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“I AM JUST AS TYPICALLY SCOTTISH”:
G. S. FRASER AS SCOTTISH POET

Richie McCaffery

The poet George Sutherland Fraser (1915-1980) was born in Glasgow, raised in Aberdeen, educated at St. Andrews, worked on the Press & Journal, and enlisted in the Black Watch; but in most accounts of 20th century Scottish poetry Fraser has been paid diminishing attention.¹ After the war, he settled in London, and then in Leicester, yet this did not lessen his sense of being Scottish, observing, in his Vision of Scotland (1948), that “one way to understand and love a country is to leave it.”² Changed critical attitudes to two poetic movements in which he had a significant role, 1940s neo-romanticism and 1950s formalism, undoubtedly also contributed to his neglect. There are parallels here with the longtime neglect of another Scottish expatriate, W.S. Graham.³ Taken together, the questioning of Fraser’s authenticity as a Scot and critical ambivalence to those movements have left awareness of his poetry vestigial. The purpose of this article is to identify some of the reasons for this neglect and to argue that Fraser’s achievement as a Scottish poet should be better recognized alongside that of his contemporaries who remained in Scotland.

³ This parallel is noted by, e.g., Alan Bold, Modern Scottish Literature (Harlow: Longman, 1983), 71-75 (71).
Fraser’s poetic output might seem limited by comparison with more prolix colleagues, both in the 1940s or in the current poetry scene. He died relatively young, at 64, yet over a forty year writing career he published only a thin chapbook and four slim books of verse, with a long delay between his third and fourth book.\(^4\) Perhaps his other writing came to overshadow his poetry, so he seemed merely, in Hamish Whyte’s phrase, “a successful all-rounder as writer and critic.”\(^5\) However, after the war, and into the 1950s, Fraser made his living as a literary journalist, pouring out not only reviews, articles and essays, but translations and travel writing. His wife Paddy wrote that that “he had an enviable ability to write at any time, to any length, any deadline, in any state; even if he was ill or hung-over, he could turn in his copy on time, always perfectly typed, ... oblivious of comfort or surroundings.”\(^6\) His critical books, such as *The Modern Writer and His World* (Penguin, 1953) and *Vision and Rhetoric* (Faber, 1959), had a great influence, but there appears to be no comprehensive bibliography of Fraser’s writing, which was profuse. In early middle age, a university teaching position brought Fraser, married with three children, some financial security, though lecturing, reviewing, and further critical books and editions continued to take centre stage.

In 1969 Fraser was persuaded to gather new poems in a slim paperback titled *Conditions*.\(^7\) Seen into print by a young Nottingham-based poet and critic, John Lucas, *Conditions*, which proved to be the final collection during Fraser’s lifetime, sparked a brief resurgence of critical interest because it seemed to show a late creative efflorescence from a poet who had been written off as creatively extinct. Fraser had never in fact stopped writing poetry, and when he died in 1980, shortly after a heart attack forced him to take early retirement, he left a substantial tranche of unpublished poems and translations. Soon

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\(^4\) Fraser’s early books were a chapbook *The Fatal Landscape* (London: Poetry, 1941), *Home Town Elegy* (London: Editions Poetry London, 1944), both published by Tambimuttu, and *The Traveller Has Regrets* (London: Harvill Press, 1948), an idealistic new imprint for whom Fraser also did translation work; and *Leaves Without a Tree* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1953), which includes only a few new poems.


\(^7\) G.S. Fraser, *Conditions* (Nottingham: The Byron Press, 1969).
afterwards, with the help of Iain Fletcher, Fraser’s near contemporary in Cairo during the war, Lucas edited a substantial collected volume, Poems of G. S. Fraser, with Leicester University Press, and more recently Lucas brought out Fraser’s Selected Poems via his own imprint Shoestring Press, prompting another minor re-ignition of interest in Fraser’s poetry, which had dimmed somewhat in the decades since his death.8

The two poetic eras to which Fraser is most commonly linked, the New Apocalyptics and the Movement, have both suffered at the hands of astringent retrospective critics and, at least in Scottish terms, have yet to be thoroughly and dispassionately reappraised. John Lucas claims that poets clearly associated with writing of the 1940s “have still not recovered from the often malicious battering administered by those who succeeded them.”9 It seems fitting that while the Movement poets largely reacted against and dismissed New Apocalypse poets, they too have largely fallen out of literary favour. Fraser himself seems to have been able to operate almost amphibiously in both movements as a contributing poet but also something of a spokesperson or theorist. He provided a lengthy introduction to the anthology The White Horseman (1941), one of the manifestos of the largely Celtic New Apocalypse movement, and later he welcomed the dry, wry, neo-classical ethos of the Movement, as editor of two influential 1950s anthologies, Springtime: an Anthology of Young Poets and Writers (London: Peter Owen, 1953, coedited with Fletcher), and Poetry Now (London: Faber, 1956).

