

# Contemporary Scottish Women Writers

An abstract painting with a central figure in shades of blue and yellow, holding a red object. The background is a mix of brown, orange, and green tones. The style is expressive and textured.

Edited by  
Aileen Christianson  
and Alison Lumsden

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# Contents

Acknowledgements		v
Introduction		1
Part One: Contemporary Scottish Women Poets and Playwrights		
Chapter One	Scottish Women's Poetry 1972–1999: Transforming Traditions <i>Margery Palmer McCulloch</i>	11
Chapter Two	Kathleen Jamie's Semiotic of Scotlands <i>Helen Boden</i>	27
Chapter Three	Liz Lochhead's Poetry and Drama: Forging Ironies <i>Aileen Christianson</i>	41
Chapter Four	Sharman Macdonald: The Generation of Identity <i>Susan C. Triesman</i>	53
Chapter Five	Sue Glover, Rona Munro, Lara Jane Bunting: Echoes and Open Spaces <i>Ksenija Horvat and Barbara Bell</i>	65
Chapter Six	Jackie Kay's Poetry and Prose: Constructing Identity <i>Alison Lumsden</i>	79
Part Two: Contemporary Scottish Women's Prose Fiction		
Chapter Seven	Muriel Spark and Candia McWilliam: Continuities <i>Aileen Christianson</i>	95
Chapter Eight	Agnes Owens's Fiction: Untold Stories <i>Lynne Stark</i>	111

Chapter Nine	Emma Tennant, Elspeth Barker, Alice Thompson: Gothic Revisited <i>Carol Anderson</i>	117
Chapter Ten	Janice Galloway's Novels: Fraudulent Mooching <i>Glenda Norquay</i>	131
Chapter Eleven	A. L. Kennedy's Longer Fiction: Articulate Grace <i>Sarah M. Dunnigan</i>	144
Chapter Twelve	Scottish Women's Short Stories: 'Repositories of Life Swiftly Apprehended' <i>Alison Lumsden</i>	156
Selective Bibliography of Writing by Other Contemporary Scottish Women Writers <i>Lynne Stark</i>		170
Contributors		180
Index		182

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Aileen Christianson  
Alison Lumsden



# Introduction

*Alison Lumsden and Aileen Christianson*

The first issue of *Cencrastus* in 1979 made reference to the paucity of women writers in Scotland.<sup>1</sup> There were, in fact, Scottish women writing in the 1970s and 1980s: poets (for example, Valerie Gillies and Liz Lochhead; for further details, see Chapter 1); novelists (Muriel Spark, Jessie Kesson and Emma Tennant, for example); short story writers such as Elspeth Davy; and dramatists such as Joan Ure. The 1990s have seen the addition of many new Scottish women writing from a more confident assumption that being female and being Scottish are linked and culturally positive. The breadth of the work of contemporary Scottish women writers now ensures the redrawing of the literary map of Scotland, allowing for these writers a natural assumption of place in a culture previously more accessible to male Scottish writers. Women writers have become fully part of 'the bedrock' of this 'small / and multitudinous country'.<sup>2</sup>

The political debates surrounding the 1979 referendum for a devolved Scottish Parliament, and the failure of the campaign for implementation, may ironically have been the watershed for Scottish writing generally, as Gavin Wallace suggests in his introduction to *The Scottish Novel since the Seventies*:

The intellectual wasteland to which many believed Scotland had been reduced in 1979 was, however, not barren for long – if, in fact, it ever had been. The late 1970s and 1980s witnessed the beginnings of a third and infinitely more radical phase in twentieth-century Scottish literature ... The considerable impact of this bold enlargement of Scottish creative potential remains symbolised by the publication in 1981 of Alasdair Gray's novel *Lanark*.<sup>3</sup>

