

Review essay

Re-imagining religion: Scottish writers and the breadth of religion

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Reviewed works:

Meg Bateman, Robert Crawford and James McGonigal, eds., *Scottish Religious Poetry: From the Sixth Century to the Present* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2000), pp. xxviii + 330, ISBN 978-0715207758.

Edwin Morgan, *A.D.: A Trilogy of Plays on the Life of Jesus* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2000), pp. 224, ISBN 978-1857544985.

James Robertson, *News of the Dead* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2021), pp. 371, ISBN 978-0241401996.

David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. xii + 446, ISBN 978-0199231829.

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Religion, however that word is to be understood, is everywhere in Scotland, even today and even as the traditional Christian churches, so powerful for so long, seem to be in terminal decline. In the city of Glasgow there are church buildings everywhere as well as now gurdwaras, mosques, temples and synagogues. Religion too pervades the literature and art of Scotland from the earliest times to the present day. Some of the oldest Scottish literature – though it is more properly perhaps Irish and written in Latin – is found in the religious poems of St Columba (c. 521–597) and other saints of the Celtic church. Scottish literature in Scots really dates from the late Middle Ages and the last days of the courtly Roman Catholic

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tradition in the magnificent poetry of Henry Dunbar, Robert Henryson and Gavin Douglas. After that the Calvinism of the Reformation in Scotland, far from bringing Scottish literature to an end eventually was the source of masterpieces of creative satire like Robert Burns' "Holy Willie's Prayer" or dark fiction like James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). In order to explore very briefly and selectively the ubiquitous and often deeply unsettling experience of Scottish religion in literature and the arts, this review essay revisits four relatively recent works of poetry, drama, fiction and theology. They are, in no particular order, an anthology of *Scottish Religious Poetry* (2000) edited by Meg Bateman, Robert Crawford and James McGonigal; Edwin Morgan's *A.D.: A Trilogy of Plays on the Life of Jesus* (2000); James Robertson's most recent novel, *News of the Dead* (2021); and the theologian David Brown's *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (2007). These editors and authors have this in common – they are all Scottish. They are also, in quite different ways, all concerned with the matter of religion.

Scottish Religious Poetry: An Anthology was the first collection of religious verse in Scotland ever to be published, providing examples of poetry, some in translation, from the sixth century to the present day. At least, this primacy is its claim, however extraordinary it might seem. While keeping almost exclusively to the Christian tradition (as this article will also do), it illustrates well the complexity, ubiquitousness and sheer oddity of the place of religion in Scotland and its history. The Introduction by the book's three editors starts with a description of a Glasgow cultural landmark, the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art as it stands in a modern building that belies its modernity by its medieval garb next door to the medieval Cathedral of St Mungo and the Necropolis – 'in some ways an unsettling place.'¹ The museum represents the many religions in multi-cultural contemporary Glasgow and 'a vibrant sense of Scottish religion at the start of the third millennium.'² But where is such vibrancy to be found?

¹ Meg Bateman, Robert Crawford and James McGonigal, eds., *Scottish Religious Poetry: From the Sixth Century to the Present: An Anthology* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2000), xv. It should be noted that the future existence of the St Mungo Museum hangs by a thread. It remains closed following the Covid-19 lockdown and has been saved, at least for the time being, only after a sustained campaign by loyal supporters in Glasgow, not least leaders of Interfaith Glasgow: see <https://interfaithglasgow.org/update-on-st-mungos-museum/>.

² Bateman, Crawford and McGonigal, xv.



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The answer is everywhere, once you start looking, and feeling and thinking beyond the traditional churches, expanding the word ‘religion’ to embrace both belief and unbelief, assertion and mystery in word, image and place. As these editors point out, this complex vibrancy gives a uniquely Scottish twist to the old debate that can be seen in English poetry and criticism from the time of Dr Samuel Johnson up to the twentieth century Oxford books of Christian verse edited by David Cecil and Donald Davie – what exactly is religious, or more precisely Christian, poetry? Let us then briefly look at some of the poems anthologised in *Scottish Religious Poetry*.

