

# The Auld Man: Scottish Literature's Thrice-Nominated Nobel Nominee

**By Stuart A. Paterson**

*One of the most important relationships of my life was with William Auld, the only Scottish writer to be nominated three times for a Nobel Prize in Literature. Our friendship was as gratifying as it was unexpected, as comfortable as it was transformative. It produced a plethora of poetry borne out of some of the most stimulating exchanges I have ever been privileged to experience. We might have seemed far apart, not only in age, but in class and outlook. Yet we became close companions, forming a bond which was at once familiar and creative. It was rooted in a mutual passion, not just for language and ideas, but in the upbringing and society which formed us as artists and as men.*

The late 1980s/early 1990s was a marked time of discovery and excitement for me as a young poet. I'd been writing poetry since my early teens, filling entire hardback A4 notepads with scribblings, verses and 'epics', drawing mainly on what I'd absorbed from reams of song lyrics by favourite bands and singers. I left school at sixteen and went straight into work, eschewing the possibility of Uni for the traditional brown envelope of a weekly wage packet to pay rent, bills and the traditional weekend nights out. It's what most of us did. We weren't uneducated or stupid, far from it. We just wanted to pay our way, our way being a steady job, maybe promotion, the odd qualification, a house, a family, a Killie season ticket. Poetry was a hobby, an expressive and selfish outlet, and one I didn't see as being for anyone but me. The hardback A4 notepads piled up at the back of the drawer.

I decided to go to Uni at twenty-two spurred by an increasing love of books and writing. I didn't want to reach sixty-two having explored no other way. I immediately came across a universe of writers and writing I'd never known existed, and that was me sold. In 1989, at Stirling Uni, I began publishing *Spectrum*, a magazine for new and established writers. Issue 1 rolled off the Apple Mac printer in a welter of single A4 pages which I assiduously compiled

into slide binders and hawked round campus, shop and pub. Through Uni staff contacts, I'd been lucky to receive new work from the likes of Edwin Morgan and Douglas Dunn, and *Spectrum* grew over the years into an Arts Council-funded publication which featured some of the UK's finest writers. In 1991, I had my first ever poem published - *Orbis* magazine in England paid me a fiver and gave me a free copy. Here we go, thought I, this is the life, in print and the price of four pints at the McRobert Bar.

In 1992, on the advice of another poet, I compiled thirty poems and sent them off to the UK Society of Authors in application for an Eric Gregory Award, 3-6 of which are handed out each year to those deemed to be the UK's most promising poets under the age of thirty. To my astonishment, I received one, which was handed to me in cheque form a few months later by a Nobel Prize winner at a glitzy London ceremony in Middle Temple Hall. I started to submit and have poems accepted for inclusion in starred Scottish lit mags such as *Chapman, Verse & Lines Review* and then the title poem and a few pages in a major and widely reviewed Scottish poetry anthology, *Dream State: The New Scottish Poets*. I went to more and more readings and met more and more poets, some of whom were established names in the canon and who became friends and mentors. The Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh, run by SPL founder and *Lines Review* editor Tessa Ransford and head librarian Tom Hubbard became a regular haunt.

The SPL was a heady place back then for a young (and admittedly ambitious) poet. I was always welcomed with a brew and blether by Tessa or Tom, and would settle myself at an upstairs table reading work I had found only there. The Courtyard Readings in summer were vibrant and busy, poets mingling, listening, reading, having pints later. It was all an education and also a handy gathering ground for submissions to *Spectrum*. One day, Tom asked me if I'd heard of a Scottish poet called William Auld, whose work he thought would sit well with the wide-ranging ethos of the magazine. I confessed I hadn't heard of him and Tom gave me William's address, suggesting I make contact and assuring me that I'd find him a poet of note and an unusual one at that. I wrote to William soon after and thus began one of the most rewarding and creative periods of my life, as a poet and human being.

