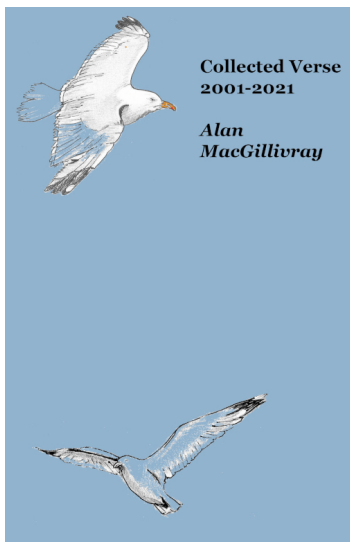


'Collected Verse 2001-2021', by Alan MacGillivray

Review by Matthew Macdonald



There is something often daunting when presented with a Collected Verse publication. On the one hand, it can seem like a Sisyphean task to face down a poetic output of two decades in a single tome. On the other hand, having in one place the strata of a poetic life across so many different publications can give a real sense of the depth, breadth and completeness of a poet's work.

It is this second part that is most evident in the Collected Verse of MacGillivray presented here. Combining the collections *An Altitude Within* (2010), *the saga of fnc gull* (2009), *Redomones*, and *Eye to the Future* (2016), *Riding to Trapalanda* (2018), *Walking to the Island (with Insular Poems)* (2018), *Sonnets to Hugh MacDiarmid, and Other Scots Poems* (2020) with the previously unpublished *On the Banks of Nith* and *Laughing at Confucius*, this is a deep dive into the work of a poet who excels at the subtle lyric, the analytic eye and the sweeping emotion.

One of the highlights of this book is the inclusion of *the saga of fnc gull*, a pair of sequences in Scots presenting the life and times of one fnc gull. The poems, full of humour and wit as well as heart-aching beauty, are accompanied by beautiful line drawings by the poet's wife, heightening the impact of the words themselves.

Alongside the exploits of fnc gull, there are poems that touch on every possible

experience of life itself – from the thoughtful and emotionally searching ‘Night-Town’, the political attitude of ‘POTUS Moment’, the lyric of ‘Trapalanda’ and ‘Meetin in the Mist’ or the comical ‘The Nth Doctor Who’. It is a testament to MacGillivray that over the course of 339 pages of poems, he never re-treads the same topic without offering a new take.

Aside from the sheer weight of output in the collection, MacGillivray’s poetic ability is demonstrated throughout the number of different forms explored in the text. While the collection’s favoured form is free verse, MacGillivray turns to sonnets on many occasions (‘Love Sonnet XI, XVI, XVIII, LXV, LXXII’, ‘Four Sonnets of Garcilaso de la Vega’, and the ‘Sonnets to Hugh MacDiarmid’, to name just a few). However, eclogues, haibun, haiku, terza rima, ghazal, and ballad all appear across these pages.

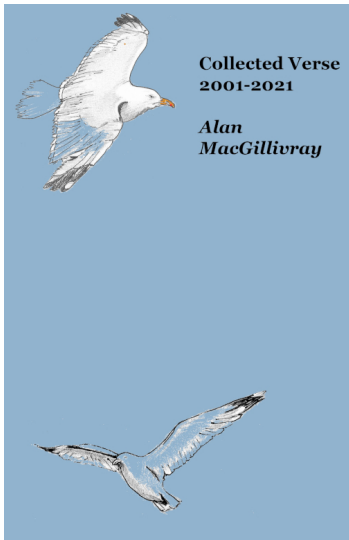
Whether extemporising on the Scottish Independence referendum, the nature and form of the Scottish Isles, the Spanish Civil War, humanity’s place in the cosmos or how a seagull can teach us the most about our world, MacGillivray shows his proficiency in poetry and prosody that cross topic, moment and form.

Condensing two decades of poetry into one book is no easy task, but this grouping of poems is endlessly inventive and operates much like Forrest Gump’s box of chocolates: you never know what’s going to be on the next page. MacGillivray is as comfortable taking his semantics for a walk along longer form poems (be they ballads, or the mixed sequences of ‘fnc gull’, ‘Eye to the Future’ and ‘Dail a’Chladaich (The Shore Meadow)’ from *Walking to the Island*) as he is at home with the Imagist lyric, where all is contained in few lines (‘Firth of Clyde’, ‘Not the Real Thing’, ‘Stone Poem’, ‘Back in the Tang Dynasty’).

In many ways, the perfect encapsulation of the experience of this collection comes from the poem ‘Day on the Hill’, from *Redomones*. While on the face of it, an exploration of a physical place, this is truly the best attitude to take with you as you voyage across twenty years of MacGillivray’s poetry:

*To know that mountain, make an early start
If you want to savour what it has to give.
You’ll never take in all, as long’s you live
Yet stride its natural range and know its art*

Collected Verse 2001-2021 is published by Kennedy & Boyd



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