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ALEXANDER SCOTT

Scottish Poetry in 1968

In quantity, 1968 was one of the most productive years in Scottish poetry since the end of the war-time boom. In quality, too, there was more than a modicum to admire.

A brilliant beginning was made in January with The Second Life by Edwin Morgan (Edinburgh University Press). Although Mr. Morgan (b. 1920) published his earliest pamphlet of original verse as long ago as 1952—the year which also saw his first major translation, Beowulf—and although his reputation has grown steadily, and ever more swiftly, over the years, the present volume is his first full-length collection. It was to be expected, then, that the book would reveal the work of an accomplished craftsman rather than an apprentice, and for once expectation was not disappointed but surpassed. The Second Life is the most individual opening essay in poetry since George Bruce's Sea Talk in 1944, and the award to Mr. Morgan of the Cholmondeley Poetry Prize for 1968 by the Society of Authors was a well-deserved tribute to a distinctive talent. Another was a publication award from the Scottish Arts Council.

In theme and subject-matter the book ranges widely, and inevitably some poems are less successful than others. The elegies on such symbols of modern myth as Marilyn Monroe and Edith Piaf are either oratorical or over-sentimental or both—but the Hemingway elegy, 'The Old Man and the Sea,' with its dominant image of the cold sea-mist crawling across America and chilling the whole landscape, creates an almost numbingly-effective evocation of the despair which drove the great writer to his death, 'the smoke in the sea-mist'; the vignettes seen from the Aberdeen train or glimpsed through the fog swirling round the Forth road-bridge are too slight to make much impact—but the presentation of 'The White Rhinoceros' combines the grotesque with the pitiful, the pictorial with the emotive, in a highly original manner, and 'The Third Day of the Wolf' vividly expresses the escaped animal's terror by means of the headlong rhythms of the chase; the poem to Ian Hamilton Finlay assumes a knowledge of his personal life which the reader is unlikely to possess—but 'To Hugh Macdiarmid' is at once a brilliant parody of that writer's own
later “scientific” verse in English, an incisive summation of his past achievements, and an illuminating sketch of his present situation.

Central to the book, in position as in effect, are the poems on Glasgow; and Mr. Morgan, on the strength of the best of these, may well come to be regarded as the finest poet ever to emerge from that smoky cityscape and make it the main theme of some of his most powerful verse. The cry of human agony in “Glasgow Green” pierces beyond the provincial scene to achieve universality, and “King Billy,” on the burial of a “gang-leader in the bad times/ of idleness and boredom, lost in better days,” is scarcely less intense in the passion of its pity.

But such is Mr. Morgan’s versatility that his humorous poems on Glasgow themes are equally successful. “The Starlings in George Square” is hilarious in its surrealist description of the effect of those shrill beaks on “The Lord Provost in her marble hacienda” and on lesser mortals compelled to go about their business in the open while the birds above them are doing theirs; and it combines comedy with a sensitive appreciation of the beauty and mystery of the birds and gratitude for the unknown forces which have led them to associate themselves with the city—

One thing we know they say, after their fashion.  
They like the warm cliffs of man.

Again, “Good Friday,” a burlesque monologue by a drunken proletarian, is also a beautifully understated expression of the pathos of ignorance.

Some of the love-poems, too, have a Glasgow setting, and take strength from the association of prosaic details with poetical passion. The best of them, however, might be set in any lover’s room anywhere—“One Cigarette,” with its vivid opening line, “No smoke without you, my fire,” has that moving simplicity, that seeming artlessness, which only consummate art can command.

One cigarette  
in the non-smoker’s tray . . . .  
Till I hear the very ash  
sigh down among the flowers of brass  
I’ll breathe, and long past midnight, your last kiss.

Mr. Morgan is also a writer of fantastic imagination, who delights to explore outer (and inner) space as expressed in terms of science-fiction, and although he is not the first poet of his generation to write “sci-fi” verse—this is one of the few distinctions in Anglo-Scottish poetry which the present writer can claim1—he is the most versatile.

Time-travel in "From the Domain of Arnheim" and teleportation in 'In Sobieski's Shield' are employed not merely fancifully, or to provide opportunities for technological displays, but in order to throw new light on fundamental human emotions of pity and terror. For me, these works represent a significant extension of poetry's imaginative range.

Beside his thematic variety, Mr. Morgan's formal unadventurousness is somewhat surprising. With the solitary exception of an early stanzaic poem about Paradise Lost which is a conscious exercise in Empsonian riddle-me-ree, all his work is couched in the Whitmanesque free verse currently fashionable among the young, who seem to hold that its lack of rhythmical regularity and rhyme make it "truer to nature" than stricter forms. The peril of delinquescence into prose which forever haunts this kind of verse can be avoided only by the poet who possesses both controlled passion and a perfect ear, and Mr. Morgan, fortunately for his readers, is at once a master of strong emotions and a wizard of rhythm; but he does not always escape the diffuseness encouraged by the freedom of his chosen form. At least one of his most-admired poems, "In the Snack-Bar" (on the plight of one "long blind, hunchback born, half paralysed") would be twice as effective if it were only half as long.

Elsewhere, Whitman's example betrays Mr. Morgan into too frequent use of invocation, with the result that some of his verses proceed in sudden spurts, jerked along from one ejaculation to the next—"Orphean sprig! Melting baby! Warm chihuahua!" At his best, as in "Glasgow Green," these exclamatory apostrophes are usefully employed as breakwaters for the surge of a passion so overwhelming that without them the poem might drown in its own power, but in "The Death of Marilyn Monroe" they constitute a litany unintentionally ludicrous in effect—"Los Angeles,/ DiMaggio! Los Angeles! Miller! Los Angeles! America!" Here the poet gives the unfortunate impression of trying desperately to whistle up an emotional tempest out of a flat calm.