This ease of mobility between often antagonistic literary movements might be taken as indecision, weakness, or opportunism. There is always an element of Fraser never wholeheartedly belonging to any school. He was an incongruous figure in “slaty” grey Aberdeen in the 1930s, an essentially middle-class, urbane poet writing in an Augustan English and yearning for the bright metropolitan lights at a time when poetry was marked by polemical, left-wing Marxist gestures. He did not fit in with the Left-leaning “Pylon School” of Auden, Spender, MacNeice and Day Lewis or with the Scottish nationalist and linguistic fervour espoused by Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance. He never let himself go

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8 Ian Fletcher and John Lucas, eds, Poems of G.S. Fraser (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1981); G. S. Fraser, Selected Poems, with an introduction by Andrew Waterman (Nottingham: Shoestring Press, 2015). Quotations and citations below are taken from Poems and are referenced in text in parentheses.
enough during the 1940s to be a truly wild, bardic neo-romantic voice, like J. F. Hendry or even Ruthven Todd, instead acting more like a sober commentator from the fringes of the action. By the time he welcomed the Movement in the 1950s, he was already indelibly associated and arguably tarnished as a poet of the 1940s, and too old and established to be really relevant to a generation of poets born in the later 1920s and the 1930s.

Nevertheless, Fraser’s devotion to poetry and writing was both professional and vocational. This marked him out among his peers but it also left him vulnerable to criticism, which he himself exacerbated by an innate tendency towards self-deprecation. His autobiography *A Stranger and Afraid* (posthumously published, though written at the age of 35) is permeated with self-lacerating lines like “a shuddering sense of personal impotence” and how he had lived a life of “false freedom, drift, of sick evasion.”

To the extent that poetry also takes into account personality, a retiring soul such as Fraser, effectively complicit in his own critical relegation, was increasingly marginalised by louder and more confident voices.

The prevailing notion among poets of Fraser’s generation was that poetry was personal, an avocation, and that any poet worth their salt had a day job, what Philip Larkin called “the toad work.” In Scotland, many poets worked as teachers, some in primary school, like Norman MacCaig, Sorley Maclean, and Robert Garioch, and those who did not follow this accepted pattern, such as Hugh MacDiarmid or Sydney Goodsir Smith, were often judged and found wanting. However hard he might work in Chelsea to make a living as a full-time writer, Fraser was routinely disparaged by resentful contemporaries as a lucky amateur or self-appointed panjandrum of letters who had not really earned his prominence as critical arbiter.

He was more than that. Fraser’s house in Chelsea in the late 1940s and the 1950s served as a literary salon, but this placed emphasis on him as mentor or talent-spotter, rather than a creator himself. In his poem

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12 The Movement poet Donald Davie, secure in a Cambridge fellowship, later quipped that literary London had “had to get along with the occasional apercu from George Fraser”: quoted in *Poems*, 12; cf. also John Lucas, “G. S. Fraser, 1915-1980,” *PN Review*, 42.1 [2015]: 51-53 (53).
“Poetic Generations,” written in the 1950s, Fraser looks back ironically at the Auden generation and his own pre-War poetry:

When first I thrummed the lyre
Right at the back of the stage,
O what politic fire
Inspired our vocal rage! (*Poems*, 130).

Then, poetry was full of passion and righteous anger, which was dissipated and wasted on the war effort itself. The neo-romantic poets that followed, tangling his generation in a “net of images,” drowning, “fishing up words” from the “deep sea of their dreams” was equally unsatisfactory to those facing a post-War world: “dreams are a bore in the morning” (*ibid*.). Fraser’s point is that each new generation of poets might have something to say, but is as fallible as the generation that preceded it—all poets over time groping towards a significant or lasting statement in their work, playing an intrinsically “long” game. Fraser gives a detached existential overview of the poetic condition that goes far beyond mere trends or fashions. The fact that poetry might always fall short of our expectations is not sufficient reason to give up the hard and important work of trying to formulate something meaningful on the page:

We are not the last or the first
With silly tears to cry
For never losing the thirst
We cannot satisfy.
If this is not what I mean,
It is almost what I meant:
We must make the instruments clean
As the predicament,
We must put ourselves to school
In sullen middle age
Till compass, square, and rule
Restore the vocal rage! (*Poems*, 131).

At a time of sweeping political rhetoric in poetry, in the 1940s, and of cynicism masquerading as wit in the 1950s, Fraser’s poetry is particularly significant for consistently voicing doubt, of the self and of society. To quote a line from Fraser’s long poem “Exile’s Letter,” in his post-War volume *The Traveller Has Regrets*, it is Fraser’s belief that “To show my weakness is my strength” (*Poems*, 71-74 [73]). Where more sloganeering contemporaries believed that poetry could enact social change or political power, Fraser sees it as a means of self-preservation, of keeping the self or individual sane and intact as it moves through extremely trying times.
In the 1940s, overly propagandistic or rhetorical poetries often made Fraser feel uneasy and insufficient as a poet. In his early poem “Crisis,” from Home Town Elegy (1944), we see in detail how the war has rendered his bedroom, full of books and literary papers, utterly chaotic, and the poem closes with the alarming dilemma that this disorder might not simply be symptomatic of the times, but might reflect some deeper, personal failing. Still, Fraser could strike a more bitingly confident note. In “To a Scottish Poet,” also written in war time, Fraser paints a picture of a haunted isle where he can no longer live, where the only thing to do is to “defy” the ghosts of Scotland and “stand insolent, as poets stand” (Poems, 69). In Fraser’s view, poets are the voice of resistance and conscience, their outsider status giving them strength.

