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Special feature: Scottish Poetry

Guest editor: Alison Flett

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Looking at the Thistle
Introduction to the Scottish Poetry Feature, November 2014

Alison Flett

2014 has seen Scotland go through an exciting transformation. Perhaps not quite as exciting as many would have hoped but the referendum process has sparked a new vibrancy in the Scottish community and created an enthusiasm for grass roots politics that has carried on beyond the announcement of the result. A great time, then, to be looking at Scottish poetry and in particular at poems about crossing borders and exploring new worlds.

Since the renaissance in Scottish literature which happened a century after the union of the crowns (when Scotland first lost its status as an independent nation) Scottish poetry has been used to give a voice to the people of Scotland and to redefine notions of Scottish culture and identity. In the late eighteenth century, Robert Burns' was Scotland's strongest voice with poems like *Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation* directly tackling some of the issues raised by the Scottish court's move to England. Just over a century later in the 1920s, Hugh MacDiarmid was the voice of Scotland with *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* perhaps the best example of his fervent questioning of what it meant to be Scottish, and in the 1980s it was poets like Tom Leonard and Liz Lochhead who spoke out against the marginalising of Scottish language and culture. In 1999 the Scottish Parliament came into being and the arts took on a new prominence. In his 2003 St Andrew's Day speech, the then First Minister Jack McConnell stated:

I believe we should make the development of our creative drive the next major enterprise for our society. Arts for all can be a reality, a democratic right and an achievement of the 21st century.

I believe this has the potential to be a new civic exercise on a par with health, housing and education – the commitment to providing and valuing creative expression for all.¹

In the throes of the more recent push for independence, novelist and playwright Alan Bisset claimed that the arts in Scotland would receive an even greater boost were Scotland to become independent.

Most in the Scottish creative community believe that independence will release a renaissance in our literature, theatre, film, television and music, as we throw off the suffocating cultural effects of London dominance.²

As it turned out, Scottish independence in 2014 was not to be but the spirit of the Yes campaign lives on in Scotland and is particularly strong within the artistic community.

So as Scotland moves into a new era of cultural and political awareness, it seems appropriate to share these poems about crossing into new territory. Although only two of the poems focus on the recent referendum, what they all share is a sense of transition, whether it be the movement from one island to the next (as in the poems of Alec Finlay and Ian Stephen), from anxiety to acceptance (Kevin MacNeil, *A Buddhist's Guide to Dealing with Malicious Critics*), from marriage through divorce (Kona Macphee, *Telemetry*) from life to death/ flight to roost (Chris

¹ www.culturalcommission.org.uk/cultural/cc_display6861.html

² Newsnetscotland.com 6 August 2013.

Powici, *Rooks*) or the tremulous silence left in the wake of passing fighter jets (Tim Turnbull, *The Great Be Empty*). What many of them also demonstrate is the self-confidence and pride in Scottish heritage, landscape and culture that has been prevalent in the Scottish poetry scene since Scotland first lost its independence. And perhaps this is what poetry is for: to keep alive a spirit of independence in the face of subjugation; to raise the voices that often go unheard; to probe, to explore who it is we really are and what it is that makes us that way.

Alison Flett's poetry collection *Whit Lassyz Ur Inty* (Thirsty Books 2004) was shortlisted for the *Saltire Book of the Year Award*. Since moving to Adelaide in 2010 she has won a number of poetry prizes and been published in various anthologies and journals including *Etchings*, *Communion* and *Australian Love Poems* 2013.



Visitors ...

(for David Malouf, who dislikes the word 'vibrant')

... move through Stromness
unaware they are patching holes,
bumping ghosts; they touch
stone, thinking it's clean.

They find vegetables, good
coffee; they keep alive

take away atoms of sky
traces of accent, salt.

Sometimes one comes
with more absorbent
mind and eye.

For you, David,
I hope standing stones
brood by Aussie lagoons;
St Magnus's fat red pillars
prop the memory
of dappled tombs.

The autumn light (which is
not vibrant – never that)
was a little richer with you here;
is more various for you having
taken it home.

Pam Beasant

Rinansay*

Sheep and kirk,
croft and lighthouse,
wreck on treacherous reef;
green, gold, grey,
crumbling stone, lichen-
covered – every inch
could have been touched
by hand, hoof or gull's
stick leg. Dig and dig,
find new meaning in
layers of soil, of
genealogy.
Re-invent
this subtle, parallel
place, that makes north
true, possible, outlined,
like a ghost's drawn breath.

Pam Beasant

**North Ronaldsay, Orkney*

islands

for Alistair Peebles

‘how beautiful they are, the islands that we’ve never been to’ – Davy Polmadie

THE WORLD’S
WILD HOLIDAYS

islands

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EIRE’S
WAKE

iona

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SAINTS’
SKEPS

garvellach

•

AWESOME
THREESOME

jura

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‘islands’. Alec Finlay.

