

THE INTERNATIONAL
COMPANION TO

SCOTTISH POETRY

EDITED BY CARLA SASSI



The International Companion
to Scottish Poetry

INTERNATIONAL COMPANIONS TO SCOTTISH LITERATURE

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Gibbon*

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Edited by Carla Sassi

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Edited by Carla Sassi

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Series Editors' Preface

When in 2009 the first of the series of *Companions to Scottish Literature* under our editorship appeared under the aegis of the Edinburgh University Press, we had a vision of the scope and range of the series which extended to nineteen potential volumes, some based on literary periods, some on overarching themes and some on specific authors. As the years passed, other topics were recognised and added. By 2013, fifteen volumes in the series had appeared, but Edinburgh University Press had also decided that it no longer wanted to continue publishing new titles in the series. We remain grateful to them for their support for those first volumes and the community of Scottish literature scholars and lovers worldwide must be grateful to the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, which after reviewing the position, decided to take on completing the original vision for the series under the aegis of its academic imprint, Scottish Literature International. After the gap of a year to manage transitional matters, the 2015 tranche, therefore, represents under the series title, *International Companions to Scottish Literature*, the continuing fulfilment of the series editors' original vision, with the welcome addition of further topics. These will take the number of volumes produced well beyond twenty.

The 2015 tranche includes two volumes originally envisaged: the thematic volume on Scottish Poetry edited by Carla Sassi, which complements the 2011 volume edited by Ian Brown on Scottish Drama, and the volume on Edwin Morgan, edited by Alan Riach. The third volume, on Lewis Grassie Gibbon, edited by Scott Lyall, is an addition to the original vision, and one highly appropriate. Gibbon studies have developed strongly in recent years and this Companion is much needed.

As readers will see, these volumes continue to attract contributors of international standing and the highest quality. From the start, we have argued the complexity and profundity of the issues that Scottish literature embodies and addresses. The editors and authors of the 2015 volumes

play a full part in helping fulfil the vision with which the series in its initial form began, to problematise in the most positive and creative way any easy notion of what Scottish literature is. The generic and linguistic complexity of the poets, poet-playwright and novelist these volumes address illustrates that vision.

Ian Brown

Thomas Owen Clancy

Acknowledgements

The project behind this volume is the outcome of over two decades of research and teaching, in the course of which many friends, poets and/or colleagues, have contributed in different ways to my appreciation and understanding of Scottish poetry, providing me with invaluable inspiration and support. While I could not attempt to list them all here (many of them are indeed contributors to the present volume), I do wish to thank them collectively.

Scotland is a country that nurtures and supports literary culture to an extent that is rare elsewhere. Its extraordinary literary institutions and events – especially the Scottish Poetry Library and StAnza, Scotland’s annual poetry festival – have provided a unique source of inspiring ideas and concepts for the *Companion*.

Acknowledgements are due to the School of Critical Studies of the University of Glasgow, and in particular the colleagues of the department of Scottish Literature, for generously hosting me as an Honorary Research Fellow in 2010–11. It was there, in one of the friendliest and most stimulating professional environments in my life so far, that the project of the present volume took shape. I am especially grateful to the series editors, Ian Brown and Thomas Owen Clancy, for their support throughout the stages of preparing the book, and to the ASLS Director, Duncan Jones, for overseeing its production.

Finally, a special thanks goes to my mother, who taught me love of words and beauty. To her memory, this volume is dedicated.

A Note on the Text

Quotations from poems and the titles of poems written in languages other than English and Scots are provided in the original language in regular type, followed by translation in italics.

Gaelic poets are indicated by their Gaelic name, followed by its English version in parenthesis. An exception has been made for those poets who are internationally known by their English name: in these cases, it is the Gaelic name that follows parenthetically.

The collections of poems or anthologies whose full bibliographical details can be traced freely on the Internet are indicated in the text only by title and publication date. Fuller details are provided in endnotes for old and rare primary sources. Secondary sources are regularly referenced in endnotes.

