Introduction

The true, if not the only, end of poetry is delight, declared John Dryden. This anthology has been designed on Dryden's precept, rather than on purely academic principles, which may exclude the surprising and the offbeat. So readers will find here not only the definitive voices of twentieth-century Scottish poetry from MacDiarmid on, but unexpected contributors, ranging from Robert Service of Yukon fame to the psychiatrist R. D. Laing and those witty chroniclers of contemporary city life, Adam McNaughtan and Matt McGinn. By inclination the editors prefer the immediate and unpretentious to the grandiloquent. They also share a respect for craftsmanship and deft use of language, even if the old disciplines of rhyme and rhythm no longer hold automatic sway.

For non-Scottish readers, a little background information about the Scottish poetry scene may be of assistance.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Scottish poetry was barely emerging from the 'Kailyard' (or cabbage patch), with its sentimentality and over-concern with petty localised issues. Pittendrigh Macgillivray, though primarily a sculptor, was among the first to realise that the Scots language, increasingly fragmenting into local dialects, needed some sort of revitalisation if it were to survive effectively in literary use. Like Lewis Spence, Macgillivray looked backwards, towards the sixteenth century, in spelling and world-revival. It was left to Christopher Murray Grieve, in his poetic persona of Hugh MacDiarmid, to achieve a real revivification, devising what was variously called 'Plastic Scots' and 'Lallans', but resulting in *Sangschaw*, *Penny Wheep*, and *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*; works of genius all three. Nevertheless, Macgillivray's verse was published early in the twentieth century so he is due the initial credit.

Two other writers helped to liberate the subject matter of Scottish poetry. One was the unhappy John Davidson, who in 1909 walked into the sea and drowned himself in the mistaken belief that he had cancer. His early poems, published in the late nineteenth century,

include such frequently anthologised pieces as 'The Runable Stag' and 'Thirty Bob a Week' (which profoundly influenced both T. S. Eliot and Hugh MacDiarmid); but our selection comes from his later work, written in the first decade of the twentieth century, in which he propounds Humanism and a Nietzschean belief in the death of God. James (B. V.) Thomson, his older contemporary, had already burst the bonds of poetic conventionality with 'The City of Dreadful Night'. The constraints of the kailyard were thus well and truly shattered.

Those excellent North-East writers, Violet Jacob and Marion Angus, along with Charles Murray, represented a further effective use of Scots as it was still spoken, as did the work of Sir Alexander Gray from the same airt.

Then comes the MacDiarmid linguistic explosion, resulting in the appearance of the greatest Scottish poet of the century, particularly in his incomparable early Scots lyrics.

What Eric Linklater called 'the second wind' Scottish Renaissance (the label allegedly given to the MacDiarmid movement by a French professor, Denis Saurat, though possibly by MacDiarmid himself, using Saurat's name) then produced Sydney Goodsir Smith, Douglas Young, Robert Garioch and others, a group with which co-editor Maurice Lindsay was for a time associated.

With the possible exception of Edwin Morgan and Edwin Muir, no 'great' poet appeared in twentieth-century Scotland other than MacDiarmid – and, Gaelic scholars would claim, Sorley MacLean. However, there has been a plethora of admirable and enjoyable ones.

Sorley MacLean and three of the other most notable contemporary figures – Norman MacCaig, George Mackay Brown and Iain Crichton Smith – died in quick succession in the 1990s. Interestingly, three of the four came from the Northern or Western Isles (Mackay Brown from Orkney, though with a Highland mother, MacLean and Crichton Smith from Raasay and Lewis respectively). MacCaig had strong Highland connections. There are many possible theories about this imaginative outpouring from the country's peripheries. Is the Celtic connection at the heart of it or did the elemental nature of land and seascape form the creative sensibilities of the emerging poets? Thesis-writers will no doubt ponder, and pontificate on, such matters.

Meanwhile, even deprived of this major quartet, poetry flourished in Scotland as the new millennium loomed. In spite of the neglect of the classics of 'English' literature in schools, new poetry circulated

via a variety of book publishers north and south of the Border, through such other mediums as the daily poem column of *The Herald* newspaper and the broadsheet *Poetry Scotland*, and through the revival of poetry pamphlets. Poetry was also written and discussed in the convivial setting of writers' groups.

Out of a diversity of talents and themes, at least two trends emerged. First the old agonising over the actual nature of the language used by Scottish poets has ceased. Poets – whether employing standard English, classical Scots, Lallans, regional dialects, city patois, or any permutation or combination of these – are linguistically relaxed. No place now for the fierce debates of the Muir–MacDiarmid era. Complexity of language is seen as an enrichment rather than a drawback. The increasing new confidence of Scots in their own cultural heritage (of which language is a central component) has no doubt influenced, and will in turn be further influenced by, the re-establishment of a Scottish Parliament.

A second major development in contemporary Scottish writing is the burgeoning of women writers. The successors of Helen Adam, Marion Angus and Violet Jacob are a feisty lot. The best known are probably Glasgow-based Liz Lochhead and Glasgow-born Carol Ann Duffy, but there are many others writing with candour and wit about all aspects of the human experience – including female sexuality.

A representative selection of Gaelic poetry is included in the anthology, both in its original version and in English translation.

In compiling this wide-ranging anthology, the editors have been impressed, above all, by the sheer range and energy of the poetry produced by their twentieth-century compatriots and by the many insights the poetry offers into a tumultuous era of war and peace and social change. They hope readers will share their enthusiasm.

Maurice Lindsay and Lesley Duncan