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<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

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SACRED
GROVE

isle maree

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MAMMA
THULE

hoy

•

RING
ROAD

rousay

•

WEE
HOP

papa westray

•

SHEEP
DIP

rusk holm

•

Alec Finlay

St Columba settled on Iona, on the hill with its back turned on Ireland; there are beehive cells on the Garvellach Isles; Jura is famous for its paps, or mam-shaped hills, and Islay for its distilleries; Dr Johnson said that Coll was not rocky, but one great rock; Tiree is famed for its hours of sunshine; the mountains of Rum are often cloud-tipped; the mad King Sweeney spent 6 weeks in exile, sleeping in a cave on Eigg; a Stevenson lighthouse gleams on Hyskeir; Dr Johnson visited Raasay and compared it to a distant Phaeacia, and its hospitality to that of a Homeric court; there are sacred plantings of Druidic oak, Norse larch and Christian holly on Isle Maree; Hoy has a pair of mam-shaped hills; my father worked for a time as a road-mender on the single road that rings Rousay; the flight from Westray to Papa Westray is the shortest in the British Isles; Rusk Holm is little more than a rock, with a shelter for a few tide-worried sheep – the definition of an island is any place you can graze sheep on all year round.



Photograph Gunnie Moberg c.1979
Gunnie Moberg Archive, Orkney Library & Archive
gunniemobergarchive.wordpress.com



Northeasterly

Driven by sleet and hail,
snell, dour and winterly;

it fills the unwilling sail,
empties the late, green tree.

Something of husk and shell
lodged in the dusk of me

empties itself and fills.
Like that sail. Like that tree.

John Glenday



King Oscar Land

This is land of spoke too soon.
The land of spoke too little.
This is the land of never spoke at all.

I promise, should I find
I'm the first one ever here
I'll hoist my white flag at the place

where nothing at all begins
and shout out to myself: *I claim this land.*
My love, I claim this land for you.

John Glenday



Windfall

In those days the stars were green.
They hung like fruit from a sooty branch,
tense, ripe and sugary.

What is love if it is not a gathering
in of sweetness? In the meadow between
river and house, remember

how you stood with your arms
open to the night, under every tumid
star; waiting for one to fall.

John Glenday

GRAVE GOODS

Tankeringen

Sandane, Norway

In the square in Sandane
I raise my camera to frame the *Tankeringen*.
Was it chance find or theft or gift
that brought this birchwood enigma
to your mountainside,
that dark beached hull above the fjord?
It lay here, folded to your breast
for thirteen hundred years,
the end of a journey, and the beginning.

In the space between planting and harvest
a thread was woven through mountains to the sea.
South along coasts ships dreamed their way -
strakes flexed and trembled as they surged
through daylight and darkness,
the Volga, the Caspian Sea.
At the edge of the fjord I raise my camera.
Certainly there were journeys.

What could you see, what changed as you stared
through the ring of thoughts?
Framed in its carved, calculated form
your home and children, women at the loom
or hives, livestock in the fields, men at their nets
or honing blades, boats tilted on the shore.

Perhaps as you slid its angles,
narrowing and widening its aperture,
you saw other skies, rocks and water
framed by the form of tree or ragged fleece
Uzbek ram horns, fish or spears,
a Turkmen *gul* that bloomed like a flower or sun
from tapestried rugs and tents and saddlebags
slung on the backs of horses as they surged
mile after mile across the arid plains.

Yvonne Gray

Note: In the square in Sandane, Norway, stands a sculpture, an enlarged version of a mysterious wooden object found in the grave of a local chieftain, the Eidehovding, dating from 475-500 AD. Measuring about 20 cm in length, it is cut from a single piece of wood and can be changed into a variety of geometric shapes. Only two other objects like this have been found, one in Iran and one in Afghanistan.

'Grave goods'. Yvonne Gray.
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Necklace

Dark blue pearls –

your eyes as they gazed
some days on the green lake
that spreads like silk cloth
round Vora's shoulder.

Dark blue pearls –

the winter sky
that glitters at night
above the ice cap.

Dark blue pearls –

cool and smooth in your palm
as they spilled from his oar-roughened hand

Dark blue pearls –

the dark blue lustre
of nights at sea; his eyes; his thoughts;
the impenetrable strangeness
of those places you will never see.

Silver and gold-foiled beads –

the glimmer of fish in the green lake;
ice on the pitcher at dawn.
ale in a horn in the evening;
the moon and sun above the mountains.
Strange coins, silver and gold,
transactions in the places you will never see.

Two amethysts –

the sky in the summer twilight;
violets and gentians, devils bit and cranesbill.
Tears with a hundred faces
like ice that falls from the mountain.
Eyes, eyes that have looked on places you will never see.

