

Norman MacCaig (1910-1996)

Sure Proof

*I can no more describe you
than I can put a thing for the first time
where it already is.*

*If I could make a ladder of light
or comb the hair of a dream girl with a real comb
or pour a table into a jug...*

*I'm not good at impossible things.
And that is why I'm sure
I will love you for my ever.*

From 'A Man in my Position' 1969



Norman MacCaig was born in Edinburgh in 1910. Although he spent all his childhood and his later life in Scotland's capital, his mother's Highland past was a great influence on the young poet. MacCaig's mother was from Scalpay, Harris and the Gaelic heritage inherited on visits to his mother's family on the islands was to have an enduring effect on MacCaig.

MacCaig's formal education was firmly rooted in the Edinburgh soil: he attended the Royal High School and then Edinburgh University where he studied Classics. He then trained to be a teacher at Moray House in Edinburgh and spent a large part of his life as a primary school teacher.

During the war MacCaig refused to fight because he did not want to kill people who he felt were just the same as him. He therefore spent time in various prisons and doing landwork because of his pacifist views.

Having spent years educating young children, MacCaig then went on to teach university students when in 1967 he became the first Fellow in Creative Writing at Edinburgh University, and he later held a similar post while teaching at the University of Stirling.

MacCaig's life and poetry was principally divided into two parts, represented by two

locales. Although he takes his reader with him on visits to New York and Italy, the locality of the bulk of his poetry is divided between two Scottish locations. His home city of Edinburgh provided contrast with his holiday home of Assynt, a remote area in the North-West of Scotland where MacCaig spent much time, especially in the summer months. The landscape and people of Assynt provided inspiration for his poetry as well as bringing MacCaig close friendships and a love for the land.

Norman MacCaig's poetry began as part of the New Apocalypse Movement, a surrealist mode of writing which he later disowned turning instead to more precise, often witty observations. He was great friends with Hugh MacDiarmid and other Scottish poets he met with in the bars of Edinburgh to debate, laugh and drink. Although he was never persuaded by his literary friends to write in Scots, he was respected by friends such as MacDiarmid as having made an important contribution to literature.

As he became older, MacCaig's fame spread and he received such honours as the O.B.E. and the Queen's Medal for Poetry, yet it was at home in Edinburgh and Assynt where he was probably most appreciated. This was evident at his 75th, 80th, and 85th birthday parties when the cream of the Scottish literati and musicians came together for readings and musical performances.

By the time of his death in January 1996, Norman MacCaig was known widely as the grand old man of Scottish poetry.

Norman MacCaig: An Interview

Jennie Renton, textualities.net

I was going to start by asking you what you mean by calling yourself a Zen Calvinist, but I realised that if you were really a Zen Calvinist, you couldn't possibly answer that question. So I'm going to start by asking you, can poetry be taught?

Well, I'll answer the first one first. I was on a panel and I was asked what my religion was and I said 'Zen Calvinist,' just to shut them up. And the second question, can poetry be taught? I didn't think so. When I was asked to be Writer in Residence at Edinburgh I thought, you can't teach poetry. This is ridiculous. I'd always been suspicious of 'Creative Classes.' However, I learned something. I thought that if the young person, the student, has poetry in him or her, to offer them help is like offering a propeller to a bird. And if they haven't got poetry in them, there's nothing you can do that will produce it. I used to quote a fascinating couplet: 'The feathered tribes on pinions skim the air, / Not so the mackerel and still less the bear.'

But I found that when the students brought me things, I never taught them in the sense of,

'You should do this, you should do that.' The thing was to discover what they wanted to write about and the form that they wanted to write it in, and go through each poem with a toothcomb in an attempt to show them how they could improve the poem. A very common thing was to find a line I just couldn't understand, and I'd say, 'I don't understand that line. It's very boring to ask, I know, but what does it mean?' Extraordinarily often they'd say, 'Well as a matter of fact I don't know.' And I'd say, 'What's it doing there then?' And they would say, 'I liked the image.' I'd say, 'So do I. But I don't know what it means. It's a nice line. Remove it. Make it the start of a new poem.' And I found that talking like that was a big help to them. Two things happened. One was, because they had a sympathetic guy to talk to, they started writing more. The other thing was, since they knew I was going to go through it, niggling away, they wrote far more self-critically, and they improved to an extraordinary degree. I would think I saved them a few years in reaching the stage they did.

