

Northwords **Now**

Issue 16

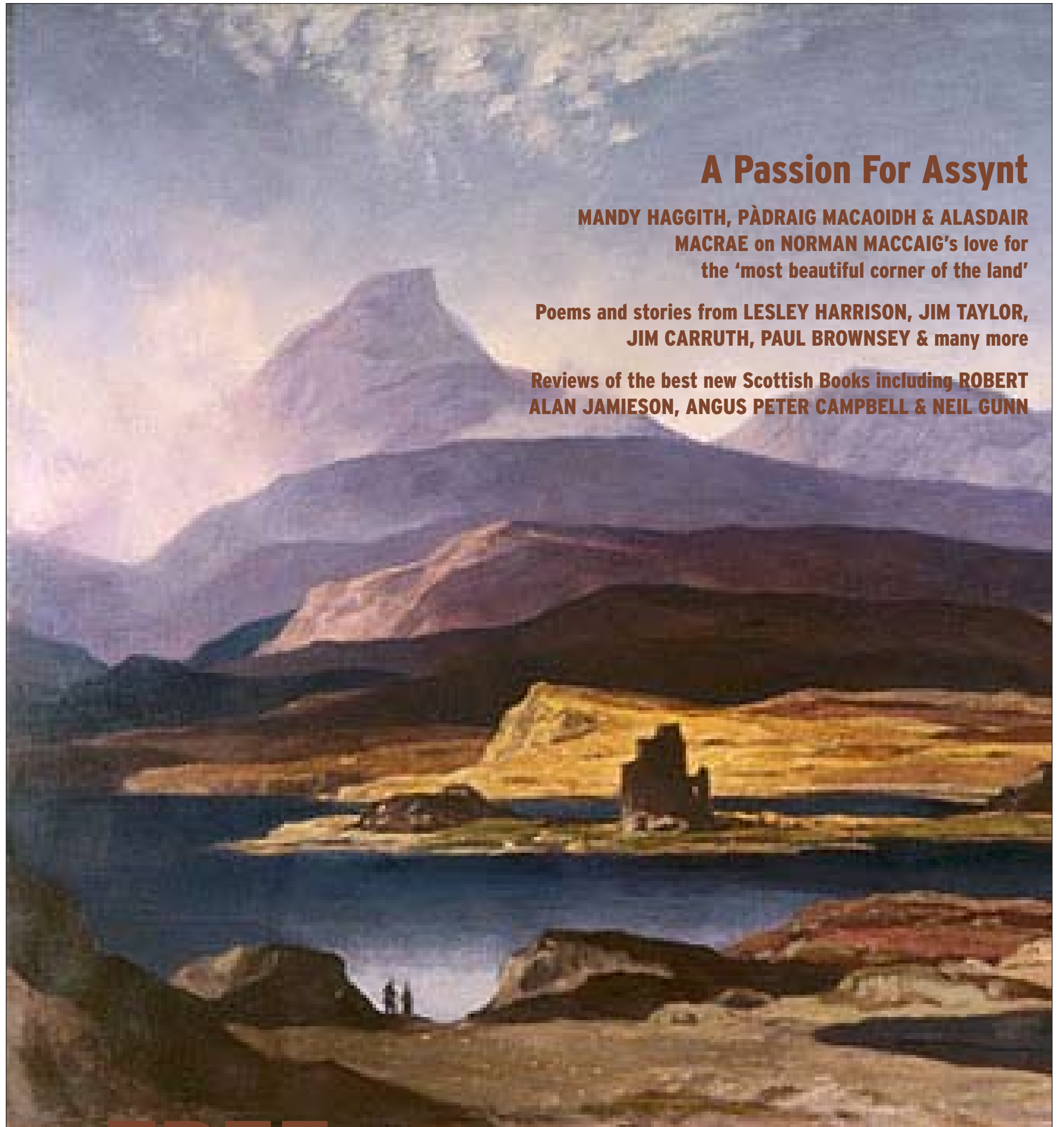
Autum 2010

A Passion For Assynt

**MANDY HAGGITH, PÀDRAIG MACAOIDH & ALASDAIR
MACRAE on NORMAN MACCAIG's love for
the 'most beautiful corner of the land'**

**Poems and stories from LESLEY HARRISON, JIM TAYLOR,
JIM CARRUTH, PAUL BROWNSEY & many more**

**Reviews of the best new Scottish Books including ROBERT
ALAN JAMIESON, ANGUS PETER CAMPBELL & NEIL GUNN**



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Coriander, kor-i-an'der, *n*, an annual plant, the seeds of which when fresh have an offensive smell.

Corinthian, kor-inth-i-an, *adj*, pertaining to *Corinth*, a city of Greece.

Corium, ko'ri-um, *n*, the innermost layer of the skin.

Cork, kork, *n*, the outer bark of the cork-tree, an oak found in S. Europe.

Corm, korm, **Cormus**, kor-mus, *n*, sometimes called a solid bulb - the short, bulb-like subterranean stem of many plants.

Cormack's & Crawford's, Kor-max and Kraw-fordz, *n*, Purveyors of fine footwear and drapery. From the Latin, Cormakis et Crawfordus. A rare species of independent retailer known throughout the land for their quality of merchandise and service. To be found in its natural habitat of Dingwall and Ullapool in the Highlands of Scotland. Known also as C & C's, *See'n Sees*. To "do a cormack and crawford", *v*; - to buy quality goods.

Cormophyte, kor'mo-fit, *n*, a plant having a true axis of growth - also cormogen - *adj*, cormophytic

Cormorant, kor'mo-rant, *n*, a genus of web-footed sea-birds, of great voracity; a glutton.

Corn, korn, *n*, a grain or kernel; seeds that grow in ears, as wheat, rye etc., grain of all kinds.

Also **Corn**, *adj*, poor humour. A joke that misses its mark - not unknown in the advertising industry

Also **Corn**, *n*, a small hard growth usually on the toe or foot, resulting from ill fitting

footwear. Unknown in *Cormack's & Crawford's* - see entry above

Extract by kind permission of the Oxford Dictionary and *Cormack's & Crawford's*, Dingwall and Ullapool.

Victor Frankenstein used electricity to animate his monster.

William McGonagall was struck by lightning while walking from Dundee to Braemar.

William Falkner wrote 'As I lay Dying' while working at a power plant.

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Boswell, being angry at her, threw the mutton chops out of the window. I ventured outside to see what Forres might offer a traveller. The main street was broad and fair though the brats on the street were impertinent. However they left off their games when we came upon a market, whereat they called out 'Babalu, babalu!' and ran among the crowd.

I had not encountered this word before. A courteous woman explained it thus: somewhere in this place there is an object which you will desire, though you know not what it may be.

A curious word, yet cogent. I am resolved to enter it into my Dictionary.

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WHERE TO FIND NORTHWORDS NOW

EDITORIAL

TO MY MIND all three syllables of the phrase 'Northwords Now' ring true. 'North' and 'words' are unequivocal signals of the magazine's geographical leaning and its content. But that small word 'Now' is equally important. I want Northwords Now to be unashamedly modern. It might seem, then, a touch perverse to devote so much of this current issue to voices from the past. But the truth is that writers draw sustenance from their literary forbears even as they keep a weather eye on the present and, for that matter, the future. The work of Norman MacCaig is a prime example of this principle. In this, the centenary year of his birth, he doesn't so much cast a shadow over contemporary Scottish poetry as a subtly revealing light. Mandy Haggith's 'response' to 'A Man in Assynt', shows just how revealing that light can be, and this is amplified by Pàdraig MacAoidh's translation of MacCaig's poetry. Alasdair Macrae's article provides a lucid insight into MacCaig's fascination with questions of history, identity, language and environment. These questions are as relevant today as when 'A Man in Assynt' was written, some forty years ago. The voice of Norman MacCaig is that of a profoundly modern poet; one who is deeply aware of the past but never more so than when it 'irrupts' into the present.

I'm also delighted that this issue gives space to revisiting the life and work of a rather too easily overlooked writer. W.S Milne's article on Flora Garry not only celebrates a poet with an acute and vivid feel for place, it also reminds us – if any reminder were needed – of the rich linguistic diversity of the north of Scotland.

Finally, I can't end this editorial without acknowledging the passing of Scotland's makar, Edwin Morgan. He left a body of work so rich and diverse I suspect it will take many years before its full value can be assessed. In the meantime there is plenty to enjoy in the writings of a man whose reach was not just national but global – perhaps even cosmic given the fascination with space travel in his poetry, most notably in *From Glasgow to Saturn*. Edwin Morgan also left a very tangible legacy in the shape of the Edwin Morgan Travel Bursary for young poets. Richie McCaffery has been a grateful beneficiary of this bursary. His poems in this issue (see page 4) were written before the death of Edwin Morgan, but I'm sure Richie will not mind if, in place of an obituary, we let his 'Island Cycle' stand not just as a fine sequence of poems in its own right, but also as Northwords Now's own tribute to a remarkable literary life. ■

CHRIS POWICI, EDITOR

Northwords Now

A three times yearly literary magazine published by Northwords, a not-for-profit company, registered at February 2005.

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Front cover image

'Wilds of Assynt' by David Cameron. By kind permission from Perth Museum and Art Gallery.

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Subscriptions

The magazine is FREE and can be picked up at locations across Scotland. See list on P23

The fee for individual 'home-delivery' is £6 for 3 issues, cheques payable to 'Northwords'.

Submissions to the magazine are welcome. They can be in Gaelic, English and any local variants. They should be sent to the postal address – see above. Unsolicited E-mail attachments will not be opened. The material should be typed on A4 paper. Contact details and SAE should be included. We cannot return work that has no sae. **Copyright** remains with the author.

The next issue is planned for late March 2011

The Board and Editor of Northwords Now acknowledge support from Inverness & Nairn Enterprise, the Scottish Arts Council, Hi-Arts and Bòrd na Gàidhlig.Council and Hi-Arts.

ISSN 1750-7928



An Island Cycle

POEMS BY RICHIE McCAFFERY

In 2009 Richie McCaffery was awarded an Edwin Morgan Travel Bursary. He bought a second-hand Raleigh, a Calmac ticket and headed for the islands. These are some of the poems that emerged from his journey.

Kinloch Castle, Rum

We lie in an old servant's brass bed
in this palace of 'purposeful idleness'.
Left idle after no domestic returned
from the voracious muck of Ypres.
On the wall the deer are in velvet

or gralloched in lifeless oil paintings.
Tonight we all sleep more or less in ruins,
you and me in all this baronial mould
and the deer on the fens in blackhouses
of an *caroa mor*, on beds of clover.

Glen Mundi

I see the heart in need of healing
in foxgloves that grow like bruises
by a broken stile at the wood's edge.

My shoes will see me a few more miles,
conifers and ditches go motte and bailey
against me, light goes like angels' share.

One day I will bed this agate each root
clings to, until then I think of her, the seed-
splitting crack her buttons made as I undid

them. I am not lost in this thicket, Nature
is a slattern who doesn't care where
odd earrings are. I could almost make

this cosmic cold my own, but I still hack
and moth towards the glow, where she is,
in the valley of warm milk and soft voice.

Glen Carragrieach

Flora from a medieval grimoire:
tormentil, bog asphodel
and *devil's bit scabious*.

Clouds coiffeur themselves
in peat stained corries.
The bone china skull

of a golden plover
has joined the stones.
Selfless makar, to sing

a tiny coronach for every
winged death and make
this lichenous silence its own.

Arran

We have got lost on purpose.
I altered the map as we went along,
the way you edit your pinchbeck life.
Now no rivers will be posted to the sea.

We stand on the edge of a dolmen,
and look in to its flooded chamber.
I have become a kist for your ashes.
Your cigarette flares, a fierce full-stop.

Fairy Pools, Skye

We pitched our tent that evening
in the basalt glower of the Cuillins
and went barefoot for firewood.
In the pines, in a fern glade
a burn ran like marbles over rocks.

Huddled around your pocket radio
that night, we danced blanketed.
A song called 'Secret Heart' came on.
Through hailstorms and squalls
a voice from the dark wavelengths.

I held you like a decanter
in the tent, pouring splashingly.
We were the only people alive.
I was all kaleidoscopes and adrenalin
and never told you it was my first time.

Ferry from Raasay

Leaving Raasay on my 23rd birthday,
from the sweaty ferry window a trio
of bottle-nose dolphins scimitar
in jumpy brine of the Little Minch.

That shagreen in blurred slatiness
seemed choreographed, a tourist trick.
But they kept weaving the waves,
oscillating between two worlds.

On my own, cycling from Sconser
I felt there was something in the muirs
and along the boot-lace liquorice roads
that I had to keep up with, at any cost.

Not the destination, nor what I'd find
but the dicey wealth of going forward,
to never coast in foamy after-thoughts
of the voyage, or spin forever in its eddies.

Luskentyre Bay, Harris

We loggerheaded a long car cortege
led by a rain-beetle black Daimler hearse.
It held a dead islander, a tweed weaver
whose loom had ran grey then white,
from ancestral blanket to ashen shroud.

They buried him near the dunes of the bay,
where dry sand falls like flaxen water.
We agreed it was a good place to spend
forever. Since then, when we make love
I feel the waves keep time between us.

Fairy Glen, Uig

Walked to Fairy Glen in the dark,
the moon was a nickel-plated spoon
glowing at the bottom of a lochan-

not the huge satellite casting
its argent ore over the county
where I was born.

Things are getting smaller
the further and farther I go.

Writing On The Wild Side

Linda Cracknell and The Black Isle Words Festival

By GREG MALLEY



Cycling Wild - Linda Cracknell on The Black Isle

NEXT TO EDINBURGH or Wigtown, The Black Isle Words Festival (September 10th-12th) may be one of the smaller of Scotland's literary gatherings, but in this case small is not only beautiful but also rather beguiling. For a start there's the town of Cromarty with its lanes and vennels, its impressive Georgian townhouses rubbing shoulders with low-built cottages, giving the impression of a sort of intimate and agreeably anarchic architectural dance. Then there's the Cromarty Firth, on one side of the town – blue and glittering and reigned over by cormorants, gulls and the odd oil rig; on the other, verdant woods and fields. The size of the festival also means that it's intimate, friendly, inclusive and able to achieve a sense of focus that its larger siblings on the book calendar can't really match. The fact that most of the events take place in the comfortable and attractive confines of the recently renovated 'Old Brewery' only adds to the pleasure.

An important strand of this year's festival was Cromarty's own literary history. Saturday afternoon was given over to two very enlightening talks on the work of Cromarty author Jane Duncan whose *My Friends* series of novels made her, in the sixties, one of Scotland's best selling writers. One senses that the mood for a literary reappraisal is nigh. Mairi Hedderwick (illustrator of Jane Duncan's children's books) and Fiona Thomson, from Leeds Trinity University, shed a revealing light on how Jane Duncan's far from ordinary life informed her work as a novelist. On the

Friday evening 'local authors' Kenny Taylor, Angus Dunn, Jim Miller and Anne MacLeod swapped accounts of the history of the festival and, along the way, the role of place in their work. I confess that I'm inclined to treat the phrase 'local author' with a fair degree of caution but these are serious literary practitioners and their discussion was peppered with enough humour, insight and sheer writerly nous to keep the audience on its toes.

The festival also joined the local to the universal through its major theme: Where Wild Things Are. Sharon Blackie, from the Lewis-based Two Ravens Press, talked passionately of how the impact of a wild setting resonates with her mission as a publisher (and novelist) to bring to light kinds of writing that challenge accepted ways of living. Sir John Lister-Kaye not only gave a mini-history of nature writing in English, he treated the audience to a selection of his own experience from his latest 'nature memoir', *At The Water's Edge*. This included a memorable description of a dry stone wall as a 'weasel cathedral'. It's good to see that it's not just poets who know how to turn an engaging rhyme. The festival culminated with a talk from award-winning nature writer Jay Griffiths on the links between language and nature, and environmental and human justice. Challenging stuff to be sure, but relevant, contemporary and above all clear-sighted and intelligent.

But The Words Festival is about more than a 'passive' audience lapping up words of wisdom from published writers. The Saturday

ceilidh and reading party gave a hint of just how much 'local talent' can be found in this corner of Scotland. Earlier in the day poet Gerry Cambridge (see *Northwords Now* 15) and short story writer, playwright, and essayist Linda Cracknell led a workshop in the local woods. I caught up with Linda shortly after the festival to talk about Cromarty, and walking and writing.

According to Linda, the great thing about The Black Isle Festival is 'the slim differentiation between readers and audience'. This became particularly apparent during the 'walking workshop'. 'I could feel a real sense of place emerge' she explains, especially when the group paid a visit to the local 'Gaelic Chapel'. Though now in ruins the fact that the beginnings of a wood – or, as Linda insists 'a sacred grove' – is now springing up within what remains of the walls means that its spiritual significance is taking on a new form.

Indeed the significance of 'place' has been central to Linda's recent work as a writer, as well as a teacher of creative writing. A Creative Scotland award in 2007 gave her the opportunity to explore place through a series of what she calls 'purposeful walks'. These included following an old drove road from Perthshire to Skye, re-creating a journey her father had made through the alps, and tracing the route of a Second World War Norwegian resistance fighter, Sven Sømme, who escaped imprisonment, and almost certain execution by the Nazis, by escaping across the mountains into Sweden. The fact that Linda was

accompanied some of the way by descendants of people who remembered Sven and helped him on his journey, not only served to heighten a sense of connection with the land but also put her in touch with the past. As far as Linda is concerned, walking is not about 'escaping people, but understanding how the land is peopled; walking is a way of connecting with history as well as nature.' It has also meant facing new creative challenges. Linda freely, and somewhat gleefully, admits to a leaning toward 'verbosity' in her non-fiction. This is something that 'Linda Cracknell the short story writer' guards against, but which 'Linda Cracknell the essayist' clearly finds a wee bit 'liberating', as if the principle of 'freedom to roam' should extend to the written word as well as the landscape.