Introduction

Carla Sassi

When Liz Lochhead was appointed Scots Makar – National Poet for Scotland – in 2011, she formally accepted her new role ‘on behalf of poetry itself, which’, she explained, ‘is, and always has been, the core of our culture, and in grateful recognition of the truth that poetry – the reading of it, the writing of it, the saying it out loud, the learning of it off by heart – all of this matters deeply to ordinary Scottish people everywhere’.¹ Lochhead’s words are not mere rhetoric, as indeed in Scotland the status of poetry is high and the love for it strong and widespread. Her statement, however, while it indeed expresses a sense of national pride, does not imply any national closure. Very much like her predecessor, Edwin Morgan (the first to hold the post of Scots Makar between 2004 and 2010), in her work she constructs nationhood as a democratic and inclusive polity, envisaging poetry as a medium to express local as well as planetary consciousness. In Anne Varty’s words, ‘she has taken Scotland beyond its borders and brought home new worlds, transforming both her native landscape and its global position’.²

Like all scholarly endeavours, and especially those that engage at some level with the ‘national’, even the present volume, encompassing approximately fifteen centuries of poetic production and thus engaging with writers and texts from ages when ‘Scotland’ did not exist, or its geopolitical configuration was very different from that of today, is inevitably retrospective in nature and informed by contemporary concerns. Scotland has changed dramatically in the past twenty years, socially, culturally and politically, and today seems to be on the verge of further radical change. In this period of dramatic transformation poets and poetry have often played an active role, not simply by voicing or representing contemporary hopes and demands, but by questioning conventional political language and taking a ‘poethical’ perspective on the possible future of their country – most visibly so during the 2014

referendum campaign. *The International Companion to Scottish Poetry*, conceived and written in the course of the past five years, could not and does not refrain from partaking in such a changed ideological and political landscape – that of a country that has gone a long way, in comparison with many European nations, to rethink its identity as that of a cosmopolitan ‘post-nation’, ready to revision its past as much as to imagine a new future. Very much like Lochhead’s ‘glocal’ project, then, the present volume aims at accounting for a genre that indeed matters deeply to contemporary Scottish readers and scholars and is perceived by many of them as a centrally meaningful expression of their national identity, and at the same time to take it beyond its borders, to estrange it from its cultural moorings and to have it fruitfully engage in a dialogue with the world.

It may be worthwhile to point out that the present volume is the first of its kind to engage with Scottish poetry as a whole. Innumerable scholarly works on specific poets, regions and periods are available. An impressive range of anthologies illustrate its many chronological, linguistic or thematic facets or indeed provide an overview of the history of Scottish poetry. Histories of Scottish literature, of course, devote ample sections to this genre. But no companion to, or history of, Scottish poetry has been produced before. The variety of reasons for this may be wide, and to assess them fully is beyond the scope of this introduction. They may have to do with the fact that ‘history’ and ‘poetry’ stage two anti-thetically different ‘grammars’ and aims – denotative versus connotative, a quest for ‘objective’ data and information versus a ‘subjective’ focus on form and language. They may also have to do with the complex history of ‘Scottish literature’ as a field of studies and with the markedly controversial process that has characterised the formation of its literary canon in the twentieth century – both aspects that somehow concur in making the weaving of a consistent critical narrative more challenging. They are surely to do with response to Scotland’s multilinguality: the ways in which at different periods poetry in Gaelic, Brittonic, Norse, Latin, French, Scots and English have been seen as separate, Gaelic literature distinct from Scottish literature, literature in English as not really ‘Scottish’ or Scottish literature as a subdivision of ‘English literature’. These are indeed issues that have been faced and carefully considered by the present editor, and that inevitably underlie this project. A companion, however, is not a history – it is, more humbly or more ambitiously, a tool that aims to support any would-be ‘traveller’, professional or occasional, into a field of studies. It may thus be compared to

a map in the hands of someone who ventures into a new or partly new territory. It will yield precious, even though, by necessity, incomplete, information, as well as options of orientation and indications of possible routes and paths. A map, very much like a companion, will provide an abstraction – an overview that leaves numberless local details uncharted, and yet offers a picture someone travelling on ground level would otherwise miss.

Readers already aware of the richness and complexity of the history of Scotland's poetry will know in advance that the present volume cannot aim, given its very size, at exhaustiveness. It does, however, aim at inclusiveness: spanning across fifteen centuries, it accounts for texts written in Celtic, Romance and Germanic languages and dialects, it engages, albeit succinctly, with the work of some of the best-known world poets – the makars, Robert Burns, James Macpherson, Walter Scott, Edwin Morgan, among others – as well as with authors (quite often women) whose work has been less visible at both a national and an international level. It also attempts to highlight, when possible, international affiliations, as indeed poetry (or any literary and artistic expression) can never be confined in the exclusive space of a single nation – it will trespass borders, and come back enriched and changed. And the history of Scotland's poetry is extraordinarily rich in such journeys: contaminations, hybridisations, borrowing and reappropriations, across three families of European languages and through contact with different cultures, within and outwith its national borders, are possibly one of its most notable and valuable features. The instability and complexity of Scotland's political history over the centuries may have had a negative impact in some aspects of its national life, but they have arguably represented an extraordinarily fertile field for poetic creativity – a wealth that has been fully evaluated only in the past twenty years or so, when the literatures of Scotland, in three main languages (Gaelic, Scots and English), have been recognised on the same standing, as all contributing in equal measure to the definition of the Scottish canon. Roderick Watson's critical anthology *The Poetry of Scotland: Gaelic, Scots & English 1380–1980*, published in 1995,³ represents an important milestone in this respect.