Quite a few of those students have had books out since. Valerie Gillies for one, and a fellow who's now in England, and Alistair McLean, who wrote a good first book of poems. The second one I didn't like so much. The first one was called *From the Wilderness*. It's not much talked about now, more's the pity, but it made quite a stir when it came out. And there were others. So you can't teach poetry, but you can see what the writer is up to and point to the faults.

Is there anything you think about that you haven't been able to express on paper?
That I think about or feel about?

Think... feel... something of you. Something that you are.

I don't know. I don't think of myself all the time. I'm just a fellow...

But you are yourself all the time.

So I don't need to think about it.

OK. Something you feel about.

In some ways I'm a reticent man, and for quite a number of years there wasn't very much of my real true deep feelings in my writing. A terrible thing about getting oldish is that your friends start dying, and in the last ten years I have lost seven or eight of my closest. And I have found as a result of this, quite unexpectedly, that I was able to speak about deep feeling much more openly than I used to.

Have you ever tried to write from what you see as another person's viewpoint?

I don't think so. I'm not good at imitation, and that's a sort of imitation. If I wrote a play

with four characters every single one of them would talk like me regardless of age or sex. And also I'm not good at inventing things. And also I'm not good at inventing things. I couldn't invent a plot. I couldn't invent a character. All I write about is what's happened to me and to people I know, and the better I know them, the more likely they are to be written about. But I couldn't write monologues in the voice of another person. Wouldn't want to. I feel it's intruding on the other person.

Do you mind if your poetry is misunderstood?

Anybody who writes doesn't like to be misunderstood. So I do mind. I ask myself, is it my fault or the reader's? And if it's my fault, then I call it a bad poem and I put it in the bucket.

Which books have you read that have unlocked your poetic expression?

Oh dear, I've read so much. I said I have no powers of invention. Well, I also have no powers of mimicry. And in a way, that's been a help to me, because I take great passions for a particular poet - sometimes it lasts for many years, sometimes only for a while. This happens to everybody. But you'd have a job to find many of my poems which would seem to be very influenced by a particular person. In one book, there are one or two poems where a shrewd observer would say, 'Aha, MacCaig's been re-reading John Donne.' And there's another book where there are a few poems where the same shrewd observer (curse him!) would say, 'Aha, MacCaig's been reading that American fellow, Wallace Stevens.' But aside from that, there's very little trace of direct influence.

Which friends have you encountered first through their writing?

Quite a number. Mostly Scots of course. With people like McDiarmid, Sorley McLean, Sidney Goodsir Smith and Garioch, just to take the first four that naturally come to mind, I knew their writing before I met them.

Do you feel that reading them led you to become friends with them?

No. I just liked them because they were the person they were.

Moving on now to the books in this room. How do you describe your relationship to the books you own?

Well, I'm a light traveller. I chuck things away. But I hang on to books. I love them. I even think they're very nice decor in a room - far better than paintings... That's not quite true!

How does it make you feel when you look at those bookshelves there?

They make me feel friendly. All those authors there, most of whom of course I've never met. That's the poetry side, that's the prose side, that's the fishing and miscellaneous behind me. You get an affection for books that you've enjoyed.

There are some friends you don't meet for twenty years and when you meet them again

it's as if no twenty years has happened - you're lucky when that happens. I feel the same about books. There are books up there I haven't read for many years but I wouldn't put them out. I never know when I might want to read them again.

How do you arrange your bookshelves?

