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Scottish Poetry 1982-1984

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Among the most welcome appearances in the years 1982-3 were two volumes of collected poems from Edwin Morgan and Derick Thomson. These books, along with Robert Garioch's *Complete Poetical Works*, (not forgetting Iain Crichton Smith’s *Selected Poems, 1955-80* from the previous year), have provided us with a substantial body of the best work to appear in Scottish poetry from the 1940s to almost the present day. It is a fine achievement and the individual publishers are to be congratulated. In fact Macdonald’s produced three of them, and, indeed, Thomson was awarded the 1982 Literature Prize established by the Royal Bank of Scotland. All the same, I remember regretting at the time that there had not been still more publicity about these major retrospective collections in the general press and the broadcasting media. Specialist literary magazines serve a vital function, of course, but the real struggle for wider recognition, and the sales that go with it, has to be engaged in the market place at large. This is particularly vital in the case of Derick Thomson, one of our finest modern Gaelic poets, whose audience is already circumscribed by the attitudes of the various media towards his native language. In this context it is doubly sad to report the death in 1984 of George Campbell
Hay, who was one of the few poets in Scotland equally at home in all three of her languages.

With Poems of Thirty Years, Edwin Morgan has assembled a section of his recent work, previously uncollected, preceded by all his major publications, beginning with Dies Irae and The Vision of Cathkin Braes from 1952, along with generous selections from smaller volumes such as Emergent Poems (1967), Gnomes (1968), and Instamatic Poems (1972). At 440 pages the book would have been larger still, had the poet's many translations been included as well, although the first volume does contain verses and riddles from the Anglo-Saxon. The reader cannot help being struck by the versatility and the wit of Morgan's muse, from concrete poems to sound poems, to science fiction narratives, love lyrics, "Glasgow" poems and, finally, the "Instamatic" verses, which offer an imagined reportage from that world-wide battlefront—beautiful, trivial, tragic, appalling—which is the human bread in the diet of our daily newspapers:

Ellingham Suffolk January 1972

Below a water-mill at midnight
breaking the river Waveney into white
an intricate water-dance of forty-one swans
and one man leaning from the mill window
smokes and broods
ravished and nothing understood.

These Instamatic pieces are deceptively neutral in their distanced stance, but they catch the unforced watchfulness which characterizes the poet's relationship with the world in all his works, as well as his sense of irony, play, and beauty. Then again, there are moments which hint at the much stronger passions of rage or bitterness, but such feelings are usually guarded and carefully controlled.

The scope of this collection allows us to see more clearly how the poet's development has been towards a more neutral and open clarity of verbal statement and response. By comparison, The Vision of Cathkin Braes and The Cape of Good Hope offer a language often furiously dense with images, epithets and ideas, charged with echoes of Old English, or at other times with a Whitmanesque rhetorical confidence almost Biblical in its scope.
Yet in *The Cape of Good Hope* (Morgan intends us to recognize the meaning behind the mere place name), the opening section offers no less than a preview of many of the images and themes in the poetry still to come. I'm thinking in particular of how Morgan relates voyaging and the nature of the physical universe to man's engagement with the spirit, and of how he uses contemporary events and the gadgets and detritus of modern life as icons for his essentially optimistic vision of the material world as an exciting realm for the artist:

Lands end, seas are unloosed, O my leviathan
Libertinism, armoured sea-shoulderer, how you broke
Out over foam and boulder! Break ascetic man
Like seas to cringing crag-hang home. Mainward
my freedom looks, towards everything that is nature alone,
Looks from the rotting groyne and the drainwater-rusted
Concrete sea-wall and the plucked-up entanglements and the steps
Cut for safe cliff-walking, from the peeling danger-posts
Whipped by the wind and from the callow love-graffiti
Of the gullies whipped by the tide that sheets them inhumanly,
Out past the floating fish-crate slat and the creel fragment,
Out over the petrol-film, the oil-drift, the gull trap that
Sheets them humanly; . . .
Out from the landfall smell of law, the landmarks
Of wedding and fidelity, pylon, aerial, radar-ear, . . .
Out from the heart and the spirit and humanity and love
Over matter alone, and into the sea of matter
Moves out, till everything that is is nature.

The "drainwater-rusted concrete" and the "callow love-graffiti" will appear in many of the later poems, but never simply to be despised as symbols of decay, as so many modern poets have done, but welcomed rather as evidence of a human presence, or perhaps "energy that has vanished" and yet somehow been sustained by the transforming power of art, just as Joan Eardley's paintings vitalized the slums and the sagging facades of Glasgow. (See, for example, "To Joan Eardley"). "There is no other life, / and this is it" Morgan wrote in "London," and I value his quiet attachment to the modern world as it is. If, at
times, the frenetic surface of things leads him to more ephemeral responses, it is never too long before a humane balance is restored—the balance that is celebrated so finely in the collection's last poem, "Cinquevalli," which I take to be a personal elegy to the juggler as poet, or the poet as juggler who can show us the world "a spinning thing that spills, for a moment, no drop."

Morgan entered poetic maturity in the mid-sixties with The Second Life (1968), for here, like Lowell, he left the densities of his earlier style for a new clarity, achieved in his case through what looks like a redistribution of creative resources. It was as if concrete poetry, in giving him an outlet for The Cape's driving linguistic energy, released a sparer and a plainer diction, and a new intimacy of expression. Beyond the wit of poems such as "The Computer's First Christmas Card," and the cleverly controlled Ginsbergian rhetoric of "The Death of Marilyn Monroe," there is a most impressive sequence of nine love poems, beginning with "From a City Balcony," and ending with "The Welcome." This is the set that includes justly well-known pieces such as "One Cigarette" and "Strawberries," and it is significant that it is preceded by the title poem "The Second Life" and "The Unspoken," both of which seem to be more personally direct than Morgan had ever been at this point, both of which create a finely tender and delicate sense of vulnerability. Reading through these many Poems of Thirty Years, I enjoyed all over again Morgan's delight in creative "estrangement," and the play of language in cahoots with life and all its unstable and changing forces; but I came especially to value the quieter and more intimate side of his muse, and to note its reappearance in what I now take to be key sections of From Glasgow to Saturn and The New Divan. Once again The Cape of Good Hope can be said to have contained the seeds of this development, this time in its closing lines:

This is the love that materiality
Must learn, and this is the materiality
That love must seize to be saved from despair . . . .

George Campbell Hay knew about despair in both his life and his art, although his poems in English, Scots and Gaelic can celebrate the beauty of the world with such music and
compassionate delight that they transcend the pain he saw there too. His war experiences in North Africa were harsh ones, (so memorably expressed in "Bisearta"), and his long poem *Mochtar is Dughall* comes from the same source. Written in the years at the end of the war, it develops the affinity he felt with an Arab life and culture so different from his own, and yet so similarly gripped by its sense of the power of fate and the harsh commandments of religion. The poem was never fully completed but Hay agreed to the publication of the book by the Department of Celtic at the University of Glasgow, and we must thank Derek Thomson for its appearance, two years before the poet died at the age of 69. Hay's English translation has gaps in it, and it is offered in the form of prose, but still we gain insight into a strange vision of men from utterly different cultures brought together in the desert, and killed by a war which has arisen from sources so very far from their own interests—"Two complex, priceless worlds . . . blotted out forever." This is a powerful evocation of "Adam's Clan" in all our brilliance and savagery, pride and compassion, what we have in common and the blank misunderstandings between us, and it is to be hoped that the translation and the notes to this unusual poem can be further developed in some future edition of this remarkable poet's work.

