



Riach, A. (2016) Not Burns – Elizabeth Melville! *National*, 2016, 19 Feb.

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version.
You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/149717/>

Deposited on: 12 October 2017

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow

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

Not Burns – Elizabeth Melville!

Alan Riach (Friday 19 February 2016)

Thocht Tirannes freat, thocht Lyouns rage & roir:

Defy them all and feir not to win out

Or, in English: “Though tyrants try to intimidate you and lions rage and roar, defy them all and fear not – we will win.”

Fine words from the first woman in Scotland to see her work published in a book of her own: *Ane Godlie Dreame*, printed in Edinburgh by Robert Charteris in 1603. Elizabeth isn’t named on the title page. The book is credited to “M.M. Gentelwoman in Culros, at the requeist of her freindis”. “M.M.” is Mistress Melville and the epigraph reads: “Introite per augustam portam, nam lata est via ducit ad interitum”, from Matthew 7:13: “Enter ye in at the strait gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat”.

The two-line quotation above is engraved in the paving stones in the Makars’ Court, just off the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, unveiled with a flourish by Germaine Greer on 21 June 2014. Melville is commemorated alongside Burns, Fergusson, Ramsay, MacDiarmid and many others.

But she stands also in the company of other women, whose poetry too often has been neglected or obscured. No real poet will ever denigrate the value of what might be learnt from other poets – women or men – so the generation of women writing poetry since the 1970s acknowledged the generation of pre-eminent poets, all men, writing immediately after the Second World War. Their names are perhaps familiar: MacCaig, MacLean, Morgan, Garioch, Goodsir Smith, Mackay Brown, Crichton Smith.

Today, the names of those women writing great work in the later twentieth, early twenty-first centuries might be equally – some even more – familiar: Liz Lochhead, Jackie Kay, Kathleen Jamie, Meg Bateman, Carol Ann Duffy, Anne Frater, Gerda Stevenson. But as with the older men, and as with Burns himself, secure critical evaluation of their work is ongoing.

There is one thing they all share, though: none are disciples. None follow blindly the styles or opinions of their fellows and predecessors. Influence is not the word. But there are climates of experience, attitudes and priorities that change in time like gravitational tides and currents, while certain values stay true. MacDiarmid was an example to all, good, bad, ugly and beautiful, but he was never an idol and deplored the idea of “followers”. Iain Crichton Smith once remarked that MacDiarmid’s one really important example was to show that it was possible to be a great poet in Scotland. It could be done.

So instead of the familiar habits of our day, celebrity culture, the authority of money and media – the broad way through the wide gate – maybe it’s worth picking a strait gate and a narrow path to approach some of these less familiar poets. And think of them in their own histories.

In the UK, it was only after the First World War in 1918 that men over the age of 21 and women over 30 were “given” a vote. Equal franchise at 21 took until 1928. Democracy is a long time coming. In New Zealand it had happened in 1893. In Finland, in 1913. In Saudi Arabia, not until 2015. The political, social and domestic contexts – not to mention sexual, financial and religious assumptions and oppressions – affected the possibility – let alone the encouragement – of women writing poems, or painting, or composing, until very recently.

And if that’s no more than a thumbnail sketch, it’s easily forgotten. These simple facts are a context for the long haul towards acknowledgement that women, as much as men, might make works of art as valid as any by virtue not only of experience but also, and equally, of quality of judgement.

It’s evident in Elizabeth Melville’s poems. In our secular, materialist era, their pervasive religious context might seem at first glance to make them irrelevant. This is wrong, for two reasons: first, religious convention is everywhere even now, in its worst aspects of sectarianism and violence. In its assumptions and exclusions it can be as dangerous as patriarchal sexism. In daily practice and social life, religion is always political. It was even more emphatically so in Melville’s time. Society is not as secular as it seems.

More important, though, is that in literary terms, any belief system can be read metaphorically. The Welsh poet R.S. Thomas understood this and said so: as a church minister, he got himself into some trouble for saying that he thought God was a poet with a great mathematical mind who dreamed the world into being, and that the Bible was an enormous metaphor. Who can prove he was wrong? Sometimes literalism is the enemy. All literature works by metaphor. That doesn't mean it isn't grounded in reality or doesn't help us with the literal and lasting truths of what life is. Ultimately, that's why we still read Homer or Dunbar.

London will disappear. Troy did. Shakespeare will survive.

So when we read Elizabeth Melville, we have to understand her work entirely in her own history with its specific religious contexts but we can also appreciate its value in the 21st century. It has application.