Linda has also brought her experience as a writer and walker to bear in her editing of *A Wilder Vein* (Two Ravens Press), a collection of 'new literary non-fiction that focuses on the relationship between people and the wild places of Britain and Ireland.' Clearly Linda remains excited and enthused by the variety of writing in *A Wilder Vein*. The hallmark of these 'essays' isn't that they explore wilderness according to the out-moded rubric of 'man conquering nature'. Rather, what impresses Linda is how the writers show how the wild is present 'as much on the fringes, and in the nooks and crannies of our towns and cities as it is in our moorlands and forests.' According to Linda, a writer like Katharine Macrae evokes the ways in which 'a fusion between emotion and landscape' is possible in the most unlikely of settings – in this context 'the strange flat landscape' between Hull and the North Sea. 'Of course nature matters' Linda explains, 'but we also need to cultivate a feeling for wildness if we're not to get bogged down in received opinions about what counts as wild or not.'

One 'received opinion' Linda was happy to put to rest when editing *A Wilder Vein* was that nature writing was something done by men. The trails blazed by Rachael Carson, Annie Dillard and, more recently, Kathleen Jamie were being further opened out by a host of new, or comparatively little known, women writers. Linda doesn't try to conceal a smile of pride, and pleasure, in letting me know that as many women as men contributed work to *A Wilder Vein*. However, the idea that writing by women necessarily leads to a different vision of nature is 'far from certain'. Indeed Linda's approach to writing and environment, though informed by passion and care, is refreshingly free of ideological certainties. As she puts it, 'The ways in which we experience and write about nature are as diverse as nature itself.'

Amen to that. ■

A Wilder Vein, edited by Linda Cracknell and with a foreword by Robert Macfarlane, is published by Two Ravens Press (www.tworavenspress.com).

Two of the walks Linda Cracknell has written about as a result of her Creative Scotland Awards have now been published as 'pocketbooks'. Details of *Whiter Than White* and *The Beat of Heart Stones*, as well as Linda's other work, can be found at www.lindacracknell.com

White Fluffy Clouds

SHORT STORY BY JIM TAYLOR

WHEN OLD PETER finally retired as groundwork foreman for MK Lawrence, he got into the oil painting big-time. Snowbound log cabins, mainly, in the style of the old west. He tried to keep Doreen from coming round the house, because he knew she would start going on about the smell of the turps. Meanwhile, his collection of Bob Ross videos, *The Joy of Painting*, grew to line the TV cabinet and some of his shelves. Sun-dappled woodland paths, frozen Alpine lakes, a Mexican village at sunset; Bob Ross could knock them out in minutes, but the real holy grail for Peter was the translucent breaking wave scene. Despite what Bob had to say about self-belief, that wave required more than just a leap of faith. Peter even had a framed picture of the man himself on his mantelpiece, in amongst the family portraits. That was one thing that had never sparked any comments, but they all knew he'd had thirteen years to get used to his own company.

Not that May was ever completely out of the equation. Fresh flowers on a Sunday and a quiet word about family, often concerning Doreen's latest. It was easy to sense May's response. She had always known how to keep things like daughters-in-law in perspective. Who would have known you could have a laugh with the dead, but you could. They'd even had a chuckle together about his faux pas over the dungarees.

Any time Old Peter needed a new pair of trousers, he was in the habit of going to White's in town, where the guy knew exactly what he needed and would just stick them in a bag – none of that changing room palaver. Then he would take them right round the corner to the alteration place to get them taken up. However, this one time it wasn't White himself, but a young lassie behind the counter. Old Peter didn't feel good about it, just

giving her the size, but still he'd trusted her. He took the breeks to the tailor and asked for the usual modifications. Sure enough, when he got them back, they turned out to be four inches short and bell-bottoms to boot. Talk about Coco the Clown.

It wasn't the sort of thing he wanted anyone finding out about and he thought he was safe enough putting them in a black sack for the jumble sale, in amongst a heap of other old jumpers and junk, but, true to form, Doreen found the bag and had a good rummage to see what he was throwing out. When she wanted to know whose the child-size flares were, he had to come clean. She'd mentioned it about fifty times since.

Like the day he came back from church. She was in the middle of telling him to clear the bruck out of the back room, how much to contribute to Angela's graduation gift and who was and wasn't being invited to Pauline's wedding, when all of a sudden the youngest grandson asked him if there were animals up in heaven, Charlie the black Lab being not long in the ground. He didn't want to hurt the boy's feelings, but there was no point stuffing kids' heads with nonsense. The afterlife wasn't a safari park. Doreen rebuked him right in front of the bairns. Who in the hell did he think he was, Francis of Assisi in reverse?

"Maybe I'm wrong, but it's what I believe and the boy's nearly twelve."

"Well you're nearly sixty-eight and you can't buy yourself a pair of trousers."

One thing he'd managed to keep to himself was the scan appointment in Aberdeen. He made out he was going down to see Lena Smith, who was in for another hip job. He was always doing bits and bobs for the old wives in church and he knew, for a while, the family had been keeping an eye out for one of them snaring him – a companion for him in his later years – but no go. He just liked

keeping busy and he knew May would approve, especially about keeping Lena's garden right for her, after the way she'd stuck by them when they were still new in the place and Young Peter was having all his problems. Anyway, when the consultant admitted him on the spot for a fifty-fifty operation, he had to inform his next of kin. Thank God that was at least possible these days.

It was twenty years since Young Peter had knocked him on his backside on site, ten since they'd started talking again and one since the boy had come round for a heart to heart about his problems with Doreen. They ended up sitting under Old Peter's first framed masterpiece – a cabin, with gently smoking chimney and a welcoming light in the window, sitting snugly under two conifers. "Everyone needs a friend," Bob Ross had said about adding in that second tree.

"It's no bad, Dad," Young Peter had admitted.

"Aye. I ken the proportions are a bit out, but..."

He'd tried to think of Bob Ross's quiet, reassuring style, while telling the boy about marriage not always being easy and how he'd had many a barny with May. He neglected to mention that most of them had been about Young Peter himself. But they hadn't had their troubles to seek – Police never away from the door. He'd stopped using the belt when Young Peter looked him in the eye and said, "This is how you get your kicks, isn't it?" Getting him a place at work had seemed like the best thing as well, but that hadn't been easy.

Old Peter had faced a few guys down in his career as a foreman: drunks, conmen, slackards, thugs. Each time, he'd felt like Gary Cooper in High Noon, searching for the courage to stand alone. And to think for all this he'd been paid ninety pence an hour more than the

rest of them. But standing up to his own son had been a different sort of challenge. When Young Peter came back from a dinner break with a drink in him – not for the first time – and started throwing his weight around, he knew he was going to have to sack the boy just to show the same rules applied to everyone. It was one of those no-win situations, but he hadn't bargained on a punch in the face and a ten-year family split.

Inevitably, it was Doreen who took his call from the hospital and started going on about prior warning, but when Old Peter came to from the op, it looked as if she and Young Peter had made it to the bedside in double quick time. They were a bit out of focus, but then Doreen seemed to loom large and he realised she was putting his specs on for him. Behind the couple was a window and the clouds in the sky were the type Bob Ross always put in his pictures – small, white, fluffy ones. Young Peter took his hand and for a second they were back at the school gates. Big Peter had knocked off early to pick Wee Peter up after his first day. Wee Peter had been hit by a big boy and Big Peter was telling him to make sure and hit him back harder the next day.

"Sorry for the bum steer," Old Peter told his adult son. Realising his visitors didn't understand, and wanting to show he was still on top of things, Old Peter suddenly asked the time, though he had no idea what day it was. Young Peter told him it was half past four and then closed his eyes, because he knew just what the old guy was going to say next.

"It's the last round-up," said Old Peter. It was what he had always announced at work, when it was time to square away.

"No, Dad. It's no finishing time the noo."

"No." Old Peter nodded. It was fine to think there might still be time to plant that rockery for Lena. And a few more goes at the breaking wave. ■

Innocence

BY ROB EWING

The back green was our nanny for the morning, a rumour of grass snakes and four-leaf clover though in truth it was a parched scab of dust. Sent out to flap among the washing, we tried

to stay good. But what's a kid to do? Bored by the slimy scent of bins, by the oppressive woodsmoke air of Avonbridge, which in its vale wears a cap of smog in all but summer, we spied—

her window. Next to my gran's, Mrs Craw's: the crone who dressed in black, like her namesake, over selfsame spindling legs. So, what to do? We peered in. Her scullery, empty; a yawning sink

like my gran's, ragged lino, Bell cooker, walls bare with the decorous emptiness of poverty. And there, beneath her open window—soup-pot, primed with tatties, carrots, split peas, for putting

on later. I ask you, what were we to do? Then the laughing thought of it made us mad: it was all we could do to stop ourselves from throwing in stones and dirt from her back path. Which we did.

When her bad drunken son came home later, to find no soup for his tea, he hammered her. What could we do? We listened through the wall. His roars detonated in my dreams; I crammed my ear

to the rubber sheet to drown them out; and her emptied face—seen as we idled in the back court by her door next morning—haunts me still. Now, when I take a fill of my own mother's soup,

as much as it is good and warm and tasting of all the consolations of childhood, still a part of me expects one day to break my teeth on a stone: or find the dregs of muck we left her with.

Irish Stew

SHORT STORY BY MANDY HENDERSON

AFINGER FULL of blue paint, like butter, it smears to join the rest on the wall, buzzing next to the orange. I enjoy the blur between the worlds when I lose focus, attraction and repulsion in equal measures, cavorting in another universe. But only making brown in this world.

There's a door in this space. I hate the door. It reminds me of other things, like what's on the other side of it. I tried to paint it out a long time ago, after I'd finished covering the skylight in welts of black, but still it opens, regularly, disturbing my sob angel and me. I try to think about the paint when it does, this magic ooze ringed in the colour of morning grass, fuelling the surface, charging her into movement. And she does, all the time, millimetre by millimetre, muscles surfacing as she rounds on me, her pivot as slow as time, as slow as I paint. As slow as my little girl grew. My sob angel's hair is Polynesian black, each lock never drying as it strips her back open into a barbarous violet. Some days I slap the brush hard, punching her thigh into inches. Sometimes I'll dip my hand into a bucket of slack crimson and smear the room, an offering in the blood of a bastard. I'll carve her shoulder in thick oil. I'll wipe it off. I'll cut my arm. I'll ignore the blood. Footprints in nebulous hues mass around the wall – a reverential arc – as I paint her, paint her, paint her.

Some days are worse than others.

I try to ignore the woman who looks around the door, head appearing like a puppet in a show. She bobs there, holding on as she peers over some event horizon, opens the hole in her face, tries to speak to the alien. Her hair looks like a wig. I think it is my wife. I push my own hair back, degrading its reality with a viridian coating and cross the studio to follow her to wherever she leads me.

I'm sitting at a table looking at the plate. There are clods of yellow potato in between a golden glue of carrots, the cling of lamb jamming it all together into a glow bowl of juices. It's so bright I feel I have to shut my eyes as I try to get some on a fork. Where we're sitting hurts my eyes. Halos seem to surround the bubbling, humming, sloshing, edging these sounds in comfort, warming the smells of home. But I can't let it in, let any of it in, let it sneak up on my soul. I imagine the table is a hundred feet long but still I see her. My wife is dangerous. I glance at her. And notice that her hair is blue. She's eating stew and her hair is blue, the deepest cobalt of mourning.

In the studio I like the light low. I paint by candlelight. Lots of them actually. Some of them big church ones, some of them the tea lights that everyone has by the dozen, stuffing the place full of synthetic strawberries. They keep me working, the candles, let me see my sob angel flicker, let me see her fingers quiver

as she recedes and reforms, further from completion with every brushstroke. The paint is in constant flux, warping her motion, keeping her slow, hiding her beneath so many layers, as on top, on top, on top of what's there I paint her again. She is turning around towards me, and there is nothing I can do but make her.

I paint. She moves. I work so fast. She turns so slowly. In this world of purpose and sloth there is a paring of fat from the soul; insulation stripped, it begins to quiver, raw in the wind. Sometimes I howl in protest at this. Unaware of its rising – the preparation of my larynx, the opening of my mouth – the sound always shocks me into battle stance, brush as a dagger, eyeing skylight. Door. Most of the sound leaving me seems to do so without my full awareness. There's a delayed reaction in my ability to be in control of any utterance. But my internal chatter is voluble, liquid in its scathing of the world and my own pitiful place in it. I've been painting this picture for a long time. I've thought of nothing else, well I think I haven't. Left that to others. To carry on normally. I alone have taken on the burden of being an arsehole, carrying the torch of the tortured twat. Listening to my monologue I ask myself awkward questions. Things like, "How much of all of this is real and how much affectation?" or "When did you actually stop being a basket case?" "Are you not tired of being a prick?" "Do you ever want your sob angel to face you?" "Are you painting your dead daughter?" This is the question I've been asking myself the most over the last few months. The others, although hard to be honest about, are answerable. I can't remember the year previous to this increasingly lucid time. I must have been truly bereft then. Now it has become a habit, as appealing as candlelight. As I will not extinguish my candles, I will not extinguish my grieving.

Any loud sound I make is inevitably followed by a knock, the door opening a fraction, and a brisk "Everything okay?" lobbed in from the other side. She hates coming in here. I'm aware of this much. Maybe she can't bear to look at me grasping a brush as though I might push it through my chest. Or maybe it's just the smell.

There are around three knocks per day – apart from the extra ones after loud expletives – usually coinciding with bodily needs I suspect I may have developed as some sort of learned behaviour triggered by the knocking. Or is my wife telepathic and knows if it's sustenance I need, or an urge to evacuate in some way? I'm never sure myself until I hear the knock. And even then the sensation is ambiguous; *knock, knock* – stomach rumbles; *knock, knock* – need a crap. Or, stomach rumbles – *knock, knock*. Need a crap – *knock, knock*. It's a big mystery every time, usually resolving itself. But when I'm led to the bedroom it's always a surprise; a surprise and a disappointment. It means I'll have to sleep, or more than

likely lie staring at the smoke alarm on the ceiling, daring the darkness to kick me into oblivion.

Leaving the studio is like leaving a life support pod. I take a deep breath on exiting, hoping to take as much of that pressured atmosphere with me as possible, a tube of leaf green in my pocket, a smear of dead paint from the sob angel across my chest. It's like inhaling before diving. Because god knows how long I'll have to be down there.

The bathroom fails to wash away the dirt in my head and the bedroom fails to suspend my longings. But in the kitchen something different happens. It does not protect me, the kitchen: it shouts about its cooker, its taps, its magnetic novelty picture frames stuck to the fridge, full of unbearable images. It is fluorescent in its disdain of me. Maintaining its occupants it stirs an everlasting pot, sneering at self indulgence, confident in its duty. And now I realize just how important it is to know this. My wife knows this. Angela knows this. My wife Angela knows this. I try to look at her, now disturbed by the blue hair. (I could paint her face to match. Then I wouldn't have to recognize her as human at all.) Are there eyes there? Can I ever look at them? Acknowledge them as the same eyes my daughter had? The same eyes our daughter had?

I look down at the food in front of me, wondering why I've been eating the same thing for an awful long time. The wood of the table is warm, as is the hand that lifts my jaw. She tells me to eat and I do.

And here I am again, back in here, the door closing behind me. Only this time I'm not so sure I want to hear it closing. It's a studio. A room. An attic at the top of the house. Paint, once garrulous, speaking in a multitude of voices, now pleads with the walls in hardened crusts, still livid underneath, as I look at the sob angel's profile. The profile I painted the night before.

And I just can't paint it anymore.

This realization rattles my heart into action; chill streams slip through dormant valves, re-animating. I need to get to the skylight. There's a ladder somewhere. Tripping, scrambling, I get the damned thing. I've got a pallet knife. I can scrape off my improvised blackout. I can do it. Do it now.

I'm standing in front of you, sweating, breathless, recognition trickling down my back. I watch the smoke from the blown out candles tracing your cheek, rising towards the ancestral webs that hold up the ceiling. Ordinary light from a midday sun flattens the room. I stand shaking in it until it passes over.

Shadows have stretched by the time my stomach answers your voice from the kitchen. I can hear our loss deepening your chords, felting their old clarity. It's time to eat.

"Why do you always give me stew?"

"Because it's all I can manage."

"What kind is it?"

"Irish. Irish stew."

It's our first conversation in – well I'm not sure how long. I can look into those eyes now. And be ashamed.

"Why Irish stew?"

"Because you're from Ireland and I want you to remember something real."

"But people from Ireland don't eat Irish stew every night. And I don't even like it."

"I know. It's taken you a year and a half to remember that."

"Why is your hair blue?"

"It's blue Gregor because nothing's seemed real for a hell of a long time in this house and I thought it would help me blend in a little better."

I don't know what's shocking me most, her explanation or hearing my name bowled across the table. I'd almost forgotten I had one.

"Why is it blue?"

