D & G Literature

By Hugh McMillan

I'm just finished a commissioned piece, a modern response to William Nicholson's epic poem of 1828 'The Brownie of Blednoch'. All thirty-two verses of the original were written in rich rural Scots at a time when literature in the Stewartry and the Machars (look up your atlases) was going through a 'gowden age', a mere four years after the publication of *The Scottish Gallovidian Encyclopedia or the Original Antiquated and Natural Curiosities of the South of Scotland* by the brilliantly eccentric ethnographer, collector and liar John Mactaggart. Mactaggart points to a Galloway populated by poets. Every second person he meets is a poet or can recite screeds of verse. Not by Burns either, that Ayrshire interlowper.

Nowadays we have less fairies, less Scots language and less people. A promotional video in 2021 by DGU, the area's Arts Association, shows a beautiful and barren landscape, populated by pixie-faced ceramic artists, dancers dressed like prawns, and strong-thighed poets striding out against the setting sun. There's strong historical provenance for this. After the savage reorganisation that followed land enclosures, emigration and depopulation become the key motifs of Galloway. Where Burns's poetry was pithy, connected, grounded in real life, the writers that came after were dealing with an emptying landscape. Their work is often a whimsical invocation of life as it once was, or, in fact, as it never was. S. R. Crockett, Galloway's most famous writer in the post-Burns era, was a perfect Makar for the ghost landscape. Here is the second verse of a poem Robert Louis Stevenson dedicated to Crockett. The emphases are mine, the insight Stevenson's.

> *Grey **recumbent** tombs of the **dead** in **desert** places,*
> *Standing Stones on the **vacant** wine-red moor,*
> *Hills of sheep, and the howes of the **silent vanished** races,*
> *And winds, austere and pure!*
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> *('To S. R. Crockett', Robert Louis Stevenson)*

Crockett, of course, like the more posh Allan Cunningham before him, was

supplying a demand from the urban bourgeoisie for whimsical rural tales or, in Cunningham's case, rediscovered (or reinvented) ballads.

The ongoing marketing of the area as a romantic wasteland fits nicely into the narrative of continued depopulation punctuated sporadically by boutique colonisation. Wigtown Book Town/Book Festival is a great example of this, though they have worked hugely hard there to encourage legacy literature, outreach and showcasing the linguistic history and diversity of the area. The film noted above would make me, if I were an artist elsewhere, pack my bags and set off to the fairyland of D and G with its glistening lochans but it wouldn't encourage anyone already living in Annan or Sanquhar or Lochside to think that engagement with literature or the arts was for them or fitted in any way the rhythms of their lives. Both the Stove, a wonderful artists' cooperative based in Dumfries, and the WBF are challenging the notion of literature as a bourgeois leisure pursuit and taking it to the schemes and the schools and the prisons. Their initiatives to encourage young writers – both my daughters have begun writing careers thanks to these schemes – are laudable but it's hard to shake the idea of the arts here still being seen as a luxury rather than necessity.

The disconnect between 'ordinary' people and literature is a relatively new one. There has always a strong tradition of the rural working class writing and celebrating poetry and many villages had their own bards. Both Nicholson and Mactaggart came from Borgue, a single tiny village close to Kirkcudbright. Of course, as in the rest of Scotland, poets here had to cope with the legacy of Burns, simultaneously an inspiration and a dead weight. In research into my own small village, Penpont, I turned up four pamphlets published since the war. Their subject matter is amusing anecdotes from the village shop, stories of local eccentrics, romantic pastiche poems about landscape, but also some interesting individual pieces commenting on current affairs. They were all by women. The mining communities of the mid and upper Nith valley spawned many poets, too. In spite of Thomas Carlyle telling Queen Victoria that the coastal road from Carsluith to Creetown was the most striking road in Britain, the real poetry highway in Dumfries and Galloway is the A76, from its terminus in the 'Sang Hoose o Scotland' in Dumfries, via Burns's farm at Ellisland to the other end in Kirkconnel where the railwayman poet Alexander Anderson was born in 1845. Anderson was a surfaceman who later became chief librarian at Edinburgh University. His poems, in Scots and English, are very individual reflections on the

passage of time, on the dampening of the fire.

> *Love, turn thy gentle feet away,*
> *How can I be thy lover?*
> *A low wind grieves among the leaves,*
> *And the time of the rose is over.*
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> *('The Time of the Rose is Over')*

Dumfries with its busy port was always the hub. Before Burns, Fergusson marched all the way here down the Mennock Pass (which intersects the present A76) to meet his mates in the Coach and Horses. Barrie was enthused by the bookshops as much as the enchanted gardens of the Nith. In the early twentieth century, periodicals like the *Gallovidian Annual*, edited from 1926–36 by the brilliant Dumfries-born poet Dorothy Paulin, gave local writers opportunities for their craft. After the war, the legacy of 'The Yellow Door' literary salon in English St spawned town writers like Kirkpatrick Dobie, Douglas Rome and George MacAdam and writers in the rural locale like Michael Crump. There were others beyond the town of course. To the west, in a one-man literary salon in Crossmichael, stewed the brilliant trilingual poet Willie Neill. To the east in Langholm, Christopher Murray Grieve couldn't wait to get away.

When I was a boy poet, poetry was a shameful and isolated practice pursued by eccentrics like Tom Pow who used to sweep about with his long hair and long coat making gnomic utterances while folk drew back, terrified, muttering 'that's Tom Pow THE POET'. Tom Pow, an international class writer, was part of a generation of writers from the area like Ron Butlin, Jim McGonigal and Alison Fell, all graduates of Dumfries Academy. Not born here like them, he has, unlike the rest, stayed. Most of the contemporary writers we have here are from ither airts but have made permanent homes here, folk like Des Dillon, Josie Neill, Liz Niven, Chrys Salt, Vivien Jones, JoAnne Mackay, Karen Campbell, Douglas Lipton, Margaret Elphinstone, Stuart Paterson. In the last thirty years, three well-received anthologies of work from regional writers have been published, edited by Dumfries-born story writer Pete Fortune, and another in Scots edited by Rab Wilson, all attempting to pose the question of whether there is such a thing as Dumfries and Galloway writing. The answer is probably not, although there are many pieces rooted in landscape and there are plenty of Dumfries and Galloway

writers, maybe as many as in Mactaggart's day, though far fewer native born. 2022 marks the centenary of the birth of Willie Neill, the 'godfather' of contemporary D and G writing, a poet whose reputation and legacy has probably suffered because he stayed down here rather than engaging in 'big city cantrips'. It's probable that the fuss made will be minimal, a fact that will confirm to us all down here that we're a much underrated and overlooked part of Scotland's literary world, even though Willie Neill was, predictably, from Ayrshire.I'm just finished a commissioned piece, a modern response to William Nicholson's epic poem of 1828 'The Brownie of Blednoch'. All thirty-two verses of the original were written in rich rural Scots at a time when literature in the Stewartry and the Machars (look up your atlases) was going through a 'gowden age', a mere four years after the publication of *The Scottish Gallovidian Encyclopedia or the Original Antiquated and Natural Curiosities of the South of Scotland* by the brilliantly eccentric ethnographer, collector and liar John Mactaggart. Mactaggart points to a Galloway populated by poets. Every second person he meets is a poet or can recite screeds of verse. Not by Burns either, that Ayrshire interlowper.

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