



Riach, A. (2015) Mr and Mrs Scotland are taking a vacation in the autonomous region. In: Falconer, R. (ed.) Kathleen Jamie: Essays and Poems on Her Work. Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, pp. 21-31. ISBN 9780748696000

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<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/101067/>

Deposited on: 01 February 2017

## **'Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Taking a Vacation in the Autonomous Region'**

**Alan Riach, from *Kathleen Jamie: Essays and Poems on Her Work*, ed. Rachel Falconer (Edinburgh University Press, 2015)**

At the end of an essay published in 2008, Kathleen Jamie said that 'wildness' was 'not a place to stride over but a force requiring constant negotiation. A lifelong negotiation at that: to give birth is to be in a wild place, so is to struggle with pneumonia. If you can look down a gryke, you can look down a microscope, and marvel at the wildness of the processes of our own bodies, the wildness of disease. There is Ben Nevis, there is smallpox. One wild worth protecting, one worth eradicating. And in the end, we won't have to go out to find the wild, because the wild will come for us.'<sup>i</sup>

A 'gryke' is a fissure in flat limestone, in which can be seen hundreds of plants thriving in the shelter of a miniature wilderness, and the delight in such a vision is described by Robert Macfarlane in his book, *The Wild Places* (2007), which Jamie's essay reviews. Her point is that, attractive as Macfarlane's work is, there is a liability in a comfortable narrator's honeyed prose recounting an expedition from which he and the reader both know they will safely return. The wild places evoke not only open, expansive, uninhabited land, but locations in time, where land-ownership might be a matter of violence, where the language of place names offers a history far from serene, where the 'preservation' of 'Nature' might come at the cost of neglecting or obscuring threatened or tortured realities, from which or through which people might – or sometimes, must – go fearfully. When the wild places are sporting-grounds for families of guests of royalty, or under the radar practice-space for war planes, wildness is not an exotic resort but a condition of social life that might, or should, be changed.

The contexts so far have been personal or geographical localities – the body (in childbirth or disease), the territory (wherever the excursion takes us), but there is another wild place in Jamie's poetry: the nation. For Jamie, Scotland is contextualised with co-ordinate points that arise from the foundations of her understanding of socially gendered, power-structured identities, in which nationality is only one component and redefinable part. The nation is a wild place of contesting forces. Affirmation of statehood is not likely to change that. No simplification of the political power structures can alter the priorities of demarcation, legalities, limits and what is beyond them. And from her earliest books, Jamie has been working to develop poetic forms of articulation that acknowledge clear structure while moving through its securities. What might be described as the

character of the work of her contemporaries – Liz Lochhead, Jackie Kay, Meg Bateman, Carol Ann Duffy, for example – might be quite firmly delineated. Jamie's work is more erratic than theirs, less certain, less emphatic, more tentative. The space it occupies is transformational. Their poems are frequently reports on, or playful engagements with, experience; Jamie's are more often about its potential, prospects or possibilities arising from it. This essay is an attempt to explore and justify this proposition.

*Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead: Poems 1980-1994* (2002) is a selection of her poems from her first collection, *Black Spiders* (1982), through to *The Queen of Sheba* (1994).<sup>ii</sup> The poems chart Jamie's exploration of understanding what ideas of position, power, place and personality, might mean, as they change in conditions of desire, enquiry and decisive judgement. Following *Mr and Mrs Scotland*, Jamie's later work develops further and her prose essays in *Findings* (2005) and *Sightlines: A Conversation with the Natural World* (2012) testify to specific engagements with nature, wilderness, the wild, and what these words mean. The potential for the later developments is inherent in the early work.