"It's blue because it helps me to deal with all of this. One of us had to be real, and it was apparent from the outset that it sure as hell wasn't going to be you. I am just as devastated as you, and maybe this was my way of connecting with it all... connecting with you."

Her ordinary, angry words overwhelm me. So many, all at once. As soon as you make tentative steps into the everyday world it seems to want to ram you, the simpler the question the more terrifying the answer. I'm tempted to retreat but I know it's no good. I'm in the kitchen and the kitchen knows how to get its own way.

"Angela. Come with me."

Amazingly, she comes with me. (Leading you up to the studio twists me into something new, or rather, old. I remember leading you through this house to our bedroom like this, fingertip to fingertip, your arm straight out, hand tickling mine. I knew that you liked to watch my bum from a step behind. I'd do a wiggle, make you laugh.)

The door of the studio remains open behind us. I'll never shut it again. My sob angel is there in front of us, on the wall, on one knee, elbow resting, heavy hair falling over one shoulder in black remembrance. Her face belongs to Angela. I've been painting my wife for a year and a half and I didn't even know it.

Standing beside her, feeling cut open and on display, waiting for words with beaks, I search for her hand. I can look at her, ready now for her mourning, able to envelop more than my own.

"Angela?"

"What is it, Gregor?" (A deep blue strand of your once black hair wanders across your forehead, looking for an ear. You tuck it in, smiling at me.)

"I'm not Irish."

"I know." ■

Farpais Figsin Ghàidhlig Northwords Now

Tha Northwords Now gu math riarachta a' chiad farpais-sgrìobhaidh Ghàidhlig aice a chur an cèill. Thèid an sgeulachd agus am figsean-clisgidh as fheàrr fhoillseachadh anns an iris agus tha duaisean-airgid ann cuideachd. 'S ann an-asgaidh a tha an farpais - dìreach leugh na riaghailtean is stiall ort!

Riaghailtean na Farpaise

Sgeulachdan an-asgaidh
Ceann-latha mu dheireadh gus an cur a-steach: 31 Faoilleach 2011

2000 facal air a' char as motha is 1000 facal air a' char as lugha airson sgeulachdan goirid

300 facal air a' char as motha airson figsean-clisgidh (gun srian ris an ìre as lugha)

Chan eilear a' cunntas an tiotal am measg àireamh nam facal.

Airidheachd

- Tha an Duais fosgailte don a h-uile duine, feadhainn an taobh a-muigh na Rìoghachd Aonaichte nam measg, os cionn 16 bliadhna dh'aois.

- Feumaidh an stuth a bhith ann an Gàidhlig.
- Feumaidh an stuth a bhith buntainn dìreach don neach-iarrtais agus gun a bhith air fhoillseachadh a-riamh, air fhoillseachadh leat fhèin, air fhoillseachadh air làrach-lìn no a leithid, air a chraoladh no air a bhuannachadh no air duais a thoirt a-mach ann am farpais sam bith eile.

- Cha bhi càil a chuirear a-steach an dèidh bàis airidh.

A' Cur Stuth A-steach

- Cuir an sgrìobhainn agad gu: Northwords Now, Bosga 15066, Dùn Bhlàthain, Alba, FK15 5BP. Cha ghabhar ri stuth a chuirear a-steach le post-dealain.
- Feuch an sgrìobh thu 'Farpais' air a' chèis.
- Faodaidh tu suas ri 2 sgeulachd ghoirid agus còig figsean-clisgidh a chur a-steach.

Cruth an Stuth

- Feumaidh an sgrìobhadh a bhith ann an Gàidhlig, air a thairpeadh, air aon taobh, le àireamhan air na duilleagan agus iad ceangailte le stinleag. Gach inntinn air duilleag fa leth.
- Beàrnan dùbailte eadar na sreathan agus omradh air àireamh nam facal gu h-àrd air a' chiad duilleag.
- Sgrìobh a-steach t' ainm, do sheòladh, an àireamh-fòn agad, seòladh post-dealain (ma tha a leithid agad) agus tiotal(an) do sgeulachd(an) air duilleag fa leth agus cuir seo a-steach an cois na sgrìobhainn agad. Cha bu chòir gun nochd ainm, seòladh, no comharraidhean sam bith ach an tiotal air na sgeulachdan fhèin.
- Chan eilear a' cur sgrìobhainnean air ais, feuch an cum thu lethbhreac.
- Chan fhaodar ceartachaidhean sam bith a dhèanamh an dèidh dhuinn na sgrìobhaidhean fhaighinn.
- Feuch an cleachd thu a' phostachd cheart.

Gabhail ri sgrìobhainnean

- Cuir a-steach cairt-puist le stampa is seòladh agus 'AIDEACHADH' sgrìobhte air ma tha thu ag iarraidh gun tèid na chuir thu thugainn sa phost aideachadh.
- Cha tèid againn air stuth aideachadh air fòn no post-dealain.
- Tagraichean thall thairis: cuir cùpon eadar-nàiseanta bho Oifis a' Phuist agaibh seach stampaichean mas e do thoil e.

Toraidhean

- Thèid fios mun fheadhainn a bhuannaicheas a chur ann an àireamh Earrach 2011 de Northwords Now.
- Air mhodh eile, cum sùil air an làrach-lìn airson fiosrachaidh an dèidh a' Ghearrain 2011.

Còraichean

- 'S ann leis an ùghdar fhèin a tha na còraichean ach bidh còir gun srianadh aig Northwords Now an sgeulachd ghoirid a bhuannaicheas, agus a' chaid chòig figsean-clisgidh, fhoillseachadh anns an iris agus air làrach-lìn Northwords Now.

Breitheanas

- Is e am briteamh Rody Gorman, bàrd air Mhuinntireas, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.
- 'S e dìreach am briteamh a nì am breitheanas agus cha bhi deasbad ann an sgrìobhadh mu dheidhinn an dèidh làimhe.
- Chan urrainn don bhrìtheamh beachdan a nochdadh air sgrìobhadh fa leth.

Duaisean

- Is iad na duaisean ann an roinn nan sgeulachdan goirid:
 - 1mh £200
 - Dà dhuais de £50 an dèidh sin
- Is iad na duaisean ann an roinn figsean-clisgidh:
 - 1mh £50
 - Ceithir duaisean de £15 an dèidh sin
- Chan fhaod farpaisiche sam bith barrachd is aon duais a ghleidheadh anns an dà roinn

Buileachadh nan duaisean

- Thèid fios a chur don fheadhainn a bheir a-mach a' bhuidhe ro thoiseach a' Mhàirt 2011.
- Thathar an dòchas na duaisean a bhuileachadh aig Sabhal Mòr Ostaig sa Ghiblean 2011 (fios ri tighinn).

Le bhith a' cur stuth a-steach, thathar a' gabhail ris gu bheilear leagte ris na riaghailtean. Mura cumar ris na feumalachdan mu chur a-steach stuth, thèid airidheachd a chall.

Northwords Now Gaelic Fiction Competition

Northwords Now is delighted to announce its first Gaelic writing competition. The best story and flash fictions will be published in the magazine and there are cash prizes. The competition is free to enter - just read through the rules and get writing!

Competition Rules

Entries are free of charge
Closing date for receipt of entries: 31st January 2011

Maximum of 2000 words and minimum of 1000 words for short stories

Maximum of 300 words for Flash Fiction (no minimum)

The title is NOT included in the word count.

Eligibility

- The Prize is open to anyone, including non-UK applicants, over 16 years.
- Entries must be written in Scottish Gaelic
- Entries must be entirely the work of the entrant and must never have been published, self-published, published on any website or public online forum, broadcast nor winning or placed in any other competition.
- Entries submitted posthumously will not be eligible.

Sending Your Entry

- Post your entry to: Northwords Now, PO Box 15066, Dunblane, Scotland, FK15 5BP. Submissions by e-mail will not be accepted.
- Mark the envelope 'Competition'.
- You may submit a maximum of 2 full length short stories and five flash fictions.

Entry Format

- Entries must be in Scottish Gaelic, typed, single sided, with pages numbered and securely fastened with a staple. Each entry on a new sheet.
- Stories and flash fiction to be double spaced and a word count noted at the top of the first page.
- Write your name address, telephone number, e-mail address (if you have one) and the title(s) of your story or stories on a separate sheet of paper and include this with your entry. The stories themselves must show no name, address or identifying marks other than the title

- Entries are not returned, keep a copy.
- No corrections can be made after receipt.
- Please ensure that you use the correct postage.

Receipt of entry

- Enclose a stamped addressed postcard marked 'ACKNOWLEDGEMENT' if you require acknowledgement of receipt of your postal entry
- It is not possible to confirm receipt of entries by phone or email
- Overseas entrants : please send an international reply coupon from your Post Office rather than stamps.

Results

- Details of prize-winning entries will be printed in the Spring 2011 issue of Northwords Now.
- Alternatively, check the website for details after February 2011

Copyright

- Worldwide copyright of each entry remains with the author, but Northwords Now will have the unrestricted right to publish the first prize short story, and the top five flash fictions, in the magazine and on the Northwords Now website..

Judging

- The judge for the competition is Rody Gorman, Writer in Residence at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig .
- The judge's decision is final and no individual correspondence can be entered into
- The judge is unable to comment on individual entries

Prizes

- Prizes for the short story category are:
 - 1st £200
 - Two runners-up prizes of £50

- Prizes for the flash fiction category are:
 - 1st £50
 - Four runners-up prizes of £15
 - No competitor may win more than one prize in each category

Prizewinners / prizegiving

- Prizewinners will be notified in writing by the beginning of March 2011.
- It is hoped to hold a prize-winning ceremony at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig in April 2011 (details to be announced)
- Entry implies acceptance of all the rules
- Failure to comply with the entry requirements will result in disqualification

Mongolian Poems by Lesley Harrison

Lesley Harrison's pamphlet *One Bird Flying* was runner-up in the NLS Callum Macdonald Memorial Award in 2010. It describes a poetic response to Marco Polo's journey to the court of Kublai Khan, and was written during her year spent in Mongolia. These last poems were finished after the publication of *One Bird Flying*, and provide an epilogue to the journey.

Xalxan Province

From *The Journals of Marco Polo, I. 38*

This land pushes all other countries to the edge
of the map. The sky is paper white.
Its cities are painted on the air;

its huge rivers never reach the ocean
but die along the desert
in brown pools that hold no reflection.

Here the colours of the earth begin :
salt lakes, crumpled and weightless
ochres bled from rock

old light trapped in bottles
tied with wool and hitched in racks
on black camels full of dust

their ancient, muffled feet splaying
as they draw a line across the earth
the sky growing flat and brown

distances receding, the ground coming closer,
the last tents shrinking gone.

Shaman

Transcribed from *Xadag, 2007*.

I will tell you a story. Your story.

There was a man who lived before you were born, who
could see you coming. He saw you in the water, in the
roots of the fire. He listened to the drumming of the
trees, the fish beneath the ice. He found where you
would enter the earth. He burnt stones, and called you
from the colours of winter. He broke a mirror, and held
light to the sky.

Now the sky is watching you. The place where you were
born is dreaming of you. The black earth, the stones in
the river bed are dreaming of you. Even the ancestors are
dreaming of you. One day, you will go back out of the
earth, and fly up to the outer air to meet them. The sky
will open for you. The place you die will be ready.

You will find it on your own

Lop

From *The Journals of Marco Polo, I. 39*

At Lop there is a castle where a great market for corn
and almonds is held, this being a fine and fruitful country.
But first you must journey for 30 days across a desert
which is so vast and bitter, that neither beast nor bird is
met with. Few have traveled here; many old men fear it.
Here, if you are overcome by sleep, or natural desire, and
your caravan passes round a hill and out of sight, quite
soon a once familiar voice will call you by your name

back into the desert, where the air is filled with low,
earthy music, of wind pipes and bone flutes, and thin
bells, and many sorts of soft, broken melodies, these
leading farther into and beneath the dunes. (At night,
a wise man will lash himself to his camel's rein, and lie
down with his charms and amulets, aligned with the path
he would, at sunrise, if Allah wills, resume.)

Shangtu

From *The Journals of Marco Polo, I. 61*

At Shangtu he keeps a stud :
ten thousand mares and geldings, all white as snow.

These mares are seeded by the wind
lifting their tails in autumn, growing slow

and round, turning inward with the season
till one day they are gone.

Now winter comes:

cattle thin, the lines of their ribs exposed;
horns crack, frost rots off their tongues

their mouths a lamp-black hole of teeth and ice.
Now daylight recedes, red with cold

rivers are welded to the ground;
the earth turns to the moon;

twin worlds of dry white air
and bare, dismantled bones.

Days are nameless; each a hung silence.
Then one day, late in April

the wind leaves muddy footprints on the path;
the sun burns a hole in the sky

and there are the horses, browsing the ridges
like clouds broken on the grass

creatures from a strange, older country,
rough hair growing down their flanks

the light slipping off them.

North

From *The Journals of Marco Polo Book I:56*

Upon traveling for forty days, you reach
the grey levels of a frozen ocean.

Neither men nor animals are found here.
The ground is sterile, starred with ice.

An island lies off the coast:
here tourmalines are scattered on the earth

in such numbers that you may choose
as many as you please. But you are now so far north

on your journey, you have entered the story
of a traveller, looking for an island,

who arrives at a grey, soundless ocean, his heart
cooling in the open air, the North Star far behind.

Orkney Epilogue

And then, a year later, out at Gyre
lying hard against the sand
pushing back until I felt the earth roll over

I woke with the first brush of rain,
the wind blowing dislocated clouds inland,
the islands riding deep in the current:

two cranes
standing in a field
still as stones

the wind flowing round them
like water. And as I stood,
they lifted their arms and ran

into the air, head first, like aeroplanes
full tilt over hoy's worn hills,
drawing a curve in the sky

gathering the world beneath them
rising, growing lighter,
leaning forward on the map's brown lines.

An afternoon, a dog, a figure waving ;
an empty field, full of joy -

The Assynt Of Norman

Norman MacCaig and the Poetry of Place

BY ALASDAIR MACRAE

NORMAN MACCAIG BEGAN to visit Assynt in the 1940s and, with his family, he spent his summers there until some years before his death in 1996. One of the very early poems in *The Poems of Norman MacCaig*, 'Falls of Measeach', written in 1948, is unusually specific in being set in the spectacular Corrieshalloch Gorge on the route leading to Ullapool and Assynt from the south. Two years later he has a poem 'Back to Sutherland after a long absence'. Reading through *The Poems*, it is noticeable that there is a steady increase in place-names; the poetry becomes more localised, more geographically intimate, more at home in Assynt.

The parish of Assynt in West Sutherland stretches north for about a dozen miles from the parish of Coigach and east for about the same extent from the Atlantic (the Minch) facing Lewis. The area is bisected by Loch Assynt and the River Inver issuing at Lochinver and pitted with innumerable lochs and lochans. Dominating the landscape are the mountains Canisp, Suilven, Cul Beag, Cul Mor, Stac Polly, Quinag and Ben Mor Assynt, dramatically sudden surges of rock, constantly changing shape as the observer moves round them. According to J.B. Whittow in his excellent book *Geology and Scenery in Scotland* 'The curious character of the mountains in the Assynt area is largely the result of the differential weathering of contrasting rocks, brought into juxtaposition by major thrusting'. Lewisian gneisses and Torridonian sandstones to the west meet in odd disjunctions with schists and quartzites and even some limestone in the Moine thrust from the east. This is a site of geological fame where tectonic movements were first clearly observed and identified by B.N. Peach and J. Horne in 1883.

Coincidentally, in 1883 a major Royal Commission under Lord Napier was engaged in investigating the conditions of poverty and hardship in the Highlands and Islands following the Clearances, the collapse of prices for cattle and the Potato Famine in the 1840s, and an accelerating depopulation of the area, particularly of younger men. Old men giving evidence to the Commission recounted the names of forty-eight communities in Assynt emptied of their inhabitants in the earlier years of the century. 1883 also saw the publication of *A History of the Highland Clearances* by Alexander MacKenzie, a best-seller of its time. Three years later, in 1886, the Crofter's Act gave some form of tenure to the people who worked the land and who, till then, had existed largely at the whim of land-owners, often alien to the region in class, language and culture. The old clan system of hereditary chiefs had kept Assynt in the control of MacLeods and then MacKenzies for five hundred years till 1760 when the land was sold to the Earl of Sutherland, the family of greatest notoriety in the period of the Clearances.

Not that the time of the clan chiefs was

idyllic or even benign. A large stain has so marked the MacLeods that the family is remembered for little else. While he was under the protection of MacLeod of Assynt, the betrayal for money of James Graham, Marquis of Montrose, and his execution in 1650 in Edinburgh's Grassmarket led to the demise of the family and their denunciation in song and story. As late as 1849, W.E. Ayton, the mediocre poet and Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at Edinburgh (and partly responsible for the introduction of English as a university subject) wrote of the incident:

*A traitor sold him to his foes;
O deed of deathless shame!
I charge thee, boy, if e'er thou meet
With one of Assynt's name –
Be it upon the mountain's side,
Or yet within the glen,
Stand he in martial gear alone,
Or backed by arméd men –
Face him, as thou wouldst face the man
Who wronged thy sire's renown:
Remember of what blood thou art,
And strike the traitiff down!*

And, indeed, since the MacKenzies sold out to the House of Sutherland in 1760, the area has been subject to buyings and sellings, notions of ownership, and fashions of exploitation of the land for sheep-farming or hunting and now tourism. Radically new ideas of land-use, employment, development, community and ownership have become possible since the buy-out of 21,000 acres of North Lochinver by the Assynt Crofters' Trust in 1993.

