

Julia Park: *So how are sales of your latest book — Madame Fi Fi...?*

Gerry Cambridge: I don't know. Several hundred copies? It is part of the paradox of being a poet that one can earn far more from teaching other people how to write their own poetry than from selling one's own books.

*In your experience, why does Scotland (Great Britain) appreciate its poets so much more than America? (stipends, funding, respect, etc.)*

Is this, in fact, the case? From my occasional dips into *Poets and Writers*, there seem endless residencies, literary awards, and teaching opportunities for poets in the U.S. There is also, of course, more competition for those positions and accolades. And, owing to all the factions which have to be satisfied, the poetry world over there would seem far more complex, populous and sprawling: therefore harder in which to develop a 'reputation'. The university as a centre for creative writing has only begun to develop in Scotland over the past decade or so. Perhaps it's still possible to have a non-specialist readership in Scotland, though I know of no research which proves this. The non-literary population here still seems to romantically expect its poets to be uncaged spirits, possibly as a throwback to the nation's poetic icon, Burns. Scotland is a small country. Its two major cities are 50 minutes from each other by train. Its poetry scene is sufficiently small for one to know just about everyone involved. So it is probably considerably easier to make a name for oneself here than in the open spaces of America. And probably easier to function as a poet. Many American poets seem, to Scottish writers, intimidatingly professional. There is something in the Celtic psyche which is wary of too much professionalism where poetry is concerned, almost as if the muse will stay away if prepared for too assiduously, or if her appearance is presumed.

*How have your relationships with other writers influenced you? You knew George Mackay Brown, and you have lately been collaborating with Dana Gioia...*

Mainly by osmosis, rather than through anything overt. George Mackay Brown, the Orkney writer, gave me an example of a dedicated spirit, who seldom left his native archipelago. He simply wrote quietly, year in and year out. He had no taste for polemic or literary politics. From Dana Gioia, what I took was the example of his professionalism, his forthrightness in criticism, and his interest in what one might call the sociology of the contemporary poetry scene. And, behind all that, his example of a genuine engagement with the art of poetry. Such influences can either be aesthetic, ie, directly from the work, in which case one need have no personal contact with its author; or personal, that is, the way another writer has managed his or her writing life can be inspirational. Neither of these writers have especially influenced my own work technically, though George was instrumental in getting me to study poetic form. Dana Gioia's work is too different from mine in terms of sensibility to have been of any real influence.

*And what of the residual influence of Robert Burns?*

That engaging and percipient poet-critic, Edwin Muir, once said that the average Scotsman loves Burns because he is an example of a man attempting to commit as many sins as possible as ideally as possible. In the popular heterosexual mind, Burns is the poet *par excellence*: the free spirit, poor yet triumphing creatively against circumstances, spontaneous,

forthright, exceptionally attractive to the opposite sex; the inspired genius dying young: this perception can set up both freeing and limiting expectations, by association, for a contemporary male poet in Scotland. There is also, of course, the cultism which surrounds the tradition of Burns' Clubs, satirised by Hugh MacDiarmid at the opening of his great long poem, 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle', and regarded as being rather inimical to the reception of contemporary Scottish writing. All this has, however, little to do with Burns's technical influence on Scottish poetry now. Except as a general example, this influence doesn't seem very marked.

*You have been a rhymers — seemingly forever. Why?*

I like the musical and suggestive possibilities inherent in rhyme: in, for example, satisfying a rhyme scheme, or deliberately subverting it. However, I have also written much free verse. Different subject matters require different techniques. Rhyme and formal verse link one to a long tradition of verse expression with all that implies for intertextuality, etc. Conversely, each free verse poem is unique and unrepeatable. Form is also a metaphor: repetitive forms, for instance, can reinforce particular subject matters. For a poet, it needn't be a case of 'either/or', but 'both'.

*What American poets do you read and enjoy — or not? Whose work do you admire (anywhere, any age in history)?*

I admire all poets who strike what seems to me a genuine note, have sufficient technique to allow it expression, and who seem to speak, whether directly or indirectly, of things which matter to them. American poets whose work I have read with enthusiasm at various times include Whitman, Dickinson, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, Robinson Jeffers, Theodore Roethke, James Wright, Sylvia Plath, Robert Francis, Richard Wilbur, and Anthony Hecht. I don't know enough about more recent American poetry to have developed definite tastes, with the exception of poets associated with New Formalism, and there singling out names seems invidious.

*You play blues harmonica. Has playing the blues influenced your work, or has your poetry conversely affected your playing? Do you "see" poetry or "hear" blues in the respective medium?*

I see no crossover at all, except insofar as I love the possibilities of verbal rhythm, and the harmonica is a great rhythm instrument. I play at least as much Scots-Irish traditional music on harmonica — jigs, reels, and the like — as I play blues.

*How naturally does playing the blues come to a Scotsman?*

That depends on the situation of the Scotsman. I happily concede that the most convincing harmonica blues are liable to be played by an old African-American down on his luck, with no front teeth, and a half bottle of whisky for company. I love the music, but hardly consider myself its ideal exponent.

