

Gerry Cambridge has just completed a two-year residency at Hugh MacDiarmid's former home, Brownsbank. His book's title is taken from a line in MacDiarmid's poem 'Scotland Small?' in which scorn is poured on a "fool" who fails to detect the multifarious nature of a Scottish hillside. Cambridge, a superb photographer, has written poems to accompany 48 of his own images of Scottish wildlife — mainly insects, reptiles, flora and birds — along with captions which are models of clarity. MacDiarmid, whose latter *cri de coeur* was for a poetry of facts, would have enjoyed this book.

If Cambridge's personification of plants and animals is sometimes a little coy, often he is spot-on: the short-eared owl who settles amid sapling spruce is "small in those miles as a comma in a book, / the bird of hooks and big plush softness"; the common lizard's scaled skin is "a mosaic as of polished pebbles / inset by a master craftsman"; the cleg declares "professor or pauper / you're nothing to me but a factory of blood on legs."

The close-ups of this "chomping, scurrying, quivering, procreating kingdom" are amazing: the veins of a maple leaf look like an aerial view of a baked red desert or the cracked glaze on ancient porcelain; while the wolf spider with whom one comes face to face on page 93 should surely be preceded by a warning, "Arachnophobes, turn two pages here."

Cambridge's introductory essay on his teenage infatuation with wildlife is equally good. He pays tribute to the persistence and self-sufficiency of Sam Gilliland, the man "who would talk of having typed so much of a novel he had to bandage up his wrists". But along with such mature reflection there are nods back to the ridiculousness of adolescence: he and two friends, for example, exclaiming over bird photographs in *The Encyclopaedia of Birds* "as loudly as other young males would have over photographs in *Penthouse*."

Cambridge is in the tradition of Scottish naturalists like Hugh Miller, John Muir and David Stephen. Keats, he says, "felt the beauty of a rainbow was somehow tarnished by knowledge of its properties. Yet the natural world is made more, not less, marvellous by awareness of its workings." This book, a mix of entertainment and education, will delight anybody who agrees.

JAMES ROBERTSON

from *Scotland on Sunday*, 5 September 1999