The cool restraint of Derick Thomson's own verse must come to non Gaelic readers through his own translations, many done specially for the dual text edition of what amounts to his collected poems from 1940 to 1980. As with Edwin Morgan's book, *Creachadh na Clarsaich / Plundering the Harp*, offers a final section of new poems and an almost complete republication of five previous volumes. From such a perspective I think we can see a growing incisiveness in Thomson's lyric voice, as his free verse reaches the clarity and simplicity of the two collections which stand, for me, at the heart of his work. These are *Eadar Samradh is Foghar / Between Summer and Autumn* (1967), and an extraordinary linked sequence of short poems, *An Rathad Cian / The Far Road*, which first appeared in 1970.

Thomson's themes were there from the start, however, in early poems such as "In My House Between Two Countries," "Bayble," "Two Ghosts," "Delivery," and "The Well," where the melancholy hurt of love lyrics such as "Harvest Field," meets with a more objective exploration of Lewis, the poet's native island, in a world where his mother culture seems fated to fade
away on the periphery of things. In this respect Thomson’s concern with local history and his own sense of exile (he is Professor of Celtic at the University of Glasgow) speaks for the experience of many Gaels, but his characteristically gentle and elegaic utterance gives his work a wider relevance. In the end we come to feel that he is engaged with the lacrimae rerum of human existence in general, and Lewis becomes a metaphor for a greater sense of loss and exile:

The Point Road

The edge of the road with the sea washing it still, and memory of winter moons still guiding me, who would say that my feet would not pace each step precisely? Sea-flats Brae white with summer bog-cotton, and the Braighe plain clothed in incense of flowers, the burial-ground there still. Each twist and turn stamped on my memory, as though I had learnt no other road but that in twenty years, as though I had not filled my head full of fragments of learning, chock-a-bloc.

Straight the course of the Roman road at the start of our history, and now I can reach because of my studies, because of my age, because of a thousand obstacles that I do not always understand, the end of these ancient roads, long and obliterated, more easily than I can find the end of the seven miles on which are Sea-flats Brae and the Braighe, and the sea surging.

Such insights have produced Thomson’s most powerful poems, especially when his tendency to melancholy finds new strength in the drier wit and the plainer free verse statements of the collections from the 60s and 70s. Poems such as "The Herring Girls" and "When this Fine Snow is Falling" and of course "Coffins," speak of personal and community experience with a new sense of quiet authority, while "Steel?" and "Sheep" add a political edge, not without its own mordant humor:
And when you reach the Promised Land,
unless you are on your toes,
a bland Englishman will meet you,
and say to you that God, his uncle, has given him a title to
the land.

The Far Road—a sequence of 56 short poems—adopted a less
direct voice to return to Lewis, as the poet visualizes his island
in the guise of a lover, a crone, a landscape and even "a loom /
in a locked outhouse"—"a knowledgeable fellow from Glasgow /
came to identify you,... and went home and wrote a report on
you." The effect is not unlike a series of imagist poems,
sometimes ironic and sometimes almost surreal in effect. Each
piece on its own may seem to be left somehow unresolved, but
they gather force as the sequence progresses. Thomson reflects
on local figures and local history and all the pains "I suffered for
your sake, / the lies, the sentiment, / your beauty blinding me";
but, in the end, he comes to recognize that what Lewis now
means to him cannot be found simply by crossing the Minch:

Though I were to go back now,
though I were to step ashore
on the eyeing quay,
and walk the street of tongues,
there would be no return:
as well to tell the truth.

There are similar sets of linked imagistic lyrics in the 1977
collection, Saorsa agus an Iolaire / Freedom and the Eagle,
although the poet turns them to a more overtly political end in
symbolic sequences such as "The Eagle" and "The Plough." These
seem less effective, to me at least, because they are closer to the
abstractions of allegory, although the poetic images of "The Well"
do achieve the kind of translucent clarity that Neil Gunn sought
to convey in so many of his novels. Yet another sequence, called
"The Journey," takes a quite different tone, to make a blackly
humorous and urbane sketch of a sick, drunken, sentimental and
fatalistic Lewisman, sometime visitor to his own island after a
long working life in Glasgow. The wry and succinct voice of
this piece is shared by many of the new poems at the end of
Derick Thomson's collection, and the book closes with a sequence
called "The Ark of the Covenant" which reflects on what religion
has come to mean to those who live in the north of the Long
Island. Iain Crichton Smith has dealt with the same themes in an
elocution of anguish, but Thomson's muse, while it recognizes
the pains of Godliness, does not lose the dry humor which has
become so characteristic of his work in the last ten years. In
"Taking the Books" he recalls the boredom of prayer, "On our
knees, / elbows on the bench, / the morning's little eternity,"
while his grandfather addresses God from distinctly domestic
circumstances:

"You can hear every word we address to You
in this peace,
in Your sacred morning."
The eggs make a fearful din jumping in the pan.

The domestic circumstances in George MacBeth's Poems
from Oby are less religious, but perhaps more fully
reverent—with the daily observances of home and garden being
valued in their own right. This is a new departure for a poet
whose macabre humor has ranged so widely in previous
collections, and the Foreward recognizes his need to explore "a
new involvement with the countryside," grateful for the good
fortune of having found a fine old house "a piece of land to feel
secure on, and someone to live there with." The result is a
remarkable collection of poems, which raise the deceptively
simple themes of gratitude and recompense from the very start,
("This Evening Lisa" and "Lament for a Fledgling"). MacBeth's
tone is calm and autumnal, with a relaxed Georgian formality,
committed to the small dramas of family life ("Katrine's
 Kittens"), and to the caring tasks of repair and refurbishment as
a kind of guarantee of value and moral balance. In "Ripping up
Lino" the poet has to contend with dry rot and the prospect of
more damage from the creeping damp of winter—"Those tides,
those winter tides, that seem to break? / The deep hard surge of
anguish as it's thrown / Along the wormed earth." Yet it is here
that he will take his stand—"I need the pressure of a proper
cause":
A home. The needs of family and place.
A thing to tackle with a risk, and hope.
Quite gradual, but uphill, like a slope
That leans towards a level, for a base.

The unfashionable and unpretentious decency of these domestic poems accumulates to striking effect, but those "winter tides" are not without hints of a greater anguish in the world outside, and there are shafts of similarly disturbing intensity in other poems such as "Five Horse Chestnuts"; and in "Katrine's Kitten's," for example, when the runt of the group is finally saved (after five easier births), the closing line persists with an aural echo of the fate it has escaped, or may still succumb to: "Hours later, now, I say, / Six kittens are alive still, born today."

The humane spirit of many of these pieces is reminiscent of Douglas Dunn's lighter hearted poem "Ratatouille," in which the rituals of kitchen and garden are offered as the most truly civilized kind of worship, a reverence summed up in the collection's closing poem, "This Morning, Lisa": "I speak your name / Inside my head, the source and depth of all, / And, crossing through lost lines, I say my aim / Is to uphold my house. May it never fall."

