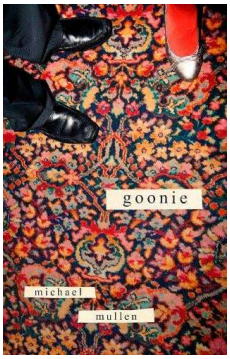
‘Goonie’, by Michael Mullen

Review by Taylor Strickland



From Ruaraidh MacThomais to Liz Lochead, a radical strain runs rampant through Glasgow poetry: part-experiment, but also part-survival response, since the city’s material history is constantly under threat. Little survives there, but Glaswegians survive, so the story goes. We know because Tom Leonard’s sound poetry championed Glasgow’s voice.

Michael Mullen in his Foreword Prize-nominated debut *goonie* modulates the city’s voice via a confessional mode. Language drives the collection. ‘Beithir’, the introductory piece, is illustrative:

this *Aye*
tongue *drookit*
the thrill n *hus kent*
of words *thi laldi*

Explosive lyrical vernacular, not seen since MacDiarmid, is similarly ‘synthetic’. Anyone familiar with the Glasgow dialect will straightaway detect Mullen’s unbounded expression with the past participle ‘kent’ (Scots for ‘known’), the ken boundary falling somewhere around Falkirk… Glasgow, in other words, is the epicentre but tremors transmit out beyond the city limits, to encompass greater Glasgow, the west of Scotland, and maybe a nation, both in time and space. The final line revives ‘yow-trummel’, most memorably used in ‘The Watergaw’, MacDiarmid’s best loved lyric. Is the language nationalistic, or a literary exercise? Maybe both, as it was for MacDiarmid.

One question then stands: has Mullen evolved the literary and linguistic scope since MacDiarmid? The answer is in the mode. Nominally, 'Beithir' appropriates not Scots, but Gaelic, the poem being otherwise unrepresentative of that language. Mullen, as a Sasannach, pays tribute to beithir in form, and this redeems his usage. 'Wild', as an adjective, 'lightning', as a noun, and sometimes a 'serpentine beast', here 'beithir' evokes definition and is thus abstracted, the words on the page becoming a forked object, a fluid concrete poetics that sooner hearken across the pond to CAConrad than to Glasgow's own Edwin Morgan. Mullen, in turn, renews our awareness of the liveliness of a linguistic spectrum, mostly a Braid Scots, connecting it to a broader transatlantic composition method, from which the scope expands.

goonie's thrill for language develops in vignettes. Readers encounter everyday conversation, one about alcoholism, one about spiritualism (occurring in a barbershop). Leonard-esque sound inheritance is evident, but these voices are less masculine, and more dynamic. A fondness for them is maintained even when Mullen reveals minor prejudice:

> *sedated by the tin-itch of spirits.*
> *Smirnoff – nane ae that foreign stuff –*
> *…*
> *Craig she's good so she is*
> *cannae git her oot that spiritulizt church, honest*
> *shez in ther mer than hur accho church –*

A humorous warmth, as one has for a pal, or family, is cast in a Scots inflected by the digital realm, thereby proving the Scots language thrives beyond the byre, beyond literature, and beyond expectation. It is alive on the urban tongue, in the twenty-first century, and it is worth celebrating.

Mullen's orthography is an extension of an already fluid orthography that reinforces queerness. Shane Strachan from Aberdeen and Josie Giles from Orkney have leveraged the language's sonic density to establish a paradox of regional register and sexual universal. Mullens joins them from Glasgow, but freely moves between English and Scots, like Burns, but still more sleekit even:

> *my other name*
> *POOF*

quick scribbled on the postbox

…

he's acting

like a

POOF

…

Yer the Tennet's pished Jekyll tae my Hyde

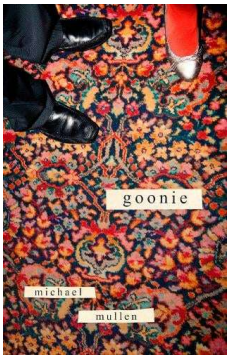
Yer the moon, doll, and I'm the tide.

Post-modern, concerned with orality as much as literacy, explosive of cliché, but never at the expense of birthright, birthplace, the working class, and a love of the country. In being sleekit, we should perhaps question our own observations. A love of country facilitates a critique of the nation. It should do. Wool-gathering is impossible in a city which one year fights on behalf of 'refuweegees' then soon thereafter invites Reform to its precincts… But as much as the city's working class is worn on Mullen's sleeve, he personalises a people, makes them human for us, when very easily he could intellectualise and protest. Take for example the poem 'goonie' which gives its name to the collection. For those unaware, a 'goonie' is Scots for a gown that a child wears, especially a nightgown. Mullens transforms the gown to a child's performance costume, evoking aspiring stardom and queerness all at once, in one of the most touching episodes of the book. A narrative poem in which he, as a child, dances to Abba for family, 'spurred oan bi ma Aunt'. He wears 'polyester' with 'the wurk troosers'. His aunt raises her vodka Irn Bru as a toast, for she 'jist lettum wear witever he wahnts tae'. Here we peak into the openness of a household, and it brings both tears and laughter, the language anchoring it to nowhere else. Glasgow.

