

PS

*edited by Raymond Friel and Richard Price*

number 5

**PS** is the Prose Supplement to **Painted, spoken**, which is edited, typeset, and published by Richard Price. Please send an A5 stamped self-addressed envelope for a free copy. Earlier issues have been digitised at: [www.poetrymagazines.org.uk](http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk)

**PS's** editorial policy is constituted in instalments by the contents of **PS**

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## **Entering A Forest: Celebrating Robin Fulton's Poetry**

*Richard Price*

Robin Fulton, *Grenzflug* [poems in English and translations in German, chosen and trans. Margitt Leibert], 143pp. 19,90 Euros.  
[www.rugerup.de](http://www.rugerup.de)

This year marks the appearance of *Grenzflug*, over sixty selected poems by Robin Fulton chosen and translated into German by Margitt Leibert. The poems are each presented in their original English, too, and so this beautifully produced book forms a remarkable retrospective for Anglophone readers, too.

*Grenzflug* - border crossings, border flittings? The poems do range across various displacements, various migrations, but are as much about the passing of time as the moving across boundaries. Anyone who has gone simply from one district to another in their life can identify with these poems, especially if those districts were the 'parish of childhood' and the 'borough of adults': Robin Fulton is a brilliant poet of memory. Here are reflections that are in turn puzzled, fond, analytical; beautifully austere. So often they have that Metaphysical catch of the breath that Norman MacCaig had for the visual nature of things but which are here also operating aurally and, especially, on the forces of remembrance: "[...] A radio / sits on a bright table, / an ice-age marvel on display."

There is something kindly about Fulton's aesthetic, for all its scrutiny and undecieved reflection. I think of James Schuyler's recurring motif of the window, a Vermeerish point of reflection perhaps, but for Fulton it is the tree and the forest which tap tap tap at him, inviting a quietly philosophical poetry. I've mentioned before how the tone reminds me of Rae Armantrout at times, too. Fulton's poetry is intellectually restless, searching, yet musical.

Fulton has given the Anglophone world the gifts of his German and Scandinavian translations over the years – and perhaps a celebrity poet or two may have capitalised on the work he and others have laboured over – but in the end, in my view, that is a debate about translations, versions, and 'borrowings' that whatever its rights and wrongs has not taken the measure of Fulton's own considerable poetry. What should not be lost is that Fulton is a wonderful and original poet who is one of the best writing in English today.

## **Robin Fulton**

*Interviewed by Iain Galbraith*

September-October 2007

*Instances*, the first of Robin Fulton's many poetry books, pamphlets and broadsheets, appeared in 1967. His most recent volume, published in 2007 by Rugerup, is *Grenzflug*, a 'new and selected' poems with facing German translations by Margitt Leibert. The term "career" is one that would never occur to Fulton when describing what has happened to him since leaving university (his poems prefer words like "ellipse"), but this does seem a good moment to be asking how this son of an Arran manse has come to be where he is now: in that multi-layered, dynamic place, which – if we are serious about 'Coming down to Earth' (part of the title of one of his books) – can be visited most profitably in his poems.

Along a life-curve passing through Glasgow and Helmsdale in Sutherland via Edinburgh to Stavanger in Norway, where the poet and translator lives today, we catch glimpses of a wartime childhood whose material coordinates – Tilley lamp, wireless, Avro Anson, not to mention the lochgelly tawse – seem utterly remote from the trappings of the present day, at least until we notice how familiar words like "television" or "telephone" and of course "skyscraper" have begun to sound eerily old-fashioned by contrast with "bridge", "anchor", "letter", and even "poem". En route we witness the Edinburgh student's encounters with literature and philosophy, the young poet's engagement as editor and critic with the work of his contemporaries, and the intensity and loyalty of his concerns as a translator of the modern Scandinavian poets. At every point of the journey we are aware of his unique relationship with music, and of his growth as a reader and writer of poetry.

I find it difficult to remember when I first became aware of Robin Fulton, the poet. His name was far from being new to me when I bought his *Fields of Focus* in 1982, later including work from that volume in a poetry anthology I edited for a German publisher in 1984. I was not to meet Robin Fulton until 1997, however, when I had the privilege of choosing six British poets (Iain Crichton Smith, David Constantine, Lavinia Greenlaw and Michael Longley also belonged to that little group – as did Sorley MacLean, who died before the event took place) to come and read at the German city of Münster's renowned international poetry festival. I have continued to read his work wherever I can find it. Alas, this has not always been easy. Not to put too fine a point on it: Fulton is an "outsider", and British book publishers have neglected his work. We have remained in contact, sporadically, since 1997, first by letter and telephone, later by email, and it was with the help of the more recent medium that the following 'dialogue' took shape.

**IG:** Is it going too far – since neither of us pretends to be a child psychologist – to suggest that a poet’s aural sensibility is probably awakened at an early age, if not necessarily fully formed? So many of your poems address the quality of music or attend to auditory ideas and impressions of one kind or another that I would like to start by asking you to say something about the early education of your own ear. Are there sounds – not necessarily musical ones in the stricter sense, we’ll come to those in a minute – which you still think of as redolent of your early years: on Arran, for example, which I believe your family left for the outskirts of Glasgow when you would be about seven? Or later, in the Strath of Kildonan and Helmsdale? Much in your poetry suggests an acute memory for sound: “your mind is pierced through/ and through/ by cries lapping like water against tarred wood” (‘Loch Araich-Lin’, from *Inventories*, 1969). “My private music remembers me” (‘Remembering Walls’, from *Fields of Focus*, 1982), you write, and an uncollected poem, ‘Gartymore Around 1950’, written in 1996, speaks of the way such “private music” is pared down in time to a handful of ineradicable sounds: “the voice of Crex crex working dry/ ditches. Will it never finish/ sawing at that same piece of wood?”

**RF:** I spent my first seven years in the manse at Shiskine on Arran. The house faced eastwards across a wide shallow valley criss-crossed by hawthorn-hedges. Apart from Glasgow holiday-makers arriving in their macs in August, the island was as yet untainted by tourism – “heritage centres” and suchlike were still in the future. We were surrounded by working farms. And it must have been more isolated then: an expedition to Glasgow was a rare and laborious event. Without electrical gadgets, the manse was quieter than a modern house. The radio, battery-driven, was never on for the sake of background but was turned on only for specific items, usually the news. My paternal grandmother came from Edinburgh to stay with us for some of the war years and she played the piano a lot. She misused the sustaining pedal, with the result that the notes boomed and oozed into each other more than they ought to have done. Generally I didn’t hear her efforts as music, only as noise, and if I didn’t want to hear it I would wander off into the garden. At five, I started at the school on the other side of the valley. It was quite a long walk and I dimly recall drawing out the time examining plants and so on along the road. Now and then father would let me sit on the back of his two-stroke Francis-Barnett motorbike, reg. no. DGD363, without helmets of course. Mother moved around the countryside with a pony and trap: I have a photo of her in it, wearing a long black leather coat and wielding a whip. The pony was said to know where she wanted to go: not surprising, since any sensible equine brain would know without being told where a leather-clad whip-bearer wanted to go.

The “redolent” sounds, then. Rain on the window. The wind in trees. I have read of Orkney people coming south and feeling that bushes and trees clutter up the lie of the land, obscure the bedrock; I would never want to live in a place without trees. Less timeless sounds included the hiss of the Tilley lamp on winter evenings. And the chimes of Big Ben introducing the solemn voices of the wartime newsreaders. And the groan of planes often crawled across the sky. The R.A.F. used Arran for

training, and fatal accidents were frequent. A frolicsome Spitfire pilot dived on our back garden one day, pulling up just short of the clothes-poles. German bombers on the way to Glasgow, I was told, passed over us, and rumour had it that if the Germans had unused bombs they liked to drop them on churches. Father was in charge of the local Observer Corps and with a home made magic lantern trained his group to recognise any plane from any angle and at any height. They took it in shifts to sit in a dug-out in the moor west of the house, armed with binoculars for planes and a .22 rifle for rabbits and hares. All plane movements were reported. Long afterwards I heard that he had spotted Rudolf Hess's plane coming in. I was able to spot quite a few planes before I could read properly. My favourite was the Avro Anson (the leading edges of the two chunky engines and the nose tip of the fuselage made a straight line).

On the whole, though, life around the manse was quiet. Why we moved in 1944 to Clarkston, just south of Glasgow's city boundary, from relative plenty to something close to poverty, I never found out. In the countryside a visiting minister would leave with a handful of farm produce; in the city there were bread queues, barrage balloons, shortages, and father accepted a low stipend paid quarterly. But I enjoyed the change. The trams ('Let Glasgow Flourish') screeched and I found them exciting. There was a raucous violent quality to the playground noise at Eastwood School which alarmed me at first but after I had demonstrated in a fist fight with the class bully that I could hold my own, no-one bothered me.

The worst violence in school-life came from adults, corporal punishment being the norm. How many hands were damaged by the lochgelly strap? How many millions of children learnt from school that the use of violence against smaller and weaker fellow-humans was an acceptable way of solving problems? My paternal grandfather, William Fulton, was a science teacher at an Edinburgh Secondary (I think it was Boroughmuir) and was "promoted" to be headmaster of Towerbank Primary in Portobello, just outside Edinburgh. This achievement is recorded on his gravestone. I was told, with no hint of disapproval, that he wore coat-tails in school and held a rolled up lochgelly behind the tails, ready to lash out. Even in well-regulated, teetotal, "decent" households children were not safe. Instigated by mother, father would cuff me on the side of the head, which is not only humiliating and painful but of course highly dangerous. One of these cuffs sent my head into a wall and smashed a bakelite switch: I can still feel the crunch. These erratic punishments had no direct connection with any specific evil deeds on my part: they seemed to be related to things I might have done or could have done.

Thinking of school sounds I hear a remote echo of girls chanting as they wielded their skipping-ropes.

Skinny-ma-linky long-legs  
big banana feet  
went tae the pic-churs  
couldnae get a seat.

