ALEXANDER SCOTT

Scottish Poetry in 1970

Less remarkable for the emergence of new talent than for the consolidation of existing reputations, the year was particularly notable for the variety of tributes paid to Scotland’s greatest living poets, Hugh MacDiarmid (in Scots and English) and Sorley Maclean (in Gaelic).

In the spring, MacDiarmid (b. 1892) was the subject of a special double number of the poetry magazine Akros (Akros Publications, Preston), which included two interviews with him—conducted by a pair of fellow-poets, George Bruce and Duncan Glen, the latter being the magazine’s editor—and essays on different aspects of his myriad-minded production by T. S. Law, G. S. Fraser, Glen and Rory Watson, critics who range in age from the sixties to the twenties and thereby illustrate the continuing appeal of this great writer’s work to readers of every generation. His More Collected Poems (MacGibbon and Kee, London), mainly devoted to verse of the 1930’s which was omitted from his Collected Poems (1962) for reasons of “publishing expediencies,” and chiefly remarkable for the brilliant sequence of sixteen sections from To Circumnjach Cenrirastus (1930), in which the friction of intellect and passion strikes fire from Scots flint, and for the exact exploration of verbal colour in “Scots Unbound” (1952), demonstrated his apparently inexhaustible virtuosity, whose scope makes the task of selection more than ordinarily invidious. The volume of his Selected Poems edited by David Craig and John Manson for the Penguin paperback series (Hammondsworth, Middlesex) will no doubt have the intended effect of introducing the work of an unjustly-neglected great poet to a wider audience than heretofore, but the book is much too slender—a mere 124 pages—to encompass his range with anything approaching adequacy, and the marxist aspect of his verse (which has always jarred against his anarchist celebration of absolute freedom, and resulted more often in heavy-handed rhetoric than in light-footed poetry) looms too large. Despite these drawbacks, however, and also despite the eccentricity of an introduction which fails to place him in his proper environment and against his native background, a volume which contains some of his finest work—as well as some of his worst—can hardly fail to attract attention.

When three previously-unpublished Gaelic poems by Sorley Maclean appeared in the anthology of Contemporary Scottish Verse 1959-
1969 (Calder and Boyars, London) edited by Norman MacCaig and the present writer, they were hailed as works of genius by critics as different in attitude as an anonymous Scotophile in The Times Literary Supplement (London) and a sympathetic Sassenach, Robert Nye, in The Scotsman (Edinburgh). Further previously-unpublished poems, ranging in time from 1940 to the present, filled the whole of No. 34 of the poetry magazine Lines Review (M. Macdonald, Edinburgh), and these and others constituted the crowning glory of a volume which Maclean shared with three more poets, Four Points of a Salire (Reprographia, Edinburgh). His fifty pages, consisting of seventeen poems in Gaelic with his own translations into English prose, illuminate the view that "Maclean, whose Dain do Eimhir (1943) made Gaelic contemporary—an achievement comparable with MacDiarmid’s revitalisation of Scots two decades earlier—continues to write in a manner which is at once twentieth-century and timeless, and with a fusion of intellect and passion rare in any poetry." The dazzling blaze of his genius casts a shade upon the other contributors to this book, although George Campbell Hay (b. 1915) was a sensitive and incisive poet in Scots and English and Gaelic throughout the forties, as William Neill (b. 1922) shows some promise of becoming now. The fourth member of the quartet, Stuart Macgregor (b. 1935), has yet to master the art of allowing his own personal voice to speak through a command of verse forms which, at present, gives too many of his English poems the air of pastiche.