Andrew Greig is committed to a more elliptical utterance, and although his love poem (or "out-of-love-poem") "Journal of the First Winter" speaks from domestic circumstances too, it makes an edgier and more modernist thing out of falling snow and a faltering relationship:

Living here on the frontier
something had to give
when we cannot.

An unwritten contract
is being shredded
into millions of pieces,

they are falling quietly
behind my eyes.

We sit here
in helpless peace
while the sky gives way.
Every line in this passage has wit and the weight of multiple meaning, without ever becoming joky or ponderous, and Greig's style has clarified and strengthened appreciably, I think, since *Men on Ice*. The same force can be found in "The Glove," and, indeed, in all the poems on similar themes which make up the second section of this new collection, *Surviving Passages*. The poet remembers an early rejection slip in "The Elephants," and vindicates a youthful poem with its extravagant images of elephants, by bringing them back again, more fully alive this time perhaps, to speak for a wilder delight in language and imagination:

Like shadows round a gloom they are gathering again, 
up-river, in fog, in the muzzle of the bridge. 
They waver, grow firm, solidify, condense out 
of unconscious air, their flanks cross-hatched 
and scarred by a thousand lifetimes. 
Lightning breaks across their backs 
like sticks across the knee.

This more exotic side to Greig's muse illuminates "In the Tool-Shed," and the fable-style of "It is the Height," confirming an unforced familiarity with Symbolism and modern European connections while keeping its author's own particular verve. The verve of "Portobello Beach" is infectious, as it reminisces about our teenage swaggering years, linking the exotic with the familiar in a tone—half tense, half jocular—which is reminiscent of Laforgue, perhaps, in its unease. I'm not sure that the sequence works uniformly well, but its generosity of insight and technical dexterity is a delight. There are fine poems in *Surviving Passages*; their enthusiasm and their quieter insights repay many returns.

Speaking *From the Domain of Arnheim*, Alastair Fowler's voice has less colloquial immediacy, and his cadences use long sentences with a more measured beat to them. Yet his language does make conscious use of different registers—from academic tones to something more wry and oblique—and in some poems the formal flow is completely broken up by successive sets of parenthetical insertions, ("Shadows of Shadows" and "A Story Perhaps"). The result conveys something of this poet's interesting multiplicity of mind, and his ear for how syntax can be made,
with its own kind of music, gradually to unravel a tangled line of thought. But this is a difficult aspect to show without extensive quotation. Certainly Fowler tips his hat to contemporary writing and critical theory, with references to Edwin Morgan and Chomsky, (via Marvell!), among many others, but the poems I find most affecting are those which take a more personal approach—however indirectly—such as "Rose," and especially "Our Poems of Age," which uses shorter more jagged sentences to explore the fate that time has in store for us all: "A child I used to know was playing once / On blaes paths in a summer garden / With a sky to last for afternoon years / Rounded blue. The flowers faded / And I was called indoors. But it ended well: / It was all right: he was home, my father."

The last poems in Robin Fulton's *Selected Poems* (1980) contained images of travel and flying and in this, his latest collection, the theme is taken further. These are poems of intense philosophical loneliness—as if the poet's fate is to be a traveller who observes while passing through, or above the rest of the world—"Is this being god-like, watching / autobiography at a safe height?" ("East Coast Revisited"). His world is curiously, touchingly empty, and despite the cosmopolitan implications of titles such as "Travelling," "Passing Verdun," "Waking in Jylland," his most characteristic moments are when he finds himself looking through windows—of a car or a plane—, or, on arrival, when he follows his shadow "... meekly to a room / and close four walls round me" ("Night-Travelling"). The poem "One Hour into a New Year" confirms this vision of the poet as a kind of exile, isolated in his car, thinking of animals dreaming in the zoo, or of the dreams or television images flickering in homes across continents, of those in hospital as "exiles planted beyond / their own horizon," and of his own estrangement from the houses where friends once lived. The book's title, *Fields of Focus*, is a photographic term, and Fulton's sense of past and present time and his own insubstantiality as he moves through the world, make a cinematic application more than fitting. He has made such territory uniquely his own, from an imaginative world of Scandanavian forests and lakes, and a delicate sense of the authenticity and even the danger of the isolated moments in our lives when we are between stations, so to speak. Thus the poet walks on snow, leaving footprints "anonymous already," thinking of "white paper that would never be written on"
"Walking on Snow"); or in "Edges" he has a sense of barely managing to balance on the edge of the moment "like the high-wire walker / looking up and letting his foot find the wire. / The next bold step is Spring." The tone is cool, perhaps cold, but honest and revealing—like the white light of Norway where the poet has lived for the past thirteen years.

The tone of Ron Butlin's imitations from the Chinese is more relaxed, taking us back to the familiar and graceful conventions of moon, grass, river and the seasons. With the eighth century poems in The Exquisite Instrument, Butlin achieves a pleasantly quiet utterance, but it has to be said that he is less memorable than Pound, since he has not tried for the compression and the tensions which the American managed to inject from early Imagism and his theories of the ideogram. Butlin's voice seems more at home, however, with the ironically self-conscious verses of Wen I-to, whw died in 1946. Perhaps this more modern and dynamic sensibility (even in the relatively timeless thesaurus of Chinese literature) helped to free the Scots poet from the ghost of Cathay—a formidable enough obstacle for anyone attempting English free verse in this field.

Aonghas MacNeacail recreates another kind of quiet clarity in his Gaelic poem Sireadh Bradain Sicir / Seeking Wise Salmoll, a dual text edition with drawings by Simon Fraser. It is not a long piece, but it makes a handsome book in large format, although I am afraid that its reproduction has not done justice to Fraser's work. The myths evoked in these drawings go beyond the exclusively Gaelic ones of the salmon of wisdom and the hazelnut of knowledge, but MacNeacail stays close to his roots in a symbolic exploration of creativity in terms of magical hunt, dance, and mysterious journey. Although his spare and spacious free verse is not traditional, I feel that much of its force derives from an inherited store of association and musical nuance. The full force of this cannot be conveyed in brief quotations, nor in English, a language whose traditions in natural imagery are much more diverse and diffuse, thus making the crystal simplicity of MacNeacail's Gaelic that much more difficult to reproduce.

Kathleen Jamie's first collection, Black Spiders, offers poems which are equally alert to the puzzle of language and the poet's responses to the world. "Women in Jerusalem" and "Abir" derive fairly clearly from a Middle Eastern journey, while the title poem and "Storm in Istanbul" take elements from the same
experience further to make a more intriguingly dislocated and private kind of poetry. This comes to full expression in the Ashbery-like wit of "The Barometer": "My furs are laid out and waiting. / The maids keep tutting. / I catch myself biting / dead skin from my lips. / I have played with my gloves all day. / I ought to just jump / and meet Hades half way." It will be interesting to see if she develops this most promising voice in the work to come.

Founded by Tessa Ransford in 1981, the "School of Poets" was conceived as a workshop and a meeting place for new writers in the Edinburgh area. Over the next two years they produced a series of six folding cards with about eight poems in each of them—a really good idea for first publication. Jenny Robertson, Colin Mackay, Sally Evans, Rosemary A. Hector, Elise McKay and Ann D. Gwilt have all been well served by these excellently produced little editions, and the last two names in particular show an admirably uncluttered clarity of observation and expression.

