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# The Bottle Imp

**Issue 18, November 2015**  
**Best Scottish Books of 2015**

**W**as 2015 a good year for Scottish writing? Judging from the number of people who told us they struggled to choose just one title, we'll say a definite Yes! ASLS has asked fourteen authors, critics, academics, and members of the literary sector to tell us about their favourite Scottish book from this past year. The book could be in English, Scots, or Gaelic, it could be published for the first time in 2015 or re-issued this year, and could be a work of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, or academic research. And what a wonderful list it is. We've got some well-kent faces here and exciting new ones, and it all shows the variation and vibrance of Scotland's writing culture. There is something for everyone, so get comfy, and have a browse through the Best Scottish Books from 2015. The list is organised by title. If your favourite isn't here, let us know about it!

What was your favourite book of 2015?

## **40 Sonnets by Don Paterson**

*Faber & Faber, 2015*

— chosen by Alan Spence, award-winning poet and playwright, novelist and short story writer Don Paterson is one of the finest poets writing in the English language (and in Scots for that matter). He's a master craftsman, but there's much more to his work than technique – there's a profound humanity and a spirituality he carries lightly (and often with a grim Dundonian humour). His love for the sonnet form has been clear throughout his previous collections, his versions of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, the delightful anthology *101 Sonnets* which he edited for Faber, with its invaluable notes on his choices, and more recently his guide to the sonnets of Shakespeare. (At one point he described the sonnet as almost a default setting). Now at last comes a new collection

of his own work in the form, simply titled *40 Sonnets*, which seems destined to become a classic. In it he simply owns the form, moving with confidence and poise from the most traditional – with nods to his masters, Rilke, Shakespeare, Yeats – through fascinating variations. There are sets of rhyming couplets, there's a thin one-word-per-line Scots version of a Japanese original, there's a Morganesque sound poem. There's even a prose piece in the middle of the whole thing – a blackly comic riff on the perils of translation and 'versioning' (at which, paradoxically, he excels). A dazzling box of tricks, then, shot through with wit and sometimes rage. (There are vitriolic rants, for instance, against Tony Blair and Dundee City Council!) But at the heart of it are memorable, timeless poems of love and friendship and loss. A wonderful book.

## **60 Degrees North: Around the World in Search of Home by Malachy Tallack**

*Birlinn Books, 2015*

— chosen by Pam Perkins, Professor of English at the University of Manitoba

The new Scottish book that I most enjoyed reading this year is Malachy Tallack's *60 Degrees North: Around the World in Search of Home*. Tallack writes evocatively and well about the places where he touches down in his journey, which range from the metropolis of St Petersburg to Fort Smith, a one-time fur-trading hub but now an isolated outpost on the Alberta–Northwest Territories border. As subtitle indicates, he also has a more abstract subject, the concept of home, and he explores this idea both through people he meets on his journey and through his own sense of rootedness in Shetland, where the book begins and (more or less) ends. While he resists the sentimentalities of romantic nationhood, the general tone of his meditations on belonging is melancholic, even elegiac: Tallack spent his childhood in Shetland but begins his account of his complex relationship with the islands with his reluctant return there, as an adolescent, following the sudden death of his father. Like many of the other recent writers on the north, he also worries about the fragility of the human and natural environments of the Indigenous communities of Greenland, Canada, and Siberia. Yet along with the melancholia, Tallack offers an energetic, often impassioned engagement with place, making this a sophisticated and memorable contribution to the travel genre.

***The Book of Strange New Things* by Michel Faber**

Canongate Books, 2015 (2014)  
— chosen by Cynthia Rogerson, prize-winning author and Programme Director at Moniack Mhor Writers Centre

*The Book of Strange New Things* is not only the best book I've read all year, but one of the best books I've read in the last ten years. I have recommended it repeatedly to anyone with an interest in religion, long term marriage, missionaries, society's future in the face of fractures in social infrastructure, and faith. In my opinion, it is, along with *Under the Skin*, Faber's finest work. Much is made of Michel Faber's diversity – that he creates entirely different books each time. Victorian prostitutes who plot to thwart men, man-eating aliens who pick up hitchhikers, etc. But I disagree. I think each of these books are recognisably his, both in tone and story line. The protagonists (usually female and disfigured in some way) are often unhappy outsiders who struggle in an indifferent world. Loneliness and alienation are often central themes. Beautifully written in Michel's unique simple style, the stories are nevertheless complex and often brooding. *The Book of Strange New Things* is all these things as well, but there is something achingly tender and wistful about this story. And this tenderness is new.