While Neill and Macgregor are at the start of their careers, that of Burns Singer (b. 1928) ended with his sudden death in 1964, which robbed Scotland of a perceptive and provocative critic whose own verse—now gathered in a volume of Collected Poems (Secker and Warburg, London) edited by W. A. S. Keir—remained in a condition of somewhat doubtful promise, rather than reaching assured achievement, throughout his all-too-brief career. Much of his work consisted of abstract idea-mongering, and in most of the rest his personal fantasies were inaccessible to the reader. When he attempted narrative, as in "The Transparent Prisoner," he was unable to avoid the style, as well as the mysticism, of Edwin Muir; and his solitary exercise in characterisation, "Marcus Aurelius," all too apparently betrayed the influence of Pound. Elsewhere, again, the rhythms and the repetitions of his stanzas followed those of W. S. Graham. On the few occasions when he attained to the combination of clarity, objectivity, and individuality—as in "Peterhead," a delicately-executed etching of a town-and-seascape—his work had its own assurance, but this he did not live long

enough to develop with any consistency. It is sad, but true, that the
introductory essays on his chequered career and peculiarly-colourful
character, written by his editor, and by the poet he most admired, Hugh
MacDiarmid, are of far more fascination than all but a handful of his
verses.

Another volume of Collected Poems (Edinburgh University Press)
comes from a poet who is still, happily, with us—George Bruce (b.
1909), whose work spans the years since 1939. A native of Fraserburgh,
a fishing-port on the North-East coast, Bruce began his career as essen-
tially a poet of place. In his verse he contrived to get more of the
"feel" of that coast, the "impregnable and very ancient rock, rejecting
the violence of water," than any other writer from that area had yet
succeeded in doing. His verse was uneven, sometimes almost banal in
its avoidance of the appearance of striving after effect, but at its best
it had a resilience and a wiry toughness reminiscent of the environment
in which it grew, its directness reflecting the nakedness of rock and
sky, its slow, abrupt rhythms echoing the assault of the sea against the
cliff. There were some few occasions when his voice was overlaid by
that of Pound ("Go, little book," etc.), and the influence of Eliot was
evident in those liturgical passages where he sought to express the re-
ligiosity of the fisher-folk, but in general his style was as idiosyncratic
as the place and the people it described. Built up from an accumulation
of accurately-observed details, his work always possessed authenticity,
but on those occasions when his emotional fire was at less than white-
heat his verse would fail to be more than an assembly of facts and
would give the appearance of being the raw material of poetry rather
than the finished product, a dullish catalogue lacking the power to stim-
ulate the imagination. But since he usually dealt with a landscape im-
pressed upon his imagination in childhood, and with people whom he
regarded as belonging to a larger family of which his own formed
part—the Brucers had been connected with the Fraserburgh fishing for
a century—it was seldom that his emotions were not directly involved
in his writing, and that emotional force, acting on his concern with
"shape and line and plane," welded his particular observations into unity.

His more recent poems, from the late fifties and early sixties, show
an even finer sharpening of style as well as a widening of range. "Visi-
tations from a War-Time Childhood" has a glittering satirical edge to
its starkness, and "Laotian Peasant Shot," in its unsentimental under-
statement, strangely but successfully combines the heart-cry with the
shrug. More recent work still, from the late sixties, is at once surrealist
and rooted in everyday reality, displaying a technical command em-
ployed in the exploration of both personal and general experience, and
with much greater emotional scope (rage, despair, passionate love,
compassion, and even randiness) than the gravity of his earlier work allowed. The residual Calvinism which he used to share, however mildly, with the people among whom he was brought up, has disappeared—
the cardinal document for this is "Autobiography," a poem which is an object-lesson in the art of economy, concisely creative. He can no longer be regarded as a regional poet pur sang, for his later poems on Edinburgh and Glasgow and St. Andrews—as on Laos—show an increase of his power of seizing on essential details and weaving them into a unified design. And while the most successful of the earlier pieces were descriptive rather than philosophical or lyrical, "Against a Wall—for all soldiers"—which appears for the first time in the collected volume—expresses the philosophy of existence in the most nakedly powerful terms, while the late love poems sing with an unforced sweetness. If some of Bruce's work still seems to be "the raw material of poetry rather than the finished product," this is the inevitable consequence of the struggle to express the bare fact—"The Word," as he calls it in one of his most penetrating studies—in which he has been engaged throughout the whole of his distinguished career.

