

SEÁN HALDANE

“The Richness of Art”: Reading Robert Garioch

THE INTRODUCTION TO THE *Edinburgh Book of Twentieth-Century Scottish Poetry*, reviewed by Anne Stevenson in Issue 18 of this magazine, states “With the possible exception(s) of Edwin Morgan and Edwin Muir no ‘great’ poet appeared in twentieth-century Scotland other than MacDiarmid—and, Gaelic scholars would claim, Sorley MacLean. However there has been a plethora of admirable and enjoyable ones.” Well, kick me! What a strangely masochistic phrase, “Gaelic scholars would claim”. Wouldn’t ordinary speakers of Gaelic claim too? If not, the only “great” twentieth-century Scottish poet is MacDiarmid. And few would claim he was consistently “great”, especially after he suffered a head injury falling from a London bus—an accident sometimes blamed for his switch from Scots mainly to English, and which, he told Norman MacCaig, might have affected his sense of rhythm. (I would guess from descriptions of the impact that it caused frontal lobe brain injury, which might explain his subsequent discursiveness and erratic judgement.) Leaving aside the vulgarity of “great”, whether in ironic inverted commas or not, we may agree with MacLean that what Croce called “the lyric cry”, the apogee of poetry, expresses itself in MacDiarmid’s early poetry, as it does in MacLean’s own impassioned verse. But what about this?

Ghaisties

Cauld are the ghaisties in yon churchyard, and cauld the airms	<i>ghosties</i>
that they mell wi the mists of the timm breists of their loves;	<i>mingle empty</i>
at the heid of their bed cauld angels staund on guaird, and marble doves.	
They ken-na the fear of God as they sleep ayont sin, nor the terror of man,	
and there’s nane but the angels to glunch at their truelove’s chairms,	<i>look glumly</i>
yet they lang for the reek of the creeshie swat frae the skin	<i>smoke fatty</i>
and the grup of a haun.	
But we in the warld are alowe wi the glawmer of bluid-red flame	<i>aglow</i>
that loup’s to the bluid in yer tongue’s tip as it tingles on mine,	<i>leaps</i>
and the howe	<i>hollow</i>

of the back we love wi our finger-nebbs,	<i>finger-tips</i>
and the wame,	<i>belly</i>
brent-white, wi a flush aneath like cramoisie	<i>quite-white crimson</i>
wine,	
hou it curves to meet my ain!	
O, ma sonsie frow,	<i>lusty dame</i>
whit tho the flesh be bruckle, and fiends be slee,	<i>frail sly</i>
the joys of the solid earth we'll pree or they dwine,	<i>try decline</i>
we'll lauch at daith, and man, and the fiend, aa three,	
afore we dee.	

Robert Garioch (1909-1981) in middle age described this “youthful work” in a letter to the Scottish poet Maurice Lindsay as “a damn good love poem, just the same, though not my line nowadays.” His “line” was mainly caustic humorous verse in his native Edinburgh Scots. He remarked, “it is easier to use Scots for comic than for serious purposes”. Towards the end of his life, he also translated various European poets, notably the Roman dialect poet Giuseppe Belli, into this language he made his own as surely—some would say more surely—as MacDiarmid made Lallans.

Garioch described his poetry as “happening only when the wind is south-south-east”—the rarest direction of the wind in Edinburgh. But he wrote over two hundred poems and a hundred or so translations, almost all of them “admirable and enjoyable”. And in ‘Ghaisties’ we are looking at something else: a great love poem. It has an intricate music, a passion, and a precise realism. After one reading its vision is unforgettable. And—I hate to say this, being only partly Scottish and having to tread carefully—its language renews not only Scots but English. Here is a poem by Garioch in English:

Letter from Italy

From large red bugs, a refugee,
 I make my bed beneath the sky,
 safe from the crawling enemy
 though not secure from nimbler flea.
 Late summer darkness comes, and now
 I see again the homely Plough
 and wonder: do you also see
 the seven stars as well as I?
 And it is good to find a tie
 Of seven stars from you to me.
 Lying on deck, on friendly seas,
 I used to watch, with no delight,

new unsuggestive stars that light
 the tedious Antipodes.
 Now in a hostile land I lie,
 but share with you these ancient high
 familiar named divinities.
 Perimeters have bounded me,
 sad rims of desert and of sea,
 the famous one around Tobruk,
 and now barbed wire, which way I look,
 except above—the Pléiades.