Pre-eminently, from the title itself, the promise of mortal demise delivered upon conventional, reactionary, intimidated articulations of 'Scottishness' is complemented by fully-charged assertions of value in social, gendered and regenerated self-determination. Yet this binary opposition oversimplifies the way the poems work, which is to deliver nuanced, subtle explorations of experience, ideas and physical locations being discovered, tentatively, as well as inhabited, fully, with great strengths of attachment, but going further, being considered in terms of what future potential such experience portends, what it might bring. The ideas and locations take her far from Scotland but as the title insists, her native country is not erased by this. This dynamic in Jamie's writing extends to her prose, where a sensitivity to particularities and the exercise of the power of critical judgement combine in situations both of hard extremity and transition. Her work brings together some of the most delicate perceptions and argumentative, oppositional propositions, in modern Scottish writing. This is a key method in her writing practice.

The trajectory of the book may be simply described as beginning in lyrical, personal but oblique perception, opening into a dialogue in a tragic love affair represented by personae from the Second World War, resuming and deepening a sense of personal authority via an excursion along 'The Karakoram Highway' and a further excursion to 'The Autonomous Region'. The final selection from *The Queen of Sheba* reoccupies and redefines the poet's position and authority in Scotland, with a more confidently assertive and defined presence which nevertheless insists upon the unavailability of the uncontrollable world. Jamie's poems open and invite us to encounter this world

beyond securities of category and definition. Their slight, hesitant movement at times belies the certainty of what she is delivering.

This is evident in her first collection, *Black Spiders* (1982). The title refers to the hair around the nipples of an unnamed man caught sight of by an unnamed woman. In the title poem's opening lines, she leaves him to go 'up to the convent' and he looks towards her, then goes swimming 'to the caves'. (p.15) In the closing lines, she glimpses him 'below', 'brushing salt' from his chest hair, and her desire to tickle and kiss him there is lightly, delicately noted. The sensitivity of physical attraction, the delicacy of the emotional relation, the evocation of hunger and need, impatience and movement, are all registered in the opening five and closing three lines; between them are nine lines depicting the convent abandoned ('The nuns have retreated' but for the 'eldest' nun peeling the bell 'in glee', as if demented) and the collection boxes empty. The praying was over once the nuns saw 'the Turks' / swords reflecting the sun'. The poem begins and ends with unfulfilled personal sexual desire, physical proximity and distance, the elements, a man and a woman; but its central lines depict the aftermath of a collective violent raid. The 'he' of the opening and closing lines is mysterious, undefined. The careful manipulation of past and present tense evokes retrospection and projection, recording desire that only a future might fulfil. But the whole intricate weave of imagery and action, tenderness and violence leaves a sense of the fragility of that future, an uncertainty about what it might bring, just as the need and want that is felt remains definite, but insecure.

This is a poetry representing diffidence, faltering, hesitation and desire, yet its assurance in delivering these qualities is constant. The locations are explicitly unfamiliar: one poem is entitled 'Women in Jerusalem' (pp.16-17); in 'The Harbour', we read, 'the harbour could be anywhere' (p.20); in 'The Leaving of an Island' (p.21) the word 'an' rejects cartographic specificity. In 'November' the named month gives calendrical place, but vagueness and universals inhabit the lines: 'On the shore / where he insists we walk, he holds me like a man / at a deck-rail in a gale.' (p.22) When we do get a location, it is occupied by an anonymous company: in 'Cramond Island', the group are 'Most who', 'them' and 'They' and once back in 'the study', 'they stare to sea, and heal, / marking pages with salt and sand / shaken from windblown hair.' (p.25) This vagueness invites the reader's accompaniment, a recognition that as we read these poems, we too are of these people. Yet at the same time, the figures Jamie refers to are not only others, depicted and seen as if in a film, but also personae, speaking and acting aspects of herself. Every one of these early poems is an exploration of these possibilities, which her later work carries to greater and more various realisation.

Her collaborative book-length poem-sequence, *A Flame in Your Heart* (1986), written with Andrew Greig, takes the personae to a defined historical location, where a Second World War fighter

plane pilot and his wife, and finally, widow, voice a series of oblique dialogic poems representing their relationship, their isolated experiences and reflections, their desires, hopes and failings. In *Mr and Mrs Scotland*, only Jamie's half of the earlier book is reproduced, so that reading her poems in this sequence outside of the dialogic totality delivers a character-based story centred on a persona who inhabits an inherently dramatic, or indeed theatrical, form. (pp.29-41) The nuances and undefined qualities of her earlier poems are more fixed and co-ordinated here, so there is a sense of development, but not of definition. She is still seeing where these modes might take her.

