Brief Notice


"Within the form that he carves for himself out of an experimentation that takes him back to the wellsprings of drama and forward to new techniques, and deriving his dynamic from his Scottish background and traditions, Bridie has contrived to express some of the great problems and dilemmas of humanity, from a characteristically Scottish viewpoint." Thus the late J.T. Low in the final paragraph of *Doctors Devils Saints and Sinners* assesses James Bridie's achievements as a dramatist, subsequently concluding that he can be placed alongside a wide range of dramatists including Shaw, Beckett, O'Casey, O'Neill, Brecht, Pinter, Ionesco and Albee among others.

This final paragraph illustrates the laudable aims, many strengths and the few weaknesses of Low's valuable study. Using his wide knowledge of the theatre he discusses nine plays in detail—usefully dividing them into the categories of Doctor Morality Plays, Biblical Plays, Dramatic Portraits and "Poetic" Experimental Plays—before offering a more general analysis in chapters on Bridie's language, his dramatic craftsmanship and his achievements in a historical perspective. The result is a book which not only gives Bridie the full
recognition he deserves, both as a dramatist and as a founding father of twentieth century Scottish theatre (most notably of Glasgow Citizens Theatre), but which also sustains a fascinating argument through viewing Bridie in the light of medieval morality and mystery play traditions. Taking a line from one of Bridie's best known plays, Mr Bolfray, "To put it in simple words, we cannot conceive the universe except as a pattern of reciprocating opposites," Low shows how Bridie exemplifies a peculiarly Scottish concern with morality and demonstrates the ways in which this frame of mind led to his frequent departures from realist and naturalist conventions into stylized fantasy. Of course, as Low points out, this places Bridie's work firmly within the tradition of Burns' Holy Willie, Hogg's Justified Sinner and Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde.

Low is at his most perceptive when, with obvious enthusiasm, he discusses examples of Bridie's technique and assesses his importance within Scottish literature, although his references to the specifically dramatic tradition raise several interesting points which would appear to deserve further exploration. Low, however, tends to devote over much space to justifying the study of Bridie, through frequent and rather startling comparisons with "major" dramatists. Dr. Angelus, for example, is likened to Measure for Measure, The Tempest and The Orestia. Such parallels not only do Bridie something of a disservice; they also appear quite unnecessary since in his discussions of the individual plays and of Bridie's achievements in the theatre, Low presents a strong case for his subject's significance. Even without such inflated comparisons Bridie emerges from this comprehensive study as a dramatist of considerable importance, both in his own right and for Scotland.

GLENDA NORQUAY


The reputation of Charles Murray has certainly been in decline for the last few decades, but he still retains a small but faithful following, as we see from this volume which was published by Aberdeen University Press for the Charles Murray Memorial Trust. Born in 1864 he emigrated to South Africa in 1888 and spent the rest of his working life there but returned to his native Scotland upon retirement. After A Handful of Heather which was privately printed in only twelve copies Murray published Hamewith in 1900 which was frequently reprinted. This was followed by A Sough o' War in 1917 and In the
Country Places in 1920. Years after his death in 1941 a small collection of fugitive verse came out in 1969 also subsidized by the Murray Trust. Finally we have it all together in this volume—just over a hundred poems.

At first glance the poems seem a bit facile, a little too much of the familiar verse set in the Burnsian mould. But beneath there is a small lode of gold; Murray occasionally rose above the pose to write some real poetry which we see in the poet's refusal to be intimidated by life, or even death, in "The Lawin":

Then coont on the Lawin', the Lawin', the Lawin',
Keep mind o' the Lawin', forget na the score;
We pay what we're awin', we're awin', we're awin',
We pay a' we're awin' when Death's at the door.

We find some of the best of Murray's small body of work when, as Nan Shepherd suggests in her short introduction, the poet adopts the skeptical stance about religion for which Scots are famous. We see this ambivalence in "Yokin' the Mear":

The wife has her notions, she greets like a bairn
To think 'at we're sinners an' like to be lost;
The state o' my sowl is her daily concairn,
When a' I need's something to sat tIe my host. [cough

Perhaps Murray sums up the duality of the Scot best in "Gin I was God" in which we find God, deafened by all the harps and hymn-singing, looking down on how men had made a hell of his

...braw birlin' Earth,—a hale week's wark—
I'd cast my coat again, rowe up my sark,
An', or they'd time to lench a second ark,
Tak' back my word an' sen' anither spate,
Droon oot the hale hypothec, dicht the sklate,
Own my mistak', an', aince I'd cleared the brod,
Start a'thing ower again, gin I was God.

The lode is a small one, but it yields real gold.

ALEXANDER FRASER

Alan Bold has written a 14-page Introduction to this third edition of *Annals of the Five Senses*. In the work he sees all that MacDiarmid, who was at that time still C.M. Grieve, was to become. What Bold claims may be true in a limited sense, like the pre- *Leaves of Grass* work, there is little to prepare the reader for what was to come. I use the Whitman comparison deliberately because the poem "A Moment in Eternity" has a Whitmanesque quality to its all-embracing imagery:

I was a multitude of leaves
Receiving and reflecting light,
A burning bush
Blazing for ever unconsumed

This collection, which consists of six poems and six short prose pieces, was published by MacDiarmid at his own expense in 1923 when he was unable to find a publisher, was reissued by the Porpoise Press in 1930, but it is still one of the rarest of the poet's books in either edition, so this re-issue will be welcome to readers. The poems are to be found in Grieve's *Complete Poems* but not the prose. During World War I Grieve projected an autobiographical novel (in three volumes!) and claimed in 1916 that he had already written one volume of it, which seems to have disappeared. The prose we find in this collection does not suggest that MacDiarmid would have become the force in prose that he has become in poetry; perhaps he recognized this himself.

But even the best poem in *Annals*, "A Moment in Eternity," does nothing to prepare the reader for what was to follow two years later in *Sangschaw*. Gone is the English diction in that volume to be replaced by Scots. With *Sangschaw* we have the poet's splendid use of Scots in poems such as "The Bonnie Broukit Bairn," "The Watergaw," "I Heard Christ Sing," to name but the first three which appear in the collection. Here Grieve had become MacDiarmid; he continued to write in Scots for several years until he felt the need to return to English in order to write his "poetry of facts" as he called it in "Poetry and Science."

It is good to have widely available these poems and "psychological studies, essays, mosaics (call them what you will) which I have..."designed" so that we can form a better understanding of where MacDiarmid came from.

G.R.R.