If the sense of locality is central to much of Bruce's work, the same might be said of Iain Crichton Smith (b. 1928), for many of the best pieces in his Selected Poems (Gollancz, London) issue from his personal experience of particular places and people in the Highlands, himself included—he was born and brought up in the Hebridean island of Lewis. This self is much more than a detached observer. He suffers, he rejoices, he celebrates his moments of illumination, and he extends his sympathy to the men and women he meets, even when they humiliate him, and even when they humiliate themselves by their own lack of sympathy. The style of some of his poems is almost prosaic, and can afford to be, for the tension between pity and hatred which vibrates in them needs no embellishment. Others, again, consist of series of statements which are also series of highly evocative and impassioned images. One of the finest is "Old Woman"—"Your thorned back/ heavily under the creel/ you steadily stamped the rising daffodil." Those three lines embody a vision of a whole life devoted to labour and moral disapproval; and while the old woman's attitude may differ from the poet's own, he has a profound understanding of it, since he shares with her the same ancestry, the same history (represented here by his acrid study of "Johnson in the Highlands" and his bitter-sweet sketch of a corrupted tradition in "At the Highland Games"), and the same daily background. No poet could be more closely involved with his themes than Crichton Smith, and none could express them with more concentrated concern, a bare precision, a subtlety which reveals insight as well as verbal skill, and—at times—a blazing visionary passion of agony and glory.
Yet, whenever he removes his eye from the object (or subject) in order to engage in philosophical theorising, he tends to lapse into “literary” images which jar against those embodying his sensuous experience. The fourteen-part sequence, “Deer on the High Hills”—where the influence of Wallace Stevens is writ large—too often fails to span the leap between sight and speculation and falls into a mish-mash of Greek mythology singularly inappropriate to the Highland scene. But the last poem in the collection, the twenty-five-part sequence “Shall Gaelic Die?”—translated into English from the author’s own Gaelic—suggests that it is only in the southern language that his work is flawed in this fashion, and that the sensuous force of the original Gaelic is so powerful that Wittgenstein and Cuchulain, Noah and Alexander Macdonald, can all appear as characters without any sense of incongruity, their separate identities fused into a compelling context by the incantation of the word.

Verbal incantation has long been the overt concern of W. S. Graham (b. 1917), and there is little that is new in Malcolm Mooney’s Land (Faber, London), with which he broke a silence of fifteen years. In some ways, indeed, the book represents a retreat from the position won with such pictorial panache in its predecessor, The Nightfishing (1955), for while most of the contents of that collection were concerned with Graham’s principal and continuing theme, the difficulty—amounting to virtual impossibility, in his view—of communication between man and man and between poet and public, the title-poem was a triumphant negation of that argument, since its superbly sensuous lines expressed with evocative conviction the cohesive force of a shared experience. But in the title-poem of the new book the poet is utterly alone in an Arctic landscape, while elsewhere he is in solitary confinement (after Kafka—not to mention a hundred or a thousand others), trying to “get through” on the plumbing system. He also laments, not for the first time, the impossibility of recapturing his lost childhood, and regrets the otherness of persons apart from himself. While he has lost none of his unerring skill in the weaving of verbal music and the creation of images which, while novel, he makes appear inevitable, that music tends to repeat tunes already heard in his work, and those images are all of a kind with earlier metaphors. In some poems, too, he proves his theory of the impossibility of communication not wisely but too well, by presenting word-patterns whose obscurity is total. This volume is the work of a highly-professional craftsman, but—with the possible exceptions of a little love-poem and an elegy for a friend—it says nothing which the author has not said before.

Also showing sad signs of beginning to repeat himself is George Mackay Brown (b. 1921) in A Spell for Green Corn (The Hogarth
Press, London), an Orkney chronicle play in six scenes which span the centuries between "the age of saints and fish and miracles" and our present "age of machines and numbers and official forms" in order to express an obscurantist view of art as the handmaiden of the fertility rites which underlie religion. The central scenes, revolving round a seventeenth-century witchcraft trial, are all too reminiscent of Mackay Brown's fine dialogue story, "Witch" (A Calendar of Love, 1967); and although the conversation of the characters, here and elsewhere, is at once spare and sparkling, much of the action and the argument are less than entirely persuasive. Whether the medium in which the work is written is poetry or prose or a combination of both is a matter for argument, but the printed version of the play contains some verses equal to Mackay Brown's best, a ballad of John Barleycorn which reads like a creation of the folk imagination rather than the product of an individual writer, and "The Poet," a haunting celebration of the artist's "true task, interrogation of silence."

