The Golden Treasury of Scottish Verse

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First published in Great Britain, the USA and Canada in 2021
by Canongate Books Ltd, 14 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1TE

Distributed in the USA by Publishers Group West
and in Canada by Publishers Group Canada

canongate.co.uk

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available on request from the British Library

Supported by The National Lottery® through Creative Scotland

The publisher acknowledges support from the National Lottery through Creative Scotland towards the publication of this title.

ISBN 978 1 83885 261 0

Typeset in Apollo MT by 3btype.com

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C018072

The *Treasury* holds work in all our language traditions: Scots, early and modern; English, Gaelic, and a sprinkling of Latin, presented in translation. The English translations appear directly after the original poems. All are present in the room, all are whispering into each other's ears, 'Scotland, small?' Despite the challenges they have faced, Scots and Gaelic are still living languages. Scots, especially, has proven itself receptive to the influences of the new communities Scotland has welcomed over the centuries. Our plurality of languages and dialects is a birthright, one which we should embrace wholly, and protect from class, political and religious affiliation. It is especially in our poetry that this diversity continues to flourish.

Speaking of class: the idea that poetry is largely an upper-class, courtly or 'educated' pursuit has never really taken root in Scotland. Certainly, these pages carry works by the nobility and aristocracy – though even these poems bear the Scottish trait of the 'common concern', and fret about the human business of love, birth and death. But always, always, we have the folk. The folk are aye singing, and weaving their loves and laments and

best tales into the form they can best remember. Poetry and song are sister arts, and at times they have become culturally indistinguishable (we are arguably entering such a time again); in Scotland we have, of course, the great ballad tradition that Hamish Henderson declared our cultural gift to the world, and it is well represented here. The ballads were a people's poetry, shaped and streamlined in the wind tunnel of their repeated telling. Of the people, too, was the work of Burns: his rallying cries to equality were a global sensation, his songs are still sung today, and the full extent of his work on the traditional songbook still unknown. Poetry here has never been *de haut en bas* – and our mixed, mongrel, diglossic language traditions saw to that. An earthly and earthy Scots was ever present. The Enlightenment was the product of the Edinburgh tenement, and the conversations it enabled between social classes helped to align Enlightenment ideas with social reality; the street has subtly informed our poetic speech ever since. (Arguably this may limit us too, and our tendency to 'not get above ourselves' has been a self-censoring influence on our poetry. In our natural suspicion of high-flown rhetoric, poetry after the Makars generally kept its heid doon: we had no Metaphysicals, and barely any Romantics.)

As we read through the centuries, we were struck by the sudden shrivelling of Lowland poetry post-Reformation. It practically disappears. After Knox, after the loss of the royal court, not only the theatres fell dark: the ability to turn a decent line of verse seems also to have been lost or forgotten, for all we will have kept singing under our breath. The literature recovered, but the long silence alarms. The Victorian era produced some strange eccentricities – Scotland churned out its fair, wretched share of rill and hills, brooks and nooks (invariably babbling and shady) – as well as an impressive line in Music Hall daftness. Then, of course, there's the Kailyard, that cultural cringe wrapped in a couthy tale presented in a shortie tin. All this was ably expunged by Hugh MacDiarmid, whose political enthusiasms and personal flaws should never detract from the great corrective he was. But the nineteenth century also saw the emergence of a proletarian voice – of miners, mill-girls and weavers. The voices of women strengthen, becoming properly audible and de-anonymised in the twentieth century.

We have deliberately chosen to slightly over-represent more recent poetry – both to make the book engaging to a contemporary reader, but also to offer a sense of the stream of tradition becoming a delta, on whose banks we stand.

- Editors Kathleen Jamie, Don Paterson & Peter Mackay