The less consciously emphatic, the more movingly functional the verse becomes. As in "King Billy":

Grey over Riddrie the clouds piled up,
dragged their rain through the cemetery trees.
The gates shone cold. Wind rose
flaring the hissing leaves, the branches
swung, heavy, across the lamps.
Gravestones huddied in drizzling shadow,
flickering streetlight scanned the requiscars,
a name and an urn, a date, a dove
picked out, lost, half regained.
What is this dripping wreath, blown from its grave
red, white, blue and gold
'To Our Leader of Thirty Years Ago'—

In that passage the scrupulous avoidance of the slightest suspicion of
"fine writing" is perfectly suited to the sombre lamentation of the
theme. But nevertheless it needs all of Mr. Morgan's forceful passion
and pointed fun to prevent a whole collection written in this near-
prosaic manner from becoming too saltless to be entirely palatable, and
the reader who finds himself yearning for even one "jewel five words
long" has some reason for his dissatisfaction with the lack of rhyme.

For formal variety it is necessary to turn to the so-called "concrete"
experiments which occupy (one can hardly write "fill") twenty-four
of the book's eighty-eight pages. None of these verbal cartoons and/or
linguistic puzzles is less than ingenious, but in many the effort required
to master the ingenuity drains away whatever emotional effect may be
intended, while others are so slight that a single reading exhausts their
potentiaity. A "poem" called "Siesta of a Hungarian Snake" which
takes the form "sz sz sz SZ sz SZ sz Zs sz zs Zs zs zs zs" has the brevity
which is believed to be the soul of wit, but it lacks the soul which
might make it worth revisiting.

Even the most generally praised of these pieces of visual verbalism,
"Message Clear"—which for some readers has seemed to build up to a
climax in the last line of affirmation, "I am the resurrection and the
life," after beginning with a line of supreme doubt, "Am I," and then
stumbling through a further-fifty-three lines all of which are pieced
together out of various different letters contained in the concluding
statement—is more likely to arouse admiration for the writer's skill in
verbal mosaic-work than emotional acquiescence in the "message ob-
sure" which that mosaic is intended to convey. By far the most effec-
tive of the experimental works is "Canedolia: an off-concrete Scotch
fantasia," which is a hilariously comical Caledonian kind of Jabber-
wockery.

Further "concretions" by Mr. Morgan appear in his pamphlet
\textit{gnomes} (Akros Publications). Comparatively unambitious, these vary
in effect from the transiently pleasurable ("Waves") to the totally
obscure (the title poem), and none goes more than a minimal distance
towards persuading the present writer that "concrete" techniques con-
stitute a true poetic form. To coin a common-sense Johnsonism, "If
you can't say it, it isn't poetry"—and, as Norman MacCaig has publicly
(and ambiguously) pronounced, "Concrete is unspeakable." But what-

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ever reservations the critic may have about some of the uses to which Mr. Morgan puts his talent, there is absolutely not the slightest doubt of that talent’s distinction. First volumes possessing the impact of *The Second Life* are published not more—and often less—than once in a generation.

Also appearing in hard-cover for the first time, Alan Riddell (b. 1926) incorporated the contents of two earlier pamphlets in *The Stopped Landscape* (Hutchinson, London), which brought him an award from the Scottish Arts Council as one of the best Scottish poets under the age of forty-five. Riddell’s is “a still, small voice” which sometimes lacks energy, yet for all its gentleness his verse often expresses a haunting sense of loss, all the more poignant for the quietness with which he accepts it.

> Time we went sailing down the loch, our hearts
> as free as spinnakers. Or we dawdled the hills,
> paddling in ponds and carries the day-long hours . . .
>
> Where were we sailing? Always we seemed
> to be nearing the horizon, yet the land
> from our bows drew ever and ever away . . . .
>
> Sometimes his profound dissatisfaction with the way things are,
> the heavy weight of fact that clings to us like mud clogging our feet,
> is expressed fancifully, with the semi-surrealist technique which has
> attracted considerable attention when employed by such writers as
> George Macbeth and his disciple D. M. Black but which has scarcely
> been noted in Riddell’s work, where it is used with restrained subtlety
> rather than blatant surface bravura.

> From a height, and on days of no wind,
> boulders on the bed of a bay look like
> bubbles held down there by the great pressure above them . . .
>
> Imagine, then, what a strange chorus of sound
> any afternoon might burst forth from the sea if only
> that muffling weight were lifted and they all
> floated innocently up to the surface.

Two separate Scottish Arts Council awards went to Stewart Conn (b. 1936) for another first volume, *Stoats in the Sunlight* (Hutchinson, London). Perhaps the most remarkable of Mr. Conn’s gifts is his talent as a myth-maker, and in the first half of his book he gives a legendary quality, a universal relevance, to his memories of the Ayrshire farm where he spent much of his childhood and to the contrasts wrought by time in the place and in the people who lived there.
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But acres crumple and the farm's new image
Spreads over the old. As I face
Its change, a truck tips litter; hens assess
Bright tins, then peck and squawk their rage.
The truck spurs flame and I have no redress.

At least one of Mr. Conn's character-sketches has already become
an anthology-piece—"Todd," a subtly-sympathetic tragi-comic study of
the poet's great-uncle, a countryman mad about horses who died

When the mechanical tractor came to pass.
Now I think of him neighing to some saint
In a simple heaven or, beyond complaint,
Leaning across a fence and munching grass.