The *Companion*, then, responds to and furthers the ongoing quest for a pluralist representation of Scottish literary history, both by foregrounding an inclusive approach (rather than a strictly canon-oriented one, that would have focused on a select number of established writers), and by accounting for the different languages in which poetry was written

in the course of centuries: from the early Celtic languages, Old and Middle Scots, Latin and Norse, to Scotland's modern languages and dialects. In particular, it aims, innovatively, at providing an integrated and comparative approach to the three linguistic strands – Gaelic, Scots and English – that have been mostly treated by academic practice as separate, even incommunicable, fields of investigation. To this end, most of the chapters of the *Companion* have been co-authored by a Scots/English studies scholar and a Celtic studies specialist, or by a single contributor who has competence in both literary areas. This very structural choice – one that it is hoped will be opted for more frequently in the future – bestows a fresh perspective on the conventional chronological and thematic categories in which the *Companion* is articulated. It also aims to encourage the reader to see Scotland's poetry as a continuum of voices and to pursue further comparative exploration.

Because the purpose of the present volume is not to provide a history, but rather a flexible tool in the hands of students and scholars, it has been structured in three parts, representing three different standpoints from which Scotland's poetry can be investigated. While each part (and indeed each chapter) can be read individually, the three sections are also meant to work on a larger scale, and create a sense of the many ways in which poetry can be read and categorised, as well as yield a picture which is broader and more articulated than a single approach would have provided. The first part, 'Languages and Chronologies', is divided into nine chapters and provides a timeline based on conventional literary periodisation, while at the same time accounting, as explained above, for Scotland's heterogeneous linguistic voices. In this section, individual chapters are devoted respectively to early Celtic, early Scots and Latin poetry, as well as to the poetry in the languages and dialects of northern Scotland, seen as a linguistically and culturally specific region. The remaining chapters chart the parallel/intersecting poetic voices in Gaelic, Scots and English from the Middle Ages to the present day. The second part, 'Poetic Forms', divided into three chapters, focuses on the formal aspects of Gaelic and Scots poetry – metre, rhyme, sound patterns, stanza – and on the shape of a quintessentially 'Scottish' genre, the ballad in English and Scots. The third part, 'Topics and Themes', consisting of seven chapters, identifies five 'universal' subjects ('Nature, Landscape and Rural Life', 'Nation and Home', 'Protest and Politics', 'Love and Erotic Poetry', 'Faith and Religion') and concisely charts the specific meanings these take in specific historical and cultural contexts, from the medieval to the contemporary age. The two concluding chapters

focus on two professional practices that are crucially related to poetic production and that also present interesting national specificities – respectively charting the translation of a select number of Scottish poets into world languages (‘Scottish Poetry as World Poetry’), and providing a survey of the support to poets and poetry offered by contemporary institutions (‘The Literary Environment’).

A final, methodological note is in order with respect to the ‘national’ perspective foregrounded by the *Companion*. Each reader will of course bring his/her own distinct cultural baggage, interests and expectations to the appreciation of the present volume, and will predictably leave it with a slightly different set of impressions. And yet, for all its structural open-endedness, the *Companion* does pinpoint at least two national ‘truths’. The first is the objectively extraordinary richness and diversity of Scotland’s poetic heritage and contemporary scene. The second is the existence of a relevant number of specific features – cultural, formal, thematic – that create important lines of continuity across regions, languages and centuries, and that allow us (specialists in Scottish studies as well as occasional visitors) to deem the macro-category ‘Scottish poetry’ as a highly meaningful and productive one. T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis’s notions of a monolithically or organically defined ‘Great Tradition’, with capitals, are by now superseded and anachronistic. And so is the idea of a ‘pure’ and transcendent form of art, untouched by local processes, or the possibility of a purely ‘cosmopolitan’ literary utterance. The *Companion* eschews such views and attempts instead a balanced approach between a notion of nation that is purely ‘territorial’ or, to borrow and adapt a term used by Christopher Whyte, a stance that is ‘agnostic’ in relation to ‘nationalist ideology’,⁴ and the observation and recognition of recurring specific features, ideas and emotions that indeed have concurred in shaping the present idea of ‘Scotland’.