

# John Glenday: *The Strathkinness Interview*

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**J**OHAN GLENDAY was born in Monifieth in 1952. He lives in Carnoustie and works as a Counsellor for addicts in Dundee. Glenday has been an English student, a driver, a printer's assistant, and a psychiatric nurse. He founded and ran the Blind Serpent Press with his second wife, Penny. Kate Armstrong's *Wild Mushrooms* (1993) is a fine example of the Press's contribution to the literary language debate in Scottish culture. Glenday's first volume, *The Apple Ghost*, appeared to critical appreciation in 1989. In 1990-91, he was appointed the Scottish/Canadian Exchange Fellow; previous recipients were Liz Lochhead and William McIlvanney. While based at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Glenday travelled widely, drawing on painting and the American Civil War as subjects of his 1995 volume, *Undark*. His poetry has been published internationally in such publication as *1st of May Poetry Prize Anthology*, *Behind the Lines*, *Blind Serpent*, *Chapman*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Lines Review*, *Observer/Arvon Prizewinner's Anthology 1985*, *Other Poetry*, *National Poetry Competition Prizewinners' Anthology 1984*, *New Writing Scotland* 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, *Poetry Matters*, *Radical Scotland*, *Scottish National Poetry Competition Anthology*, *Scriveins*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Wascana Review*, *De Europese Lente*, *Event*, *Fine Madness*, *Gairfish*, *Luceafărul*, *Northlight*, *Poetry Canada*, *Poetry Oxford*, *Secrets from the Orange Couch*, and *Verse*. The following interview took place at the home of Mr. and Mrs. J. Cocker, in Strathkinness, Fife, across the Tay estuary from Carnoustie.

*I'd like to begin by asking what you're doing now in your writing.*

I'm finishing off putting together the next collection. It's a bit more disparate than my first collection. Many of the poems are centred on art, in one form or another, and I wondered if this has something to do with my chronic lack of imagination. I think a lot about imagination. And I certainly get inspiration from art, sort of second hand, so I've been working on a sequence based on the paintings of René Magritte and there are also other paintings I've done work on. I'm also trying to write some poems based on the work of Eadweard Muybridge, an English photographer who went out to California in the 1850s. He was the person who first worked on sequential photography to show how animals and human beings moved. It was really the basis of two things for me: one was the understanding of how animals such as horses can gallop, so it was an anatomical work, and it was also one of the first attempts at cinematography.

*And the poems function on the same level.*

Yes, that's what I was trying to do with the poems. One of my least successful poems was my Muybridge poem. It's a poem about his life, because he had an extraordinary life, and I was also comparing his two types of photography. He took photographs of his family, and he took the sequence of photographs for—I can't remember the name of his sponsor—Stanton, I think it was; but it's that movement in stillness that interests me. There's an apparent stillness in the portraits of his wife especially, and portraits of Hopi Indians—he did a lot of study of them—and the movement in the sequential photographs. But there seemed to be a paradox because the sequential photographs are the deader of the two. I can't understand it. He sliced up this movement so finely; it's almost like he sliced up the movement in the subjects as well. There is the portrait of his wife, which is apparently absolutely still; you can see the depth in the photograph and the movement is all still there. You feel there is so much coming out of her that isn't being released by the photograph, and that interested me.

*So is there a shift between the narrative poems and the more imagistic poems or are you using similar kinds of poems to deal with both types of photography?*

The trouble I'm having with the key poem, the Muybridge poem, is that I'm trying to get the two into one. It's a narrative poem because it's telling the story of his life, but it's also trying to explain what's behind the sequential photographs and what may be can be read into them, and how it relates to us as readers and observers. His wife had an affair with a local con-man and their child, whom Muybridge thought was his own child, was actually the child of this con-man. When Muybridge found this out, he killed his wife, shot her in the head. He got off with it too, as a matter of fact. The time when the photograph was taken this all was going on; she's actually pregnant in the photograph. Behind this image, there's the affair; there're the victims of the affair—Muybridge, the child that's not his. It's all there unsliced. And then you have his other photographs where he divided it all off absolutely and he's looking into it all and he understands how this animal moves; his wife though—he doesn't understand how she moves. But it's a difficult one to condense enough into a poem.