The same girls who found it almost impossible to memorize a few lines of "proper" poetry for homework were able to reel off countless verses of playground chants without ever having seen them in written form. I spent a lot of time in the loft at home: the rafters creaked now and then and the muffled chirping of the sparrows out on the slates never stopped. We lived at 23 Carolside Avenue, an ordinary terraced house, not a manse as such. I went to look at it a couple of years ago and wished we had stayed on there. But we moved, again without any reason being given me. We left one November evening in a thick fog to get the night train to Inverness. With over twenty seine-net boats and a railway yard Helmsdale was a livelier and more habitable place than it is today, but to me it was a desolation. Each week contained about nine Sundays, and on all of them rooks and seagulls squawked pointlessly. The manse, one of the churches, and the war memorial are grouped on a promontory on the south bank of the river, separate from the village. Telford's bridge was still in use during our first years there. The memorial clock chimed the quarters. In the depths of the night if I heard quarter-to I knew I had to wait only fifteen minutes to learn what time it was; if I heard quarter-past I knew I had a long wait. When the wind rattled the draughty sash window and howled in the chimney the noise of the chimes was twisted.

**IG:** Is there something about diction you remember from those early days – your father was a Church of Scotland minister, after all! Or maybe the pull of different speech rhythms and accents within the family – auditory accidents of birth that may have become part of an early home ground? Were you strongly aware of sound changes and of language differences when you got to Glasgow, or indeed left Glasgow for Helmsdale?

**RF:** Your question about diction surprises me because I seem to have found a gap there. I remember only one occasion (apart from sessions with a speech-therapist at Eastwood who thought my s-sounds needed engineering) and that was when I was nicknamed something like Tü in my first months in Sutherland, presumably because I had imported a few Glasgowsish vowels. For the rest, people spoke, or they didn't, and I don't recall noticing how they spoke.

I know now that mother's ancestors were from Sutherland, that her grandfather, qualified tailor and staunch Free Presbyterian, settled in Thurso, where she grew up. She kept much of her Caithness accent all her life, with the odd Gaelic word ("boorach" for a mess, "bodach" for a perhaps miserable old man, "fionn" for what in Scots is called "peelie-wally") but maybe not thinking of them as Gaelic. I have my maternal grandfather's Gaelic *New Testament* but I think his knowledge of the language was more or less passive. I know now too that father's people came from the Borders, that he grew up in Edinburgh, and that he had a large but generally unused stock of lowland Scots vocabulary.

Your question seems to imply that since he was a minister then speech played an important part in our household. On Fridays and Saturdays non-speech played an important part. Compulsory silence for



much of the time then fell upon us as he strove at his Sunday sermon. He didn't go and hide because the hiding-places were usually too cold: he sat down at the fire, where the rest of us wanted to sit. The ash on his cigarettes would grow longer and longer as phrase after phrase was written down and scored out and written down. His sermons appeared to go down well with his listeners. He kept them to ten minutes and gave them a clear construction, with firstly, secondly and thirdly, so everyone knew where they were on the time-scale. As with all the sermons I have heard, the connection between the biblical text and the sermon tended to be tenuous or simply inscrutable. I remember the content being vaguely consoling in a vaguely uplifting way. I soon began to feel question-marks milling in my head but the rhetoric he used was probably the kind his congregations wanted. His delivery, with very exaggerated enunciation, embarrassed me acutely. It might do, still.

**IG:** Coming back to music itself – “public music” this time, so to speak – a large number of poems mention by name or suggest actual pieces of music, musical instruments (including bells and the human voice), or refer to composers, for example Bach, Beethoven, Vivaldi, Shostakovich, Rachmaninov, Britten or Vaughan Williams. Could you tell us something about your early exposure to music and song? I suppose the music of the Kirk would have been formative? What of the kind of music we meet in your poems? Were you aware of classical music much in your childhood or school years?

**RF:** As far as “the music of the Kirk” is concerned – well, we're not exactly referring to, say, the musical life of York Minster! Unlike the Free Kirk (whose psalm singing must be one of the most discordant forms of communal singing ever devised) the Church of Scotland allowed the use of an instrument, so an organist would trample away at a wheezy pedal organ. Meandering “voluntaries” would happen at the beginning as people shuffled in and organized their bottoms and their Pan Drop sweetie-pokes: and again at the end as they shuffled out, not hesitating too long on their way to Sunday spuds and beef. During hymns the organist had to try to hold everything more or less together, hoping that at the end of each verse most of the voices would land on the cadence more or less simultaneously. That was not easy since the more eager voices had a habit of inventing their own courses.

I found tunes like ‘Infant of Mary’ and ‘In the bleak mid winter’ very haunting but when I began looking at the words of the hymns I was puzzled. ‘Away in a manger’ tells us that the baby Jesus never cried: even if this remarkable assertion were true, how did anyone know? And it seemed odd to observe mild elderly ladies in strange hats chanting ‘Onward Christian soldiers’ – what sort of belligerent acts had they in mind? Hearing ‘Abide with me’ dragged out by a sparse congregation at an evening service was a truly dreich experience. Mother even had a fancy for some of Moody and Sankey's revivalist songs with their unblushing references to Pearly Gates. Was I missing something, I wondered, or were apparently sensible adults happy to sing nonsense? I wondered if the Good Lord really wanted to hear these things every Sunday. Couldn't we have a hymn-free church? A lifelong and no doubt

irrational distaste of some of those hymns means that I still feel almost ill if I hear them. I had of course no idea of the vast world of religious music of quite a different calibre waiting to be explored, but it seems I had already started to niggle at the thorny yet intriguing problems that appear to be inescapable when we consider the setting of words to music.

"Formative?" Of my attitudes and mental habits, yes, but I can't see any direct influence on what I later came to write. As for "proper" music in my earlier years, I doubt if there is anything formative there either. I didn't notice much. The piano stool was stuffed with songs from operettas but they weren't taken out so often. Grandmother had to have a finger amputated and she bravely set about re-fingering all of her pieces. I think mother was exasperated by having to hear the process, which took its time. Now and then grandmother would insist on my standing beside her to turn the pages. She usually managed to turn the pages unaided, so maybe it was a ruse to "expose" me to "good" music. If so, it failed. As far as I could see, Mozart and Beethoven had no idea of when to stop. She was twenty-two when Brahms died but she quite likely found him a bit too modern. She was scornful of her cousin Francis George Scott for being deliberately "difficult" – but in fact his settings of MacDiarmid's poems, however apt, are musically quite conventional. She could work up a rage about Béla Bartók, whom she insisted on calling "Bella." I suppose my family might have come into the category Sir Thomas Beecham had in mind when he declared that the British hate music but love the sound it makes. That was a perceptive remark which has only gained in relevance now when the aural equivalent of wallpaper can be produced by touching a button.

**IG:** Continuing to employ this distinction, the preoccupation with "public music" in your poems seems to grow from – or be part of – the 'private music' we spoke of earlier. A poem like 'The Change', for example, probably written in 1973, the year you flitted to Norway, contains the lines "I hear the rain, wonder how to count/ single drops in the hushed toneless glissandi". Of course musical metaphors are frequent enough in poetry – perhaps even too frequent – but there is more to music in your poetry than a convenient source of simile. Indeed you draw a clear distinction between music and language, calling the former, like light, "that continent without words for anything" ('Night Alone', from *Fields of Focus*). Music here is a liquid reservoir of vital but unquantifiable potential accumulated (generated?) over the decades, with the "power to rise slowly again" and permeate different landscapes. I notice, too, how your references to music are often accompanied by dates, the musical process interlacing with a historical dimension. About a decade later, for instance, we find, again in *Fields of Focus*, the poem 'From 1939', which ends with a image similar to the one I have just cited: "I listen to him play/ through a noise like early rain on leaves". At times, too, trees – omnipresent in your work – become instruments, and we find the subject of a poem listening to a forest. Would it be wrong to think of music as a kind of constant background matter in your poetry – a metaphysical dimension? One of your earliest "musical" poems, from *The Spaces between the Stones* (1971), carries the title 'The Music of the Spheres'.

**RF:** Your paragraph about “private music” is so apposite that I don’t have much to add to it: “Music ... a liquid reservoir of vital but unquantifiable potential accumulated over the decades, with the ‘power to rise slowly again’ and permeate different landscapes...” That’s it. A more banal way of putting the matter might be to say that the accumulated music (in my head, for I don’t perform) is in my life and is bound to be in some or many of my poems. Foreground rather than background, or foreground and background. I suppose literature was a kind of substitute for music but I have never felt so wholehearted about the world of books. It’s awfully quiet. And there are such blizzards of words. I prefer words to come at me in small groups. And sometimes only one at a time.

**IG:** We may as well loiter in these formative years for a while – your school and student days. There were a couple of other things I wanted to ask. Do you like the word ‘loiter’, by the way? Its early Dutch meaning was “to wag about like a loose tooth”, a word later introduced into English by so-called “foreign loiterers”, or vagrants – translators of sorts, I suppose. In the meantime you’ve become a stravaiger between places and tongues yourself, so how did you take to languages at school? I think you must have become quite proficient in Latin? And still at school, what about reading? What about reading outside school, for that matter? Were there stories that caught your imagination?

**RF:** Early reading? Apart from *The Beano* and *The Rover*, very little. I have always read slowly and I certainly started late. In Clarkston I read a few adventure stories but became so engaged in them they frightened me and gave me nightmares. I had some tiny booklets about polar exploration and they had the same effect. (Later on I read Apsley Cherry-Garrard’s *The Worst Journey in the World* and Edward Whymper’s *Scrambles among the Alps* and briefly, in an armchair way, fancied the life of an explorer.) A cherished book at that period was *Life in Ponds and Streams* but I never got beyond the first few chapters because I insisted on finding everything mentioned. I failed to find any amoebae, but I collected caddis-fly larvae and was fascinated by the way water-beetles could run on water. My favourite book in school was a geography book I had at Helmsdale Primary: I liked the smell of the paper. (Recently I found a Spanish dictionary with the same smell and I bought two copies just to make sure.)

A handful of people perhaps had more influence on me than books. A taxidermist at The Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh let me into the workshops there and showed me how to make casts of fish: in one of the cases today there is a cast of a sunfish I watched being prepared. In Thurso an engine-driver called Harry taught me how to drive the locomotives to and fro, shunting wagons to make up a goods train. The most exhilarating thing in my childhood was pulling an oily brass lever and feeling tons of steel hiss and clank into motion beneath me. In Helmsdale a bus-driver called Willie Mackay taught me how to drive the buses, and I drove several of them all over the place, very illegally of course. Not all escapades were happy. On one of my trips with the water-bailiff he took me along in a small boat to shoot cormorants off the Ord of Caithness. There were too many of them and the government

paid half-a-crown per head. A storm blew up, and I realized afterwards that it was only touch and go that we made it safely home. I could scarcely swim and life-vests were unheard of. The experience and others like it intensified the fear of water that had been inculcated in me from early years and I still have nightmares about Caithness cliffs going straight down into deep water, with no shore.