The first three poems in the collection from the sixth and seventh centuries are translated from three different languages – Latin, Old Gaelic and Old English. They are a reminder of how Scotland, from these early days, was a porous and indeed a European concept. Geographical borders can be evaporated by religion and culture, as we are reminded by the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of the Rood* from which lines in runic characters are carved on an eighteen-foot stone cross in Ruthwell Kirk near Dumfries – matched by a manuscript version of possibly equal antiquity found in a north-Italian monastery in Vercelli on the pilgrim route to Rome. Religion, and poetry, travel. Ancient poetry from the Gaelic oral tradition found a new voice in the great collection known as the *Carmina Gadelica* collected and edited by Alexander Carmichael (1832–1912), and represented by four entries, printed in Gaelic and English, in our anthology.

But then if the Dark Ages are relatively little represented here, we see clearly how in the early sixteenth century that there was a magnificent flowering of courtly, Catholic verse just prior to Scotland’s cataclysmic version of the Reformation. This poetry is all built around the matter of religion, and resounds most clearly in the macaronic verse of the poet and priest William Dunbar (?1460–1513/30) presented here in one of his most resounding affirmations of Christian belief:

Done is a battell on the dragon blak;
Our campioun Chryst confoundit hes his force;
The yettis of hell ar brokin with a crak,
The signe triumphall rasis of the croce.³

³ Bateman, Crawford and McGonigal, 52.



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One unlikely poetic result of Scottish Reformation was that among the poets collected in this anthology, on two occasions, there is one called ‘A Committee of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland’, represented by its tradition of metrical psalms (1650) and paraphrases of Scripture (1781). Some of these, above all the version of Psalm 23, remain engrained in Scottish sensibility to the present time.

The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want.
He makes me down to lie
In pastures green: he leadeth me
The quiet waters by.⁴

Simple, strong and plain – it is quintessentially Scottish.

Not all the later poems in this anthology, however, present this side of the Scottish religious sensibility. The editors include also elements from James Thomson’s (1834–1882) *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874), a nightmarish expression of *fin-de-siècle* pessimism and dying faith.

Lo, thus, as prostrate, ‘In the dust I write
My heart’s deep langour and my soul’s sad tears.’
Yet why evoke the spectres of black night
To blot the sunshine of exultant years?
Why disinter dead faith from mouldering hidden?
Why break the seals of mute despair unbidden,
And wail life’s discourse into careless ears?⁵

The poem is a bleak, Dantesque vision of hell. The Devil, as we shall see in James Robertson’s novels, is also never far from the religion of Scotland.

The complex mixture that is ‘religion’ in modern Scotland is represented by poets like Tom Leonard and Carol Ann Duffy, described in the Introduction as younger poets who ‘are willing to work out experimentally the full significance of their early religious experience in a range of tones.’⁶ Stretched even further, perhaps, is a Glasgow poet (and a

⁴ Bateman, Crawford and McGonigal, 101.

⁵ Bateman, Crawford and McGonigal, 200.

⁶ Bateman, Crawford and McGonigal, xxvii.



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professor of literature) who preferred Marxism to Christianity, but never escaped the toils of religion – the late Edwin Morgan. Morgan’s verse begins the book with his rich and stately translation of the Latin of St Columba’s “*Altus Prosatur*” (“The Maker on High”). He is also there close to the end (being a Makar himself), concluding with his prose poem “The Fifth Gospel” which turns the gospel narratives on their head with Jesus refusing to send the demon into the herd of Gadarene pigs, perfectly reasonably (it seems to me):

Why should I kill two thousand pigs? For being animals they would go frantic and rush headlong into the lake and be drowned. Am I to bring these farmers and their families into destitution in order that you may sit clothed and in your right mind, sipping your wine and paying your taxes? (265)

It is an excellent example of Scottish common sense (honed philosophically, of course, in the eighteenth century).