Norman MacCaig was delighted with these new possibilities but the Assynt he had got to know so well was a product of some of the geographical and historical elements described earlier. In the midst of geological givens – the mountains, rivers, lochs, sea – the landscape of fields, vegetation, trees, human settlement, animals, was largely the creation of the very estates he deplored, and many of his best friends worked for such estates as game-keepers, shepherds, gillies, house-keepers, factors. For about thirty years the MacCaig family rented a small house in Achmelvich some miles north of Lochinver, and in later years they took a house in Inverkirkaig some miles south of Lochinver. Over the years, his knowledge of the area and its people widened and deepened, and his passions for walking and fishing led him to explore the mountains, the burns and the lochs. In the earlier years he cycled round the coastal roads. The friends he made opened his senses, as he says in 'Among scholars':

*On our way to a loch, two miles from Inveruplan,
Three of us (keepers) read the landscape as
I read a book. They missed no word of it:
Fox-hole, strange weed, blue berry, ice-scrape, deer's
hoof-print.
....*

They saw what I

*Saw, and more, and its meaning. They spoke like a
native
The language they walked in.*

If they are native speakers, he is aware that he is still a learner. His reading is experimental and he explores different moods or different relationships to the observed world, ranging from awe to something approaching whimsicality. He anthropomorphises elements and creatures – it is inevitable – but there is a knowing quality, a self-mocking jokey intimacy, that guards the poetry from tweekness or sentimentality or glibness. In a poem such as 'Small lochs' he speaks of his liking for lochs 'the smaller the better'. The poem ends:

*And don't think it's just the big ones that are lordily named.
I met one once and when I asked what she was called
The little thing said (without blushing, mind you)
The Loch of the Corrie of the Green Waterfalls*

*I know they're just H2O in a hollow.
Yet not much time passes without me thinking of them
Dandling lilies and talking sleepily
And stand huge mountains on their watery heads.*

Facts are not to be confused with our fictional fancies.

In 1967 the Scottish BBC showed a television film featuring MacCaig's longest poem (nearly three hundred lines), *A man in Assynt*. Some people have seen the poem as atypical but, apart from its length and a certain programmatic sequence of topics, line by line and thought by thought it is characteristic of its author. It does have a political edge and a directness of view but these are not new. A central question, repeated in several ways, concerns ownership: 'Who owns this landscape?' 'Whom does the sea belong to?' The question operates in two ways. First, there is a historical and individual sense: who has bought the land, the fishing rights? and what entitles someone to speak of 'my land', 'my mountains'? He is thinking of clan battles, estate-owners, developers, land-users of various kinds. However, and this introduces the second sense of owning, he interrupts himself and asserts:

*False questions, for
this landscape is
masterless
and intractable in any terms
that are human.*

The poem opens with the geological setting and it is in this vast perspective that human efforts, the bickering and possessiveness, and the ordering and communal, are presented. The human footprint seems negligible against the gouging of glaciers and, even on

the historical scale, a generation's accomplishments are 'tiny in / the misty landscape of history'. Nonetheless, we – the writer, the readers, the community he explores – are human and the poem is concerned with the aspirations, failures and sustaining practices of people in a particular locality. MacCaig did not share the religious beliefs he encountered in Assynt, he knew that songs about battles long ago would not feed starving people in the bad times, but he recognises in the poem that continuity, a sense of shared tradition, can keep a society alive. Depopulation, however it happened, has left a sadness, an elegiac quality in the area, visible in the vestiges of past and now deserted settlements. The gaelic word *larach* (often anglicised as here to *laroch*) describes precisely this, 'whose larochs / sink into the bracken', otherwise put as 'a rickle of stones'.

Probably half of the poems MacCaig wrote after 1960 are set in Assynt, with an extraordinary variety of moods and focuses, and a continuing inventiveness of language. For many readers, his most striking group of poems are those he wrote on the death of his close friends in Assynt, in particular the group 'Poems for Angus', on A.K. MacLeod, who died in 1976. Although there are many very dark poems in his later years, MacCaig saw himself as a celebratory poet, a person who derived much pleasure from places, weathers, animals and, most of all, friends. He is celebratory but not usually an optimist. It is for that reason that some readers find the conclusion of 'A man in Assynt' uncharacteristic. He is watching the movement of the tide and, after contemplating the possibility of the gradual elimination of human settlement in the area, where 'man becomes / in this most beautiful corner of the land, / one of the rare animals', he shifts his vision:

*And the mind
behind the eye, within the passion,
remembers with certainty that the tide will return
and thinks, with hope, that the other ebb,
that sad withdrawal of people, may, too,
reverse itself and flood
the bays and the sheltered glens
with new generations replenishing the land
with its richest of riches and coming, at last,
into their own again.*

This hope was expressed quarter of a century before the Crofters' reoccupation of Assynt but, although much work has to be done, and much disappointment will have to be surmounted, it may be that Assynt will emerge as a sustainable place in an increasingly fraught and beleaguered climatic situation. In 2002 a memorial to Norman MacCaig was erected near the Kirkaig Bridge to mark the local community's appreciation of the poet. He would have claimed to be sardonically amused at such a whigmaleerie but he would have been deeply moved by the gesture. ■

Norman MacCaig

from *A Man In Assynt*

An old song. A rickle of stones. A
name on a map.
I read on a map a name whose Gaelic means
the Battlefield of the Big Men.
I think of yelling hosts, banners,
counterattacks, deployments. When I get there,
it's ten acres, ten small acres
of boggy ground.
I feel
I am looking through the same wrong end
of the same telescope
through which I look back through time
and see
Christ, Socrates, Dante – all the Big Men
picked out, on their few acres,
clear and tiny in
the misty landscape of history.

Up from that mist crowds
the present. This day has lain long,
has dozed late, till
the church bell jerks and, wagging madly
in its salty tower, sends its voice
clanking through the sabbath drowse.
And dark minds in black clothes gather like
bees to the hive, to share
the bitter honey of the Word, to submit
to the hard judgment of a God
my childhood God would have a difficulty
in recognising.
Ten yards from the sea's surge
they sing to Him beautiful praises
that surge like the sea,
in a bare stone box built
for the worship of the Creator
of all colours and between-colours, and of
all shapes, and of the holiness
of identity and of the purifying light-stream
of reason. The sound of that praise
escapes from the stone box
and takes its place in the ordinary communion
of all sounds, that are
Being expressing itself – as it does in its continuous,
its never-ending creation of leaves,
birds, waves, stone boxes – and beliefs,
the true and the false.

These shapes; these incarnations, have their own determined
identities, their own dark holiness, their
high absurdities. See how they make
a breadth and assemblage of animals,
a perpendicularity of creatures, from where,
three thousand feet up, two ravens go by
in their seedy, nonchalant way, down to
the burn-mouth where baby mussels
drink fresh water through their beards –
or down, down still, to where the masked conger eel
goes like a gangster through
the weedy slums at the sea's foot.

Greenshank, adder, wildcat, guillemot, seatrout,
fox and falcon – the list winds through
all the crooks and crannies of this landscape, all
the subtleties and shifts of its waters and
the prevarications of its air –
while roofs fall in, walls crumble, gables
die last of all, and man becomes,
in this most beautiful corner of the land,
one of the rare animals.

Up there, the scraping light
whittles the cloud edges till, like thin bone,
they're bright with their own opaque selves. Down here,
a skinny rosebush is an eccentric jug
of air. They make me,
somewhere between them,
a visiting eye,
an unrequited passion,
watching the tide glittering backward and making
its huge withdrawal from beaches
and kilted rocks. And the mind
behind the eye, within the passion,
remembers with certainty that the tide will return
and thinks, with hope, that that other ebb,
that sad withdrawal of people, may, too,
reverse itself and flood
the bays and the sheltered glens
with new generations replenishing the land
with its richest of riches and coming, at last,
into their own again.

Pàdraig MacAoidh

Bho Duine ann an Asainte

Seann òran. Rughan chlach. Ain-
m air mapa.

Mi a' leughadh air mapa an t-ainm

Blàr nam Fear Mòra.

Mi a' smaoinichadh air airbhean nuallach, sròlan,
ais-ionnsaighean, imeachdan. Nuair a ruigeas mi,
chan eil ann ach deich acraichean de dh'fhearann, deich acraichean
beaga de bhoglaich.

Mi a' faireachdainn

gu bheil mi a' coimhead tro thaobh ceàrr ceudna

na h-aon phrosbaig

tron seall mi air ais a dh'fhaicinn

Chrìosta, Shomhairle, Dante – gach Fear Mòr

air leth, air am meanbh-acraichean

fosgailte, beag biodach

ann an cruth-tìre ceothach na h-eachdraidh.

Suas on chèò: an t-àm làthaireach

a' dòmhlachadh. Laigh an là seo ro fhada,

chaidil e a-staigh, gus

an do snaoth clag na h-eaglaise, a' bogadh gun chiall

na thùr saillte, a' craoladh a ghuth,

a' trostadh tro shuain na Sàbaid.

'S aighean dorch a ann an aodach dubh a' cruinneachadh

mar sheilleanan chun na cuirceige,

gus mìl shearbh an fhacail a phàirteachadh, gus gèilleadh

a thoirt gu breitheanas cruaidh Dhè

nach aithnicheadh ach air èiginn

Dia mo leanabais.

Deich slatan bho ataireachd na mara

seinnidh iad Ris luaidhean eireachdail

a bhios ag at mar a' mhuir,

ann am bogsa bàn air a thogail de chloich

gus adhradh a thoirt do dh'Ùghdar

gach datha 's eadar-dhatha 's

crutha, agus naomhachd dearbh-aithne

agus sruth-sholais iom-ghlanadh cèille.

Tha fuaim na luaidh 'ud

a' teicheadh on bhogsa-chloiche

gus àite ghabail ann an Òrdugh cumanta

gach fuaim. 'S e th' anna

Bith ga foillseachadh fhèin – mar a bhios ann an cruthachadh

leantainneach, gun chrìoch, de dhuilleagan,

de dh'èoin, tuinn, bhogsaichean-chloiche – agus de chreideamhan,

den fhìrinn, den bhreug.

Na cruthan seo, na feòil-ghabhlaichean: tha aca fhèin

an dearbh-aithnean suidhichte, an naomhachd dhorch',

am fìor bhaothaireachd. Faic ciamar a nì iad

leud 's bannal de bheathaichean,

dìreachd de chreutairean às an tèid,

aig trì mìle slat de dh'àirde, dà fhuitheach

nam flanerie mosach nonchalant,

a-nuas do bheul an uillt, far an òl feusgain

òga bùrn tron fheusagan –

no shìos, nas fhaide sìos, gu far an tèid an easgann-shùileach
sgàilichte mar Chorleònach
tro shluma lusach grunnnd na mara.
Deoch-bhiugh, nathair, cat-fiadhaich, breac-mara,
gearra-bhreas, sìonnach, seabhag – an liosta a' snaigheadh
tro gach cùil den chruth-thìre seo, tro gach geur-chiùs
's geur-ghluasad uisgean agus tro
cheabhachdaireachd àile,
fhad's a thuiteas tughaidh, a mhìn-bhris ballaichean. 'S e
an stuadh a bhàsaicheas mu dheireadh, gus am fàs clann-an-duine,
anns a' chùil as bòidheche den tìr seo,
beathach ainneamh.

Shuas an sin, tha an solas sgrìobach
a' snaigheadh crìochan nan neul gus a bheil iad,
mar chnàimh thana, soilleir leis an fhèineachd dhubharaich.

Shìos an seo, tha ròs-chrann lapach na chailpig neònach
de dh'àile. Tha iad gam dhèanamh,
àiteigin eatorra,
sùil shiùbhalach,
gaoil neo-dhiolta,
a' coimhead air an tìde-mhara a' laimhir air àis,
agus a' dèanamh a cùlachaidh aidhbheil o thràighean
's creagan-na-fèile. Agus tha an aigne
air cùl na sùla, anns a' ghaol,
a' cuimhneachadh gun teagamh gun till an tìde-mhara
's a' smaoinneachadh, le dòchas, gun ath-ghluais an tràigheadh eile,
an cùlachadh brònach de dhaoine,
gus na bàighean 's na gleanntan tìorail a lìonadh
le linntean ùra ag ath-stòradh na tìre
le stòras de thurchar, agus a' tighinn,
mu dheireadh thall,
a-rithist thuca fhèin.



Photograph of Canisp by Richard Hanson

MANDY HAGGITH:

A passion for Assynt

*'... a visiting eye,
an unrequited passion...'*
Norman MacCaig, 'A man in Assynt'

This ice-sculpted loch-and-cnocan space is still
the most beautiful corner of the land.
The air prevaricates on,
the ups still lift,
the hollows still astound
with sphagnum art and puddle-craft.
The tide glides out
and slides back in again.
Tourists (though he wouldn't use the word
not seeing himself as one) continue to come,
maybe even wearier now of our much newer civilisation:
the clock's tyranny out there is strong as ever.
Here, natural rhythms perpetuate,
day and night, moon and season.

His questions pointed at true north,
a compass bearing that has driven
men in boats and folk inland
on a journey he'd be proud of.

Who owns this land?
Loch Roe, Clachtoll, the pools in Stoer,
the fanks, Clashnessie Bay,
our litany of mountains -
Cul Beg, Cul Mor, Suilven, Canisp -
they're ours, the local people's,
crofters, women even, all who live here
who fought and won,
raised the funds to share the rights
to this rock-bog-wood-loch land.

We possess and it belongs to us
but what he knew was that
we owned it all already
and though we have the title now
its text does not express the two-way deal:
it is also us who belong to it.
It remains masterless.

Suilven's snow-clad, sun-drenched,
an iced pudding in a bowl of cream,
as delicious as it's always been
and always will be.
Nothing we do changes the mountains,
though I swear they gleamed
the day we bought them.

He asked if owning has anything to do with love.
I answer him, everything and nothing.
It's a marriage made in a solicitor's office,
the deeds are silent about what matters.
Yet it was passion for this place
that drove the people to rewrite its history,
to wrest the land from rich and absent men.

The mountains are unaffected.
Lochans do not care.

The sea's as merciless as always,
still practicing arpeggios on the beaches
ready for wild jazz jabbling in the Minch,
ragged as ever, robbed of its fish,
pulsing in and out of a harbour
he wouldn't recognise:
no boats tied up unloading
catches from whisky-drinking fishermen;
the bar land-locked;
fish market, an empty hangar;
a tanker full of cage-grown salmon;
and a row of French and Spanish freezer lorries
vacuuming up the guts of deep-sea ships.
In Lochinver, the ancient smell of brine,
seaweed and fish is laced,
for the time-being at least,
with diesel.

Outside, it's the old Atlantic perfume,
great westerly gusts of it,
soft and wet and welcome
as a grandmother's tea.
They say trouble's brewing
in the ocean, the great web
of feeders and fed, collapsing.
For now though,
dolphins line-dance northwards
past Sleat and Soya
and beneath them sand-eels
shoal to a deep-sea trance-beat.

The untiring tide has worked its shifts.
At the end of the winter the thaw is slow,
toads keep to their secret places,
great-tits teach in tree-tops,
woodcock blunder among birches, dodging bullets.
We argue, of course, this is still Assynt:
less poaching than in his day, maybe,
but no fewer devastating views.

He watched folk waning,
eking a subsistence from acid soils, which he called
dying acres, seeing abandoned lambing fields,
larochs, rushes, heathered lazybeds untilled,
but was it death he saw, or people
tiring of the struggle
to yoke the land to their control?

How do we tell if a land dies or thrives?
Whose assessment of life or death do we believe:
the March crofter who sets a match to heather
and lets the muir burn, or the children
counting dragonflies by Loch Beannach
on a summer afternoon?
Who loves this land the best:
the hunter coming in
with a stag on the back of his quad,
or the woman heaving a basket of seawrack
to her berry patch in the rowan wood?

Another non-question;
like ownership,
our love is shared and various
and as unlikely to run dry
as the rosary of lochs,
Urigil, Cam, Veyatie, Fewin,
fingered by streams, their destiny
the gushing fervour of the Kirkaig.
Yet it, too, swells and wanes
to the pulse of seasons.

Spring comes,
polytunnels flourish,
rowan berries will feed
the fieldfares' skirmish,
woods regenerate where teeth and hooves desist,
seals feed in the fjord,
otters glide out on the rising water,
ravens tumble and gannets plunge
and lift
and ride the sky.

The land lives, despite what we do,
or fail to do. Schemes start,
abort. Traditions
grow and cease.
The land lives on.

A tide of people ebbed
and turned: new generations
replenish the land, coming into our own,
coming in, coming in,
to renew the unrequitable passion.

The Poetrie O Flora Garry

BY W.S. MILNE.

