

Reviews

Island Journeys

The Un-Discovered Islands

by Malachy Tallack, illustrated Katie Scott

Birlinn

Love of Country, A Hebridean Journey

by Madeleine Bunting

Granta

The Book of Iona, An Anthology

edited Robert Crawford

Birlinn

Island on the Edge, A Life on Soay

by Anne Cholawo

Birlinn

Voices Galore

by Janice K Ross

Twinlaw, Kirkcainr

Reviewed by Ian Stephen

After setting out from the Shetland of his formative upbringing, Malachy Tallack (a founding editor of the international on line journal, *The Island Review*) stopped over on points of land, also traversed by the conceptual 60th parallel. That quest was well described by Mandy Haggith in this journal. Now in *Un-Discovered Islands*, he recounts a different form of travel. The hyphen in the title is everything because this study is a compendium of Islands once thought to exist and even plotted and named on charts. One or two are still to be

found on Google Earth. Some have been discounted only very recently. The writer is systematic in his approach, making such groupings as 'islands' which seem to have been errors in navigation, deliberate frauds and those which might have jutted into the air for a year or two before further volcanic action caused them to slide from 'real' to 'unreal' status. New islands were good for financing expeditions. Sponsors were motivated by their names being placed on a 'discovered' landmass.

This is a completely different type of book to *60 Degrees North* which is intensely personal in its motivation. It is an objective and finely written history of human errors or deceptions. The writing is also only a part of the work, in the same way as the same writer is a singer-songwriter and deliverer of works where the melody and the lyric have to share the load. In this case the coloured illustrations by Katie Scott are essential to the conceit of travelogue with a difference. This artist is best known for her part in the gorgeous children's book *Animalium*. The bold nature of her lines and colour, as well as the typography, further the pleasure of following undiscoveries with the same interest as if you were a child again, reading of what might lie over your own horizons. I have had the pleasure of seeing Mr Tallack lecture on his sequence of undiscoveries at *Faclan* book festival. It was informative, engaging and methodical as well as disarmingly impersonal.

Somehow the tone of the writing is similar to the deliberately flat and effective narration in both Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and the homage paid to it by Angus Peter Campbell in *Invisible Islands* (also published by Birlinn). Strangely, the passion of the personal response to islands came, in *Faclan*, from Madeleine Bunting, in a travelogue which focuses on the social history of her selected Hebridean islands. Her study of the culture linked to these islands is often a summary and comparison of the responses of other literary travellers. Judicious quotes from the poetry of the great Lewis expressionist, Iain Crichton Smith are a welcome exception.

This is not a criticism but an attempt to describe the chosen scope of a well-written book which is also a very handsome presentation. Granta have commissioned the Guardian's native Lewis photographer, Murdo Macleod, who has provided a painterly cover-photo which is both contemporary in style and an echo of the Scottish colourist painters who were also addicted to Island-going. The writing of Ms Bunting, who has been driven to return many times, itself reveals her commitment. It has a narrative drive which sweeps you from the bizarre interior of the castle on Rum to a brisk and effective summary and comparison of the

'benefactors' Matheson and Leverhulme who both resided in a similar 'castle' overlooking Stornoway harbour.

I felt she was especially strong on her summary of Matheson and analytical on Leverhulme (*The Soap Man* of Roger Hutchison's book with Birlinn). I also felt she was a bit light on the 'psychic researcher', Ada Goodrich-Freer in her chapter on Eriskay. That author borrowed freely from the research of Father Allan MacDonald as described in detail by a committed folklorist of the next generation, John Lorne Campbell. I felt Ms Bunting also let Charles Edward Stewart off the hook though she does describe the disastrous and brutal consequences of the 'uprising' for many of the Gaelic speaking island population. She writes wittily on how the Hanoverian and future alternatives to the Stewarts proved pretty shabby despite all the flash.

This traveller does not pretend to be an adventurer. She drives and catches ferries. She visits St Kilda by the fast, crash-bang-wallop speedboats. Her description of Village Bay is one of the most accurate I've read, in its refusal to edit out the Cold War portacabins and the concrete road. She diverts her attention to Flannan Isles when that opportunity opens up. But it is not only this book's realism which makes it so different from the unreal islands of past history or near-contemporary fiction. The book opens with an evocation of looking out to the Hebrides on childhood holidays (much like Jackie Kay's outline of her relationship with Mull). Her response remains intensely personal but she is never starry eyed. Take this description of driving the Barvas moor:

'...on some days, grey cloud and smirr drain all contrast from the land, leaving an unmerciful bleakness.'

