

## **REVIEW: A SOBER LOOK AT THE THISTLE**

*Mario Relich*

David McCordick (ed.), **Scottish Literature in the Twentieth Century: An Anthology**, Dalkeith: Scottish Cultural Press, 2002, 1254 pp, pb, £29.99, ISBN 1 84017 042 5.

David McCordick's introduction to his anthology of **Scottish Literature in the Twentieth Century** is nothing if not self-effacing. He tells us: 'Another first-rate book of this same size but with entirely different writers could easily have been put together.' Nevertheless, this is an unprecedented, path-breaking and textually rich selection which pays tribute to the finest modern Scottish writers. McCordick's vantage point is that of an American academic, one who strives to be even-handed in his critical judgments. To begin with, the introduction provides a simple, clear guide to the main movements of Scottish writing during the last century. His actual critical judgments, or guerilla-like interventions, occur mainly in his usually brief comments to a number of individual selections. He avoids top-heavy scholarly apparatus, and there is little in the way of bibliographical or biographical information. What the anthology loses in its usefulness as a work of reference, however, it gains as a work addressed primarily to the discerning 'common reader'.

Hugh MacDiarmid's **A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle** takes pride of place in the poetry selections, together with his famous Scots lyrics, as stellar works of 'what is sometimes called the Scottish Renaissance'. McCordick also observes that **A Drunk Man** 'is usually cited as the masterwork of modern Scottish poetry', a judgement which he implicitly endorses by reproducing it in full. And he also states more categorically: 'This long poem, Macdiarmid's masterpiece, is the most important work of Scottish verse in our century'. The traditional judgement that MacDiarmid is less

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effective in his English poems is also supported in that the selection consists overwhelmingly of poems in Scots. Despite his generous selection, which includes early lyrics like 'The Watergaw' and 'Crowdieknowe', and totals nearly seventy pages, he does not shrink from pointing out that 'for all his reputation, and his great gifts, MacDiarmid is not really much read outside of Scotland, even by those who love poetry.' Sydney Goodsir Smith and Robert Garioch are also very well represented. Goodsir Smith's sequence of love poems **Under the Eildon Tree** is included in its entirety, as is Garioch's **The Wire**, his bleak POW vision of the twentieth century. About Goodsir Smith, McCordick tells us: 'Exuberance, wit, variety and a charismatic speaking voice combine to make one of the best arguments for the modern visibility of Scots.' Garioch's links as urban satirist to Robert Fergusson are emphasised by inclusion of his elegiac tributes to the poet called by Burns 'my elder brother in the Muse', 'At Robert Fergusson's Grave, October 1962', 'To Robert Fergusson', and 'Embryo to the Ploy', Garioch's populist dig at the Edinburgh International Festival. Among the most lyrical Scots poets, William Soutar and Tom Scott are included. J. K. Annand's 'Arctic Convoy', winding its way in 'the pit-mirk nicht', provides another haunting wartime vision. More recent Scots poets include Sheena Blackhall and W. N. Herbert. McCordick does not neglect either essentially minor, but distinctive, talents like that of T. S. Law, drawing attention to his 'vigorous, colloquial, town-meeting style, and an agenda of national and working-class causes'.

In his introduction, however, McCordick rates 'what one may call the school of the well-made English verse' so much above poetry in Scots that he suggests: '... history may conclude this English verse was the real strength of modern Scottish literature.' He also points out that one of the most eminent of these poets, Norman MacCaig, although 'a close friend of MacDiarmid, wrote in English throughout his career.' Even in the case of the 'poet's poet' Edwin Morgan, McCordick's bias is in favour of his urban sonnets rather than more experimental verse. As makers of 'chiselled' verse, he highlights and devotes much space to Edwin Muir, Iain Crichton Smith, George Bruce, Stewart Conn, Douglas Dunn, Valerie Gillies, Ron Butlin, John Burnside, and 'the remarkable Don Paterson'. His enthusiasm for Paterson indeed reaches apotheosis, calling him 'the most original and important poet of his generation'. He regards Paterson's poetry as 'Joycean' in spirit, and **God's Gift to Women** as possibly 'the most significant verse publication of the last fifty years'. Readers can judge for themselves, and one included poem 'A Private Bottling' is certainly major by any standards. It is no secret that so

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discriminating a poet and critic as Ian Crichton Smith thought very highly of Paterson's work.