FLORA GARRY'S POETRIE is ower-muckle neglecktit. Sae it is, for example, that nane o her poems appear in Tom Scott's *The Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (1970), or in Douglas Dunn's *Twentieth-Century Scottish Poetry* (Faber, 1992), or in Robert Crawford and Mick Imlah's *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* (2000). This is an unco owersicht, as Flora Garry is on a par wi Violet Jacob an Helen B. Cruickshank, some of whase wark appears in aa three anthologies. At schuil, she minds us, the dialeck wis regarded as doun-pittin, an 'vulgar.' Fechtin thae custumed forces wis helpit bi her mither an faither, baith writers, coaxin the dialeck at hame. She tells us she wis brocht up wi 'good music and lively talk, most of it in the Buchan dialect.' 'Words to us,' she says, 'were the breath of life.' In 'Bennygoak (The Hill of the Cuckoo)' we fin her great-granfadder biggin the fairm at the Mains o Auchmunziel (Gaelic, she tells us, for 'a field near the moss'), scrapin a livin frae an itherwise 'bare brae face,' heedless o human graisp:

*It wis jist a skeelp o the muckle furth,
A sklyter o roch grun,
Fin Granfadder's fadder bruke it in
Fae the hedder an the funn.
Granfadder sklatit barn an byre,
Brocht water to the closs,
Pat fail-dykes ben the bare brae face
An a cairt road tull the moss.*

Garry hansells the Gaelic name for the hill itself, 'Bennygoak,' anchorin the Buchan in a rich Celtic paist, caain her screivins, 'Poems in the Buchan Dialect.' This is a fair thocht-through stance, a deliberate ack, deidicatin her 'wee buikie' as she caas it tae 'the folk of New Deer village and all who live by the Ugie and the Ythan in the "braid Buchan lan" of North East Aberdeenshire.' Garry is a self-refleekin thinker miles awa frae the schuil o naive kailyaird lyricism some fowk wid condemn her tae. Her poetrie always shines oot wi an acute intelligence. Her lines are weel-dreelt and ordered, nae shammelt, and there's nae dreichness aboot them. She vrochts at her wark, 'shoodrin her load,' clear aboot the maitter at han, nae letting her min slip frae the facks afore her:

*There's twaa wyes o kennin –
Wi yer heid, yer rizzon an muckle respec
For the weel-stored-min';
Wi yer finger-eyns, yer instincts an yer een,
Lear o anidder kin'.*

Her wark has aboot it whit G. M. Young, in anither context, has caaed 'a passionate apprehension of form,' a deliberate vrochtiness an maiture craifsmanship. There are nae dressings-up then, nae fanerels or furligorums here. Inheritin the best o the bothy ballads, Scots sangs an plays, an fiddle playing, Flora Garry tell us she wants 'to create beauty in sound.' She marschalls the dialeck's rich acoustics, en-richenin, deepenin the life o the wurd:



*Nicht's creepin in aboot, it's early lows-in-time.
Ahin the laich funn dyke, licht's hinmost lowe,
A smaa reid cwyle, smores i the reek o the rime.
An icy skimmerin lappers the troch mou.
The nyaakit bourtree's gapin for the smaa.
The day's deen. The year's at the deid-thraa.*

This is the aipenin stanza o 'The Quine an the Teuchats.' The poem hews closs ti the rhythms o the spik, wirts fu o the spirks o naitur, bringin ti the dialeck a spang-new qualitie, an independence o min chaireckteristic o fairmin life. Flora Garry says the fowk o Buchan share 'a sharp awareness of the things of the mind, but not to the exclusion of lovable human qualities and of earthy everyday affairs,' their wirts 'brief, succinct, vivid, down to earth,' revealin 'a contemplative habit of mind.' Sae we hear the spring-heid o her airt waalin up frae the people tharsels an thair leid:

*Bit ae foreneen the win swang roun to the wast,
The clouds were heich an licht,
The sky wis blue-er gin we'd seen't aa Simmer.
The howes firmt up. The strae began to reeshle.
Shaef efter shaef we turnt the stooks wi wir hans
In tull the face o a strong sunshiny breeze.
I' the cornyards, the smell o the ripent grain...*

She envisions the fairmer, 'scythe in hand to snick the seeding thistles,' the shooers blat-terin in frae the sea, the win-blawin-through-snaa, the North East's ceaseless 'salty gales.' The lan for Flora Garry is a leevin phenom-enon, nae an abstraick fanton, but she kens that the taingle o the kintra disnae suit aa

fowks, an concentrates especiallie on feminine entrapment as a theme:

*'Flit, flit, ye feel,' says the unco bird,
'There's finer, couthier folk
An kinlier country hine awaa
Fae the hull o Bennygoak.'
Bit ma midder's growein aal an deen
An likes her ain fireside.
Tivid brak her hert to leave the hull:
It's brakkin mine to bide.*

At the same time, she caiptures the brav-erie, the stalwarthiness, o ummen, as in 'War: 1939–1945':

*An Droogie's dluver dother? She could mak her fadder's peels.
Nae hoven wyme o clocher, nae beelin, hack or strain
But she could ease; an fin royt nackets tummelt greetin at their play
She'd rouve up their bleedit sair bits, sen them duncin furth again.
The baims likit Chrissie. Faar's she?'*

*An Cyaarnadellie's foreman? I' the clear Spring nichts
He trystit wi the banker's deemie up at the market place.
Noo, she's skycin roun the gable-eyn, her leen, i the early gloam,
Wi a muckle cwyt aboot her an a graavit ower her face.
Cyaarnadellie's foreman, faar's he?'*

*.....
'Speir at the waarslin tides, the desert saans, the caal starlicht.
They ken faar.'*

As Thomas Hardy for ain kent, great hu-man passions are played oot on the back roads as weel as on the main roads o life Garry's nae wrichtan on her ain; she kens that. She's aye alert tae the literatur o the area, praisin the wark o Gavin Greig, Charles Murray, David Kerr Cameron, Jack Webster, Jessie Kesson, David Toumlin, John R. Allan, an John C.

Milne. The fundamental tone, or pitch, o Garry's verse is stabilitie, a wey o livin whaur a culture deals wi experience an thocht as a hail an nae juist as a mairdle o pairts. In this wey her airt exists on mair than one plane at aince; her poems are nivver whit she caas 'ae-fauld', but are multiform, varyand an deep, unlike her neebour Aal Massie wha can think o nithing but 'wedder and baests maet.' Thai're wirts, she says, that 'fire the callest bleed,' an transform the 'roch human carl' in aa o us.

An wis thar iver sic a phrase-makar! 'The wide win-cairdit skies,' 'the black earth lies in clods,' 'the snaa-bree rins on the roads,' 'Feerious birlin sleet-raips,' the ettercaps,' 'slivvery tangles,' the cat's purr's 'three-threids-an-a-thrum,' an her phrasing has a proverbial pouer: 'Better a kin'ly gley gin a dirten glow-er.' Dialeck is shawn here tae be the foonda-tion-stane o the linguistic communitie that is the Buchan, aye-abidin. For Garry, poetrie is stabilitie, the ruitedness o a wey o life, a culture. Human knowledge an lear turn heel-ie-gouster frae one place tae anither, always changin, never still, a fack paipered ower in oor ivermair globalised wardle. Personal iden-titie gets lost in an eddy whaur local associa-tions are owerwhummed. The lucid, fluent, singin an exact language o a community is owerblawn, but nae tae a mindfu airtist like Flora Garry:

*On the ploo'd eynriggs o the stibble park
A flock o teuchats gedder, cooryin doon
Atween the furrs an chunnerin i the dark;
Tappit heids an chilpit chudderin breists
Seekin some strab o strae or twaa-three faal
O girss, to hap them fae the sypin caal.*

Garry biggs up her hairmonies on whit MacDiarmid caaed 'Earth.... the only ground of human hope,' an on the thorough-bass o the Buchan dialeck, as Lewis Grassie Gibbon did on the spik o the Mearns, wi universal vailues, an intelligent love o life.

Whan she notes that ae winter the grun was as haird as airn, an it tuik picks tae howk up the neeps (she's quotin here frae a neebour's faimlie-diary) we're nae that far re-muived frae the speerit o Herzen or Gorky's wark – thar's nae difference in the hairdness o the life presentit. Flora Garry'll still be heard lang eftir mair famous voices are hiv doilt awa.

In her poetrie we hear the true voice o the Buchan. She has gien us guid, faithfu wark ensuring some masure o endurance. As Sappho an Alkaios vrocht in their native Melic dialeck, sae tae daes Garry in hers, singin, thankfullie, o 'Creation's mornin oor.' Her wark mair than pruiues the fack that an enlichtened persistence in the leid will aye guairantee some beautie:

*Bit the Spring o the year'll thowe the nirlt grun,
Slocken the gizzent gowan-reet, kennle the funn,
An wallochy-wallochy-weet the teuchats rise
Ower the new-shaven leys. ■*

Poems by Theresa Muñoz & Marion McCready

Travelling

BY THERESA MUÑOZ

holding your gaze
as other farewells take place
on the glossy floor

salt and wet cotton –
the smell
of leaving

★

at security
I shrug off my jacket
pull off my shoes
pad across the metal frame

avoiding her face,
the woman
whose hands slide down my chest

★

am I, or am I not
falling out of the sky

the low rumbling
the bouncing

in my seat I feel it coming,
its unkind wave chasing

the future; where were we
when we said goodbye?

★

your hand on my back
our smiles stretched
the din of others around us
minutes sliding past

★

nothing so difficult
as getting further
further away

the landscape
from my window changes

hard ice
to ocean

★

daylight wakes me
some place new

light spills
over me, into the aisles

leaving you
on my mind

as we descend
into overwhelming brightness

Barcelona zoo

BY THERESA MUÑOZ

We agree to reconvene in a few hours
because you would like the Picasso
museum, and I want the animals.

Alone the afternoon stretches out.
I pay seventeen euros
damp from my pockets

and wander
with a broken sandal
around the drowsy creatures

yawning hippos
bowed flamingos
and jungle cats curled

in their wire enclosures.
Only the monkeys
swipe and holler.

Sweaty and blistered
with a crumpled zoo flyer
I edge the perimeters

and see you standing
beyond the exit's
turnstiles

freed, the instant
your face turns
and spots me.

The River is Playing a Guitar

BY MARION MCCREADY

The river is playing a guitar,
the guitar is green.
The river is strumming a song,
an elegy.
The river-boys have come,
they've come for me,
I am the voice of the sea.

The guitar is a fish in the hand,
strung in the deep.
It scratches its back on my stones,
feeds on my sleep.
It hums in the lap of my waves,
my waves are free,
I am the voice of the sea.

The sea is a muckle of sons
in the chord of G.
They swim with their river-guitars,
they sink to their knees.
Buttercups buckle the banks
in their memory,
I am the voice of the sea.

The Herring Girl

BY MARION MCCREADY

Under a cloud of shoals she lies.
The peaty moon

rising from her knees,
sailing the length of her curves.

Her herring bone hands
hang by her side.

The cry of her oilskin tongue,
lost to the wind.

Across the loch
the false men shimmer

their glitter of quartz,
feldspar, hornblende.

They talk amongst themselves.

Cailleach of the moors,
she slits throats in her sleep.

Though she lies inland,
her body is a work of the sea.

She follows the seasons
in the ports of her mind.

Her dreams are preserved in brine
as she lies waiting,

waiting, waiting
for the silver darlings to arrive.

A Car, Snow-sunk and Abandoned, Smells of You

BY MARION MCCREADY

The horizontal pull, slow fall from firs
lean towards the ground, my garden-cloud.

The trees are clothed in birds, they wait for me
in my snow-dress, my bare feet.

The horizontal pull, slow fall from firs,
jaggy grassy tips reach through the snow.

Droplets hang from branches, rows of moons;
one by one they fall, christen my hair.

The winter cherry blooms an orange glow;
a street light in its arms. Sludge browns the road.

The horizontal pull, slow fall from firs.
A car, snow-sunk, abandoned, smells of you.

A candle hugs a window, the burn is hedged
with ever moving drift and bramble bushes, dead.

Love To Somewhat

SHORT STORY BY PAUL BROWNSEY

“I don’t know why you keep coming to see me.” She almost bows as she steps back to let them in, but that is because of her hip. The drawl might express irritation or gratitude.

“Because we enjoy coming to see you.” Martin’s tone is less suited to heartiness than to asserting the equality of mankind in the face of one who, if not positively aristocratic, is, as Tom has said, aristocratish. He retreats to mere politeness: “The Temple always repays another visit.”

“And here’s *Murdo*,” Tom cries as though the details of Mrs Forbes-Innes’s life need congratulating. He crouches, arm stretched welcomingly towards the floppy mottled mongrel making its dragging way towards the door, a pause after moving front legs, a pause after moving back legs.

“He, at least, will not be here next year. Time to make an appointment with the vet.”

“Ah!” and “Really?” they say in an interested way as if she has told them that Historic Scotland has identified genuine eighteenth-century wallpaper beneath the modern stuff on the walls of this granite manse, built by the laird in 1782 for a kirk he then refused to build because the congregation would not accept his nephew as minister, on grounds of immorality. Following Mrs Forbes-Innes into the big untidy dog-haired sitting-room, they give *Murdo* nice social smiles such as some people give a gay couple.

“He is sixteen,” she says as they all seat themselves, Martin carefully at the other end of the settee from Tom. Her ivory linen dress looks too good for just being in the house, so she must have put it on especially for their visit.

“Sixteen!” they say to *Murdo* like adults congratulating a child on its exam results.

“Arthritis. Nearly blind. A growth on a foot that had to be removed. And there’s some sort of obstruction in his insides.”

“Poor old *Murdo*,” says Tom, but only fondly, again stretching out a hand towards him. Safe for now in the knee enclosure of the desk, *Murdo* responds with just one feeble tail-thump. Yet where a lesser dog might have lain and dozed, he sustains the evident strain of sitting up, smiling with lolling tongue at each speaker, a good host acknowledging the conversation.

“Another year,” Tom adds, moving the conversation on from *Murdo* to the general processes of life and death, which must be unstoppable even here in the North East of Scotland, even though, visiting it only for an annual holiday, you can imagine it a time-free zone where the changes that occur from year to year merely reveal simultaneous facets of one timeless reality.

Martin remarks, “In seven years the estate has tripled the rent on Myrtle Cottage.”

Tom remarks, “Mr Sauchen still makes his daily ascent of Durriebhar Hill. We saw him setting off on our way here. He waved to us. Marvellous for ninety-three.”

“Ah, well, that is not quite true.” Is she

confiding the information or just stating it? “They put his boots and his walking shorts and his rucksack on him and let him go a few steps from his door but that’s all he can manage.”

“It’s nice, neighbours looking after him like that,” says Tom. It’s nice, too, that the lady whose surname unites two of the great families of the North East is aware of the humble details of the lives of the folk in the villages around her.

She stares. “Neighbours? I thought they were from the council. Social workers. Home helps. People to get him up and put him to bed and prepare his meals – ”

“The welfare state in action,” Martin challenges.

“I could do with someone to get me up and put me to bed and prepare my meals. My hip...” The wide mouth and the backswept hair divided into two wings could make these the woes of the Duchess of Windsor.

“Is there anything we can do?” Tom.

“Any little task?” Martin’s rimless glasses somehow emphasise *little*.

“My husband’s grandfather would see to *all* that was necessary. If someone needed a doctor... There was a boy in the village, he drove him into Aberdeen himself and knocked on the door of the professor of surgery at Aberdeen University and said, ‘I have a boy outside with appendicitis. You are to operate at once.’ The professor was about to sit down to his dinner but that didn’t matter.”

Tom: “That way of, of caring for the poor had the personal touch, real human connection, not just bureaucracy and sub-section 18(d) of the Social Care Act or whatever.”

“Provided everyone had my husband’s grandfather’s sense of responsibility!”

The rebuke will later be admired, though first, as they drive away, Martin will say, “You can just see it, so feudal, the locals having to tug their forelocks to the fucking grandfather to get proper medical care.”

Tom will say, “Money would be no problem about going private for her hip. She must support the NHS on principle.”

...A familiar wooden box stands on a side-table by her chair but it is not opened until she has hobbled in with tea-things. The scones look home-made. Can they ask her whether she made them herself?

“This may interest you.” She produces from the box the album she shows them every year, an album of cuttings and letters and pictures relating to the Temple. Here is a postcard from the National Gallery in Edinburgh of a Nasmyth bathing the Temple in sunset while peasants not wearing tartan dawdle on a road beneath it amid sheep and a dog. In a photograph local men enlisted for World War I are crammed between the pillars on both storeys, looking out in cheerfulness. She remarks, as she has done before, “My husband’s great-uncle went over the top with them at the Somme and was killed. The heir.” Here

are photographs of eminent visitors to the Temple: Ruskin assessing its significance in the cultural landscape, Gladstone as if sight-seeing were a duty of office no less demanding than maintaining peace and industry, Queen Mary among fawning men.

“And what have you been doing?” she says as they turn the pages, enthusing, the album on the settee between them.

“Much as usual.” Tom glances at Martin.

“Work,” says Martin, the unamplified word possibly a challenge to one who has lived without the need to work.

“Except...” A glance at Martin again.

“Except we became Civil Partners at Easter,” Tom completes. “Civil Partnership. You know.”

Tom adds, “Putting things on a legal footing.”

“How marvellous! What fun! So sensible!” says Mrs Forbes-Innes. “I wish I could do the same.”

“No, like married people,” says Tom. “Next-of-kin, legal. Us.”

She says, “So many demands. Papers. Bills. All beyond me.” A picture arises briefly of the pair of them putting straight the affairs of this corner of the great estates of the North East, sorting papers at the desk beneath which *Murdo* still maintains himself sitting, moving a front leg from time to time to shift weight and ease the strain.

“No, *Murdo*, scones are not for dogs,” says Tom, even though *Murdo* has made no move to beg one. The passage of food through him is now futile.

“There are loose photographs and things here,” she says, handing over the box as they come to the end of the album.

