# Helen Cruickshank: ‘Bide the storm ye canna hinder’

## By Jenni Calder

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*Minding through the strife,*
*Hoo the luntin’ lowe o’ beauty*
*Lichts the grey o’ life.*
*—Helen Cruickshank, ‘Sea Buckthorn’*

*Butler, Vincent; Helen Cruickshank (1886-1975); Glenesk Folk Museum*

It may seem unlikely that a female civil servant brought up in rural Angus should have become a key figure in what she herself did not like to call ‘the Scottish Renaissance’. But Helen Burness Cruickshank was a poet of distinctive voice who for several decades supported and nurtured many of Scotland’s most noted

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She was born in 1886 in the village of Hillside just north of Montrose. Her parents both worked at Sunnyside Mental Hospital in the village, but this was a farming community and it was the rural environment and the cycle of the farming year that shaped her language and her imagination. Her *Octobiography* (1976) provides an evocative account of her childhood years, full of detail on her natural and material surroundings. It's a wonderful source of information relating to a particular place at a particular time, conveying the rhythms of life as well as recording the clothes people wore, the food they ate, the work they did and the recreations they enjoyed. A striking theme is the importance of music making and traditional song, which remained deeply felt interests throughout her life and clearly influenced her poetry. 'We knew all the songs in the Scottish Students' Song Book,' she wrote. (*Octobiography*, p.30). Music making was important for the songs themselves and their roots in tradition but equally for the social exchange and cohesion these occasions generated.

Helen, Nell to family and friends, went to the village school and then to Montrose Academy. The family spent holidays in Glenesk, where Nell and her two older brothers roamed the countryside and she learnt to observe and respond to the natural environment. She was undeterred by any conventional view of female activity – 'I always wanted to do what the boys did' is a line in her poem 'Beech Leaves', although the poem also conveys an ambivalence about some of the boys' activities – specifically here the destruction of a wasps' nest. She became a keen hill walker and mountain climber and the pull of Glenesk and adjacent hills and glens – Glen Isla, Glen Clova, Glen Shee – never subsided.

Although a bright student who could have gone on to university (as her brothers did) the family were not able to afford this. Instead she sat the Civil Service examinations and at the age of 17 went to London to take up her first job at the West Kensington branch of the Post Office. London offered her not only independence but cultural opportunities that she eagerly embraced. She went to concerts and plays and galleries, and walked around London in a spirit of curiosity and appreciation. These early years of the twentieth century saw the growth of the women's suffrage movement and she soon joined the Hammersmith Branch of the WSPU and was spending her days off chalking pavements and selling the organisation's weekly paper. Her Aunt Betsy commented, 'Eh, lassie …

ye'll come tae an ill end yet' (*Octobiography*, p.43).

In 1912 Cruickshank was transferred to a job in Edinburgh, her first opportunity to get to know the city that became her home for the rest of her life. She worked initially in the accounts office in the main GPO building at the bottom of North Bridge (which now houses the offices of Creative Scotland among other organisations). Edinburgh, she wrote, was 'a case of love at first sight' (*Octobiography*, p.45) and she was enchanted as she explored the city by its 'unexpected loveliness' (p.46). Walks in the Pentlands, sometimes camping overnight, became a regular activity.

By the time war broke out in 1914 she was writing poetry. In 1920 she responded to an appeal by Hugh MacDiarmid for contributions to his newly launched *Northern Numbers*. He encouraged her, although she did not meet him until 1924. This was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. Cruickshank wrote in Scots and English, as she would continue to do for the whole of her career. Scots was the linguistic environment she grew up in, and neither London nor Edinburgh diminished her intimacy with the language and her sense of its appropriateness for the landscape, physical and emotional, of her poetry. The Scots she used was the real, lived language of her growing-up and it retained the pulse and vigour of its origins. It enabled her to convey the texture of Angus life. Her poem 'In Glenskenno Woods', published in her first collection *Up Noran Water* (1934), captures a lyrical and reflective moment of humanity's conjunction with the natural world.

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An everyday countryside occurrence, a little girl's hair caught by bramble thorns, becomes a metaphor for life's future entanglements and the speed with which they approach – 'The autumn/O' life draws near'. The poem's gentle and reflective realism is characteristic of Cruickshank's voice, although she also developed veins of humour and irony. She clearly saw herself in that 'little lass', the child waiting and listening and not aware of what life has in store.

For seven years Cruickshank lived in a bedsit in Marchmont, then in a flat at Meadowbank before taking up residence in what was in effect an artists' colony off Shandwick Place where friends gathered for musical and literary evenings. By this time she was beginning to get published, encouraged by MacDiarmid. It was a mutually supportive relationship, as MacDiarmid was often the beneficiary of her hospitality when he spent time in Edinburgh. The year 1924 was a turning point for Cruickshank. Just as she was becoming a part of the literary community and was increasingly engaged in Scotland's 'position in the world of arts and letters' (*Octobiography*, p. 58) the death of her father meant that care of her mother fell to her as the only daughter. She bought a semi-detached villa in Corstorphine where her mother joined her until her death in 1940. The house, Dinnieduff on Hillview Terrace, would become a magnet for many of Scotland's most significant writers.

For Cruickshank the move brought an abrupt end to her bohemian existence at Shandwick Place. 'The year of adjustment,' she wrote in *Octobiography* (p.62), 'was, I think, the unhappiest of my life. I had regained a mother but lost my freedom.' It also brought an end to the possibility of marriage. She had had a

seven-year relationship with an artist, already terminated, clearly not without distress. (Several poems reflect this, including 'Heresy', with the lines 'Lock the door/And hide the key., Keep your heart/In secrecy.) The Civil Service did not employ married women, but now she had her mother to support and a house to maintain and could not afford to give up her job. But if that door closed, others remained open and inviting. She clearly resented the adjustments she had to make but did not allow them to obstruct her commitment to a literary life.

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Cruickshank was also a founder member of the Saltire Society, initiated in 1936, and increasingly committed to encouraging awareness of Scotland's cultural heritage, which she felt was neglected. Her commitment to the Scots language was part of her effort to reawaken an understanding of its rich potential – an effort shared by Hugh MacDiarmid, of course. 'Our Scots language is so colourful, graphic, economical, pungent or poignant that I am constantly surprised it is not oftener used by poets,' she wrote. (*Octobiography*, p.77), and she quotes George Mackay Brown's comment from *The Orkney Tapestry*: 'Decay of language is always the symptom of a more serious sickness.'

Cruickshank's interests were increasingly dominated by the belief in the need to explore and promote Scotland's 'position in the world of arts and letters' (*Octobiography*, p.58). Although she was dismissive of the idea of a 'Scottish Renaissance' she sensed a renewed vigour in Scotland's cultural environment and a spirit of creative challenge. Her own role in this was considerable, both through her contribution as a poet and in her support for so many of the leading writers of the time.

Throughout this period Cruickshank had a demanding job as well as her many cultural involvements and domestic responsibilities. But she also found time to escape into the hills, to her beloved Glenesk and further afield in the Highlands and Islands and in the Lake District, sometimes with a companion but often alone. She relished the solitude and clearly the regular reconnection with landscape was restorative as well as nourishing her poetry. Her second collection, *Sea Buckthorn*, was published in 1954 and *The Ponnage Pool* in 1968. Editions of her *Collected Poems*appeared in 1971 and 1978. In the 1950s she became sought after as an authority on Scottish literature, with invitations to speak live and on the radio.

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