One of Fraser’s strongest exilic poems of the period, “The Death of My Grandmother,” is also curiously the one where he finally seems to strike a valedictory note not only to his grandmother, but to Scotland itself:

There’s little personal grief in a quiet old death (Poems, 59).

Fraser depicts a figure adamantine in her resistance to influence of place or change of place, finding something almost sinister in his grandmother’s flinty and joyless resolve to live as she had always done and never change her views on anything. He compares this to the “rock-stacks in the stony Orkneys” that endure until they fall into the sea. He even wonders if the Scottish shibboleths in her speech were in fact merely something picked up from “some novel by John Buchan” and he suggests that place for her was something that was endlessly enfolded, something subsumed with each move in an ongoing concatenation:

... No more the old
Books in the glass case, and the box bed
I half remember as a boy in Glasgow:
Caithness enclosed within a house in Glasgow,
Glasgow enclosed in London: time in time,
The past within the past, parentheses.
In laying her to rest, it is as if
We folded up with her brown age a landscape,
A ribbed and flat and rocky map of duty
That is the northern edge of every island
Where pleasure flowers only in the swollen south:
Mourn character that could persist so long
Where softer personality dies young. (ibid.).

Here Fraser makes it clear that he sees no virtue in hanging onto the past and steadfastly trying to remain the same, he will be more open to life
and its permutations. This can be seen also in the trajectory of his career as a poet. Always technically formal, Fraser did not naturally belong amongst the neo-romantics of the 1940s, and he came to regard the Movement in the 1950s as something that might redress the balance in the direction of a more urbane, rigorous and academic style which would compensate for the gross disruption and distraction of war. Andrew Sinclair has argued that the war “left [the] craft in a state of confusion,” and that Fraser’s post-War development exemplified a sense that poetry “would have to be more relevant and restrained.”  

R.P. Draper, a Leicester colleague who later moved to a chair at Aberdeen, sees in Fraser’s ideological fluidity as a poet not a lack of direction but something more closely related to his childhood in Scotland. Draper argues that for Fraser, born in Glasgow but raised in Aberdeen, these cities became “romantic” and “classic” respectively, “symbolic of the two aspects of his own temperament.”14 This schism, paralleled in the work of a poet Fraser admired very highly, Edwin Muir, can be seen to govern a lot of Fraser’s life. Though he claimed his experience of Scotland had been “provincial” in contrast to the “cosmopolitan” he sought and found in post-war London, he also asserted that “the poetic state that I inherited was a Scottish childhood.”15 During the war he had encountered the intoxicating influence of an essentially romantic or Dionysian literary movement, but returning to the literary salons of Chelsea after the war, he embraced something much more classic or Apollonian that heralded the Movement. One problem in resolving such dualities may have been his geographic mobility and dislocation. While travel is considered valuable and empirically expanding, living abroad can bring about questions of self-exile, escape, indirection and restlessness, all of which are accusations that seem to hover above Fraser’s poetry and make him difficult to categorise. In 1955, George Kitchin argued that Fraser had “endured exile in London, Egypt and Japan,” and that he was spending too much time with the “wits of the

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South.” While he did not go to Egypt during wartime of his own volition, and he settled in London after the war initially because his family had moved there from Aberdeen, he went to Japan in 1950 not as an exile, but willingly, as he also traveled to South America in the late 1940s, and to the States in the early sixties.

One clue about his transnationalism comes in the rare, hastily-assembled prose book *Impressions of Japan*, produced out of his ill-fated year in Japan in 1950-51 as “cultural adviser” with the British Council. Fraser himself refers to his job as a “cultural mission,” working to aid “the mental and spiritual rehabilitation of post-war Japan.” One immediate product of his Japan experience was his book, *The Modern Writer and His World*, written “to provide Japanese students of English literature, who had been cut off from contact with us during the war, with a fairly clear guide-book to modern tendencies.” *Impressions of Japan* refers euphemistically to Fraser’s visit being cut short by “illness.” In truth he suffered a nervous breakdown and tried to commit suicide by leaping from a moving train, leading to hospitalization in Japan, a lengthy repatriation process, months of further hospitalization after he got home, and in Berkshire and London, and financial hardship for his family.

The idea of Fraser spending much of his life as a cultural or poetic missionary is a compelling one. Even when he worked as an academic in the English department at Leicester University, he taught evening poetry workshops for the adult education college, and he was still devoting time to the encouragement of younger writers, such as the extraordinarily gifted but tragic poet and theorist Veronica Forrest-Thomson, whom Fraser supported as both a poet-peers and an early-career academic.