Here is their own letter of eight years ago. ...often been intrigued by it as seen from the road below and understand from Mrs Catto at Huntly Tourist Office that you sometimes permit members of the public to visit it... That she has kept the letter could mean that when they sent her flowers by way of thanks after the first visit and she replied that they must come and see it again, she meant it (Tom’s view) and wasn’t just being polite (Martin’s).

And here, beneath their letter, is something they haven’t seen before, a coloured snapshot of a young man in a flat cap and 1960s sideburns and large doleful Jacobean eyes that don’t doubt their own authority.

“My husband.”

They are silent at the breakthrough. She has never talked about him, but they know from blonde white-coated large-bosomed Corinna with the thick glasses, who runs the shop at Durrie and with whom they have warm annual chats, that he ran off with a nurse after going into hospital for prostate problems and that’s why Mrs Forbes-Innes is in the Old Manse, alone.

Something moist drags against the hand that Tom rests over the side of the settee. *Murdo* looks up just like a dog whose eyes are not milky with cataracts. His response to

Tom’s outstretched hand of earlier was a little delayed, but he still does what dogs do. Licking hands? No problem.

“Poor old *Murdo*,” says Tom, patting his matted head, confining “poor old” to his general decrepitude, excluding from its scope both the forthcoming injection and the lack of people to get him up and put him to bed and prepare his meals.

“He was my husband’s dog.”

“You can see why she wouldn’t want to look after her husband’s dog when it’s old and sick, cleaning up dog diarrhoea after what he did to her,” Tom will say that evening, laying the unpolished wooden table in Myrtle Cottage for their meal, which Mrs Forbes-Innes might have shared.

Wouldn’t want is kinder than *doesn’t want*.

“And we don’t know that she is from one of the great families. The Forbes-Innes name was his. Maybe when he married her it was like what he did second time around. Maybe she was the daily help. They were lovely scones. And she’s named for a film star. Merle. Wouldn’t live-in servants have gone by the sixties?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Martin will say, as if that refutes Tom’s speculation.

“But her accent isn’t servantlike. I’m sure that photo was never there before. She put it there deliberately, to give herself an opening to open up about him, and when it came to it she couldn’t. Upper-class reserve, stifling your emotions, stiff upper lip.”

“It helps, I suppose, if you’re chivvying your tenants to their deaths in the trenches.”

...“But of course you came to see the Temple,” she says, and of course this is acquiesced in.

Like them, *Murdo* makes to follow her out the door, rightly taking no account of the fact that he has no pedigree, like the woman his former master ran off with.

“No, *Murdo*.” Tom raises a forefinger to reinforce the command. “You might fall over the cliff with your bad legs.”

The overgrown path, roughly stepped, rises steeply in a curve through what is more field than garden, but overgrown shrubs and rose bushes show that once it was rescued from pasture. “It’s just around those Scots pines,” she says as if they were first-time visitors, heaving herself up energetically despite her limp that makes her rotate her hips at each step, and there it is, down on the brow of the knobbly height. Its two circular storeys of stubby Egyptian pillars and a roof sometimes compared to a turban are vivid in clarifying sunshine.

Tom pauses to scrutinise it, head on one side, paying tribute to the idea that each visit yields new insights, enhanced knowledge of things human and divine. The backdrop is green hillside, hazy, dizzying, field upon field rising above the road far below.

“I’m not convinced it is a folly.” Martin’s tone accuses someone. “It’s 1792, isn’t it? – more ▶▶

or less contemporaneous with the Egyptian Room at Cairness House by Fraserburgh, and that is thought to have Masonic significance – *The Magic Flute*, ‘O, Isis und Osiris’, and so on – so this could have had some sort of genuine ceremonial significance.”

Tom: “Maybe the laird built a pagan temple in the grounds of the manse—that-never-was to get up the noses of the highly moral congregation who wouldn’t accept his choice of minister.”

She says, “A man wrote wanting to set up a garden centre at the Temple but he couldn’t get planning permission.”

The interior is disappointing. Where one might have hoped for, say, a giant statue of a dog-headed deity dramatically shadowed by lights floating in stone bowls carved with mysterious symbols, there is brickwork and concrete. The internal staircase between the storeys is of metal, like a fire-escape out of *West Side Story*. They point out to each other the graffiti carved into the pillars. *Jas. Henderson 1827* shows loving craftsmanship worthy of a preservation order.

Martin says, “If there’d been planning permission in 1792 they’d have refused permission to built the Temple.”

“And yet,” Tom replies like someone in a play before an audience, which fits in with the Temple, for photographs in Mrs Forbes-Innes’s box show Shakespeare being acted here, the upper storey of pillars Juliet’s balcony, “things that at one point seem awful and hideous gradually, like, become part of the landscape. Years from now we’ll be romanticising about tower blocks.”

“And what,” says Mrs Forbes-Innes, like a grande dame in Wilde, “is a tower block?”

At least, that’s what they think and hope

she says; but her words in her croaky voice were not quite clear, and honesty will later compel them to admit to each other that perhaps she merely said, in a disbelieving way, “What? – About tower blocks?”

“I mean,” Tom continues, “even if the Temple was built just as a folly, you do wonder whether, like, over the years it hasn’t acquired a sort of power anyway.”

“Yes.” No upward lift of a question-mark in her voice. Is she a priestess of mysteries as well as a connection of aristocratic families?

“I mean,” says Tom, “amidst all this... *greenness*.” He is at the balustraded edge of the forecourt, the empty road snaking below.

“I mean,” he says, what he would never say to Martin despite their decades of intimacy, “on a day like today, the sun sort of getting inside everything and permeating it, when you look out on that greenness, so deep and large and intense and, like, mind-drugging, individual human things get, like, trivialised, no, *seem* trivial, but that doesn’t mean you don’t cherish human things, you have to, because they’re part of something, but... It’s like Traherne: ‘There is in us a world of love to somewhat, though we know not what in the world that should be.’ You could almost be, like, a pantheist.”

“We need to be going if we’re to get milk.” The sun dazzles off Martin’s glasses.

“Corinna doesn’t shut until eight,” Tom protests. Nevertheless they drift away from the Temple, back up towards the Scots pines.

“I mean,” says Tom, defiantly, “it’s like being different individuals fades out, there is something that this little insistent pressing demanding yelping self merges into, and even death doesn’t matter.”

And here, as they round the trees and begin to descend the path to the house, is

Murdo, bravely ascending a slow pawing step at a time, as Mr Sauchen might have ascended Durriebhar Hill before it got too much for him. Murdo is even observing the official dog thing of carrying a stick in his mouth.

He drops it in front of Tom but then eschews the barking and springing about that are dog-language for “Throw it for me” and sits, panting heavily, smiling as though all that anyone could ask of a dog has been accomplished and he positively enjoys meeting such challenges.

This seems to inaugurate their farewells, though they are some way from the house.

“It’s been very nice to see you both again. Perhaps you’ll come back next year.”

Murdo, though he will be incinerated by then, associates himself with the invitation by an attempt to place both front legs up on Tom’s thighs. He falls over and yelps.

“Poor old Murdo.” Tom, crouching, strokes comfort into Murdo as he rights himself, frantically trying to lick Tom’s stroking hand in proof that nothing indicative of imperfect dog-functioning happened. Martin, like someone passing disapproving comment, says, “We wondered if you would like to have dinner with us at Myrtle Cottage.” As if he’s gone too far this time he adds, “Next year.”

“How marvellous! What fun!”

“Nothing elaborate. We have quite simple meals.” Martin, warningly.

Tom: “Just, like, fresh Don salmon and raspberries from the garden. And a Dubonnet in the garden first.”

“Ah, Dubonnet. The last time I asked for Dubonnet the Duchess of Buccleuch called it the scraping from the floor of the vineyard. But she did say I was in good company because it was the Queen Mother’s favourite drink.”

This stunning gift raises most pressingly a question that in previous farewells has only dared to hint at itself. They answer it unflinchingly, of one mind, perfectly co-ordinated. When Martin takes her hand he puts his other arm around her in a hug and kisses her on one cheek while Tom, putting his arms around both of them, kisses her other cheek. They stand enfolded by her smell of old roses and old books; one would have thought that the turban on the Temple, meeting Tom’s eye beyond the rise, would have had to elongate its pillars to do so from here. When they separate she is smiling; whether in pleasure or amusement or forbearance they will debate later.

They hasten ahead down the path, are almost running when they reach the gate.

“’Bye, Murdo,” Tom bellows to the out-of-sight dog and his mistress as he slams the car door shut.

Driving back to Myrtle Cottage beneath the Temple on its height, they and their Volvo are now part of the sun-goldened Nasmyth scene.

“It was,” says Tom defiantly, as they squeeze carefully past a car coming in the opposite direction, “like the Temple *did* something.”

“SF53 EGD. Did you see that?” Martin has pulled off the road, scrunching into broom. “Some old bag talking on a fucking mobile ’phone on *this* road. SF53 EGD. You witnessed it too, didn’t you? I’m reporting her to the police. SF53 EGD. It’s virtually fucking single-track. She could kill someone. SF53 EGD.”

He drives on through peasants and sheep, careful not to run over the dog. ■

Poems by Jim Carruth

Not missing Michael Jackson

(i.m. Jimmy Baxter 1921–2009)

Three days after that other funeral
we sat together on hard pews
to celebrate the life
of a man who knew who he was
who worked the land from birth to death
and put no burden on us
to see him as anything more
so we were happy to sing for him
All things bright and beautiful
to let that be our farewell.

For a couple of minutes, no more,
the minister talked of the man himself,
a slow but imprecise driver
whose old and battered pick up
gathered dents and paint fleck
scratches like postcards
from all his neighbours’ farms.
We were there to bury a modest man,
simple as that, the sun streaming
through stained glass, glory enough.

Lamentations

That last winter he said prayers
in bed; listened through the rain

as one of the remaining cows
bellowed out from its stall

and the others followed,
every beast in the shed

sending their woes to him,
voices he’d grown up with

voices he’d always known
pained journeys of sound

flooding his night,
a mourning beyond words

a choral bond
calling for the ark.

(a village elder’s advice on) the white crow

Why do you search
for false auguries of hope?

Nothing followed the triple rainbow,
or last winter’s one wild rose.

Now this feathered messiah.
Can I speak plainly here:

a white crow is still a crow;
a lifeless sheep is still a corpse;

a bloated corpse is still a meal
for your white crow.

It still rises with its flock
flies with its flock

still falls with the black
on the weak and the dead.

Poems by Elisabeth M. Rimmer, Samuel Tongue, Heather Reid, Hamish Whyte & Colin Will

A Doll for Lucy - The Orkney Venus

BY ELIZABETH M. RIMMER

It would have taken time without metal -
hours, weeks, grinding the stone to part
the head from the shoulders, score the lines
that gave her hair, hands below wide sleeves,
the flow of her dress and the pins
that kept it together, like owl eyes, like breasts.

Who else would they have done it for, endowing
two inches of pebble with wisdom,
her mother's fertility, her father's smile,
the memory of hills in her brow-line,
the lochs of home in her eyes,
except a loved child?

More than a play-thing,
they made her a doll to keep in her pocket,
a blessing of family, homeland and story
to keep her safe, as we would keep you.

Boy Soldier

BY SAMUEL TONGUE

Here's another broken toy-soldier,
an Action-Man stripped and scrapped, snapped
in a dusty wargame,
dumped in the Oxfam
on the Great Western Road,
thrown into a box with the rest of them,
an embarrassed tangle
of skin coloured plastic,
painted-on grins
and disposable
posable limbs.

All those backyard wars
and here's where they end;
the returned,
unreported,
waiting for charity,

the returned,
always returning
to the places behind
those unclosing,
inked-in eyes.

Barnacles

BY HEATHER REID

Running to the sea you're forced
to navigate the sprawl of rocks
which might, in certain lights,
be stranded whales,

their grey backs draped in weed,
their skins crusted with barnacles
as scratchy as your brother's gallus friend
when you were twelve:

the thrill of stubble burn,
that same hot web of hurt
if you should slip.

Suddenly, your mother's voice,
Careful...

See The Ferrets

BY HAMISH WHYTE

Street photographer's snap:
mum, dad and me aged three
with bucket and spade
holiday family at St Andrews -
memory began here
with big sand and sea
the caves I couldn't reach
and best of all the daily walk
back from the beach at teatime
past the garden where the ferrets were
where I'd always want to stop
for those winking somethings glimpsed
through the hedge, that never quite
finished their shapes:
the movement, the strangeness.

Sitting in the sunny garden
all these years later
it's dunnocks and robins
I look for hopping out
from under the privet -
but still hope
those old unfixable slivers of light
flutter at me, strain my eyes
to catch whatever it was
whatever it is.

Watching Birds

BY COLIN WILL

"10,124 Pinkfoot Geese sighted at Aberlady,"
read the note on the whiteboard.
10,124 eh? A big number; a lot
of counting, and so precise.

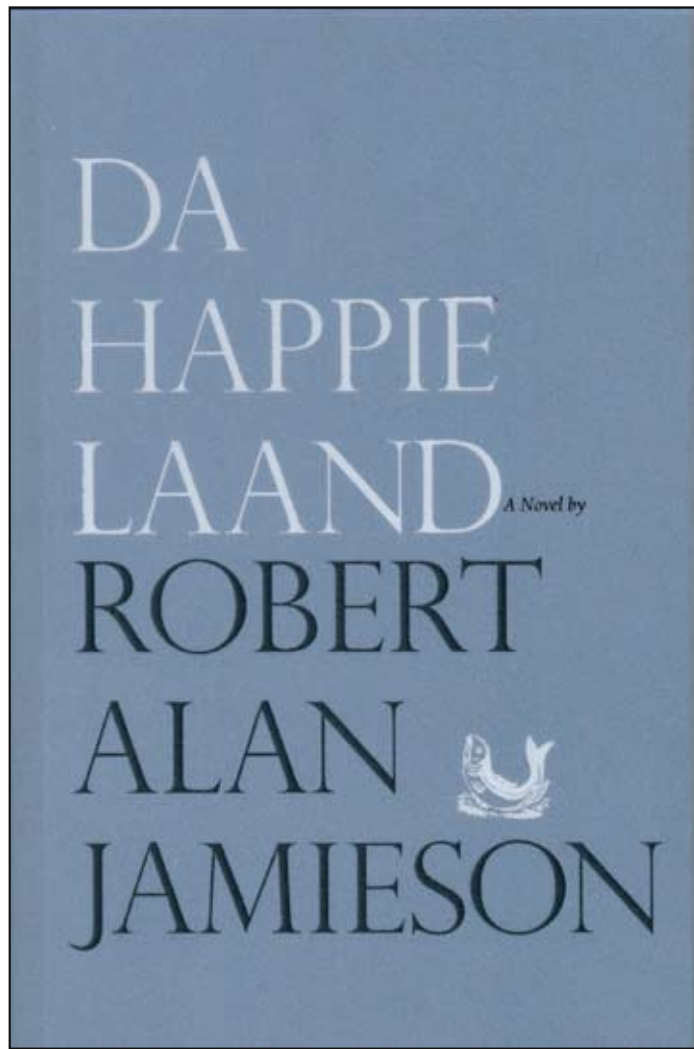
I picture the counter's thumb,
swollen and tired from an excess
of clicking, eyes blearing across
the grey-brown flock. "Did I count
that group? Has that goose moved?"

I can't imagine devotion
on this scale. It's enough
that I recall walking
in a November dusk
through the buckthorn thicket,
foot before unseen foot
along the muddy path.

Over my head
10,124 Pinkfoot Geese babbled
in the near darkness.
This glorious chorus came and went
in waves, as V after V
whiffled in to land
on the salt flats.

I don't read anything
into this; it's a fact, an event
that occurs every evening,
witnessed or not.
I'm just glad to know
these visitors pause here,
their holiday home
in the warm Scottish winter.

REVIEWS

**Da Happie Laand**

by Robert Alan Jamieson
Luath Press

REVIEW BY PAM BEASANT

It's hard to know where to start with this novel, which is so wide-ranging and yet compact, it takes a while to let it sink in and articulate the effect. It's the product of scholarship, and great love. It's no surprise, perhaps, that this writer, born in Shetland, with his prodigious ability and preoccupation with language, heritage, sense of place and context, should have tackled these enormous subjects head-on. What is pleasing and moving is his enormous success. It is lifted far beyond social and historical documentary by the universal humanity and emotional intelligence of the writer, and the compelling central storyline.

The interweaving of fact, fiction and reconstruction is superb and as closely knit as a Shetland fisherman's sock. There is the first-person narrative of young David Cunninghame, searching for his lost father in Shetland. Then there's the search for David by the dying minister in Perth, Archibald Nicol. There's the human history of the Lairds and the people of Norbie in old Zetland; and lastly there are the lives, adventures and descendants of the Shetland folk who travelled to the new world and founded new communities while guarding the old language and traditions.

The strands are closely connected, the characters related by family and place, and da happie laand of the title can refer equally to

the old world, the new world, the mysterious concept of heaven and the search for faith and for self in the here and now. It could hardly be more ambitious in its scope, or more poetically realised.

It begins simply enough, with David Cunninghame appearing on the doorstep of the old minister, dishevelled and footsore and refusing to give his name. He leaves a bundle of papers, and when Rev. Nicol subsequently realises David is an ex-parishioner whom he baptised as a child, he starts to piece together the fragments he's been given. As his health deteriorates, he works on the unfinished old Zetland history, written by learned nineteenth century schoolmaster James Gabrielson, and sets in motion a correspondence with descendants of key people in David's story in New Zetland (part of New Zealand), through which a whole history emerges. Meanwhile, his personal reflections stray through the narrative – his anxiety about David, his grief at the loss of his wife and his shaken faith as he confronts his own mortality. All this is beautifully and poignantly achieved.