And she also defers to the language of visiting poet Louis MacNeice:

'the colour of grizzly bears or burnt toast.'

The perspective is of a writer who sees the Hebrides as an integral part of the British Isles. She demonstrates her own respect for her subject by consistent use of Gaelic versions of place names. She grieves at the possibility of the Islands departing, with the rest of Scotland from the United Kingdom. It's an honest view, well expressed and there's feeling behind it. I did sense, here and there, that much of the author's research and conversations were within a 'bubble' of like-minded intellectual peers. But some conversations, such as those with the publisher Agnes Rennie (Director of *Acair*) did bring her into the heart of present day economic and social issues in rural communities.

Ms Bunting uses the word 'Nationalist' several times and refers to the Scottish independence debate with reference to the islands under study. I thought of writers as diverse

as Neil Ascherson and James Kelman (who has family background on Lewis) outlining the distinction between 'Nationalism' and Independence'. Maybe it's unfair but I looked in vain for the taste of chance conversation.

The scholar and poet Robert Crawford is wide in his selection of literary responses to the single landmass of Iona - maybe a wee bit too wide in including a certain Victoria's impressions of the separate island of Staffa, even though she was Queen for a while. The book opens with Candia McWilliam's fiction, set on the right island this time. Her writing includes a meditation on the use of the heated girdle, not just for scones but for the 'sea-strawberry' of squid. Poetry from both David Kinloch and Meg Bateman evoke the Colourists, strongly associated with Iona and the Ross. Though in English Ms Bateman's verse uses refrain which evokes both monastic chants and Gaelic layers of culture. The monastic strand is strong in the book and parallel translation is used to give fair due for both Latin and Gaelic originals.

This is a handsome work, eclectic in its range of selections but of course the title is a shade provocative. It is one to dip into and return to but could only ever be 'A book....' of the vast range of written responses to that powerful island, as indeed the subtitle implies.

The island of Soay, in the shade of the black Cuilin ridge, is less visited. It is probably best known now for the exploits of Messrs Maxwell and Geddes in their attempt to establish a stark factory, for processing slain basking sharks, in that once-populated place. Anne Cholawo is a graphic artist by trade. She left the stresses of deadlines to live in a leaking house on an island with access only by arrangement. This is a simple, honest and detailed account of becoming one of the very few humans to remain on an island which once was home to many.

A series of programmes, 'Barra Island Discs', has resulted in a collection of oral accounts, edited by a schoolteacher turned volunteer radio-journalist who wisely keeps comment to the minimum. The subjects range from the reminiscence of one of the many Barra Able Seamen who became a master mariner, to those of the literary celebrity, Chris Brookmyre. It's an entertaining collection which thankfully conveys the voices of inhabitants as well as visitors.

Wait For Me, Jack

by Addison Jones

Sandstone Press

Reviewed by Alison Napier

It is a while since I have encountered 'reverse chronology' in a new novel despite it having been utilised by luminaries such as Martin Amis, Iain Banks and Virgil. Hence my surprise when having read the first chapter of Addison Jones' fine new novel to find that after the initial chapter the narrative leapt immediately to the end of the tale with the two main protagonists within a whisker of death.

Each subsequent chapter then leads the reader back in time until the opening chapter is finally reached and repeated once more at the end of the book. I do hope this makes sense.

In less assured hands this could seem an annoying and unnecessary writerly gimmick. The anticipation of 'what will happen now?' is removed as we always know what has happened. What we don't know however is why and how it happened and the effect of reading is transformed into one of an anxious awareness of the future such as the loss of a child, an injury, an abrupt change of job, and waiting to learn the circumstances that led to such momentous events. So the reading becomes an exercise in patience. More than once did I resist the temptation to start the book at the end and work forwards in time.

