

The following brief reviews appeared in Scotland on Sunday in late 1997

**NORMAN MACCAIG**

*Selected Poems*

edited by **DOUGLAS DUNN**

*Chatto & Windus* £8.99

Reviewed by **Gerry Cambridge**

Any reviewer or editor in Scotland of Norman MacCaig's poetry has to overcome the shadow of the man himself over his own poems. While alive he was such a presence, such a wit, and such a superb reader of his own work that it can be difficult seeing the poetry clear of the man, as future generations will.

The task of selecting 155 poems from the nearly 700 in the collected MacCaig must have been complex, and not necessarily helped by Dunn's friendship with the older poet. Dunn expects that many readers will miss favourite poems here, or wonder at the inclusions. I certainly did, looking in vain for superlative poems such as 'Gulls on a Hill Loch', or the memorable 'Foggy Night', with its petal falling onto a table marking "a fence / between the millions of years that have gone / and the millions to come."

Dunn's introduction is lively, interesting and warm, though when he picks out the rhyme technique of 'The Unlikely as Usual' as exemplifying the virtuoso MacCaig one thinks, *If this is virtuosity we're in a bad way*. MacCaig wrote excellent rhyming verse, such as this volume's 'Return to Scalpay', but other examples here suffer from his earlier penchant for vapid philosophising. 'Poem for a Goodbye', for instance, seems overdressed to kill. It has Donne's circuitousness, but little of his emotional power. One reads MacCaig more for the rinsed freshness of his perception, and his resulting leaps of insight. His later free verse achieves a wholly individual voice, a voice intelligent, witty, and full of the graith of experience, alive to the minutiae of the everyday, as well as to the enlivening idiosyncrasies of its author. As poetic strategy, this is less showily revolutionary than a 'big' unifying poetic vision, but may be more radical. MacCaig knew the difference, like the character in one of his poems, between "What does it mean?" and "What does it mean to me?" He was as alive as Hopkins to the particularity of the world — that physical world which is a law unto itself and, ultimately, a threat to purveyors of big ideas, whom MacCaig so often pilloried.

Of course, there are wonderful poems here. Douglas Dunn has carried out a complicated task with grace, but this is not, for me, the definitive *Selected*. That would need to be considerably longer than this somewhat budget-conscious edition.

## THE WAISTBAND AND OTHER POEMS

by Donny O'Rourke

Polygon [no price visible]

## AIR FOR SLEEPING FISH

by Gillian Ferguson

Bloodaxe, £6.95

### Review by Gerry Cambridge

As epigraph to his poem 'Reviewing' — a retraction of past "injudicious" opinions — in this, his first full collection, Donny O'Rourke quotes Randall Jarrell: "A good critic is one who likes as much as possible as persuasively as possible". But in this context, he misrepresents Jarrell: one of contemporary poetry's severest critic-reviewers, he was acerbic, ferocious, and exhilarating.

O'Rourke's generosity towards Jarrell he extends too to his own work. His book consists of about 80 pages of poems, and songs printed in italics, prefaced by a fine prose memoir about the author's Port Glasgow origins. The influence of Lowell's *Life Studies*, of New York poet Frank O'Hara and of the Beats is notable in this city-based, convivial, family-orientated, bluesy free verse. The volume is divided into four parts, section 3 of which comprises a painful sequence about his mother's death and funeral. The book closes with a number of poems on contemporary relationships.

In terms of content, the collection is an engaging read. Its poems are lively, accessible, sometimes grievous or moving, often witty: "I'm by Picasso/massy and round/ but Giacometti made Richard" he writes in 'Penang'. O'Rourke is confessional and sometimes self-advertising. His chat line poem 'Dr Poetry', for instance, is highly amusing and fictional, but he cannot resist having it tell us that, in fact, his slim volume *Second Cities* was reviewed favourably by Simon Armitage! There's a self-promotional aspect here which distracts from the comedy of the poem. In a recent interview with an over-awed reviewer O'Rourke mentioned his habit of writing "emotional postcards" to himself; he includes a number of such pieces, like 'It's So Beautiful Tonight You Wish', a roll-call of his poet-friends which reinforces the impression that poetry is becoming an art form for a coterie.

The distinction of a poem's form (whether free or formal) helps make it more than a brief entertainment. The loose structure of some of O'Rourke's poems can make them enervating to read in bulk. His successes, among them 'Great Western Road', 'Primary', 'Robbie', the elegy for O'Hara, and parts of 'Marche Funèbre', are worth discovering, and O'Rourke's poems come alive in performance: he is a

virtuosic reader of his own work. Some of the 'songs', too, are excellent. 'Wine & Wooing' has a final verse which reads like that from a 1990s Burns.

Gillian Ferguson's first book is a collection of intense, vividly lyrical poems, often about nature, which bear re-reading and show a painter's eye for light and colour. As a poet, Ferguson is almost unknown at present — only a handful of her poems have appeared previously in magazines and anthologies. Her work arises from a pure impulse; her attention is focused on the subjects of her poems, which have their own life, like the creatures and flowers they sometimes feature. One responds to them in part for this reason. While human-based, often sensual and lavish — "The slow blink of my waist-thick gilded lashes/ like the soft clash of lazy gates" she writes in 'Sunny Evening' — they are not homocentric. She can write riskily and with unexpected delicacy about subjects as unpromising as clothes moths and slugs, and often works with images impressive for their accuracy and restraint: "Weeping yellow leaves/The pond willow shelters/ Its drowned twin." Her language is finely-judged: 'Reclaiming the Garden' begins: "The gardener dead,/his dog bones,/weeds are *hysterical*" [my italics]; when, in the brief poem, 'Grief', she talks about her "circular blood", the adjective is both unexpected and ordinary.

This is a strong debut collection. While it tends towards a sameness of tone, its poems seem genuine and unconcerned with poetic fashion. Ferguson's focus on nature, married to a very feminine awareness of the body, makes hers an unusual voice, the development of which one awaits with interest.