In *The Way We Live* (1987), the self-determination and security of her voice is unmistakable. Yet it arrives in a remarkable confluence of local, specific reference with emphatically international and universal imagery. For example, the title of 'Havers' is a Scots word for spoken nonsense, flights of fancy, talking rubbish, and the poem begins: 'She once went to Girvan on horseback / it's said.' (p.71) Girvan is an Ayrshire seaside holiday resort, popular in the 1960s, and the reference might depend on knowledge extraneous to the poem, but 'once' suggests 'once upon a time' and 'it's said' gives a cautionary note. The romantic idea of riding by the sea is built up further then deflated:

Wind from the hillsides  
through her hair and its mane, sheep  
on the roadside. Havers. Her hair  
never felt breezes, caught to her neck  
like grey fleece to wire. (p.71)

'She' appears from the memories of childhood, her hands like saint's bones and her cheek like flaky grey parchment. Far from a figure idealised in romantic abandon, she seems more like a spinster aunt. Yet what tone prevails in this poem? Scorn for the urge to romanticise a more mundane reality? Affection for the fact of memory, helplessly giving more to the unrealised life only glimpsed and hardly comprehended by the observer? There is a melancholy quality to the clash of local idiom, the Scots word and place, a sense of diminishment, and a stronger sense of the contemporary moment bringing this past person into the poem's presence.

The culmination of this process of bringing together these seemingly disparate things is in the title poem, 'The Way We Live' itself, beginning with the command to 'Pass the tambourine, let

me bash out praises' and the elision from that opening (a quotable unit) into the second and third lines: 'to the Lord God of movement, to Absolute / non-friction, flight,' then on into the fourth line: 'and the scary side: / death by avalanche, birth by failed contraception.' (p.76) The use of capital 'A' in 'Absolute' and the apparently arbitrary imagery of avalanche and contraception (both vague, non-specific references) all keep the lines active and almost abstract. The only clear visual image in these four lines (apart from avalanche, which is generic) is 'tambourine' – a word which immediately evokes a hand, two hands, a body in movement, rhythm, music and dance. It is not a conventionally familiar Scottish musical instrument, and the references that immediately follow, to chicken tandoori and reggae, run straight into tenements, tee-shirts on pulleys and dreaming waitresses, which are both Scotland and other places just as well. Airports, motorways and the symbolic, and real, 'mountains', lead to geography: Rannoch moor, 'endless gloaming in the North' but also 'Asiatic swelter' and 'the skeletal grip / of government'. The ninth line of the poem ends, 'waking to uncertainty' but the last two lines return to the opening command and invert the syntax brilliantly: 'To the way it fits, the way it is, the way it seems / to be: let me bash out praises – pass the tambourine.' No exclamation mark is required, for the self-assurance delivers the sense of preference without exaggeration, and the placing of 'the way it seems' at the end of the penultimate line makes sure that touch of uncertainty is still present. Whatever it is, this seeming, whatever is there *apparently*, is something we must deal with as surely as whatever is *actually* there, 'the way it is'. Both what 'is' and what 'seems' require the engagement and the promise to be engaged, being made in the poem.

The excursus that informs the poems of the 1993 collection, *The Autonomous Region* (selections, pp.77-108) takes us to Lake Qinghai and the Tibetan plateau in China, one of the far places, or the 'wild places' to use Robert Macfarlane's term. By now, however, Jamie's character and the methodology of her poetic enquiry are clear, and clearly her own. In the distance of her travels, there are conventional exoticisms ('a high pass over the mountains', 'the Sun-Moon mirror', 'jasmine / air', 'dear Uygur boys', yaks), but there is also the infiltration of Scots words, a language that registers that nationality in the context of the other 'autonomous region': Fa-hsien has bathed in the 'joyous lake' and made himself fresh and clean:

and now his hand and cards have changed

reveal

a hanker for his ain folk,

his auld hert follows suit. (p.95)