*What would be poems based on Magritte's paintings? Is there some inspiration from things like Williams's "Poems From Brueghel"?*

Not really. I suppose it will hearken back to that, and also W. H. Auden's version as well, but it's really just something I'm drawn to do. I think I'm a frustrated artist, and there are some paintings I look at and I'm absolutely drawn to write about them. And usually my interpretation is, thankfully, totally wrong; it's nothing to do with what the artist had in mind. I have one based on a Chagall painting, "Over Vitebsk," and my poem is extremely pessimistic, extremely gloomy. It hearkens to Chernobyl and this sort of personal war, whereas the Chagall—when I actually read what he wrote about that painting—is a supremely optimistic painting about his hometown, his first media exhibition. This was a very positive painting for him. I totally missed that, which I quite enjoy because I feel I've got something out of it about me, not too much Chagall, not writing about what he felt but how I

feel. . . . He had a sense of inner weight as well, what weight people have. Not how heavy they are, but their inner weight. So many of Chagall's paintings have these weightless people in them. In "Over Vitebsk," it's a wandering Jew; with his bag over his shoulder he hangs in the air, a canted animal; so you can see he doesn't weigh anything. He's mentioned in terms of a *luftmensch*—people of the air, vagabonds who eat air because they have no money or supplies.

*When you were in Canada, a couple of these poems came out in "Event," which were part of a series or sequence on the American Civil War. What's happening with those?*

I'm continuing writing those. I'm hoping to have about ten poems in the end on the American Civil War. There are about five at the moment that I'm happy-ish with. I'd like to extend that to about ten. I've got the bones of about another five or so poems. I would envision it in the next while to have a fairly substantial section of it.

*Re-linking the other two interests, the weight and the motion?*

Very much the photography and the motion, yes. Most definitely so. The whole inspiration for writing about the American Civil War was in photography. It went back to Brady, who was the touring photo-journalist of the Civil War. He went in a caravan to the battlefields. The Balkan/Crimean War was one of the first wars where there were battlefield photographers. Again it comes to movement and stillness because there's a paradox in the art of photography. The people who stayed still were the clearest in the photographs. When finally the photograph goes off you have to sit there smiling for a minute and a half while these slow chemicals absorb the image; so, in the battlefield, the dead people were the ones that came out clearly. If you look at Brady's photographs, in the background you can see the living people; they're like ghosts and you can see through them, and they're moving about in the background. So the horses and soldiers that survived the battles are like ghosts moving through the battlefield, and the dead are absolutely clearly lined out in the photograph. It's an interesting paradox.

*It's quite a stark contrast with your idea of weightlessness inside people.*

That's right. The ones without weight—the living are the ones without weight. A visual inspiration that really fired me to write about the civil war was that after the war, the magazines no longer wanted the photographs, so the glass plates were sold to greenhouses with the negatives of these dead soldiers. Again there's a superb image of the glass being a filter between the light, and whatever's being grown out after the war.

*The other area you were working on is the whaling industry in Dundee.*

That's right; again this is something I have a problem with. I've been trying to decide whether to write in Scots or in English for this one. I feel I should be writing in Scots, but works I have in progress for it have been mostly in English. It's a sequence I've been wanting to do because it's close to my heart, and my own family has been involved in the whaling industry in Dundee. My grandmother's brother was an engineer, and one of the last Dundee whalers. . . . He was one of the characters in the poem "Distant Relations." And I always like symbols of things under the world of air, and the things that go on in the whaling industry in Dundee are very definitely that. The Tay whale itself is a marvellous symbol; this dying animal that washed up the Tay is a symbol of the dead and dying whale industry.

*Why the problem over whether to write in Scots or in English?*

I'm not sure. I just feel that naturally it should be in Scots. I'm writing about my own country here, so these poems should be in Scots. So many of the documents I've read, the first-hand documents of the deck hands of these whalers, were written in Scots, and I feel I want to carry that on. But, as I say, just purely naturally the poems I've written have been in English, and I feel a wee bit uncomfortable with that.

*What about a contemporary audience and introducing them to Scots?*

I know. I would be quite keen to lead a contemporary audience towards an appreciation of written Scots rather than English.

*Some sort of hybrid language?*

I'm not sure about that. At one time I thought about having direct speech in the poems in Scots and the rest of the narrative in English, but I'm still very unsure of where that's going.

*That would be an apt metaphor for colonization, wouldn't it?*

The whaling?

*If the narrative is in English. . . .*

Oh yes, I hadn't really thought about that one.