But staying with the process and the idiosyncrasy is rewarded for we are immediately drawn into the American West Coast of the 1950s where Jacko and Billie are respectively a copy writer and a typist in Perkins Petroleum Products, San Francisco. In different ways they are each reinventing themselves and pursuing their own individualised American Dreams but as the years pass we watch the glossy sheen gradually wear thin on these dreams and the self-deceptions that are required to create the glue that might hold them in place grow ever more urgent.

Jack and Millie (even the name changes are poignant attempts at new identities) live out their long lives in a groove parallel to the lives they were sure they were destined for. Millie longs for an education and Jack is always almost writing a novel. Their children are over the years a delight, a disappointment, a mystery and, finally, their primary support system.

The novel spans the years between 1950 and 2014 and references all the major events of these 64 years. The assassinations and the brands, the television programmes and the

popular music, the meal plans, the social movements (beatniks, hippies) and the slang, all are meticulously placed in their decades with a precision that avoids the self-conscious shoe-horn.

But regardless of the dodgy fashion choices and uncomfortable soft furnishings what we have here is the story of a marriage that survived, rightly or wrongly, all the turbulences of these years. It begins with cigarettes and flirting and rapidly arrives at hints of disappointment that the dream is not all it promised. Yet the loyalty that each has to the other, and to the shared history of their heroic battles and tiny triumphs, creates a bond that survives temptations, infidelities and these uniquely American decades, a period that offered so many illusions and aspirations yet held them fractionally out of reach of the 'just about managing' majority. Plus ça change.

So be assured that this, right from the finish to the very start, is a darned fine novel indeed.

Step by Slow Step

By Rhoda Michael, illustrations by Julie Wyness

Leopard Press

Reviewed by Anne MacLeod

There is a worldwide Medical Humanities movement which celebrates the work produced by those active in medical care in all its diverse inter-disciplinarity; which assesses the medical interaction and its implications for empathy, ethics and understanding across the raft of social sciences; and which encourages practitioners to reflect on medicine and life with creative and scientific rigour. There have, of course, been many celebrated medical writers. William Carlos Williams and Keats are among the more pre-eminent but more recent Scottish examples of writers from the caring professions would include Suhayl Saadi, John Glenday and Gavin Francis. Rhoda Michael, retired educational psychologist, may be seen as a worthy addition to this spectrum.

The British Psychological Society advertised a poetry competition in 2015, printing a poem 'Language' by one of its judges, David Sutton. The first stanza declares 'Its maps, they

say, are in our minds already:/ How else could we adventure in that country/So sure of paths we never walked upon?’

In *Step by Slow Step* Michael maps a world multi-voiced and variegated. Its imagined inhabitants are generally unsure of direction and – most tellingly – of their own strength. She paints this world incrementally, through the stories her protagonists offer in individual and often muscular free verse. Though many of the poems are written in first person, and though the underlying question is often, as George Gunn comments on the flyleaf, one of love, it is not only in the eight-poem series ‘Songs of Ishmael’ that love will trip, confound or scar. Michael examines love and life in all its guises. At times playful, as in ‘Something Leather’, (‘Her message said she would be/wearing something leather’), or tender, as in ‘Little Girl’ (‘Little tumbling girl, tumbled into sleep/before you could wash her’) she does not shrink from the difficulties of human existence. In ‘Piano’, ‘His feet shuffle. His lungs seize in the frozen air./ He’s foraged nothing. Nothing that will burn.’; in ‘Girl Inside’, ‘Listen to her, grinding her teeth and moaning,/like the wind in an empty drain.’ And for Ishmael, at the centre of the biblical poem sequence that brings this volume to a close, there is nothing but heartbreak. ‘Abraham’s voice rejoices./ Behold him whose name is Isaac,/who shall be my first-born son.’

A natural editor – she was for many years the much-loved Poetry editor of *Northwords*, and first editor of its new phase *Northwords Now* – Rhoda Michael is clearly beguiled by the sound and sensuality of language. In ‘Snap’ she celebrates ‘Snap of ice from the tray./ Snap again in the glass./ Ice-sharp sliver of sound,’. Stop for a moment. Read that aloud. Luxuriate in the feel of each word, as Michael clearly does.

These poems are not an easy or superficial read. The precision of the language; the strength of each narrative; the crowding, distinctive voices demand time for assimilation, for thought. This handsome collection, effectively illustrated by Julie Wyness and edited by Janet Macinnes, will amply repay such effort.