Alan Bold favors direct observation, too, and In This Corner contains a selection of poems culled from the output of twenty years, with almost half the book given to new or previously uncollected pieces, along with a large choice from his 1979 volume, This Fine Day. Bold responds to the world with the directness of a reporter who draws on the surface of things to find the story underneath. It is "underneath" rather than "within," I think, for he is not interested in subtlety or introspection, and his sometimes rugged use of strict form—often in rhymed quatrains—speaks for an equally direct response to the story of the poem, rather than to the poem in the telling. There are times, too, when the "story" seems curiously empty, or too predictable in its connotations, since it is offered with so little sense of an inner and continuing life being present in either the poet or the subject. I felt this particularly in a number of the pieces which deal with the old, the derelict or the desperate, in which it seems that Bold's aim has been to achieve a ballad-like narrative objectivity. Yet, unlike the ballads, the telling leaves too little unsaid. In "Lady in White" and "Figure in a Seascape" for example, or "Widow" and "Old Nell," it is as if the risk of sentimentality has been avoided at the cost of a kind of gruff confidence that what is seen and thought is absolutely all there is to say.
An old woman died near me. An old get
You would call her—slobbering and timid
In face of real power, yes. And yet
Arrogant with her proud tongue before
Those closest to her. Can you imagine?

The speaker in these lines from "Old Nell" is a persona, of course, but the tone is not so very different in the other poems of this kind, while the reportage of "Mission" and "Chance Encounter," about a suicide and a sex murder respectively, is all surface and hence, perhaps appropriately, its confidence and its easy conclusions seem blankly repellent. "Sexagenarian" seems much more successful to me precisely because it chooses to be denser in its images and its telling. Having said that, there are other poems in which the poet's determination to be open to the surface of things works much better. The grimness of "June 1967 at Buchenwald," for example, gains force by the simple rhetoric of statement and repetition, and, as in a Brecht play, we find ourselves unable to escape the writer's unwinking gaze on the subject and on the moral which he draws from it so directly. This same gaze is rarely directed towards the poet's own inner life, but when it is, as in "A Memory of Death," which deals with his father's drowning, the result is an outstanding poem with the kind of honesty which is painful in its confessional, documentary vulnerability. There are other poems of the inner life in this collection, "Markinch Hill," "Mound" and "In a Dark Wood," but they do not reach the revealing power of "A Memory of Death."

Edwin Morgan has not been the only poet to write about Glasgow, of course, and Noise and Smoky Breath, edited by Hamish Whyte with many excellent photographs, drawings, and paintings reproduced in color, is generous testimony to the fascination of Glasgow as a subject. The anthology covers work from the beginning of the century to the present day, and especially the years since the sixties—a span which more or less defines the resurgence of creative writing and confidence in the West. Needless to say, Morgan, McGrath, Mulrine, Leonard and Lochhead are all well represented, along with Maurice Lindsay, Alex Scott, Stewart Conn, Duncan Glen, Cliff Hanley, Carl MacDougall, Alan Spence and many others, not to forget Ian
Hamilton Finlay, whose *Glasgow Beasts, an a Burd* from 1961 must surely have been one of the earliest, and still one of the wittiest examples of street patois Zen. There is life and energy and great good humor in this anthology, although when so many poems on the same topic are collected together, there is a danger of the whole project beginning to look like a species of genre literature—an inverse kailyard of gangs and slums and jeely pieces, presided over by Morgan's famous "shilpit dog [fucking] grimly by the close." I think that the excellent art work in the book helps to re-set the balance in favor of a cheerful and unpretentious strength, without cliché, and color and beauty too, in the everyday urban world.

1983 was memorable for the long awaited publication, and the unexpected sales success (as a Penguin paperback) of William Laughton Lorimer's translation of the New Testament from Greek into Scots, and a Scots, moreover, which was intended to reflect the individual differences in style to be found in the various gospels. This outstanding feat of scholarship engaged the last ten years of Lorimer's life, and the work was completed and revised for publication by his son Robin. The vitality and the freshness of the book speaks for itself:

Luikin up an seein a fell thrang comin til him, he said tae Philip, "Whaur can we buy breid tae sair aa thir fowk?" It wis juist tae say him, like, at he said this, for he kent braw an weill what he wis tae dae.

"Twa hunder merk," Philip answert, "Wadna buy as muckle breid as wad gie them a tuilthfu the piece."

Ane o the disiples, Andro, Simon Peter's brither, said til him, "Ther's a laddock here wi five bear laifs an twa fishes: but what is that amang sae monie?"

"Gar the fowk lie doun," said Jesus.

Such strength and simplicity has been the hallmark of George Mackay Brown's poetry for many years, and *Voyages* is no exception. Many of its poems use the "voices" of people and things in a haiku-like way to accumulate a sense of place and timeless community. The effect is reminiscent of the success of *Fishermen with Ploughs*, although the "Seal Island Anthology" section is even more oblique. The Japanese/Chinese analogy is a stimulating one, especially in the way that Brown likes to create
that special sense of space, peace and silence, and in fact the sequence of seven "Letters to the River" is an indirect acknowledgment of a Chinese connection. Yet this poet has always known how to say more by saying less, and in many of these new poems he seems to have developed a still further appreciation of how to use understatement, uncertainty and the elliptical "quotation" of different voices to great effect:

Idle summer out (said the bee)  
There are no jars  
In a cupboard of the House of Winter  
For drifters and dandlers and dreamers.

Plunder the sun (said the butterfly)  
Smoulder. Save. Scheme.  
Mask-and-Glove take all, at last.  
(from "The Laird's Garden")

I enjoy these poems, not least because such images and voices strike a new note among familiar themes of sea, history and the primal grace of our daily round.

Finally, for 1983, there was Robin Fulton's edition of Robert Garioch's Complete Poetical Works, an expanded version of the 1977 Collected Poems, offering textual notes, further Belli translations and more verses from the poet's notebooks. It is a pity, however, that there are still some poems omitted from this "Complete" volume, and that the opportunity was not taken to offer a resetting of Garioch's work in some sort of chronological order. This new book does make a useful addition to the works of a subtle and craftsmanlike poet (more darkly serious, at times, than he is sometimes given credit for), but I suspect that those readers who already have the 1977 collection will remain content with it.

In the critical essay which precedes his long poem These Words: Weddings and After, William McIlvanney considers the state of modern poetry and proposes a "socialist aesthetic" for it, so that its "contribution to our understanding of ourselves" might be "accessible to many more people than at present." He believes that too many contemporary writers have embraced difficulty for its own sake, as if poetry were isolated from wider contexts and merely a matter of "words in self-containment," to be considered
as "a self-governing body" by elitist groups in the "hothouse culture of universities or the oxygen-tent conditions of a poetry reading." Given these terms it is difficult not to agree with him, but I think that the issue may be still more complex than he allows. For a start he casts T.S. Eliot's *The Sacred Wood* in the adversarial role as representative of the academic and elitist values he distrusts. But surely the intervening years have seen a structuralist revolution in modern criticism which has, quite rightly, restored the importance of McIlvanney's wider contexts to our attention? In their different ways, Structuralist, Marxist, Freudian and Feminist critics have shown us the true politics which lie (in both sense of the word) behind those very self-deluding claims that poetry is poetry "and not another thing"? I completely agree with McIlvanney when he says that the difficulties of poetry should always be "resolvable within the work itself," but then the really hard question has always been to do with the degree of that difficulty, and each of us will have different breaking points.