Forrest-Thomson, like Fraser, was a Glasgow-born “Scot abroad,” who died at 27 of an overdose of drink and pills. In his poem “A Napkin with Veronica’s Face, not Christ’s,” Fraser drew on his own earlier experience

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17 G. S. Fraser, *Impressions of Japan and Other Essays* (Tokyon: Asahi-Shimbun-Sha, 1953), 137.
18 G.S. Fraser, *The Modern Writer and His World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1952), 7 (quoted in Draper, *ODNB*).
19 The fullest account was given by Paddy Fraser, as in n. 6 above.
in writing about the tightrope act many poets walk between lucidity and madness:

A broth of learning seemed to blur her mind,
A rich aroma, and but one stir more,
One pinch of herb, and surely she would find

The great elixir and the hidden lore
To make her the immortal Harlequin
Of death-blue profile on Picasso’s shore

And all her thoughts were angels on a pin
Or plunging horses on a carousel,
Whirling around, or weaving out and in....

Madness, illusions of omnipotence!
I am a poet, I have known them too.
You have outsoared the shadow of our sense,

I cannot check your flight, or soar with you:
Poor dead girl, choking on your messy pillow...

(Poems, 185-188 [186-187])

Patrick Scott arguably did not go far enough in suggesting that Fraser’s use of strict poetic forms was a way of controlling destructive or damaging emotion, such as the anger and resentment Fraser expresses in “Lenten Meditation” (Poems, 151). This begs the question where Fraser might have found his inner resilience, the self-discipline and a gentleness that largely preempted bitterness.

Edwin Morgan and Fraser had a good professional relationship as academics, if not poets. They had a common interest as mentor or external examiner in several younger writers, including Forrest-Thomson and the poet James McGonigal, then writing a thesis on Basil Bunting. But there was clearly a coolness between Fraser and Morgan as poets. During the War, both men had served in North Africa, Fraser as a corporal, later warrant officer, for the Ministry of Information, in Cairo and Eritrea, and Morgan as a medic and hospital orderly. In one well-known sonnet, Morgan portrays a supine or craven Fraser, while Scottish contemporaries were serving in combatant roles in the desert, waiting in Cairo, far from actual fighting, with notebook and pen ready to jot down

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21 Scott, as in n. 2 above, p. 33.
the latest pronouncements from the pro-fascist King Farouk. Yet it was a very firm conviction that “Hitlerism was something that threatened the very humanity of man and had to be destroyed” that made Fraser enlist voluntarily for the army as early as 1939, at a time when Morgan was still considering registering as a conscientious objector. Typically, Fraser himself struck an apologetic tone about his war service, writing that he never claimed the war service medals to which he was entitled because he had “pounded my typewriter in the same area where other soldiers had fought battles.” Here, as often, by downplaying his life experiences, Fraser encouraged others to minimise and marginalise his achievements as a poet.

For some Scottish contemporaries, this sense that Fraser had not really shared in their wartime experience would breed distrust of him as somehow less Scottish in both poetry and politics. On the first day of 1945, Fraser wrote to another Scottish poet whom he had met in Cairo, Hamish Henderson, that he felt contrite about “our comfort here ..., our intrigues, petty quarrels, paper wars and you out there in the night, in the cold, in the rain and the mud.” Henderson’s biographer, Timothy Neat, reports Henderson as never quite able to forgive Fraser for his role in the war. Reviewing Fraser’s early poetry, and finding it facile, Henderson commented: “every conscious tremor of the muscles is gauged to a nicety.... There is as much lyricism in George Fraser’s songs as in a Times article.” Neat suggests that Henderson’s song “Honest Geordie” was directed against Fraser, lambasting what he saw as a personal and political betrayal:


24 *Return to Oasis: War Poems and Recollections from the Middle East 1940-1946*, ed. Victor Selwyn, ... Ian Fletcher, G. S. Fraser, et al. (Shepheard-Walwyn, 1980), xxxi. Both men had contributed to *Oasis: the Middle East Anthology of Poetry from the Forces* (Cairo: Salamander, 1943).

25 G. S. Fraser, *A Stranger and Afraid*, as in. 10 above, 171.


Fraser had given Hamish the impression that he could hardly wait to join him in his revolutionary campaign for Scottish self-governance but, returning to London and discovering the pleasures of success as a literary critic and British Council lecturer, Fraser had quickly deserted the cause (Neat, 292).

However unfair, considering that Fraser simply returned to his family who now lived in London, the stigma of desertion stuck with Fraser among his Scottish-based contemporaries. Henderson’s most famous folk anthem, the “Freedom Come All Ye,” offers a pluralist vision of a tolerant post-War ‘big’ Scottish society where all types, races and creeds of people are to be embraced, but it appears that Henderson viewed exilic Scots like Fraser as an enemy, or at least a threat, to this new society.

This placed Fraser in a very real dilemma, which comes across strongly in such poems as his “For Tilly, Sick, with Love” (Poems, 35-36). As the poem shows, even in the midst of a London literary soiree, Fraser has kept something distinctively Scottish; there is a nod towards this, for example, in the ‘weak, wersh beer’ at the party. Still, there is an oppositional sense that Fraser is punishing himself for leaving Scotland and making himself an outsider or alien citizen wherever he goes, as in the title poem of his third collection, The Traveller has Regrets:

The traveller has regrets
For the receding shore …
But the blue lights on the hill,
The white lights in the bay
Told us the meal was laid
And that the bed was made
And that we could not stay (Poems, 57).