If Mackay Brown is essentially an Orcadian, much of the verse in a first collection by William McIlvanney (b. 1936), The Longships in Harbour (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London), is associated with the Ayrshire town of Kilmarnock—which was also the scene of the same writer's spirited first novel, Remedy is None (1967). As a poet, however, McIlvanney seems too close to his themes—most of which derive from his own family's history—to have got them into emotional perspective; and while those themes are only too personal, his style is not yet individual enough. A macabre science-fiction fantasy, "Eugenesis," is a welcome exception to both those faults, and suggests better things to come. No such suggestion, unfortunately, is indicated by The Spark of Joy (Caithness Books, Thurso) by Rayne Mackinnon (b. 1937), an Anglo-Scot whose studies of life among down-and-outs, either inside or outside a mental institution, are written in a style of Wordsworth-and-water, far too weak in imagery and rhythm to give adequate expression to the tragic subject-matter.

Another Anglo-Scot, W. Price Turner (b. 1927), has developed a style of the starkest strength in his third full-length collection, The Moral Rocking-Horse (Barrie and Jenkins, London), with its highly individual blend of satire and passion, ironical humour and understated sympathy, all-our attack and disguised defencelessness. When satire, wit and attack predominate, the verse can become somewhat crabbedly gnomic, but when the other elements are also present in the mixture his work is outstanding for its combination of hard brilliance and penetration to the soft centre of feeling. "Full Supporting Programme," a study of sudden death in a cinema, exposes human heartlessness with a surgical skill which at the same time contrives to be both comic and
compassionate, and "Rose Harem" is at once stabbing in its self-mockery and scintillating in its sensuous evocation of scene.

Alongside the aforementioned hard-back volumes, the year has witnessed a plethora of pamphlets, but few which seem likely either to enhance the reputations of writers already notable or to establish those of poets at the commencement of their careers. In a sequence of "visual" verses, *Rhymes for Lemons* (The Wild Hawthorn Press, Dunsyre, Lanarkshire), by Ian Hamilton Finlay (b. 1925), rhymes and reasons are alike to seek; and a collection of "concretions," *The Horseman's Word* (Akros Publications, Preston), by Edwin Morgan (b. 1920), appears to have little point. But Morgan's *Twelve Songs* (The Castelaw Press, West Linton, Peeblesshire) is a stimulating exception, the freshness of its lyrical variety expressing a novel aspect of a talent which shows an admirable capacity to continue to increase its scope. Among the beginners, too, there is one outstanding exception—Roderick Watson (b. 1943), whose *Poems* in the Parklands Poets paperback series (Akros Publications, Preston) have a singular angularity of vision, a kind of macabre grace encompassing both horror and beauty. Other poems by Watson, in the annual anthology *Scottish Poetry* 5 (Edinburgh University Press), are less esoteric but no less individual, while yet others in the nationalist quarterly, *Catalyst*, show him to be as gifted in Scots as in English.

