

# 'Poems' by Iain Banks and Ken MacLeod

## Review by Alan MacGillivray



The untimely death of Iain Banks in 2013 deprived Scottish, and international, writing of a prolific, highly imaginative and immensely successful novelist in both the Scottish 'mainstream' and science fiction genres. Following on his startling debut with *The Wasp Factory* in 1984, Banks published a new book almost annually until the posthumous appearance of *The Quarry*. The final total was twenty-eight works of fiction: fifteen published as by Iain Banks, mainly with a Scottish dimension, but including a handful with some fantasy elements; and thirteen science fiction works as by

Iain M. Banks, mainly centred on his major imaginative concept of 'The Culture'. An impressive lifetime achievement for any writer, especially for one whose life was cruelly cut short before the age of sixty. A writer's reputation tends to suffer a decline within a short period after death, usually to recover with a new generation of readers and of biographers and literary critics. We must hope that this does not happen in the case of Iain Banks, and that somewhere already the materials are being gathered for a proper literary biography and critical study of his writings and their influence. A writer of his standing in both Scottish literary and science fiction circles deserves appropriate respect and attention.

Like most other serious writers, Iain Banks did not confine his efforts only to one literary genre. Apart from his factual book celebrating Scotch whisky, he dabbled in short stories and wrote a SF novella. Now, along has come a small collection of his poems. Small, because Banks did not write very much poetry; indeed, the book has been made slightly larger and probably more marketable by containing also some poems by Banks' lifelong friend and fellow SF writer, Ken MacLeod, who has acted as the book's editor. As was Banks, MacLeod is a prolific writer, and, although he came to success as a science fiction writer slightly later than Banks, he has a current total of thirteen novels to his credit. With such reputations gained in the high-status area of prose fiction, it is not surprising that an early

interest in poetry went on the back burner and did not deliver in terms of edited collections or even in regular magazine contributions.

*Poems* by Iain Banks and Ken MacLeod is a slim volume of one hundred and sixty-six pages containing fifty poems by Banks and twenty-eight by MacLeod, one of the latter being a long work, 'A Fertile Sea' (dedicated to Iain Banks). The first thing to be noticed about the poems of both men is that they were mostly written before recognition came with novel publication. Iain Banks (born 1954) had written all these poems in his late teens and his twenties by 1981, before *The Wasp Factory*. Fully half of MacLeod's poems come from exactly the same time period. So what we have are the verses of two young men who came through Greenock High School together delighting in language, experimenting with intellectual concepts and trying to get a handle on adult emotions, using the techniques and attitudes of the New Poetry, with hints of the Mersey Poets and the later Scottish Renaissance poets. If they had continued with serious poetry into more mature adult years, we might now be considering a large body of their collected work, within which these early works would be classed as 'Juvenilia'. But they didn't continue with poetry, diversified instead into imaginative and speculative fiction (greatly to every reader's profit and pleasure), and this is what we have as their poetic output.

Yet it is not to be lightly dismissed. While the first twenty poems in the Banks section (arranged roughly chronologically and dating from 1973 to 1975, before he turned twenty-one) are heavily influenced by T. S. Eliot, especially the first poem of the book, 'Damage', there are several short pieces that already show a Banksian wit. For example, the one merely entitled '18':

*ispleased with all  
The blind men touching it  
Up, fondling and  
Prodding its  
Skin, tail, trunk, legs and tusks,  
The beast tramples them all to death  
And resumes its work  
Composing a treatise on reality.*

The poems tend to be marred by an excessive use of very short lines and an over-

abstract first-person discourse at a remove from the poet's own real observation. The most successful poems come later in the section, where there is concrete description and reflection on a real experience. The longer poem, 'Routenburn', in which Banks describes and meditates on a landscape, a moorland area in North Ayrshire near his home which he visited on a motorbike, captures the essence of a spoiled environment, from which all romantic possibilities have been stripped away. In '041', 'Jack', 'Song for J' and 'Rannoch I', Banks demonstrates an ability to present real experience in pieces where the length and lines and development are effectively controlled. '041' deals with a telephone call from London back to a lady friend in Glasgow, and 'Jack' describes a night-time conversation on a bus between a brash know-it-all young man (Banks) and a traditionally-minded old man.

In contrast to the poems arising out of real, often Scottish experience, there are poems with the imagery and subject-matter that we associate with his later published science fiction novels. We know that Banks was already writing SF before the success of *The Wasp Factory*, and that this early writing found later publication. Several of the early science fiction poems surfaced, as Ken MacLeod tells us in his brief Introduction, in later novels, and it would be an interesting study for a scholar to trace any other connections between Banks's science fiction poetry and his fiction as Iain M. Banks.