So when this sequence comes to its final poem, Jamie is using Scots throughout. The journey into the wild place of a distant and different geography has returned the voice and returned the language to her. She hears

Wave droonin wave

on a pebbly shore,

the *ahe* o machair, o slammach,

o impatience; ahent the saft saltire

i trashed, an sheep;

wha's drift on the brae

is a lang cloud's shadda. (p.106)

Upon waking, there is the realisation: 'A'm far fae hame, / I hae crossed China.' The poem abjures apostrophes, varies the spelling of one-letter words ('i' and 'A' and 'I'), works through the uncertainties of diction, yet delivers the conviction in, and commitment to, self-realisation.

This is most elaborately and compellingly affirmed in *The Queen of Sheba* (1994). The title poem is well-known but it is important to read it as opening the way for what follows in the book, collecting individuals, experiences, registers and idioms of language, characters changed through time (both in personality and in social history), hopes for possibilities and curses on constraints. The Queen of Sheba arrives to visit revenge upon the dead hand and oppressive spirit of 'Scotland'. The word recurs in the caricature couple who give their name to the title of the whole collection, Mr and Mrs Scotland. Identities of nation and gender are confirmed, confined and constricted by convention, and demolished by the appetites – both sensual and intellectual – of the exemplary Queen and all the 'thousand laughing girls' who draw not 'their' but 'our' hot breath to shout out their affirmation of self-extension. (p.113) The element of fantasy or dream in the title poem is tempered by the use of vernacular, working-class urban Scots phrases, and this technical procedure

is evident in 'School Reunion' (pp.121-125), 'Bairns of Suzie: a hex' (pp.126-127), 'Wee Baby' (p.128) and 'Wee Wifey' (p.129). In these poems, domestic, small-town, small-minded clichés of Scottishness are sharply satirised and ambiguously reimagined. The 'wee baby' might be a sentimental horror, slavering on the future, but she is also 'cradled in the sieve of all potential'. The 'wee wifey' might be 'out to do me ill' but she is 'a demon' caught by the persona in the poem, and 'we love each other dearly'. There is an affinity and indeed affection in this horrible connection. If these diminutive terms make subordinate identities that are no more than parts of the woman writing the poems, they remain attached. Dividing 'land from sea, sea from sky' may be tidy, but things are always on the move, and won't stay apart: 'The kingdom of Wee Baby is within. / She curls her fists and holds tight.' Like the nocturnal creatures in Robert Lowell's paranoid poem, 'Skunk Hour', Baby and Wifey 'will not scare.'<sup>iii</sup>

These conventional representations of 'Scottishness' regenerate identities and find form in Jamie's plurality of idioms, voices and tonalities. This is clear in 'Arraheids' (p.137), where prehistoric arrowheads are identified as 'the hard tongues o grannies' that have been lying in the land for generations, 'in wicked cherms'; and in 'Skeins o Geese':

Whit dae birds write on the dusk?

A word niver spoken or read.

The skeins turn hame,

on the wind's dumb moan, a soun,

maybe human, bereft. (p.159)

Writing, inscription, becomes an elision, as 'word' is negated as something that is neither voiced to be heard nor made visible on paper to be seen. Birds 'write' nothing on the dusk, and then the sound in nature of the wind's 'moan' is 'dumb', meaning, perhaps, not soundless but inarticulate, and in that respect, suggesting ('maybe') something human, a song of loss, grief or sorrow, as in the Scots phrase, to 'mak' moan' or 'makin' a main' (familiar from the traditional ballad, 'The Twa Corbies'). These words are all connected in the poem syntactically, through rhetorical question and answer and visual image depicted in a sky whose twilight clarity is evoked by the reference to the wind, which is, like the geese, moving through its empty space. Yet each word or phrase seems weightless, the different linguistic registers of Scots and English terms and verbal idioms artfully placed yet



almost imperceptibly distinct. 'Whit', 'dae', 'niver', 'hame' and 'soun' are Scots, and all other words are standard English. The subtlety here is unobtrusive but deft,