Fraser is more outspoken when writing about Ireland, and this is arguably because he is aware that he is a foreigner abroad. While he loves Ireland and its literatures and has holidayed and honeymooned there, he can also see nationalism and the romanticizing of the past for what it is, something essentially hollow and petrified, and he equates this to something inherently and antiquatedly Scottish:

How one admires the pride of ancestry…
We saw stuffed birds, partridges, ptarmigans,
A bear, I think a fierce snow Arctic bear,
Shot by a loyal servant, as it lumbered
Over the ice to maul his Gore-Booth master.
A Conan Doyle world, not a Yeats world, really.
And sawdust stuffing coming out of the bear’s paws.

(Poems, 174-175 [175]).
This poem gives the sense of how distance, however unwanted, between the self and the homeland creates a clearer and perhaps a more realistic vision of it than those who live inside of it are able to invoke. For Fraser, Scottish or indeed Irish poets staying within their society origin can arguably only offer a rather one-sided view. Likewise, all nations and their literary imaginaries need to be created or informed by both endogenous and exogenous standpoints in order to function in a healthy way. A similar critical transnationalism can be seen in such Scottish poets as W. S. Graham, living in Cornwall for most of his adult life, and Kenneth White, who embraces French and Far Eastern literatures and philosophies and has styled himself as an intellectual “nomad.”

Although the fractious backbiting of Scottish poets in the post-war period may not hold much sway now over our own opinions of the poets who criticised and those who were criticised, it nonetheless shows us how certain voices were marginalised and pushed out of consideration, particularly those who were seen to be deserting Scotland spiritually and politically by leaving it physically. Of course, not all poets of this period who remained physically loyal to Scotland are still as highly regarded. Arguably, poets like Sydney Goodsir Smith (1915-1975) and Alexander Scott (1920-1989), who figured prominently in the Scottish Renaissance vogue for synthetic Scots, have somewhat faded from view, whereas poets like Norman MacCaig (1910-1996), who uncompromisingly wrote wittily lyrical poetry in (a Scottish-inflected) English, and the protean Edwin Morgan (1920-2010), who was able to move with the times through successive literary developments, still remain alive in the collective literary consciousness.

Nevertheless, some of Fraser’s critical relegation is certainly related to the fact that he did not return to Scotland after the war. This was a time when much poetic and intellectual energy was being ploughed into a vision of a new Scottish society in which the voices of the Scottish Renaissance would hold sway over artistic and political matters. Though Fraser himself could write appreciatively of MacDiarmid, some of Fraser’s defenders have denounced MacDiarmid’s influence as “narrow” and “crude.”

MacDiarmid’s own nationalism and politics, as also of Scottish cultural politics in the post-war period. Scottish literature of this era, while MacDiarmid and others took pains to stress its internationalist outlook, could also take an essentialist turn with Scottish poets or writers living outside Scotland, and this shortchanges complex poetry like Fraser’s.

Many of Fraser’s most successful poems take the form of an argufying verse epistle to a certain figure, such as Anne Ridler or Hugh MacDiarmid. This in itself suggests that Fraser is always approaching his subjects from a distance, and that the emotions and abstractions he conveys in his poems are deeply pre-mediated and held in check by the formal demands and constraints of the forms he uses. Again, the tone in most of these poetic epistles is one of self-deprecation. The speaker posits himself as an inherently inferior being to the recipient of the letter. In “Letter to Anne Ridler,” we discover for example that Fraser identifies himself as a quiet Northern voice, largely unnoticed but still utterly and doggedly committed to poetry:

Or if we never meet, remember me
As one voice speaking calmly in the north
Among the muslin veils of northern light;
I bore the seed of poetry from my birth
To flower in rocky ground, sporadically,
Until I sleep in the unlaurelled night (Poems, 45-47 [47]).

Maurice Lindsay, in many ways more of a literary generalist and panjandrum than Fraser, struck an early tone of admonition with regard to Fraser’s work and life. Reviewing Home Town Elegy in Poetry Scotland, Lindsay predicted that Fraser:

may become a major Scottish poet … if he does not allow the southward-sланting yearnings of his heart to master him. If he turns himself into an Englishman no doubt Scottish themes and images will disappear from his work, and it will lose much of its charm and distinctiveness.