He made it clear right from the off that he was Bill, not William. He lived in Dollar, very close where I'd been living myself until recently in the Ochil Hillfoots. He wrote in Esperanto, a language I knew nothing about, invented in 1873 by

Polish ophthalmologist LL Zamenhof. He came originally from a working class Glasgow background and supported neither Celtic or Rangers. He'd been a deputy head teacher in Alloa for decades until his recent retirement, at a school where he'd often sit alone in his office at lunchtime to write poems. He loved Scottish poetry, its long tradition, its many makars. He loved the Scots language. He'd flown spitfires over Africa in WWII. He first encountered Esperanto as a twelve-year-old Scout in Glasgow, inspired by his paternal grandmother, a native Gaelic speaker who learnt English in domestic service in Glasgow. This, alongside the Scout motto, *Estu Preta*, and his first taste of Esperanto, made him think *What would it be like to think in a language other than my native English?* He saw Esperanto as *The expression of a common human culture, unencumbered by national frontiers*. Bill was as proud a Scotsman as you'd find and that Scottishness added inimitably to an internationalism always foremost in his writing and his universal outlook.

Bill immediately became a prolific correspondent, replying to letters within a day of their receipt. In that an initial flurry, I learnt all of the above from him and so much more. We exchanged new poems, mine in English and Scots, Bill's in English and sometimes Esperanto with English translation. We began speaking regularly by phone. He sent me copies of *La Brita Esperantisto*, the UK Esperanto journal he founded in the 1950s and still edited and produced, as well as many copies of his books, including *Traduku! (Translations!)*, recently published. I found that he was a famous poet wherever Esperanto was spoken and had been the first ever Visiting Lecturer in Esperanto at UCLA. In a lecture at St. Andrews University, he said *It's very rewarding for me that when I travel, I meet people who know my work. I have met a Romanian who knows one of my collections of lyrical poetry by heart. In Peking a Chinese man made a speech of welcome in which he clearly demonstrated a close acquaintance with my entire oeuvre. My mail brings me letters of appreciation from all over, including such places as Outer Mongolia.*

Bill translated many famous books into Esperanto: Shakespeare, Byron, Wilde, London, and *Terry Street* by Douglas Dunn, a Scottish poet whose work he greatly admired. While I knew him, he translated all three books of *Lord of the Rings* into Esperanto and considered this to be his greatest achievement. Which didn't stop him sometimes moaning about it keeping him up late into the night trying to find the right word in Esperanto for some Sindarin, Entish or Uruk-Hai noun. Many

believe his 1956 long modernist poem, a series of cantos called *La Infana Raso*, to be his finest work in the language. It translates as *The Infant Race* although his wife Meta often referred to it as *This Mewling Race*. In 1992, after a few months of us adding substantially to the profit margins of Royal Mail, Bill asked if I'd like to come to Dollar for a visit and I agreed without a second thought.

When he picked me up in Stirling in his car, he first greeted me with the words he then always used to greet me - *Hello dear boy!* His face was a very welcoming and expressive one — rosy, open, honest, immediately readable - topped by a shock of white hair. It's fair to say we hit it off right away and this was the first of many wonderful visits to the beautiful sandstone house in Dollar which he and Meta were to share for forty-three years. And the first of many nights we'd spend sitting up til all hours in his study, blethering about life, poetry, and everything in between. His study was home to almost 5,000 books in Esperanto, quite possibly the biggest private collection in the world, which he generously donated to the National Library of Scotland in 2001. After a bite of supper, Bill would bring over a bottle of malt, two tumblers and a water jug on a small tray, place it on the table between our armchairs, pour our drams and proceed to make the first of many rollies from the baccy mixture he'd been having delivered to Dollar from a Glaswegian tobacconist for decades. With every dram, a rollie. With every rollie, a story or poem. With every story or poem, gales of laughter, howls of discord, brief cesuras for thought, then another dram, another rollie and back onto Burns, politics, fitba or any number of shared enjoyments. Bill was in his late sixties at this point, me in my late twenties. We might as well have both been enthusiastic teenagers, such was our passion for the subjects we discussed on those nights. And much of that passion was centred on a mutual love of poetry. Next morning always saw Bill first go to the small room by the kitchen and remove the baccy he'd had drying there on the heater overnight. And fetch a big jug of water from the kitchen, knowing fine I'd be needing it much more than he would. Then off to the kitchen for beans and toast and to hear Bill and Meta's early morning blethers, always happy, always in Esperanto. Far from making me feel excluded, this use of Esperanto as a domestic language of home and family felt very natural and emotive.