No less than twenty of the fifty contributors to *Scottish Poetry* 5—which is edited by George Bruce, Maurice Lindsay and Edwin Morgan—belong to Watson's age-group, but few possess talents approaching his in either versatility or skill. Among a group of Glasgow writers calling themselves (somewhat egregiously) "The Other People," only Tom Leonard (b. 1944) emerges from the fog of apprentice obscurity into the clarity of assured achievement, with "The Good Thief"—who palavers pathetically with Christ in "fitba'-daft" Glaswegian patois—and "The Other Side of the Ticket," a sensitive English exploration of ambiguity, and even he has other poems which are either silly-clever or simple-simon naïf. In two poems called "Storie de Cristo," Colin Kirkwood (b. 1944) approaches the gospel through the medium of fourteenth-century Italian art, but the gentle mockery of the vernacular style of painting in an age of faith, which is implicit in the direct descriptions of the first poem, is spoiled by becoming much too explicit in the second. Kirkwood once shared a pamphlet with Robert Tait (b. 1943), who continues to spoil too many of his poems by the use of shock tactics repeated so often that their effect becomes merely numbing—although his portrait of a child, "Annalisa," shows him to be capable of effective restraint when he is expressing a shared experience rather than a private fantasy. Apart from Watson, the most
consistently effective beginner in this collection is a "late developer," Alasdair Maclean (b. 1926), who has found his own voice, a tone of quiet desperation which testifies to personal solitariness in a largely sitcomical world ("Question and Answer"), expressed with an unstressed intensity far more moving than any song-and-dance. His best work combines a spare directness of style with the ability to make metaphors which are at once strikingly unusual and illuminatingly appropriate ("Rams").

Not for the first time, Scottish Poetry fails to provide an adequate selection of the best of the year's production in Scots—as distinct from Scots/English—verse, and consequently another "late developer," Alastair Mackie (b. 1925), whose talent is no less impressive than Maclean's, is represented by only one poem. Fortunately, this imbalance was corrected by the appearance of eleven of his poems in the August issue (No. 15) of the magazine Akros, while nine others were included in The Akros Anthology of Scottish Poetry 1965-70 edited by Duncan Glen (Akros Publications, Preston). An Aberdonian, from an area where Scots probably remains more secure in the mouths of the people than anywhere else in the country, Mackie has an idiomatic command of his medium which gives him mastery over a wide range of themes, from the local to the universal (and the universal-in-the-local), and his emotional scope is equally notable, colloquial comedy and acid wit mingling with the shudder of desolation and the exultant cry, while his style can encompass both bare statements and dazzling patterns of images, and his strong individual rhythms reinforce the impact of his personal vision of the world. By far the finest poet in Scots to emerge during the past two decades, Mackie has been publishing verse since the early fifties, but his work appeared in the magazines all too occasionally until some six years ago, when the founding of Akros by Duncan Glen provided him with a platform permitting frequent demonstration of the brilliant gifts with which he has enhanced the native tradition. That work of such vitality has been ignored by the other Scottish magazines which enjoy Scottish Arts Council support—Lines Review and Scottish International—is a grave criticism of the editorial policies of those publications, which are now linked by the editor of the first having become a director of the second, and which published no poetry in Scots throughout 1970 except some verses by Robert Garioch (b. 1909), a member of Scottish International's editorial board. Garioch, a humorous writer on Edinburgh themes who has been described—somewhat harshly—as "too self-consciously the Scottish bard," has recently shown signs of "the-clown-who-wants-to-play-Hamlet" com-

plex, but the dull solemnity of his "The Big Music," a leaden in movement and pedestrian in style, is a far cry from the idiomatic liveliness and rhythmic dexterity of much of his comic verse.

If work in Scots is largely under-represented in *Lines, Scottish International* and the *Scottish Poetry* collections—all of which are edited by poets who themselves write in English—*The Akros Anthology* swings to the other extreme, with fifty-four pages in Scots to only twenty-one in English, and an attacking introduction by Duncan Glen which suggests, in no uncertain terms, that those of our poets whose work is in English have put themselves outside the native tradition to such an extent that they are not entitled to regard themselves as being Scottish authors in any meaningful sense. The result is a selection from recent work where established Scots makars like Sydney Goodsr Smith and the present writer are allotted eight pages each and a beginner in Scots like Donald Campbell (b. 1940) is given seven, whereas established Scots/English poets like Norman MacCaig and Edwin Morgan receive two and four respectively and beginners are confined to one. Although the author of this article has a not unnatural partiality for his own work, he cannot resist the conclusion that the picture of the contemporary Scottish scene presented in this anthology is scarcely an accurate reflection of the various talents involved, and the fact that he is a bilingual poet, writing in both English and Scots, makes him disinclined to accept Glen's contention that the Anglo-Scottish poets are necessarily dominated by English and/or American fashions.