Melville, or Lady Culross (c.1578-c.1640), was the second daughter of an aristocratic Fife family, in times when the gulf between rich and poor was not as great as it is today. She was an exact contemporary of Shakespeare, and witnessed the departure of King James VI to London to become James I of the abruptly united kingdom.

Her major work is “Ane Godlie Dreame”, a vision-poem taking us on a journey through Hell. She may have been familiar with Robert Henryson’s “Orpheus and Eurydice”, in which Orpheus searches for his lost love through Heaven and Hell. She might even have read Dante’s “Inferno”. Her poem explores a similar metaphor and its meaning is familiar to anyone: you have to search high and low, untiringly, even though immense difficulties are set against you, to find the truth you’re looking for. It’s a cliché of cringing pulchritude in Harry Lauder’s song, “Keep Right On to the End of the Road” and politicians will trot something like it out flippantly whenever a soundbite is wanted. But there is a truth in it, and Melville’s expression of it has lastingly serious force. Unlike Henryson or Dante, Melville was a staunch protestant but the imagery and linguistic energy in her poetry are not confined to any single faith.

“Thir ar the dayes that thou sa lang foretold / Sould cum befor this wretchit warld sould ende. / Now vice abounds and charitie growes cald, / The Devill prevaillis, his forces he dois bend / Gif it could be, to wraik thy children deir”. It’s all too familiar in a 21st century where instead of provision for the worst-off folk the prevailing political practice is to rob the poor and fill up the coffers of the richest.

For Melville, hope comes in the form of a benevolent angel: “With siches and sobs as I did so lament, / Into my dreame I thocht their did appear / Ane sicht maist sweit, quhilk maid me well content: / Ane Angell bricht with visage schyning cleir” who asks her, why all this grief, and advises, “Lift up thy heart, declair thy greif to mee, / Perchance thy paine brings pleasure in the end.”

So the journey begins, through an infernal terrain so visually vivid the impression of filmic potential is emphatic. “Fordwart wee past on narrow brigs of trie / Over waters greit that hiddeouslie did roir: / Their lay below, that fearful was to sie, / Maist uglie beists that gaipit to devour.” And when she almost falls in weariness to rest, the Angel pulls her up: “thou may not sit nor stand, / Hald on thy course and thou sall find it best, / Gif thou desyris to sie that pleasant Land.”

It gets worse: “I luikit down and saw ane pit most black, / Most full of smuke and flaming fyre most fell: / That uglie sicht maid mee to flie aback, / I feirit to heir so manie shout and yell”. The Angel confirms her fear: “This pit is Hell, quhairthrow thou now mon go, / There is thy way, that leids the to the land”. The essential metaphor of the poem is clear enough: “The way to Heaven mon be throw Death and Hell”.

Along with the “Dreame” a complete edition of Melville’s poems recovered from manuscripts by one of the finest scholars of early and Renaissance Scottish music and poetry, Dr Jamie Reid Baxter, was published in 2010 by Solsequium, 104 Duke Street, Edinburgh, the imprint of www.privatebooksales.co.uk. This little book, carefully annotated with a glossary for the unfamiliar Scots words, is a treasure of Scottish poetry and a significant work in the history of Scottish women’s literature.

So the story of women writing poetry in Scotland has a long tradition, despite our society’s oppressions of it. Many, perhaps most, of the great Scottish ballads may have been composed by women. In the 20th century, Violet Jacob (1863-1946), Marion Angus (1865-1946), Helen Burness Cruickshank (1886-1975) and the novelist and translator Willa Muir (1890-1970), warrant reappraisal, because the conventions of denial and neglect continue to prevail.

As Edward Dorn put it in 1984: “Poetry is where you find it, not where it says that it’s at. Where it says it’s at, I don’t find a lot of poetry there – very often, mostly none.”

Keep looking. The truth is out there.

[Boxed off:]

Sonnet by Elizabeth Melville, Lady Culross

I will be as an elme that still doth stand
and will not bowe for no kinkynd of blaist
I will have my affectiouns at command
and cause them yield to reason at the laist

In midst of all my paine I will hold fast
the herb of patience to cure my sore
No kind of greif sall mak my hairt agast
nor earthlie cairs torment my mynd no more

Sould I lament I can not tell quhairfoir
It will be long or murning may me mend
altho I sould sit siching evermore
no sichts nor sobbs can caus my greif tak end

Rejoyce in god my saull and be content
then hes thou more than wealthie Cressis rent.