"Todd" evokes the identification between the hero and his horses with
such controlled simplicity, sensuousness and passion as to be irresistible.

When Mr. Conn writes about contemporary Scotland, however, his
verses tend to be fanciful or pictorial merely, without the power else-
where derived from the mythological imagination. "Strange Seraph," on a cart-horse in Edinburgh, imposes human feeling upon the animal
in a manner at once uncomfortable and unconvincing, and "Driving
through Sutherland," while sketching both the present landscape and
its history (the notorious Highland Clearances), fails to establish their
relevance to one another.

There are myths again in the second half of the volume, but these
are less personal and more literary, and the verse tends to sag beneath
"picturesque" imagery of a somewhat outmoded romantic kind. But
in at least two of his fables, "Flight" and "Ambush," poems which are
at once contemporary and timeless, Mr. Conn achieves a naked strength
of style which both matches and enhances the ruthlessness of his
themes. Equally ruthless, and yet with a tenderness all the more remark-
able for its association with a refusal to avert the eyes from "nature
red in tooth and claw," is his love-poem "The Fox in its Lair," with its
stark awareness of the common muck out of which all beauty springs.

And you, my sweet,
how can you hope
to convince me
you are all sweetness—
when I know where
your hands have burrowed?

Another poet under forty-five to receive a Scottish Arts Council
award in 1968 is D. M. Black (b. 1941), for his first hard-cover col-
lection, With Decorum (Scorpion Press, London), but since this was

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published in 1967 it lies outside the scope of the present article. However, a very fair selection of the book was reprinted in 1968 as Mr. Black's contribution to Penguin Modern Poets II (Harmondsworth, Middlesex), and from this the reader can gain a sufficiently adequate idea both of his merits (surrealist imagination, intellectual acuteness, rhythmical force, a fine fusion of wit and feeling) and his faults—willful obscurity, remorseless banging of the big drum, and an over-emphatic display of technical virtuosity.

Also published by Penguins was the equally-talented Alan Jackson (b. 1938), in Penguin Modern Poets 12. His best work has subtle sympathy and ironic wit, although other pieces express a raucous violence shrieking in concert with the fashionable taste for what Robert Lowell has called "raw, huge, blood-dripping gobbers of unreasoned experience"—as in "Fraulein," where a "shocking" tale of rape followed by syphilis appears merely sensational because presented in complete isolation from the rest of the environment.

At only thirty, Mr. Jackson has already attained individual achievement as a satirical symbolist, with such bitter brevities as "Loss" where, using a thin Scots close to urban speech, he turns conventional flower-imagery to most unconventional ends in revealing the all-too-frequent fate of beauty in the Scottish climate.

A nitrogen fell deid
bi ma doorstep the day
dark rid the colour o blood
Wis the only yin come up this year
A imagine it fell wi a thud

Most often, however, Mr. Jackson writes in English. An original stylist with a highly personal voice, he demonstrates a wide range of feeling and form, moving from the epigrammatic wit of "Young Politician" ("What a lovely lovely moon. / And it's in the constituency too") to the controlled passion of rage and sorrow in his picture of man as "the worstest beast" and the sensuous richness and strangeness of the poem called "3 l/g 4" (three little green quarters), which explores the mysteries of time and fate in terms of the superstitions of science and science-fiction.

meanwhile we discover in earth's skies at night
the unidentified flying object guilt
the beautiful round shining space ship god
the dark fast dangerous cigar shape the devil
and the appearance and eclipse in a flash of red
of three little green quarters of our personality
near an ancient burial ground just inside our head.
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Significant aspects of the future development of Scottish poetry in English would seem to lie in the hands of Messrs. Jackson and Black.

The latter's admired master, George Macbeth (b. 1932), appeared simultaneously in hard-cover and paperback with *The Night of Stones* (Macmillan Poets, London). In the past, Mr. Macbeth's bizarre imagination, high technical skill, emotional power and intellectual ruthlessness have been combined in the creation of some splendid poems on his own childhood, on his relationship to his dead father, and on mythological themes; but here imagination has dwindled into fancy, emotion has atrophied, the intellect has turned inwards, and the bizarre has become the byzantine. The few verses in the present volume (his fifth) which are accessible to the reader have sufficient wit but insufficient passion, and the many which remain inaccessible—despite appended prose glosses—display a determined esotericism which only a resolve to be *outré* at all costs would seem to explain. Other pieces, which Mr. Macbeth calls "sound-poems" and "found sound-poems," are not creations but constructions, involving "an invented language" called Eskimono and other examples of technical tricksiness that betray a hollow at the heart of the writer's experience.

Among "established" poets, Norman MacCaig (b. 1910) published by far the finest collection of the year, *Rings on a Tree* (Chatto & Windus and The Hogarth Press, London), which dramatically demonstrates that his own tree of creation is still in vigorous growth, still producing new branches and fresh fruits.

The sun goes up on Edinburgh.
Manhattan goes up on the sun.
Her buildings overtop Arthur's Seat
and are out of date as soon as
a newspaper. Last year's artist is
a caveman. Tomorrow's best seller
has still to be born.

There MacCaig is in New York, in the last of a scintillating sequence of nine poems on that nightmarish cityscape, where the striking simplicity of his style is counterpointed against the proliferating confusion of the environment, creating clean-cut unities from a muzzy maze of matter and manner. But if New York appears (to the eyes of the stranger, at least) to be without a history, Scotland is hag-ridden by a past which Mr. MacCaig—like most of our poets—finds frequently pitiful as well as sometimes inspiring. For the emigration which has gone far (too far?) towards the ruin of the Highlands he finds an evocative symbol in "The Red Well, Harris"—

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Where that eye of water once
blinded from the ground
now stands a gray house
filled with voices.