There we have it in print: you can be Scottish if you live in Scotland, but if you make your bed south of the border, you have crossed the Rubicon of national identity and are forced to become English.

below, and a contribution to Poems Addressed to Hugh MacDiarmid … on his Seventy-Fifth Birthday (Preston: Akros Publications, 1967).
And so, the prevailing literary attitude towards Fraser in Scotland from the 1950s onwards was to see him as committing *trahison des clercs*. Alexander Scott, one of the most intransigent voices from commentators of the second wave of the Scottish Renaissance poets, repeatedly attacked Fraser’s anthologies and collections in Scottish outlets such as *Saltire Review*, accusing Fraser of “ignoring the Scottish contribution [to British poetry] almost completely.” Walter Keir, similarly, attacked Fraser for being out of his depth in editing the Faber anthology *Poetry Now* (1956), because his selection of Scottish poets was little more than an “arbitrary lucky dip.” It was Scott in 1956, in his position as editor and therefore anonymous author of the news-roundup section of *Saltire Review* who excoriated Fraser for his desertion: “a Scot to the English, and an Englishman to the Scots—who probably knows less about literary developments in Scotland over the last ten years than any other writer born and educated in this country.” Scorn like this, unfair and vindictive, might shake the resolve of even the strongest victim. It is unknown as to whether or not Scott and Fraser ever met, but they had not by 1970, when Fraser was to write privately to Maurice Lindsay:

> I am in a rather melancholy mood about my reputation as a poet. Alex Scott, whom I have never met … says I never wrote a good poem after 1943—the rest is sentimental, or in the worse sense ‘academic.’

In 1973 Fraser again writes to Lindsay, but this time with more assertiveness and less self-pity: “I don’t know why Alex Scott dislikes me so much. I have never met him…. I am just as typically Scottish as he is” (Robb, *ibid.*). The Fraser article which Scott denigrated in 1956 was in fact largely positive and celebratory about Scottish poetry, a “homecoming” piece for the *Twentieth Century* magazine, where Fraser, on a week-long trip to Edinburgh, had discovered a “literary life more concentratedly energetic than anything we know in London…. if I had achieved inner peace, I would certainly not go to Edinburgh to preserve

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However, Fraser was clearly something of a cultural tourist observing the Scottish Renaissance in full swing via the hostellries of Rose Street, and he described the visit as bringing about “a haunting sense of being in a foreign country” (Hopewell, *ibid.*). It is interesting to note how, less than twenty years later in 1974, Fraser wrote in a private letter to Kathleen Raine, that the poetry scene, at least in its Rose Street phase, had all but fragmented:

Grieve too old and feeble now to come to Edinburgh … Hamish Henderson busy at the School of Scottish Studies, recording bothy songs … Tom [Scott] lives in Portobello, rarely comes into Edinburgh proper … Sydney Goodsir Smith has stopped writing, wakes late in the morning, and walks a hundred yards to the nearest hotel where he spends his days drinking, mainly in solitude.  

Raine herself was a poet whose ancestral Scottishness was the subject of some debate, so it is to Raine that Fraser reveals his qualms about the native writing scene in Scotland, formed by those who never really left Scotland, or by those like Goodsir Smith, who embraced it after a childhood spent abroad.

For all of Fraser’s misgivings and vacillations about writing in Lallans or about the literary Scottish nationalism of Hugh MacDiarmid and his acolytes, throughout his life he insisted unequivocally that he was fundamentally a Scottish poet, though not accepting the ideological and political baggage that came with such an identity. In another letter to Raine, Fraser wrote: “I was proud that Tom Scott included both you and me in the … *Oxford Book of Scottish Verse.*” In his poem “Meditation of a Patriot,” Fraser seems simultaneously to reject Scotland and, controversially, to claim that it is only Scotland’s expatriate community or tourists who, on visiting Scotland, can see it for what it is:

> The posters show my country blonde and green,
> Like some sweet siren, but the travellers know
> How dull the shale sky is (*Poems*, 37).

Fraser’s contention is that Scotland willingly exported a fanciful and mythical image of itself:

> Romantic Scotland was an emigrant,
> Half-blooded, and escaped from sullen weather.

The poem carries the repeated refrain that

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35 Janet Hopewell, as in n. 15 above, 31.
36 G. S. Fraser, ALS, to Kathleen Raine, 24 April 1974, Acc. 8002/1 (NLS).
37 G. S. Fraser, undated handwritten letter to Kathleen Raine, Acc. 8002/1 (NLS).
With Byron and with Lermontov
Romantic Scotland’s in the grave.

Scotland, Fraser argues, cannot sustain living poets because of its philistine emphasis on practical skills rather than the intellect or any consideration of beauty, an emphasis personified in this poem by the “vulgar editor” at a Glasgow newspaper looking the young Fraser up and down who “seems to wonder what my sort is for.” Veronica Forrest-Thomson asserted that all poetry is artifice, especially when it deals with the external world. One might argue that in Fraser’s poem all images of Scotland are seen as artifice, bogus and self-generated, existing only in its distinctive type of nationalist discourse. Scotland is as much an imaginary state as it is a material reality. Nonetheless Fraser writes of Scotland as “my country,” even if he also suggests that his kind of patriot might be willing to leave or criticise the country of their birth.