I commuted to Golspie Senior Secondary School, an hour each way by slow bus, for six years. I saw class-mates only in school and felt isolated in Helmsdale. Pupils from the north and west of Sutherland boarded in a hostel and at times I envied them. The first three years were uninspiring and I developed spells of what must have been something like depression. I acquired phobias, especially for certain streets in Helmsdale and in Thurso and for the whole eastern coastline of Caithness. The thought of the empty moors stretching westward terrified me at times.

I took refuge not in books but in music. I had begun poking at the piano in Clarkston but this interest was more mechanical than musical, engaging the same parts of my brain that I used in assembling simple gearboxes with Meccano parts, manufacturing ink and toothpaste, making a plaster cast of a trout and skinning a stoat to cure its smelly skin. No TV, no computers, no organised out-of-school activities... left to our own devices and a bit of boredom, we could be quite inventive, for better or for worse. Piano lessons started in Helmsdale, not, I think, at my request, but once I got going I knew this was what I wanted to do. I was soon practising obsessively, a couple of hours a day on school days, four or so on other days. Unfortunately the only available teacher was still working for her L.R.A.M. and didn't pay any attention to the use of muscles. After about four years an uncle gave me six lessons with Walker Cameron, a leading Edinburgh piano teacher whose career was to be cut off by MS. His New Town flat was cluttered with pianos of every shape and the tall velvet curtains had huge holes in them. When I saw him play an "impossible" Chopin Etude I thought – who cares about ragged curtains? He made some kindly remarks but his verdict was that I was using my muscles wrongly and would have to go back to the very beginning and start again. In fact, the tendonitis which has followed me all my adult life had already set in. I wouldn't have "sold my soul" for anything but I would have given a lot to be able to play (properly) Bach's '48' and Brahms's *Second Piano Concerto*. Being young, I took the disappointment heavily. Whether I had the necessary talent or physique for a career in music, I have no idea. My parents, who knew nothing about how musicians work and live, had already announced that I could go in for anything except music. I disliked them for several years but a sense of duty prevented me almost from admitting this even to myself.

Meanwhile, school had picked up for me from the fourth year. What a small group of teachers gave me of lasting value were certain analytical and organisational habits of mind.

In English we did a lot of "parsing" and "analysis," said to be hideously boring but I liked seeing how the different parts of sentences worked together. It was good training.

So was Latin, the only language in which I had formal teaching. In the fullness of time I actually taught elementary Latin at The Edinburgh

Academy, two periods each school morning, to a "D" class whose I.Q. ratings were below 100. Some of the pupils simply could not grasp the difference between a subject and an object so I had to try not to be impatient with them. Some parents had high hopes for their future academic achievements. Back in Golspie, John Norman Macleod, whose Latin classes I tolerated for five years, was nicknamed The Bood (= Buddha) because he had high cheek-bones, slitty eyes and a brownish complexion. He walked like a jerky robot, lived in a local hotel during term, and was not always expected to act like a human being. Most of the class-rooms I experienced were full of fear: the fear in his classroom was cold. He drilled us in the declensions and conjugations. Much of our time with him was spent reciting these, allegedly in unison, as he stood over us with a stop-watch. Every now and then he would shriek: "Stop. Not clear enough. Start again!" Pedagogically most incorrect, but very effective. Whatever Latin vocabulary I have forgotten, these declensions and conjugations are stuck in my brain with Super Glue. I have tried to learn similar things in other languages but the various bits swill around in my head like wet fish and soon fall out.

The teaching of maths, my favourite subject, was given new life by the arrival of Agnes Macleod, mother's second cousin and good friend. We called her Big Beam because she was quite wide across the hips. She could be fierce, flying into titanic rages but they never lasted long and she could laugh at herself – "Well, that was a bit of a storm wasn't it?" she would declare, thrashing a ruler on the desk of some hapless youngster who didn't have all three eyes trained on her. Her approach to sluggish pupils was: "OK you're a lazy moron but I'm going to bully you through your Highers and you'll be grateful!" She did, and they were. We put up with her idiosyncrasies because she so obviously put herself out for her pupils. She was the only teacher I had who really seemed to be a human being. And she was the only ex-teacher I kept in touch with, long after school-days. She could be both amusing and infuriating: now and then she would stir up a volcanic argument by the simple expedient of denying an obvious fact and then refusing to accept obvious evidence put in front of her.

Two more nick-names. A droopy, squawky and perhaps unhappy lady arrived to teach us art. To do this she would prop up a vase before us and make us spend ages shading in pencil, a process we glumly tolerated as another pointless enterprise imposed upon us by adults with nothing more interesting to do with themselves. We called her Jessie Lovely. Another arrival, but more welcome to me, was a "proper" music teacher with the improbable name of Forrest Primrose Millar. He was an accomplished pianist and I couldn't see why he had come north to the wilderness. He took a helpful interest in me and wanted to put me forward for Higher Music but it seems the authorities were not so keen. Since he had something to be self-confident about, he was self-confident, so we called him Joe Brag.

**IG:** Did your awareness of poetry grow at school? Was there encouragement from any of the teachers? Who were the poets of your early years, if any? No Scots, I should think, except Burns maybe. Am I right? Sometimes poets experience a sudden awakening to poetry in

adolescence? Was that something that happened to you, or did you come to writing poetry later on?

**RF:** "Literature" at school was dismal. Mr. Thomson, who succeeded an icy Miss Mackenzie we called The Turk, laughed helplessly at his own jokes and "did" poetry by persuading us, often against high odds, to reduce the resonant lines of Milton and Co. to stammering, incoherent prose in order to show we understood "what the poet meant." Much later, in Norway, I found that many students came from school with a similar assumption that a poem is a difficult puzzle which has to be decoded to reveal the "content." I was quite happy not teaching literature if the captive audiences had stubborn assumptions of that kind.

You ask about Burns. We were exposed to a few standard "favourites" and Mr Thomson would become quite jovial, but we found the vocabulary heavy-going. In a Highland school where the English of many pupils had a ghost of Gaelic behind it, Ayrshire Scots seemed remote.

On the positive side, although it didn't feel positive at the time, we learnt a lot by heart. I did more than I had to and soon I had in my head large slabs of the A.V. New Testament, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, and Browning. It mostly faded out of my head in due course, but the rhythms, especially of the New Testament, are still with me. A few phrases and lines began to haunt me with their sound – "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course" – and I saved them up like secret discoveries that had nothing to do with school. You may be tempted to ask if this is where the urge to write poems began, but I don't think it was.

The rote learning became part of my obsessive behaviour and for a period I was unable to go to sleep at night without going through the lot "just to make sure" I hadn't forgotten anything.

Not long after he had arrived from Kelso as our new headmaster, W.A. Rutherford took some of us for English in our sixth year as a post-Highers extra. He astonished and perplexed us by encouraging us to have our own opinions and to express and discuss them. Our own opinions had so far played no part in school life. He also made reading, for its own sake, seem a normal thing to do. I made my way through Grierson and Smith's *A Critical History of English Poetry*, not very exciting but a window with views that were new to me. Because he wasn't the usual blunt and authoritative headmaster he was regarded, I think, as a bit of a ditherer, but he did try to bring a kind of enlightenment to a system where drilling and training had been seen as the only legitimate functions of a school. By encouraging me to read for the sake of reading, he had a liberating effect on me and I felt duly grateful. With hindsight, I wonder if I didn't plunge into the world of books in a blind-folded way: throughout my student years I read for the sake of reading rather than for the sake of any syllabus. The world was about to make demands on me that had little to do with books and perhaps I was too engrossed in the printed page to give those demands due attention.

At home there wasn't much in the way of literature. What with homework (including those time-consuming and pointless "ink-

exercises" at the weekends), practicing the piano and sitting on the bus, I had little time for reading until my sixth year. Now and then mother would wave encouragingly at a glum little bookcase in the front room and refer to "good books." Most of the spines seemed to have Walter Scott printed on them and the bindings smelt of castor oil. Walter Scott still smells of castor oil. To those unacquainted with that supremely repugnant odour, I should explain that at regular intervals throughout childhood I had castor oil poured into me to clear out my inside. Whether my inside ever needed clearing out was beside the point.

Both of my parents could put M.A. (Hons) after their names, father with First Class in French and mother with Second Class in French and German, yet I never saw them reading anything in French or German or indeed taking any interest in such things. They read *The Daily Express* (probably agreeing with the sentiments to be found therein) and green-covered Penguin thrillers (Margery Allingham, Agatha Christie). Father devoured *The Scotsman* and *Amateur Gardening* and I recall him working through Churchill's version of World War Two.

Intellectually, life in the manse(s) was not inspiring – it was in fact rather narrow and rigid. Religion was never mentioned, let alone discussed. Nothing was discussed. Both my parents mellowed in their later years but in the full vigour of their prime they nourished prejudices that would certainly cause tensions in a modern-day congregation. Working wives were disapproved of. So was taking up loans. Roman Catholics were of course regarded with intense hatred and suspicion, and Anglicans, with their bishops, didn't fare much better. They were very fond of disapproving, yet when it came to an individual who needed help, the frowns would vanish and help would be forthcoming.

There was at times a hard edge to mother's view of the world. I remember her announcing that life is not pleasant, so if school is a preparation for life, then school ought not to be pleasant. Q.E.D. In June 1954 at the end of my fifth year I was given the County Dux medal for Sutherland. The school got a half-day and my parents and I sat in the front row of a crowded gym while Education Committee V.I.P.s sat in a row on the platform. Father was stonily morose as if he disapproved of the whole business. Mother flattened me with: "Now just mind that you're only plain Robin Fulton and don't get any ideas about yourself!" I wished that someone else had been given that wretched medal. Father could on occasion seem more relaxed and possibly he put a higher premium on a peaceful existence. Not always, though. While a student I took part in a little debate in *The Scotsman* and argued against the literal interpretation of biblical texts. In a letter father thunderously accused me of "attacking Christianity" and demanded that "this reprehensible practice must cease forthwith." A Congregational minister in Edinburgh who had befriended my two flat mates turned up with a bottle to celebrate the publication of my sensible remarks.