Yvonne Gray



A Buddhist's Guide to Dealing with Malicious Critics

The silent room is clamorous
with his animosity. Breathe deep.

His spiteful voice echoes in your head
because you allow it. Breathe, now be

the first to forgive him. Even his snide eye
is at times a dewdrop reflecting the moon

and sky, though later he twists in feverish,
cackling dreams. So what if he thinks

your forbearance is cowardice; he might not
know courage. Light a stick of incense

and bow to buddha, chant a vow
to save all sentient beings, including him,

now offer thanks to this poor benefactor,
whose ill brilliance perpetuates his own suffering.

See what his harsh words really say. Let them go,
let vain anguish collapse into ash, drift

away like fragrance or poignance or praise.

Kevin MacNeil



Telemetry

'I am still amazed that poets insist on writing about their divorces, when robots are taking pictures of orange, ethane lakes on Titan...' - Christian Bok

Even the dullest of observers might interpolate
a growing separation from that jangling Doppler shift
of twin-sourced *he said, she said* sarcasm,
those solitary maydays beaconing the small-houred night –

yet seemingly your fraught detectors missed it all
so utterly that you're astonished by these screeds
of legalese, these neatly bitter testimonies
piled like mission transcripts from an uncontrolled abort:

by how, in the courtroom's chestnut-panelled moonscape,
a flight plan is enacted with automaton fidelity
while you observe from some unfathomable distance,
gauges needling zero, dumbed by an inuring lag;

and yet the confirmation of a lone and bumpy landing
must filter through eventually, however much you'd turn
those dished receptors – scooped rinds of some vital part
now cleft and gutted – any other way,

until you're left with this: a single grainy shot
of some unvisitable destination, washed
in dolor's mutant sepia; a titian vista
gleaned from an icy billion miles of black.

Kona Macphee



Skein

I came to university
from a childhood in the country.
For months, of an evening
the distant, drunken laughter
sounded like skeins of geese
so I'd look up into the sky
and see nothing.

Ten years later, I'm still stuck
in this town. Often there is
drunken laughter, but when I
hear it and look, the people
I remember are no more.
Suddenly a honking, feathered
arrow crosses the sky –

another great movement away
to somewhere better, leaving
me half-drunk and quiet,
thinking about the lateness
of the hour, day and year,
looking up and looking down
at always the wrong time.

Richie McCaffery

Howick

The smoothest wood I've touched,
not cane-tip or pew finial,

but the top bar of an elm kissing-gate
in the middle of no-where

on a path overgrown with gorse.
Only the two of us, pausing

in that slow burnished rudder
of field-wind, just passing through.

Richie McCaffery



Wayward bound

In the back-garden, the boys play battles
with windfalls for their weapons.

In her newly silent house, the furniture
I mocked as a boy is sending down roots.

She said she would only be buried
in grass trimmed by sheep-hunger.

From the train window, dead crows nailed
to farm fences look like musical notes.

Richie McCaffery

Here we go

Alison goes from Oz – Hey, Peebs,
the deadline's here, got anything?
Says I, I'm sorry, and etc, busy and
to top it all this referendum month
I made an Independence Meadow
out the untamed back, the bulletins
and phone-ins wafting at me,
barrowing to and fro. Scunners, etc.,
some result, but hey – but hay!
And here's more. Last night we heard
another generation's on the way,
seen across the ultrasound
waving, set for springtime!
– Congratulations Grandpaw! she replies,
and adds a happy thought, that here's
a patch of independent Scotland
for the new grandbairn to play in.
– A fine peedie subject for a poem,
says I. All round, I like it. Cheers!

Alistair Peebles



Rooks

Four days after the funeral of my mother
I am walking up Kippendavie Road
and the June evening sky's filled
with the slow, wild cries of rooks
gliding in from the sheep fields
to the sprawl of oaks halfway up the hill.

My mother had her service all planned out
would have imagined her sons and daughters
grandchildren, neighbours
gathered on the narrow, familiar pews
as sunlight flowed through the tall windows
onto the bright cross and cut flowers -
imagined our voices joined in psalm
I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help

but these rough midsummer hymns
these dark stone-throated birds
vanishing into the leaves
as the earth calls them – us - all of us – home?

Chris Powici

The Otter Goddess

The otter goddess won't hear our prayers,
cares more about the sway and feel
of kelp against her belly
than whether we believe in her or not.

She'd sooner eat gull than have anything to do
with love or forgiveness;
she can't even tell herself apart
from the slick sinewy crab huntress
her presence inhabits.

All she knows is grace -
cool thrill of tail-flick and fur-glitter
as she surges up the green depths
to sashay on the swell.

And guillemots dive about her.
And death is another time.