The house is solid. But
nothing will keep the children
in its happy prison
from scattering abroad, till
the house at last stands empty—
one drained well
on top of another.

For this poet the contemplation of the historical process is a fundamentally tragic experience, to be expressed in images of useless violence, as in his poem on travelling through the Borders by train, where the memory of “fired ricks and rooftrees in the black night—
glinting/ on tossed horns and red blades” conjures up an emblematic picture of his own fate, which is also that of humanity in general—

I sit, being helplessly
lugged backwards
through the Debatable Lands of history, listening
to the execrations, the scattered cries, the
falling of rooftrees
in the lamentable dark.

Like the past, the present has its irresistible tragic elements, as in “Winter,” where the freezing season makes “cormorants, glazed to the sea-rock,/ Carved out of life, their own tombstones.” But there are other occasions when the icy heart and the cold eye are blessed by the abrupt glory of sunshine—

Suddenly the sun poured
through an arrow-slit in the clouds
and the great hall we walked in—its tapestries
of mountains and parquet of rich
bogland and water—blazed on the eye
like the Book of Kells.

This “blazing on the eye” is the vital quality of Mr. MacCaig’s own work, the quality which makes it an exhilaration to read even when his themes are at their most melancholy and which gives to his celebratory poems a dazzling splendour of delight. In the best of his new poems his style, cleared of its former density of metaphor, is as transparent as water from one of his own Highland lochs, and the sunlight glitters there above even the blackest depths of disenchantment, while the shallows of momentary pleasures shine like fresh-coined silver.
Mr. MacCaig is the most outstanding of those twentieth-century Scottish poets whose work is entirely in English, and to find another collection with something of the same sustained high level of achievement as Rings on a Tree it is necessary to go back to his own last book, Surroundings (London, 1966), where he first began to explore the new directness of style which he has brought to the knife-edged pinnacle of near-perfection in the present volume.

Inevitably, Mr. MacCaig’s work has had its influence on the younger poets, including Laughton Johnston, an Aberdonian now in his middle twenties, whose pamphlet of twelve poems, Meetings, was published by Outposts Publications, London. From the elder writer Mr. Johnston has learned how to keep his eye on the object, and his work has a clarity and a control which present people and places to the reader with delicate precision. One hopes he will prove to possess sufficient power to propel him onwards and upwards to the achievement of individual mastery.

When C. M. Grieve (b. 1892) wrote the poems contained in Early Lyrics by Hugh Macdiarmid (Aktos Publications, Preston, Lancashire), the founding father of the “Scottish Renaissance”—more properly, “resistance”—was scarcely older than Mr. Johnston. This pamphlet of prose and verse, edited by the poet J. K. Annand, is principally concerned with the relationship between Macdiarmid and the schoolmaster George Ogilvie to whom he dedicated “A Moment in Eternity,” the earliest of his verses included in his Collected Poems—a relationship which began in 1908 when Ogilvie was principal teacher of English in the Pupil Teacher Centre at Broughton in Edinburgh and sixteen-year-old Grieve arrived there from his native Langholm in Dumfriesshire with “a Border accent you could have cut with a knife.”

The essay on Ogilvie written especially for this pamphlet by Dr. Macdiarmid pays eloquent tribute to the schoolmaster’s decisive influence on the awakening talent of the future poet, and Mr. Annand—himself another pupil of Ogilvie, as well as being a disciple of Macdiarmid—demonstrates the continuance of that influence after Grieve’s schooldays by means of a penetrating investigation of their correspondence, 1911-30, including letters on the composition of Macdiarmid’s major work in Scots, A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle (1926), which throw a flood of light on the poet’s intentions.

As an additional pleasure, the pamphlet also contains eight short poems sent to Ogilvie by Grieve in 1921, seven of which have never before appeared in print, and all of which show him endeavouring to achieve that masterly brevity so notable in the Scots lyrics of Singschaw
and Penny Wheep (1925; 1926). These earlier efforts are in English, but in at least one of them, "In Memory," C. M. Grieve is well on the way towards becoming Hugh Macdiarmid.

Only the rosebud I remember,
Only the rosebud and the one green leaf
—Beneath the gravestone of the sky
At last I lay them—a sufficient sheaf!

The most recent of Macdiarmid's extended works in Scots, "The Borders," commissioned by the B.B.C. and televised in 1966, was also published during 1968, in the London magazine Agenda (double number, Vol. 5, No. 4—Vol. 6, No. 1). While the septuagenarian poet showed himself less than entirely comfortable in his chosen form, the ballad quatrains inevitably associated with Border verse, the work incorporated the finest of his late free-verse poems in Scots, "A Change of Weather"—also published individually, in the anthology Scottish Poetry 3 (Edinburgh University Press)—which ironically reflects the ambiguous movement of the "real deep water" in a Scottish loch.