Much has happened since that watershed and, indeed, since the rejuvenation of Scottish writing described in Wallace and Stevenson's collection of critical essays (1993). The political climate has, of course, altered dramatically with Scotland's achievement of a devolved Parliament in May 1999, an event for which many of us demonstrated (during the meeting of the European Heads of Government in Edinburgh, December 1992), with hope rather than belief in its happening. In terms of writing, there has also been a spate of new women writers to join those who were already publishing (and who have continued to

develop). Another study, Christopher Whyte's *Gendering the Nation*, published in 1995, raised interesting issues about sexuality, gender and nation, giving 'notice that Scottish texts are being read in new, disruptive and not infrequently discordant ways'.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the publication of Gifford and McMillan's *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* (1997) has provided a literary map on which contemporary Scottish women's writing may be located, recovering a rich tradition. The study also reintroduces writers into the critical debate, as the editors themselves suggest in their introduction:

Overall, we do feel that this volume succeeds in being celebratory in the sense that it opens up possibilities of reading: it aims to reveal and release texts, not to fix and preserve them. And above all it hopes to introduce the work of both known and forgotten writers to an audience within and far beyond Scotland.<sup>5</sup>

Anderson and Christianson's collection *Scottish Women's Fiction 1920s to 1960s* (2000) provides more detailed discussion of specific works by earlier twentieth-century women writers.<sup>6</sup> Given these developments and with these previous collections providing a cultural framework, the time is appropriate for a new collection of essays devoted to contemporary Scottish women's writing. Indeed, the increasing interest in Scottish literature and culture generally in schools (the inclusion of a compulsory Scottish text in Higher Still is a significant landmark), in universities and in the wider public sphere almost necessitates such a study.

Any work which takes as its parameters the terms 'Scottish' and 'women' must make some attempt to explain its critical paradigms. Clearly there is a sense in which both denote a degree of 'marginality', an exclusion from the dominant discourse of white male 'Britishness'. Benedict Anderson suggests a close relationship between race and gender when he writes that one of the paradoxes of theories of nationalism is that 'in the modern world everyone can, should, will "have" a nationality, as he or she "has" a gender' (although he nowhere examines the role of gender in nationhood).<sup>7</sup> However, we must be wary of *assuming* that peripheralisation of nation can be straightforwardly equated with that of gender. Anderson argues that 'Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity / genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined' (6), but what is frequently interesting about the women writers discussed here is the way in which their work *cuts across* patriarchal constructions of Scotland to suggest alternative 'imaginings' or constructions of nationhood and their relationship to it than those offered by their male counterparts. Frequently, it is women writers within national cultures who seemingly disrupt homogeneity.

The notion of a study which takes as its terms of definition 'nation' and 'gender' is also problematised by post-colonial theory which calls into question the idea of nation itself, reminding us that national identities, like their

boundaries, are not *essential* but simply constructed. Homi Bhabha argues: 'The very concepts of homogeneous national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or "organic" ethnic communities – as *the grounds of cultural comparativism* – are in a profound process of redefinition.'<sup>8</sup> Bhabha's thesis is exemplified by the break-up of the Soviet Union during the 1990s into smaller and smaller 'national' regions. Now that a greater degree of autonomy has been achieved in Scotland and what many would regard as the common political goal attained, what begins to emerge is a sense, or a reminder, of Scotland's own lack of homogeneity. Within its compact national boundaries there are significant geographical and cultural differences between Highland and Lowland Scotland, north-east, east and west, mainland and (diverse) islands. Helen Kidd nicely complicates the idea of 'site' and 'topos' as 'mutable and movable' in relation to Scotland's complicated regional differences, 'the site' being 'split – not into two – but into many', in her 'Writing Near the Fault Line: Scottish Women Poets and the Topography of Tongues'.<sup>9</sup> A question for the twenty-first century, perhaps, is how Scotland, 'this most complicated and self-ironising of nations',<sup>10</sup> will hold together in its devolved state.

What rationale is there, then, for a collection of essays which takes as its terms of reference contemporary Scottish women's writing? Clearly, as with all studies of Scottish Literature, there is an implication that whatever diversities may exist within Scotland itself, these writers have more in common than they would with those of another nation. Similarly, there is an assumption that as women writers they share certain agendas and influences, and interrogate the 'space' of Scotland in their own way. This book places contemporary Scottish women writers together with the understanding that while the terms 'Scottish' and 'women' may be fluid and, to a degree, problematic, nevertheless these categories contain potential as paradigms in which to consider these writers' work.