Chris Powici



All Pictures Are For Sale

The plasterboard walls
between the Men's
and Women's stalls are
shakily thin. Someone
is pissing noisily. You
can't help hearing
the tearing of paper; everything.

Back in the café
all the pictures on the walls
are cut-outs of animals:
monkeys, peacocks, dolphins
in parcel-wrap brown,
their attitudes frozen
on newspaper backgrounds.

In the far corner
a television mimes: soldiers
who crouch and run.
I know because you told me
you read the stories around
the animals once,
to see if they were random.

A sleek pigeon strikes poses
on the windowsill
in the sun. Everything
goes on: animals, televisions,
wars, digestions; words
reaping the world in lines
like peasants in a painting,

in a field of corn.

Wayne Price

Desert Stop

A lean dog carries its grin like a bone
through the rippling noon.
Three workmen crouching in the tiny shade
of an orange tree watch it cross
a football pitch marked out on dust
at the edge of some small town.

I was sleeping; I don't know
where I am. The coach is stopped,
the engine idling. Two soldiers
in green uniforms, cradling
their guns, are moving slowly
up the purring aisle. A woman
whispers in French; the air-conditioning hums.

The workmen shade their eyes and turn
their burning indifference onto us,
onto the bus's sheer wall
of flashing steel and glass.

Beyond the goal posts somebody
has fenced themselves a yard: a few scruffy hens
are dabbling at the dirt.
When I look for it again
the loping dog is gone.
The brighter the sun at noon, the more
the windows blind. The more the chickens
scratch, the harder the ground.

Wayne Price

Abandoned house on tidal island

Brine inlets
will always encroach
on primed territories –

sand soundings
ochre contours
green bleed.

The seepage
makes its own maps
of tide and pressure.

Our attempts fall apart
like our dictionaries
before you can proof them.

Ian Stephen



'Abandoned house on tidal island'. Ian Stephen.
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It goes on down



It's a particular three
individual spears
dipping and trimming in nearly
mutual response to airs

and in prevailing light
two islands of a known group
are bare to
their midriff rock

but you know they possess
summits
in the drizzle
and a whole neighbour
is still concealed

Visible faults
nested white
on the climb and fall
of one volcano.

It goes on down.
Clear to deep
but wind shifts fast.
The lee becomes the weather side.

'It goes on down'. Ian Stephen.
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The glass top breaks.
In the turmoil
you have no idea
of depth.

This is a place
where you know that
everything we know
can snap.

Ian Stephen

from *St Kilda lyrics* with the music of David P Graham,
Inventio-Musikverlag, Berlin, 2013.



The Great Be Empty

Fighter jets hurl themselves
down the valley then bank
and careen up over the spruce
clad ridge. They thunder above
the wee white house designated
quarry for this exercise; the
wee white wooden house
whence emanate all those
indignant missives to Min.
of Def. regarding flight
path nuisance and think of
the children, I'm at my wits
end; but what jolly japes for
bored or nervy pilots whom
will soon enough be pounding
the stockades and mountain
hideouts of hirsute despots
now grinding teeth, whetting
scimitars and plotting what
new outrage. And the wee
white wooden house rattles
in the turbulent wake and
the smallest girl erupts in
tearful, fearful hysterics,
while out in the meadow
the trefoils, vetches, yarrow,
cranesbill and the national
flouer sway gently in the
afterburner's fading roar.

Tim Turnbull

Tay: Autumn

The sluggardly Tay can hardly be bothered,
rolling in umbers: burnt by the far bank,
raw in the shallows. Desultory fish slop
out in the black pools. Fishermen colonise
half of the river, and waders are optional,
the water's so low. There are bales in the
cornfields, potato tops cut and awaiting
an influx of cheap Euro-labour to sort them
and stone them and send them to Tesco.
Away in the distance the Cairngorms are
blue, and the stones on the riverbed slick
with green weed. The water's recession
exposes the boulders and channels that
govern the currents. Pebbles in reds and greys
speckle the bank edge. Why aren't you
thinking about words. I am looking out
at things.

Tim Turnbull



Rote

A split vote – a joke. To think we ever saw the road
twisting away to a nuclear free Argyll. It was always
going to take a while. Box as clever as you like,

there's always going to be some cheap tyke or other
paid handsome and well briefed fresh up from the corporate
campaign bus to spin a sweeter lie about why we're as well

just tholing the yoke a little longer. Honest folk like you
and I – what chance did we have of coming up trumps
against the lumpen uber trooper blue pinstripe eyeballing

the YES across your face and chest and aawhere else
in case anyone was plagued with any doubt.

Sweet sang the laevrick, high abön the Cuillin.
And if I lie deep and torn in the pull of the Minch, it is from there
I must rise.

Christie Williamson