As far as Scottish poets writing in English only are concerned, the year's tale may be well concluded by Robin Fulton (b. 1937), with his translation of Alexander Blok's Russian masterpiece, The Twelve (Akros Publications, Preston, Lancashire). Mr. Fulton's version is highly readable; and on its closeness to the original another notable translator of Russian verse, Edwin Morgan, has made this incisive critical comment—Fulton has decided that if no translation can hope to manage everything, then the least indispensable features of metre and rhyme must go . . . but in Blok's poem, to anyone who knows the original, it must seem that a great deal has been lost if the extraordinary variety of metrical, rhythmical, and sound effects (rhyme, assonance, onomatopoeia, echoes of popular songs) has to be diluted. The central difficulty is that The Twelve is both "abandoned" and controlled, both leaning sharply out towards life and colloquial speech and song and yet structuring its appeal by overt acts of verbal aesthetics. . . . Fulton's "Twelve" honestly accepts certain limits, and works lucidly within them. A fully satisfactory version would require to be more adventurous, to pull out more stops." 2 Readers with a taste for comparisons which are far from odious will be interested in looking at the present translation alongside the Scots version by Sydney Good-sir Smith (b. 1915) in Figs and Thistles (Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1959).

Mr. Goodsir Smith's only individual publication in 1968 was his

1Lines Review, No. 27, p. 37.
Scots libretto for Full Circle, a short opera by Robin Orr commissioned by Scottish Opera and presented in Perth during one week in April. As staged, this work was highly effective, both musically and dramatically, but the poetical level of the libretto sounded rather lower than the summit of Schiehallion. The radio play in Scots verse from which the libretto derives, The Stick-Up, was to have been published in Mr. Goodsir Smith's Fifteen Poems and a Play, a volume advertised—by a new publishing concern, Southside, Edinburgh—as due to be issued to subscribers on 24th June, but it still had not appeared by 31st December.

If some of Mr. Goodsir Smith's more recent work in Scots is rather unequal, that of Tom Scott (b. 1918) has always been so, oscillating between a lyrical power at once smooth, surging and scintillating—as in his much-anthologised "Brand the Builder," which pulses with organised energy and sensuous vigour—and the opposite pole of a satirical screech, jolting in movement and near-hysterical in tone, as in The Ship (O.U.P., London, 1963), an unconsciously comic exercise in the art of sinking. Unfortunately his new extended work, At the Shrine o the Unkent Sodger, a Poem for Recitation (Akros Publications, Preston, Lancashire) belongs to the latter category, since it is a raging anti-war rant in twenty-two pages of high-pitched howl.

In case it seems unlikely that any poem by a writer of some reputation should be as complete a failure as is suggested above, a counter-balance may be added from the most favourable review which the work has received, by the Scots poet Robert Garioch, who calls it "a passionate denunciation of war as seen from outside, pressing on, regardless at times, through line after line of powerful Scots in resounding blank verse with occasional variants. . . . Restraint of expression would be out of place in such a poem, and there is not much of it here. In places the imagery is burst open by pressure of emotion, but the effect is certainly startling."³

Regardlessness and lack of restraint, in the present writer's view, are evidence of bad art, irrespective of theme and subject-matter, and only one passage in the whole of At the Shrine o the Unkent Sodger has the restrained regard proper to poetry. This is a Scots version of Antipater of Sidon's superb lament for the destruction of Corinth by the Romans, rendered by Dr. Scott in rhythms perfectly in tune with the passion of pity which the lines express.

³Lines Review, No. 27, pp. 46-7.
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Whaur be your garlandit waas, O Corinth o the Dorians,
Whaur your proud touers, whaur your gartner gear,
Whaur your braw palaces, your kindly coort and board,
Whaur, big-bosomed and bonny, the dochters o Sisyphus
That welcomed the forfairen vaiger, the guid-man hame
At the sunset 'oer? Gane wi the sea-spume
Struck by your rock frae the hydrophobic sea,
Gane sa yon glorie, sae rack o't abydes here,
Gane yon marble beautie, the berried breists,
The hot mouth open ripe at the kiss.

When Dr. Scott is moved by sympathy, as there, he writes with complete command of his medium. But when he loses his temper, as anywhere else in this work, he also loses all sense of poetic proportion, and yells like a soap-box orator bawling expletives through a megaphone.

Much more muted is the tone of J. K. Annand (b. 1908), whose pamphlet Two Voices (M. Macdonald, Edinburgh) derives its title from Wordsworth's sonnet beginning "Two voices are there, one is of the sea,/ One of the mountains, each a mighty voice." If Mr. Annand's own voice is rather less mighty than those lines suggest, it has its individual cadence. His literary Scots is close to the spoken tongue, and he writes it with idiomatic ease, while his irony, a nice blend of the grim and the gay, is native to the Scots tradition.

In the poems in the first half of the work, on mountain-climbing, the tone is generally light, reflecting the poet's holiday mood—although he gives expression to his ironical humour in a witty roll-call of the Lowland hills, making their names the basis of a folk-tale at once funny and fierce. But too many of the other mountain-poems lack the pulse of passion. An exception is "Trith is lang-socht-for," which works indirectly, through a sequence of sensuous images, and where the movement of the verse, rushing and checking, echoes the ebb and flow of the obliquely-expressed argument. Yet even here the impact of the imagery is somewhat lessened by its association with nineteenth-century romanticism.

Some of the sea-pieces, too, lack the "lift" of poetry, but others are vibrantly alive with the quivering tension between horror and beauty which Mr. Annand experienced while serving on Arctic convoys during the war. The sequence beginning "A-a-all the starboard watch!" displays economical command of dialogue in its acid-etched evocation of battle, while "What gart ye jine the navy, Jock?" welds together brutality, tenderness and savage wit in lines of stabbing simplicity.

The danger of a style so unadorned as Mr. Annand's is that the poetry seems forever on the point of crumbling into prose, and on
those occasions when the emotional pressure is low, disaster is all too likely to occur. But in "Why bide ye by the sea, lassie?"—an individual variation on Walter Scott’s ballad, "Jock o Hazeldean"—Mr. Annand uses a style stripped to the bone in order to express an elemental situation with a ruthless realism that still contrives to sing.