The debate is an important one, however, and William McIlvanney raises telling points in his pursuit of it. Some of them come home to roost in his own poem, which uses the conventional progress of a bourgeois wedding, from church to reception to bed, as an image of the difficulties of finding truth behind all our sad and silly social disguises—at the point where "the institution ends and humanity begins." It is a good theme, and there are memorable scenes, as when a passing ragged boy on a cold night shouts sudden abuse through the door of a cosy cocktail bar—"Just for a moment the weather broken / And a big night pelting silence on their hovel." As a novelist McIlvanney has a sure eye for such moments, and indeed his intention was to "appropriate for poetry some of the techniques of the novel and the cinema." But here, I think, some of his linguistic choices let him down, for his deliberately low-key and loping metrical form makes great use of intermittent couplets and a lightly satirical tone. But the end result of such a technical choice is that every now and then he seems to be holding the aunts and uncles, and the silly ceremonies of the wedding day, at just the kind of fastidious arm's length that we would expect him to deplore. However pleasingly "undifficult" it might be, you cannot use such a language without trailing along some of its associated values and attitudes, too:
Auntie Margo is in prison
Looking out through chintzy bars.
It's a big one—cells are endless,
Detached house and restaurants,
Holidays in foreign places,
Deadly guests and fancy cars . . .

Such a tone is foreign to "insights, illuminations . . . unexpected recognitions, understood griefs" and this aspect of the poem seems to me to remain unhappily separate from a much finer closing section, in which the young couple do come to deeper truths about "The fierce dreams that we are, / See in each other's eyes, but make no sound, / Where our own deep Atlantises lie drowned."

The matter has something to do with the vitality of poetic forms and the vitality of language, which must be made anew, even when it is inherited. It is notable that the passages of McIlvanney's poem which are in Glasgow speech are among the most satisfyingly alive lines in the whole piece, and this is exactly the poetic territory that Tom Leonard has made so challengingly his own in his Intimate Voices. This book offers a much needed chance to see a wide selection of Leonard's work in one volume. Many of its poems take direct issue with the themes raised by McIlvanney, and they show an even more acute awareness of the hidden chains to be found within our structures of "culture" and "education." This is the specific subject of a number of Leonard's street patois poems, but in the end the cultural politics are equally vivid, simply implied by the voice itself—especially in the context of a "poetry" book of printed words. "right inuff / ma language is disgraceful / ma maw tellt mi / ma teacher tellt mi . . . even thi introduction tay thi Scottish National Dictionary tellt mi / ach well / all livin language is sacred / fuck thi lohta thim."

Leonard reflects on culture and living language in two essays included in Intimate Voices. In "The Proof of the Mince Pie" he tackles some of the issues raised by McIlvanney in a direct and humorous examination of his own uneasy role as a writer in a system which seems to him to promote high culture as a commodity, or as a membership ticket for the educated class. So he likes to switch categories and upset expectations:
sittn guzz-
lin a can
a newcastle
brown wotchn
scotsport hump-
min thi furst
movement a
nielsen's thurd
symphony—happy
iz larry yi
might say;                   ("Unrelated Incidents, 4")

There is violence in these pieces, too, and sometimes a sense of barely stifled rage beneath the surface, as if to ward off the danger of licensed social comedy and the complacencies of "Parliamo Glesca."

In the second essay, Leonard cites his admiration for William Carlos Williams and this offers a useful clue to an aspect of his work, often overlooked, I think, in the debate about his contentious use of street Glasgow speech and "bad language." This is to say that he values the dynamics of actual expression, so that his phonetic spelling and line breaks are as intent on accuracy in the timing and the emphasis of recounted experience, as they are in the more obvious matters of class awareness and a non-"literary" vocabulary. Keen to be true to the authentic moment, and so very wary of what he takes to be any kind of linguistic, stylistic or imaginative pretension, Leonard seeks to catch the most expressively limited or fleetingly inconclusive moments in his poems. In this respect he approaches the transparency of some of Williams's minimalist pieces, with the irony of a writer aware that language is only an imperfect kind of code in the first place:

My eyes are sidling round the room.
The clock is a clock. Full stop.
The chair is a chair.
Full stop.
Everything's heavy—the sunlight's far too warm.
("Psychiatrist")
If the poem "hangup" jokes brilliantly about minimalism, ("mini what / minimalism / aw minimalism / minimalism aye / aye right / aye right inuff / aye right inuff definitely / aye bit / naw bit / a stull think yi huvty say sumhm"), we should not think that the poem really does say nothing. The meaning is there in how the rhythms, repetitions and hesitations act out a process, and on the new and unexpectedly searching critical contexts which are implied simply by the presence of the voice itself. Leonard's interest in the surreal and avant garde aspects of performance poetry and sound poetry, grows from the same insight that words alone may not be enough.

The poem "Fathers and Sons" speaks for some of the tensions which fuel Leonard's creative work, ("I remember being ashamed of my father / when he whispered the words out loud / reading the newspaper ..."); and those tensions in society at large were splendidly revealed when Intimate Voices shared the Royal Bank of Scotland prize for 1983, and was almost immediately withdrawn from school libraries in Central Scotland. On the other hand Glasgow District Libraries have published a little collection called Aye nowyir talkin which takes its inspiration from the mouths of youngsters growing up in Glasgow. John Swan has recreated these "fragments of talk" and imposed a loosely poetic structure on them. The result implies a great deal about the energy and the sadness of urban experience, and, more importantly, it confirms the authenticity of the spoken word and the expressive rights and skills of people who are never usually given access to the printed page. In this respect these pieces fit Tom Leonard's territory, but they also serve to show more clearly the true value of his controlling sense of irony and rage.

Neither of these qualities are central to the work of Duncan Glen, but he shares Leonard's distrust of creative pretension and, with McIlvanney, he would oppose any concept of poetry as a "sacred wood," only to be entered by those with a "rare sensibility." The influence of William Carlos Williams is found again in the layout of Glen's verses, and he has made good poems out of his determination to achieve a kind of authenticity from a succession of quiet and unstressed statements. I think that Williams is at his best in this mode when he uses it to draw attention to the primacy of the ordinary world in its most humble aspects—the world shines through his transparency. In the Small Hours, however, strips everything to the minimum to
offer us Duncan Glen alone with himself and his blank paper in the course of a long night's meditation on the nature of being. Lacking the world, and with a deliberately undynamic technique, Glen is equally unwilling to settle for the dramas of challenging statement or inner struggle, and so the result seems to me to be crucially honest, but finally just too blankly revealing of how difficult it is to fill empty paper (interestingly) by spinning words out of yourself. *Situations*, on the other hand, well produced and illustrated by Derek Carruthers, does better with a series of eighteen poems which reflect on "Innocence," "Experience" and "Maturity." These haiku-like pieces take only seven lines each to reflect on the world in the simplest manner, although not without treading a difficult line between pathos and bathos.