*Some of these questions are from your visit to Canada. If we tried to tie the language into your trip to Canada, being away from home, from Scotland for a year, did that allow you to write about it in a more objective way, or did you find that you became occupied or preoccupied with things non-Scottish?*

I think I definitely became preoccupied with things non-Scottish. That's when I started writing the Civil War poems, almost as soon as I got to Canada. I think that allowed me to refocus somewhat. I also enjoyed it because it allowed me to focus on Scotland in that there are so many parallels between Canadian problems and literature and Scottish problems. I felt I could look at Canadian literature and say: yes, this is what's going on back home. I could understand it—the way Canadian writers feel like there is some sort of osmotic pressure from south of the border, from America, that if you're not published in America you're not going to make it. The same thing goes on in Scotland. If you want to be published, to be known, you get published in London or whatever, and if you bring out a book in Scotland then it's not really a book. The successful writers permeate the border; if you're really successful you go down to England. That interested me, the parallel. And also the contrast I noticed, coming from Scotland. I take my nationality totally for granted; I come from this one country; everyone in it's Scottish and have been for umpteen years, and my family have lived in the area I'm in for hundreds of years—probably thousands, I don't know. You can see the layers of civilization there. But then you go to Canada,

and you can see it's really been a patina, the Western Civilization that we understand. Native culture has been going on for millennia, before colonization, but it's somehow been pushed aside; now, there's this thin layer of "civilization." . . .

*Looking at the parliamentary debates in Westminster and Scotland's long history and then at Canada's relatively short history, what happened here appears to be rather trivial. . . . We've spent seven years discussing whether or not the maple leaf should be the symbol on the national flag. We have a national flag, but it seems to be becoming more and more an empty symbol, being pulled south.*

Yes. The problem with the maple leaf is that it was the national flag of Ontario rather than anywhere else.

*Just to expand a little on the effect of Canada on your writing, it seems that is more of a theoretical, a sense of macro or large scale parallels between the two places rather than the specifics. You made a statement that your poems are rooted in place and reflect where you live. How did that change in locale—particularly given the discussion of the paintings and the American Civil War poems—affect the sense of your poems being rooted in place, reflecting where you live?*

I think it altered my perspective somewhat. I'm not really sure how it did that. I still believe that my poems are always rooted in place. I don't mean rooted in my history and where I come from, but they're always nailed down somewhere. And in poems that I've written, Canadian-based poems, it's almost as if I've taken the persona of having known this country for a while, that I'm understanding something that isn't really there, this past I've got. I kind of take it on in Canada, writing about Canadian things.

*It's making something more out of the idiom, bringing your sense of place to Canada.*

I feel a paradox. I feel at home somewhere, but it's feeling at home *and* feeling lost, when I write about it. If I thought I was a Scottish national and this is my country and I feel at home, I don't think I'd write poetry about it. You have to feel at home, but in some way alienated. And that was more obvious in Canada; for

that year I felt that this is me, this is my country. It was more obvious that I was an alien in Canada because we speak the same language, but we have very different thought processes; the way people think is totally different. The landscape was different, the people were different, and I was telling myself: I live here; this is my country for that year. And it made more acute that difference between the alienation and the living.

*Was writing the Canadian poems staking a claim you weren't sure about?*

Yes, maybe it was. One individual, Lord Alfred Whitehead, says when you're lost, you don't ask "Where am I?"—you ask where the other places are. You always know where you are, but you don't know where they are. So you go to Canada, you think "I know where I am"; you're in place and location. I found it exciting, that thinness in Canada. I don't mean that in a bad way. It was a novelty. What's his name, the poet who says it's "a lack of ghosts we're haunted by"?<sup>1</sup> I don't know if he meant that in a cultural sense or a linguistic sense, but it's exactly right with Canada, a lack of ghosts. . . .

*Do you find since coming back from Canada you're focusing more or less on it in your writing?*

I think I've spent a lot of time thinking about Canada and my time there since I've got back, and what I've tended to focus on is this alienation, this travelling, moving out from somewhere you know into somewhere you don't know. So I'm interested in the colonization of America as a whole, of Canada and the US, and what's drawn people out to a place that's uncharted, by them anyway, by Western Civilization. That's what attracted me.

*So do you see the writing that you produced in terms of the Victorian sense of travelling, as the place you go to that is exotic, or in terms of the reversal that came about with Cunninghame Graham's writing, where he's seeing the person who's doing the travelling more as the exotic who's travelling around. This is a little bit different from what you were saying about Whitehead, because it's the not knowing where you are, the place suddenly showing up something in yourself you haven't seen before.*



Individuals are always reflected in their environment, in where they are. I can't really reconcile going to exotic places because I think the problem is that whenever you colonize, you destroy that exotic place. The process of destruction in that doesn't really appeal to me at all. What appeals to me is the way people change when they change where they are, when they change their environment. I come from a fairly rooted culture—my father died in the house across from the one he was born in; he'd been out of Scotland once in his life, which was the Second World War. What appeals to me is people who did the opposite, who just left everything behind, and how they changed. It's interesting to describe landscapes and exotic places, but it's really just the people who move through them that interest me. When I write about the Civil War, I'm not really interested in the politics; I'm not interested in the vast battles. It's the individuals who took part that interest me.