Crash Land

by Doug Johnstone

Faber & Faber

Reviewed by Paul F Cockburn

An iconic character seen in much Western literature, but especially crime noir fiction, is the femme fatale—‘the beautiful, sophisticated, seductive woman who walks into the hero’s life and turns it upside down. It’s not an archetype Doug Johnstone has used before—many of his novels have helped map out the edges of ‘domestic noir’, their focus on all-too-ordinary people whose lives are forever changed by one single, criminal act. Nevertheless, his approach to this potential cliché is both effective and intelligent;

The ‘femme’ in question is Maddie—full name, Mrs Madeline Pierce—who steps into the life of jewellery student Finn in the departure lounge of Orkney airport. ‘Sometimes life is dramatic,’ she tells him, although neither anticipate the horrendous plane crash that leaves seven dead, three—including Finn—injured and Maddie initially unaccounted for.

Johnstone is never an author who wastes time or energy with literary throat-clearing; it’s clear from the start (to the reader, if not to the increasingly gin-addled Finn, who is our one and only point of view character throughout the novel) that Maddie is fleeing more than just the lecherous interest of some oil terminal workers. Quite quickly we realise that Finn is a somewhat self-centred character (not least shown by his lethargic lack of enthusiasm for his supposed girl-friend back at home in Dundee); Johnstone’s skill as a writer is to ensure that, even if we might not even initially like him, there is enough to hold out interest and we come to sympathise with ‘in extremis’—even though, ultimately, many of his problems could’ve been avoided by him simply thinking with his brain rather than what’s in his pants.

Crash Land is just as assured and sharply written as anyone familiar with Johnstone’s work would expect, though it is nevertheless something of a gear-change, given that his last few novels have been decidedly set in Scotland’s urban central belt. Here, we are once again among the kind of unforgiving rural landscapes which featured in his earlier novels, with the added isolation and sense of claustrophobia of the Northern Isles. As is his way, Johnstone drip feeds details of the Orkney landscape, and the elements which shape it, building up a disturbingly all-too-real sense of the beautiful rawness of the place and its people.

Not that Johnstone isn’t above a little literary play, by referencing arguably Orkney’s most famous author, George Mackay Brown. This isn’t just with an apposite epigraph, however, but by the delightful conceit of having Finn named by his own, now-deceased mother after one of Mackay Brown’s main characters, with Finn concerned by what that might actually mean about himself and his life. It’s neither showy nor pretentious; nevertheless, as a way of gently anchoring his novel onto the literary heritage of the island on

which it is set, it simply confirms Johnstone's lightness of touch. Johnstone has produced a gripping read which thankfully never underestimates his readers' intelligence.

Immortal Memory: Burns and the Scottish People

By Christopher A Whatley

John Donald, Birlinn

Reviewed by Kirsty Gunn

Writing and A' That

Historians have a special way of making literature speak. By putting poetry and novels into an historical context, not only do they make those works seem more pressing and relevant to the societies they reflect, they can show them to be prescient, too, of a sort of future national 'self'. We need only look, for example, at recent publications around the centenary of the First World War with their examination of the lives and work of poets of that era to understand better the effect upon the psyche of wars now, from PTSD to jihadism. And any account of social change – from the outcome of the suffragette movement to the dismantling of municipal Britain – illustrated with a novel by Virginia Woolf, say, or our contemporary James Kelman, shows us much more clearly the kind of Britain we inhabit today: as gender-riven and economically divided as before the introduction of the welfare state.

So then to this timely and *rousing Immortal Memory: Burns and the Scottish People* in which one of our most important historians takes on what may be described as the 'afterlife' of a poet who seems to speak for the nation as fulsomely now as then. 'Living in Scotland, it is virtually impossible to be unaware of Robert Burns' writes Christopher Whatley in his opening pages, setting the tone for the project. The past is in the present indeed.

That word 'seems' holds the key, though. For this sophisticated record of a writer whose work was at all times managed by the authorities and overriding politics of the age is at once imaginative and inspirational in the way it shows how poetry and culture are in flux, with mixed motives and beginnings, and not to be tied to fixed national aims. 'The point in relation to Burns is this' writes Whatley, 'He represented certain fundamental principles and ideals that had...stirred tens of thousands of his countrymen (and women). But his was a quest for liberty and a vision of greater social equality, not a party political manifesto.'