***Gods of the Morning: A Bird's-Eye View of a Highland Year* by John Lister-Kaye**

Canongate, 2015  
— chosen by Angie Crawford, Scottish Buying Manager at Waterstones

I've looked at the world in a different way and enjoyed taking the time to do so since reading John Lister-Kaye's *Gods of the Morning*. It is an awe-inspiring, provocative and deeply profound observation about the changing seasons and nature from the author's viewpoint in the Highlands. He writes philosophically about migration – 'how we all venture out and return home, the myriad of creatures responding to the secret codes emitted by the sun and the spinning earth, the remarkable ability of birds to navigate by the stars' ... how indeed it is not always survival of the fittest but of those most adaptable. In a year that has been rich with writing about our landscape and nature, it is John Lister-Kaye's poetic prose punctuated with thoughtful literary quotes that has made this book and the discussing of it really special and my outstanding book of the year!

***The Good Dark* by Ryan Van Winkle**

*Penned in the Margins*, 2015  
— chosen by Jennifer Williams, Programme Manager for the Scottish Poetry Library

I was going to choose the SPL's Best Scottish Poems 2014 edited by Roderick Watson, but as I'm in it I thought that would be much too cheeky! However I would have selected it not for my own poem but because of all the other fabulous poems gathered by Roderick, and because I think it's such a great project – the editors have complete freedom and spend so much time pouring over the published work of the past year when making their choices. It's a very generous and glorious celebration of contemporary Scottish poetry, and always free to access online. In lieu of that one (though I do encourage you to have a read), I'd definitely pick *The Good Dark* by Ryan Van Winkle. As a fellow American poet who has been living and working in Scotland for a long time, it tickles me to hear how his poems and voice have held onto what seem to me to be recognisably American qualities, while witnessing how that has mixed with the influences of his Scottish/international life and writing career. Lines like 'The waves were white shoes crashing / down wooden stairs ...' are delicious; it's so hard to find new ways to write about the sea but that image is perfect, familiar and new at the same time. The personal and the remembered, whether true or invented, lend vibrant intimacy to these poems. For instance, in the magnificent long sequence that closes the collection, 'I know I dropped a light bulb / and that I was happy / when a sliver of glass sneaked / so deep into my foot / I could not squeeze it out / could do nothing / but accept it as mine.' They invite us into a life that may or may not be one we've lived, but certainly they tell the story with such imagistic eloquence that we can feel the poems. I love that.

### **Jellyfish by Janice Galloway**

*Freight Books, 2015*

— chosen by Alistair Braidwood, who runs the Scottish cultural website *Scots Whay Hae!*

2015 was not as exciting in terms of new Scottish writing as the last couple of years have been, but Kirstin Innes' *Fishnet* was a debut novel that refused to be ignored and which everyone should read. Imprint of the year was undoubtedly Saraband's 'crime' offshoot *Contraband* which published as diverse novels as Graeme Macrae Burnett's *His Bloody Project*, Matt Bendoris' *DM For Murder* and Graham Lironi's *Oh Marina Girl*, all of which are excellent. However, my book of the year is, without question, Janice Galloway's short story collection, *Jellyfish*. It's an exquisitely crafted book, but married to a strength and depth of feeling which is, at times, extraordinary to behold. Against all the film, music, theatre and other books I have read this year, this has stayed with me like nothing else. As with the best poetry I have returned to my favourite stories and paragraphs again and again and they give up something new each time. Simply stunning.

### **Jellyfish by Janice Galloway**

*Freight Books, 2015*

— chosen by Adrian Searle, Publisher at Freight Books

Janice Galloway is a national treasure and *Jellyfish* is her first work of fiction in several years. She is a writer I have read with real admiration from the beginning of her career. She's undoubtedly one of the most significant voices in contemporary Scottish and UK literature and this book confirms her position as a master of the short form. *Jellyfish* contains razor sharp tales of some of the most powerful human experiences, told with her striking, nuanced, original grasp of language.

### **The Music and the Land: the Music of Freeland Barbour by Freeland Barbour**

*Birlinn Books, 2015*

— chosen by James Robertson, a poet, writer of fiction, editor, and co-founder of the Scots language imprint *Itchy Coo*.

