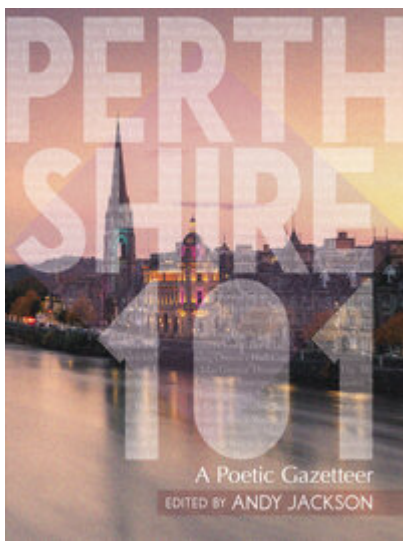


# 'Perthshire 101: A Poetic Gazetteer', edited by Andy Jackson

Review by Richie McCaffery



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Firstly, I like how the book is strategically designed, divided into the four airts of the county, beginning in the North, moving through the East, South and West and culminating in the Fair City of Perth itself. I could well imagine someone, a literary-minded tourist perhaps, using this book as they might some sort of poetic Baedeker. Andy Jackson's initial plan was to invite poets from Perthshire, or allied to it, to 'choose up to four themes' to ensure that a lot of ground was covered, and it certainly is. We begin with Morag Anderson's fine tribute to the doughty, mostly Irish emigrant, labourers, the 'Tunnel Tigers' who were drafted in to help with the gruelling work of hydro-electric schemes 'bringing electric power to the glens and to northern Scotland':

*Stars partition the sky like Stations of the Cross,  
the last wash of light offers itself west.  
I walk worn muscles to the corrugated camp,  
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But this far from home, God is small*

*& frivolous.*

*(from 'Hollowing a Mountain')*

Anderson's poem is, in many ways, an auspicious start, a strong poem but one which talks about bringing light that carries on through the rest of the anthology. The closing poem about a much-loved music institution, George T Watt's 'Concorde Music: a Villanelle', finds us in Perth in the present day. There's a sense of beginning in the past as a means of illuminating the present, making what might seem like our mundane surroundings suddenly magical. But between these two book-end poems, it seems like a small galaxy unfolds, page by page. I'll squeeze in my main criticism now - here are 101 poems by 28 poets but I would have liked to see greater representation. Where is Dunning's Walter Perrie, or Callander's Sally Evans, or Dunblane's Chris Powici? As an aside, it is good to see Jackson's own concrete poem tribute to the late Margaret Gillies Brown, one of Perthshire's greatest makars. I've a feeling that enough poets could have been sourced to have a poem each, but perhaps this isn't the point. One of the virtues of having four poems by a poet is that as you progress through the book, you find yourself drawn to some voices more than others. Harry Smart's poems always

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There is much to be gleaned and enjoyed from the historical poems and portraits, but I'd argue that the main strength of this anthology is showing us the vitality of Perthshire in the present, as the flower of its ancestral parts. Anywhere that trades upon its own beauty is vulnerable to losing something of its identity and Richard Watt's mordantly witty Edwin-Morgan-esque sci-fi poem about future visitors to earth (and to Perthshire) shows us the risk of commoditising place:

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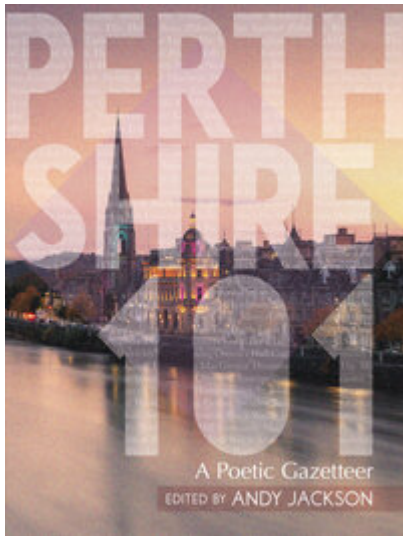
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So, we are invited to visit the multifarious and very happening big county of Perthshire, be it in person or just on the page. One of the mantras of responsible tourism is to 'take only photos / leave only footprints' and Karen Macfarlane's poem about berry-picking as a child in the Carse of Gowrie shows us that we may try to plunder a place of all it has to offer us, but it's often select vivid memories that we really keep and treasure, which is what *Perthshire 101* is all about:

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