So the historian goes on to show the influence of the poet - across society engendering reading groups, self publishing initiatives, workers' politicisation and more - a story as fractured and various as Burns' own output. 'If, after 1707, the grand narrative of Scottish history was harder to tell as it had been enmeshed with England's' writes the author of *The Scots and the Union*, republished just prior to the 2014 Referendum, 'it was in the localities that Scotland's history was be found, recorded and resumed.'

In finely graded and textured prose, Whatley follows that local story as much as a larger one as he grafts the poet's legacy onto a country riven by disagreement, massive industrial and economic change, along with growing awareness of its nationhood – showing how Burns was used to shore up one belief system or other in turn. There are the autodidacts, the law lords and businessmen who together and individually, in Scotland as well as South of the Border, furnished their own ambitions at Burns Supper tables. There are the councils and town planners planning extravaganzas to raise money for the great spate of Burns statue building to promote their own corners of the kingdom; there, the editors and writers, the churchmen, who created intellectual contexts in which their own interests could shine. And there too, Whatley shows us, are the weaver poets – in particular a whole group of women writers and thinkers - who would make Burns the basis of their own creative practice: First learning poems by heart that could be sung and recited to illiterate communities around them, then going on to write their own richly engaged and emotive verse. For writers, as well as readers and scholars, learning about poets like Jeannie Paterson and Janet Hamilton, Isobel Pagan and Janet Little in a narrative of a poet all too often thought of as a man's man, belonging to another time and sensibility, is another way of bringing the Burns of 'Auld Lang Syne' bang up to date.

In all, this complex and fascinating history that 'looks' and 'listens', as its writer says, more than it ever just records and researches, asks us: 'What messages would the statues silent voices convey?' and suggests there might be a range of answers. As we search our national psyche for signs of identity and meaning the publication of *Immortal Memory* could not be more timely. Beware the simple cries of 'Scots Wha Hae' that have been commandeered by the politicians and the nationalists, Whatley seems to be reminding us. Literature and its legacies - our imagination, after all - is far more sophisticated and multifaceted that can be summed up in the simple cry of 'Yes'.

Double Exposure: A Memoir

by Brian Johnstone

Saraband

Reviewed by Jennifer Morag Henderson

Double Exposure is a memoir that focuses on two family secrets, revealed twenty years apart. After the sheltered upbringing of a private schoolboy in 1950s Edinburgh, Brian Johnstone's sense of self was challenged when he discovered that not only his father but also his mother had previous 'lives' before marriage, and that both of them had daughters: he has two half-sisters that he only finds out about in adulthood. Johnstone goes back into his own memories, as well as speaking to other relatives and researching in archives to find out more about his parents' youth. *Double Exposure* captures the slow and lasting damage that family secrets can cause. The revelations themselves are not the point of this book, and instead it is about coming to terms – or not – with the things that are revealed. This is not a linear, easy process, and it is depicted extremely well.

Johnstone is a poet, with several collections to his credit, and has been involved in organising poetry events for many years: current project *Scotia Extremis* has been featured online over the last year. His memoir reflects this literary background, and several of his previously published poems are featured in the narrative, the context adding to the meaning of the poems, while the poems enhance the memoir itself. He also makes reference to many other books and essays about memory, family, and about understanding the impetus to write memoir, which he looked at in his own quest to understand his mother and father.

Thinking of himself as coming from 'the very model of a 50s nuclear family' which was 'perfect – in the perfect world that was settled, post-war, suburban, middle-class Scotland', Johnstone struggles with the realisation that things were not as they had seemed. He hopes for psychological understanding of his parents' choices, but has difficulty, in particular, with accepting his mother's choices. He quotes sociological studies which he has read in his attempt to understand her belief in the stigma attached to having an illegitimate child, but cannot reconcile this completely with his own attitudes, formed in the social upheaval of the 60s and 70s. This is one of the sadnesses of this book: that it is a coming-to-terms with things that cannot be altered, which are fixed in the past.

Johnstone says that he has changed some names, but it seems that at least one of the people intimately involved in this story may be unaware that this memoir has been published.