Freeland Barbour is a weel-kent figure on the traditional music scene. Born into a long-established Perthshire family, he is rooted in the history and culture of Scotland. A former, accordion-playing member of the folk group *Silly Wizard* in the 1970s (when he left he was replaced by Phil Cunningham), Barbour went on to found two highly successful dance

bands, the *Wallochmor Ceilidh Band* and the *Occasionals*. He is a brilliant pianist, worked for years as a producer on BBC Radio Scotland, and now runs a recording studio. Over five decades he has composed hundreds of dance tunes which are played as standards throughout the world, and it is these, reproduced as sheet music, which form the backbone to this magisterial and beautiful two-volume set. Even if you don't read music these books are a joy: profusely illustrated with photographs by Cailean MacLean, Robin Gillanders and others, *The Music and the Land* records Freeland's long musical journey across Scotland, with excursions en route to Northumberland, Ireland, North America and Scandinavia. A fantastic resource for musicians both professional and amateur, the printed music is accompanied by anecdotes and explanations linking the tunes to the people and places that inspired them. The book is a piece of social history, a geography lesson, a heartfelt, often humorous celebration of the tradition to which Freeland Barbour has contributed so much, and a passionate tribute to the land and the sea. Expensive? Perhaps – and yet, really, an absolute bargain.

### **Ossianic Unconformities: Bardic Poetry in the Industrial Age by Eric Gidal**

*University of Virginia Press, 2015*

— chosen by Matthew Wickman, Founding Director of the Humanities Center at Brigham Young University

Eric Gidal presents the argument, as ingenious as it is persuasive, that the Ossian poems register the emotive effects of environmental change. This contention predicates itself on a portrait of the Ossian poems as modern artifacts, less the translations than the creations of James Macpherson. But as Gidal shows, these poems resounded across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Scotland and Ireland as tokens of the type of natural catastrophe that Rob Nixon calls 'slow violence'. Macpherson thus becomes the oracle of a later age of environmental consciousness, once as he spoke ventriloquially for the fallen warriors of an early, heroic age.

### **A Petrol-Scented Spring by Ajay Close**

*Sandstone Press, 2015*

— chosen by Gwen Enstam, *International Project Developer for ASLS*

2015 has seen a revival of interest in the British Suffragists, with the publication of *The Hourglass Factory* by Lucy Ribchester and *A Petrol-Scented Spring* by Ajay Close, and most recently, the release of the film 'Suffragette'. The two novels are both wonderful, and they are also very different; while *The Hourglass Factory* takes the fight for women's suffrage as background to an adventurous and evocative mystery, *A Petrol-Scented Spring* plays it straight, bringing the nitty and (at times very) gritty aspects of the Suffragette movement more substantially into a narrative about power, social change, and resistance. Dr Hugh Ferguson Watson is the only doctor in Scotland willing to force-feed the incarcerated Suffragette Arabella Scott, who is strapped to a table and not allowed to sit up, read, or bathe. But, the novel asks, in the struggle for control, is it physical force or intellectual argument that ultimately wins? And what about love? The doctor's wife wonders if her husband's heart has already been 'claimed or smashed' before they even met, which brings us back to his time with Arabella. Close bases her narrative on documents held by the National Library of Scotland, including the real Dr Ferguson Watson's medical notes and interviews with Arabella Scott's grand-daughter. And it shows. *A Petro-Scented Spring* is a beautifully written, accomplished novel that vibrates with authenticity. If you are looking for a novel that brings you into another world and leaves you thinking about it for days after you finish, this is it.

### **A Portable Shelter by Kirsty Logan**

*Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2015*

— chosen by Duncan Jones, *Director, ASLS*

It is one of the perks of the publishing life, to be able to see the insides of books as they are made – and it's this privileged viewpoint that, for me, nudges *A Portable Shelter* out in front of Kirsty Logan's other 2015 book, her first novel *The Gracekeepers*. *A Portable Shelter* is a collection of thirteen short stories, bound up inside a narrative framework where two women tell stories, in secret, to an unborn child. Inspired by traditional Scottish tales, these are sometimes set in a recognisable here-and-now; sometimes in the abiding world of fairy-tale; and sometimes in a shifting and unchancy zone where even the rules of once upon a time can't be trusted. They

are united, though, by the themes of love and loss which run through each story, and – even when there's a wolf at the door or a witch in the dark wood, or worse – by the quality of serious playfulness in Logan's writing which makes this book such a pleasure to read, and re-read.