Your love lies by a skerrie side
Droukit wi saut sea-faem.
A cauld corp ‘mang busteous waves
Can never mair win hame.

He has nae need for the deid-cowp, lass,
Nor yet the betheral’s spade.
The guisy sea-maw pykit his een,
The parlin his chafe-blade.

Sae walawae for your luve, lassie,
Walawae for your man.
He’s nocht but a rickle o rottin banes
And a toon ham-pum.

Equally endowed with the gift of song is Helen Burness Cruickshank, whose The Ponnage Pool (M. Macdonald, Edinburgh) was published to coincide with her eighty-second birthday on 15th May. This volume is a record of a half-century of devotion to the art and craft of poetry, one of the earliest pieces being entitled "April 1918," while the most recent, a moving elegy for a young girl who "should have died hereafter," is dated 18 January 1968.

The Ponnage Pool, then, may be regarded as Miss Cruickshank’s "Collected Poems." As such, the book is scarcely impressive in bulk—fifty-three poems in sixty-five pages—but within its comparatively brief compass it contains sufficient work of individual merit to ensure for the author an enduring place in the Scottish verse tradition. While Miss Cruickshank, like most minor poets, is an unequal writer, at her best she achieves the kind of superb simplicity which is as much above praise as it is beyond analysis. Most of her successful poem are in Scots, which she writes to the manner born, as in "Background":

Frost, I mind, an' swaw,
An' a hairn comin' hame frae the schule
Greetin', nearly, wi' cauld.

This admirable directness of style sometimes slumps into the prosaic when Miss Cruickshank attempts it in English, but in Scots she is able to combine its bare concentration, wasting not a word, with subtlety and depth of feeling and a lyrical freshness of movement, achieving an unforced sweetness possible only to a complete command of
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the vernacular at the deepest level. Her "In Glenskenno Woods" is that most difficult accomplishment, a true poem which is also a true song, a sensuous interpretation of youth and age and the mysteries which throughout life remain as tangled as the briars catching the girl's hair, expressed with perfect control of imagery, rhythm and language.

Even more remarkable, for its greater emotional range and intellectual penetration, is the title poem, where the unfathomable interplay of life and death is poignantly expressed through the image of salmon-fishing in her native river, the Angus Esk. This is a poem at once local and universal, rooted in everyday detail and yet shining with the radiance of profound vision, where the poet and the environment become a unity which is greater than either.

I am the deep o' the puie,
The fish, the fisher,
The river in spate,
The broon o' the far peat-moss,
The shingle bright wi' the flooer
O' the yallow mim'alus,
The swallow fleelin' across.

In English, Miss Cruickshank's most striking creation is "Spring in the Mearns," on the death of Lewis Grassic Gibbon, where the major image of "smoke on the hill/ where the whin is burning" enables her to weave a beautifully-balanced pattern of variations on the theme of the inter-relationship of destruction and creation. Other elegies, lacking this cohesive imagery, are less interesting as poetry than as autobiography.

Seventeen of the poems in The Ponnage Pool are new, and all but two of these have been written since Miss Cruickshank's seventieth birthday. In style, they range from "Peradventure," an experiment in "concretion," where the work's appearance on the page is part of its effect, to "A Lang Guidnicht," a patriotic protest which adapts the sixteenth-century Scots and the stanza-form of Alexander Montgomerie. These new poems—for which she was given a Scottish Arts Council publication award—make abundantly clear the continuing intellectual adventurousness and emotional involvement of their octogenarian author, whose work has won the admiration of contemporaries and successors alike.

Among these successors is the present writer (b. 1920), whose collection of twenty-nine poems in Scots and five in English, Cantrips (Akros Publications, Preston, Lancashire), resulted in his receiving from Hugh Macdiarmid the following letter, dated 10th July 1968,
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with kind permission—characteristic of Dr. Grieve’s usual unusual generosity towards younger poets—to publish it as he pleased:

Congratulations on your *Cantrips*. . . . Beautifully produced—and worthy of it. I think it is your best book—and certainly almost the only substantial verse contribution to the Lallans Movement outside mine. (Sydney [Goodsir Smith] is in a different category.) . . . Here you have displayed a full range . . . with such things as ‘Doun wi Durt,’ ‘Screened on Sunday’ (an excellent *d’esprit*, splendidly clinched with the X certificate) and ‘Lit. Crit.,’ with its magnificent last two lines. Of a very different kind is ‘The Gallus Makar,’ one of the two or three best poems inscribed to me—and the only one in Lallans that is a first-rate poem in itself. I hope the book has the success it deserves—both in respect of purchasers and reviewers.

In the latter respect, at least, the book has been successful beyond the author’s fondest hopes. Norman MacCaig, writing in the magazine *Akros* (No. 9, January 1969), expressed the view that the poems embodied the essential qualities of the Scots tradition, which he defined as being realism, a refusal to turn a blind eye to the faults of what is most admired, passion, and “wit, humour and comic invention”; and in writing of the longest poem in the volume, “Heart of Stone,” a verse picture of Aberdeen commissioned by B.B.C. television, he described it as “a nice compendium of Scott’s virtues,” adding that “here, and in many other places, I find what pleases me very much: a splendid use of Scots: an intransigent insistence on saying what he thinks . . . and a nicely controlled extravagance of feeling and of utterance. It’s also frequently funny.”

Another who praised “Heart of Stone” was the North-East poet George Bruce (in *Lines Review*, No. 27, November 1968), who wrote of it that “The directness of the people, the vigour, even their strenuousness is in the verse itself. Aberdeen lives. The poem lives,” and made the general comment that “where [Scott’s] material is strong, complex and of social consequence, his style takes in easily dramatic effects, description and comment. His poetic character in Scots is marked.” He too found some of the poems “very funny.”