With an awareness of the problems attached to its terms of reference, then, the aim of this book has been to employ them eclectically. When deciding who should be discussed in this collection, 'Scottishness' has been interpreted in the widest possible sense; writers who live and work within Scotland and who engage directly with its parameters in their work – Janice Galloway and Laura Hird, for example – are included, alongside those who no longer live here – Muriel Spark, Sharman Macdonald, Candia McWilliam and Ali Smith. It was also the intention of the editors that the critical approaches taken towards these writers should be wide-ranging. Several of the writers here – Dilys Rose or A. L. Kennedy, for example – resist being labelled in terms of their nationality or gender, suggesting that to them such categories are limiting. With this in mind, there was no overall mandate that contributors to this volume should address any of the writers purely in these terms. In fact, we encouraged a diversity of approach and length, rather than enforcing or attempting what might become a misleading homogeneity. Rather than 'subsuming emergent cultural differences ... under the all-overshadowing tartan

umbrella of what is traditionally perceived to be truly or typically Scottish', as Schoene-Harwood puts it, we hope that these chapters can be 'read and appreciated as contributions to the heterogeneous canons of feminist, gay ... or working-class literatures written in English'.<sup>11</sup> However, several of the chapters do take a paradigm of nation or gender at least as a starting point of their discussions. The results are often fruitful, foregrounding concerns in the work of these women writers that might otherwise have gone unrecognised (or have been underemphasised).

In spite of attempts to be eclectic, a book such as this is also governed by what is possible. While it was the intention of the editors to include chapters on several other writers, this proved difficult for a variety of reasons. Gaps and omissions, if inevitable, are still noticeable. Writing in Gaelic is considered, as one of Scotland's three languages, only in Chapter 1, 'Scottish Women's Poetry 1972–1999', and those Gaelic writers available in parallel texts have also been listed in the 'Selective Bibliography of Other Scottish Women Writers'. This results partly from the fact that those critics who are fluent in Gaelic and English may choose not to contribute, but it also reflects an acceptance by the editors, Scots- and English- but not Gaelic-speaking, that an honest representation of current writing in two of the languages in Scotland is better than a token addition of a further chapter on contemporary Gaelic women's writing, perhaps repeating what Meg Bateman has already well discussed in 'Poetry in the Modern Idiom', in her 'Women's Writing in Scottish Gaelic since 1750'.<sup>12</sup>

Other omissions result from the fact that a planned chapter has not come to fruition. We had intended that the writers Margaret Elphinstone and Ellen Galford would be considered in what has become a ghost chapter on Scottish fantasy. Elphinstone, in her critical article 'Contemporary Feminist Fantasy in the Scottish Literary Tradition',<sup>13</sup> draws attention to the problems of situating her own novels generically and also to the subversive possibilities in the feminist fantasies of Sian Hayton's fiction (also unrepresented; for their novels, see 'Selective Bibliography'). All three are writers who, as adults, came to Scotland from English and North American backgrounds but whose writing engages with Scotland. Both Galford and Elphinstone use fantasy to discuss Scottish reality, and placing Galford's novels within genre is also difficult. Galford has talked of the difficulties bookshops have with physically situating her novels: Scottish, lesbian, Jewish, fantasy, political satire, historical fiction – there is no bookshelf category encompassing them all.<sup>14</sup> All of Galford's fiction comes from the refreshing perspective of lesbian as norm, her narrators time-travelling, sceptical and chatty. Her two novels set in Scotland, *The Fires of Bride* and *Queendom Come*, contain satirical interrogations of attitudes to religion, sexuality and gender and all her novels are radical in their sweep and flexibility. It is the accident of her birth in New Jersey which seems to prevent her being read as a Scottish writer, when many of her concerns, in fact, place her within contemporary Scottish cultural contexts.