They're very strictly arranged because I'm so untidy. If I didn't arrange them very strictly I'd never be able to find a book. The poems are arranged according to the country they come from for a start - in translation because I'm a hopeless linguist. Czechoslovakian, Swedish, French, Italian, Russian, etc. And they're all in alphabetical order so that I can find them. I'm orderly in my mind. I hate being trauchled. When I was a teacher, teachers would come into my classroom and admire my desk on which lay nothing whatever, whereas theirs were heaped with papers and books.

Would you call yourself a book collector?

No. I wouldn't really. I only keep books that I like very much. Otherwise I'd throw them out. I'm not a 'book collector.' I don't care whether a book is a first edition or not. I'm not a bibliophile in that word's natural sense.

You often read your poetry in public. What's the difference between a poem heard and a poem read?

It depends on the reader. Not only have I read a lot in public, I've heard a lot of people reading in public. And some poets are far better read off the page because they're very bad speakers. I'm thinking of one in particular whom I won't name, a good poet, and he reads in such a dry, boring way, your eyes start drooping. On the other hand, a good reader of his own work - like Robert Garioch - once you've heard reading, when you read the poems off the page the rhythms of his voice come in and they definitely help you to understand the poem. Not that his poems are obscure. But it does give an addition if the reader is a good reader. If not, it reduces them.

I recently came across some old 78s of T.S. Elliot reading the Four Quartets. What do you think of the way he reads his poetry? He has a very dry delivery.

A very dry delivery. But, there is a gossipy interest of course, not only in hearing a poet, but in seeing one. I'm not against gossip. And Elliot's a good instance. At first I thought, what an awful reader. And then I began to see a connection between the way he read and the way he wrote. And the two combined. Now I don't think I would like to hear Elliot read by anybody else.

For you, would the ideal library of modern poetry consist of authors reading on compact

disc?

I don't think I would like that. When I talk of hearing a poet's voice speaking, I always think of it as in the presence of the man. I've never bought a cassette of someone reading his own work. I've been given some. But if it's a person I know, like McDiarmid, I've got his voice in my head already.

We haven't touched on the prose works that you enjoy, and that might have influenced you. You once said that when you first read Moby Dick you thought it was a dreadful book, but on re-reading it you thought it was a work of genius.

That's happened several times. I find it's impossible for me to read Proust. And it's impossible for me to read Henry James. I want to shake him and say, 'Don't be so damned finicky!' Spit it out straight and proper without all these additions and nuances, you know. I just can't be bothered with them. I love certain novelists and short story writers. I think the novelist I re-read most often is Dickens. I used to have a great love for Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, the big boys of the last century. But Dickens stays. Every year I go north I take a Dickens with me. He's so funny for one thing. He's got his faults. One in particular - he can be shockingly sentimental. Mawkish. But only at times. And what a number of characters he's created. Everybody knows about Micawber, or Fagin - just as everybody knows about Falstaff and Hamlet. They are grotesques, but they're alive, very alive. And there are bits in those characters that we know in other people. Oh yes.

The modern style is much more lean and spare than that, isn't it?

Yes. The nineteenth century novels came from a time when there was no television and people had time to read novels in three volumes. People haven't got the interest in long long works these days. A lack of interest which I share. I'm sometimes asked, why don't I write a long poem? And I say, I don't like reading long poems. Why the hell should I write one?

You also have a large collection of fishing books.

Well, I love fishing. I wouldn't kill a fly myself but I've no hesitation in killing a fish. A lot of men are like that. No bother. Out you come. Thump. And that's not the only reason. Catching them is a great interest because there are so many things to take into account - the height of the water, the weather, what sort of fly, what size of fly, what colour of fly - and where are the damned fish anyway? Are they under that bank? No, it's too shallow. You know. It's full of interest of that sort. But the big one is that it takes you into bonny places. I used to fish the Border rivers, but nowadays you have to queue up for a shot and I can't stand that. When I go fishing I like to know that there's nobody within five miles of me. I'm very gregarious, but I love being in the hills on my own. And the country up in west Sutherland and Ross-shire is so beautiful.

