

REVIEWS

George Campbell Hay (Deòrsa Mac Iain Dheòrsa)

Edited by Michel Byrne

The Lorimer Trust / Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2000.

2 vols.; pp. xxii + 459; xiv + 251. ISBN 0 7486 1063 4. £95.

George Campbell Hay, as revealed in this new collection, was one of Scotland's greatest and most prolific poets. Brought up in Kintyre, educated in Edinburgh and Oxford, a learner of Gaelic, he made it and Scots tools to an intricate and passionately musical poetry. His outlook on life was forthright, single-minded, positive, but the years following the second world war were rarely happy for him, as he drifted in and out of psychiatric care, and it was this instability and unhappiness which led to his tragic and early death, alone, in Morningside in 1984. Despite fitful work on his collected poems during his later years, this never came to fruition, Hay always being distracted by new projects, new energy, or long troughs of unproductiveness. Now we are given a chance to reassess a major 20th century poet hidden less because of taste or critical rejection, than because of the vicissitudes of his life. Dr Michel Byrne has laid Hay's work splendidly before us, with clearly presented editions of the poems, accompanying the non-English or Scots material with lower-page prose translations by either author or editor..

Byrne opens a discussion of George Campbell Hay's poetic craft with a fit quote from Hay's translation of Ibsen (II.59):

Yes, form I worship, cost what
it may.
That's understood. Bear this
in mind from me—
with form my verses become
poetry.

Hay's translations from a multitude of European languages, as well as Arabic, are not included in this magnificent double volume, but all his original poems are, accompanied by a thorough introduction and editorial notes. This is an immense achievement which leaves the Scottish literary world much in Dr Byrne's debt, as too in the debt of the Lorimer Trust which financed and directed the long-term project behind this publication. Hay was always a worshiper, never a slave, of form. Words in his power sing with power and synergy. If Hay's content may occasionally give one pause, the form rarely does. Saunders Lewis wrote: 'poetry of the highest quality is not made with ideas or expositions. Words! Explosive words, revelatory words, creative words, words with rhythms which shake, that is the stuff of excellent poetry.' If you agree with that statement, then Hay at his best is a true mover and shaker. His significance for Scottish literature, indeed for 'northern studies' in general, goes beyond his art, and extends especially to his full poetic mastery of the three languages of modern Scotland—Gaelic, Scots and English—and his poetic capability in other languages—Norwegian, French, Italian. It is his command of

words, his sense of form, which allows him to work between and among all these languages. The rhythmic and invigorating 'Seeker, Reaper' (no. 158) is, perhaps, the poem which most unites his northern languages: a poem predominantly in Scots, there are passages in English, in Norwegian, in Gaelic, all unified by the driving maritime theme. The poem praises a boat which quests all the seas:

Heiskir, Haiskir,
the Old Heids o Ayr,
Man and Canna,
they ken me there,
I've pitched the seas they sent
me
about me in the air,
I've belted aa the seas I've met
tie trailin' wisps o hair.

There is a certain amount of warranted emphasis in this edition on the Gaelic poetry, but readers of Scottish literature may find it is his less known English verse which surprises, especially in the superb war poem 'Ésta Selva Selvaggia' (no. 135), whose lines have haunted me since the first time I read them, around the time of the onset of the Gulf War, with my TV screens full of the bombing of Baghdad:

Yesterday? We saw it die
among the shellbursts in the
sky,
and heard the snarling
headlines cry,
hyenas of a night of fears,
scarlet with tracer, pale with
flares,
under distorted guiding-stars.
Man, violent against his will,
tore himself open, looked his
fill
and saw; and he is shuddering
still.

Equally, while Byrne concurs with Robin Lorimer's statement that '[t]he central fact about Hay's poetry is that it is Gaelic poetry' (p. 71), what strikes me, as a medievalist, is the fundamentally medieval rhythms and craftsmanship which underwrite so much of it, whether it be medieval Gaelic metres, Anglo-Saxon, French, or Italian. He mixes these influences freely, importing Italian metres into Gaelic, or, extraordinarily, creating a pastiche of an Old Irish verse in Norwegian (no. 258):

Vender vår.
Solen står.
Landet ler.
Ånder år.