Robin Bell's book-length sequence *Strathinver* returns us more forcefully to the world of community and to the changes in social history which he knew in his home village of Aberuthven in the years from the end of the second war to the coronation. To recreate this "forgotten" era and all the characters of the village, he has invented a place called "Strathinver," and a finely achieved narrative verse form of six-line stanzas, rhyming a b c c b a. These sixty portraits are drawn from all stations of small town life, from "Townfoot" to "Townhead," with the churches and schools between them, as well as the "County Set" and the farms all around. The method is not unlike Edgar Lee Masters's portrait of Spoon River via the gravestones of the community and the stories that lie behind each dead character. Of course Bell's tone has little in common with Master's humorously morbid vein, but the balanced grace and precision of his observation is effectively elegaic all the same. This also has to do with the documentary distance of the poet's eye and the even pace of a largely iambic measure.

The result is excellently detailed, and we gain a real sense of the place and its people and past history. Yet the soberly balanced verses and the poet's rather detached point of view start to add something else, too. As the portraits accumulate, the community comes to seem oddly fenced-off in its bourgeois respectability, or by its decent sense of Scottish privacy, so that there is an air of still life—*nature morte*—about it, even as the stories unfold, and despite their occasional interaction. It is as if the community, or Bell's vision of it, were an entirely static
thing, no more than the sum, indeed, of an album of individual portraits. The result is a curiously unpolitical vision of human life, or, perhaps, a very indirect recognition of what is lost when such a vision prevails. Bell may well intend such a conclusion of course, although it is not developed; or it might be the result of his looking backward, to a time already gone. It is an interesting critical question. Are there subtle ironies, for example, at the very end, when a celebration bonfire is raised for a retired farmer and all the hope which we were told was ours in a "New Elizabethan" age?

Blackout curtains, gasmasks went into it,
anything old and dark that could be lit.
It blazed for John, for Tensing and the Queen
and to drive out the last shadows of the war.

I think there are; and on the larger issue of whether this place was meant to seem so oddly frozen from the start, my judgment would be that just as McIlvanney's chosen style began to control the meaning of his poem, so Bell's measure, and his decision to speak through a collection of individual portraits, has added a different isolation and a more critical poignancy to "Strathinver."

Brian McCabe is equally committed to technique and formal structure, and he opens his third collection, Spring's Witch, with six fine sonnets in which the clarity of his vision and the lightness of his touch are both very pleasingly evident. He writes from a traditional first-person-poet point of view, but there is no confessional turmoil here, and little need for a more stressed expressive language, even though his themes include a sense of loss or the hopes and quarrels in a love affair, as in "The Break-Up," and "Rain (I)." McCabe has an unsentimental but loving eye for whatever is alive, as in "The Blind," for example, or in the "Keekaboo" poems, which use an infant and its parent as metaphor for the spirit of creative play at loose in a world of hunger and death and fear—we take the point fully, and yet the poem never loses its gentle wit and delight. Other pieces have a wry sense of the poet's speaking presence and of what language does when you start to recreate the world through it, as in these lines addressed to the rain:
It's our memory making ragged holes
in the street into living mirrors,
clotheslines into necklaces etcetera.

... 

To resume, it touches us in places
of the very keenest recall—
eg. the neck and ears.

(from "Rain (2)"

The depth of insight behind such a quiet and unpretentiously open sensibility should not be underestimated, and we meet these qualities again in Rob King's short collection of ten poems, *Keeping Track*. King uses a free verse pared to the bone, with brief sentences, short lines and the simplest of descriptive statements. Yet the effect is neither curt nor "minimal," and its simplicity is deceptive, for these few words chart the movements of the poet's mind with precision, and they evoke his sense of thoughtful wonder and humane irony at the variousness of the world, the beauty of its odd contingencies, and the puzzle of meaning. This does not work well in his short pieces, which remain slight, for Rob King seems to operate best over a slightly longer, more narrative form to convey a gradually unfolding line of thought, and the unexpected conclusions which are central to his imagination ("Tunnel," "Waiting for Lobsters," "Black Overcoat," and "Luxury of Grass"). In fact the logic of the longer poems, and even the music of their stripped language, is difficult to convey in quoted extracts, but the opening lines from "Fisherman" will convey something of this poet's fine and characteristic tone:

You are walking at the river edge.
Black roads. White patches of frost.
Brown fields reflect the sky.