Jamie's poetics of juxtaposition of voices has been carefully analysed by Nancy Gish in her essay, 'Complexities of Subjectivity: Scottish Poets and Multiplicity'.<sup>iv</sup> Gish discusses the work of Liz Lochhead and Jackie Kay as well as Jamie, and perceptively notes that in the 'distinct lexicons, spellings, sounds, and pronunciations' of their poems, the readers' participation is engaged and the language forms become interactive, not to be assumed. Lochhead puts it succinctly: 'I would say that the big split in Scotland is between the self and the other self.'<sup>v</sup> Up until *The Queen of Sheba*, Gish argues, Jamie's poems are 'in English and conventionally "expressive"' – though as we have seen, there are clear indications of the process of 'othering' that was to become so decisively characteristic, even within the earlier English-language poems. Jamie has said that when she moved to Sheffield in England in 1989, and registered the distinct languages of Scots and English, she was more capable of dealing with and making use of 'the Scots polyphony'.<sup>vi</sup> This discovery and the inhabitation it led to helped bring about her sense of what the 'wild places' really are, the locations of extremity and liminality. In this way, 'Scottishness' in the new Scotland must mean something very different from what had been accepted heretofore. The Autonomous Region is no longer an exoticised location on the Tibetan plateau, but comes into its own across the history of generations, from MacDiarmid, through the generation of great poets, all men, writing after the Second World War, to the post-1970s generation of women rewriting the identity of the nation. If MacDiarmid set an example of multi-faceted national identity, and the 'seven poets' generation created their work from the geographical places each one distinctively favoured, then the gendered world of the generation since has made the national identity even more complex and welcoming, home to different diversities, accommodating – not always easily – the wild places of nature and domesticity, chaos and order, states and movements, internationality and self-determined nationality.

Eavan Boland, in her essay, *A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in the National Tradition* describes her own determination to write herself into a national tradition, as a woman.<sup>vii</sup> To do so was to break the identity of masculine authority and to redefine the discourse of nationalism. She wanted to write defiantly and definitively as an Irish poet, she says, in other words, emphatically to be part of the national tradition in its complex totality; and at the same time, she wanted to write decidedly as a woman, in work that arises from her own self-conscious experience and might deal with any matter on equal terms with her male contemporaries. This assertion begins with recognition of the predominance of male poets eulogising the nation as a principle of womanly virtue – Kathleen Ni Houlihan, Mother Ireland – but instead of opposing and rejecting nationalism as something hopelessly contaminated by the masculine imagination, and thus to be rejected, Boland's

strategy was to reclaim both the nation and the provenance of poetry as her own domain. This strategy deconstructs the polarised associations of male provenance as state-nation-authority-law-literature-art-poetry and claims for female engagement the state, nation, authority, law, literature, art and poetry. Women equally with men, therefore, this strategy insists, are to be understood as citizens and artists. This degendering of secular politics was an act of enablement. The fictions of gendered prioritisation could therefore be understood as historically engineered. They may have been purposeful and useful; they may have been psychotic or pathological; but they could not be maintained unselfconsciously any longer.

Now, in Scotland, that had already been taking place, first in the work of Hugh MacDiarmid, then in the generation of male poets who came out of the Second World War, who began publishing in the 1950s, and are depicted together in the iconic multiple portrait, 'Poets' Pub' by Alexander Moffat (1980), now hanging in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh. The fact that the seven poets prominently depicted there are all men is an accurate representation of the poets whose magnitude of achievement in their era of social history is undeniable. Other poets may have been included, but none would match the seven in the painting for sustained quantity as well as quality of work. Two decades on from its completion, though, the scene had changed. The important point here is not that Moffat was discriminating against women (he was not), nor is it even that society in the 1970s was discriminating against women (which of course it was), it is rather that the women who were published increasingly in the decades following the painting used the achievements of their predecessors gainfully, gamesomely, in the development of their own distinctive work. Meg Bateman learned from, respected, honoured and made creative use of the work of Sorley MacLean. The same could be said of Liz Lochhead and Edwin Morgan, or any younger poet writing in English and Norman MacCaig, just as each one of that generation of men – MacLean, MacCaig, Morgan, Iain Crichton Smith, George Mackay Brown, Robert Garioch, Sydney Goodsir Smith, learned from, and acknowledged the achievement of, Hugh MacDiarmid. None of them were to be emulated, and MacDiarmid especially repudiated the notion of 'disciples', but they each showed that things could be done – different things, in different ways, and in different locations. In this respect, they were exemplary.