It was Edwin Morgan, however, who got his fingers burnt by (admittedly a largely conservative) Christian opposition in Glasgow to his three plays on the life of Jesus, *A.D.* Written for the millennium at the behest of the Glasgow-based Raindog theatre company, these plays were first performed at the Tramway in Glasgow in the autumn of 2000. By then Morgan was already in the grip of terminal cancer, though he denied that he was being drawn towards any form of religious consolation, saying to Glasgow *Sunday Herald*:

I feel I’ve got a strong enough belief just in myself and in life and in ordinary human beings and in what they may do in future to satisfy me. I don’t feel the desire for anything beyond that, for some other world.⁷

It is not difficult to see why the Christian community in Glasgow were upset. Morgan’s Jesus has an illegitimate child; the beloved disciple, John, is gay; the centurion at the foot of the cross is finally dismissive of the sense of strangeness which he feels at the death of Jesus, before turning

⁷ Quoted in James McGonigal, *Beyond the Last Dragon: A Life of Edwin Morgan* (Dingwall: Sandstone Press, 2010), 378.



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brusquely back to his soldiers and the real world. But Morgan, for all his Marxist leanings, never quite gives up on the story – religion is not to be dismissed easily. Of Jesus (and indeed of his adversary Satan) in these plays, the charisma and indeed the intelligence is clear, but of both Jesus and Satan it may be said that ‘one is not required, of course, to trust him.’⁸ Finally it is left to the three ‘astronomers’, Gaspar, Melchior and Balthazar to have the last word, as they look back on their strange experience of many years before in a starlit Bethlehem. Gaspar laughs at the cynicism of his friends who dismiss the whole thing as nonsense:

My friends, you are hopeless.
I wash my hands of you. You have no soul.
Let me just warn you that this person,
This Jesus, who is also called Christ,
This dead man who may not be dead
Already has followers called Christians.
They are going to be blown about the world
Like seeds – they hope –⁹

Morgan was a gentle, kindly man who could never quite let go of the Christianity that haunts the culture of which he was such an articulate expression. He was the first Makar, or National Poet for Scotland, and the last survivor of the ‘Big Seven’ of Scottish poets (the others being Hugh MacDiarmid, Robert Garioch, Norman MacCaig, Iain Crichton Smith, George Mackay Brown, and Sorley MacLean.).

Of a much more recent generation is the Scottish novelist James Robertson, yet the pages of his books are equally haunted by religion, and along with it the figure of Satan. His early success, *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (2006), is a story on the edge in so many ways – the tale of a man who, by his own testimony meets Satan, though the man is also a Church of Scotland minister who has lost his faith, an adulterer and probably an inveterate liar. Is he just weak, perhaps? As his former lover says, ‘He was a weak man. His upbringing, his character, the whole religion thing – not being able to reject it and not being able to embrace it

⁸ Edwin Morgan, *A.D.: A Trilogy of Plays on the Life of Jesus* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2000), 68.

⁹ Morgan, 223.



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– it was all weakness.’¹⁰ If that is true, then such weakness – almost always in men – pervades Robertson’s fiction. It is certainly true of Charles Kirkliston Gibb, the early nineteenth-century narrator of one epoch in history of Glen Conach in Robertson’s latest novel *News of the Dead* (2021). On his arrival in the glen, Gibb is spared church-going on Sunday by the Scottish weather:

In every other part of this self-righteous, God-ridden country one is obliged on the Sabbath not only to attend kirk, whatever the weather, but also to endure additional devotional sessions at home. Here, though, there are no zealous saints to admonish one’s backsliding.¹¹

But Gibb is working, or is supposed to be working, on a document called *The Book of Conach* – and here we read, embedded in the novel, of the ancient story of the blessed Saint Conach who is introduced as ‘a man of beautiful holiness and righteousness, who carried the Gospel to those of the Pictish people who had not received it from Columba, Drostan, Machar, Walloch and others who lived before his time.’¹²

No-one, however, in *News of the Dead* is quite what they seem to be. Its pages are full of voices – from the ancient past, the more recent past and the ‘present’ – connected in mysterious ways by the land of Glen Conach, falling into myth and bound in memories, and then forgotten. Time is passing for the Christian church. Almost at the end we read:

The church closed between the two world wars and the graveyard was full so, for a hundred years now, glen people have been buried out of the glen, or these days, mostly, their bodies go to Friockheim or Dundee to be cremated.¹³

Robertson’s Scotland is a land in which the church and its religion is dying. But the land itself remains haunted by its past and its beliefs, no-one being

¹⁰ James Robertson, *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2006), p. 383.

