

Reviews



Linden Bicket, Emma Dymock and Alison Jack, eds., *Scottish Religious Poetry: From the Sixth Century to the Present: An Anthology*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2024), pp. xxv + 326 pages, ISBN 978-1800830479. £25.00

It has been a quarter of a century since the first edition of *Scottish Religious Poetry: An Anthology* (2000) appeared on our bookshelves, edited then by Meg Bateman, Robert Crawford and James McGonigal. At the time it was a revolutionary volume, which placed the poetry attributed to St Columba in the sixth century side by side with works by poets like Kathleen Jamie and Roddy Lumsden at the dawn of the twenty-first. Alongside its linguistic diversity – including poems written in Latin, Old Gaelic and Old Norse as well as the expected modern tongues of Scots, Gaelic and English – such a long *durée* approach served to demonstrate the evolution and importance of religious verse across Scotland's history. This project was emphasised in the volume's introduction, where the editors themselves pondered:

Where *are* we now, in religious terms? This anthology presents a variety of answers to that question but raises many more, as it reflects upon where we have been, and the journey from there to here. Such questions, perhaps, are simply signalling that we are dealing with mystery, and the halting attempts of humankind to comprehend it. (pp. xv–xvi)

Yet, despite the myriad virtues of the first edition, we know anthologies are not timeless – time marches on and new poetry is written. Twenty-five years on we may then rightly wonder once more: where are we *now* in religious terms?

This question is exactly what Linden Bicket, Emma Dymock and Alison Jack, the editors of the newly published second edition of *Scottish Religious Poetry* (2024), aim to address. In some ways, much has changed in the period between editions. Accelerations in technological evolution coupled with the intervention of a global pandemic have fundamentally



changed our relationships with one another and, by extension, with the notion of the divine. In other ways though, much has remained the same. Scotland's relationship with religion has always been one marked by upheaval – linguistic, confessional and cultural – as the introduction to the original volume explained in detail. In such a lengthy narrative of Reformation, Enlightenment, sectarianism, and war, the increasing secularisation and multiculturalism of the twenty-first century may be seen as merely another drop in the ocean of Scotland's complex relationship with religion. The editors of the new edition certainly think so themselves: the second edition seeks to both pay homage to and build upon the invaluable work of the now out-of-print original. Perhaps the most significant area in which the new editors achieve this is through their inclusion of Bateman, Crawford and McGonigal as religious poets in their own right, an addition which belies the ongoing close-knit relationship between the production of Scottish religious poetry and its scholarship.

The previous editors are not the only new poets added to the roster of the second edition. Whilst the first edition was impressive in its scope, this new publication has managed to squeeze in twenty more writers, with an increase from 102 individual poets to 122. Many of these new inclusions of course come from those published in the years between the volumes, such as contemporary Shetland poet Roseanne Watt and the Edwin Morgan Poetry Award winner Alycia Pirmohamad, both of whom were children when the anthology was first published. However, there have also been additions made elsewhere, reflecting the ongoing reappraisal of the Scottish literary canon more generally: in twentieth-century women like Màiri M. NicGhillEathain/Mary M. Maclean and Ann Scott-Moncreiff, as well those like Imitiaz Dharker and Bashabi Fraser who were active as poets when the original volume was published but have become more prolific since. Several poets included in the first edition have also had their poetic offering expanded in the second, such as Violet Jacob, Marion Angus, and the modern makars Liz Lochhead, Jackie Kay and Kathleen Jamie. Through such changes, the editors display a sensitivity to the shifts that Scotland's culture and literature have undergone throughout the past two decades, crafting a volume that is representative of the Scottish religious and literary landscape today as well as paying homage to its history.

Of course, the ability to provide such an expanded offering in some senses has led to reductions elsewhere. Several canonical poets have had



the number of their poems reduced in the new volume, and the editors have also made the difficult decision to include only the translations of those poems not originally written in a living language – omitting the Latin, Old Gaelic and Old Norse originals of several older poems. Such decisions will no doubt incite criticism from some readers. However, in their introduction the editors make nuanced and compelling justifications for these decisions. Anthologies are a complex artform, meant perhaps more acutely to inspire interest in authors and works across a genre or period than to provide a scholarly edition of every poem. Readers interested in old languages will likely be able to seek out an edition elsewhere of the Old Gaelic or Norse poems, and the same may be said of those poems omitted from major canonical poets. Robert Burns is unlikely to be a new name to even beginner students of Scottish poetry, but encountering a lesser-known poet like Janette Ayachi may help to challenge and inspire reader's perceptions of Scottish religious poetry in vibrant new ways. With such aspects in mind, the benefits of the volume's inclusions far outweigh the drawbacks of its omissions.

These benefits include constructing a volume which views Scottish religious poetry as no longer merely the purview of white writers or as concerned only with Christianity. Poems like Bashabi Fraser's "The Gurdwara in Leith" remind us that Scotland today is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country where the lines of what defines someone or something as 'Scottish' or 'religious' are increasingly, rightfully, blurred. In their reappraisal of Scottish religious poetry, the editors invite us to reflect on poetry as a place where such cultural contrasts can meet, perhaps best illustrated in Janette Ayachi's "Youma and the Three Kings" which begins 'The imam, a witch doctor and the local visionary/ arrive like three kings hovering with offerings' (ll.1–2). However, the possibilities presented by such inclusions perhaps highlight another area of omission in the realm of language. Whilst modern Gaelic, Scots and English are all included, what of the significant minority languages of our multicultural present, such as Urdu, Polish and Punjabi? Many of the communities who speak such languages retain a strong relationship to religion and the divine, and one must wonder whether, in confining the volume to Scotland's official three languages, we are losing an important area of diverse religious expression in the country today. Anthologies must always make these difficult decisions, and the challenges entailed by such a project in finding, choosing, and translating may, of course, prove insurmountable,



but these considerations present food for thought for any scholars looking towards a third edition of the series in the future.

In any case, an inclusive spirit is what underscores Bicket, Dymock and Jack's approach to defining the category of Scottish religious poetry as a whole. Their insightful discussion throughout the introduction of what makes a poem 'religious' culminates in the decision to provide 'a generosity of spirit in finding the religious in a poem' (p. xxiii), including poems which respond to the notion of the divine, as well as those more concerned with the material history of theological belief and its impact on Scottish culture. In an increasingly secular age, such an approach invites us to rethink what religion might mean to us today. To quote from Alycia Pirmohamed's "I Want the Kind of Permanence in a Birdwatcher's Catalogue": 'I shower in the summer solstice light/ and read my morning prayers off the cracked/ screen of my phone' (ll.14–16). Today, our encounters with the divine might be more fleeting than in past eras, but in their generous spirit the editors of *Scottish Religious Poetry* (2024) remind their readers that this does not make them any less impactful.

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Alasdair Black, *The Courage to Speak: Sex, Sexuality and the Church* (Stirling: Extremis Publishing, 2025), pp. xi + 218, ISBN 978-1739484583. £13.00

New Testament scholar Preston Sprinkle has commented that few subjects have been as heatedly debated within the church as sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. Moreover, he notes that this contentious ethical issue, which was relatively untouched by biblical scholars and theologians until the 1980s, has seen a significant wave of writing and