The Christianity of my parents remained to me a closed area into which I couldn't see. It appeared to be of an elementary and practical sort, yet it was based on assumptions which many other Christians would want to probe into. They gave me the impression that they knew what was what and that was that. Or, as I came to suspect, they were afraid of questions, even of the most simple and well-meaning sort. The battlements were permanently manned. If I felt inclined (at any age!) to

air the most casual philosophical, political or religious question, quite without ulterior motive, I soon checked myself for I could see the ton of bricks in the air waiting to fall on my skull.

Whatever I have tried to write comes from an interplay of many chronological layers, not just from the earlier ones. Of course those earlier ones have an inescapable effect, but I don't see them as "formative" in the sense of moulding me into a fixed shape and leaving me in that shape. I don't even think of my earlier years so often, and when I do I always see something different. They are fluid. When I look at my second decade, I would like quite a lot to have been different. When I look at my first, I realize how lucky I was. The war was a vague and distant anxiety but it never came crashing into my daily life. I was never even evacuated. On the contrary, evacuees came to us, in the shape of some rascals from the Gorbals in Glasgow. Mother knocked them into shape, and at least one of them (I think he was called Willie) was grateful and kept in touch long after the war.

**IG:** Moving on then, who were your most influential teachers at Edinburgh University? Your poetry could be thought of as eminently philosophical: in its interrogation of sensual perception, mental representation, the layered texture of experienced reality. These problems were also addressed in the work of Scottish Enlightenment philosophers like Hume and Reid. Were you enrolled in Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh? Did you engage with philosophy in those years?

**RF:** Most of us seem to have vivid memories of our schoolteachers – we were, after all, incarcerated with them, for better or for worse. My memories of student life are fragmentary, consisting mainly of personal idiosyncrasies, isolated incidents, Edinburgh streets and Edinburgh weather. What did I expect? Super-teachers? I had no idea what scholars did, never having come across one. I found myself confronted with a large number of apparently very knowledgeable people who talked too quickly, didn't mind much how we behaved and assumed that we didn't need any help.

Do you expect me to remember all sorts of exciting new ideas? I don't. No doubt rivers of ideas were poured into my head, but they have for long now been absorbed into the subsoil of my mind and are not to be distinguished. I was quite unprepared for university life as it then was. I was willing to read, and I did, in a sense too much, following my own notions and often forgetting about syllabus demands. I read most of the English poets cover to cover. Apart from concerts every Thursday at the Reid School of Music and every Friday at the Usher Hall with the S.N.O., I felt I had no time for the various activities which other students seemed able to fit in. The more I read the more uncertain I was about what to do with my reading. This in the short term made me an unsatisfactory student and hardly enhanced my attractiveness to potential employers, but in the long term gave me an invaluable life-time foundation, enabling me to dip into almost any part of English literature knowing roughly where I am and able to pick up the threads.

Actually, it was assumed at school I would go in for science and up to the end of my fifth year this was my intention. I took Higher Science in the fifth year, a year earlier than was usual, then discovered that there



was "no more science" for me in Golspie. I also realised that for five years we had been setting up tiny experiments, devised long ago by other people, to prove what everyone knew anyway. Curiosity played an insignificant role and my interest suddenly sagged. Agnes MacLeod took "advanced maths" with four or five of us, just out of kindness, but here too my interest lost momentum. Her blunt injunction had always been "Don't ask why, just do as I say!" As we clambered around in trigonometry and calculus my urge to ask why began to get in the way.

So, a box was ticked on the application form for Edinburgh University, a grant was applied for, National Service was postponed, and I stumbled into "English." The bizarre advice from my parents was to wait until I had my degree before deciding on a career. In addition, mother warned me against associating with medical students. I found myself in a loft bedroom, with a skylight window, in Warrender Park Road, c/o a landlady who cooked exactly the same meal seven days a week, four weeks a month.

You ask me about university teachers who inspired me. It may seem ungenerous to say "hardly any." But Christopher Smart, whose untimely death shocked us all, did inspire me with his not very articulate enthusiasm for medieval mystics. What I read in some of them, plus C.S. Lewis's *The Discarded Image*, roused my interest in aspects of medieval literature, in turn leading me to a lifelong exploration of Dante. There was a temporary downside to this. At the end of my third year I failed and had to resit Inter Honours English Language. I had been reading medieval mystics, who never turned up in the exam. Middle English drama froze my brain, and it did come up in the exam. I was, further, totally perplexed by those shifting vowels in Middle English (I wished they would stay put) and the lectures we had on Middle Scots were the most chaotic I have ever sat through.

There were fine scholars around – John Macmurray (Philosophy), Angus Macintosh (English Language), W.L. Renwick (English Literature), Talbot Rice and Giles Robertson (Art History), to mention five who come to mind at once. According to a good Scottish tradition, senior professors would take survey courses for first year classes. Professor Renwick talked quietly and seemed tired a lot, so he sometimes sat down behind the lectern, leaving us with a disembodied learned voice. In tutorials he would lie down: we then stared at the soles of his shoes and listened to the same voice. As our Finals ended – eight three-hour papers – he materialized and asked some of us if we were tired. "Yes." "Oh well, you ought to be," was his laconic response. He dematerialized.

All of those who taught us knew what they were talking about, but too many of them lacked the most elementary pedagogical skills and were unable to relate to students without being distant or awkward. First year courses were run on a sink-or-swim basis, and many sank who could well have been helped to float. First Ordinary British History seemed to include everything from Julius Caesar to yesterday, so if you swotted up Elizabeth I's foreign policy and the exam asked about her domestic policy, too bad, you sank. In First Ordinary Latin we handed in weekly Latin proses: I always got sixteen and a half out of twenty-five, but I never knew why. An elderly Mr Smith "construed" our set texts for us and it seemed that at least 50% of his lecture time consisted of "eh-eh-eh" as he unravelled the Latin word-order.

Yes, I sat through ("unregistered") First Ordinary Moral Philosophy and read all of Plato / Socrates and dipped into Aquinas, promising to return. I liked the ruminative quality of the proceedings but felt impatient at tutorial topics such as: "If a human being is trapped beneath a priceless gothic cathedral would you be willing to destroy the cathedral to save the human being?" I also sat through Fine Art: it was a luxury coming in out of a wintry Edinburgh mist and having one's eyes bathed by the blazing hues of medieval and renaissance paintings. A uniformed janitor stood at the back of the darkened room by the projector and moved to the next slide when the lecturer banged his pointer on the floor.

Ian Gregor and Mark Kinkead-Weekes turned up in the English Department and we thought they were a bit trendy. One day Ian Gregor walked with me from Minto House up to George IV Bridge and waxed lyrical about "the play as poem, as po-em!" I thought he was talking through a hole in his polo-neck and he probably thought I was backward. He liked to tell us that Lucky Jim was really about us, "that's us, you know!" He didn't realise that a son of the manse come down from the north might have more in common with an Indian sitar-player than with Amis's silly young fellow.

This illustrates one of the professional hazards of teaching: your ex-students are likely to remember not your wise words but your blunders, bad jokes and peculiarities.

Andrew Rutherford, related to my old headmaster and once a pupil at Helmsdale Primary, also turned up. He seemed to be both socially and academically ambitious and in fact he did go on to have what is called a "distinguished career." I showed him a few verses I had been writing and he commented that I had rather obviously been reading Eliot. When I graduated I asked him about post-graduate work and he said that while my degree was perfectly respectable for something like school-teaching I wasn't really up to higher things. He died aged seventy, having scarcely retired, and was buried with his parents in Helmsdale. A large part of the gravestone is taken up with a list of his honorary doctorates, each with place and date. Scotland didn't need to wait for a Tony Blair to chant "Education, education, education."

**IG:** You were studying English, but I don't suppose there would have been very many Scottish writers on the syllabus – maybe Dunbar, Douglas, Henryson? You went on to do a PhD on Scottish literature in 1972, *Social Criticism in Scottish Literature 1480-1560*. How did you become aware of Scottish writing? Two years later you published a book about Scottish poetry called *Contemporary Scottish Poetry: Individuals and Contexts* (1974), which is still useful today. By that stage it seems you had taken stock of the entire Scottish poetry scene of the day. Looking back at that book as an event, it suggests to me an unusual confidence to have been capable of writing about the work of your contemporaries in that almost definitive way. The poetry scene – then as now – would have been a bonfire of vanities! You probably felt safer to be out of the country when the book "hit the streets"! Besides taking stock of Scottish poetry in the early 70s, had you been reading European poetry? Or the Americans? There's an occasional hint of

Wallace Stevens in your earlier poetry – a title like *The Man with the Surbahar* (1971) being only the most obvious echo.

**RF:** It was belatedly that Scottish education found much space for Scottish literature. In my four years at university doing a degree in English Language and Literature, Scottish writers were marginalized, indeed almost invisible. The inaccurate and patronising term “Scottish Chaucerians” was still in use, and if Burns, Scott and Carlyle were mentioned it must have been briefly. I still have lacunae in my reading but of course I don’t blame my teachers for these. Subjectively, I can’t take to Burns, Scott (as well as smelling of castor oil) is verbose, much of MacDiarmid is unreadable, and Neil Gunn’s dialogue and philosophising put me off. My ignorance of the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment has only recently been partly repaired. Some of these reprehensible omissions may come to be put right, but I promised to get round to Aquinas first ...

I had to postpone post-graduate work: I laboured at my Ph.D. thesis part-time from 1967 to 1972. I first wanted “to do something” on Blake because I was convinced that he wasn’t as mad as those who had scarcely read him made him out to be, but that was neither precise nor promising as a thesis. I went to Professor John MacQueen of The School of Scottish Studies and not surprisingly he cajoled me into his own field. I wrote about Henryson, Dunbar, Douglas, Lindsay and the author of *The Thre Prestis of Peblis*. I don’t think anyone has ever had cause to refer to my thesis in a footnote but for me the exercise was useful. It might have helped me into a niche in a Scottish university but I didn’t seem to be niche-shaped. My nine years in school-teaching and my active involvement in poetry both seemed to have damaged my outline. Outside Scotland, my Scottish interests dented me further: interviewing me, a professor at an English university wondered why I had chosen “a Scottish subject” for my Ph.D. Couldn’t I have chosen “something more central?” I think he meant Shakespeare. When I came to Norway, my thesis had to be re-assessed by two Norwegian “experts,” neither of whom knew anything about late medieval Scottish literature.

