

REVIEW: EDWIN MORGAN AND MODERN SCOTTISH POETRY

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Christopher Whyte, **Modern Scottish Poetry**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, 246 pp, pb, £14.99, ISBN: 0 7486 1600 4.

Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, **Aspects of Form and Genre in the Poetry of Edwin Morgan**, Amersham: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2003, 209 pp, hb, £29.99, ISBN: 190403226.

Christopher Whyte and Rodney Stenning Edgecombe apply radically different critical approaches to their chosen subjects, modern Scottish poetry and Edwin Morgan's poetry respectively. Edgecombe greatly admires Morgan's *oeuvre*, treating him as a masterly shape-shifter of traditional poetic genres, thereby transforming them, while Whyte seizes on what he regards as ludic and postmodern elements in Morgan's work. Scotland's Poet Laureate is, indeed, prominent in both these substantial works of critical analysis, exclusively so in Edgecombe's monograph, and as a key 20th century Scottish poet in Whyte's book. One critique is genre-based, and the other more concerned with gender theorising.

To begin with Whyte, he structures his discussion of modern Scottish poetry in what he calls the 'aleatoric' fashion, a term he borrows from 'serious contemporary music'. Just like current musical performers who choose a range of options within specific musical compositions, he focuses on poems selected not from an entire *oeuvre* but from key collections published in each post-1940 decade. It is a critical method which generally serves him well, and few would argue with his choice of collections, such as Norman MacCaig's **Riding Lights** (1955), one of his best, or Robert Garioch's **Selected Poems** (1966), the most substantial volume published in his lifetime. Even the choice

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of Hugh MacDiarmid's **In Memoriam James Joyce**, published in 1955, although much of it was written in the thirties and forties, is eminently justified, because it was in the fifties that it made its greatest impact, even if a muted one compared with his Scots poems. Whyte, however, neglects J. D. Fergusson's powerful illustrations to this late masterpiece. But the artist's contribution did not escape Edwin Morgan's notice. In an essay on 'James Joyce and Hugh MacDiarmid', he had this to say about MacDiarmid's great sequence, subtitled 'A Vision of World Language': that it 'is decorated like the Book of Kells or **Finnegans Wake**, with indignant Celtic whiploolashes, prudently blocked rounds, whirligig glorioles, and tiberious ambiembellishments by the Scottish artist J. D. Fergusson, including James Joyce's name set forth in best stubby ogam'. Whyte, in fact, does not seem to have consulted the first edition of **In Memoriam James Joyce**, the only one which contains Fergusson's illustrations, at all.

More reprehensibly, he omits discussion of Hamish Henderson's **Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica** (1948), just as important, surely, as the original Gaelic publications of Sorley MacLean's **Poems to Eimhir** (1943), and George Campbell Hay's **Hillside Springs** (1948), which he does discuss. Yet Henderson's collection was certainly rather more widely-read than the other two. It also contains an epigraph from and possible allusions to MacLean's poems, which he evidently admired long before the Gaelic poet became well-known in Britain. All three poets, moreover, were significantly affected by the desert-war in North Africa, and shared broadly similar political views in favour of the common soldier. As Henderson later became culturally so influential with the Folk-Song Revival, which had its own impact on Scottish poetry, such inexplicable erasure of a poet undoubtedly of greater renown than either MacLean or Campbell Hay, and yet close in spirit to both, seriously distorts Whyte's discussion of the forties – according to him the key decade for all subsequent developments in Scottish poetry. Earlier decades, indeed, he treats as 'The Story So Far'.

Another problematic aspect with Whyte's approach is that while his scepticism about issues of national identity is salutary, claiming to prefer 'a revisionist reading of the interwar period', his application of gender politics can be every bit as oppressive as the nationalistic biases he condemns. George Mackay Brown's sacramental imagery, for instance, indicates, according to Whyte, that he had a limited view of women's sexuality as inherently passive, and his discussion of Liz Lochhead's poems betrays an impatience with what he takes to be the exclusiveness of her heterosexuality.

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Hence this kind of damning comment about her: 'Lochhead risked becoming the kind of woman writer (and the very phrase is problematic) men are not afraid of, one who can all too easily be digested by and absorbed into the literary and academic establishment'. After this kind of put-down, shrewdly qualified between brackets, it is not very surprising that, in contrast to the gender polarity 'at the core of Lochhead's love poetry', he very much prefers Carol Ann Duffy's work, in which 'an ungendered presence is more common'. And how seriously can we take, from a Reader in Scottish Literature at Glasgow University, his detachment from the 'academic establishment'? With regard to Mackay Brown, in order to appreciate his poetry, it is surely not necessary, as Whyte's critique seems to logically entail, to be a Catholic traditionalist or possibly even a misogynist.