*I understand what you're saying about not being concerned or involved with the politics, but in the images that you draw from the Civil War, there definitely seem to be political statements.*

I perhaps am saying that when I write about cattle being driven south towards the battle; yes, I'm implying things about how I feel about war, what I feel about that sort of action. I don't like to say things directly; I like to imply in what I've written how I feel about things. I think the basis for doing that is the individual. You don't describe the Union policy on the war or anything, and draw from that how you feel about nineteenth-century American politics; what you have to do is look at one person, see what they were doing. It's the opposite of what Edwin Stanton, in 1860 or whenever, said "The individual is nothing." It's the opposite; the individual is everything.

*Certainly in describing pain, it would seem to be more poignant when delivered through an individual than through a mass.*

That's right. Some of the best generals in the war understood that. Robert E. Lee understood the individual. He was much more concerned for the men as individuals than how his troops were in battle. I mean, thousands of men were slaughtered

through his direction, but he was always concerned. The story I heard was the story of Gettysburg. He'd been defeated, and in retreat he saw an officer beating his horse, and he went over and told him to stop. That's the sort of focus I'm talking about, that he can detach himself from a massive scale tragedy and focus on one animal that's being abused, and stop it. . . .

*Could you talk a little bit about the genesis for "The Apple Ghost?"*

The first poems in that book were the poems about my family [in the section "Other Lives"]. I felt it was something I had to work through. Quite a few of the poems in the book relate to my father and I think I was trying to sort things out, how I felt in my relationship with him. He was a very private person and not at all interested in literature per se. He read a lot, but he wouldn't read anything that was fictitious. And he never really spoke very much, so I think I've used poetry as a way of working out how I felt about him. And in that section, those were the first poems that came, so I tried to link them in with the second section. Concerning *From an Occupied Country*, I wrote that in a very brief period of time. I decided that I wanted to write something as near as I'd ever get to political poetry, which is a sort of slant-written "science-fictiony" sequence. That's the nearest I can get. I always abhor direct statements, abhor a poem saying this is what I think, this is bad, this is good, and this is tragic. So that was my intent, to get to something, telling the truth about my feelings, the "truth" in inverted commas, about Scotland. Like tell all the truth, but tell it slant; you're trying to tell it slant.

*When we were talking about this in Canada, you said you were reading J. M. Coetzee's fiction at the time of writing some of the poems of "From an Occupied Country," and I was trying to get a sense from you of how much of an influence that was. In reading through the poems again, it struck me that it's really only in the last part of "Goodbye" you get the kind of dichotomy that Coetzee is setting up.*

Yes, another poem that's half Coetzee's is "Pottery," where the characters are finding out something from the past from what's left of the soil. In Scotland, there are so many middens around, old farm middens; whenever the land is ploughed, little bits of

porcelain and china appear, especially in spring when it rains. There are little pieces of what was there before, history. . . .

*I'd like to spend some time going into some of the problems in "Other Lives." I was struck when reading the poems through again that the most optimistic poem in that sequence was the first poem "The Rise Of Icarus." From that point on there is death—and particularly black poems. Shades of darkness seem to dominate more and more, so by the time you get to the end of "Other Lives" you ironically, or not so ironically, end up with silence. Why is it you find—and maybe this is a question you can't answer—writing about other people so depressing?*

I think maybe you've been led astray a wee bit. Darkness and silence are fairly positive things. . . . With darkness you have this paradox again. When it comes to words, the dark bits on the page are the written bits. So you're charting the page. Samuel Beckett talked about blackening the page as he was writing. When I write to make things dark, it means two things. It means I'm producing the words that go down on the page and darkening the page. I'm also wanting to make things more unsure. I'm suspicious of things that are definite. You have a relationship with your family that's shit, or a relationship with your family that's great, and I can't see that. What I'm trying to say is that I don't know. The more I think of it, the less certain I am.