Another category of writer was absent from my undergraduate syllabi – writers who were not definitively deceased, i.e. still walking around. Was there life after Tennyson? To Arthur Melville Clark, our least favourite lecturer, perhaps not. I remember someone talking about Yeats, but I don’t know if anyone unravelled my puzzles about *The Waste Land*. On my own, I read, from cover to cover, Yeats, Eliot, Auden, MacNiece, Frost and Stevens. I still dip into Stevens for I like the panache of his writing in spite of the occasional obscurity. In the three books of poems I published in the early 1970s I alluded to Stevens in various ways. At the time no-one seemed to notice that if you say ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’ with a stuffy nose it sounds like ‘The Man with the Surbahar’.

As for more recent American poets, I find it hard to get onto their wave-lengths. They use the English language, yes, but it sometimes feels like a different language from the one we use, which ought not to be surprising. And they seem to have assumptions about what poetry is and can do which I can’t catch sight of.

**IG:** Richard Price has suggested that it has been the poetics of a "middle generation" of poets, including Stewart Conn, Aonghas Macneacail, Alison Fell, Tom Leonard, D. M. Black and yourself to "talk seriously but quietly". Could it be that you came of age, so to speak, against a background of Scottish "noise" – a self-advertising MacDiarmid, strident tones in literary politics nationwide, and so on – and that you did not feel over-inclined to chime in? You have done much to promote Robert Garioch's work, and I notice the 2004 introduction to your later edition of Garioch's *Collected Poems* mentions Garioch's scorn for MacDiarmid's "self-promotion" and the "antics" of his "courtiers". At the same time, for all MacDiarmid's self-promotion it wasn't until very late – the late 60s and early to mid-70s – that his work was properly collected and made widely available, so that in terms of actual influence it was probably the generation after yours who came to engage with MacDiarmid's work at a formative age – poets like Robert Crawford, W. N. Herbert, Peter McCarey, also Alan Riach.

**RF:** Much of MacDiarmid's work was actually available to those willing to hunt it out but I didn't read him in quantity until I was over thirty. I sympathise with the remarks which Garioch confided to his notebooks and closer friends. Garioch had a keen eye for pretensions, yet he willingly acknowledged that at his best MacDiarmid was a fine poet. MacDiarmid was a composite figure. It was said that in private he was courteous and generous, yet as a pen-pusher and self promoter he could be ridiculous and highly arrogant. I often wondered if his tongue was in his cheek and if he had a good laugh at his "courtiers" as they took many of his pronouncements seriously. I don't know. When I became aware of these things in the 1960s it was MacDiarmid's followers who kept up a booming noise about the Great Man being a Terrific Genius. "Literary life" anywhere is not automatically edifying but the Scottish version in the 1960s often showed MacDiarmid's alleged example being used to justify silly behaviour.

For instance, you could refer to the "Caledonian Antisyzygy," contradict yourself all over the place and take that as proof that your intellect was truly Scottish. Or you could write loads of "stony rubbish," as the Great Man admitted to doing, and this would show that you too are a genius and not a "pygmy." Or you could make abusive remarks in print about your fellow-writers and justify this as "flyting" – conveniently forgetting that flyting was witty rather than witless.

The Scots seem to have a fondness for bearing grudges steadfastly and for engaging in sectarian battles (even when some sects contain only one person each). When Callum Macdonald asked me to edit *Lines Review* in 1967 (I continued with it until 1976) I strayed in as an innocent and was astonished by the ill-will that came my way from those whom I failed to recognise publicly as geniuses. I didn't say they weren't: it was enough not to say they were. Some were writing (uninterestingly, I thought) in Scots, so they saw me as siding with the English, that foreign tribe responsible for all their ills. Some of them huffed and puffed at me for the rest of their lives. One of the Loud Ones nursed a grudge for at least two decades and finally let it out in a bilious book-review. Alexander Scott could always be counted on for a jibe – my favourite one came after I had moved to Norway – he referred to me

as "a humourless expatriate Scotophobe." I would have preferred a definite rather than an indefinite article there.

It was against this dismal background that I wrote *Contemporary Scottish Poetry* (1974). I put the book together at the kitchen table when I was unemployed, staving off panic at the apparent lack of future income. I felt reasonably confident doing it, partly because I regarded it as a fairly humble enterprise anyway, and partly because I hoped that those whose opinion I respected would see what I was trying, while the rest had already expressed their opinions of me and I didn't care about them. What I tried to do was give thumb-nail accounts of the work of Scottish poets as it appeared to me at that time – without paying any regard to sectarian divides or to the categorisations that had become habitual.

**IG:** There is a chapter of *Contemporary Scottish Poetry* where you compare Norman MacCaig and Iain Crichton Smith. I think you were drawn to each of them in different ways. There is sometimes a wittiness and aphoristic tendency in your own poetry that can be reminiscent of MacCaig. I have to say I am not fond of all of MacCaig's work, especially where a kind of prickly haughtiness comes to the fore, as it sometimes seems to me. So I was especially alert to this passage in your book: "The defensive element in MacCaig's work is strong in the sense that when the performance is most skilful the element of personal involvement and exposure is least noticeable: the wit can often be a way of saying "Private. Keep Out", a kind of aggressive camouflage. This puts him at some distance from the more consistently serious and defenceless manner in which Iain Crichton Smith pursues his obsessions ..." (84). "Defenceless" is an interesting word! Your own poetry often enacts a kind of defencelessness, too, or responds to the defencelessness of the subject to memory, associations, messages from the past and so on. Do you think there was a kind of subtext here, where you were triangulating the position of your own work from a contrast between the other two poets? I suppose this question is about whether the decision to write a book like that was also an attempt to find your own place as a poet.

**RF:** Norman MacCaig was a special inspiration to me, simply because he wasn't dead. I was accustomed to poets being dead or very old and remote. In all I spent about thirteen years in Edinburgh and for much of that time I lived at various addresses more or less round the corner from Norman. I discovered his work during my pointless six months at Moray House College of Education (for which read: that place where unsuspecting young graduates were non-prepared for the classroom reality awaiting them). Here was someone who walked the same Edinburgh streets as I did and made poems out of what he saw. He also had a foot in Sutherland.

Looking back, the poems I admire most are hard to locate precisely for they lie somewhere in the middle of a wide spectrum. At one end we have the riddling, perhaps-sort-of-metaphysical poems of the early 1960s. At the other we find slack too-free-verse poems that tend to fall off quickly: many of the later poems are like this. When asked how long it took him to write a poem he liked to refer to cigarettes. One of his

replies was: "Two fags. Unless it's a wee one, then it's one fag." Hearing these quips I thought he could have switched over to long cigars.

As in the case of Maclean, readers of his work who didn't experience his readings will have to do without the voice. It may be that they will be less drawn to poems which "went down well" and more to those that require and reward slower attention. He loved audiences and they loved him: no harm in that perhaps but his tongue was lively and could lead to cruel jokes and to dogmatic statements about subjects he knew nothing about. He admitted, flippantly of course: "Flippancy is my terrible enemy. I get on fine with him, mind you, but I have to watch it."

In the middle then – where high jinks and natty miniatures of fauna are present not just for their own sake (although I know readers who like both of these for their own sakes) but where verbal skill and close observation serve an overriding purpose, some registering of a turning-point in someone's life perhaps, of a moment of powerful emotion, of a sad or joyous revelation. He liked to say that the language of a good poem should prevent its readers from making stock responses.

The newest edition of his collected work was edited by Ewen McCaig (Polygon, 2005) and contains about 800 poems. Too soon to see the wood for the trees maybe, but the cornucopia is there and it has plenty of poems that will last: it's up to us to find them.

What you say about "defencelessness" in my poems is apposite with regard to many of my poems but I don't think that writing that book had anything to do with my own efforts. I've never bothered about finding "my own place as a poet". The concept seems very static and boxy. In the course of my first three decades enough bossy adults had "put me in my place" and I began to wonder if a degree of elusiveness might not make it harder for them.

**IG:** The title of one of the pieces in a later book of essays and reviews, *The Way the Words Are Taken* (1989), is 'MacCaig in What Position?', a reference to the title of MacCaig's book *A Man in My Position*, which you were reviewing 37 years ago. Does that period – in which the reputations of poets like Sorley MacLean, Norman MacCaig, Iain Crichton Smith, George Mackay Brown and Edwin Morgan were still in the making – now seem to you to be a very different chapter in the history of Scottish poetry from what looks like a much quieter phase today? And as for questions of "position", while Eddie Morgan is still lively, of course, do you agree that the reputations of the other poets I have just mentioned have remained fairly strong?

**RF:** I don't understand much about reputations and how they change. At present I think we are in an unhealthy situation where poets are more or less defined and justified by the prizes they have won or nearly won. As we know, prizes are often shared out among and by friends and seldom indicate objective assessments. You'd think poets were now competing like athletes – am I the 89th best poet in the world, or only the 90th?

The reputations of Scottish poets are still cramped by their being perceived as Scottish: they are still given the Scottish prefix. We hear always of "The Scottish poet" Edwin Morgan but we'd likely have to go to the Gobi Desert to hear of "The English poet" Philip Larkin. I wonder if

the assumptions behind this practice have been strengthened since devolution, with both the English and the Scots caring less about what is happening over the border?

I'd say that Robert Garioch's stature is secure, provided his work is kept in print. I edited the first gathering of his collected work for Callum Macdonald in 1983: after Macdonald gave up, his stock went to The Saltire Society, who, as guardians of Scottish culture, were quite prepared to let Garioch go out of print. My revised edition came from Polygon in 2004. Far from being the wee comic on the sidelines, he was a highly skilled verse craftsman who brought to his poems an understanding of Scottish literary history and a personal awareness of twentieth century Europe.

Why did people try to belittle him? I think he suffered from a common social mechanism. If you belong to a clan members of other clans may trample on you but members of your own clan may help you, and if you are able to help or hinder others (in no matter how humble a way) then they'll abstain from trampling on you and may even be nice to you. But if you are not in a clan and have no worldly power you'll be seen as a nobody, free to be trampled upon. An awful lot of people love trampling.