But Robert Garioch—himself a notable author of satirical comic verse in Scots—was not amused, referring to the satires as “quarrels” and as “a vexatious total of fingers of scorn pointed . . . in Knoxish fault-finding.” However, he too held “Heart of Stone” to be “a fine poem . . . The gritty words in blank verse stiffened with alliteration convey the feel of the granite city . . . The reader is agreeably diverted by some happy and original imagery . . . and felicitous expres-
sions,” and he admitted that one of the “vexatious” comedies contained “a splendid couplet which appeals to me personally,” while finding that “A general characteristic of these poems is the mastery of language . . . in Scots rich in vocabulary, modern in tone, using a pretty full Scots grammar without awkwardness or apparent effort. There is a good variety of metres, all handled with the skill of an expert.” 4

Again, Mr. Garioch was good enough to praise two of the poems in English as being “in particular exceedingly moving, the sound and sense taking strength from each other and giving more than they receive. . . . Both are quiet, almost private, poems. It is not easy to convey an impression of their quality; better perhaps just to recommend them to the reader as very good poetry”; while Mr. Bruce remarked that “in English [Scott] demonstrates . . . that his competence does not exclude tenderness” and Mr. MacCaig commended the English verses for their individuality—“they couldn’t have been written by anyone else.” On the other hand, an anonymous commentator in Scottish Field (November 1968) dismissed the whole volume, in a couple of denunciatory sentences, as mere imitation Macdiarmid. Time, no doubt, will tell—or else it will hold its tongue (which, of course, amounts to the same thing in the end). Meanwhile, the author has received a publication award from the Scottish Arts Council for this collection.

In addition to the individual volumes discussed above, the year also saw the publication of two interesting anthologies. One of these, The Scottish Literary Revival: an anthology of twentieth-century poetry, edited by George Bruce (Collier-Macmillan, London), was designed for use in schools—according to information supplied to contributors by the publishers, although there is no mention of this fact in the book as published—and this has had the unfortunate effect of limiting its range. It is particularly significant that Sydney Goodsr Smith’s supremely bawdy Elegy XIII from Under the Eildon Tree, which Mr. Bruce has elsewhere described as “Smith at the top of his glorious best,” 5 is conspicuous by its absence, its place taken by the “safer” but less scintillating Elegies VI and XII—a procedure which is the contemporary equivalent of excising “Love and Liberty” from a selection of Burns and substituting “The Cottar’s Saturday Night” and “My lave’s like a red, red rose.”

4 Scottish International, No. 4, pp. 57-8.
5 Akros, No. 7, p. 67.

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But with only 130 pages (including index and glosses on the Scots poems) at his disposal, the editor has contrived to work wonders, finding space for no less than thirty-eight poets in a forty-six-year period. He has been criticized for including, at one end of his age-scale, some of Hugh Macdiarmid’s immediate predecessors, and for omitting, at the other end, writers under thirty and craftsmen in “concrete.”* But the inclusion of Pittendrigh MacNeill (worth it for that wonderful name alone) and Marion Angus has the perfectly proper purpose of reminding us that Macdiarmid’s genius was not entirely self-generated, and the exclusion of the under-thirties and the “concretioners” may be defended on the not unreasonable ground that at least a considerable proportion of their number have repudiated the concept of that “Scottish literary revival” enshrined in Mr. Bruce’s title.

The period with which this anthology is concerned has been dominated by the towering figure of Macdiarmid, whose verse is so varied in form and theme that it is virtually impossible to select from him, in small bulk, a variety of poems which adequately reflects the range of his prodigious production, but the thirteen poems which Mr. Bruce has chosen from different periods of his career make his genius unmistakeable. Macdiarmid’s superb outgoing scope is often seen as being complemented by Edwin Muir’s gentle mysticism, and the eleven poems by Muir that Mr. Bruce presents show every mode in which his reserved but distinguished talent expressed itself.

Among those poets who first made their mark during the second world war, most space is given to Norman MacCaig (in English) and Sydney Goodall Smith (in his own effectively idiosyncratic brand of Lallans). Both of these are writers of marked individuality and considerable range, whose work has had a discernible—sometimes all too discernible—influence on some of their successors. Post-war verse in English is represented by a dozen poets, in Scots by only two (Tom Scott and the present writer), which scarcely seems entirely equitable; and again there are only two poets in Gaelic, Sorley Maclean and Derick Thomson. But while one may have some reservations about the range of this anthology, Mr. Bruce still deserves praise for his endeavour to present a new generation of poetry-readers with a picture of the twentieth-century Scottish scene. His brief introduction is both incisive and acute, although not always completely accurate (Goodall Smith’s Under the Eildon Tree was first published in 1948, not 1951, and it contains twenty-four elegies, not the stated sixteen).

The other anthology, Scottish Poetry 3 (Edinburgh University

* Thomas Crawford, Lines Review, No. 27, pp. 34-5.
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Press), edited by George Bruce, Maurice Lindsay and Edwin Morgan, is an annual publication and serves a quite different purpose from the first. One of its most valuable functions is to provide an opportunity for seeing the efforts of the up-and-coming alongside the creations of the already-arrived, and the editors spread a wide net with a narrow mesh in order to fish in the troubled waters of contemporary endeavour. If, to some tastes, the net seems too wide and the mesh not narrow enough, and if the present haul appears to contain some rather queer fish as well as some exciting new discoveries, that result is only what is to be expected from fresh fishing-grounds. Now in its third number, with a hundred poems by some fifty contributors in its 120 pages, Scottish Poetry continues to be both lively and widely-representative.