*I can understand the "I don't know" certainly with the pace of the poems themselves and the subjects of several of them. "I Dream Of Gliders" seems to take up a theme in relation to your father as the rise of Icarus. The way it's structured—a reverie you're having about your father is interrupted. You call "A curse on the dog in our dirty alley,/ Which woke me rudely with its stupid bark" [13]. There seems to be a pessimism about actually recapturing and holding on to what's coming from the past.*

Definitely that's the retrospective poem, and that's another Scottish writer's foible. Poets such as Muir all had their Edens, which, looking back to, probably didn't exist. This is what I was doing there, really thinking back to how things might have been, though I know they never were. A retrospective. Silence as well is very much a positive thing, especially in poems about my father because he was such a silent person, a quiet person. I think that's

where a lot of the poetry came from. I think the bits in between the words—it's a bit trite to say it—but it's what you don't say, what you're not saying that's important. . . .

*When you're speaking about the words in poetry, how do you feel now about "wonky" as a poetic word? It's one you use in "The Apple Ghost."*

That was very deliberate. It's actually not one of my words; it's one of the woman's words. It's a middle-class English word, really. It's one that she would use, probably she did use. "Wonky" is supposed to bring up the idea of this woman not really coping. She's used to having everything done for her by this superbly coping, understanding husband. She's used to a laid back, middle-class existence, and it's falling apart. So her whole life is "wonky."

*And there is a movement from the present to the past in that poem to intensify the falling apart that's taking place. . . . You were talking about not liking the ideologically definite; it struck me, going back to "A Guided Tour" (earlier in the first section) that the adjective in the title indicates that someone is setting up the tour, someone is going to be doing the selecting, and it is also one of the few that ends with a command, "Look, this was him."*

Yes, the guide's dead. The man in the photograph is the guide, really, and we're following the trails he's left through the house. This is another thing that fascinates me—the marks that people leave in the world, whether it is an empty house; the stains and worn places indicate perhaps what a person did in that house. It's a dead person, the guide. The guide is a false trail in a lot of ways. The command at the end is really something that's ignored; that is what the poem is about. The poem is trying to get you to look at him, though you never did before.

*Given what you're doing with the other poems, particularly that visually it's set apart as a single-line stanza rather than a quatrain as the others are, it's almost as if you're not sure you've succeeded with the guided tour you've produced.*

Perhaps. Maybe the poem does stand apart from the others. I'm not sure. I don't often have commands in my poems.

No, and that's one of the things which drew me to that one. In "Honesty," there are three lines which stuck out for me. One that ends the first section, "Now that's all gone" [20], and a bit further down "the small change would accumulate," and then the very last line—it's part of the question that begins earlier—"who was there to tell me I would feel / your fragile silver coins / grow warm against my palm; / their only weight / the dark seed they contain?" It seems questions are being raised in the poem "Honesty" but they are unanswered. The conclusion itself is yet another question. It points to some sort of tentativeness, again, about unearthing things.

That poem was very much about a lack of communication. It is about the end of my first marriage, splitting up with my first wife, and whether one of the problems was an inability to communicate. I was trying to write about that but not write about it. Communicating an inability to communicate, really. That's what the coins are, the marks of what's left in life. When you move through the house, the things you find say something about what you were doing in that house, for the umpteen years you were married. The coins represent honesty, and what the coin's shape leaves. . . .

*"The Drowning Pool" seems to be a poem about suicide.*

That's actually supposed to be a love poem—that stifling vertigo you get when you're falling in love with someone, the emotional drowning, really. I don't suppose it matters if it is about suicide. The killing of the Self, the loss of that.

*I really like "Snow" a lot. It has very martial imagery. Is this a misplaced poem? Should it have been in "From an Occupied Country"?*

I suppose it could have been. I wrote it before those poems, that's why it didn't go among them.

*And next to "Snow," "Dachau." I can see a connection between them that way.*

"Snow" probably could have been included in *From an Occupied Country* because it started off as a very simple descriptive poem—the fact that in this country, snow is a surprise attack; you wake up

in the morning and it's there; it's come during the night. It's very sneaky in the way it arrives. I suppose you could extrapolate from that, and say it would fit in with *From an Occupied Country*.

*"Dachau" is much more metaphorical than "Snow" and it works very strongly on two levels, I thought. "Dark hair obscured your face, the tears were hidden. / 'I shall return as soon as this is over.' / The blue keel dipped upon the ocean's fulcrum; / The pale hand moved against the superstructure" [35].*

Probably what I was thinking of when I was writing it was the old legend of the Selkies, the seal-people that were the souls of drowned people turned into seals. It's a sort of Western Isles poem; that's the feeling I had when I was writing it. It's basically supposed to be an obscure little narrative about someone drowning. The seal goes underwater in the last stanza.