In 1971 I thought I would like to see Garioch follow me in the Writing Fellowship at Edinburgh University. I had no say in the matter but I spoke to a few people who perhaps had. A professor in the English Department said "Robert Who?" and Garioch's boss at the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, where he was working part-time, told me bluntly that Garioch was lousy both as a lexicographer and as a poet. Several people muttered to me that Garioch must be getting on, isn't he going a bit dippy? He wasn't: he was still in his sixties and working hard at what became one of the finest translation achievements in twentieth century Scottish literature – his collection of a hundred and twenty sonnets done into Scots from the Romanesco of Giuseppe Belli, with rhymes and all.

I was around in the late 1960s when Sorley Maclean's fame began to spread out. The odd thing is that this fame gathered momentum among non-Gaelic speakers by way of translations which often read unidiomatically yet perhaps suggested something "Gaelic-ish" to their readers. His personality helped, for he was a very captivating talker, able to negotiate labyrinths of genealogical connections and to quote extensively. He made a bit of a mystery out of some of the circumstances behind the writing of *Dàin do Eimhir* and some people found this a touch tiresome. Christopher Whyte now seems to have sorted out the matter in his 2002 edition. New readers coming to Maclean's work will of course have to manage without his voice and presence. Will their response be different from ours, who heard him?

I want to put in a word here for Derick Thomson: not only did he devote decades to the promotion of Gaelic language and literature and to the publication of Gaelic writing, but he quietly built up an impressive body of poems. In many of them we see the world he grew up in confronting the world of his adult "mainland" experience. His own translations are consistently readable.

I like Meg Bateman's poems but am curious about the motives of those few who, like her, took up Gaelic as a second language and then

chose to write in it. Only their small Gaelic speaking readership can savour the originals: a wider non-Gaelic reading group will have to make do with translations. The second-language Gaelic poet has thus chosen the disadvantage that has plagued first-language Gaelic poets all along.

Edwin Morgan has had a degree of public and popular recognition of a kind which few Scottish poets have experienced, and rightly so. For about half a century he has been a force for good in Scottish writing: non-sectarian, forward- and outward-looking, and bringing into our language the works of a wide range of European poets. Rumour had it that "Eddie actually knows all those languages." Attempts to reach out to non poetry readers, however well-intentioned, don't necessarily turn such people into poetry readers, and I feel a loss of intensity in some of the "public" poems produced in his capacity of Makar. In general I have found something of interest on every page he has published but must confess, feeling unkind to say so, that I don't always remember his poems very well. They don't get under my skin, but that is doubtless a matter of temperament.

On one summer vacation, to put off the return to Helmsdale, I took a three-week job in the university library, a terrible chore, checking that the books that should be there were there and in the right places. I was set to work with someone who was so laconic that the least attempt at conversation got nowhere. His body was there, and it was moving about, but that was all. I heard afterwards that that was George Mackay Brown, during his strange career as a student.

I have heard it said that his poetry is a take-it-or-leave-it sort, you like it or you don't. I wouldn't go as far as that but I would guess that at least some of his readers would not be in the habit of reading the whole range of contemporary poetry. He shied away from public appearances but his way of life eventually attracted a good deal of attention, well-meaning but not always well-understanding, so here again, after the poet's death, readers have to focus more on the page and less on the personality. I would like to like his poetry more whole-heartedly but I find myself stumbling over the frequent and predictable formulae and the recurrence of threes and sevens and so on. His sometimes ahistorical use of the past need not in itself be disturbing – many writers use the past ahistorically – but the past he often wants to conjure up becomes part of his railing against the modern world, which he often simply refers to as "Progress." (In some of the articles he wrote for a local newspaper his gripes about modern times amounted to ranting.)

Small doses is probably the answer: take it by the dram not the flagon, as if it were Highland Park. His gathered poetry, edited by Archie Bevan and Brian Murray (John Murray, 2005) runs to about 570 pages. It's another cornucopia. I suppose the publication of a more-or-less collected edition is a sign that a poet's reputation is reasonably assured, but as books go these publications are cumbersome, like a pulpit bible. We've had Lowell weighing in with 1,200 pages (and not really complete) and Hughes with nearly 1,400 pages. The poems are packed in as if for bulk transport. They are suffocated. Both poems and readers need a bit of air round them, so selections will continue to be useful, and not just for the lazy. For instance I like Kevin Perryman's English/German selection of Brown (Babel, 2001): twenty seven



judiciously chosen poems, handsomely printed and with translations which as far as I can see live up to their originals.

Bob, Norman, Sam, Derick, George, Eddie, Iain... all these characterful individuals, with dates of birth ranging from 1909 to 1928, now have a secure place (horrid word) as figures (another) in any account of twentieth century Scottish poetry. Any decent account ought to have space for G. F. Dutton (b.1924), who has kept clear of so-called literary life because he has been too busy with more interesting things. As a professional biochemist he published important research papers. His horticultural writings emanate from his "wild garden" tended near the tree-line in the Perthshire hills. He has even written about climbing and swimming. His lean poems, in which every item seems to have been measured in milligrams and millimetres, probe experimentally at the most basic elements of our human existence in a non-human environment. He has described them as reflecting "a lifetime's campaigning around the reality of metaphor." As for those apparently disparate categories, "science" and "art," he has said that he finds both categories compatible: "they build a continuous spectrum of experience." *The Bare Abundance, Selected Poems 1975-2001* (Bloodaxe, 2002) is substantial far beyond its modest weight in paper.

Garioch found school-teaching so irksome he walked out of it one day in 1964, at the pre-pension age of fifty-five. MacCaig said he enjoyed teaching, or at least that he liked kids (not the same thing). Iain Crichton Smith, the "youngest" of this group, told me, on what turned out to be our last meeting, that his years of school-teaching, which ended in 1977, had been "just a waste of time." Heartfelt words no doubt, but it's possible the tensions were not entirely negative. As we can see throughout his poetry, tensions fired his imagination – Gaelic v. English, island v. mainland, moral integrity v. worldly power, and, obsessively, the barren constraints of Free Presbyterianism v. the liberating power of the imagination. In his poetry I don't think he used his brain very clearly or paused to make logical distinctions: he tended to think or feel in large unexamined categories. What gave his poetry its life, its frequent surprises and its occasional banalities, was the sense of writing at his nerve-ends. Many of his poems have the impression of being written compulsively and rapidly. His remarkable type-scripts certainly encouraged this impression. I printed a lot of his work in *Lines Review*, including a special issue devoted to him, as well as two volumes in our *Lines Review Editions* series, and I put together his *Selected Poems* for Callum Macdonald in 1981. I seldom found myself thinking: this poem is good and this one is bad; the strengths and the weaknesses, the astonishments and the let-downs, are often inextricably combined in the one poem. I think he seldom went back to rework poems. On the rare occasion when I suggested the removal of a phrase or line, he was liable to conclude that the whole poem was "no use" and threatened to "chuck it out."

His poems get under my skin and I go back to them a lot.

**IG:** Later on, when you moved to Norway, you became a university teacher, although this was not your first experience of teaching. You had presumably begun to read the Scandinavian poets intensively by this time, too. Your first books of translations date from before 1973, with

Lars Gustafsson's Selected Poems appearing in 1972. When did you first encounter the Scandinavian languages?

**RF:** You have cajoled me into talking about things which, it appears, happened a long time ago. This makes me think of my early life as a kind of stray mongrel: every time I look back it's there, pretending not to be following me, pretending not to have got it into its doggy head that I owe it something. It won't go away.

With luck, there is life after graduation and I have had several decades of it. If nurturing a career is a virtue I have not been virtuous. I have had a series of humdrum teaching jobs, the longest lasting in what I might call the lower reaches of higher education in Norway. If we insist on producing, or feel compelled to produce books (music, paintings etc) of the kind variously described as non-commercial, unsolicited, un-commissioned, we can't complain too loudly about what most other people would see as a self-made problem. I don't see how anyone can write a novel on top of a full-time job. Poetry at least has fewer words and often works on the principle of "thinkee-long-workee-chop-chop". It's not simply a question of hours but one of finding and keeping the right kind of mental space clear.

There's something to be said for a non-literary job. When we read of a poet living "as a full-time writer" we can be sure that the said poet spends most of the time not writing poems but talking about poems, giving readings, taking seminars, sitting on committees, or even holding a position like Professor of Creative Writing (which seems to me rather a puzzling and non-scholarly thing to be). As a school-teacher, allegedly qualified (Chapter V it was called) to teach English at any level I taught very little English and quite a lot of Latin, maths and geography, mostly to 10-12 year olds. I arrived in Norway with a Ph.D. in late medieval Scottish literature and history and found myself, grotesquely, being asked to teach English for Economics students and American Institutions, two subjects of which I was spectacularly ignorant. I have never taught literature. If I had, I might have turned into someone like Michael Caine's Professor of Lit-terat-ure at the beginning of *Educating Rita*.

My teaching in Norway was all done in English so I didn't have to learn quickly to sound like someone else just to pay a few bills. I'm not one of those chameleon people who are "good at languages." My brain is not wired up properly for that. I didn't even hear a foreign language being spoken around me until I was nearly thirty-three. Orally and aurally I feel like a country bumpkin when faced by the sort of person who offers several languages in which to have a polysyllabic conversation. On the other hand I am endlessly fascinated by vocabulary and grammar and I seem to have spent a lot of time poking around in (mostly short) poems in various languages.

*La Divina Commedia* is not of course short, which is why it has taken me decades to be able to spell my way through it in detail. In the 1960s I had a go at Russian and got as far as being able to stumble through Pasternak, Voznesensky and Chekhov. The Russian I swotted has been in cold storage for a fatal length of time but I've noticed one curious effect - if I read Chekhov in English now it seems a very pallid affair.

I came to Swedish, in a sense, without meaning to. In the 1960s Bergman's films affected me strongly. Their impact was primarily visual: the photography and the way it was edited made me watch several of his films over and over. Then there was the sound of the language. I dabbled in a Linguaphone course, out of curiosity, not expecting anything to come out of it. One result was my first trip abroad, in the form of a nearly three-day train journey from Edinburgh to Stockholm. I met some Swedish poets and rashly plunged into trying to translate a few of their poems. A short poem doesn't have so very many words and "learn by doing" is a good enough maxim, but I would like to sweep up most of my printed first efforts and burn them. Without a degree of rashness, however, I don't suppose we'd start anything. Some of the poets I worked at were very helpful; a few seemed to be helpful but allowed blunders through.