But on the comparative merits of Scots and English poetic language McCordick tends to oversimplify. About MacCaig, Douglas Dunn, for one, has warned in his introduction to **The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Scottish Poetry** that 'it would be mistaken to think of MacCaig's idiom as one of English-English'. Rather, according to Dunn, MacCaig and other modern Scottish poets, implicitly no doubt including Dunn himself, write 'to varying degrees English repossessed by the voice of the Scots vernacular.' He goes even further about MacCaig, declaring that MacCaig's English is 'modified by proximity to a Gaelic inheritance if not by Gaelic itself.' This is bound to be even more true about Crichton Smith's English poems, since he is generally acknowledged to be a masterly modern Gaelic poet. But only his English poems are included in the anthology. Yet in the case of Derick Thomson, the poet's own translations of his Gaelic originals 'have been selected for inclusion here on their own merits as English-language poetry'. However, it is George Campbell Hay, described by S. B. Kelly as 'one of the greatest Gaelic poets of the last century', citing his recently-published **Collected Poems and Songs** as evidence, who suffers most. He is represented by only a handful of minor poems in Scots and English. Fortunately neither Hamish Henderson nor Charles Sorley, both noticeably Scottish-accented in their English verse, are omitted, as the editors of **The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse** have notoriously done, perhaps to airbrush the 'imperialist' world wars out of their selection. While Sorley takes his honoured place among the First World War poets, Henderson, like Hay, was far more than a 'war poet'. Nevertheless, his **Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica**, included in its entirety, is one of the most powerful, humane and moving sequences to emerge out of the Second World War, and utterly distinct from other war poetry of the time.

About Kathleen Jamie, McCordick makes the somewhat cryptic, and possibly ironic remark: 'For good or for ill, it has been this fine writer's fortune to be labelled, along with Liz Lochhead, as Scotland's preeminent feminist poets'. And about Kathleen Raine, 'Scottish on her mother's side', he tells us: 'Lyric, intellectual, often philosophical, sometimes feminist, hers is a remarkable talent.' Such a gingerly approach to the word reveals that he has some reservations about poets being labelled 'feminist' at all, yet he deliberately chooses poems by Jamie which *might* be construed as such. No

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doubt he expects alert readers to realise that poems like 'Things Which Shall Never Be', 'The Queen of Sheba', and 'Den of Old Men' are not just critical of men. They probe into the many ways relationships become thwarted by lack of imagination, or generosity of spirit. Jamie's 'Old Wifey' can very fruitfully be compared with Lochhead's 'What the Pool Said on Midsummer's Day', both exploring darker aspects of the feminine psyche.

The anthology is very strong in its selection of prose fiction, even if it is mainly of short stories rather than extracts from novels. It is just as well that major Scottish novelists, such as Robin Jenkins, also tend to be excellent practitioners of the short story form. This is also the case with major poets like Iain Crichton Smith, Douglas Dunn, and George Mackay Brown, all expansively represented by both poems and short stories. About Dunn, McCordick even goes so far as to say that '[h]is short stories may be even more impressive'. He has chosen gripping stories with serendipitous flair, and with a shrewd eye for parallel treatments of similar themes. Dunn's 'The Canoes', for instance, seems completely different from Alan Warner's 'Car Hung, Upside Down', yet both stories convey a state of stasis, and quiet desperation, even if Warner's is much more catastrophic. McCordick makes it clear that one of his principles of selection was 'avoiding excerpts wherever possible', adding that some items 'have been taken from longer works, but nothing has been presented here that is not genuinely free-standing'. As for Alasdair Gray, he is represented by two of his stories, and his biting, fantastical autobiographical sketch, 'Mister Meikle', but also by a generous and reasonably free-standing extract from his great novel **Lanark**, entitled 'The Oracle's Tale'. James Barrie is well represented by two of his whimsical, yet surprisingly tough-minded stories, though the spotlight is more on his dramas. Memorable stories by John Buchan, Neil Gunn and Violet Jacob are also included. These are more than matched in flair by contributions from Ali Smith, A. L. Kennedy, and Janice Galloway. Dilys Rose is well represented not only by poems and stories, but also by the film-script of an included story, 'Friendly Voices', which she co-wrote with Jack Wyper.