Characteristic of the generational change that took place in the 1970s and 1980s is Liz Lochhead's 'Mirror's Song', which begins with the command to the reader and the poet's persona and the mirror of the poem's title: 'Smash me looking-glass glass...' and ends with the line, 'a woman giving birth to herself'.<sup>viii</sup> It is as if in such an act of self-generation, and regeneration, the exemplary struggle enacted in the poem, takes its place along with the work of all the poets named in the process of a nation giving birth to itself. From MacDiarmid through the geographical locations

favoured by the next generation of men, to Lochhead and the complex identities embodied by the generation of women after them, and Jamie in that generation, the multi-faceted, plural nationality is redefining and qualifying itself, and extending into new forms and preferences. It is a continuing epic work. As Wole Soyinka describes the nature of the form: 'The epic celebrates the victory of the human spirit over forces inimical to self-extension. It concretises in the form of action the arduous birth of the individual or communal entity, creates a new being through utilising and stressing the language of self-glorification to which human nature is healthily prone.'<sup>ix</sup>

Soyinka argues in his essay, 'The Fourth Stage', that in the cosmogony, the understanding of what humanity is in the cosmos, in which he grew up as a Yoruba in Nigeria, there are three worlds: the worlds of the ancestors, the living and the unborn. It is possible to see how, in the world of western capitalism, commercial priorities are dynamic because they are pre-eminently about the living, resources are exploited and the future can look after itself; and it is possible to see how conservative, moribund societies (like those places where, generation after generation, Mr and Mrs Scotland once lived) can be dragged down by doing things the way they've always been done in the imagined world of the ancestors; but the world of the unborn needs more attention. More than in the work of Lochhead, Kay, Duffy, Bateman, this sense of what we might provide for, or keep in mind for the well-being of, future generations, is characteristic of Jamie. The sustained strength of character of Lochhead, the clever turns and challenges of Duffy, the self-assurance and poise of Kay, and balance of self-centredness and vulnerability of Bateman, are very different from the hesitations, gingery decisions, multivalent perspectives, tentative annotations of experience that typify Jamie's poems. This is because each poem is less a declaration than a proposition, less an assertion than an attempt, less the oil painting, more the sketch, indicating rather than fully embodying. Yet these are inadequate metaphors because they do not convey the achievement, which is singular and as great – though perhaps less easily described – than those of her contemporaries.

Soyinka goes on to say that there is a fourth stage, the realm of transition, when things change, and human beings enter onto this fourth stage, or into this fourth space, to risk transition, to bring about change. This is the space of tragedy, but it is also the space where change does happen, transition can take place. In the whole cosmos of creative and destructive being, Soyinka says, according to the wisdom he acquired in his own upbringing in Nigeria, offences against humanity and even against nature 'may be part of the exaction by deeper nature from humanity of acts which alone can bring about a constant rejuvenation of the human spirit.'<sup>x</sup>

Tentative yet certain, willing to risk the destructive potential of this stage, where wildness is, Kathleen Jamie's best work reminds us that the values of Enlightenment and reason are not the only

ones. The decisiveness with which Jamie has taken this risk has been clearly characterised since the beginning of the new millennium by a direct engagement with the politics of Scotland and national identity. As with Eavan Boland's decision to write as a woman while redefining national identity by writing within it, rather than rejecting or denying it, Jamie's explicit engagements are strong. For example, the poem published in 2001, on the design chosen for the new parliament building designed by Catalan architect Enric Miralles, entitled 'For a new Scottish Parliament', consists in its entirety of two lines. The first delivers the image of the upward-looking hull of an overturned boat, but then the second line describes this as a 'watershed', meaning both a transitional historical moment full of future potential, and a visualisation of a wooden shelter made of a construction normally associated with being at sea.<sup>xi</sup>