*The "making things dark" is the final poem of "Scrimshaw Works." I can see what you were saying, because this one is about writing itself and getting the work down, but you've got "a dark wind that lifts the pages from my desk."*

I do it both ways sometimes. The dark wind is a pessimistic thing. Loss of memory, forgetfulness. Magritte said this about one of his paintings. For the next book [*Undark*, Peterloo Poets, 1995], there is a poem called "The Empire of Light," which is about the painting in which he had a house in darkness and the daytime sky. Magritte's explanation of why he painted it is that he's fond of light and he's fond of darkness, but he doesn't know which one he likes best. So he put them both in one painting. I'm fond of darkness.

*So you're saying that's a reaffirmation. The gerund that begins the title, "making," is both the subject and the activity itself, but in that flow, it's almost as if it goes on forever. There's no end to that particular process.*

That's right. Again, I don't like beginnings and ends. There's that wonderful phrase of the Scotsman who wrote about geology.<sup>2</sup> He talks about "no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end." He's talking about the world's geography but I think writing as well should be the same.

*You wrote the poems in "From an Occupied Country" the quickest of the three groups. At the time you were writing them, was there a historical connection that acted as a catalyst for the urgency in writing them?*

I'm not sure. I don't think so. I don't think there was anything particular going on in Scotland in late 1987. I just felt I wanted to say something about Scotland. I've always had a repulsion/attraction thing. I'm attracted to my nationality, the fact that I'm Scottish and it's what my nation is, but I don't want to be parochial ever. The idea I go along with is what Edwin Muir was looking for in Scottish literature, something that relates to European and World Literature, rather than something that expresses itself as the literature of this little country stuck on the end of Europe. I just really wanted to say things about what I felt about Scotland, but in a more general context. I think what you said about Coetzee is quite accurate; the temporal shifts I stick in. You don't want to fix anything down, to say this is something that happened in the past, or to regulate the future or "now"; it's all three.

*Coetzee was doing that because of the censorship laws, knowing that without that radical shift and displacement of time, the case could be made by the government censors that the book was about South Africa.*

I didn't know that.

*You're not doing it with censorship laws in mind.*

No, I'm doing it because I didn't want the poems to be fixed down.

*How about place?*

I think it's about Scotland. The obvious references in the poem are about Scotland, talking about the "Visitors from the South."

*Probably Canada, too?*

Yes, probably. That's what interested me about Canada. . . .

*In "A Difficult Color," the word "croft" would seem to indicate the locale, although I would have to check a dictionary of Maritime usage in Canada to see whether or not it was taken over there.<sup>3</sup> It seems to be about*

*the Highland clearances. The interesting thing is both the title and the final line "It's that sort of color."*

Again, it hearkens back to the Civil War poems, where you pick an individual or one thing and concentrate really closely on that, so you can say something about what's around it. You could read that poem and say "Isn't it terrible. They burned crofts, people would get thrown off the land and have to travel away by night." But I would try to de-emphasize what was going on by just concentrating on this color, the actual color of the flames. And red for me has always been the color of goodbye. In terms of Physics, red is the color you get when a light is receding from you, or you're receding from it. In relativity, red shifts. On motorways, the red lights of cars are going away from you. So I've always had the idea of "red" as something being lost. The poem "Red Shift" carries on that again. The whole poem is about colours changing because the observer is moving away from something rapidly. . . .

*You were talking about the language issue for the whaling poems, and the whaling industry being gone. But Gaelic seems to be the most appropriate language to write about it in. I was just thinking of the drama and difficulties the reader would face in turning the page and being confronted by something in Gaelic. It would probably be as forceful.*

No, I felt it had to be in English. I tried to write the poem in a stilted, uncertain way, like someone who doesn't really know this language. It's supposed to be someone whose first language is Gaelic writing in English. And how their own culture is destroyed, and the country's abandoned, and they are left with just the language, with no way to say goodbye in this new language, because that's the last thing the visitors from the South say when they're going. So it's sort of a double loss, of what went before and what was brought to replace it.