¹¹ James Robertson, *News of the Dead* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2021), 13.

¹² Robertson, 63.

¹³ Robertson, 368–69.



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quite what they seem. His novels are disturbing, often beautiful, sometimes cruel and harsh.

And so we have heard something from the Scottish poets, the playwrights and the writers of fiction. What then of the theologians? There is no doubt that Scotland during the last one or two hundred years has been a country of mighty religious thinkers in the ancient Christian traditions with all their beauty and their divisions, and at a time when theology in church and academy has been slowly fading in England. But here I choose one who is a Scotsman, who has taught much of his life in England, in centres of Anglican learning, and who finally returned to teach at the University of St Andrews, maintaining, like many of us born south of the border, a complicated relationship with the Scottish Episcopal Church. David Brown's book *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* is not a particularly Scottish book yet it warrants its place here in its celebration of a divinity that is found in song and dance and a 'salvation [that] concerns the health of the body no less than that of the soul.'¹⁴ For despite its Calvinistic dourness, which is after all a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of the land, Scotland is a deeply sacramental place in which are to be found 'thin places' on the edge between the human and the divine, and sacred spots with origins lost in the mists of time until taken over by Christianity, their sacramentality ensured.

Brown begins his book with these words:

This book [...] seeks to reclaim for religious experience great areas of human encounter with the divine that have been either marginalized in contemporary Christianity or almost wholly ignored.¹⁵

In his own way Brown takes his place beside the poets, Edwin Morgan and James Robertson. It is not only that theology must move on from the dialogue with its traditional partner philosophy, but its voice must be sought on margins, edges and boundaries beyond the walls of churches which are failing in modern Scotland. It is not merely that we find God in the beautiful and sexy (or indeed the ugly and wasted) body, but in

¹⁴ David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 391.

¹⁵ Brown, 1.



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unexpected places – unexpected at least for most churchfolk. Brown suggests that ‘if religion is to survive’ it needs to take seriously a remark once made by Bruce Springsteen:

If you grow up in a home where the concept of art is like twenty minutes in school everyday that you hate, the lift of rock is just incredible. ... Rock and roll reached down to all those homes where there was no music or books or anything. ... That’s what happened in my house.¹⁶

Why do I find this, in a curious way, a very ‘Scottish’ remark? That might seem very odd to many people. But I do so because it is made in the context of a conversation in David Brown’s book which emphasizes the ‘generosity in God that is wider than many a theologian’s narrow curtailing of divine activity.’¹⁷ The generosity of religion, found in so many unexpected places.

This brief review article indicates something of the nature of an ineradicable element in Scottish history and culture. It is part of the soil and landscape as of the people. As a nation with borders little defined by geography or walls, Scotland has always been part of a larger world, whether it be from Scandinavia in the north or Europe in the south, ensuring that contemporary Scotland, as illustrated in the Glasgow Museum of Religious Life and Art, is also now a global and multi-religious society. As churches decline, the poets and writers of Scotland continue to illuminate an ancient tradition of which Christianity is but a part, though certainly the major part for the last fifteen hundred years. But there is always an edge, a familiarity which is yet strange. *Scottish Religious Poetry* concludes, deliberately and appropriately, with a poem by Roddy Lumsden (1966–) entitled “The World’s End”. (I am reminded of Michael Powell’s extraordinary 1931 film, *The Edge of World*, relating the story of the last inhabitants of a remote Scottish island.)

a place some call a border, some an edge,
as if the many missing or a saviour
will rise in welcome when we step over.¹⁸

¹⁶ Quoted in Brown, 296.

¹⁷ Brown, 324.

¹⁸ Bateman, Crawford and McGonigal, 307.