There is a feeling that it is a story that is still, and may always be, incomplete, and that the exposure of these secrets has not been a cleansing experience. The heartfelt conclusion, however, is both a justification for the book and an affirmation of love's strength: 'All I want to be able to do,' Brian Johnstone says, 'is to tell both my parents how much I loved them – and how I would have loved them no less had I known what I know now.'

My Katherine Mansfield Project

by Kirsty Gunn

Nottinghill Editions

Reviewed by Cynthia Rogerson

If you have an allergy to gushing, close your eyes now. I can think of nothing but praise for this original and exciting work. First of all, the book itself is an exquisite object. A small hard back with a grey canvas cover, there is no picture - merely some text in red and white. MY KATHERINE MANSFIELD PROJECT. Under this title: 'One has left a version of oneself at the PLACE OF DEPARTURE and it waits for us at the POINT OF RETURN - but she is not me when I get there.'

So, already, before you have even opened up the book, you are drawn into this other world with prose alone. Gunn has a distinctive style, always recognizable. She fully admits her obsession with (and therefore influence by) Mansfield - but her style is not mimicry. Gunn is herself, entirely - honest, questioning, humble, with an incisive intelligence that streaks through her sometimes meandering prose. There is composure and coherence, but there is also a compelling naturalness. And a sense that Gunn (like Mansfield) is very interested in exploring new ways to tell stories.

Also like Mansfield, Gunn is from Wellington, New Zealand, and has spent her adult life in the UK (London, Dundee and Caithness). In 2009 she was awarded a Randell Fellowship, and the opportunity to live for a season in Randell Cottage in Thorndon, very near the childhood home of Mansfield. Gunn was already an established Mansfield authority, and intended to spend this period immersing herself further in Mansfield's world - and to respond to it with her own writing. And of course, there was the chance to experience a homecoming that Mansfield yearned for but never attained.

Rather like Mansfield's story 'Dollhouse', then, this tiny book contains realities inside realities. It is the memoir of an writer ex-pat returning to her home and recording her various ideas, feelings and epiphanies about this. It is a smattering of information about Mansfield's childhood and adolescence, told through extracts of her stories and biographical details. It is a small collection of Gunn's own stories inspired by Mansfield's stories - snippets and sketches which will not lie still on the page, and thrill the senses each time. And finally, and perhaps most vitally, with all these snippets and memories and stories taken together - it is a work concerned with the meaning of home. Not just for exiles, but for everyone. In addition to Mansfield, Gunn draws on writers such as James Woods and Said and VS Pritchett. What the concept of home means to us, and what happens to us when we move away from it. Because of course, we all move from home - even if we die in the house we were born in.

Yes, one of the reasons I am gushing is because of the obvious parallels with my own life - I am American, and increasingly find myself fascinated with the home I casually left behind. It has a strange power, and I read Gunn's book looking for light to shed on my own mysteries. I found light aplenty, and more. If Gunn had not already won Scottish Book of the Year in 2007 with *The Boy and the Sea*, I would bet on this book winning that same award in 2017. For Gunn is a master, and this book - this discourse of dislocation - is a masterpiece.

Waves

by Jared A Carnie

Urbane Publications

Reviewed by Gabrielle Barnby

There are many aspects of island life that will strike newcomers as unusual. There is the horizon, long and low, there are the turbulent interstitial spaces where water moves. For a visitor, all these things are moderated by state of mind and purpose.

In Carnie's novel the central character Alex has arrived at a moment in his life when the world seems utterly closed; he feels like an island. His best friend James' purpose as they travel to Lewis is to help him discover a more positive perspective.

The reader is introduced to the landscape of the Hebrides from the point of view of a naïve visitor. As Alex passes through a series of social events and experiences in the new environment his perspective does indeed begin to change. However, there were occasions

when I found myself wanting more precision in Carnie's descriptions, more of the writer's interpretive eye.

The narrative itself is firmly grounded in everyday life – music and popular culture references abound. The novel exudes a sense of comfort throughout – although at times this undercuts the tension of Alex's underlying emotional state, the reader is well furnished with musings on familiar preoccupations to carry them along.

Carnie also gives the reader a determinedly sober protagonist, strikingly opposite to many dramas exploring the same topic for a similar age group, where drinking and its consequences can frequently be used as a short-cut to emotional accessibility.