Ice on the river.
A young man on the bank is fishing.
The line loose winds through the water.
On the far side a figure
not moving.
The paradoxical effect of King's laconic style is to draw the reader into the poem, and into a new sense of the simple power of plain language. With the same concern for succinct force Aonghas MacNeacail's poem *An Cathadh Mor / The Great Snow Battle* adopts a more overtly symbolic language to convey its author's feeling for existence as a dynamic process, simultaneously intimate, local and universal. In its imagery this is a more various and concrete poem than *Seeking Wise Salmon*, and for this reason, in my opinion, a more successful one. In following the rise and fall of a blizzard, the pace of the poem, its layout on the page and the density of its images rise and fall as well, fading away to a memorably quiet conclusion:

```
we awaking

gorse under white coat
one yellow blossom blinking

tracks of feet from a clachan
light neat
like the feet of a goddess

wind making bare
sun making bare

peace

shadow of a daisy
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The overall effect is further enhanced by the excellent drawings of Simon Fraser, which give a Chinese eloquence to the large pages and to how the poet's images are set out on a snowscape of white paper.

I also like the Chinese-style poems in Iain Bamforth's *The Modern Copernicus*, and especially the striking images to be found in "Letters from the T'ang"—"Lacquer dust and powdered bone / And red-streaked cinnabar." Here I think he finds a concrete focus and a linguistic restraint which is admirable, and found again in the opening lines of the sequence "Walking Back to China":
Here, at the frontier, there are leaves
And brittle frosts, and the long days.
So do not ask what time of year
The birds shower south from the Steppes
To a slow death, and these dog days.

In some of the other poems, however, the density of images within the insistent syntax of long adjective-laden sentences, becomes so clotted that the poet’s fascination with the driving flow of words overpowers both sense and context: "To celebrate his marriage with the air / And mock a virgin’s prayer become voluptuary / Or floridly, a surfeited nostalgia" ("The Idiot"). This seems simultaneously precious and grandiose to me, but the effect works much better in "The Art of Fugue," perhaps because we also begin to hear a genuinely distinctive voice emerging from the passage of the text.

By comparison, Pete Faulkner's first small collection *Reptile Fun*, offers a much more clipped utterance in a less demanding linguistic mode. The art in these photographic images is that they turn out to be actual but strangely surreal in effect. Faulkner's poems are often related to travel, or to the eye of the traveller as he passes by. He tells his different stories in fifteen brief snapshots, and in the spaces between their lines:

**Gringos**

Young boys by the roadside
hold up dead iguanas.
Butter candles flick
on a cracked plaster madonna.

Calling in for a beer
at the Hardrock Cafe
I realise
I’ve still got her St Christopher medal
in my pocket.

Matthew McDiarmid’s poems are equally dream-like at times, but his voice belongs to a much more literary, less cinematic, tradition. In fact *Not in My Own Land* offers an
extendedly musical sequence of poems drawn from a song tradition of timeless places—flowers, trees and seasons, and the continuing presence of a lover like a muse, or the muse like a lover. There are echoes or reflections from the troubadors to the Cavalier poets, from De La Mare to Edwin Muir, and yet the cumulative result is genuinely McDiarmid's own. In its gently emblematic way, this collection is a poem sequence on the recurring themes of identity, love, beauty and passing time, as if the poet were threading his way through a formal herb garden of such questions. Perhaps the danger of this approach over such a long span is that the prevailing drive to be mellifluous at all times begins to subsume the strength of individual pieces. There are beautiful poems in this collection, nevertheless, controlled by a musical ear quite unfashionable, these days, in its intensity.

The sonnet, too, can be a musical and intimate form, but Edwin Morgan's new collection is notably outward-looking, as indeed, the title suggests by calling itself *Sonnets from Scotland*. These 51 poems take us on a curious historical tour of the country from its geological origins—"Slate," "Carboniferous," "Post-Glacial," through some future nuclear destruction, to the post-holocaust society of "The Solway Canal" and "A Golden Age," which are recalled as if they, too, came from some far distant past: "That must have been a time of happiness. / The air was mild, the Campsie Fells had vines. / Dirigible parties left soft sky-signs / and bursts of fading music." Readers who already know Morgan's science fiction poems, and the haunting spirit behind the prose works of J.G. Ballard and Keith Roberts, will respond to the effective defamiliarization of Scotland which is offered here: "The jungle of Gleneagles was a long / shadow on our right as we travelled down. / Boars rummaged through the ballroom's toppled crown . . . and west winds blew, past shattered bricks and tiles, / millions of seeds through ruined Holyrood" ("The Age of Heracleum"). The process is an important one, for it is by these means that the artist makes and remakes his reality, and the weel-kent icons and images of Scotland are greatly in need of such refreshment. This is the true value of the unexpected collisions and encounters which Morgan has unearthed for these poems, most especially, perhaps, from our country's more literal history, as when it received such unexpected guests as Edgar Allen Poe, Thomas de Quincey and Gerard Manley Hopkins, all of whom have sonnets dedicated to
them. In fact the sheerly eclectic range of this collection is celebrated all over again in Hamish Whyte's index to it—an entertaining read in itself—in which the Grampian Mountains rub shoulders with references to *The Good Soldier Schveik*, Greenland and Gurdjieff. Thus the sonnet "North Africa" recognizes the oddness of a fate which took the Second World War to put Sorley MacLean, Hamish Henderson, George Campbell Hay, Robert Garioch, G.S. Fraser and Morgan himself, all in the same theater of operations; while a poem like "Theory of the Earth" bring the title of the first book to propose the igneous origin of the earth together with a famous line from Burns's "A Red, Red Rose": "James Hutton that true son of fire who said / to Burns 'Aye, man, the rocks melt wi' the sun' / was sure the age of reason's time was done: / what but imagination could have read / granite boulders back to their molten roots?"

It is Morgan's imaginative capacity for seeing his country anew that provides us with such liberating connections in poem after poem. Some of them strain too much under the burden of their various and disparate information, but others achieve a fine musicality, and a sense, too, of a more deeply private context, as in "After a Death," "The Mirror," or "Silva Caledonia":

The darkness deepens, and the woods are long.  
We shall never see any stars. We thought  
we heard a horn a while back, faintly brought  
through barks and howls, the nearest to a song  
you ever heard in these grey dripping glens.

The "grey dripping glens" have been Iain Crichton Smith's home for many poems about Lewis and his own complex relationship to that island, but the best pieces in his new collection take exile for their theme, and exile as a sense of separation beyond the merely geographical. Of course the historical roots are plain enough in such poems as "When They Reached the New Land," or in "The New Houses," which has an old man in Canada, holding on to simple facts as if they were a lifebelt in the sea of his 87 years: "In this garden my wife planted a rose / which I water, daily, with a green snaky hosepipe. / Two years she's dead and heaven is possible. / I believe in God and in his foreign mansions. / Sometimes I dream of Lewis in the night ..." The poem "No Return" explores the
poet’s own sense of separation from an island where he has not lived for many years, much changed from the place he remembers; but other pieces in *The Exiles* offer a still odder sense of detachment and an almost surreal dislocation from the familiar world. In "Australia," these images stem from the strangeness of the country itself where "the trees are deathly white," like the dingos "drifting in white, the far exiles / buried in the heart of brown deserts. / It is a strange language they speak / not Australian not Gaelic . . ." Then again, poems such as "Returning Exile" and "When My Poetry Making Has Failed," find this unease in the poetic imagination itself, a location closer to home, perhaps, but austere and remote enough in its own way: "But nothing saves me except the water that runs / harmlessly and without herald / from some place that I have been and cannot remember / where the words stand around like rocks." For me the most moving and exciting poems in the collection stem from this voice, made doubly effective by Crichton Smith’s musical cadences and his use of images which are lucidly familiar and yet shifted into stranger new contexts: "Always in the same way the poets die / when the girls on horses irretrievably / cross the horizons that are slowly closed, / when the ravens no longer dip their pens in ink / and the winds bring no treasures from the west / in stubbly autumn . . ." ("Always"). In similar vein, "Speech for Prospero" tells of the left-behind island that may haunt all creative imagination, while "Speech for a Woman" explores a similar sense of loss and exile and surreal desolation in the heart of a mother:

One night
I saw my children
climbing the stairs in the frost
which had carved an unintelligible language
on the single window.

"Where have you been?" I asked
for they were whistling
and talking about the magic games they had played
in green ferocious shirts.
"Everywhere," they said.
There may even be echoes of "The Wife of Usher's Well" in this piece about children who have left the home, brought curiously and powerfully up to date by the poem's references to their "sweaty socks . . . embroidered jerseys . . . the records with the satanic drums." Islands and old women have been recurrent figures in Smith's work from the start, and such poems as these give a new and wider life to familiar themes, without losing what makes them essentially Scottish.