*There are other areas I would like to ask you about. One is influence: you don't seem to be keen on Hugh MacDiarmid,<sup>4</sup> the synthetic language. There's a difficulty with Scots in that it's a language that is perhaps minimally understood by Scots people themselves. So there seems to be a difficulty of flying in the face of your audience, or, as you were suggesting earlier, more positively, bringing your audience along. But that really*



*seems to be a case of revivifying individual words, and it seems like an enormously long project.*

I'm not totally against artificial Scots. I've written in Scots a fair bit. I think it's problematic. I think as a means towards an end, it's fine. I don't want to lose the richness of the Scots vocabulary. The way it's looked at today is that it's a political thing; it's a constraining thing, to wipe out the Scots vocabulary. So I'd fight against that, but I feel it's only a temporary measure, that you can't really build on it. I think MacGregor did it very successfully; he has reintroduced words into this language through his poetry. So it's partially successful. And really, the blame for it is my education. I was educated in a system that told me that Scots was a second-rate version of this better language called Standard English. That's what the people on television and radio spoke and what the teachers spoke. So really my first language is English, and unfortunately so. Scots is the language of my father. It wasn't a written language, and I still feel uncomfortable with it as a written language. If I write in Scots, it tends to be old poetry that tends to be more sentimental, and I always feel uncomfortable with it. . . . My personal experience is that my Scots and my English halves write different poetry. I'm not sure that I enjoy my Scots writing very much. It's problematic.

*I began by talking about influence and got into language. That's part of where the influence comes from. Influence in poetry itself—I think you suggested William Souter and MacKay Brown.*

In Scots, certainly, and MacDiarmid very much. Souter because he's a local writer for me, and he's always been underestimated. MacKay Brown and Edwin Muir very much. But most of my major influences tend not to be Scottish. Again, it goes back to my schooling. If I was being shown poetry, it was very much English, not Scottish poetry. It was only later on I came to MacDiarmid. So my first influences in poetry were Tennyson, Yeats, Eliot. I think everyone goes through an Eliot phase, somewhere in their late teens.

*In your earlier comments about your father, you mentioned that there's a tradition in Scotland of isolation and insularity, and then you talked*

*about others who leave everything and go. That seems to be a more positive, parallel tradition to the staying rooted in Scotland, Shutting everything down so the infrastructure can be rebuilt rather than moving outward. I was wondering where you see yourself in that; obviously you've gone and you've returned, but there doesn't seem to be a noticeable shift in your writing as a consequence of those visits.*

No, I think it's fixed here. Everything comes from here, from where I am. But again, coming back is an important concept to me. You get a tension in you when you go away—like Donne's compasses, in "A Valediction, Forbidding Mourning." It's the same with me and where I come from; the further away you get from it, the more tension there is drawing you back. There's an old Gaelic proverb: "Go," said the king. "Stay," said the wind. The king tells you to go, but you can't unless the wind's in the right direction. The king for me has always been my family or father. My father says "Go," but the wind, your nationality, the thing that holds you there, keeps you coming back. Each time you change. Your responses are changed as your perceptions are altered.

*Is the weight getting heavier or decreasing?*

I think that going away makes me more fond of Scotland. It's easier to go, if that makes sense. Scots are awfully good at that—you know what Canadian Scots are like—they move away but they say how great Scotland is.

*Do you have any plans to move into other genres—novels, journalism, travel writing?*

I've done some journalism. I've written some newspaper articles on things like hillwalking, a lot of that. I'd like to try doing some adaptations of books for radio; that appeals to me. There's a couple of novels I'd love to see how well that would work on the radio. I'm always fascinated by the short story, except I'm absolutely incapable of writing them. I don't know why. I never seem to get my characters to move. They're always fixed wherever I start them off. I read good short stories, and I feel total despair how people manage to create such wonderful stories. . . .

*What do you see the writer's commitment as? Is it strictly a commitment to art or to text as artifact or is there some larger role for the writer, and does the writer have to wear a different "cap" if he or she is going out into the public realm?*

I usually shy away from the writer having this greater role, somehow passing on some wonderful message to people. I'm always a wee bit wary of that. I think, "Fine. How do you want people to get the layers in the poem, beyond the surface layer?" They either do or they don't. That's up to them. There's no difference between what I'm writing and a piece of journalism. It's just that the subjects and the way I work on the subjects that's different. In terms of commitment, I think, I'm totally committed to writing, and that doesn't mean I sit down every day and write for four hours, because I don't, certainly not. But I can't imagine being alive and not thinking about writing and working on problems in my writing all the time. I'm not really sure why that is. I think it's just my way of working things out. I can't remember ever wanting to be anything else but a writer, as far back as I can think.