Elphinstone discusses the paradox of writing her early fiction as pastiche or as 'about where I live' yet having it published and reviewed as science fiction or as Scottish fantasy. Placing herself within a Scottish critical tradition, she writes of having used Gregory Smith's model of the 'polar twins of the Scottish Muse'.<sup>15</sup> She now voices more overtly feminist connections:

I totally part company with my former self. But then, ten years ago I hadn't read Cixous ... what she did do for me was put me off hierarchical binary oppositions for life. Away with this real / fantastical juxtaposition! Life is infinitely more complicated than that, and all I can say these days, when I look at the fantastic in my own writing, is that since no paradigm of reality ever does add up, I don't bother too much about boundaries ... my rejection of anti-syzygies in any shape or form is that they imply a really boring fixed boundary between one state and another, whereas to me one of the interesting things about fiction is that it avoids having to establish set differences between fact and imagination, or evidence and truth.<sup>16</sup>

A critique of binary, oppositional modes is also recurrent in several of the chapters in this collection, as they interrogate ideas of what Jackie Kay calls 'inherent contradiction'. Lumsden, for example, foregrounds Kay's wish to embrace difference – 'contain both things, being Black and being Scottish'<sup>17</sup> – while Christianson believes Spark's work provides positive conjunctions between the apparently incompatible.

Shena Mackay, born in Scotland but raised and educated in England, is another missing writer. While her fiction is generally set in south-east England, her novel *Dunedin* (1992) and short stories *The Laughing Academy* (1993) both gained Scottish Arts Council awards. Her work is present in Scottish collections,<sup>18</sup> and she is classified as an 'Anglo-Scot' by Flora Alexander.<sup>19</sup> Her recurring interest in border-crossings, the significance of the past, and the nature of identity is most notable in *Dunedin*, the opening and closing sections of which focus on a group of Scottish settlers in early twentieth-century New Zealand. Her intensely visual prose frequently concerns temporal and cultural borderlands, possibly linking her work to Scottish traditions; her sharply satirical wit invites comparisons with Muriel Spark. But she remains very much herself, both illustrating and exploring the slipperiness of identity. Her relationship to Scottish literature seems less certain than that of Spark, Elspeth Barker or Candia McWilliam, all of whom are discussed in this book.<sup>20</sup>

In the chapters on writers who have been discussed, several points clearly emerge. First of all, what is apparent is the volume of work by Scottish women writers today. Indeed, so great is this volume that the general chapters – on poetry, on drama and on short stories – have had, by necessity, to be selective. What also emerges is that contemporary Scottish women writers are offering both a continuity with past tradition and a break from it, Carol Anderson's chapter on female Gothic neatly illustrating this relationship. Similarly, several of the chapters also suggest where they overlap today with their male



8. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 5.
9. In Vicki Bertram (ed.), *Kicking Daffodils Twentieth-Century Women Poets* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 95–110 (95, 95–7).
10. Candia McWilliam, 'All the Dead Dears', *Sunday Review: Independent on Sunday*, 17 September 1995, p. 32.
11. Berthold Schoene-Harwood, "'Emerging as the Others of Our Selves" – Scottish Multiculturalism and the Challenge of the Body in Postcolonial Representation', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 25.1 (May 1998), pp. 54–72 (55).
12. In Gifford and McMillan (eds) (1997), pp. 659–76 (667–75).
13. Margaret Elphinstone, 'Contemporary Feminist Fantasy in the Scottish Literary Tradition', in Caroline Gonda (ed.), *Tea and Leg-Irons: New Feminist Readings from Scotland* (London: Open Letters, 1992), pp. 44–59.
14. 'Mythdemeanours: Celtic Twilights and Lesbian Dawns', in 'Myths and Peripheries: The Hidden Ot(her) in Scottish Literature', MLA session, December 1993, Toronto, Canada.
15. Elphinstone, p. 48; G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature Character and Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1919), p. 20.
16. Letter to editors (13 December 1999) about her most recent novel, *The Sea Road* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000).
17. Gillean Somerville-Arjat and Rebecca E. Wilson (eds), *Sleeping with Monsters* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990), p. 121.
18. For example, Harry Ritchie (ed.), *New Scottish Writing* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).
19. 'Contemporary Fiction III: The Anglo-Scots', in Gifford and McMillan (eds) (1997), pp. 630–40. Emma Tennant, Alison Fell, Sara Maitland and Candia McWilliam are the other 'Anglo-Scots' discussed.
20. These thoughts on Mackay are from a conversation with Carol Anderson, for which thanks.
21. Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, New Canadian Library, 1978), p. 350; cited in Coral Ann Howells, *Private and Fictional Words Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 10.
22. Kathleen Jamie, *Jizzen* (London: Picador, 1999), p. 42.