And I love landscape. Not 'Lincolnshire,' you know. No. It's got to be hills.

What do you think about when you're there fishing in that landscape?

I don't go around looking at mountains thinking, 'There's a poem in that.' People often say, where do you get your inspiration? A word I hate. A lot of poets carry a wee notebook in their pockets to jot down ideas and lines and even a verse or two. I never do that. I never think about poetry except when I'm writing it. I mean my poetry. It's like breathing in and out to me. It's like having a conversation with someone who isn't there. Because it has to be addressed to somebody - not a particular person, or very rarely. So I don't go wandering about the place thinking, 'There's a subject for a poem.' Never ever. I'm too busy looking, or not looking, or talking to somebody. I'm a terrible blether.

Could you mention any poetry that used to be particularly important to you, but perhaps is no longer, and some that is significant to you right now?

I was very interested in American poetry for many years. Much less now. They've gone down in my estimation. In fact a lot of them I think are absolute baloney. Those Charles Olsens and people like that. At first I was interested in seeing what they were up to, what they were doing, why they were doing it. They never moved me in the way that one is moved by true poetry. The first time you read Ginsberg his flamboyance, even his coarseness, is interesting. I've still got his books, and I don't want to throw them out, but I doubt I'll ever read them again. I love poems by Herbert and Holub - and by the Swedish poet Tranströmer, to mention but a few. I don't mean I read their books right through, but I find myself very often picking one out and reading four or five poems. They stimulate me to write. It's like priming a pump that's dry, and you pour water in the top. Squeeze, squeeze, and it squelches away and then the water comes

OBITUARY:Norman MacCaig

Angus Calder, The Independent Jan 25, 1996

Joe, the young barman in the Auld Clachan (not one of the howffs which MacCaig frequented) said when I showed him the front-page news, "I guess he'll be more famous now that he's deid." It was typically modest of Norman MacCaig not to die on Burns's birthday, but good, if a death can be good, that it came in a week when people need reminding that Scotland has other great poets.

Joe went to one of the few schools in Scotland which MacCaig did not visit, under the Scottish Arts Council Writers in Public scheme. While auld wifies on the Edinburgh buses have been mourning the loss of the city's special poet, there are kids all over Scotland who studied MacCaig's poetry for exams but, more importantly, saw this ravaged Caesar stride into their lives and read perfect poetry to perfection.

I don't know if Ali Smith, the brilliant young short-story writer, first encountered him that way, but when Joy Hendry gathered together the tributes of scores of Scottish writers to celebrate Norman MacCaig's 85th birthday last year, Smith, who lives in Cambridge now, came up with one of the best. "Whenever I travel to the rail track home / I can't help it, I think of that casual MacCaig poem / The one where he's sitting smiling to himself on the London/Edinburgh train / soaring North, yes, here we go, here it comes again."

Scotland has three languages for poetry. MacCaig's was the English of Edinburgh, where he was born, and became a primary-school teacher, never aspiring to be greater, in a worldly sense, than that, though later both Edinburgh and Stirling Universities were honoured to have him on their staff, talking to students about writing with that aversion to bullshit which was his hallmark. The surprise was that this elegant, modest man was the closest friend of King Bullshit, Hugh Mac- Diarmid. They were diametrical opposites. MacDiarmid wrote huge sprawling poems about everything under the sun, especially politics and Anglophobia. MacCaig, a pacifist who suffered for his principles in the Second World War detained in Wormwood Scrubs, wrote frequently, with vast affection, before and after MacDiarmid's death, about his tankie friend. But MacCaig's politics, what you see in his verse, were those of the independent individual. They are short poems. Each makes, incisively, its point. The affinity, as many have pointed out, is with Herbert and Holub and other great poets of post-war Eastern Europe.