The journey of Alex's emotional change is soothed, aided and mid-wifed by the Hebridean landscape and some exceptional hospitality. Carnie's prose is fluent and well-paced, he handles social gatherings with ease and the Ceilidh is certainly a well-observed set piece. As a first time novelist he shows much promise and is sure to offer us more in the future.

The Long Haul Towards Lucidity

Poetry review by Mandy Haggith

When Norman MacCaig published his second book, an Assynt friend responded with 'When are you publishing the answers?' which the poet described as 'the only critical remark that was ever any use to me', saying it started him on 'the long haul towards lucidity'. Avoidance of being 'wilfully obscure', and giving the reader the respect of clarity, seems to have become established as a key value in Scottish poetry, if a stack of eighteen recent poetry collections is anything to go by. Only one of the poets (MacGillivray) fails to go along with it – her title, *The Nine of Diamonds - Surroial Mordentless* (Bloodaxe), is indicative of the difficulty of her content, a self-consciously surreal dazzle of wordplay.

Fortunately, there are many other approachable new poetry collections. Among the best is William Letford's *Dirt* (Carcenet). The poems are experimental, virtuosic in language and texture, yet also full of heart. Love, for family and friends, is pervasive. In a prayer, addressed to 'Da', he says, 'I try to be vulnerable, so I can let that love in. I look/ for beauty in small things. Let the night sky make me/feel small.' There are laugh-out-loud funny poems, like 'The Proverbial Morning', when his lover wishes to be a panda but fears being a skunk, and tender moments, such as when his fingers trace words on a lover's skin:

If you're lucky you'll find someone whose skin
is a canvas for the story of your life.
Write well. Take care of the heartbeat behind it.

Hamish Whyte (*Things We Never Knew*, Shoestring Press) is another poet at the lucid summit. Watching a wasp at a keyhole, he is characteristically wry.

If this were another kind of poem
it might be about entrances
and exits, transience and the sting
of life. I can't make much of it,
except to say that probably
the wasp didn't fit.

He doesn't write those kind of poems, yet he does catch enlightening glimpses of the world out of train windows and presents us with instants of great emotional depth (like a grandfather and child burying a pet mouse) in a manner that seems beguilingly simple. If you too have a collection of stones gathered at significant moments, but now you've 'no idea where most of them/ are from,' this collection of poems is for you.

The most lucid of all is the much lamented Elizabeth Burns, whose exquisite pamphlet *Clay* (Wayleave) demonstrates perfectly an aesthetic of elegance and understated wisdom. This slim volume is surely the pinnacle of pottery poetry: poems about birth, life and death, treasuring and mourning. Her brief, delicate verses are encircled by the metaphor of life as a pot filled with experiences. In 'Gift' she expresses it thus.

'the bowl a small circle of sun
which will become
spring-light – '

Some other pamphlets demonstrate that this format is still used for some of the best poetry being published, and we don't need to look only for full, perfect bound, collections for the cream of current poetry. The loveliest to handle and most pleasurable to read from are the pamphlets made by Mariscat Press. With a bright pink cover covered in extraordinary bat faces – it sounds lurid, but it isn't at all – Jane McKie's extraordinarily titled *From The Wonder Book of Would You Believe It?* is full of wondrous contents, a menagerie of bats, insects, fish, fungi and jelly fish. This is poetry at its most playful and full of inquiry. Her

descriptions are crystal sharp, fresh as hail, gorgeous as a rainbow. Spiders are ‘prodigious minor saints’. A puff-ball explodes ‘like a marvellous expletive’. And here is insect radio, which surely Edwin Morgan would have loved:

...your songs are the moonlight
behind sunlight, invisible
but bright, like words scratched

in lemon juice – thrum
of mosquito, rattle of butterfly,
scrape of ant. The frequencies

of earth, your mother
tongue – *boon boon zzzz*
zoum zoum summ summ.

Playful in a different way are Kate Tough’s found and concrete poems in *tilt-shift* (Tapsalteerie). They are concocted of phrases pilfered from an eclectic mix of sources: an index of first lines of William Carlos Williams poems, American railway stations, knitting magazines, an eighteenth century lady’s diary and Google auto-complete, just as examples. This is a poet who looks at the world as if down the wrong end of a telescope and finds poems in all manner of unlikely places. Many of the results are very funny.