Further, on 22 August 2013, it was reported online by the BBC that Jamie won the open vote to write a commissioned poem for the refurbished Battle of Bannockburn site, looked after by the National Trust. This has been inscribed on the rotunda monument there. The poem gestures towards 'our land' in its mixed weather, owned not by people but part of the whole earth, with its particularities of 'westlin' winds and fernie braes, / Northern lights and siller tides'.<sup>xii</sup> Jamie commented on the BBC online page:

From the start I wanted this piece of work to make a nod to the Scottish literary tradition and the Scottish landscape, to evoke the deep love of a country that makes one community out of many people. As Bannockburn is so important in Scottish history, it seemed proper to acknowledge our cultural traditions, especially poetry and song about landscape. Of course I'm pleased 'my' poem was chosen, but I don't think of this work as 'mine' any longer. It's built from traditional materials, so to speak, and it's spun into the future, and like the land it describes, it belongs to everyone that appreciates it.

David McAllister, director of the Battle of Bannockburn project, added: 'Kathleen's poem encapsulates the essence of the Battle of Bannockburn project - introducing a contemporary take on the battle and the landscape while paying respect to the memory of this important moment in Scottish history.'<sup>xiii</sup>

However explicit this alignment with nationality and the politics of national identity, Jamie's qualifications are a safeguard against the ossification of identity nationalism sometimes inclines towards. Her poems continue to emphasise the liminal space that even something as seemingly secure as nationality is always in the process of moving *through*. Scotland may be 'our land' but we are 'mere transients', acknowledging Robert Burns and Hamish Henderson (in her references to the songs, 'Now westlin winds' and 'Freedom, Come All Ye') but also the conundrum of love in the

poem's last line: 'You win me, who take me most to heart.' This is reminiscent of the opening lines of Hugh MacDiarmid's poem 'Scotland': 'It requires great love of it, deeply to read / The configuration of a land...'<sup>xiv</sup> And just as MacDiarmid evokes a constant process of change and unending renewal, a redistribution of things in a world that takes the risks of regeneration, so Jamie in her later work keeps us in mind of what that liminality must mean, in her poem 'Crossing the Loch' from *Jizzen* (1999).

This poem begins with a quiet, conversational question, asking the reader if she or he might remember 'how we rowed toward the cottage' across a bay, after a night drinking in a pub. The poet says that she cannot remember who rowed, but only how the jokes and voices went quiet and the sound of the oars in the water 'reached long into the night'. The crossing is scary, the breeze is cold, the hills 'hunched' around the loch and the water itself seems to conceal nuclear submarines, nightmares lurking below, real and metaphorical. Yet the water is phosphorescent and beautiful, shining on fingers and oars, and the passengers are like pilgrim saints making a crossing to another place, a destination from which they will enter their futures. They are 'twittering' (small birds in a nest washed out from shore, with no idea of what the future might bring), 'astonished' (in awe, confronted by the immensity of the unknowable universe around them), and 'foolhardy' (they could have capsized and been drowned) but, the poet tells us, mixing tenses so that past, present and what can be seen retrospectively from a future position, and reminds us that there is still a future to come, 'we live – and even have children / to women and men we had yet to meet / that night we set out', travelling through the night that the poet and her companions were 'calling our own / the sky and salt-water, wounded hills' and recollecting

the glimmering anklets

we wore in the shallows  
as we shipped oars and jumped,  
to draw the boat safe, high at the cottage shore.<sup>xv</sup>

As the poem ends, the boat may be safe, the travellers ashore, but the wild is still there, and the autonomous region is always in need of new creation. Mr and Mrs Scotland may find new meaning and purpose there. Kathleen Jamie's poems show us how that can be made.

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## Notes

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i

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