The boundaries between reality and imaginary, between artifice and fact, life and mannerism are constantly at play in Fraser’s work, particularly when the theme of Scotland is on his mind. In “Christmas Letter Home,” from Home Town Elegy, addressed to his sister in Aberdeen, Fraser writes of living in an “historic poster-world,” and his fear seems to be that in wartime ordinary “luckless” lives need defending by those who had enjoyed a “lucky streak” in the pre-War world:

Whatever strikes the towering torturer down,
Whatever can outface the bully’s frown,
Talk to the stammerer, spare a cigarette
For tramps at midnight… oh, defend it yet!

…

‘These years were painful, then?’ ‘I hardly know.
Something lies gently over them, like snow,
A sort of numbing white forgetfulness…’ (Poems, 55-56).

Here Fraser gives his support to the underdog and the downtrodden, but his concern is that the recording of history and the sweepingly political language of nation will suppress for future generations the actual stories of those who were living through the war years. Similarly, in a much later poem, “Lenten Meditation,” from Conditions, Fraser shows an acute awareness for how tradition, personality and language can all damage someone’s development. In trying to fit into a family, in a certain place

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and society, we feel burdened by the expectation to play a role that is not our own:

It is hard to forgive, ever, even the dead:
My father who put on an act which was not himself
But which he imposed on me: my mother who talked:
Whose talk gnawed into my thinking and self-being:
My sister whose strength was a reproach to my weakness (Poems, 151).

Throughout his creative life, Fraser wanted to remain true to himself as a poet, writing for himself and pursuing poetry as a raison d’être, which for him was a life-force quite beyond the boundaries and borders of nation. Fraser’s varied and itinerant life was one governed by choice, not by a wish to escape, by a positive urge rather than hesitancy, indecision, or a lack of direction.

Rather similarly, Fraser, sometimes accused by his Scottish contemporaries of being politically soft, was committed to intellectual exploration, attributing his anti-ideological perspective to a distinctively Scottish education. Fraser’s essay “School and University Days in Scotland,” included in his book, Impressions of Japan, describes the Scottish educational system of his youth as instilling a “certain ‘universality’ of outlook,” discouraging “undue specialisation” to favour a “wide and ranging outlook and a general curiosity.” He saw this was an argument that worked both ways. If Scottish literature looked different from elsewhere, then the London scene looked different in the light of modern Scottish writing. In the same volume, Fraser, contrary to his assumed aversion to writing in Scots, praises Goodsir Smith’s work in “lowland Scots” as providing a “very healthy counterbalancing … to the tendency of English literary activity to become centred on London (Impressions, 104-112 [107]). Fraser, like his formative schooling, was open to a broad range of poetic styles and he did not try to undermine the efforts of the Scottish Literary Renaissance, even if he was not a member but an interested spectator from south of the border. R. P. Draper claims that Fraser was a “distinctly non-jingoistic” and “uncommitted liberal,” though the labelling hardly suits the passion with which Fraser remained and operated in the poetry world (Draper, in ODNB).

At the heart of Fraser’s life, there seems to have been a deep-seated desire not only to identify as, and be considered Scottish, but also to make it clear that pride in nationality need not tether him to the soil of the

39 On this, cf. Paddy Fraser, “G. S. Fraser: A Memoir,” as in n. 6 above.
40 Fraser, Impressions of Japan and Other Essays, as in n. 17 above, 85-90 (89).
country, nor entail animosity towards England. Much of Scotland as he had experienced it had seemed provincial or limiting. On the language question dividing poets in the forties, he once wrote to Maurice Lindsay: “I have never been tempted to use Lowland Scots myself, because I prefer the town to the country, and the sophisticated to the simpliste.” Fraser’s early poems are darkly atmospheric and foreboding, for example in the poem “Home Town Elegy,” dedicated to Aberdeen, where the speaker is on the verge of departure and writes of a Scotland that cannot “be taken with rhetoric or arms.” With an eerie prescience, the speaker briefly break into Scots: “Syne we maun part, their sall be nane remeid— / Unless my country is my pride, indeed” (Poems, 51). Fraser accepts that unless he becomes a patriotic Scot abroad, his rift with Scotland will never be fully repaired, and he accepts that poets are essentially outsiders, their human condition being one of self-imposed exile from the societies that produced them. Even in their commemoration after death, they are not properly understood:

Or I can make my town that homely fame
That Byron has, from boys in Carden Place,
Struggling home with books to midday dinner,
For whom he is not the romantic sinner,
The careless writer, the tormented face,
The hectoring bully or the noble fool,
But, just like Gordon or like Keith, a name:
A tall, proud statue at the Grammar School (ibid.).

One of Fraser’s best-known early poems, “Lean Street,” is not simply a poem of malaise, a young intellect and ambition suddenly grown too big to be accommodated by a parochial place, but rather a poem of reluctant belonging twinned with a deep social conscience. The poet’s voice and learning offer a frail defence against the obdurate hardship of the Aberdeen that he has not experienced himself, but can see everywhere:

They do not hear. Thought stings me like an adder,
A doorway’s sagging plumb-line squints at me,
The fat sky gurgles like a swollen bladder
With the foul rain that rains on poverty (Poems, 30).

Poems such as “Lean Street” show that Fraser was not blind to the political and social concerns of his time, but he is one of the few poets brave enough to admit that their poetry is powerless in terms of effecting change and to speak as a lone voice.