The Leonids, another from Mariscat, is Isobel Dixon’s nasturtium orange pamphlet, which is full of South African warmth and sunshine. The nasturtiums feature, as a symbol of the poet’s mother’s life, their colour echoing in a favourite tangerine dress. This is an elegiac book, both parents brought close and vivid. We are shown, with great compassion, her mother’s ‘sad pharaoh face’ on Skype, worrying about the cost of the call, frightened that she can’t afford to hear music. This is raw and honest writing about the adult experience of becoming an orphan.

Memories of and mourning for family members is, perhaps not surprisingly, the theme of several other pamphlets. These include three from the amazingly prolific Sheena Blackhall (*The Seely Howe*, *Cleikum* and *Crossing the Bridge*, all published by Lochlands, although with distractingly poor editorial attention). One of the most successful is *Owersettin*

(Tapsalteerie) authored by three poets, Maggie Rabatski, Sheila Templeton and A C Clarke, writing in response to each other's work in Gaelic, Scots and English respectively. It is interesting to observe how some seem like close translations, others varying more widely in their versions, and to wonder why.

Full collections give most poets the space to broaden their concerns beyond one theme, but sometimes a single strand can have compelling results. In *Jacob* (Shoestring Press), Carole Coates has written a verse novel from the perspective of a boy growing up in a dysfunctional post-second-world-war English family. We follow Jacob chronologically from his earliest experiences living with his extended family, to his reflections as an old man after his mother has died. Throughout his young life she is a disturbed and disturbing influence, and as he finds comfort in the park, in books and from other family members, it is impossible not to read incessantly between the lines that irrevocable emotional damage is being inflicted upon him:

he's beginning to know that
things happen and happen again
and become his life every day

but some happen and full of terror
remain like black rooms
with doors opening

Three more collections deserve a mention: Vicki Husband's *This Far Back Everything Shimmers* (Vagabond Voices) brings an astronomical theme and a quirky eye to her lovely debut collection. Margaret Gillies Brown's *Ilka Spring* (diehard) follows the seasons in poems, the best of which are formally tight and elegiac. Em Strang, in *Bird-Woman* (Shearsman) includes a hilarious Brown Bear in the voice of Walt Whitman in a collection full of horses, birds and dark moments, which sometimes, to borrow one of her words, 'unwing' me.

Turning finally to anthologies, where treasures can usually be found, I am not disappointed by the triad at the bottom of my heap. *The Voyage Out* is 'An international anthology of writing, art and science' produced at the University of Dundee. Given the breadth of its remit, it hangs together surprisingly well and includes some interesting pieces by non-writers on

their life journeys, the best of which is by molecular biologist Ron Hay about a life-time's study of arsenic. The stand out is Chris Arthur's spellbinding essay 'Footnotes', beautifully written and philosophically far-reaching from its starting point of his daughter's feet. Peter Davidson's prose poems on exile and return are also gorgeous.

I was delighted to be introduced to some new names by an *Anthology of Scottish Poets* (Editura Pim) produced in Romania! Alongside well-kent writers like AC Clarke, Sally Evans, Eleanor Livingstone and Graham Fulton, there are lesser-known writers with links either to Romania or other international poetry scenes. Donald Adamson's reflections on damaged trees, which when they fall are 'noticed by their absence, sudden blue/astonishment of sky', will send me in search of more of his poems. I liked Douglas Lipton's gorse, which 'censers the Scottish air/ with a South Sea island essence', and Angus MacMillan's remembrance of his brother dropping pan drops in church, 'midway between the fire and the brimstone' ... one of which rolled 'all the way from Mount Ararat to Gethsemane'.

The book to get before it's too late is *Whatever the Sea – Scottish Poems for Growing Older* (Polygon), a beautifully produced and uplifting selection of poems that almost makes ageing something to look forward to. Death is looked in the eye without flinching and with humour and wisdom, a few grumbles and considerable elegance of phrase, line, rhythm and rhyme. Here are some unforgettable voices from beyond the grave plus a busload of Scottish poets with free passes, none of them past it yet, and all lucid!