David's own immediate search gradually unfolds, with his life-changing journey north to the island home he never knew, where his father ran to and disappeared from, and the characters, politics and tensions of the community. David is deeply affected by the beauty of the landscape; its 'otherness' and strange familiarity, and only gradually realises the extent of his personal connection with it, and confronts his relationship with his father through the vivid echoes of his recent presence there.

Strong supporting characters emerge along the way. In old Zetland, there's James Gabrielson himself, narrator of the unfinished history of Norbie, and old Zetland generally. There are the individual Lairds, culminating in young Bertie Scot, 'Ditto', who has to make a new way in the world. By contrast, there are the people of the remote island of Thulay (truly Ultima Thule), outlying part of the Norbie Estate, who welcome the Crofters Commission with unflinching hospitality, while perfectly articulating the polite list of grievances against the system that expressed the whole plight of the peasantry: 'There was, in their geographical extremity, and their methods of arranging their own mental map to ignore it, something of the condition of all people'.

In the new world, there's wild and bold Zetlander Jake Kuliness ('Kapiyaki'), who lived among the cannibals and founded a community, and the gentle centenarian Mimie Jeromsen, who, thousands of miles from the islands, speaks a pure form of Shetlandic and recounts the love story of David's grandfather in beautiful dialect.

In present-day Shetland there's the eccentric minister Rev. Pirie, and John and Lena, incomers, friends of David's father; strange, obsessive 'born-agains', living on the edge of religious ecstasy. There's the Laird's kind housekeeper Mary, and the unsettling old shepherd, ever present, who says little but sees much.

The islands themselves emerge variously as a utopia, a poverty trap, an importer and exporter of fine minds and strong traditions – a troubling parallel universe and a microcosm. In the end, we all have to make peace with ourselves. David's search, proving wider and deeper than he imagined, prompts the observation that he is 'still a child, moving towards the unknown absence, caught in the cold sea and the north wind, the empty lands and the big skies. Lost.'

Shetland has found its epic. This isn't only a poetic and scholarly meditation and historical account, it's gripping and involving, beautifully paced and ultimately moving. All aspects of the narrative seem present, vivid, and, like David Cunninghame, we are drawn into an exploration of our sense of place and history, and – despite the precise dating of extracts and letters throughout – into the mysterious cyclical nature of time itself. ■

Belief in Ourselves

by Neil M. Gunn

Compiled by Alistair McCleery & Dairmid Gunn

Whittles Publishing

REVIEW BY CAROL ANDERSON

A ghostly saltire wafts across this book's cover, hinting at some of the preoccupations within. The Caithness-born writer Neil M. Gunn (1891-1973) is probably best known as a prolific novelist, author of, for instance, *The Silver Darlings* (1941), a rich historical epic. But as this interesting selection of his essays shows, Gunn was fiercely engaged with the social and economic realities of his contemporary

Scotland. This volume, the introduction announces, 'focuses on politics in the widest sense'.

Many of the issues discussed by Gunn seem unnervingly topical: land ownership, energy production in the Highlands, the decline of the fishing industry, the idea of a 'professional theatre for Scotland'. One can only imagine his reaction to community ownership in parts of the Highlands today, to windfarms or pylons or the Scottish national theatre.

Vivid phrases add emotional power to the argumentative prose. Of the enforced displacement of Highlanders to Canada, Gunn notes: 'Names like Fraser or Mackenzie wander as mighty rivers across a continent'. Or evoking Scotland's economic ills: 'A tour of the coast line of Scotland is a tour of scores of derelict harbours and creeks, every one of which was at one time tumultuous as a healthy hive'. And in the same essay, which berates the church for failure to question contemporary values: 'Big business, attended by financier and publicist, are the trinity we worship to-day'.

An afterword explains that the twenty-six essays – many originally appearing in *The Scots Magazine* – are presented thematically rather than chronologically. Themes are not spelled out, but emerge diffusely through sequential reading of loosely grouped pieces – some about Nationalism, others focussing on issues specifically Highland, including the essay 'Belief in Ourselves' (1945), which gives the volume its title. The final essays handle literary matters, often Gunn's responses to other writers of his time such as Grassie Gibbon, Muir and MacDiarmid. But themes criss-cross the volume, its architecture building a sense of Gunn's persistent concerns.

There are frustrations: notably, it is difficult to trace developments in Gunn's thinking. An essay first published in 1942 is followed by one that appeared in 1931. Most are from the late 1920s through to the 1940s, but there is a scattering from the 1960s. Chronological presentation would allow Gunn's ideas to be seen more clearly in relation to world events of his lifetime – Depression, the growth of Fascism, Communism, the Second World War. However, the volume's afterword provides useful contextualising.

This collection highlights certain facets of Gunn's mind and writing; ideally it would be read alongside *Landscape to Light*, a companion volume of essays focussing on landscape, spiritual and philosophical concerns. Among Gunn's achievements is his evocation of the natural world; for the pleasures of that we must turn to his more meditative prose, and above all, to his fiction.

Gunn is described on the back cover as 'one of Scotland's most distinguished and highly regarded novelists of the 20th century'. That reputation is not entirely secure; some critics express unease with his ideology, including gender politics (an area of thinking not addressed in the present volume). Yet Gunn's work has devoted admirers too, both among 'ordinary' readers and scholars, for his narrative skill and the ambitious reach of novels such as *Highland River* (1937). Scottish literature is flourishing as an academic discipline,

with sophisticated discussion of Gunn, among other writers. And this is good. We need to debate our literature.

But readers also need – above all we need – the primary texts. In order to judge Gunn's creative and intellectual output for ourselves, we must have the works in print. Over the years, his novels have come and (worryingly) gone from various publishers. Currently, a few are available from Whittles, others from Birlinn. We need those novels, but also the short stories – and yes, the essays. We need them in print. While there are interesting extracts from Gunn and others in an anthology such as Margery Palmer McCulloch's magnificent *Modernism and Nationalism*, individual writers deserve to be more fully represented.

And so we must be grateful to the dedicated editors of this volume, and to independent publisher Whittles, for drawing together many of Gunn's essays and making them available. ■

Not Just Moonshine:

New and Selected Poems

By Tessa Ransford
Luath Press

REVIEW BY IRENE HOSSACK

Tessa Ransford's *Not Just Moonshine* (2008) collects new and selected poems written over the last four decades. In his Foreword to the volume, Michael Lister explains the decision to order the poems according to their date of composition, rather than date of publication. He writes that ordering them this way allows the poems to refer more to Ransford's life than to her books. This is an interesting approach, which also helps to reveal the growth and development of Ransford's *oeuvre* and her evolving poetic voice through the years. The themes of womanhood, motherhood, love, spirituality, myth, the natural world and sense of place, are as much evident in the early poems as they are in those written recently. It seems inappropriate to single out certain poems from others as the collection represents a life and as such is of a whole. Overall the poems reflect a woman's experience and the experiences and insights of women, echoing the feminine in voice, tone and subject matter.

The volume takes its title from a remark made by Sir Walter Scott '...everything is moonshine, compared with the education of the heart', quoted at the beginning of the book. Given that the poems are a reflection of Ransford's life and explore many wide-ranging themes, the collection can be seen as a reply, showing that moonshine is not insubstantial or without meaning and is a worthy subject matter for poetry. Indeed the Foreword tells us that Ransford selected the title in defiance of the notion that looking on the moon is old-fashioned. This is further confirmed by the poem that sits opposite the quotation. 'Moonlight over Arthur's Seat' is a poem in isolation, before the Acknowledgements and Foreword. Arthur's Seat, a landmark of Edinburgh, with the reflective light of the moon playing upon it, brings an exchange between nature and humanity, showing their

interdependence. This poem serves as the poetic introduction to the themes and subject matter of the poems that come after it.

'Poems written in the 1970s' begins with 'Poetry of Persons' where repetition in the first lines of each stanza creates the sense in which people interconnect. It is a love poem to humanity, showing that we have most when we let go. 'How things happen' is a development of the theme of love and uses repetition to reinforce the connection between human love and nature. Love is 'beyond analysis', it 'happens' and cannot be defined. Comparing a first meeting with that of two seagulls 'caught in a shaft of sun' the poem develops the proposition that we are not in control, as we imagine ourselves to be, but should embrace the notion that we are subject to forces of nature and good can come of this.

'Poems written in the 1980s' contains some of the poems from the series *Medusa Dozen*. Exploring the complexities of womanhood through the figure of Medusa, these powerful poems express the female condition. 'Medusa Six' begins:

*Self-transformation is what makes us women,
our peculiarity, defining feature.
Watch it as girl becomes mother,
as the mother adapts to
every phase of growing in her child.*

Embracing the sometimes negative figure of woman as 'The witch, the wise woman', the poem claims these characteristics as positive forces, women are 'part of the spiral of creation,/its dyings and renewals.'

Throughout the collection are poems that play with form. One formal element in particular, is the use of repetition. This repetition can be within stanzas or through stanzas and brings a sense of wholeness to the poems, reinforcing meaning, as formal choices should. In some poems the final word in a line is repeated in the first word of the next line. 'Waxwings in the park: *variety is the spice of life*' (from 'Poems written since the millennium') is one example of this:

*A flock of waxwings in the sycamore
sycamore in February in the park
park green and windswept in the city
city grey yet glistening in the east*

The repetition brings a focus to the language and at the same time develops rhythmic evocations of landscape, though Ransford is careful not to overuse this formal element.

Poems that explore science are informed and playful. 'String Theory' (from 'Poems written since the millennium') considers 'a universe that's knitted out of string'. 'Choices the *Goldilocks Principle*' successfully plays with form to consider the 'golden mean', a scientific notion of extremes, and the requirement for things to be just right for life in our universe to flourish:

*the value of the in-between:
that just-right balance knife-edge keen
for human equilibrium*

The poem understands the fragility and complexity of life for humanity and in nature,

themes which run through Ransford's poetic output.

Tessa Ransford's contribution to the life of poetry in Scotland is remarkable. Among many other achievements, she was the founder/director of the Scottish Poetry Library from 1984 to 1999 and set up the Callum Macdonald Memorial Award to encourage poetry pamphlet publication. It is to be hoped that she will continue supporting and encouraging poets, and poetry writing in Scotland, and that we will experience more of her poetic explorations in the years to come. ■

The Last Wolf

by Jim Crumley
Published by Birlinn

REVIEW BY MANDY HAGGITH

To say that Jim Crumley would like wolves to be reintroduced to Scotland is to understate the case. 'In a northern hemisphere country like this', he says, 'if the wolf is in place everything in nature makes sense, but in the absence of wolves nothing in nature makes sense.'

This book is a passionate argument for wolves to be reinstated in Scotland, made with exuberant clarity by a naturalist whose writing is as confident as a striding wolf. Jim Crumley often cites Barry Lopez, the great American author of classics like *Of Wolves and Men* and *Arctic Dreams*. At his best, he writes as well as Lopez, and shares his uncompromising stand on our species' dysfunctional relationship with the rest of the natural world.

The most entertaining chapters of the book are those where Crumley sets about debunking the various stories of the last wolf in Scotland. He sets out to expose 'Last Wolf Syndrome': the human tendency to turn an anecdote into a lasting story, embroidering it along the way to make it a 'better' tale, but so much so that it becomes, effectively, a lie. One by one he unpicks the last wolf stories, revealing the untruths lurking within them. His rubbishing of the 'pigswill' of Victorian animal historian J.E. Harting is riveting, as is the demonstration of how far and wide his mythologising about 'rabid droves' of wolves has spread.

Crumley's own last wolf story is embedded within the book as a sequence of short fictional passages, in the style of Lopez or Farley Mowat, of the last wolf living out her solitary life on Rannoch Moor and the Black Wood. Some of the book's most vivid writing is in these passages about Scottish forest and moorland landscapes. He adores Rannoch not only for its wild rawness but also for its potential as a last refuge and future reintroduction site for wolves.

No-one can write about swans like Crumley, and one of the most magical sections is when the fictional wolf sits out a snowstorm close to a flock of these birds, and 'the snow made white ovals of swans and wolf'. Afterwards, the wolf gets up, shakes off the ice crust 'like thistle-down' and disappears 'into the snow-gloom'. It is her absence that most unsettles the swans, whose leader 'leaned his neck at the wind, dead straight.... running

and flying at once, he led the swans into the loud, urgent grace of take-off'. Throughout the book, Crumley's writing has the urgent grace of the swans' flight.

Making space for wolves in Scotland, Crumley believes, requires the refutation of stereotypes of the wolf as a child-killer, grave-robbler and battlefield scavenger. These, he argues, are less than myths, merely 'headstones to the passing of an oral tradition', in which the reality of wolves was not allowed to make an appearance. He shows how the perpetuation of falsehoods about wolves has continued into the present: his critique of Channel Five's TV programmes, *Mr and Mrs Wolf*, is particularly insightful. He shows how the myths are made: he relates an anecdote of a man in Norway who woke in the night to hear his dogs barking, went out naked to investigate, and heard, with delight, 'a concert from wolves 200 metres from his house'. But this story soon grew legs and became 'a walking story' and within 14 days it was being retold as an attack by a 'slavering pack' on a defenceless man. If such distortion can happen in a mere two weeks, Crumley asks, what hope is there of a fair representation of wolves in Scotland surviving more than 200 years?

I must, in parentheses, admit *mea culpa* as the author of a novel, *The Last Bear*, in which I portrayed wolves in such a way that it deliberately drew on the prejudices of our culture. I used wolves as a proxy for evil, and for that I hang my head in shame and apologise.

The case for bringing the wolf back to Scotland is perhaps less successfully made in this book than the case against is decimated. There is the argument that wolves would help to control Scotland's infestation of red deer thereby reducing their ongoing destruction of the woodland habitat in which they formerly thrived. There are examples of Norway and Yellowstone, in the USA, where wolves have been reintroduced in recent years, and here in particular it would have been interesting to have a deeper analysis of the effect of wolves and how much of that effect could be expected to transfer to Scottish ecosystems. It would have been interesting to get some sense of whether and how Crumley envisages the wolf's missing co-predators, particularly lynx and bear, in a future assemblage in an ecologically restored Scotland. But these are really calls for 'more', rather than criticisms. Crumley's argument rests, finally, not on a scientific case, but on the instinct that the nature of Scotland 'makes no sense' without wolves.

This book is a huge breath of fresh air. Breathe it in and be inspired that 'a wolf place does not stop being a wolf place just because the land runs out of wolves. For there is no such thing as the last wolf.' She hasn't been born yet. ■

Archie and The North Wind

by Angus Peter Campbell
Luath Press

REVIEW BY JOHN JENNETT

I was fortunate to read *Archie & the North Wind* whilst sailing the Hebrides in September. Thanks to this compelling and lyrical novel, I ►►

REVIEWS

▶ did not need to feel the real gales on my face to conjure up Angus Peter Campbell's landscape. Instead, with the author's storytelling, swilling in my imagination, the book peeled back the layers of the physical and cultural scenery.

This is the writer's first full-length venture into an English-language work, although some may have sampled his memorable, Calvino-inspired collection of twenty-one fables *Invisible Islands* (Otago, 2006). Archie is another vehicle for the same distinct voice: unashamedly rooted in the storytelling traditions of the Gael but without any self-consciousness about the magical realism of a loosely contemporary setting. Here clouds brood "like Gordon Brown" and the reader can expect the recounting of a waterhorse legend to be interrupted by a google search. The fast-paced plot propels the eponymous protagonist towards his zeitgeist confrontation with terrorists and an oil company thousands of miles from his hebridean home.

This see-saw between the dramatic present and the swirl of handed-down stories is a brilliant attempt at revealing the consciousness of Archie: an islander on what starts as a simple, if surreal, quest to "stop the North Wind". Perhaps Campbell intends Archie to symbolise a race culturally catapulted in less than a generation from "before television" to the present day. The great scholar John Lorne Campbell often reflected on this challenge, writing in 1959 that it was "extraordinarily difficult to convey the feeling and atmosphere of a community where oral tradition... [is] very much alive to people who have only known the modern ephemeral, rapidly changing world of industrial civilisation." Certainly this work vividly portrays the concept as closer to a collective consciousness: a framework of experience rather than simply a quaint fireside assembly of avuncular folk with good memories. Campbell himself being steeped in the tradition, makes it all the more remarkable that he has conflated it with a literary, English language novel.

At times the writing is as dazzling as Marquez: take the deft confidence of the opening brush strokes when Archie realised "that the sweet thing in his mouth was his mother, and that the dark thing that hid the world from him was the inside of a drawer in which he slept..." Elsewhere there is a rawness in the meandering, creative flow of the prose. Campbell has done well not to smooth off the corners that both energise the work and hitch it to the traditions.

Occasionally in the labyrinthine nesting of recounted stories I sensed the confidence of the new voice faltering as the author ambitiously wrestled the flow of his native thinking into the modern novel. Littering the text with graphic icons to telegraph switches from one narrative voice to another is a distracting crutch that this talented writer does not need. It would have done him and his readers a service for his Editor to tell him so and to bury some of the obviously authorial "explanations" that occasionally surface. Does the reader need to be told that "...it was, of course, a different version of the story, but this is the one Archie remembered, or thought he

remembered and told or re-told or embellished a thousand and one times over the years". But these minor flaws should not distract from the whole. Nor should the cover design, which on the basis of straw-polls I conducted positioned this as a book for the teenage market.

