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Fivefathers

Interviews with late Twentieth-Century Scottish Poets

Colin Nicholson

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A Note on the Author

Colin Nicholson is a Professor of Eighteenth-century and Modern Literature at Edinburgh University, where his teaching includes a seminar in Modern and Contemporary Scottish Poetry. During the 1990s he edited *The British Journal of Canadian Studies* and has edited collections of essays on Margaret Laurence and on Margaret Atwood. He has published widely in Scottish, English and Canadian Literature and is the author of *Writing and the Rise of Finance: Capital Satires of the Early Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and of *Edwin Morgan: Inventions of Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2002).

Preface

For some time now students on my Modern and Contemporary Scottish Poetry course at Edinburgh University have been suggesting that I update and reissue interviews I conducted with writers first published in 1992 as *Poem, Purpose and Place*. Students maintain they still find the interviews useful and the book is long out print. Sadly, four of the poets have died since the conversations took place and Edwin Morgan is terminally ill, though still productive. So I have rewritten and extended the chapters in which they answered my questions. Their words stand; I have added to my commentary to make a fuller presentation of their responses. In Morgan's case I include material from a subsequent interview.

What follows, then, is for my students with thanks for their encouragement, for showing me ways of reading and for helping to make teaching Scottish poetry the pleasure it remains.

Acknowledgements

I thank Polygon for returning the original copyright of *Poem, Purpose and Place* to me; and Neville Moir for permission to quote liberally from Ewan McCaig's *The Poems of Norman MacCaig*. I am likewise indebted to Archie Bevan for permission to quote similarly from *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown*, published by John Murray.

But where would poetry be without Carcanet? To Michael Schmidt I offer my special thanks for his generous permission to quote from Sorley MacLean's *From Wood to Ridge: Collected Poems in Gaelic and English*, from Iain Crichton Smith's *Collected Poems*, and from Edwin Morgan's *Collected Poems*. I sent Michael a draft of the Edwin Morgan interview to show him what I was about, and noted his controlled response to my extensive quotation. He asked for due web-page acknowledgement for the uses I make of the Carcanet editions, and I am pleased to do this. I am grateful to him beyond measure.

My thanks are due to the Scottish Poetry Library for unfailing courtesy, speedy attention and for permission to reproduce photographs of Sorley MacLean, Iain Crichton Smith, Norman MacCaig and Edwin Morgan. The photographer Roddy Simpson promptly agreed to this. The executors of the George Mackay Brown kindly gave permission for use of a photograph from the George Mackay Brown website. Thanks also to Anne Mason for her computer skills, and to Morag McGill for help along the way.

Introduction

In 1987 Cairns Craig suggested that 'both the 1920s and the period of the 1970s and 1980s will go down as major contributions to the total literary achievement of Scottish culture'. He then asked why it was that Scottish Literature should have 'retained and indeed asserted its independence in a context where the Scottish people—unlike the Irish for instance—have seemed deeply resistant or apathetic about other forms of independence'. Craig was writing under the shadow of the failed 1979 referendum on devolution: the reconvening in 1999 of a Scottish parliament may change the terms of his question and already modifies the apathetic frame of mind he described. But the reasons he gives for the survival of civic difference 'despite both internal and external pressures' are a matter of record: 'Scotland has never been integrated into the culture values of the British state. The texture of Scottish life, in its religious, educational, legal, linguistic forms, remains distinct from that of England to an extent which is little recognised in England, let alone the outside world.'[1] That recognition is now changing: notwithstanding the absence of formal statehood, the distinctive texture of Scotland's independently structured historical culture continues to generate structures of feeling that are instantiated and reinforced by systems of schooling and governing belief systems, and by legal definitions of and assumptions about citizenship and subjectivity. I never yet met a Scot who did not accept at some defining level that the word describes who he or she is.

The internal and external pressures to conform to values and culture norms developed elsewhere were nonetheless real, are still powerfully influential, and are longstanding. To raise questions about the cultural policing of Scottish custom and practice, Hugh MacDiarmid (writing in 1940) used a 1934 report by a research committee of Glasgow's local association of the Educational Institute of Scotland. At issue is not whether the subaltern can speak but rather the rules of engagement laid down for its speaking:

1 Cairns Craig, 'Twentieth Century Scottish Literature: An Introduction', in *the History of Scottish Literature*, vol. 4, ed. Cairns Craig (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987), p. 3.