### **Forest Seanchaidh na Coille / The Memory-Keeper of the Forest: Anthology of Scottish-Gaelic Literature of Canada**

**edited by Michael Newton**

*Cape Breton University Press, 2015*

— chosen by Silke Stroh, *Assistant Professor of English, Postcolonial & Media Studies, University of Muenster*

This splendid anthology is a major contribution to the Gaelic canon because it gives a wide cross-section of diasporic literature which has long been neglected by modern audiences, often because sources were scattered and hard to obtain, or because there were no bilingual editions accessible to a wider readership. Newton's collection fills this gap for the Canadian context, and it would be fantastic if future work could produce similar collections for other locations of Scottish Gaelic diaspora culture, such as Australia or New Zealand. *Seanchaidh na Coille* presents a considerable range of Gaelic poetic and prose texts from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century, along with English translations. The collection is grouped thematically into sections on 'The Subjugation of Gaeldom', 'Militarism and Tartanism', 'Migration', 'Settlement', 'Love and Death', 'Religion', 'Language and Literature', 'Identity and Associations', and 'Politics'. Newton also includes concise information on historical, socio-cultural, literary and biographical contexts. This contextualisation and the bilingual format make the texts accessible and attractive to general readers, even those who are new to Gaelic Studies. At the same time, it is also a great resource for more specialised readers, with academic references on sources and further reading, as well as scholarly commentary. Though necessarily brief, Newton's commentary provides many thought-provoking observations that also make this book an important intervention in contemporary criticism, linking Gaelic Studies to wider comparative debates on North American multiculturalism, minority identities, international diaspora studies, colonialism and postcolonialism.

***Their Lips Talk of Mischief* by Alan Warner**

*Faber & Faber, 2015 (2014)*

***Jellyfish* by Janice Galloway**

*Freight Books, 2015*

— chosen by Zoë Strachan, award-winning novelist and librettist who teaches creative writing at the University of Glasgow

Two books appeared by writers whose work has engaged and inspired me from their debuts onwards. Alan Warner's *Their Lips Talk of Mischief* brilliantly evokes being skint in the 1980s while negotiating the perennial perils of literary endeavour and falling for your friend's girl. It's sharp and funny and fast-paced, but it's the style that interests me most. There's a strangeness to some of the syntax that is uniquely Warner, and totally compelling. And while I felt so glad not to be in the situations that Douglas and Lou find themselves in, there's also a seedy glamour to it all that, let's face it, is really quite alluring. Janice Galloway shows the range of her talents in her new story collection *Jellyfish*. Some of the stories, like 'and drugs and rock and roll' are so well-realised that I wanted to stay with the characters through an entire novel, which is a real indication of a good short story writer. Others are almost unbearably poignant, especially in how they deal with motherhood, love and caring. I am not ashamed to admit to having a wee greet while reading, and I'm in awe of her ability to capture the telling detail, the quirky metaphor, the oblique glance. She prefaces the collection with an epigraph from David Lodge – 'Literature is mostly about having sex and not much about having children; life's the other way round' – and both *Jellyfish* and *Their Lips Talk of Mischief* explore this in ways that are fresh and resonant.

***Unnecessarily Emphatic* by Kathrine Sowerby**

*The Red Ceilings Press, 2015*

— chosen by Gerry Loose, a poet and text-artist who works primarily with subjects from the natural world, as well as the world of geo-politics

Kathrine Sowerby's wee gem of a book is unclassifiable; cross genre; it's a long poem that is a page turner, that reads like a thriller in which an unknown person or persons did it, or maybe didn't. It's contradictory poetry, factual, shape-shifting. It's the very stuff of language and invention. A narrative in which the reader is constantly engaged; drawn from a linguistics

textbook, it charts the permutations of relationships in a way which is compassionate and understanding of the vagaries of what it is to be human and act in the moment. A book to be read, savoured, enjoyed and re-read. It's possible to be amused and startled and challenged on the same page: open it anywhere and begin, or read from start to finish: this is a truly original work from one of Scotland's most self-possessed, mature and talented poets. Belied by the title, this is necessary reading and quietly insistent rather than emphatic.



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