PART ONE

# Contemporary Scottish Women Poets and Playwrights



## CHAPTER ONE

# Scottish Women's Poetry 1972–1999: Transforming Traditions

*Margery Palmer McCulloch*

You called me a poet ... but no man ever said I was a poet.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter explores poetry by women writing in all three of Scotland's languages – English, Scots and Gaelic – in the final quarter of the twentieth century, from the publication of Liz Lochhead's *Memo for Spring* in 1972 to Kate Clanchy's *Samarkand* in 1999.<sup>2</sup> The focus is primarily on poets living and working in Scotland although expatriate writers such as Clanchy and Carol Ann Duffy are also included. The chapter is divided into three sections, corresponding approximately with the birth dates of the writers and the three decades from the 1970s. Since Liz Lochhead, Jackie Kay and Kathleen Jamie are discussed elsewhere, their work will be given only passing mention here. Lochhead is, however, inevitably a presence throughout, since she has been an influential mould-breaker in so many ways from 1972 until the present, anticipating with *Memo for Spring* the feminist discourses of the later 1970s.

### *Whose Tradition? Which Tradition?: Poetry in the 1970s*

Among reasons advanced for the relative absence of women from poetry in the past has been the 'high art' nature of poetry itself, its privileging of literary language and forms which contrasted with women's domestic lives and lack of higher education. In addition, romanticism gave the poet a transcendent, universal status, the lyric voice traditionally being a male one. How, then, could a woman, to whom society had allocated a private role, aspire to the public voice of the poet? And when, in our century in particular, she has so aspired, what language is she to use; whose tradition is she to follow? Such questions have been prominent in feminist literary discourse from the 1970s onwards and in Scotland they are complicated by the fact that there are three languages and at least three literary traditions to be considered.

My first group of English-language poets, who, like Lochhead, began to publish in the 1970s, are transitional writers. All university-educated, they chose to use existing models, modifying them where necessary for their own

purposes, rather than to break openly with the predominantly male poetry tradition which they had, understandably, internalised and learned from.

Janet Caird (b. 1913) is the oldest of these writers and perhaps the least well-known to a contemporary readership. She is interesting for the way in which education and literary influences from an earlier period have interacted with female experience in our own time to produce a distinctive poetry. Born in Malawi, Caird was educated at Edinburgh University, the Sorbonne in Paris and the University of Grenoble; she began to publish poetry only in her sixties. Like many women of her generation, she did not consider herself a feminist in present-day terms and her education enabled her to enjoy intellectual and artistic pursuits alongside her domestic responsibilities. Yet her poetry is informed by an awareness of the restrictions under which women have lived and to some extent still live. Caird studied literature under Sir Herbert Grierson at a time contemporary with modernism and this influence can be seen in her work. Her poems are short in length, economical in statement and image; it is a poetry which has the intensity and concentration of Pound's *imagism*, yet which encourages the reader to make the leap beyond the concrete visual image to the 'message' within. In 'Red Tulips', for example, the poem's speaker, asked why she always chooses red tulips for her jug and garden, tells of her childhood home with its 'bed of red tulips, / and a small girl for whom they, / warm in sunlight, / were the most beautiful things she had ever seen'. And then come the final lines: 'This was before the world shook, / and a chasm split her landscape'.<sup>3</sup> Carol Ann Duffy has written that 'all childhood is an emigration',<sup>4</sup> but here the imagery seems to speak of an emotional rupture between childhood and adulthood which is especially critical for a female child. The tree imagery of 'Bonsai' speaks of a restricted existence for the adult woman: 'Roots clipped; / branches bound; / cherished and manipulated' she now 'sits in the parlour among old china cups, / and sees through the window-pane / the trees of the forest march on the sky-line'.<sup>5</sup> Caird's late entry into poetry has also allowed her to explore the experience of growing old. In 'Ageing', the metaphor is that of the cat 'laying a lethargic paw over fingers, / brushing fur across eyes' but whose 'claws dig deep / and the bite is mortal' (*Narrow Path*, 9). 'Time's meanest jest' is 'to leave the will but lock away the tools / for making' (*John Donne*, 17). There is a philosophical framework behind all her poems. In 'John Donne, You Were Wrong ...', her perception is that essentially 'we are all islands', our human relationships 'lighthouses, beacons, [which] criss-cross the dark ... small skiffs beached on the shingle [which] must soon drift on / under the tyranny of the tide' (*John Donne*, 50). Caird's poetry is a good example of how a woman born in an earlier period, fortunate to have the kind of education which made her at ease with poetic forms developed by a male poetry tradition, has been able to use these forms in a more feminist age, adapting them to deal with present-day concerns.