Quite soon into our correspondence, I wrote Bill a verse epistle, *A Spoken State*, addressing our new friendship. To my delight, he replied in kind. In the ensuing years, we wrote regularly to each other in verse letter and by the time we

stopped, these numbered around sixty pages of poetry. We covered anything that took our fancy, from current world events to religion and atheism to gardening to his sore toes to the very future of Scotland itself as nation or notion. I consider some of the poetry I wrote in these exchanges to be among my best, most likely because I was freed from any need for overthinking or any pretensions at that younger age. Bill told me it was the only time in his life he'd written poetry at length in any language other than Esperanto and he fair got tore into a wide range of subjects in the process. It was a sheer joy to receive and read his varied poems, always written with an effusive mixture of familiarity, skill, high language, affection and linguistic idioms, Scots not least among these.

In one of his Epistles, Bill wrote of a wish to finally 'sit down round the fire wi ma brither makars', fellow poets such as Burns, Sorley, MacCaig, Goodsir Smith and others. He was entirely devoted to Esperanto but had a real wish to be considered as a 'Scottish poet', to be part of that tradition. I very much consider him to belong there. He confessed that, although he was overwhelmingly appreciative of his worldwide renown, he harboured a slight sadness at not being better acknowledged in his native country, especially by the literary community. I tried my best to address this, in what small way I could, by publishing some of his poems in *Spectrum*, and telling all and sundry what a great man and poet was hidden in our midst. We're linguistically set in our ways in Scotland, and the 'exotic' mystery of Esperanto — why a Scottish poet would prefer to express himself in an invented language — seemed to bring out some of the inverted snobbery which is never that far from the surface in any close artistic community. Commenting on Esperanto as an invented language, Bill offered this refreshing perspective - *Esperanto is a work of art like a symphony or painting, the creation of an artist of genius who was also, incidentally, a poet in every sense. And like every other great work of art it can be inspirational - which is one reason why it has inspired so many poets. After more than a century of widespread daily use, its artificiality is irrelevant.*

Bill died in 2006 aged eighty-one. I travelled up from my then Manchester home after being invited by his family. We'd last spoken by phone the year before, when he was in the pitiless grip of vascular dementia. He began our exchange, as he always did, with *Hello dear boy!* Bill was nominated for a Nobel Prize for Literature three times, the only Scottish writer to be so lauded, and he was remembered fittingly and well in obituaries in *BBC News Online*, *The Guardian*,

*The Scotsman*, and *The Telegraph*. I wrote my own small tribute to him in the Scottish Poetry Library's newsletter, a bookend to where our friendship and creative partnership began years before. Bill was always matter-of-fact about life and death, as much as he was about the smallness of humans and humanity in the scale of time and cosmos. As he wrote in *Elegy In An Old Graveyard / Elegio En Malnova Tombejo*:

*Our egocentric species runs  
And ricochets in purblind terror  
Of its own insignificance,*

*And brings forth in the mind's blind eye  
An afterlife, devoutly hoping  
That it, at last, will signify.*

*Afterlives, tombstones, priests' amen!  
Ah, unavailing and more useless  
Than any useless work of men.*

*La egocentra homa speco  
resaltas kun teruro blinda  
de sia propra malgraveco,*

*kaj al si kreas fantazie  
transmondon, esperante pie,  
ke ĝi finfine gravos tie.*

*Transmondoj, tomboj, preĝoj, ĉerkoj!  
Ho, vanaj kaj plej senutilaj  
el senutilaj homaj verkoj!*