There is an elegance and verbal agility here worthy of Marvell (“the tedious Antipodes”)—Garioch, with MacLean, studied the “metaphysicals” intensely at Edinburgh. I think this stands up with any of the quieter love poems in English. But here is a love poem in Scots written at about the same time:

Disparplit

Disparplit by an airn wedge of weirs	<i>scattered wars</i>
wide as ane third-pairt of this angry warld	
driven atween your body, luv, and mine	
and rusty-reid wi lang on-ding of tears	<i>onslaught</i>
frae Europe's dule, we thole thae dowie years.	<i>pain endure gloomy</i>

Baith ye and I in diverse deserts bide,	
I in Libya, bistayd wi sand,	
ye by bonny Yarrow, desolat,	
we maun be dour as steel by cyanide,	<i>hard</i>
our herts as cley in simmer, cracked and dried.	

Another impeccable love poem, and another echo of Marvell—“Thou by the Indian Ganges' side / Shouldst rubies find: I by the tide / of Humber would complain.”—but we can see why Garioch wrote more often in Scots: the language itself is tougher, more sinewy, less worn by cliché. Not that he necessarily chose the language of his poems. He wrote in ‘A Makar's Prayer’:

Thrawn cattle are thae words	<i>obstinate</i>
coost up at me by thocht	
at inconvenient times,	
raither fand nor socht,	
in either of twa leids,	<i>languages</i>
of myngit ancestry...	<i>mixed</i>

I would call ‘Letter from Italy’ and ‘Disparplit’ serious poems, but undeniably they have a humorous undertone as do many love poems by, for instance, Catullus, Donne, Marvell and Graves.

Conversely, although many of Garioch’s humorous poems are just that—written with the left hand as the ancient Irish would say, or “widdershins”, in a pure scorn of pretension and stupidity as in ‘A Wee Local Scandal’, or ‘Glisk of the Great’, some have a deeply serious pathos. Here is the end of the famous ‘Sisyphus’:

...Whit was he thinking about, that he jist gied the boulder
 a wee shove?
 Bumpity down in the corrie gaed whuddran the pitiless
 whun stane, *curling-/basalt stone*
 Sisyphus dodderan eftir it, shair of his cheque
 at the month’s end.

The American poet Rosanna Warren proposed in a thesis that in effect all poems are elegiac. Certainly many of Garioch’s are. Take ‘At Robert Fergusson’s Grave’, which opens:

Canongait kirkyaird in the failing year
 is auld and grey, the wee roseirs are bare,
 five gulls leam white agin the dirty air:
 why are they here? There’s naething for them here ...

Other obviously elegiac poems are the sonnets ‘Rullion Green Cemetery’ (“A steil wund taks the pass by Castlelaw ...”), and ‘Elegy’. Garioch was consistently drawn to tight forms. This may seem at least acceptable in the “postmodern” early 21st century where “anything goes”, but those of us who were alive in the third quarter of the twentieth century can testify that it was a period in which almost all poetry considered seriously by critics and included in anthologies was in free verse. Garioch was doubly old-fashioned, in his language and in his forms, for that meretricious time.

Garioch insisted on writing in the Edinburgh Scots he had spoken at home as a child, augmented by his reading across centuries of Scots. He was consciously writing in the language and tradition of Dunbar and Henryson. Like his friend Sorley MacLean he was writing in “a dying tongue”—although Scots has more prospects than Gaelic. The point of such a linguistic choice is as much that it is not English as that it is Scots.