Hard work as a primary-school teacher. Weekend evenings in Milne's Bar, in Rose Street, by Hanover Street, just off Princes Street, by the Mound. There he formed one of a legendary quadrumvirate: MacDiarmid, if he was up from Biggar, Sydney Goodsir Smith, and Robert Garioch. The other three wrote, or had written, in Scots. They were all very much aware of the great Gaelic poet Sorley Maclean. In MacCaig's verse, you hear, enunciated or echoed, the three leids. And the substratum is Greek and Latin. He studied Classics at Edinburgh, after going to that school steeped in Classics, the Royal High. He talked about the Celtic feeling for form which he derived from Gaelic forebears, not, usually, about that grounding. But he wrote, in a poem called "Aesthetics", "Words with Greek roots / and American blossoms / have taken over the pretty garden."

Summers in Lochinver. Suilven, his special mountain. Fishing, walking. "I look up / at the eagle idling over / from Kylescu / I look away / at the shattering waterblink / of Loch Cama." Sorley Maclean wrote that MacCaig had given the Sutherland landscape new meaning. He honoured his Gaelic grannies in very beautiful English.

The career was extraordinary. I am tempted to write "by-ordinar". One of the things which MacCaig confessedly loved about MacDiarmid was the old man's rescue of Scottish expressions. MacCaig was into his thirties before he published two books of poems.

These belonged to the Neo-Apocalyptic School, rampant on the "Celtic Fringes" in the 1940s. Later, he disavowed them to the extent that one fancied that only an innate respect for scholarship prevented him destroying the copies lodged in the National Library of Scotland.

As that school went, they weren't bad. He came into his own, though, in his forties, with *Riding Lights*, published in 1955. At this point he might be, and was, mistaken for a Scottish relative of the Movement. He wrote, Celtically, in formal measures. Another book in the Fifties, and acclaim. Then the verse relaxed. Five books in the Sixties, increasingly deploying that throwaway-seeming free verse. Five later ones, written at an age when most poets have given it up for golf. *The New Collected Poems*, of 1990, did and did not round off a reputation. Even after that, folk young and old in Edinburgh (and I must add, Glasgow and Inverness) listened avidly for the itch of his scribble.

MacCaig had no religious convictions, though his poetry is infused with the seriousness of the Presbyterian tradition. He had no party politics, though rumour insists that he voted SNP. MacDiarmid blurts it all, wonderfully, up front. MacCaig's messages are about quiet decency, in quiet places.

His place in Scottish literature is unique, as the best recent writer in English, pure English. The achievement wins praise where you don't expect it. I was out on the tiles a few months ago with a young skinhead Scottish writer domiciled on what I suppose we will come to call the Irvine Welsh Heritage Trail. He surprised me by expressing his utter love of MacCaig's verse. We deplored together the fact that MacCaig was in failing health, never quite himself again after the loss of his much-loved consort, Isabel. We plotted to surprise him with a bottle of whisky in his home in Leamington Terrace. We never did it. I regret that. I offer, too late, this poem:

*"Your death is beyond belief
which you never had, anyway
It comes upon one as a private grief
- the ultimate enemy."*

Norman Alexander MacCaig, poet: born Edinburgh 14 November 1910; FRSL 1965; Fellow in Creative Writing, Edinburgh University 1967-69; Lecturer in English Studies, Stirling University 1970-72, Reader in Poetry 1972- 77; OBE 1979; ARSA 1981; FRSE 1983; Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry 1986; married 1940 Isabel Munro (died 1990; one son, one daughter); died Edinburgh 23 January 1996.

"No extra words": the Scottish Lyric Poet Norman MacCaig

Anette Degott Nov 1995

Scottish literature has been suffering up to the present time from prejudices allocating it to a Romanticism dating back to the 18th century that links it inevitably and almost exclusively to the names of Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns. Nevertheless, in this century alone, this country has produced famous poets such as Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir. Their international standing has, however, adversely affected due recognition for more recent poets - with a few exceptions such as Alasdair Gray or Douglas Dunn, who have managed to become well known in Germany.