*You are a Scot — yet you were born in England and claim your Irish-Catholic roots as well. Are you Pan-British, Pan-Celtic — with which do you most closely identify, and with which country's poets? And when are you coming to America again (the West Coast)?*

I consider myself Scots-Irish. I am first-generation Irish, conditioned by a lifetime of living in Scotland, leavened a little by my early childhood in England.

I don't know when I will return to America. Before 9/11, America was still, rather romantically, a land of poetic glory for me, based on my reading of the greats of American poetry. Since then, it has thickened and concretized in my imagination which has, if anything, become more European. My changed view of the U.S. has nothing to do with my many terrific friends there. It has everything to do with the ruling political elite. I freely admit that this is an instinctive dislike, uncorroborated by facts and figures.

*You have worked extensively with children in the school programs in your area. What advice do you have for poets who want to work with children?*

I would advise poets who want to work with children to a) like children; b) cultivate the entertainer in themselves, because children respond to boldness and extravagance; c) be enthusiastic about the subject; d) refuse to get bogged down in technical matters.

*It's a cliché, but have you learned as much from the kids as they have from you...?*

I have learned a good deal about what children find amusing or interesting. Mostly this is a matter of remembering what interested or amused yourself at that age, and testing it pragmatically in the classroom.

*You used to be a nature photographer, then set it aside, then came back with a vengeance with "Nothing But Heather!". How has your photographer's eye affected your poet's eye/writing?*

In my early work it gave me a strong visual sense. I suppose it has also made me aware of the importance of looking, in any art, and given me a respect for accuracy. Natural History photography is a specialist field, and I wanted to sell photographs. Generally speaking, it is easy to tell a good nature photograph from a bad one, in particular if one avoids the "art" end of the market. When I took up poetry, I found myself confused that there were not such understandable demarcations in that art, too. Perhaps this is where I took my interest in form: the ability to write well formally is a sort of "proving of one's chops", like the poetic equivalent of a clean and well composed image in nature photography. I'm afraid the analogy is inexact.

*People in America tend to think of the Scots as cold, hard and dour — but your poetry is fresh, sharp, and often very sensual — the eroticism in a crumb of bread, licked from a finger, leads to the glance from a lady...are the Scots a sensual people, or is the above stereotype true?*

The positive qualities you mention are probably from the Irish-Catholic side of my nature. The Scots — if one means by that people born and brought up in Scotland — are primarily a presbyterian people, moderated or affected by other influences. A significant one is the Irish-Catholic tradition. Perhaps there is some truth in the stereotype, but what it omits is the wit, dry humour, and extravagance in the Scottish temperament — if "Scottish temperament" isn't such a vast generalisation as to be almost meaningless. There are also the extremities in the Scottish character. In literary parlance, this has been summed up by the phrase "Caledonian Antisyzygy": what Hugh MacDiarmid referred to as a grinning

gargoyle kneeling beside a saint. These dualities are summed up in R. L. Stevenson's *The Strange Tale of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. In less extreme terms, of course, this is almost a psychological blueprint for a certain type of Scot, perhaps a result of the repression inherent in Presbyterianism when imposed on a certain type of personality. This is a generalisation.

*You stayed for a time in the cottage of the great Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid — and thought it was haunted. What happened?*

The cottage is also a museum, filled with the artefacts and portraits of Hugh MacDiarmid and his wife, Valda. MacDiarmid died in 1978. Valda died in the early nineties. Living there is like living with the dead. The cottage is quite remotely located among the hills of the Scottish borders. In some weathers, say late on winter nights of storm and rain, it was full of eerie atmospheres. I'd rather not go into details.

*What kind of progress did you make in your own work, surrounded by the ghosts of poets past?*

I wrote my second book of verse, "*Nothing But Heather!*": *Scottish Nature in Poems, Photographs, and Prose* while I was there. 48 of my photographs were accompanied by a specially written poem on the facing page, the whole introduced by a 7000 word essay. I also learned a good deal about working in schools and with writers groups in my two years residence: the acceptable social face of the poet's work.

*You spent a summer in the Orkneys in a crofter's hut when you were fairly young. Did you write much there? Did that experience shape many of your poems? Does that sense of solitude stay with you?*

In fact it was two summers, that of 1987 and of 1988. I didn't write a great deal there, though the experiences I had in Orkney shaped numerous poems written years later. Exposure to the islands' massive skies and distances rearranged my perceptions for some years.

*Do you prefer to write in the silence of solitude, or do you prefer company, crowds, an audience, a companion, a pub, a pint, a comely lass — what makes for the best poetry?*

An audience? To write? Goodness me, no. It would find the whole process stupefying. I would find it acutely embarrassing. I write best for a few hours immediately after getting up in the morning. It is also best if I haven't spoken to anyone, which can be a bit of a problem in a relationship.

*So when do we get to see you in a kilt?*

A friend of mine wearing a kilt once forgot to keep his knees together on a platform at some official engagement. The increasingly inflamed audience were treated to a full view of his manhood in all its wrinkled, hirsute, and pendulous glory, wobbling in rhythm as he enthusiastically gesticulated and discoursed on the finer points of the sonnet as a vehicle for romantic expression. I have decided to avoid kilts on principle since hearing this story.