I grew up in an English-speaking home, although surrounded by Ulster Scots and Hibernian English, and I have never had an emotional option other than to write in my native tongue—spoken by hundreds of millions. My poems

are like pebbles cast on a very large linguistic sea. I am sometimes jealous of the attention poets in minority languages can get. My friend and contemporary Narcis Comadira has never had any difficulty getting his poems read in the five million strong sea of Catalan—and good luck to him. His poems sell a few hundred copies, like mine—but they go further. It is not exactly a question of competition but of publicity—easier to achieve in a smaller linguistic pond. Did Garioch benefit from this effect? Not exactly. Towards the end of his life he could command audiences at poetry readings but at first he had to publish, on a small hand press, and sell his own poems—his first volume *17 Poems for Sixpence* was with Sorley MacLean. His extraordinary, deadpan prisoner-of-war memoir in English, *Two Men and a Blanket*, languished for almost 30 years before finding a publisher and now is out of print.

Garioch described this book as being “about survival”. In preparation for writing it, he read Defoe, the originator of “plain English”. There is no reference to poetry, though ‘Letter from Italy’ and ‘Disparplit’ were written during the events it describes. Garioch, a radio operator with the rank of private, presents himself as an ordinary man among “other ranks” (officers were in separate prison camps), sharing their obsession with finding wood for brewing tea: “The brew must go on”. He even provides a beautifully drawn diagram of a bellows system for maintaining flames in a minimum of kindling. He views the Italian then German prison camp guards as being similarly human (although armed and dangerously jittery) to the prisoners. It is all very ordinary. But menacing: death can occur capriciously at any moment, whether from freezing (in Prussia), a sudden shot from a panicky guard, malnutrition, or in the very last days before release being machine-gunned from American fighter planes by pilots who mistook them for Germans but “seemed to recognise the colour of our uniforms as we scattered, as when they came round on their next circle they wagged their wings, and we waved our coats to them ... The M.O.s got busy with the men who were hurt.”

Second World War prose by poets is not like the First World War memoirs by Graves, Sassoon and Blunden. There is no sense of lost “Georgian” innocence. By the mid 20th century there was not much innocence around to lose. Like Keith Douglas’s *From Alamein to Zem Zem* or Alun Lewis’s stories in *Raider’s Dawn*, *Two Men and a Blanket* details grim and boring endurance, with no heroics or even mock-heroics. This is a message from hell—a world without poetry or wit.

In the real world of Garioch’s poetry one survival from *Two Men and a Blanket* is a sense of individual insignificance which goes beyond modesty. But now it is described with wit, as in ‘Brither Worm’:

I saw a lang worm snoove throu the space atween twa stanes,
pokin his heid, if he had yin, up throu a hole in the New Toun ...

“If he had yin” indeed ... The louche sexual double entendres (the “twa stanes”, the “hole”) add to the humour. Yet how serious a poem this is. Later,

I watched, and thocht lang of the ferlies of Naitur; I didna muve;
I thocht of the deeps of the soil, deeper nor the sea ...

In *The Complete Poetical Works* ‘Brither Worm’ follows a seriously tender love poem, with a gentler double entendre in its title, ‘Quiet Passage’. It ends:

Cantie and quate,	<i>contented</i>	<i>quiet</i>
we myng and mate,	<i>mingle</i>	
and syne we’re still	<i>then</i>	
as the brou of a hill		
that kens the leisor		
of time’s ain meisor,		
the flouers that rise		
quietlenswise.		

Taking Garioch seriously has to include his wit—almost never absent, not even in ‘Ghaisties’ (“O, ma sonsie frow”). But Marvell and Donne almost never wrote without wit, and we take them seriously. And isn’t wit the soul of tragedy? Hamlet puns and quips his way to the grave. Garioch’s wit, like Hamlet’s, deepens his seriousness. In ‘The Percipient Swan’,

I’m gaithran virr	<i>gathering strength</i>
to complish ae thing	
they never jalouse:	<i>guess</i>
I’m learning to sing.	

I’m gey-near ready
to gie a wee *chanson*;
there’ll be a flap
whan ye hear my swan-song.

For a poet of Garioch’s seriousness the best poems, the ones that really make it, are all swan songs.

His presence in Scots was known to a few and when he returned in 1958 to Edinburgh, from teaching in England, he tapped into a group of true friends. But for most of his life he was obscure—as was Sorley MacLean, another school-master grinding out his days.