**IG:** You have translated a considerable amount of poetry in the past four decades – Lars Gustafsson, Olav Hauge, Werner Aspenström, Kjell Espmark, Gunnar Harding and, of course, Tomas Tranströmer, to mention but a few. These poets, with the exception perhaps of Tranströmer, were practically unknown in English when you started out, and your work has done much to put Scandinavian poetry on the map. Did you actually set out to do just that? Were you frustrated at the time that so little Swedish or Norwegian poetry was available or known in English?

**RF:** No, I had no grand design to make Swedish poetry available to English-language readers and I never felt frustrated that so few of them were thus available. I just tinkered away at different types of poem and as the years passed the typewritten sheets multiplied. I finished up with representative book-length selections of Werner Aspenström, Kjell Espmark, Lennart Sjögren, Östen Sjöstrand and Tomas Tranströmer, and narrower selections of Bo Carpelan (Finnish-Swedish), Lars Gustafsson, Gunnar Harding, Eva Ström, Staffan Söderblom and others. The only Norwegian poet I have translated to any extent is Olav H Hauge: his laconic manner can be made to work in English, but his individual way with his local variety of Norwegian made for difficulties. I also did a short selection of the Dane Henrik Nordbrandt.

An early selection of Göran Sonnevi found a willing publisher but was abandoned when Sonnevi decided, without giving me a reason, that he didn't want it published. A bigger enterprise was my attempt at Gunnar Ekelöf's "trilogy" of three related collections from the mid-1960s: it too found a willing publisher but I withdrew it because I felt that too much of Ekelöf had disappeared in the English version. If the publisher had then called me an idiot and tried to persuade me to change my mind, he would likely have succeeded. Another non-book was a study of Tranströmer's work at the stage it had reached in the mid-1970s: I completed a first draft at the request of Leif Sjöberg for Twayne's World Authors series. I stuck to the poems but that wasn't enough for Twayne, who, it seemed to me, wanted something that would tell American students what to think about Tranströmer without bothering too much about reading him for themselves. The book about Lagerkvist in the same series has, on nearly every page, a phrase like "Lagerkvist's view

of man's place in the universe." I just wasn't interested in flabbing out my book with this kind of verbiage so I dumped the lot, trying to convince myself that I had probably learned something.

I have done very little "job" translating: that is a speciality in itself. Trying to translate a poem from a foreign language, however, is an important part of reading it: perhaps the best way of reading it for you are forced to examine the nuts and bolts and can't get away with "getting the gist" of it. It gives a feel of the otherness of the poem. It may make you realise how much is likely to be lost in translation without your being able to find ways of compensating for the loss. It may be commonplace to talk about loss in translation but it is a question that never goes away. At various times I have decided to stop translating other people's poems, to stop vandalising them, to leave them where they belong. But sooner or later something catches my fancy and I start wondering how it might go into English – I'm off again. It's probably a compulsion. It's also a very inconclusive process. If I write a poem of my own it reaches a point where it seem to be "finished" or "ready" and that's that: next day I'll have forgotten it and when I see it in print I may wonder who had written it. But the translation of a poem seldom comes to a conclusion: you stop working at it when you can't do much more and you go off and do something else. Then "improvements" start pestering you like flies. They are not always improvements.

**IG:** There have always been debates about different methods of translation. Dryden wrote of metaphrase, paraphrase and imitation. Lowell and Pound favoured the last of these. According to the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, who died in 1836, there are only two ways of going about a translation: "Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him." Schleiermacher recommended the translator bend his language "towards a foreign likeness", albeit "without disadvantage to one's own language". A tall order, but that is what you have achieved! Am I right in thinking your own approach has been to remain as faithful as possible to the idiosyncrasies of the source text, attempting to capture the flavour of the foreign? Have you ever done versions of poems from languages you couldn't read, "versions" which in fact became new poems by Robin Fulton? In an extreme sense – I don't know how well you know Italian – poems like 'Marrel Hill' and more especially 'Last Views' (both from *Coming down to Earth and Spring is Soon* (1990) are a kind of very free version of Leopardi's 'L'Infinito', are they not? Leopardi's poem addresses what I think of as a typically Fultonian 'moment': "the endless / Spaces beyond the seen".

**RF:** Your quotation from Schleiermacher is a nice one. Yes, your description of what I have tried to do is right. If we are to use the word "translation" then our main concern must be to respect the original. This is not to say that inventiveness is not called for – some kind of inventiveness is needed most of the time if we are to serve the original well. The idea of the target language being stretched or pulled "to capture the flavour" of the original is often mentioned but in practice it

is not very simple. No-one wants unidiomatic versions, which appear simply clumsy, yet at least some attempt must be made to give a hint of the original style. If a Swedish poet bends his Swedish, an English translator must somehow allow for this and not straighten it out. A few American magazine editors have tried to smooth out some of my translations to make different texts by different authors look as if they have all been written blandly by the same hand. What they wanted to do was go behind my translations and re-adjust the Swedish texts which they had never seen and couldn't read.

As for "imitations," I published my thoughts on this in *Modern Poetry in Translation* in the spring of 2007 (3rd series, no.7). The rights and wrongs of versions which are neither reliable translations (with the focus on the original author) nor free-standing imitations (with the focus on the personality or cleverness of the imitator) have come to the fore recently in connection with the fashion for publishing partly-adapted, partly-imitated versions from foreign languages which the alleged "translator" can't read. We are in danger here of losing sight of vital distinctions. If you don't have much knowledge of the original language then you don't really know what you're doing. If you do have a reasonable knowledge of the original then you can make a knowledgeable choice as to how "free" your version can be.

Like all poets I have written adaptations of other people's poems. This is quite separate from my translations as such. I don't think I've tried an adaptation of any poems I have not been able to stagger through in the original. My versions of Orsion Bartana are the one exception: these were presented (in *Modern Poetry in Translation* and in *The Manhattan Review*) not as versions from the Hebrew, which I don't read, but as translations of the Swedish translations from the Hebrew. Bartana seemed happy with the experiment. I published these versions in the hope of attracting the attention of a "proper" Hebrew translator who might then make a decent representative selection of direct translations.

You mention Leopardi: the only poem of his I have looked at is the one about the gorse bush. It surely must happen now and then that different poets writing about similar circumstances come up with similar poems. Of course it's possible for a phrase or two we've read to sink down into the mind and then years or decades later float up without an author's name attached. Is this "influence" or "borrowing"? For a while no English-language poet could so much as mention a crow without being accused of plundering from Ted Hughes, as if Hughes had acquired copyright in the whole Corvus clan. A snooty reviewer once came up with an unremarkable phrase in a Larkin poem (one I had no recollection of having read) and triumphantly pointed to a similar phrase in one of my poems as proof that all I could do was copy other people's work.

**IG:** You mentioned earlier that maths had been one of your favourite subjects at school, and there are aspects of your poetry too which have always seemed to me to reveal a kind of mathematical temperament. I am thinking especially of geometry, but I also want to mention the numerical or arithmetic patterning in your use of syllabics. You have a penchant for the 7-syllable line, I notice! Most of the later verse is

quantitative in this way. This form of structuring was not always there; much of your early verse comes in a more or less irregular pentameter. In fact, in your syllabic lines, too, a loose or free, four or five stress pattern tends to assert itself. Is it the interaction of stress and syllable that counts for you? The syllabic line seems to come to you quite naturally, without any need to break up words. The syllable count is not obtrusive. Can you hear a certain syllable pattern in a poem: in Marianne Moore, for example? What made you choose this line, then stick with it so loyally?

**RF:** I haven't said much directly about my own poems and probably won't, but you refer to an "interaction of stress and syllable" so I'd like to say that that is an effect I am happy for readers to notice but I'm not always sure of achieving it.

When I started trying to write poems I was also trying to write short stories. The latter came to nothing, partly because I had no ear for dialogue but mostly because I have a habit of reducing and condensing texts and my attempts at narratives seemed to carry the economy of Chekhov to a self-destructive extreme. If the language of poems is not different from the language of prose, why bother with poems? That is what puzzled me; now and then it still puzzles me. The aspect of the problem which first struck me was: what is a line, why does it stop with this word and not with that one?

Writing metrical rhyming verse never appealed to me. So much of it has been done in English that you wonder if anyone can still write iambic tetra- or pentameters and be taken seriously. In Russian, many poets throughout the twentieth century persisted with strict forms and that gave English translators massive headaches. The danger of belittlement was always there, with the clink-clank of doggerel a continuous threat.

I once gathered all the rhyming versions of *La Divina Commedia* I could find and they all depressed and irritated me. They depressed me because of all the work and ingenuity that seemed to have been expended in vain, and they irritated me because of the way Dante's arm had been painfully twisted in almost every stanza, so that instead of tripping along the verse limped and jerked. The unrhymed versions, set out in what looks like three-line stanzas, suffer in a different way, tending to spill unchecked into something like prose. Why not just opt for prose and at least give something readable? The most useful and readable version I know is J.D. Sinclair's prose account from about sixty years ago.

Coming back to our native traditions, we find of course Garioch's skill in strict forms. His effects are not inevitably comic. At times they are deadly serious and at times they are comic and serious in the same breath. But I wonder – is it the fact that he wrote in Scots that makes him so "successful?" If someone else had done the same in English, would we be so pleased?

Well... people have written tomes on the subject and it was perhaps rash of me to jump in with a few sentences here. But my point is to try to illustrate, so far as I can remember, my humble dilemma about how to write verse instead of prose. Any attempt I did make at metrical rhyming verse turned out like the horrors we find on greeting cards or

like the start of a comic escapade that hadn't found out how to be funny.

Let's take an extreme case of rhyme-going-wrong: "I measured it from side to side / 'Twas three feet long, and two feet wide." Readers who don't laugh at this probably think how sad a child's grave is. Readers who do laugh see this as one of Wordsworth's low-points, but just why are those lines such a let-down? The idea of someone stooping at the grave with a measuring tape? I'm sure the rhyme contributes to the bathos: "from side to side" is there only for the sake of having a rhyme, and it's not even accurate, for if you measure from side to side you get only the width and not the length. We're a big step from the purposeful rhyming of: "Here comes the bride sailin doon the Clyde / she's six feet lang and fufty inches wide."

If we don't end our lines with full rhymes, what about half-rhymes, a device favoured by some of our most eminent practitioners? The trouble about half-rhymes is that they give a very half-and-half impression, as if the writer had given up the search for full rhymes. It's a bit like writing thirteen lines and calling them a sonnet.

