

## Looking at the Thistle Introduction to the Scottish Poetry Feature, November 2014

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2014 has seen Scotland go through an exciting transformation. Perhaps not quite as exciting as many would have hoped but the referendum process has sparked a new vibrancy in the Scottish community and created an enthusiasm for grass roots politics that has carried on beyond the announcement of the result. A great time, then, to be looking at Scottish poetry and in particular at poems about crossing borders and exploring new worlds.

Since the renaissance in Scottish literature which happened a century after the union of the crowns (when Scotland first lost its status as an independent nation) Scottish poetry has been used to give a voice to the people of Scotland and to redefine notions of Scottish culture and identity. In the late eighteenth century, Robert Burns' was Scotland's strongest voice with poems like *Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation* directly tackling some of the issues raised by the Scottish court's move to England. Just over a century later in the 1920s, Hugh MacDiarmid was the voice of Scotland with *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* perhaps the best example of his fervent questioning of what it meant to be Scottish, and in the 1980s it was poets like Tom Leonard and Liz Lochhead who spoke out against the marginalising of Scottish language and culture. In 1999 the Scottish Parliament came into being and the arts took on a new prominence. In his 2003 St Andrew's Day speech, the then First Minister Jack McConnell stated:

I believe we should make the development of our creative drive the next major enterprise for our society. Arts for all can be a reality, a democratic right and an achievement of the 21st century.

I believe this has the potential to be a new civic exercise on a par with health, housing and education – the commitment to providing and valuing creative expression for all.<sup>1</sup>

In the throes of the more recent push for independence, novelist and playwright Alan Bisset claimed that the arts in Scotland would receive an even greater boost were Scotland to become independent.

Most in the Scottish creative community believe that independence will release a renaissance in our literature, theatre, film, television and music, as we throw off the suffocating cultural effects of London dominance.<sup>2</sup>

As it turned out, Scottish independence in 2014 was not to be but the spirit of the Yes campaign lives on in Scotland and is particularly strong within the artistic community.

So as Scotland moves into a new era of cultural and political awareness, it seems appropriate to share these poems about crossing into new territory. Although only two of the poems focus on the recent referendum, what they all share is a sense of transition, whether it be the movement from one island to the next (as in the poems of Alec Finlay and Ian Stephen), from anxiety to acceptance (Kevin MacNeil, *A Buddhist's Guide to Dealing with Malicious Critics*), from marriage through divorce (Kona Macphee, *Telemetry*) from life to death/ flight to roost (Chris

<sup>1</sup> [www.culturalcommission.org.uk/cultural/cc\\_display6861.html](http://www.culturalcommission.org.uk/cultural/cc_display6861.html)

<sup>2</sup> [NewsnetScotland.com](http://NewsnetScotland.com) 6 August 2013.

Powici, *Rooks*) or the tremulous silence left in the wake of passing fighter jets (Tim Turnbull, *The Great Be Empty*). What many of them also demonstrate is the self-confidence and pride in Scottish heritage, landscape and culture that has been prevalent in the Scottish poetry scene since Scotland first lost its independence. And perhaps this is what poetry is for: to keep alive a spirit of independence in the face of subjugation; to raise the voices that often go unheard; to probe, to explore who it is we really are and what it is that makes us that way.

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*Alison Flett's* poetry collection *Whit Lassyz Ur Inty* (Thirsty Books 2004) was shortlisted for the *Saltire Book of the Year Award*. Since moving to Adelaide in 2010 she has won a number of poetry prizes and been published in various anthologies and journals including *Etchings*, *Communion* and *Australian Love Poems 2013*.