41 G. S. Fraser, ALS, to Maurice Lindsay, 11 Nov. 1946, Acc. 4791/ 11 (NLS).
One of Fraser’s fullest engagements with these issues is another of his neatly-controlled verse epistles, “To Hugh MacDiarmid.” While the fiercely and vociferously nationalist MacDiarmid might be considered the polar opposite of Fraser’s sceptical exilic poetry, this poem is not an explicit repudiation of MacDiarmid’s valuable work. Fraser writes out of admiration for MacDiarmid’s poetry and he identifies, like MacDiarmid, as an unequivocally Scottish poet:

... At least I can salute your courage high,
Your thought that burns language to a cinder,
Your anger, and your angry poet’s joy (Poems, 37-38).

The poem is Fraser’s modest attempt to articulate to MacDiarmid that a Scottish poet can take many forms and many existential routes. For Fraser, the journey has been a “private” one, whereas MacDiarmid has effectively made himself into a metonymic martyr for Scotland. Typically self-critical, Fraser himself lays out most of the negative points that other writers would later throw at him (“Adversity / So far has failed to jab me with her hatpin. /... /I am Convention’s child”), accepting that in comparison to the older poet his own poetic achievement is minor.

Fraser poses the important question, what is the alternative? When a life is at its end and the poet looks back, is it better to have been an individualist outsider, seen by others as selfish or self-serving but seeking to do not harm, or to have allowed the demands of nation, prejudice and hatred to warp your mission into the propagandistic, even the tyrannical. The cruel irony is that both stances make the poet a pariah or outsider:

Your journey has not been the private journey
Through a mad loveliness, of Hölderlin.
Against the windmills, sir, you choose to tourney.
And yet, by marvellous chance, you hold your own.

O true bright sword! Perhaps, like Mithridates,
Before the night has fallen, you might say:
Now I am satisfied: at least, my hate is:
Now let me die: I saw the English flee....

What race has is always crude and common,
And not the human or the personal:
I would take sword up only for the human,
Not to revive the broken ghosts of Gael (ibid.).

It is worth noting here that G. S. Fraser was one of the few critics, before the advent of modern academic MacDiarmid scholarship, brave enough to
engage seriously with MacDiarmid’s later, longer poetry. He clearly followed MacDiarmid’s work from a respectful, if wary, distance. In an obituary for MacDiarmid in *Aquarius*, Fraser remarked that all the rhetoric of race and nation does is to enable people to be further divided down sectarian or tribal lines: “I think this complete failure to grasp the essence of a neighbouring and alien culture made MacDiarmid waste a lot of ineffective hate on England.” In surveying MacDiarmid’s long life and achievement, Fraser considers the work he might have been able to produce or the energies he could have harnessed if he had not taken such bludgeoning swipes at England. While MacDiarmid is preoccupied with ancient enmities—“the broken ghosts of Gael”—Fraser is focussing on his own modest voice and “private journey” and simply trying to make friends and contacts in the poetry world. As such, Fraser’s contention is that if Scotland in MacDiarmid’s eyes is “infinite” and “multiform,” then it is perfectly conceivable that Fraser is every bit as Scottish as MacDiarmid is, since Scotland in its tolerant multiplicity can surely support two radically different personalities.

The major mistake in approaching the poetry of G. S. Fraser is to misjudge his sociability and adaptability to various writing scenes and circles of his time as the behaviour of someone Janus-faced or noncommittal. In considering the wartime life of his contemporary Tom Scott (1918-1995), Fraser lamented that when Scott tried to make a name for himself in London during the war, he was “too intrinsically Scottish, too proud and intractable to accommodate to the casual and off-hand gregariousness of London literary life.” Fraser’s poetry is a profound engagement with the self and its problematic relationship with belonging to not just one, but a number of nations. His poetry is largely concerned with protecting his own identity and selfhood from more aggressive or colourful people, like like Hamish Henderson, martially literary “men of action” who make claims for something much more than themselves, such as an overarching Scottish nationalist programme (*idem*).

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43 G. S. Fraser, ‘In Memory of Hugh MacDiarmid,’ *Aquarius*, 11 (1979), 3-10 (4).


45 Fraser, *A Stranger and Afraid*, as in. 10 above, 115.
If we consider that Fraser’s life was one spent in the single-minded pursuit of poetry, then we see a man willing to travel and adapt. Fraser’s final poem, left in draft form at his death and used in the order of service at his funeral, “High Dam, Finsthwaite, Westmorland, in October,” contains a remarkable specificity of place, even though it is effectively a meditation on mortality.

We cannot always catch the ball  
But our opponent throws it high,  
High up still still, piled clouded sky.  
The day comes when the leaf must fall (Poems, 193).

Fraser is celebrating the joy of place, and the desire to dwell wherever the next poem or inspiration is coming from. The poem is evidence that he died an active poet, still attuned to the power and draw of place, but belonging only to the “estate” of poetry and accepting the ontological frailty or inadequacy of his position.

*Alnwick*