The present state of Scottish poetry is characterised by its abundance of themes including politics, feminism and regionalism and of language with Scottish, English and Gaelic poetry. There is a lack of awareness of this diversity both abroad and unfortunately even in England as is the Scot's experience time and time again. It is typical for this situation that a poet such as Norman MacCaig should have received very little international attention despite the fact that he has received numerous awards, the latent being the most coveted poetry prize in England, the 'Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry'.

MacCaig could be described as the 'éminence grise' in today's Scottish literary scene; he had taken part in the discussions with a serious commitment to literature and poetry that took place in 'Milne's Bar' in the fifties; he knew all the main post-war poets and refers to himself as a representative of the older generation and even now, he always has a pithy comment to make. His verbal wit has often inspired fear in many an interviewer and is a reason why MacCaig's poetry readings were extremely popular events which were enjoyed not only by academics but also by school children. In the meantime his works have become a compulsory part of the literature syllabus in Scottish schools and universities. This popularity enabled the latest edition of the Collected Poems (Chatto & Windus 1990) to become a Scottish best seller, an honour rarely granted to a book of poetry.

Norman MacCaig, son of a chemist, was born in 1910 in Edinburgh where he still lives. On account of his Gaelic origins he feels himself to be Celt which is the basis for his love of a former Celtic area in the North West of Scotland called Assynt where he has been spending the summer months for over forty years. There are numerous references to Assynt in his poems. MacCaig read Classics at the University of Edinburgh from 1928 to 1932. His Gaelic origins and classical education have had a decisive influence on his work, as he once said in the following interview:

Celtic art is very classical [...]. They are very formal and I think I have always loved form [...]. Probably that's the reason I chose to take Classics at the university. And my native interest was, of course, reinforced by the study of Classics. [...]

If a poem is a complete poem, jampacked full of statements, [...] ideas, images, rhythms, which are all relevant to the theme of the poem, then it has got form. No fat on it. No extra words. Kick them out if they're not earning their keep. (Degott-Reinhardt 1994)

This emphasis on form is a typical feature of his work. His poems display a clear structure of ideas expressed in strict rhyming, iambic stanzas modulated by sprung rhythms and assonance and at a later stage replaced by free verse.

From 1934 to 1970 MacCaig worked as a secondary modern teacher and he taught at Sterling University as a "Writer in Residence" from 1970 to 1977 and also at Edinburgh University from 1977 to 1979. So not without a touch of irony, MacCaig describes himself: "I tell people I'm a retired schoolteacher" (The Scotsman, 3 July 1989). His Edinburgh flat still continues to be a meeting place for his circle of friends one of whom is the Irish poet Seamus Heaney.

In the second world war, MacCaig refused to do military service not for political or ideological reasons, but on purely humanitarian grounds as he once put it in his terse way: "I just didn't want to shoot other people" (In Verse, Scottish Television, 4 April 1988). Hugh MacDiarmid rightly described him as non-political as his poems do not take any stance with regard to the everyday world of politics. MacCaig also was not a follower of the Scottish Renaissance. This was a political movement in the twenties which asserted Scottish cultural independence in its search for a specifically Scottish mode of expression and which also revived Gaelic. He was a close friend of Hugh MacDiarmid, who was the extremely committed inspirer of this movement, both in its political and literary aspects and who was also the main creator of a Scottish language variant called 'Lallans', but despite this friendship MacCaig only wrote in English which led to his being dubbed as "a lickspittle of the English ascendancy". His poetic voice only becomes strident when he experiences inhuman indifference and hypocrisy as in the poem "Assisi" which criticises, in an ironic tone, the cruel lack of feeling of tourists towards a crippled beggar. He pillories atrocities of the past as in the "Clearances" of the Highlands ("A Man in Assynt) or the destructive rage of progress ("Progress"). His mordant attacks on sleazy religion ("Street Preacher") and his distrust of abstract ideas, masked in hollow phrases as in the "bulging words" such as "justice", "fraternity", "freedom", "internationalism", "peace" ("Smuggler") complete the picture of a man with a confident clear personal voice.