Rather too many of the "established" contributors to the present issue are represented by work at a lower level than their best, and more than a few of the beginners seem to be making a false start, but there are a number of fine poems too, both by the recognised and by the less-well-known. Among the latter, Tom Buchan, who has been putting out poems for at least fifteen years without having yet published a collection, is particularly notable, his "Dolphins at Cochin" expressing a recognition of the "otherness" of the animals no less keen than Lawrence's, but with a technique which is more economical and an emotion more controlled, while his "White Hunter" effectively cuts down to size the sham heroics of the high-financed safari and "The Everlasting Astronauts" casts a satirical eye on the pretensions of space-men "chosen not for their imagination/ but for their compatibility with machines."

The sensuous richness of Buchan's "Dolphins" is found again in Douglas Dunn's "The Playboy in the Woods," where the light falls through the leaves "in green balloons/ Of creme de menthe, succulent mouthfuls," and Buchan's intellectual penetration is matched in the single poem by Robert Duncan investigating the relationship between the poet and the public with subtle simplicity. Giles Gordon contributes two pieces on the Irish landscape which are richly evocative not only of the scene itself but also of the emotions of the poet who finds himself while losing himself within it.

Among "unestablished" poets in Scots there is equally striking work, with Flora Garry's "Village Magdalen" particularly outstanding for the evidence it provides that it is still perfectly possible to write, in a language close to the spoken tongue, a poetry which is at once emotionally profound and intellectually provocative. Like Mrs. Garry,
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Alastair Mackie comes from the North-East, and his sonnet "Still Life—Cézanne" has much of the same vernacular veracity, allied to a visual sense which vividly recreates the picture at the same time as he thrusts upon the reader the weight of its implications. Rather more mannered, but no less effective, is Eric Lithgow's Scots in "Empedocles in Princes Street," a dramatic monologue remarkable for its interplay of external and internal reality, the rain in Princes Street and the darkness in the poet's heart, with sound and sense strengthening one another in their closely-integrated weave. A fine poem in Glasgow dialect, Stephen Mulrine's "The Coming of the Wee Malkies," shows the contrasting possibilities of a completely vernacular style.

The most widely admired contribution to Scottish Poetry 3 has been "By the Sea" by Iain Crichton Smith (b. 1928), a sequence of fourteen "seaside holiday" poems from beneath whose deceptively limpid surface the passions leap out like flying fish. (This year Mr. Crichton Smith was awarded £500 by the Scottish Arts Council as our best poet under the age of forty-five, a decision against which—for once—not a single dissenting voice was raised.) The anthology also included four of his excellent translations from the superlative Gaelic of Sorley Maclean.

Some of the best pieces in Scottish Poetry 3 had already appeared in one or other of the two poetry magazines, Lines Review, edited by Robin Fulton (M. Macdonald, Edinburgh), and Akros, edited by Duncan Glen (Akros Publications, Preston, Lancashire), in which the most nearly-contemporary growing-points of Scottish poetry are to be found. In its most recent numbers, Lines—which is now issued thrice annually—has preferred to concentrate on significant aspects of the work of a limited number of poets rather than to present the usual assortment of single poems by a "mixed bag" of writers; and No. 26 contains a number of experiments in verse narrative by George Mackay Brown, D.M. Black and Robert Tait, an extract from Iain Crichton Smith's "documentary" poem on Argyllshire commissioned by B.B.C. television, "Light to Light," and a selection of varied lyrics by Maurice Lindsay and Alan Jackson, while No. 27 includes six poems on Highland themes by Norman MacCaig, Robert Garioch's Scots version of the moving Anglo-Saxon elegy "The Wanderer," and five of the recent poems in English by the present writer which Mr. MacCaig has described as "an exploration of new and looser forms which point forward to a new sort of achievement."7

7 Akros, No. 9, p. 69.
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Akros, also published three times a year, prefers to devote each issue to a specific theme. No. 7 was a "Special Norman MacCaig Issue," with the complete text of his television "documentary" poem "A Man in Assynt" and articles on his work by Hugh Macdiarmid, G. S. Fraser, Crombie Saunders and myself, while No. 8 discussed "Television and the Arts," with special reference to the series of poems entitled "Poets' Places" commissioned for B.B.C. television in Scotland from such varied writers as Macdiarmid, Goodsir Smith, MacCailg, Mackay Brown, Crichton Smith, Robert Maceliam, Tom Wright, Mervyn Cameron, Douglas Young and Alexander Scott. The essays on Scottish poetry which appear alongside the poems in Akros perform an essential critical function, and one wishes that Lines too would return to this policy, and that the new "arts quarterly," Scottish International—which has published poetry in English, Scots and Gaelic—would also adopt it. All of these magazines devote considerable space to book-reviews of current Scottish work, but valuable as this activity is, it is not enough in itself to compensate for the absence of more general articles on the arts in contemporary Scotland from two of the only three literary reviews which the country possesses.

The length to which this article has extended is itself sufficient indication of the variety and the vitality of Scottish poetry in 1968. With volumes by Iain Crichton Smith, Alan Bold, Tom Buchan, Alan Jackson, Maurice Lindsay and Sydney Tremayne already prepared for publication in the spring of 1969, with a new anthology of Contemporary Scottish Verse 59/69 scheduled for later in the year, and with the superb "Translation" issue of Akros (No. 9, January 1969) already in print, there is every certainty of continuing creative endeavour.

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