

# 'Early and Late', by Alan MacGillivray

Review by Matthew Macdonald



The poems in this collection are paired into two sections: one from the beginning of MacGillivray's writing career and the other from more recent times. Presented together they show the development of the poet's style, but also the threads and linkages that extend between the two time periods.

The Early Verses come from 1957-1972, and there is a strong ballad style that crops up repeatedly throughout the poems.

MacGillivray consistently incorporates evocative imagery, particularly when dealing with the more metaphysical of themes. In the opening poem, 'Ballade', the poet tackles the shift of culture from ancient to modern times, and throughout the poem makes reference to Sorley Maclean's 'Hallaig' - 'Time the deer stands still in Hallaig Wood' - becoming, by the poem's end, 'The Land and People will renew lost yesterdays / When Time the deer bursts forth from Hallaig Wood.'

In the poem 'Hymn to the Spider-Goddess', MacGillivray dives deep into the darkness, his language bringing to life the gripping horror of spiders:

*Weavers and crabs and running wolves,  
To Thee our fangs we raise,  
Ready with venom alkaline  
To spit Thy praise*

While the Late Uncollected Verse 2019–2022 is political in a far more direct manner, two significant political figures from the Middle Ages appear in the first section. In ‘Message to the Warlord’, the poet imagines the ultimate futility of being the Khan:

*Though he calls to Byzantium’s western sea  
Or the Great Wall’s towers for alliance and aid  
He must face alone that hill of bone  
And stand in its surly shade*

It is impossible, the poet shows us, to commit the acts of atrocity that are involved in imperialism without reckoning with that lineage.

The other political figure of the first section is the famed Scottish king, and thespian’s horror, Macbeth. In the longest poem of the Early section, ‘The Ballad of the Red Finlay’, MacGillivray offers the origin of Macbeth’s heritage a supernatural twist, all framed in biting Scots. After a liaison that leads to Macbeth’s birth, Auld Nick proclaims:

*I fear not any o your lord’s men,  
Nor the Red Finlay himself,  
For I am their true master  
And keep their place in Hell.*

*Here is my ring fram aff my hand  
And it will be a sign  
That the bairn you cairry in your wame  
Is cam frae a royal line*

*And he will real ower aa Moray  
And Alba riche and brave,  
And nae man born of womankind  
Sall bring him tae his grave*

The melding of history and poetry is evident throughout MacGillivray's writing from the Early period, but arguably even more prevalent in the Later verses.

One of the longest pieces in the Late Uncollected Verses section is 'The Divan of Hassan', a sprawling multi-voiced poem that describes and criticises the actions and authority of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The poem also incorporates elements that echo the poetry of Hafiz, among others, and present beautiful flashes of humanity against the backdrop of Western understanding of the Taliban:

*A nightingale sings clear within the grove,  
The Rose's scent comes to me on the wind  
I see the Hunter in the evening sky  
And taste the wine of my Beloved's kiss*

...

*The Scholar smiled. < This fountain is a book  
Whose wisdom cools us with its laughing song*

...

*I sat with My Beloved as she read  
Aloud to me the poems of Hafiz  
We both drank deep of Poetry and Wine  
Beside the Helmand, Paradise was ours*

The 2019-2022 poems have the distinction of being largely written during lockdown in the UK. This gives them both a stern political voice (mentions of Brexit and the loss of our European connections, as well as sly condemnations of Conservative policies and the treatment of healthcare workers during the COVID lockdown, appear obliquely in some poems), but also a wistful nostalgia.

Within the Late Uncollected Verses is 'Lockdown Lines', a poem composed of three sub-sections. Within the third of these, 'Morgan in Memory', MacGillivray encapsulates a life of crossed paths with Edwin Morgan with a tenderness to which memory during lockdown adds further poignancy:

*Last time was in Kelvingrove, shrunk down, big-eyed,  
Bearded, no more words to say, but still a book!*

*So, boys, we're off, again jump into the sun*

This nostalgia and love are equally present in the poem 'Nina', where the poet presents his affection and the loss of his aunt, and again there is something deeply tender about the way these lines frame the missing:

*Our Nina, kindest and dearest of aunts.  
Still are you with us, bright-eyed, laughing in the sun.*

This collection is an excellent and interesting window into the work of the poet and present a suitably wide selection as to be apposite for all tastes.

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