Despite such blemishes, Whyte does largely succeed in extending our understanding of what has been achieved by modern Scottish poets. Where he has gone further than other critics attempting a similar canvas, moreover, is in his discussion of translation. He makes no rigid distinctions between translation and 'original' works, analyzing in a rich, exploratory manner how Scottish poets, as in previous periods, tend to write in a wide range of registers. Whyte is equally at ease with Tom Leonard's demotic poems in Glasgow *patois*, versions of what could be, and have been, called 'Scots-accented English', with poets like MacCaig, W. S. Graham, and Douglas Dunn, with Scots as practiced by Garioch and others, and with the entirely different Gaelic language in poets already mentioned. But the very practice of writing poems in Gaelic also differs considerably among Gaelic poets, in that some, such as Sorley MacLean and Derick Thomson, write English versions of their Gaelic poems, while others, like Iain Crichton Smith, not only translate their own poems into English, but also write poems in English of their own which are an equally important part of their total *oeuvre*. Whyte convincingly argues that the translations of Gaelic poems into English should themselves be considered textual versions which, if not necessarily as good as their Gaelic originals, are at least of equal textual importance since most readers will only encounter these poems in their English versions. But he goes even further. In the case of Robert Garioch, for instance, he treats his Scots translations of Giuseppe Belli's sonnets in Roman dialect as very much on a par with his other work, and rightly so. Indeed, his discussion of the hugely important role of translation in 20th century Scottish poetry, translation in terms of cross-cultural dialogue continuing into the 21st century present, is more truly radical, insightful and thought-provoking than his penchant for overbearing critical shibboleths. His own practice as an English-speaking

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poet writing in Gaelic no doubt explains the acuity of his many insights in this respect.

As for current poets, Whyte's discussion focuses on collections by Robert Crawford, Kathleen Jamie, Carol Ann Duffy, and Aonghas MacNeacail, none of them controversial choices for representing the 1990s, although which acclaimed poet or other gets left out is bound to annoy some readers. Since issues of Scottish identity, and its adaptation to global constraints and opportunities, is so important in at least three of these poets, Whyte includes this health-warning: 'Since the present approach remains firmly agnostic, "Scottishness" here refers to a literary strategy, often the result of more or less conscious choice, rather than a quality whose genuineness can be independently verified'. And this implicit criticism of all four poets is highly questionable: 'Their poetic practice can be satisfactorily accounted for without moving beyond contemporary poetic production in the English language world'. But if that is really so, then he has chosen the most parochial poets as his last ones for consideration, a proposition demonstrably absurd.

While Whyte tends to be too gender-orientated, and rather orthodox in his 'postmodernist' critical assumptions, Edgecombe's analysis of Edwin Morgan's work is more firmly rooted in genre. Instead of focusing on key collections, Edgecombe selects for discussion the genres most favoured by Morgan, and how he has radically modernised them. For instance, he treats his 'Instamatic' poems not merely as word-pictures of newspaper photographs, however kinetic, but in terms of the poet experimenting with the ancient, and often contentious, genre of the grotesque, thereby highlighting paradoxical aspects of life in our highly technologised world. Nor is he too wary of identifying Morgan's Scottishness where appropriate: 'The poet's affinity with the comic grotesque is probably as much a function of his Scottish heritage as his temperament'. Elegies, journey poems, and monologues are other prominent genres transformed by Morgan which Edgecombe investigates, and he does so with transparent enthusiasm, and stylish liveliness. He also discusses Morgan's **Beowulf** as a poem which, as the critic puts it, in Lytton Strachey manner questions 'received Anglo-Saxon pieties', thereby transcending translation of the original. He is perhaps at his most percipient in analysing the poet's affinities with Jack London, a very tough-minded and completely modern humanist, describing 'Jack London in Heaven' as a Browningsque monologue which forges, in MacDiarmidite fashion, 'a discourse about the tedium of the Christian afterlife'.

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In short, Edgecombe makes an excellent case for regarding Morgan as one of the few truly great contemporary poets. In his very different way, and making much of the 'astonishingly generative' qualities he finds in Morgan's poetry, Whyte comes to a similar conclusion, if rather circuitously, but he does accurately point out that he has overthrown MacDiarmid as the 'the crucial point of reference for younger poets'. Oh yes, for 'both men and women'.

One of the Instamatics discussed by neither critic, 'Venice April 1971', ends with an old poet 'at the edge of the picture', most likely Ezra Pound observing Stravinsky's funeral, as he 'without expression/watches the boats move out/from his shore'. Perhaps Edwin Morgan was really writing about himself, at once stoical and optimistic about Scottish poetry in his own time.

January 2005