What else? I've read some odd things about lengths of line being dictated by breath lengths, but that depends on who is doing the breathing. Someone with asthma will produce short lines while a seasoned performer of pibroch will go on for at least five minutes.

Then there's syllabic verse. I imagine that in proper syllabic verse a line ends simply because a certain number of syllables have been used up. If such verse is read out with a slight indication of the line-breaks it may give the impression of regular hiccups at ungrammatical moments. If it is read with no such indication, we're back with prose, where we started.

My own habit, which has been a habit for many years now, is to count syllables but not to leave it at that. For a long time my poems have been given syllabic patterns but I try to make lines end for some other reason as well as keeping to the pattern. I have no great theory about this: it just suits me. I like counting and I like arranging discreet little patterns that help to give shape to a poem without being rigid. I don't mind if readers don't count syllables. If a line is filled up to reach seven or nine syllables it may go slack; if a line that is too long is boiled down to the right number of syllables it has a chance of being more compact. The natural stress pattern of the English words ensures that lines of the same number of syllables will not sound monotonously the same.

**IG:** One thing that surprised me on re-reading your work from the late 60s and early 70s was the extent to which both elegiac and sceptical frames of mind had entered your work even before you left Scotland, in the years when you held the Writers' Fellowship at Edinburgh University, for example. It surprised me because I had come to think of these moods as to some degree commensurate with a precarious condition of 'exile', with absence or separation from the stability of a (monolingual) home place. I had thought of them as arising – as they seem to do in your later work – out of inward divisions, the interrogation of previously held certainties, life "in the dark between two landscapes" ('The Last Boat of the Season', from *Tree-lines*, 1974), stimulated by journeys

"between the foreign/ land where I live/ and the foreign land I come/ from..." ('Rust', 2001). What I hadn't noticed as strongly before was a continuity between this earlier work – with its continual reference to 'ghosts' and haunting, and in which "then is diffused in now" ('A Cleared Land', from *The Spaces between the Stones*) – and the later work in which the texture of experience is so often composed of more or less uneasy correspondences between then and now, or here and there. In the earlier work, too, the received wisdom of the strict categories of time and place is already in question, and the sceptical mind begins to "look through stones/ to the other side" ('It Takes a Rare Person') – to "reach through and through and through" ('White'). I wondered whether the "haunting" – this mistrust of the "interpreted world" (Rilke) – had perhaps begun with an historical awareness of the Kildonan clearances, your acquaintance with ghosts of the empty lands? As you so rightly say in the much later poem 'Waiting to Cross a Fjord' (1996): "There is much of life in a backwater".

There is also the question of the geometrical patterning I mentioned earlier. We have spoken of the way Iain Crichton Smith "pursued his obsessions". Your own obsessions include verticals and horizontals, planes and surfaces, lines, circles, cubes and angles, curves, spheres, ellipses and intersections in space. Further, what one might platonically imagine to be physical manifestations of the geometric forms: pinnacles, spires, paths, tracks, ditches, fields, edges, walls, rooms, transitions, crossings, voyages and meetings. These words can be found in your earlier and later volumes. One comes away with a feeling of maps – more personal and also more precise than the grids we knew – being drafted for spaces behind the visible surfaces, a sense of constellations, too, often unreliable, forming and dissolving – co-ordinates and patterns sought among shifting signs and shapes. The poems constantly take compass bearings, but traditional North has been replaced here by a kind of geometric animism, as in 'Birches' (1993): "A birch-tree would tell me/ how fast I was moving/ or with its shadow-hand/ how still I was standing". Do you recognize any of this?

**RF:** Unless there's a special purpose to it (introducing work to young readers, for instance, or cooperating with a translator) poets should, I think, confine comments on their own work to footnotes. If poems really need to be commented upon by their writers then there must be something missing from the poems themselves. Once poems are printed, they're off, on their own feet. Stated intentions, programmes and so on about poems not yet written are highly suspect. The Poetry Book Society once published a collection of comments by poets on their own work - the pretentiousness of some of the entrants made we wonder if the concept of "embarrassment" had yet to be invented. Larkin's brief and glum remark was rather pleasant in the circumstances: he said something to the effect that most of his poems had been written in and around Hull with a variety of HB pencils and that there wasn't really much more to be said.

I am aware of the features you point out but haven't looked in from outside and seen them as clearly as you have set them out. I've tried on various occasions to analyse other people's poems in this way but I find a great resistance to the idea of doing this to my own efforts.



Here are some footnotes to your comments.

You refer to the Clearances. Father's combined parish (Loth, Helmsdale, Kildonan) was the area which saw some of the rawest events of the process as conducted by the Sutherland factor Patrick Sellar. And every schoolday at Golspie I could look up and see on the top of Beinn a' Bhragaidh the giant statue of Sellar's employer, the hugely rich Englishman Lord Stafford, who was made First Duke of Sutherland in 1833, the year of his death. I was aware that the events of the early nineteenth century still caused bitterness to the descendants of those who had suffered, but I was rather ignorant of the matter and didn't feel personally affected. What I read about World War One had a stronger impact on me and I began to wonder if I should be a conscientious objector when it came to National Service. I didn't learn much about the Clearances until after I had left home, first from simpler accounts (e.g. John Prebble's) and then from more nuanced examinations (the latest I've seen being that by Eric Richards).

It must have been something more personal and inscrutable that bothered me. It certainly haunts much of what I wrote up to the early 1970s.

Second footnote. Later versions of this unease are only partly to be explained by my living on the "other side" of the North Sea. "Exile" is a very strong word, used properly, and I would never use it of myself. But yes, for much of my life I have had a sense of not quite belonging to where I happen to be living. For one thing, a minister when I grew up had a vague social status. He would be respected, especially in the countryside – "respect for the cloth" was the curious phrase one could hear – and he would have the use of a fairly imposing house. Yet his income – minimum stipends often compelled frugal living – separated him from the kind of people who normally lived in such houses. At primary school I felt different from my class mates: not superior, just different. My parents had a tiresome habit of disapproving of my friends: I tended to envy "normal" friends because they had pocket-money and a bit more fun and their parents seemed to take life more as it came.

For another, I moved several times and each time I left behind friends and acquaintances. I wouldn't make a great song and dance out of this but when you raise the point and I look back it is clear to me that I felt neither Highland nor Lowland. When I'm asked which part of Scotland I come from I can't think of an accurate reply and I usually say, unhelpfully, "various bits." During my last period in Edinburgh (1964-73) I felt that this was a place I could more than half belong to, not to get stuck in but to have as a base, nice to leave and nice to come back to. Looked at objectively, Edinburgh is an inconvenient city, unkind to both pedestrians and motorists, stuffed with tourists for months each year, and poisoned by its labyrinthine east-windy west-endy snobberies. When I hear those narrow Morningside vowels, squeezed out like a miser's toothpaste, I wish I could reply in the voice of Rab C. Nesbitt. If I returned to Edinburgh now, to live not just to visit, I would be chronologically disorientated. And of course Edinburgh has its share of the things which make Britain rather unattractive at present: the shamefully widening gap between rich and poor, the obsession with celebrities, political correctness, and a general failure of respect. There's

something wrong with everywhere, of course, if you look coldly. And it's no answer having a theoretical or virtual address somewhere in sea area Forties.

**IG:** One of the other words you have frequently used in your poems is 'anchor'. Is it that without an anchor these places and landscapes may become unhinged and simply fly away? We've spoken about signs and pointers, the search for orientation in the landscape, but in fact this is as much an internal landscape as a material one, a landscape in which spatial and temporal dimensions dissolve and merge. "Dream tonnage anchors my decades" ('Old Edinburgh Tenements', 1993), you write. Encouraged perhaps by a narrative quality in your poems, I often find myself – almost subconsciously – reading them as a kind of journal, a recording of lyrical "songlines" through a northern "dreamtime". And yet there is also this feeling that there may be no route that is fully satisfying (except in as far as the poem takes its place!), no reliable knowledge of what such a route might entail.

**RF:** Third footnote. Yes, "journal." My poems seem to be a kind of oblique non-Pepysian diary. I store them in chronological order, with dates, and when collected in books that order has been preserved. I can usually remember just when and where each poem began. Some poets rearrange their poems like vases on a shelf, but I can't. Readers don't need to pay attention to this fuss I have to "keep things in the right order," and they may indeed want to shuffle them around a bit. I would find that disturbing, as if parts of a film of my life were to be run backwards.

**IG:** Finally, and yet another numerical factor that intrigued me: the more recent your work, the more numerous are the presences the poems seem to contain, the greater the complexity of the layering of many places, landscapes and people – especially the dead. The older one gets, after all, the more the people one have known tend to have moved underground. At one level this multiplication of layers and presences has a biographical dimension. In the poem 'Where' (2002), you write: "First the Highland Line/ cut me in two, then/ the North Sea cut me in four.// My composite place/ could not be a place ..." And in 'Local History' (1996) we read: "Edinburgh's still crowded./ I recognize some as me./ We mingle, vastly distant". Your earlier work seemed to register this kind of hybridity as a form of insecurity or threat. As the Jewish-Tunisian French-Arabic writer Albert Memmi has said: "A man straddling two cultures is rarely well seated". However, am I right in thinking that in time you have become more comfortable with, perhaps less "defenceless" – or rather, more comfortable with feeling defenceless – about the "composite" place, the hybrid lyrical subject, the many-peopled self? These vastly distant internal parts permit productive correspondences: "On the pavements of Schwabing or Karlsfelt// my insteps remember the give of peat/ climbing from Suisgill Burn near Kilphedir ..."

**RF:** Another footnote. "Multiplication of layers," yes, but "more comfortable," no. My poems are by no means all about disturbing

things, but if someone could scan my soul they might well see traces of a fear of chaos and of a panicky unease about large open unmarked spaces like the moors of Sutherland and Caithness. A few geometrical patterns can be very reassuring so some of the habits we learned in the name of Euclid are not to be sniffed at. Not just geometry – if we imagine geometry coming alive we'd hear music. Perhaps most obviously in Baroque music (and supremely in that of J. S. Bach) we can see an abundance of geometrical patterns, but they are present in both ancient and very modern music. Ernő Lendvai has shown how Bartók based many of his harmonic procedures on the golden mean and the Fibonacci series, patterns to be observed everywhere in nature, for instance in sea-shells and pine-cones.

PS

*the prose supplement to Painted, spoken*

Robin Fulton

interviewed by Iain Galbraith

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