Much more the super-patriot is Tom Scott (b. 1918), editor of *The Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex). In the twentieth-century part of this anthology, Hugh MacDiarmid is confined to his Scots verse of the period 1923-32, without a single example of his later work in English, and the choice from William Soutar is similarly monolingual. While Iain Crichton Smith (who shares Dr. Scott's dislike of Calvinism and capitalism, and his tendency to confuse the one with the other) is described as "the best Scottish poet now writing in English," he is confined to 26 lines, as against Norman MacCaig's 126; and while Sydney Goodsr Smith's Scots work is lauded as "second only to MacDiarmid," he receives less than half the lines accorded to Robert Garioch (for his overlong Fergussonian pastiche burlesque, "Embro to the Ploy") and to the editor himself. Dr. Scott, one of the six poets represented whose first collections have appeared since the end of the Second World War, awards himself twice as many lines as all the other five together. He also proves yet again that poets are the worst judges of their own verse, since he has chosen to be

represented by "Fergus," an early piece of patriotic propaganda in Scotch which has been described as "resembl[ing] MacGonagall in being lame, dull, long-winded, unconsciously comic, and utterly uninspired"—a work almost grotesquely inferior to the best of his later verse.

Some of this appears in Contemporary Scottish Verse 1959-1969, edited by Norman MacCaig and the present writer (Calder and Boyars, London). On this anthology, the English poet and critic Robert Nye was good enough to express the view that "those who have failed to keep closely in touch with more recent developments in Scottish poetry may be astonished both by the abundance and the quality of the poems. . . . Certain poets tend to stand out from the crowd, nor so much by the excellence of individual pieces but because the individuality and even the unfinished power of the poems that represent them refer the reader eagerly to their collections. Obvious poets of this stature are George Mackay Brown, Tom Buchan, Iain Crichton Smith and Hugh MacDiarmid. . . . The translations of previously unpublished Gaelic poems of Sorley MacLean will be an eye-opener for many . . . assuredly he is a major poet in the Gaelic. . . . The book contains a number of moving and well-achieved poems in strict forms by Stewart Conn, Robert Garioch, Maurice Lindsay, Sydney Tremayne, W. Price Turner, and the editors themselves. . . . Alan Jackson and Edwin Morgan—very different poets otherwise—can be taken as confederates of the intellectually footloose brigade, restless, experimental, willing to try anything once. . . . This is a splendidly full anthology, rich in evidence that the last ten years have seen an unusually large number of good poems written in Scotland."

On the other hand, an undergraduate apprentice poet, Tom Kinninnmont, expressed "dissatisfaction with the state of a great deal of Scottish poetry," stemming from what he called his "feelings about the contemporary literary scene, which represents . . . a kind of emasculation of culture." However, he found that "The anthology really tries . . . to be representative, and though I have reservations . . . there is no doubt this is an admirable book for many purposes, not least being its obvious convenience for school and university teaching. Certainly the book is an excellent introduction to the poetry of the last ten years in Scotland, and this is clearly what it is intended to be." Amazingly perceptive, these undergraduates!

Contemporary Scottish Verse contains some two hundred and forty poems by fifty-one poets, thirty-two of whom write in English, eleven

in Scots and three in Gaelic, while four are bilingual in English and Scots and one is bilingual in English and Gaelic. Ten years earlier, Norman MacCaig's corresponding anthology, *Honour'd Shade* (Chambers, Edinburgh), designed on a smaller scale, had presented seventy-seven poems by twenty-seven poets, fourteen writing in English, six in Scots, three in Gaelic, and four in English and Scots. In the interval, then, the proportion of Scottish poets writing in English has slightly increased, the proportion of those writing in Scots has remained about the same, the proportion of those writing in English and Scots has fallen, and likewise the proportion of those writing in Gaelic alone—although Iain Crichton Smith has emerged as a poet whose work is equally striking in both Gaelic and English. But, where creativity is concerned, statistics are largely meaningless. The future—as always—lies with individual achievement.

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