Both in his life and in his work, Norman MacCaig distinguishes himself by his modesty which detests great gestures and words and which, on the contrary, loves whatever is inconspicuous. Although most of his poems now more than six hundred in total deal with universal themes such as life and death, nature and man, they are placed in everyday situations.

In his short poems MacCaig manages to capture a unique moment with a swift brush-stroke. He then stretches this moment of time in the most precise way possible in harmony with his principle of honesty both towards himself and others. In this way, the marvelling gaze remains fixed on the seen object as in the poem "Learning":

*In these crowds of people I see Breughel making
marvellous matter-of-fact notations of
unemphatic marvels - that woman, child, horse:
I see them too.*

He does not look at these "unemphatic marvels" from ordinary life, but he tries to open the reader's eye to the special qualities to be found in the commonest things: "a brisk dose of Optrex. It opens your eyes" (Degott-Reinhardt 1994). He describes his poems as celebrations where the "marvellous matter-of-fact notations" are highlighted and experience is transferred into an atmosphere with a 'wondrous' quality as in the poem "Toad". The demand or the idiosyncrasy to observe everyday scenes ("to see things as they are whatever that means" (ib.) leads to an acutely exact scrutiny which is transposed in a wittily appropriate and sensual use of metaphor.

This apparently modest demand which almost sounds naive contains the whole spectrum of MacCaig's scepticism that is expressed in questions: What can I see? How can I be true to an object I can only perceive from my own subjective point of view? Isn't my seeing already a new creation? In this way, the poem "Ego" leads the observer to the insoluble dilemma between the object and the self:

*I see a rose, that strange thing, and what's there
But a seeming something coloured on the air
With the transparencies that make up me,
Thickened to existence by my notice. Tree
And star are ways of finding out what I
Mean in a text composed of earth and sky.*

These questions of the relationship between the subject and object of perception run through MacCaig's poems as one of the main themes and new answers to these questions and new ways of expressing this are constantly found in his work. In addition the process of perception, mortality and the phenomena of time and remembrance are also his principal concern.

His first books of poems *Far Cry* (1943) and *The Inward Eye* (1946) fit in general into the literary movement called the New Apocalypse which was active during and after the second world war as a reaction to the rationalising poetry of the Auden generation. It tried to find new directions by shaping the unconscious mind (D.H. Lawrence's "Apocalypse", 1931) and by using surrealist forms. MacCaig's early poems are characterised by an excess of metaphors in rhyming stanzas. Themes such as nature, love, death, and time as well as a metaphysical questioning of reality appear in the poetry volumes.

Later MacCaig distanced himself in no uncertain terms from these works which he did not include in his *Collected Poems*. After a nine-year long break from publication (MacCaig: "the long haul towards lucidity", *ib.*) the poet presents himself in *Riding Lights* (1955) with a controlled, precise style which was characteristic of all his later works. Succinct, terse poems convey in a clear form and with an apt use of metaphor the consciously experienced moment and the dilemma arising from subjective perception and the desire to be true to the uniqueness of what has been perceived and experienced. If an attempt can be made to find a pattern in his work of the last decades, then three phases can be distinguished with regard to the central theme of perception.

In the first phase which includes *Riding Lights* (1955), *The Sinai Sort* (1957), *A Common Grace* (1960), *A Round of Applause* (1962) and *Measures* (1965), the subjectivity of perception is the main theme within a complex thought process. Strict metrical control, well-structured verses and end rhymes provide the framework for the abstract content. Many of the poems make the transition from the visual object of the poem to the observer whose own perspective then becomes the main theme. A good example of this process can be found in "Summer farm" where the theme moves from the description of a farm to the thoughts of the poetic self thus in the last lines changing the perspective to that of the observing eye. Because of his complex images and the sharp forms of the ideas in his poetry verging on philosophy, MacCaig was categorised as "metaphysical physical" by Louis MacNeice, which is an adequate description of the first phases. In this phase, the influence of the metaphysical poet John Donne is very marked particularly in the poems of *The Sinai Sort* (1957). The complex, frequently undecipherable use of metaphor in the poems has been rightly called in the literary criticism as flippancy, as a frivolous language game.