*No ambitions like your "great" forerunner in Dundee poetry to talk about the place itself? Not so much a Tay Bridge disaster as John Glenday on Timex?<sup>5</sup>*

No, I can't imagine that. Something which is so acutely political as the Timex dispute. I can't imagine being able to write about it. Or if I did write about it, it would probably be in terms of the articles that are being made in the Timex factory. I'd focus on it with poems so slantwise you wouldn't even know there was a dispute going on. I'm very wary about being drawn into that sort of dispute. I think other people can handle that sort of thing better than me.

*You and Penny set up Samizdat Readings and the Blind Serpent Press. Could you talk about that briefly?*

The Samizdat Readings: when I began writing I was astonished that I lived in a tiny country and there was no communication going on—very little, anyway—between people who were writing. So if you lived in Edinburgh, there would be a coterie of writers there, and in Glasgow and Dundee it was the same. There

was never much communication going on. So the readings were a deliberate attempt to invite people from other parts of Scotland to come to Dundee and read, and have their work on display. In that respect, the Samizdat Readings did well; it managed to attract large-ish audiences, and bring in not the well-known writers but new writers from the areas—people who were having their own struggles with what they wanted to put over. In the Blind Serpent Press, we were very much concentrating on promoting what we felt was new writing of quality. . . . I'm not sure how long it will go on for. It's such a hassle—not the books, the books are great—to distribute the book, to do accounts. It gets more and more complicated as the years go on. You have to do audits every time for the Scottish Arts Council because they fund it. It takes over your life; it's a lot of work. Fortunately, Penny [Glenday's second wife] does most of it.

*Has your being involved with the editing caused a particular focus or given a particular dimension to the books that are being published?*

Probably. I imagine it has, because I want to publish writers that I feel are worthwhile. There was a book by Andrew Fox, a Dundee writer who's interesting in a lot of ways. I didn't agree with his subject matter, but I thought he was a good writer. And the last book by Kate Armstrong, we published that. I had much to agree with her. She writes in Scots and in English, and her Scots writing is a lot more sure and a lot more acceptable. It doesn't look artificial, the way she writes in Scots, and I envy her that. I also like her writing because she's not at all provincial in her Scots, so she translates writers into Scots, or she works from a complete novel or short stories and translates that. I admire that. The other writer was A. L. Kennedy. I've just got a book of her short stories. I don't know why, but there's quite a few interesting writers that have come out of Tayside. It could be that the writers-in-residence programmes have always been pretty strong in Dundee. There's always been at least two writers in residence at one time. Dundee's well established in that.

*Given your interest in promoting writers in the area, and writers nationally through the reading series and the Blind Serpent Press, your own interests in the culture and its history, your own interest in writing in*

*general, why nothing in the writing about how you spend the majority of your day? The work and so on, is that not a subject you find suitable or acceptable for poetry?*

I've worked for quite a few years in psychiatric hospitals and I don't feel I can write about that; maybe eventually I will. But I feel I'm too close to it, to write about it from my perspective, to write about what I do, and it would be completely pretentious and presumptuous to write about it from any other perspective. I just feel it's too close.

*And that's why you're constantly seeking things out from the past.*

That's right. My interest is always in these symbols that are way out there in the distance, that I can somehow focus on, that will reflect on my views here. I can't focus on things that are too close—like my poems about the Civil War—that's fine, there's nothing first-hand about it. However, I feel I'd much rather do a book about something I do know, but it's just too close. Maybe I just don't need to write about it; I can just work it through. I'm not sure.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Earle Birney has said: "it's only by our lack of ghosts / we're haunted" ("Can. lit." *rag and bone shop*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971. n.pag.).
- 2 James Hutton (1726-97). *A Theory of the Earth* (1754) is his seminal contribution to modern geology.
- 3 "Croft" was brought to Canada. *The Nelson Canadian Dictionary* notes that the term is "chiefly British." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* specifies "unknown origins."
- 4 "The linguistic medium . . . is 'synthetic' in the sense that it synthesises diverse elements from Scots dialects, from old and current Scots usage, and from English" (Kenneth Buthlay. *Hugh MacDiarmid*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1982. 33).
- 5 The "forerunner" is William McGonagall (1825 or 1830-1902). "The Tay Bridge Disaster," an infamous piece of his doggerel, covers the tragic deaths of those aboard a train that plunged into the River Tay. Timex, the American corporation forced a bitter and protracted labour dispute in Dundee.
- 6 My thanks to Jack, Jan, Bert Almon, Victor J. Ramraj, Ronald Ayling, John Lent, and all at the "Tav."