No less than half a dozen full-length plays are included in their entirety, as well as a number of shorter ones. The full-length ones are as follows: Barrie's **What Every Woman Knows**, James Bridie's **The Anatomist**, Robert McLellan's **The Carlin Moth**, Joe Corrie's **Hewers of Coal**, C. P. Taylor's **Good**, and Sue Glover's **Bondagers**. All are dramas which have

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sturdily stood the test of time, and all are occasionally revived on stage. But only Glover's play is at all 'new', in the sense that it was originally produced within the last twenty years. McCordick's explanation is that '[t]here have been many fine Scottish plays written in the last twenty years or so, but no major Scottish playwright has emerged'. Of the postwar period as a whole, he maintains that only C. P. Taylor comes close to assuming the mantle of major Scottish playwright, 'but even Taylor moved to England to sustain his work'. And there is the rub about the permanent crisis in Scottish theatre. The section entitled 'The Struggle for a Scottish Theatre' in the introduction will raise many hackles, but its home-truths cannot be evaded. While he discusses the attempts to generate a Scottish National Theatre in the twentieth century, and praises the Traverse for its productions of new Scottish writing, he is too polite to mention the Scottish Executive's abysmal failure to support any real initiative in this regard.

McCordick's choice of critical prose, which is very sparing, tells us something about his own views, and priorities. G. Gregory Smith's 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy' (1919) analyses and celebrates the 'zigzag of contradictions' in Scottish literature, and was seized upon by MacDiarmid almost as a manifesto of what makes Scottish literature at its best distinctive. Among Smith's observations, here is one which foreshadowed much of the impetus for the Scottish Renaissance in MacDiarmid's day: 'The Scot is not a quarrelsome man, but he has a fine sense of the value of provocation, and in the clash of things and words has often found a spiritual tonic.' Also very influential, and included, was Edwin Muir's chapter on 'Scottish Literature: Language' in **Scott and Scotland**. Muir maintained that after the age of the makars a rupture occurred in Scottish literature between feeling, invariably in Scots, and thinking, mainly in English, consequently making Scots a very limited language for modern writers. It was an argument which infuriated MacDiarmid, and which still attracts rebuttals, as if this were still a live issue. Yet even at the time Muir's argument was no more than a Scottish variation of T. S. Eliot's famous assertion that after the Metaphysical poets in the seventeenth century, a 'dissociation of sensibility', or separation of thought and feeling, took place in *English* poetry. The final example of critical prose is Tom Nairn's 'Festival of the Dead 1967', originally written for the **New Statesman**. It is an amusing, if now rather ideologically defunct, diatribe against the Edinburgh bourgeoisie. A broader selection would have included writers not exclusively focused on Scotland, such as Neal Ascherson's eyewitness account of **The Polish August** or Alastair Reid on Latin

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American writers, notably Borges and Neruda, although poems by Reid are included.

As selector, McCordick could only practice what he felicitously calls 'the art of the possible'. Any anthology, especially one of this scope, is bound to omit some important writers for all kinds of understandable reasons, the most prominent of which is cost, since permission to reprint can be prohibitive. The politics involved in selection are often much more those of publishers and literary agents than the editor's personal taste. The most contentious omission, and one which has attracted some flak, is the absence of Gaelic writing. McCordick's reasons, however, cannot be faulted for any lack of integrity, quite the opposite. As he puts it: 'To represent the achievements of such luminaries as Sorley MacLean would simply require more space than was reasonable, given the many other English-language (i.e. English and Scots) works of distinction which demanded inclusion, not to mention the inevitable failure of translations to represent the real achievements of modern Gaelic writers.' The second reason is the more crucial and persuasive one.

Some of McCordick's anecdotes are priceless. Here is one: 'Kelman, the voice of the working man, has been described in some places as the most important living Scottish writer and the finest since the War. The present editor once repeated this statement to the redoubtable poet and critic Edwin Morgan, rather expecting a show of protest at such a sweeping assertion. Morgan thought about it, and then answered in his quiet way, "That's about right".' This is by way of preface to one of his longer interventions, an assessment of James Kelman's work. McCordick does indeed rate what he calls the 'Glasgow School' of realist writers, including such diverse ones as George Friel, William McIlvanney, Clifford Hanley, and Kelman himself, very highly. He also includes the Edinburgh maverick Irvine Welsh as honorary member of this group. In his introduction, moreover, he makes the following observation: 'Scotland is unusual among Western countries in its working-class emphasis. An amazing amount of its prose is devoted to proletarian subject matter and ideology.' It is therefore unsurprising and suitably appropriate that his anthology begins not with a work of literature, but with political oratory, Keir Hardie's 'On the Necessity for Socialism', addressed to the House of Commons in 1892, but undoubtedly a harbinger of the twentieth century, even if it reads like deadly irony now.

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