Surroundings (1966) marks the beginning of the second phase, *Rings on A Tree* (1968), *A Man in My Position* (1969), *Selected Poems* (1971) to *The White Bird* (1973) also belong to this period. The poems of this phase display a new, critical dialectic in the processes of perception and presentation. The strict form breaks down to become flexible, free verse in which syntactic phrases and repetition determine the rhythm. The need for greater metrical flexibility and freedom is reflected in MacCaig's choice of new locations (New York and Italy). The poetic self is in a state of critical contention with its surroundings often represented by being addressed in the second person ("No wizard, no witch"). It sometimes expresses a clear criticism as in the inhuman behaviour of the tourists in "Assisi". The poems lament the inability of language to capture the essence of a person or thing ("No choice") as well as the subjectivity which arises of necessity from the naming of things in language ("No Nominalist"). In addition to abstract philosophising and the portrayal of concrete things or animals, real people belonging to MacCaig's circle of acquaintance are also described ("Aunt Julia"). The poems of the phase are characterised by their revolutionary, critical and rebellious spirit. This seems like a rebellion against the subjective limitations of human perception.

The third phase extends from *The World's Room* (1974), *Tree of Strings* (1977), *The Equal Skies* (1980) to *Voice Over* (1988). These poems contain personal experiences which now become transparently clear to any reader by the simplicity and clarity of the lyrical form - by the repetition of certain words and free verse within a solid general structure of the poem and by traditional images taken from the OT and Greek mythology. The poem "In Memoriam" centred on a concrete object portrays without any sentimentality the profound pain felt about the death of a close friend and on account of the cool distance created by the vivid imagery this personal experience is raised to a universal human level. Subjectivity is no longer treated as a major theme and is not even criticised, but is accepted as an immanent fact. In "End of her illness" the husband's joy at seeing his wife return home from the horror of her severe illness and also his awkward helplessness are sketched in grotesque, but apt imagery which captures the intimacy of their reunion without falling into sentimentality or without being embarrassing. These poems, especially the volume *The Equal Skies* (1980) show MacCaig at the height of his art when personal emotional hurt is re-fashioned to convey a modest and perhaps even a wise witnessing to life's experience by means of his formal mastery of the lyrical mode, culminating in a validity which transcends individual experience.

MacCaig's basic principle of honesty towards oneself and others, controlled feelings expressed in a clear form and his commitment to everyday experience, are all reminiscent of Philip Larkin. In addition to John Donne MacCaig mentions the American poet Wallace Stevens. He has in common with this poet the theme of the dialectic which links the inner world of thought and imagination to external reality although MacCaig never loses sight of the concrete and tangible aspects. His preference for precise expression in simple ordinary language to recreate concrete reality can be compared to the Imagists, particularly William Carlos Williams's attitude of solemn amazement towards real things. Distrustful of language and art and their potential and conscious of the basic inability to capture the external world in its uniqueness. MacCaig's work belongs to a general direction of post-war international poetry. His acceptance of the world of objects affirming yet distancing at the same time sets him clearly apart from the self-analysing confessional poets.

Now that MacCaig is over 80, he can look back at a life's work which avoids the grand gestures in his unaffected language but which dazzles both in its profundity and variety. His poems are characterised by his own unique style which, with its awareness of form, expresses personal attitudes as well as abstract thoughts about human perception in such a way that the reader is inspired to close observation whether the subject be a sleepy farm in summer ("Summer farm") or the beggar in "Assisi". All that is now to be hoped for is that this work will receive the attention it deserves and will finally be made available to German readers - even in translation.

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