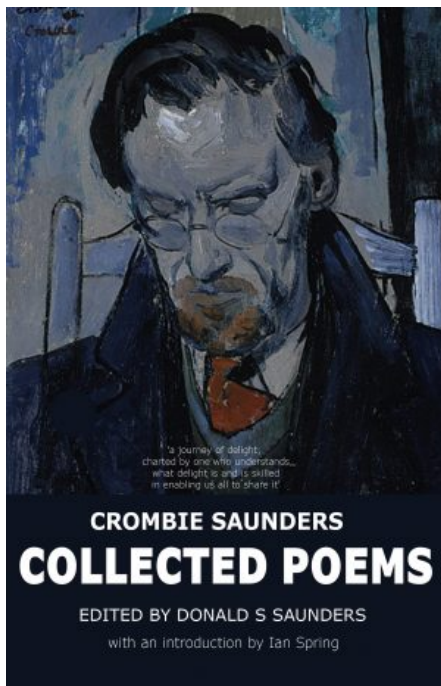


'Crombie Saunders: Collected Poems', edited by Donald Goodbrand Saunders

Review by David Manderson



This is the first full collection of the much-neglected poet R. Crombie Saunders, adding to the impressive body of publications produced by Rymour Books. Saunders died in 1991 almost entirely forgotten within the Scottish literary world, but this collection, edited and introduced by his son Donald, also a poet, makes the claim that Saunders's output, though relatively sparse, deserves to be better known. Following a brief autobiographical background and critical introduction (penned by Rymour publisher Ian Spring) that positions the work within its historical context, the collection seeks to achieve its intention by directing its focus on the poems.

Despite his significant role in twentieth-century Scottish literature, Saunders is now unjustly neglected as a writer, making it useful to first identify exactly who he was. A close associate, if never really a member, of the 'Scottish Renaissance' group, Saunders edited Hugh MacDiarmid's first collection. The *Selected Poems*

of 1944 gave the public the opportunity to reconsider MacDiarmid at the time of his greatest unpopularity. His shunning by the establishment, including the literary one, led MacDiarmid to suffer the loss of his first marriage and a breakdown. Saunders's careful editing of the *Selected Poems* brought MacDiarmid back to public consciousness, after 'On a Raised Beach', published in 1934, demonstrated that he was on a new, recovered trajectory as a poet.

Similarly, as editor of the journal *Scottish Arts and Letters*, it may have been Saunders who published MacDiarmid's essay 'The Present Position and Post-War Prospects' (1942), where the older poet welcomed a new generation of Scottish writers including Sorley MacLean, W. S. Graham and Sydney Goodsir Smith. W. S. Graham was one with whom Saunders formed a particular friendship, the two exchanging letters and audio-tapes in later years. The title of Saunders's final collection, *This One Tree*, published in 1986, may well be in Graham's memory.

Norman MacCaig was another close personal friend. The promise evident in his early work led Saunders to introduce MacCaig to MacDiarmid, and Saunders was later persuaded by MacCaig's deft handling of free verse to adopt the form in his own work. Another friend who Saunders helped was the 'avant-gardener' Ian Hamilton Finlay, whose earliest short stories were published in *The Scottish Angler*, of which Saunders was the editor. For a while *The Angler* would publish anything by the then-unknown Finlay, provided it was about fishing. Finlay accepted the challenge, while Saunders went on to become Angling Correspondent for the London-based *Daily Herald*. (With MacCaig, he also wrote a guide to the fishing inns of Scotland, all of which the pair travelled to and where they no doubt sampled the selection of whiskies available, as well as the local fishing spots, in each one.) No fewer than ten of Finlay's short stories – his earliest published work – about the life-and-death struggle between men and their savage, watery prey appear in the 2004 collection *The Dancers Inherit the Party*, edited by Ken Cockburn, which brings together much of Finlay's own neglected work.

It is no surprise, then, to find Saunders's own poems as concerned with language and closely worked imagery. Where MacCaig is philosophical, Saunders is metaphysical. His first collection, *The Year's Green Edge* (1955), contains 'The Empty Glen', which became his best-known poem and is broadly regarded as a metaphor for the Clearances. Is it about the Clearances, though, or are the images a metaphor for something more personal? –

*Time ticks away the centre of my pride
Emptying its glen of cattle, crops and song...*

Throughout the collection, Saunders produces work in English that feels complete and certain. 'The Mole' captures the image of blind hope in the face of ruin, 'Misunderstanding' delicately traces the outline of a relationship through images of a train journey which is not yet over, while 'To a Don' and 'Folly' are perfectly balanced expressions of metre and form.