Liz Lochhead's recent collection *The Grimm Sisters*, made similarly fresh use of folk tales and *marchen*, and she has always had a penchant for giving a sudden and electrifying jolt of life to the dead flesh of commonplace sayings and cliches. Her new book, *Dreaming Frankenstein*, takes this critical metaphor a step further by including a set of poems which reflect on the popular vision of that movie monster, considered as a masculine being and set twitching by a series of sexual puns. The same use of puns characterizes "What the Pool Said . . ." and "Page from a Biography," but for all the energy and the bravura flourish of these pieces, I'm not sure that it always does bring its subjects truly alive. The poet produced a more seriously telling exploration of the Frankenstein theme, for example, in her play about Mary Shelley, called *Blood and Ice*. Having said that, however, I think that some of Liz Lochhead's best work is to be found in the new poems of the *Dreaming Frankenstein* book, which includes the considerable bonus of her three earlier collections as well—namely, *The Grimm Sisters, Islands*, and her first volume, *Memo for Spring*. It is a fine achievement from a deservedly popular young poet whose sense of humor should not lead us to underestimate her more fiercely disturbing insights.

The particular strength of Lochhead's new poems lies in her edgy and alert eye for personal relationships, and for the minor strains behind party-giving, meeting strangers, or travelling in an unfamiliar land. Many of the pieces dealing with such themes seem to have come from an Arts Council exchange visit to Canada and America, and the scheme could be vindicated by this result alone. Descriptive pieces such as "Ontario October Going West," "Near Qu'Appelle" and "In Alberta" have learned a laconic force from the best of North American writing, while as a poem of social observation and self-unease, "Fourth of July Fireworks" speaks with an electric sense of the immediacy of the present moment as something nervous and changing, even dangerous:
Ice melts in the Martini tray. Midges drown. The whole night edges to a thunderstorm. Maybugs big as golfballs thud as screen doors bounce them. But, after our blood, divebombing mosquitoes dodge the mesh and slide in down their own thin whine. They bite despite insecticide.

All at sea, white and dayglo orange fins spinnaker the bay. Music blares . . .

Out on the lawn the sprinklers, oddly luminous, sputter like Roman Candles, ominous as the sudden snap of queer clear light from one weird streak unzips the dark. The German Shepherd guard dogs bark. A wind gets up.

Technically, such lines in this and a number of other poems are as fine as anything Lochhead has done. The observed details and her handling of rhymes and linking images is truly first class, as for example in how the nervous menace of those insects, fins and guard dogs is played against the literal and colloquial meaning of a wind getting up / getting the wind up—here the jokiness is entirely and tensely under control. The same edge between flip humor, honesty, and a kind of desperation, characterizes a number of poems about personal meetings and partings, such as "Ships," "Hafiz on Danforth Avenue," "Rainbow" and "A Giveaway," while "Noises in the Dark" continues the travelling theme to inject a new note of menace in a shabby hotel in the shadow of a minaret: "Human or bird or animal? What was it cried? / The dark smear across the wall still unidentified." "The Dollhouse Convention" carries this sense of threat into a more social and gender conscious arena, while the detailed images of "Mirror's Song" are eloquent with rage and pain about the plight of femininity as seen or expressed through the detritus of cluttered handbags and empty lives: "the Valium and initialled hankies, / the love pulps and the Librium, / the permanents and panstick and / Coty and Tangee Indelible, /
The words of this song say "Smash me," for the mirror is "the cave she will claw out of— / a woman giving birth to herself."

Valerie Gillies rarely rises to rage like this, for her voice in *Bed of Stone* has a different note in poems of steady description and compassionate observation, often of places or animals, as in "South Indian Village," or "A Fish." This approach can sometimes lead to a rather low-key and occasional utterance ("The Spade"), but it works best, I think, when the poet makes a closer identification with thing or place, and the calm identities and metaphors which she offers begin to merge or look more problematical. Thus in "Bantam," for example, the ragged urchin and the fiery little cockerel he is likened to, are so equally present to us that it is difficult to say in the end whether the poem is about a bird or a boy; while "The Mask" makes a marvelously eerie moment out of her daughter wearing a fox mask "when all she does / turns to fox" and "she covers her face / to open her heart." "Harrowing" rises to a more acute sense of the pain inflicted by men on dumb beasts, on each other, and even on the land in our struggle for existence, while "The Same Hour: Edinburgh and Washington" juxtaposes burning gorse on a Scottish hillside with the assassination attempt on President Reagan—"This world is no bigger than an oak-apple"—until the tensions are usefully transferred from one to the other, both ways, and the poem gains an extra energy. There is a gentler compassion in "Ending," about a dying grandfather, and in "Bomber," which tackles an incident of terrorist violence in London; but there is a more distant perspective in these poems, too, the unsentimental one which recognizes that some experiences can be observed, but rarely lived. The cool control of Valerie Gillies's style comes from this recognition, I think, and it is her strength as a writer, even on the rare occasions when that reserve is shaken, as it is in a quiet poem like "It is January."

Christopher Rush is less cool and his linguistic stance is more often self-consciously poetic: "Mortality's requiem arose / and lingered on into the night / till the taste of generations coated my tongue / and the dead's foundered galaxies / filled my head like the foam of stars" ("September Song"). There were times when I felt that these poems were tending to tell me things, rather than showing or enacting them, and this, I think, has
something to do with a kind of adjectival and perceptual insistence, inseparable, as yet, from Christopher Rush's genuine feeling for heightened language. The poems and translations in Scots make a marked contrast to the enthusiasm of this diction, but sometimes they seem to labor, and for me at least, they flow less successfully. Nevertheless, *A Ressurection of a Kind* is a substantial collection, and there is much craft to admire in it. The title sequence deals with the poet's roots in family and place, while the implications of such a focus are continued in a section of elegies, and these two parts contain some of the book's best work.

Tessa Ransford's concern for craft is established from the start of *Fools and Angels* with a skillful sonnet sequence, whose poems use the act of writing itself as a frequent paradigm for the hopes, fears, insecurities and pains which are so much part of her vision of life, art and love—sharp touchstones for her sense of the authentic. This works well and we can enjoy the aureate bravura of "Birthday Wish" and the deceptively effortless flow of "Graced with Light." Later poems such as "Loaves and Fishes" restate her gentle insistence on sensibility and sensitivity as a moral as well as a creative imperative, and I respect this stance. On the other hand, there is a danger that it produces too many poems about poems, or tends to lecture the reader, even in otherwise balanced works such as "Future Now" and "Indian Women at Windermere." Set against her concern for gentle creative fidelity, Tessa Ransford's imagery can be startlingly bloody, with something of Crashaw's masochistic taste for the mingling of pain and passion: "Ravine," "The Ecstasy of St. Teresa," "Life Sickle." Indeed, there is a distinctly Metaphysical flavor to the tropes in "Tournament" and "Mind's Desire," except that when they are offered without the self-conscious wit and swagger of, say, John Donne, these conflated images of love and pain seem oddly disturbing, and not quite in control—an effect rather difficult to fathom, without deeper and more extended analysis.

The quick irreverence of Frank Kuppner's four-line poems is entirely deceptive, for through the familiar medium of "Chinese" verses (as translated into English in the West) they offer a hilarious and fascinating excursion into the nature of imagery, imagination and language itself. *A Bad Day for the Sung Dynasty* is prompted by the figures, landscapes and
puzzling juxtapositions to be found in Chinese paintings, and out of these unspoken stories Kuppner has constructed 501 four-line verses—elegiac, sinister, tender, comic and vulgar—which accumulate to make a whole volume of variations on recurring themes. The subtle conventions of such verse, from Li Po to Pound's *Cathay*, are treated with insight and respect, but they are wonderfully sent up as well, and no one with an affection for the form could fail to enjoy this most original act of homage, imitation, parody and critical deconstruction from within:

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Suddenly the dog stands erect in the garden;
Bamboo sprouts tall and elegant behind him;
Who is that person being hacked to pieces on an upper balcony?
This could be a bad day for the Sung Dynasty.

The interaction between what is written and what the mind "sees" is the supreme fiction which Wallace Stevens took to lie behind all art, and poem after poem offers an authentic sense of surprise and delight, sometimes humorous, often quietly touching, and all reflecting on the nature of literary response itself, that is, on what is said, what is left unsaid, and what is unsayable.

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Every day the bridge gets a little longer
And still the people crossing it do not notice it;
The old believe it is merely advancing age;
The young believe all sorts of different things.

One could go on quoting, for although this is a light-hearted book, it is long enough and substantial enough to repay browsing and repeated reading. My copy has fallen to pieces. I'm left with some interesting thoughts on how often a "Chinese" style, or echoes of it, has cropped up to good effect in recent books by Scottish poets as diverse as Frank Kuppner, Ron Butlin, Rob King, Iain Crichton Smith, Iain Bamforth and George Mackay Brown.

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*Stirling University*
Scottish Poetry

1982


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