

KIRSTIE BLAIR, *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. viii + 235. \$85.

Kirstie Blair's *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community* is a ground-breaking study of Victorian Scottish working-class poetry, retrieving the work of over fifty writers, most of whom have received hardly any critical attention. It is also an exposition of their milieux in various forms of public circulation: provincial, popular newspapers and journals, in the national press and in anthologies with an international vogue, as well as through performance. Blair offers a close study of them and their critical reception, not only with reference to their contemporary popularity in the nineteenth century but also to their scornful repudiation through the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, from Hugh MacDiarmid to recent critical and historical appraisals of the period. So this book is a challenge to accepted interpretations of Scottish Victorian literature and revitalizes understanding of Scottish political, linguistic, domestic, professional, and family cultures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

There are precedents in William Alexander's studies of Victorian literature in Scots published in periodicals and newspapers, Tom Leonard's anthology *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), Marion Bernstein's *A Song of Glasgow Town: The Collected Poems of Marion Bernstein* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2013), and Blair's own anthology, *Poets of "The People's Journal": Newspaper Poetry in Victorian Scotland* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2016), but in its closely argued extrapolations of contexts, *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland* has a singular solidity and strength. Primarily, this is the result of extensive close reading, both of individual writers and poems and of the histories of production and readership.

The essence of the book's argument justifying the challenge with which it confronts accepted readings comes in response to Edwin Morgan's judgment that in the *Whistle-Binkie* anthologies (published from 1832 to 1890), "you would be hard put to find a dozen really good poems." Blair's comment is that this "depends, of course, on the definition of 'good'" (p. 64). The problem is that Blair's study never really does this, so that James Young Geddes, perhaps the one poet whose work demands retrieval, review, full scholarly editing, and republication, might be lost in the overwhelming number of people whose writing was produced alongside their work in the domestic,

professional, rural, and industrial economies, as tradesfolk, shopkeepers, miners, or in a range of other occupations. The distinction of Geddes is that he writes not only from within middle-class, working, industrial Dundee but also as an outsider intellectually, in tune with Walt Whitman regarding formal poetics and with William Blake regarding the urgency of moral priority. When Geddes describes what Blake called “dark Satanic mills,” he knows what he is talking about, and as Blair rightly says, “the likelihood that he would have written and published ‘Glendale & Co’, a radical poem that also serves as a critique of the factory system, if he worked for the imagined Glendale & Co (Geddes was a draper in Dundee and then in Alyth) is extremely slim” (p. 138). Yet this excoriating poem is intensely memorable and itself endorses the notion that, as Blair says, “It is far from true that industrialization is absent from Scottish poetry of the period” (p. 138). However, most of the poets discussed in *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland* write from within their own ideologies. These are sometimes questioned and opposed, intensely, even threatening potential violence—not least in the work of women such as Marion Bernstein and before them the popular poets writing around the time of the 1820 rising. But the trajectory of their popularity charts a move from an advocacy of radicalism, refusing limitations, to an exhilaration in popularity, with all the prioritization of self-affirmation that entails. There is a salutary precedent here of the phenomena of populism.

Blair’s study does not so much completely overturn MacDiarmid’s sweeping judgment and the following consensus presented by Morgan and a range of recent and contemporary critics as revise them, insisting that we take into account the material and ideological contexts in which this writing appeared as well as its range and its (variable) quality. Those of us who, when it comes to poems, still believe in something we can call “good” will always have to exercise discrimination.