The dichotomy I am suggesting between Banks as a poet of Scottish life and a poet in a science fiction mode has a probably relevant parallel with the more powerful and celebrated work of Edwin Morgan at the time when a schoolboy/student Banks was beginning to try his hand at verse. Morgan's two seminal poetic collections, *The Second Life* (1968) and *From Glasgow to Saturn* (1973) appeared, to considerable Scottish and international interest, at just the moment in their young lives when Banks and MacLeod were starting to write. These two collections by Morgan exhibit exactly this ability to encompass Scotland and Space, familiar everyday life and a speculative future elsewhere, that is the main feature of both Banks and MacLeod as later successful novelists. As a literary influence on them, as on many other Scottish writers, Edwin Morgan must be up there with Eliot and Auden.

A selection of MacLeod's poems appear in this volume, as MacLeod tells us, because Banks wished their poems to appear together. A becoming modesty, perhaps, is shown by MacLeod as editor, in that his contribution is a lesser one.

His poems, however, have been published more widely over the years, beyond the time when Banks apparently stopped writing poetry in the early 1980s. In consequence, MacLeod's poems show more development over time. Indeed, he even introduces rhyme, rhythm and elements of formal structure into more recent pieces. The main poem by MacLeod in this volume, 'A Fertile Sea', is strongly influenced by T. S. Eliot and is dedicated to Iain Banks.

The volume is generally a pleasing one to read and add to the writers' other works, especially the Banks Collection. It suffers from a rather perfunctory, even inadequate, editing by MacLeod and the publishers. The poems are arranged mainly chronologically, but with some unexplained departures from an order of writing. Since many of the Banks poems come from a handwritten collection, entitled *where the heart is*

*Poems* by Iain Banks and Ken MacLeod is published by Little, Brown, 2015. The untimely death of Iain Banks in 2013 deprived

thing to be noticed about the poems of both men is that they were mostly written before recognition came with novel publication. Iain Banks (born 1954) had written all these poems in his late teens and his twenties by 1981, before *The Wasp Factory*. Fully half of MacLeod's poems come from exactly the same time period. So what we have are the verses of two young men who came through Greenock High School together delighting in language, experimenting with intellectual concepts and trying to get a handle on adult emotions, using the techniques and attitudes of the New Poetry, with hints of the Mersey Poets and the later Scottish Renaissance poets. If they had continued with serious poetry into more mature adult years, we might now be considering a large body of their collected work, within which these early works would be classed as 'Juvenilia'. But they didn't continue with poetry, diversified instead into imaginative and speculative fiction (greatly to every reader's profit and pleasure), and this is what we have as their poetic output.

Yet it is not to be lightly dismissed. While the first twenty poems in the Banks section (arranged roughly chronologically and dating from 1973 to 1975, before he turned twenty-one) are heavily influenced by T. S. Eliot, especially the first poem of the book, 'Damage', there are several short pieces that already show a Banksian wit. For example, the one merely entitled '18':

*ispleased with all  
The blind men touching it  
Up, fondling and  
Prodding its  
Skin, tail, trunk, legs and tusks,  
The beast tramples them all to death  
And resumes its work  
Composing a treatise on reality.*

The poems tend to be marred by an excessive use of very short lines and an over-abstract first-person discourse at a remove from the poet's own real observation. The most successful poems come later in the section, where there is concrete description and reflection on a real experience. The longer poem, 'Routenburn', in which Banks describes and meditates on a landscape, a moorland area in North Ayrshire near his home which he visited on a motorbike, captures the essence of a spoiled environment, from which all romantic possibilities have been stripped

away. In '041', 'Jack', 'Song for J' and 'Rannoch I', Banks demonstrates an ability to present real experience in pieces where the length and lines and development are effectively controlled. '041' deals with a telephone call from London back to a lady friend in Glasgow, and 'Jack' describes a night-time conversation on a bus between a brash know-it-all young man (Banks) and a traditionally-minded old man.

In contrast to the poems arousing out of real, often Scottish experience, there are poems with the imagery and subject-matter that we associate with his later published science fiction novels. We know that Banks was already writing SF before the success of *The Wasp Factory*, and that this early writing found later publication. Several of the early science fiction poems surfaced, as Ken MacLeod tells us in his brief Introduction, in later novels, and it would be an interesting study for a scholar to trace any other connections between Banks's science fiction poetry and his fiction as Iain M. Banks.

The dichotomy I am suggesting between Banks as a poet of Scottish life and a poet in a science fiction mode has a probably relevant parallel with the more

The volume is generally a pleasing one to read and add to the writers' other works, especially the Banks Collection. It suffers from a rather perfunctory, even inadequate, editing by MacLeod and the publishers. The poems are arranged mainly chronologically, but with some unexplained departures from an order of writing. Since many of the Banks poems come from a handwritten collection, entitled *where the heart is*, it would have been an easy and defensible editorial decision to use that as the title of the volume and to ascribe word titles or first-line identifications to the seven poems that have only numbers to pick them out,