Gresset gror
hvor bonden bor.
Toner trær.
Vender vår.

Critics such as Ronald Black have explored Hay mostly as a poet whose imagination was fired by his experience of the Arabic world in North Africa during the war, an experience which gave rise to his important poems of humanity and commonality, 'Mochtår is Dùghall' (no. 109), 'Bisearta' (no. 116), 'Atman' (no. 110). Reading the corpus as a whole, however, brings other kinds of poetry into much sharper relief. Without doubt, Hay must rank as *the* Scottish poet of the sea, with sea journeys and the lives of fishermen, and the emblematic bird the gannet or solan revisited again and again. This may seem repetitive, as may his other dominant natural theme, the glen or hollow in the Kintyre countryside. My critical reference here, however, would be painting. Hay, like Monet's versions of the

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West Front of Rouen Cathedral at every hour of the day, like Joan Eardley exploring anew every mood of the waves off Catterline, is drawn to the same themes, but always trying to achieve a new level of poetic perfection, trying, one senses, always to recapture a perfect moment or an intensity of lived experience that eludes him.

Others of Hay's major themes can become rather tiresome and preachy. He engaged in a fair amount of nationalist agitprop, and it would have been interesting to see this collection and its reception during the heyday of political theatre and poetry in Scotland, in the eighties, when *Radical Scotland* was still alive and Wildcat and 7:84 ruled Mayfest. I fear his un-nuanced treatment of Scotland, of human heroism (always masculine), and his often ugly attitudes towards lowlanders and the English (not just a poetic trope, alas, as his letters, quoted by Byrne in his review and notes, bear witness) will fare less well in the present. Still, some of his sermons are well worth listening to, such as 'Priosan Da Fhèin an Duine?' (no. 115):

Mar thaing don Tì chuir deò
annad,
ma tha do dhòigh 'na Chreud,
no mar fhialachd dod cho-
daoine,
bi beò is bi thu fhèin.

In vol. II, Byrne's editorial notes are long years' labour distilled and presented unobtrusively; likewise his Review is a model of scholarship lightly worn. Hay's formidable linguistic and literary range of reference is a demanding master to serve. The Review also works as an admirable introduction to Hay's poetry,

giving a good balance of sensitively handled biographical background, and formal and literary critique. Only two minor quibbles arise here, pretty much my only quibbles with the whole production. One is to do with ease of use: the discussion in the Review would have been immeasurably enhanced if either poem numbers or page numbers had been given after mentions of poems. Although vol. I does contain Indices of Titles and First Lines, it becomes tiresome reading the poems alongside Byrne's discussion and having to go through several actions to find each poem referred to.

The other quibble is to do with the survey of Hay's literary characteristics: why was no place found for Hay's humour here? I don't so much mean his satirical bent which sometimes served his propagandistic reflexes; rather his creative whimsy, as in the magnificent pastiche of a Fenian dialogue, 'Urnaigh Oisein as Ùr' ('Ossian's Prayer Revisited', no. 27), in which Patrick is cast as a douce kirk minister, and Hay plays expertly on the conventions of medieval Irish dialogues between saints and madmen or pagan heroes:

B'fheàrr aon sgail às an
fhuaran
ud shuas air Beinn Èadair,
na ti cairtidh na ciste
is do bhriosgaidean dèilidh.

[Dearer one good swallow
from yon stream | up on the
Hill of Howth | than tinted
tea from the chest | and your
jam biscuits.]

It is this gentle good humour which comes across in poems like that addressed to his cat, Casan

Sioda (Silk Feet) (no. 83), and the cat's reply (no. 121), or the little gem of a poem on the Plover, 'Feadag Ghòrach an t-Slèibhe' (no. 163):

The daft hill plover tumbles
and cries in his birling cry,
tumbles and climbs and
tumbles,
daft in the wide hill-sky.
Alone with his hill-top
daftness,
he runs himself a race,
the windy, daft hill plover,
daft with wind and space.