The scope of the book is dauntingly impressive. Chapter 1, “The Work of Verse,” considers newspaper poetry, printed, performed, specifically prompted by occasions and events. Chapter 2, “Reforming the Social Circle: Nursery Verse, Poetic Community, and the Politics of *Whistle-Binkie*,” is a case study of popular verse from the 1820s into Victorianism, from ballad, song, and Romantic traditions to working-class and industrial city-based poetry. A reading of “nursery verse” follows, considering its presence and effect both as domestic currency and also as suggestive of the self-conscious “Bairnrhymes,” “Riddles,” and “Whigmaleeries” of William Soutar in the 1930s. This establishes

a continuity from the nineteenth-century poets to MacDiarmid's Scottish Renaissance, and firmly embeds the priority of using the Scots language in these popular idioms. Nevertheless, the preference given to Scots as the language for children's verse and comedy, and English for serious matters of public import, reinforces a dichotomy of linguistic, and by extension political, power. It starts with the young. As Blair says, "researchers have suggested that caregivers are more likely to use dialect to children in the contexts of play, rather than discipline" (p. 87).

Chapter 3, "Stands Scotland Where It Did? Nostalgia, Improvement, and the Uses of the Land," addresses "pastoral poetics" and "the nostalgic and sentimental modes associated with depictions of Scotland's natural beauty" (p. 17). This leads to questions of ecology, environment, land use, and ownership, as well as the push toward emigration, most significantly in two of the most fascinating poets relocating from Scotland to New Zealand, John Liddell Kelly and John Barr.

The "poets of place" might be read as a precedent for the "radical landscape poetry" of the post-MacDiarmid, post-Second World War generation of (predominantly male) poets, each of whom wrote of their favored territories, from Orkney to Lochinver to Skye and the Outer Hebrides, as well as Glasgow and Edinburgh. Again, a greater continuity between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than has been assumed is demonstrated. Yet however clearly we can now see the extent of these continuities, there were decisive forms of rupture in the devastations of the second decade of the twentieth century. And Blair's admirable concentration on the Victorian era is where her revaluation is centered. The history of change and continuity here is one of both yes *and* no. Scottish literature in the 1920s and 1930s was about retrieval as well as renewal, about reaching back beyond the nineteenth, eighteenth, and even seventeenth centuries, and thus bypassing and rejecting the Victorian, imperial world. It came forward with treasures from the furthest-off parts of Scotland's long traditions. It is vital to have Blair's recuperation of the nineteenth century, but that longer history insists upon a bigger context. Connections and disruptions are both involved. If the historical rejections cleared the ground, modern scholarship such as Blair's reseeds it fruitfully.

Chapter 4, "The Measure of Industry," looks at poetry from the newly industrialized Scotland: miners, engineers, and railway poets, laboring men and "the vexed relationship between human and machine" (p. 17). Chapter 5, "Humour, Satire, and the Rise of the

Bad Poet,” concentrates on the phenomenon of “bad” poetry, closing with the curious case of William McGonagall. Then the Afterword takes us from the 1890s to the 1930s, after which “popular poetry” diminishes in significance, but it has never really died out completely. A complementary story might be told about poetry, verse, and song in the Gaelic tradition, and the relation within it between the currency of oral as well as print traditions. The immediate circulation and commerce of perception that “working verse” enacts may have been much more dominant in a pre-social media, pre-TV, pre-radio era, but it is persistent and resists threats of imminent extinction. Tenacity is in its mind and marrow.

Blair’s conclusion is admirably evenhanded. On the one hand, she says, the work discussed in her book “is a last-ditch effort to preserve a vision of small-town and rural Scotland,” with village poets resisting modernity (p. 206). Industrial poets by this definition are similar in aptitude and attitude. But on the other hand, she says, the poets are part of “the emergence of cultural nationalism” demanding recognition of Scotland’s political and cultural autonomy (p. 207). The truth in this last point is both generally implicit but explicit in some of their works. After 1922 it became increasingly explicit.

And whether poems are “good” or “bad” remains a perennial question. Blair’s exposition of “working verse” in Victorian Scotland (and the term “verse” in the title stands in provocative contrast to the term “poetry” in the subtitle) ensures that whatever critical assessments we make of this era from now on, a lot more must be taken into account. *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland* is an essential contribution to the understanding of modern Scottish literature.

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