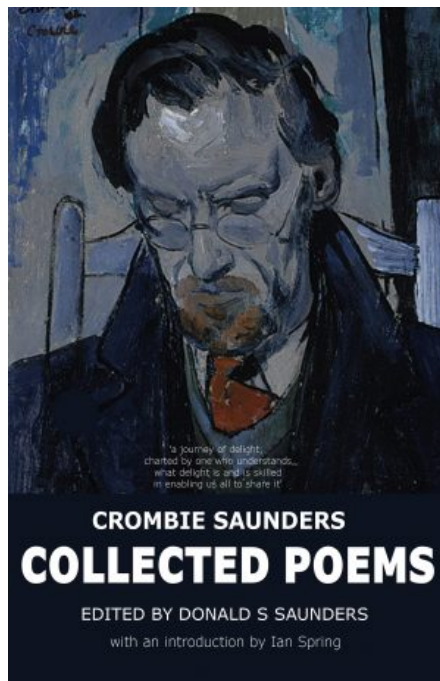
Given that Saunders's work in the mid-twentieth century was recognised as a notable contribution to the Lallans movement, led by MacDiarmid, it is unsurprising that his second collection, *XXI Poems* (also 1955), is written mostly in Scots. Himself a member of the Makars Club, Saunders helped to produce the Scots Style sheet lampooned by Tom Leonard twenty years later. Sharing the concern of the Lallans poets for 'purity' in his synthetic Scots, Saunders's poems such as 'An Auld Sang's in my Hert' ring truly. However, Saunders was also an outsider, and other poems, including 'Doun the Watter wi the Lave', gently satirise the Lallans movement and its followers. (At least one member of the group was furious with his portrait and may have deliberately excluded some of Saunders's poetry from later anthologies.) Gentleness and sensitivity to form and to people are Saunders's hallmarks, as MacCaig describes in 'To Do with R. C. S.', a little-known poem about his drinking companion and friend which Donald Saunders includes at the start of the *Collected Poems*.

Arguably, it is the third collection that produces the greatest surprise and pleasure. Published as a private edition in 1986, five years before Saunders's death and following a silence of over thirty years, *This One Tree* captures the isolation of an imagination still alert but now in the throes of reclusion and turmoil. The order in which the poems are arranged does not reveal the same logic of the earlier collections, and the poems themselves have not all been so carefully written. There are gaps between them in terms of mood and tone as if years have passed between them. Some seem incomplete, striking a jarring note when considering Saunders's earlier body of work and his evident concern with consistency. At times it is difficult to feel as though the poems were written by the same person. Yet this disjointed, uneven quality creates a feeling akin to what we now understand as modernism, and resonates with certain contemporary work – a disturbed and disturbing flow that speaks of the mind and perception of the

creator. Some poems, such as 'Don't Touch This' and 'Full Circle', are nightmares of pent-up emotion, while others appear almost unnaturally calm. Others read as though they are still caught in the process of fleshing out an idea. But what these different insights, and even imperfections – so troubling in a man of his accomplishment – reveal is Saunders's development over a lifetime: from the careful crafting of an imagist to a Lallans writer exploring his trade to a lonely and sometimes struggling worker in verse.

In a way, Saunders's output resembles some of the achievements and some of the failures of the twentieth century. Despite producing relatively little poetry, Saunders's collected body of work here enables us to cast an eye across the concerns of Scottish poetry as it moved through the twentieth century, from ideas about national decline and renewal in the 1920s and 30s to, in the later decades, a refusal – or possibly an inability – to conform to conventional representations of (in Saunders's case) what it is to be a Scottish poet. Saunders seems to have lost much of his direction and some of his hard-won rigour in the latter half of his life, but never his lyrical impulse nor his poetic vision – and his *Collected Poems* are all the better for it. Hopefully this edition will fulfil the clear intention of the editor, Saunders's son, to remedy the long neglect of his poetry.

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