Angus Peter Campbell has made a bold and brave attempt to fuse the country's Gaelic traditions with a contemporary novel with bang-up-to-date global, environmental themes. By the measure of his own peers he is a true Bard in the fullness of the tradition and by the evidence of this book a true novelist. Enjoy this English debut; look forward to the next work and even further refinement which may see the writer become as significant a voice in his second-tongue as he already is in his first. ■

From The Small Presses

REVIEW BY CHRIS POWICI

It's a sad fact of editorial life that *Northwords Now* receives more books than we can review. Nonetheless I couldn't let the best recent offerings from the small poetry presses pass entirely without recognition and so have given them this wee nook in the magazine. There, after all, more poems in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in the offices of Bloodaxe and Faber & Faber!

The blurb on the cover of Morgan Downie's *stone and sea* (Calder Wood Press – www.calderwoodpress.co.uk) promises poems that are 'held together by a clear spiritual feeling for people and places'. However any fears that this 'spiritual feeling' will result in poetry of hazy religiosity are soon laid to rest. When questions of spirit do manifest themselves it's in a very physical way. For example, the descriptions of God in 'the stone bible' range from 'red sandstone/the white calm of the sea' to 'the loony on the bus/leaving epiphanies/ as greeting cards'. If anything it's the sheer proliferation of images that at times threatens to overwhelm the poems and this, combined with the decision to steer clear of punctuation, lends *stone and sea* something of a relentless tone as thoughts and descriptions tumble across and down the page. But then one has the sense that Downie wants this to be an *intense* sort of book. More often than not when revelation arrives, it arrives at the crossroads of history and memory, nature and community. In 'the gospel ship' the voices of crofters 'rise out across/white sands/crofts thatched/with smoke/out over the/empty lazybeds...singing/god's voice/upon the waters'. Elsewhere, work itself takes on a spiritual dimension. For the eponymous subject of 'the weaver', 'her prayer/ is a yarn/chant.' I confess to being nonplussed as to why the lines have to be quite so short (more flow, less staccato please!) but the images themselves are striking. In the end it is this openness to the world about him that makes Downie's exploration of the inner life so engaging.

Colin Will strikes an

altogether different note in *The Foorshow at the Mad Yak Café* (Red Squirrel Press – www.redsquirrelpress.com). 'Sealskin', for example, begins 'I tread carefully' and a quality of reticence, and a wariness when it comes to drawing conclusions, is evident in many of these poems. In 'Credo', he even admits 'I lack the language'. He's talking about not being able to speak Tibetan but the statement hints at the unfussy, unshowy way in which 'big' questions are addressed. Moreover, when it comes to the English language, Colin Will surely knows a thing or two. There's something gleefully surreal in his description of (I think) rhododendrons: 'Bushes from the Himalaya/flash their pom-poms,/cheer-leading in shades/of pink and carmine.' ('Hide and Find') He's also very acute on how easily, and sometimes uneasily, the pilgrim becomes a tourist and vice versa. In 'The Iron Road to Lhasa', one of several 'Tibetan' poems, 'a river of red robes/and tourists' flow around the 'Lhasa circuits,/ as if to spin the city/like a prayer wheel.' That the last five poems in the book conclude with the 'untranslatable' Buddhist mantra 'Om Mani Padme Hum' suggests a poet who has set a limit on his own claims to 'truth'. Whether he's exploring questions of faith or describing mountain landscapes, this modesty, combined with a persuasively matter-of-fact diction, results in a highly readable collection.

The ghosts that inhabit the poems of Judith Taylor's pamphlet *Local Colour* (Calder Wood Press – www.calderwoodpress.co.uk) come in a variety of guises. Among others, there are pub ghosts, country house ghosts, aristocratic ghosts, family ghosts. The voice of these poems is often informal, anecdotal and entertaining but the surface humour is, at times, broken by something altogether more disturbing. In, for example, 'Disputed territory' Taylor resurrects the story of two Covenanting women 'staked and left' on the salt-flats 'to punish their faith'. This is ghost story as alternative history, turning the tables on those who still see the deaths of these women as 'lies and propaganda.' Indeed, the wider, more serious theme coursing quietly through this book is how what we fondly like to think of as 'history' is made up of ghost stories of one kind or another. In 'Ill-starred' different versions of Mary Queen of Scots are explored, every one as real or unreal as the other: 'Two visibly different death-masks/are said to be yours...There are pictures/of your pale face wherever we look'. That the poem is addressed to Mary herself only adds to the sum of ghosts. It is as if the poet is a sort of medium or, rather more alarmingly, as if the dead Queen has summoned the poem. By the end of *Local Colour* I had a strange sense of how much we demand from our ghosts, whether we acknowledge them or not.

The back cover of James Andrew's *Birdsong and Flame* (Kite Modern Poetry – 16, Fane Close, Stamford, PE9 1HG) declares that it is 'lavishly illustrated throughout', and indeed it is, with some terrific drawings of animals, people and places by Ishbel Macdonald. The poetry too exhibits a strong visual sense. The many poems set in Turkey register the ambivalence of the stranger, attracted and disturbed

by the sights of an unfamiliar city. Simply taking a stroll can involve seeing a sheep lying 'Flat on its back with its throat cut... There was no expression on the face/As if it didn't mind//Or as if it didn't know anymore/Whether it minded or not' ('Morning Walk'). The north of Scotland proves as vivid, if not quite so unsettling, as in this description from 'Postcards': 'The lighthouse overseeing Sandwood Bay/With its stack daggering at the sky/Guillemots head-butting their way/Through the waves after the fish/Puffins spattering the cliffs'. This is rich and colourful stuff so I feel a little churlish in saying that, at times, the poems feel somewhat overworked. Occasionally Andrew doesn't seem to put enough trust in the image and feels a need to explain too much. For example the phrase 'sunshine blares out' is a succinct and arresting piece of synaesthetic description. Does the reader really need to have the meaning 'confirmed' with the awkward conceit of 'visual ghetto blaster' ('Bosphorous')? Indeed, I shouldn't have minded if *Birdsong* and *Flame* had contained rather fewer poems and more white space, so that text and image had more space to engage with one another. Nonetheless, it is a collection with a lot of vigour in its evocation of place, and a commendable candour when it comes to the writer's own emotional response to the 'unfamiliarity' of Turkey.

Jean Atkin shows an impressively sure touch when it comes to that old, but useful, truism 'less is more'. The poems in *The Treeless Region* (The Ravenglass Poetry Press – www.ravenglasspoetrypress.co.uk) possess a remarkable sense of economy and focus. Her principal subjects are family life and rural communities, but we are a long way from the cosy pastoral here. In 'Galloward, 1925' she describes the work of a 'country boy' whose job it is to lay out the dead. The closing lines describe how, having helped to load the coffin on the hearse, 'he hid from the gale/and shambled drifts in the lee/of warm plumed horses.' That last line comes as a quiet, affecting surprise in its affirmation of life in the face of winter and death, but it does so without resorting to mawkish sentiment or over-elaboration. The reader is simply left to absorb the 'heat' of the image. Elsewhere, Jean Atkin is equally insightful on the hardships of working the land – and the compensations. Nature is portrayed not as a spectacular, sublime 'other', but as a familiar presence, not always easy to live with, but a necessary and generous presence all the same. 'What Happens at Night' is a fine example of how poignantly Atkin articulates this sense of belonging, her diction as clear and clean as a newly whetted scythe. The poem ends

*From this hill the lochans float upward
Into dusk. There's no wind.
Radar floods the sky. I still get
To breathe thin smells of fleece and milk.*

The Treeless Region is a small book but a fine one. What impresses is not just the skill of the poet but the integrity she shows in putting her craft at the service of a world that includes but is, ultimately, wider than herself. ■

CONTRIBUTOR'S BIOGRAPHIES

Carol Anderson previously taught Scottish Literature at Glasgow University and reviewed books for *The Herald*. She now writes fiction, and teaches with the Open University.

Pam Beasant writes poetry, fiction and non-fiction. She lives in Stromness, Orkney, and was the first George Mackay Brown Writing Fellow in 2007.

Paul Brownsey has been a newspaper journalist and a philosophy lecturer at Glasgow University. He lives in Bearsden. Stories by him have appeared in about 40 magazines.

Jim Carruth's first poetry collection, *Bovine Pastoral*, published in 2004 was runner up in the Callum MacDonald memorial award. The follow up *High Auchensale* was one of the *Herald* books of the year in 2006. For more about Jim go to www.jimcarruth.co.uk

Rob Ewing has been published in various places including *New Writing Scotland*, *New Writing UK*, *Chapman*, and *Northwords Now*. His poetry was shortlisted for the William Soutar Writing Prize. He's currently writing a novel set in the Scottish Highlands.

Mandy Haggith lives in Assynt and writes in a shed with a tree-top view. In 2009, her novel *The Last Bear* won the Robin Jenkins Literary Prize for environmental writing.

Lesley Harrison lives in Orkney. She is

currently working with Orkney artist Laura Drever on a sequence of poems and drawings about non-migrant birds.

Mandy Henderson, originally from Perth, has lived in Ullapool for 23 years. She is a visual artist and works in the local Primary school with children who have special needs.

Irene Hossack's poems have been published internationally over the last decade and she is currently working on her first collection. She took her doctorate on the poetry of Geoffrey Hill, and teaches creative writing at the Open University.

John Jennett is a graduate of Glasgow University's Creative Writing program and winner of the 2010 Sceptre Prize. His current work is inspired by the landscape and culture of the Hebrides. Further details at www.johnjennett.com

Norman MacCaig was born in Edinburgh in 1910. His father was an Edinburgh chemist and his mother hailed from the island of Scalpay. By the time of his death in 1996, Norman MacCaig was widely regarded as one of the finest Scottish poets of the twentieth century.

Pàdraig MacAoidh / Peter Mackay has a pamphlet - 'From another island' - out with Clutag Press. He has lectured at Trinity College Dublin and Queen's Belfast, and now works for the BBC.

Alasdair Macrae is a retired lecturer who taught with Norman MacCaig at The University of Stirling. His study of MacCaig's poetry, simply entitled *Norman MacCaig*, is published by Northcote House.

Richie McCaffery is part Geordie, part Sassenach and part honorary Scot, holding an MLitt in Scottish Literature from Stirling University. He has poems in *Stand*, *Magma* and *Envoi*.

Marion McCready lives in Dunoon, a small town on the Clyde. Calder Wood Press will be publishing a pamphlet of her poems early next year.

W.S Milne is an Aberdeen poet living in Surrey. His books of poems include *Tiva-Three Lines and Sangs o Luve and Pairtan*. He has published a critical monograph on the poetry of Geoffrey Hill, and has recently made a programme on *The Waste Land* with Joan Bakewell for BBC Radio 4.

Theresa Muñoz was born in Vancouver and now lives in Edinburgh. Her work has appeared in *Poetry Scotland*, *The Red Wheelbarrow*, *Canadian Literature*, *New Writing Scotland* and many others. She is currently writing a doctoral thesis on the work of Tom Leonard at Glasgow University.

Heather Reid lives in Perthshire. Her poems and short stories have been widely published

and also broadcast on radio 4. More at www.soutarwriters.co.uk/heatherreid/

Elizabeth Rimmer has lived in Stirling since 1982. Her first collection of poems, *Wherever We Live Now*, will be published by Red Squirrel in 2011.

Jim Taylor lives in Shetland. He has had short stories in *Chapman*, *New Writing Scotland*, *West Coast*, *Rebel Inc* and *Edinburgh Review* and *New Shetlander*.

Samuel Tongue is currently working on a PhD on poetic retellings of Jacob and the Angel at Glasgow University. A title is still not forthcoming!

Colin Will is a poet and publisher. He lives in Dunbar. His fifth collection, *The Floor Show At the Mad Yak Café*, was published by Red Squirrel in 2010.

Hamish Whyte's latest collection is *A Bird in the Hand* (Shoestring). He runs Mariscat Press and is an Honorary Research Fellow, Scottish Literature Department, Glasgow University

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The Village, S. Fort Street, Leith
Filmhouse, Lothian Road
The Forest, Bristo Place

Glasgow

Centre for Contemporary Arts, Sauchiehall St, Glasgow
Mitchell Library, North St.
Òran Mòr, Great Western Road
The Piping Centre, McPhater St.
Caledonia Books, Gt. Western Rd
Tchai Ovna Teahouses, Otago Lane
Oxfam Books, Byres Road & Victoria Rd.
Mono, King's Court, King St, Glasgow
Gallery of Modern Art, Royal Exchange Sq.
Glasgow Film Theatre, Videodrome, Rose St.

Postscript

Scottish Pen

LINDA CRACKNELL (SEE page 5) has been in touch to ask Northwords Now to help spread the word about Scottish Pen. We're more than happy to oblige. Scottish PEN is part of International PEN, a dynamic worldwide association of writers pledged to protect freedom of expression and promote literature across frontiers throughout the world.

PENning Water, the latest edition of Pen's online magazine for writers in Scotland takes a journey through watery celebrations, transformations, memories and fears in poetry and prose. The featured writer this issue is Aminatta Forna, a novelist born in Scotland and raised in West Africa. In 'Love Stories', she tells what has impassioned creative writers as Sierra Leone recovers from war.

For the full literary-aquatic experience go to: www.scottishpen.org/new-writing. Not only will you discover some fine writing from, among others, Scottish, Zimbabwean, Sri Lankan and Syrian writers, there's also news of forthcoming PEN events in Scotland. The web site is also a mine of information on PEN's work in campaigning for writers wherever the shadows of imprisonment and exile fall. ■

READERSHIP SURVEY

At Northwords Now we're keen to find out what you think about the magazine and to make it as easy we can for you to get hold of a copy. Please take a few moments to answer the following questions. Then simply tear this page from the magazine and return the questionnaire by placing it in a standard letter-sized envelope. Address the envelope to: Freepost RSKT-ZTJJ-XXHU, Northwords Now, Freepost, Dunblane, FK15 5BP. There is no need to affix a stamp. Alternatively, you may complete the survey online by visiting our website: www.northwordsnow.co.uk

How often do you read Northwords Now?

- Regularly
- Occasionally
- First Time

Where do you usually obtain your paper copy of Northwords Now?

- Library or Bookshop
- From another reader
- Other (please state)

- I have not come across a paper copy of Northwords Now

Have you experienced difficulties in obtaining a paper copy of the magazine?

- Never
- Sometimes
- Often
- I have not tried to obtain a paper copy of Northwords Now

How would you prefer to obtain a paper copy of Northwords Now?

- At a local library
- At a local bookshop or arts venue (e.g.

theatre or gallery)

- Home delivery (approximate cost £6 per year)
- Other (please state)

How often have you visited the Northwords Now website?

- Frequently
- Occasionally
- First Time

Would you prefer to read a paper or online version of Northwords Now?

- Paper
- Online
- No preference

How well does Issue 16 of Northwords Now mix fiction, poetry and articles/reviews?

- The mix is about right
- I'd like to see more poetry
- I'd like to see more fiction
- I'd like to see more articles and reviews

How do you feel about the geographical

focus of Northwords Now?

- There should be a greater emphasis on writing from or about the Highlands & Islands
- More space should be given to writing outwith the Highlands & Islands
- The current mix is about right.

Are you a Gaelic speaker/reader?

- Fluent
- Some Gaelic
- No Gaelic

What is your opinion of the amount of Gaelic content of Issue 16 Northwords Now?

- Too much
- Too little
- About right

Are you female or male?

- Female
- Male

Please indicate your age.

- Under 18
- 18-35

36-55

55+

Where is your usual home address? Please insert the first part of your postcode (this information will not be used to contact you).

Please use this space to make any comments about the magazine which aren't covered by the above questions.

If you would like to receive notification of when new issues of Northwords Now are available online, as well as other news about the magazine, please give details of your e-mail address.

Like the new "Northwords Now" website?

Elegant, quick-loading, easy to navigate and find what you're looking for.

As an author, your online presence and ability to constantly communicate with your target audience is of **paramount** importance.

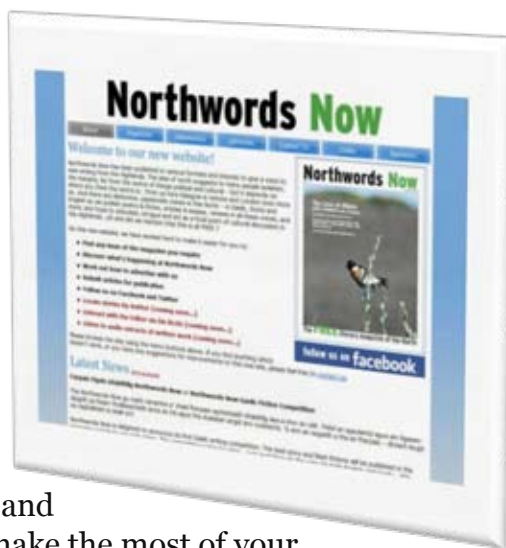
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neil gunn WRITING COMPETITION

2010 - 2011

For how to enter go to:
www.highland.gov.uk/neilgunn
or visit any Highland Library

Theme: **A Wrong Turning...**
Adult prose and poetry first prize £500 each
Overall winner awarded one week at Moniack Mhor Writers' Centre
Closing Date for all entries - 11 March 2011