It's worth pointing out that the decision to write in Scots isn't a subversive political act unless you're from the Anglosphere. It's political, but it's more an assertion of self whose subversion surprises us by demonstrating just how freely Glaswegians code-switch, seamlessly, and seemingly without reason. Living in translation. A blessing and curse. But in Mullen's case, it's also a vow of confidence. Glasgow can thole it. Scots can thole it:

Beating, breathing, being.
I'm just part of their din.

Goonie is published by Corsair



From Ruaraidh MacThomais to Liz Lochead, a radical strain runs rampant through Glasgow poetry: part-experiment, but also part-survival response, since the city's material history is constantly under threat. Little survives there, but Glaswegians survive, so the story goes. We know because Tom Leonard's sound poetry championed Glasgow's voice.

Michael Mullen in his Foreword Prize-nominated debut *goonie* modulates the city's voice via a confessional mode. Language drives the collection. 'Beithir', the introductory piece, is illustrative:

this *Aye*
tongue *drookit*
the thrill n *hus kent*
of words *thi laldi*

Explosive lyrical vernacular, not seen since MacDiarmid, is similarly 'synthetic'. Anyone familiar with the Glasgow dialect will straightaway detect Mullen's unbounded expression with the past participle 'kent' (Scots for 'known'), the ken boundary falling somewhere around Falkirk… Glasgow, in other words, is the epicentre but tremors transmit out beyond the city limits, to encompass greater Glasgow, the west of Scotland, and maybe a nation, both in time and space. The final line revives 'yow-trummel', most memorably used in 'The Watergaw', MacDiarmid's best loved lyric. Is the language nationalistic, or a literary exercise? Maybe both, as it was for MacDiarmid.

One question then stands: has Mullen evolved the literary and linguistic scope since MacDiarmid? The answer is in the mode. Nominally, 'Beithir' appropriates

not Scots, but Gaelic, the poem being otherwise unrepresentative of that language. Mullen, as a Sasannach, pays tribute to beithir in form, and this redeems his usage. 'Wild', as an adjective, 'lightning', as a noun, and sometimes a 'serpentine beast', here 'beithir' evokes definition and is thus abstracted, the words on the page becoming a forked object, a fluid concrete poetics that sooner hearken across the pond to CAConrad than to Glasgow's own Edwin Morgan. Mullen, in turn, renews our awareness of the liveliness of a linguistic spectrum, mostly a Braid Scots, connecting it to a broader transatlantic composition method, from which the scope expands.

goonie's thrill for language develops in vignettes. Readers encounter everyday conversation, one about alcoholism, one about spiritualism (occurring in a barbershop). Leonard-esque sound inheritance is evident, but these voices are less masculine, and more dynamic. A fondness for them is maintained even when Mullen reveals minor prejudice:

sedated by the tin-itch of spirits.
Smirnoff – nane ae that foreign stuff –
…
Craig she's good so she is
cannae git her oot that spiritulizt church, honest
shez in ther mer than hur accho church –

A humorous warmth, as one has for a pal, or family, is cast in a Scots inflected by the digital realm, thereby proving the Scots language thrives beyond the byre, beyond literature, and beyond expectation. It is alive on the urban tongue, in the twenty-first century, and it is worth celebrating.

Mullen's orthography is an extension of an already fluid orthography that reinforces queerness. Shane Strachan from Aberdeen and Josie Giles from Orkney have leveraged the language's sonic density to establish a paradox of regional register and sexual universal. Mullens joins them from Glasgow, but freely moves between English and Scots, like Burns, but still more sleekit even:

my other name
POOF
quick scribbled on the postbox
…

he's acting

like a

POOF

…

Yer the Tennet's pished Jekyll tae my Hyde

Yer the moon, doll, and I'm the tide.

Post-modern, concerned with orality as much as literacy, explosive of cliché, but never at the expense of birthright, birthplace, the working class, and a love of the country. In being sleekit, we should perhaps question our own observations. A love of country facilitates a critique of the nation. It should do. Wool-gathering is impossible in a city which one year fights on behalf of 'refuweegees' then soon thereafter invites Reform to its precincts… But as much as the city's working class is worn on Mullen's sleeve, he personalises a people, makes them human for us, when very easily he could intellectualise and protest. Take for example the poem 'goonie' which gives its name to the collection. For those unaware, a 'goonie' is Scots for a gown that a child wears, especially a nightgown. Mullens transforms the gown to a child's performance costume, evoking aspiring stardom and queerness all at once, in one of the most touching episodes of the book. A narrative poem in which he, as a child, dances to Abba for family, 'spurred oan bi ma Aunt'. He wears 'polyester' with 'the wurk troosers'. His aunt raises her vodka Irn Bru as a toast, for she 'jist lettum wear witever he wahnts tae'. Here we peak into the openness of a household, and it brings both tears and laughter, the language anchoring it to nowhere else. Glasgow.

It's worth pointing out that the decision to write in Scots isn't a subversive political act unless you're from the Anglosphere. It's political, but it's more an assertion of self whose subversion surprises us by demonstrating just how freely Glaswegians code-switch, seamlessly, and seemingly without reason. Living in translation. A blessing and curse. But in Mullen's case, it's also a vow of confidence. Glasgow can thole it. Scots can thole it:

Beating, breathing, being.
I'm just part of their din.

Goonie is published by Corsair

(c) The Bottle Imp