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BOOK REVIEWS

Maurice Lindsay. *Modern Scottish Poetry: An Anthology of the Scottish Renaissance*. London. Faber and Faber Ltd. 1965. 200 pp. 21s.

Maurice Lindsay's useful early collections of contemporary verse in Scotland (*Scottish Poetry*, Nos. 1, 2) have been succeeded by his more selective and comprehensive Anthology. It is an impressive and surprising selection, impressive for the amount of permanently interesting work that it displays, surprising for its omission of equally valuable work and for its occasional inclusion of verse that does no more than illustrate a fashion in sensibility. Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir should each be represented by at least a score of poems, instead of the bare ten or so that are here acknowledged. Minor talents, like those of the two Smiths—Sidney Goodsir and Iain Crichton—that achieve poetic attitude rather than poems, might decently have made room for their masters. One is glad to consider again the simple (in the best sense) successes of William Soutar, the effectively managed affectations of George Mackay Brown, such single felicities as Andrew Young's *Paps of Jura*, Muriel Stewart's *Seed Shop* and Alexander Scott's *Evensong*, the coldly clear if unemotive etchings of George Bruce and Norman McCaig; as one is disappointed to find the brilliant sensibility of Edwin Morgan so scantily illustrated—why is his splendid love poem, *From a City Balcony*, now omitted?

Your breast and thighs were blazing like the gorse.
I covered your great fire in silence there.
We let the day grow old along the grass
It was in the silence the love was.

Praise and blame duly offered—everyone makes his own anthology—the value and importance of the collection is evident. The French-born phrase, 'the Scots renaissance,' has been sufficiently vindicated. Such a body of distinguished verse, the editor rightly claims, provokes comparison and contrast with the other live periods of Scots creativeness in verse, that of the waning of the Middle Ages, when Scots achievement was supreme in Europe, and that of the Enlightenment, of Burns and Scott.

It is the blatant differences in the achievement of the moderns that interests this reviewer most. They have sensitivity but little

sensuousness, wit—as with McCaig—that contains rather than liberates feeling, sophistication of language that refines the poet's voice but also, too much, his meaning, the clear image that strengthens only by confining. Passion and belief are hardly allowed to speak out—MacDiarmid and Morgan are illustrative exceptions. It is indeed curious how hard a surface the common personality of these poets presents. It reports its experiences painfully, stoically, for, again with the great exception of MacDiarmid, little sense of delighted creation is conveyed. It is not a potentially bright world that they present, as is that of Dunbar and Henryson, or abundantly vital as is that of Burns and Scott; it is oddly dark and in-looking. Comparatively these moderns are Jeremiahs and Puritans, Calvinists in spite of themselves. It may be that such broad characterisation would apply elsewhere, to the poets of England and America in so far as they face similar predicaments, but to the present reviewer it reveals a very Scots identity however far removed from that of their rivals in the past. It is Dunbar's *Meditation in Winter* without a hint of his *Golden Terge* or his *Resurrection*. The 'fineries of light' (Robin Fulton's useful phrase) are not cultivated but in their place the 'sobrieties'—the grave discipline of Muir is unfortunately more influential with most poets than the vital freedom of MacDiarmid. Significantly, love poetry of any power and distinction is, with the exception noticed, lacking. In respect of positive substance and interpretation, the order that Muir's *Little General* and MacDiarmid's *Lo! A Child Is Born* (from the *Second Hymn to Lenin*) adumbrate is felt as an individual's imposed vision, not the spontaneous communal creation of a Henryson or Burns.

These defects are the penalties of a modern consciousness and they show here as exaggerated by the brief poem that it is the current ideal of poetic taste. As our times go it would be vain, perhaps, to wish that larger and more significant forms and rhythms were cultivated by these modern 'makars.' One can only recognize as fact that within the limits of their circumstances they have made, and continue to make, a brilliant contribution to the Scots tradition of poetry. Mr. Lindsay is to be congratulated on proving so convincingly that once again there is a vital poetic community in Scotland.

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