Although the “big fish in a small pond” effect may eventually kick in with a poet writing in a “minority language”, in Scotland in Garioch’s day it waited until the poet was old and safe. Poetry is its own reward. If it is not, what passes for it—what is written for external reward—has a short shelf life. And the poet writing in a dying tongue is especially able to dedicate him- or herself to the poems themselves, not to write to order or to be distracted by tons of bad writing by others. Such a poet can hope that his or her poems can be a linguistic example, and therefore feel free to assume a huge responsibility. All the same, poems—the most intense form of utterance in words—can even outlive the languages they are written in. It is only a few scholars and maniacs who read, for example, the Old Irish poems of Liadan or the Hag of Beare— but they nevertheless do so. And Sappho and Catullus are not dead.

Garioch was an independent: he cared about the publication, and lamented the non-publication, of his work but did not seek approval. In reviewing the similarly half-neglected poet Andrew Young he wrote: “poetry quietly asserts itself, and not a single lecturer in English Literature, one confidently believes, can do anything about it.” Nevertheless, “one” may ask if he always allowed his inspiration to assert itself, or if he sometimes destroyed what happened when it did. I know next to nothing about his family life but in the same letter to Maurice Lindsay cited earlier, in which he remarks that ‘Ghaisties’ is “a damn good love poem”, he mentions that his wife Peg—to whom it is clear from his letters he was devoted to the end—on hearing it read on radio said: “Beware what thou sayest in secret, lest it be shouted on the house-tops”. If Garioch’s wife was touchy about his more intimate poems being published, perhaps some of them are hidden somewhere. But if so this was his choice. Towards the end of his life he wrote “I can’t stand poetry, but I do try”. Similarly, Robert Graves in old age wondered if it had all been worth it. As Martin Seymour-Smith pointed out, such doubts are the mark of a true poet. Meaning, I suppose, that a career poet would not have them any more than a banker would have doubts about money. Garioch was in poetry for love.

Garioch’s poems have been published in two collections, both edited by Robin Fulton: *Complete Poetical Works* (1983) and *Collected Poems* (2004). In his Introduction to the latter Fulton notes, “I have dropped the notebook drafts. They were not without interest but perhaps the interest was not sufficient to justify republishing them. They have had an airing.” Unfortunately these days poets often need the co-operation of lecturers in English Literature, and Fulton has let Garioch down here. The omitted poems include one of his best, the late (1977) ‘The Maple and the Pine’. It is about making a violin of the best of woods, sought for seven years:

Maple for back and ribs,
neck and heid and scroll;

for belly the Swiss pine,
 season, dry and auld,
 the southside of the tree
 frae norart in a dell,
 sawn on the quarter, cut
 midwart throu the bole.

The craftsman's work is in the great tradition of Stradivarius and Amati, but when the violin is finally played it contains a "wolf"—a discord which occurs because of a structural defect. Garioch's father made violins. Perhaps Garioch himself, or his poetry, is the wolf, in that his father wanted him to be a musician. Or at another level his poetry fails to reach formal perfection because of a wildness in him:

A wolf had won inbye
 for aa my besiness,
 gowlan aneath my bowe
 whan I wad pley my piece;
 wolf-notes cam girnan throu
 the tone. In sair distress
 I brak it owre my knee,
 sic wes my heaviness.

Garioch and his wife Peg found this poem "sad". The usual wit is not there. Perhaps the wolf was death. Peg would soon be dead, and after a few lonely years Garioch followed her in 1981.

His humorous longish poem 'The Big Music' (a reference to "Ceòl Mor") describes a bagpiper in the incongruous setting of a drill hall in London giving his all in a competition. "The judges rate him heich, but no in the first three."

I would certainly put Garioch in the first three, with his friend MacLean and with MacDiarmid, although so far he has received less recognition. His poems are, like the big music in the poem, "a dauntless form of life". Taking Garioch seriously means reading his poems not only with a mind open to his wit and intellect but with a heart open to the intensity of his feeling:

The piper hauds on, wi the siccarness of doom,
 fowre centuries of culture ruggan at his hairt
 like the michtie pressure tearing throu his reeds,
 hauds on til his time, wi the richness of art,
 that is no semple richt, but we feel that it is richt.