the occasions do not emerge as memorable to the reader. The Scots in which the vast majority are written does not sparkle or surprise and the free verse of most does not arrest atten-

tion, although there are moments when Glen catches and conveys an insight. For example, in "Public View," where the British public are viewed viewing Rodin's "The Kiss" in the Tate Gallery, he registers the embarrassment shown at happy passion. The short poem concludes tellingly:

The excitement o anguish
is mair bearable in public.

Several poems manifest this succinctness but they stand out from the bulk of the poems which seem rather unenergetic. In too few instances are we touched by the kind of magic demonstrated in lines he quotes from Homer's *Odyssey*:

Then death will drift upon me
from seaward, mild as air, mild as your hand.

Ruaraidh MacThòmais (Derick Thomson) published his collected poems in 1982 and his stance and poetic vigor remain unchanged. The final lines in his new volume could apply to himself. They read (in translation):

I am still
as I was,
my ember's flame shivering
in the self-same hearth,
my bonfire unquenched.

The assertion of the whole statement and the ambivalence of the "flame shivering" are both typical of him. Even the title of the new collection *Smeur an Dochais (Bramble of Hope)*, seems doubled-edged or ironic. The bramble is a fruit but also a thorn and hope is more associated with spring than with late autumn. The translations in this substantial bilingual collection are by the poet. Because he often shapes his poems out of sharp images in free verse the translations work very successfully. Nonetheless, he also plays with the sounds and multiple meanings of his first language and this play can, often must, be lost. For example, in the poem "Macon" (French place-name), lines 12-17 read in English and Gaelic:

melon
more honey,
mélange,
misericordia,
hope,
beauty

melon
tuilleadh meala,
mélange,
misericordia,
misneachd,
maise

Even with the help of shared foreign words there is an obvious loss in the translation.

There are several sequence poems and a series of poems set in foreign locations. Thomson has a splendid dramatic quality in the openings of many poems, openings which intrigue the reader and prompt expectations without revealing the direction the poem may take. One poem begins:

The end of the world
will come in different ways
in Glasgow and in Kinlochranoch

and another begins:

When I came back from death
it was morning,
the back door was open
and one of the buttons of my shirt had disappeared.

Often, he writes with a quiet understatement even when dealing with large subjects such as death or religion or nationalism. With the years this ironic, almost self-mocking note has become more marked and he appears more keenly aware of discrepancies between belief and actuality, between ambition and realization. In "Cambridge" he remarks:

I see a notice in a bookshop—
'Theology Downstairs'—
true enough, at least for me.

There is usually an intellectual gap between his mind and the subject of his poem but the gap is often bridged with a compassion or a wry acceptance. Other people, he says, find their own achievements. A section of "On Glasgow Streets" presents a case:

Coltas na slàinte ort,
a bhodaich and dà fhichead bliadhna,
'na do shuidh air starsaich
oifis air Stràid an Naoimh Vincent,
gun bhrògan ort,
ag ithe uinean.

You have a healthy look
forty-year-old old man,
sitting on the threshold
of an office in St. Vincent Street,
shoeless,
eating an onion.

Derick Thomson, retiring as Professor of Celtic at Glasgow University in 1991, the year of these poems, sees alternative routes to happiness.

The cover of Gordon Meade's first collection, *Singing Seals*, is startlingly surrealistic and suits the final half-dozen poems which have a mythical or fantastical quality to them. They provide a very strong finale to the collection and, if the collection is arranged in order of composition, indicate a new and, I think, fruitful direction for Meade's writing. Section I of "The Mermaid's Gift" is worth quoting in full:

She puts
a pebble
under your tongue

so
your speech
can reach her.

She puts
a shell
to your ear

so
you can
hear her song.

She jabs
a fish-bone
through your heart

so
you can share
her gift of pain.

Disturbing elements appear in these poems and, like the memory of his wife's attempt to save a damaged razorbill, they leave "a slick of oil/ upon the surface of our dreams."

The majority of the poems earlier in the collection fall into two main areas: poems set in hospital and poems set on the sea-shore. Meade in his early twenties suffered a serious accident from which he took eighteen months to recover. Perhaps related to this accident, many of his poems are centered on observation, not on activity or physical involvement. The hospital poems and the sea-life ones sometimes echo each other. In "The Giant Clam" he remembers a film in which a man's foot is caught in a clam and his own recurring dream pulls him down:

I turn
And turn on

The sea's cold
Bed, my voice like the
Drowning, dead.

There are many impressive passages in this collection and it will be interesting to see how Meade progresses.

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Scottish Poetry

1990

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Scottish Poetry

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