> In most cases Glasgow pupils enter the schools with one language only, the Central Scottish Dialect, and they proceed to learn to write Standard English. As the result of education the vernacular is gradually eliminated from written work, but it persists in colloquial use [and] is the medium of expression naturally used by the Glasgow child, who may interrogate the teacher during a Dictation lesson with such a question as 'Whit cums efter "after"?' In the playground children who try to speak Standard English are generally laughed at, whilst in the classroom a lapse into the mother tongue is greeted with hilarity.[1]

In my Scottish poetry seminars at Edinburgh University I have English and overseas students as well as native Scots, not all of whom are familiar with the specifics of this process of acculturation. I find it useful to introduce Liz Lochhead's testimony from thirty years ago that 'nothing in my education had ever led me to believe that anything among my own real life ordinary things had the right to be written down. What you wrote could not be the truth. It did not have the authority of the English things, the things in books.'[2] It is little wonder that disaffection from these anglocentric assumptions should prompt Edwin Morgan to comment: 'You have a passport which says that you're UK or British, and you obviously have to acknowledge that in a purely official sense, but I don't feel British. I don't feel, certainly, English.'[3]

The experience of Gaels offers an intensifying blueprint for wider aspects of the country's story. In the western Highlands and offshore islands the effects are still visible of a sustained attempt at ethno-cultural erasure brutally manifested in the nineteenth-century Clearances of subsistence crofters from land where they held immemorial tenure, so that profitable sheep-farming could be introduced in their place. Gaelic writers point to the additional difficulty they face in recovering from an 1872 Education Act that imposed English on their culture by making attendance compulsory in schools with no provision for instruction in the Gaelic tongue. That too is changing, though the survival of Gaelic remains precarious. Iain Crichton Smith writing a century later reminded us that 'the forces of economics are driving the present population out of the islands'. But he was more concerned by what he called the 'internal imperialism' of a homogenising language use:

1 Hugh MacDiarmid, ed. *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1940), p. 363.

2 Liz Lochhead, 'A Protestant Girlhood', in *Jock Tamson's Bairns: Essays on a Scots Childhood* (London: Hamilton, 1977), ed. Trevor Royle, p. 121.

3 Quoted in Robyn Marsack, 'A Declaration of Independence: Edwin Morgan and Contemporary Poetry', in *About Edwin Morgan* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), eds. Robert Crawford and Hamish Whyte, p. 25.

> If there is no Gaelic left, will not the islander live in a disappearing landscape, as an Englishman would if his language were to die? […] For we are born inside a language and see everything from within its parameters: it is not we who make language, it is language that makes us. […] For Gaelic to die would be for the islands to die a more profound death than economics could bring. The imperialism of language is the most destructive of all.[1]

Minority language experience of the kind Crichton Smith describes became a global phenomenon in the colonial era. Many of the Gaels not shipped overseas migrated to the industrial heartland of Glasgow, where Tom Leonard's nativist techniques record different yet similar effects in the continuing and contemporary operations of internal imperialism as far as demotic speech and linguistic propriety are concerned. Leonard's innovative phonetic transcription brings working class utterance on to the page, sometimes hilariously, sometimes in angry refusal of homogenization: 'No caste has the right to possess, or even to imagine it has the right to possess, bills of exchange on the dialogue between one human being and another.'[2] Dominance and subjection of a class-based kind is also an international social phenomenon. In defense of the sound world in which he grew up, the front cover of Leonard's *Intimate Voices* carries a poem that subjects its opening line 'in the beginning was the word' to a phonetic reconstruction in which Glasgow vocalizations transform biblical utterance into 'in the beginning was the sound'.[3] As part of his politically aware interventions on behalf of the local Leonard uses a subversive irony to trace personal and family tensions produced by controlling definitions and preferred acquisitions of literacy. 'I remember', the poem 'Fathers and Sons' begins, 'being ashamed of my father / when he whispered the words out loud / reading the newspaper', and then switches to:

> "Don't you find
> The use of phonetic urban dialect
> Rather restrictive?"

before ending:

> The poetry reading is over
> I will go home to my children. (IV 140)

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1 Iain Crichton Smith, 'Real People in a Real Place', in *Towards the Human: Selected Essays* (Edinburgh: MacDonald, 1986), p. 20.

2 Tom Leonard, 'Introduction', *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), p. xxxi.

3 Tom Leonard, *Intimate Voices: 1965–1983* (Newcastle: Galloping Dog Press, 1984). Hereafter IV.