The current hardback edition is beautifully produced and sumptuous, a privilege to own, but at a privileged cost. It is much to be hoped that an affordable — *very* affordable? — paperback, of the edition will appear before too long (and it really *must* include both Review and notes as well as the poems themselves). When this material is properly in the public domain, George Campbell Hay will finally be able to take pride of place among the greatest of Scotland's poets, perhaps the only one to really gather in all its languages and poetic traditions. It is also to be hoped that an edition of his translations will appear in due course, as too a collection of his prose: only then will the full scale of Hay's achievement become clear.

He is a still vital voice, whose clarion call for humanity is needed now, as much as ever. Witness his image of refugees from the end of 'Esta Selva Savaggio':

Yesterday made them. On its
walls
they write its end; and down
it falls
in blood and pacts and
protocols.

We, having seen our
yesterday,
blasted away, explained
away,
in darkness, having no to-day,
guess at tomorrow dawning
grey,
tighten our packstraps for the
way.

A fitting encomium to this review is what seems a surreal self-portrait by Hay, cast in the voice of a fictive lover in an (unedited) mock waulking song (no. 169). The poetry in this collection invites us to agree with the speaker, who would gladly 'travel with him over oceans, over mountains'; Michel Byrne's edition ensures that we can now do this:

Shiubhlainn echtraidh agus
atlas,
shiubhlainn bårdacht agus
bagradh,
shiubhlainn cánaean is
masgull,
gruaim is grámair, tír is
cladach,
breug is ffrinn, frith is caladh,
Greugais, Gáilig agus Danais,
Fraingis, Arabais is
Laidionn,
grámairean is druim na mara,
tuinn is roinn is caol is
faclair
beinn is glean is cuan is
cairtean
shiubhlainn m'aineol is an t-
atlas,
druim na mara, druim na
mara,
moncaidh, annas, anaconda...
pioramaid is pterodactyl,
druim na mara, druim na
mara.

[I'd travel history and atlas, |
I'd travel poetry and menace,

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| I'd travel languages and
flattering, | gloom and
grammar, land and shore, |
falsehood and truth, deer-
forest and harbour, | Greek,
Gaelic and Danish, | French,
Arabic and Latin, | books of
grammar and the ridge of the
sea, | waves and headland
and kyle and dictionary |
mountain and glen and ocean
and maps | I'd travel
unknown regions and the
atlas, | the ridge of the sea, the
ridge of the sea, | monkey,
marvel, anaconda... | pyramid
and pterodactyl, | the ridge of
the sea, the ridge of the sea.]

Thomas Owen Clancy

Peter Graves

Fröding, Burns and Scott

Lockharton Press, Edinburgh,
2000
ISBN 1 874665 11 7

The influence that Scottish writers have exerted beyond the boundaries of their own relatively tiny country never ceases to amaze. The Bibliography of Scottish Literature in Translation (BOSLIT) project based in the National Library of Scotland has tracked down Scottish writing metamorphosed into a bewildering spectrum of languages from Albanian to Yakut. Nearer home, the Scandinavians have long been receptive to Scottish writers, particularly the 'big three' of James 'Ossian' Macpherson, Walter Scott and Robert Burns who defined Scottish literature before the term became synonymous with gritty realism.

Peter Graves's latest book is a study of one of Sweden's best-loved poets and the inspiration he drew from two of the above-named giants. As such, it will be welcomed by Scandinavianists and Scotticists alike.

Gustaf Fröding (1860-1911) cuts a tragic figure in Swedish literature. Both his parents suffered from severe depression, and Fröding himself was only 29 years old when he succumbed to the mental illness which would dog him for the rest of his life and lead to his being incarcerated in a series of mental hospitals and sanatoria. Yet his poems, especially those in *Guitarr och dragharmonika* (Guitar and