

## REVIEWS

In his final chapter, Niles discusses the contemporary relevance of the Traveller ethos and worldview, now accepted by audiences, particularly young people, and those sections of modern society which share concerns regarding environment, social anomie, entrenched individualism and commercialism. Niles dismisses charges of romanticism as inconsistent with the evidence gained from recordings and the Travellers' own direct experience. The chapter ends with a discussion of the storyteller's role as 'Webspinner' (hence the title of the book). Anyone experienced in ethnographic field work knows that close, collaborative friendships between tradition bearers and field workers have existed for generations. Niles's high regard for Duncan Williamson as a tradition bearer, as an individual, and as a friend never interferes with his ability to assess his subject in appropriate and professional terms.

The main text of the book is generously and competently provided with supporting materials useful to readers in Scotland and beyond, and will offer an effective point of departure for further research. A list of songs and stories is included, and the author's chapter-by-chapter Commentary provides background information in a separate section, dispensing with the need for lengthy and cumbersome footnotes. Two appendices providing detailed descriptions of recording and transcription practices are followed by a list of transcriptions; a glossary of Scots and Traveller cant terms; and a selected bibliography.

JOHN SHAW

***Scottish Religious Poetry from the Sixth Century to the Present. Selected and introduced by Linden Bicket, Emma Dymock and Alison Jack. Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2024. Pp. 326. ISBN 9781800830479.***

The first edition of this anthology was published in 2000, and has been out of print for some time. As such, a reprint would have been welcome on its own, but Saint Andrew Press have given us something more: a fully overhauled and expanded new edition. Taking the baton from the first version's editorial crew (Meg Bateman, Robert Crawford and James McGonigal), a trio of Edinburgh-based scholars Linden Bicket, Alison Jack (both of New College) and Emma Dymock (Celtic and Scottish Studies) have produced a worthy spiritual successor to the book's first incarnation.

While the second edition is, in terms of its content, largely *homoousian* with the first, the quarter century between the editions has seen some important changes. Some of these pertain to changes within Scotland itself, for instance the growth of more ethnically diverse communities and faith traditions is represented in the work of Imtiaz Dharker, Bashabi Fraser and Alycia Pirmohamed. Pirmohamed is one of several poets in the volume, among whom also are the Gaelic poet Niall O'Gallagher and Shetlander Roseane Watt, who have emerged in the Scottish poetry scene since the publication of the first edition and who demonstrate that poetic engagement with the questions and challenges of faith continues to grow and develop in new ways. We also see a poem apiece from Bateman, Crawford and McGonigal, who did not include any of their own work (aside from translations) in the first edition.

This is not simply a matter of new wine being poured into an old wineskin, however, as the new edition has retained some of the poets from the first, but with different poems representing them, as with Kathleen Jamie ('Sky-burial' in the first edition; 'The Buddleia' and 'Meadowsweet' in the second), Carol Anne Duffy ('Plainsong' in the first edition; 'Prayer' and 'Pilot's Wife' in the second) and John Burnside (retaining 'Canticle', but swapping out 'The Noli Me Tangere Incident' for 'Nativity'). Others, such as Iain Crichton Smith, Jackie Kay, Liz Lochhead and Tom Leonard, go from one poem apiece in the first edition to two apiece in the second, and Violet Jacob and Marion Angus are also more generously represented now than before.

In general, more recent work in Gaelic has a welcome stronger presence in the new edition, with contributions by Caoimhin MacNèill, Sandaidh NicDhòmhnaill Jones, Aonghas Phàdraig Caimbeul, Marion F. NicIleMhoire and the aforementioned O' Gallagher. The inclusion of more Gaelic women poets, such as Màiri N NicGhillEathain, means this collection gives more space than the previous edition to allow Gaelic women to speak on their own behalf concerning religion, and not only

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allowing Somhairle MacGill-Eain and Iain Crichton Smith to speak for them (though these canonical modern Gaelic poets also, of course, have their merited place in the anthology).

But, as John the Baptist recognised, if one is to increase then another must decrease, and so some cuts have had to be made to enable these new voices to take their place. Thus, Iain Moireasdan (Gobha na Hearadh), Dòmhnall Ruadh Choruna, Andrew Greig and Robin Fulton are among those making way. Similarly, the new edition does not provide the original-language versions of poems written in Old English, Old Norse, Latin or Gaelic prior to the seventeenth century: a space-saving measure which is reasonably justified by the point that those able to read these languages are now more easily able to do so in editions available elsewhere than they were a quarter of a century ago.

The translations of these earlier materials are themselves enjoyable as poetry, one particular highlight being Edwin Morgan's Englishing of 'The Maker on High' (i.e. 'Altus Prosator', attributed to Saint Columba), which retains the acrostic structure of the Latin original, as well as elements of the original's flexible rhyming patterns. Robert Crawford's translation of 'The Dream of the Rood' likewise carefully reproduces the alliteration so central to poetry in Old English.

The collection, as befits its scope, varies greatly in subject matter, and includes works of praise, invocations of God and His saints, metrical Psalms and Paraphrases for communal sung worship and quiet, personal reflections which veer between doubt and longing, rejection and acceptance of faith, and meditations on the complex relationships between faith, ethnicity, individuality and culture. We can see some poets containing these multitudes within themselves: the medieval makar William Dunbar, for instance, has his technical *tour de force* on the Resurrection, 'Done is a Battell on the Dragon Blak', his sublime, highly Latinate poem in praise of the Virgin Mary ('Hale, Sterne Superne') and his playful imitation of the liturgy as he intercedes for the poor unfortunate souls trapped in Stirling ('Quhair' he says, 'nowdir plesance nor delyt is') and prays that they may come to share the heavenly bliss of living in Edinburgh (*Et ne nos inducere in temptationem de Strivilling:/ Sed libera nos a malo illus./ Requiem Edinburgi dona eiis, Domine./ Et lux ipsius luceat eiis.*). Burns, likewise, gives us a satire on self-righteous hypocrites in 'Holy Willie's Prayer', his ribald 'Address to the Deil' (where Auld Nick is as much a being of local oral tradition as of Scripture) as well as the sincere, tender idealisation of the devout Lowland peasantry in 'The Cottar's Saturday Night'). Hymns, polemics (of the Reformation and the Disruption), disputes which might seem arcane now to most (Ramsay's 'The Marrow Ballad'), the complex legacy of the Covenant, both reverence for and resentment of institutions like Sabbath observance, different views on whether the Gospel means freedom and assurance or social control and conformity, the words of those who believe, those who do not and those who wished they could: the anthology is a poetic record of the people of Scotland's relationship to faith, expressed in different languages, traditions and forms, a relationship that has not always been easy but which remains compelling.

It is also a record that is not only Scottish but also international in scope. From the Columban church linking Scotland and Ireland, to the Norse pirates bewildered by and contemptuous of Christian monks, from George Buchanan's Latin elegy for Calvin, the French theologian in Geneva, to the growing South Asian diaspora communities of Scotland, these poems are not parochial in their concerns nor is the anthology parochial in its ambit (however many of the poets may have been parish ministers, of course!).

This thoughtful, well-presented and varied collection is sure to provide food for thought and reflection, along with amusement and provocation, for both personal reading and – since many of the poems were composed for just this purpose – for use in churches and meetings of different kinds. The collection is not burdened by copious apparatus, but does provide a short, thoughtful introduction – partially on the criteria for selection, at a time when neither 'Scottish' nor 'religious' have the same straightforward and obvious meanings they were once thought to have – and brief biographical notes on the poets.

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