Adapting existing poetic forms has been the practice also of Tessa Ransford and Valerie Gillies. In *Sleeping with Monsters*, Ransford comments that a passion

for ideas has been the inspiration for her poetry, but ideas have to find an 'objective correlative' in order to be transformed into poetry.<sup>6</sup> She believes strongly that poets are not 'born' but that they have to learn their craft, one of the reasons behind the School of Poets which she started on her return from Pakistan in 1968. Her language studies at university introduced her to the poetry of Rilke and Hölderlin and her own practice was to imitate these poets and English poets she admired such as Donne, Hopkins and Lawrence, learning much in particular from the translations she made of Hölderlin. She has a clear view of the kind of poet she thinks she is: meditative, contemplative, not visual – 'I'm not good at remembering details of things I've seen. It's more the analogy I'm looking for.' And unlike Lochhead and many of the younger poets: 'I tend to write about myself. I'm not very good at projecting myself into other people' (*Monsters*, 194–5).

Ransford is therefore very much a poet in an age of transition, ambitious to be recognised as a poet, aware of the obstacles women have to face in the attempt to enter poetry and yet drawn by training and personal psychology to write in the tradition of male poets who appeal to her intellect and her sense of the importance of philosophical contemplation. Her meditative poems could be seen as belonging with the work of Edwin Muir who also was deeply influenced by Hölderlin. Later collections such as *Medusa Dozen* (1994) and *When It Works It Feels Like Play* (1998) show the impact of feminism, with the latter in particular bringing together generations of female experience and exploring in a fresh way the relationship between motherhood and artistic creativity.<sup>7</sup>

Several of the poems in Valerie Gillies's first collection *Each Bright Eye* were meditations on her experience of India when studying at the University of Mysore.<sup>8</sup> Others remembered her childhood at her grandfather's farm – 'a kind of adult life in miniature' (*Monsters*, 54). From the first, however, one has a strong sense of an everyday speaking voice in Gillies's poetry as opposed to a literary voice. Gillies is clear she does not want to be categorised as a 'female poet', but does not seem to have thought acutely about the implications of gender in poetry:

there's neither man nor woman, there's only the maker ... I like to think there are things I've written where you wouldn't know whether it was a woman or a man writing, and then there are other things, to do with children, or love poems. Yet men write poems about children as well ... I suppose I've a lot of male heroes in my poems. (*Monsters*, 56)

Ironically, some of the best poems in her first collection are about her children or that most female of occupations, 'Shopping', while 'Infertility Patient' in *Sleeping with Monsters* (58–9) is powerful. Later collections such as *The Ringing Rock* (1995) contain poems of landscape and estuary, sharply observed and communicated.<sup>9</sup> Gillies is interested in making connections between poetry and other art-forms and collaborates with visual artist Will Maclean and clarsach player and composer Savourna Stevenson.