

Proximities and Distances: Stewart Conn in Conversation

*In a literary career spanning almost forty years, Stewart Conn has established a reputation as a poet widely admired for the integrity of his vision and the unshowy and wholly individual timbre of his poetic voice. His books of verse include *Stoats in the Sunlight* (1968), *An Ear to the Ground* (1972), which was a Poetry Book Society Choice, *Under the Ice* (1978), *The Luncheon of the Boating Party* (1992), a *New and Selected Poems: Stolen Light* (1999), and his latest collection, *Ghosts at Cockcrow* (2005). Conn was appointed Edinburgh's first Poet Laureate, or "Makar", in May 2002 for a three-year term. Also distinguished as a playwright and as the former Head of Radio Drama for BBC Scotland, he has written more than a dozen plays including *The Burning*, as well as a book of essays and literary reminiscence, *Distances* (2001). This interview took place at Stewart Conn's Edinburgh home on 3 and 4 July, 2006.*

Gerry Cambridge: Could you tell me about your early background?

Stewart Conn: I was brought up in a middle-class milieu in Kilmarnock, which was then a slightly down-at-heel, reasonably pecunious industrial town. I had no affection for Kilmarnock. My father was a minister of religion; I never became an adherent of his church and to his credit he never tried to coerce me into becoming one. But what did appeal to me was access to farmland: his relatives were all farmers. There were two farms on Craigie Hill about three miles then from the outskirts of Kilmarnock. That meant that I had my little escape and my "Eden". But it felt not so much an "escapist escape" as to the "real" me. I vibrated there in a way I didn't in the town. And I obviously had an interest in writing because in late primary school I asked if I could do a play rather than an essay for an exam. I suspect that wasn't an intimation that I was eventually to write plays so much as I'd twigged that if you took up a column on the left-hand side, occupied every few lines by a character's name, you'd have to write far less to fill the requisite number of pages. But there was obviously something there. I had poems in the school magazine.

Can you remember the origin of your impulse to write poetry? Burns said he wrote his first poem in praise of a lassie.

What I had most in common with Burns was that my music teacher, like his, said I was "untuneable". No, the very first impulse wasn't a lassie; that came later ... lassie and lassies. I think it was description of nature, seasons, the elements, possibly because I was slightly distanced from that in the town. Nor was a love of poetry inculcated by school where we were belted in class for using the words that were accepted in Burns's poems; I remember one particular English teacher whose only relish in reading 'Tam O' Shanter' was when she came to "Pleasures are like poppies

spread ...” But my father preached, I think, as good sermons as I’ve ever heard; he had a knowledge of English. He read Macaulay — to my amazement — as I discovered. There was something in him that was a germ of my love of literature although it was only retrospectively that I could work that out. Enthusiasm in him for my school work would be in response to a good mark for a school essay. The farms were called Harelaw — which means “the hill of hares”— and High Landcraig. Harelaw, on the slopes of Craigie Quarry had an, even in my boyhood, elderly uncle of my father, Todd Cochrane; two aunts, the cousin; so having access to the farm sharpened observation or provided a contrast to everyday school life. The farm poems described these ancient, shrivelling, black-clad, adult figures seen as of almost mythic dimension through a boy’s eyes. And there was something of a hugeness: of a big tractor, and the thrashing mill into which one farmer fell and was speared by the prongs that do the baling. So it had its life and deaths to which my imagination was subject. Why did I write the poetry? In some ways to preserve something that wasn’t always going to be there. An early anthology I had a group of poems in included an American poet, Dabney Stuart; the anthology had a questionnaire, and one of the questions was: “When and why did you begin to write poetry?” And Dabney Stuart’s answer was: “When I began to remember.” That struck me: it suggested that once you begin to remember, you’re aware of transience and mortality — no matter how limitedly at that age. I think there was an element of something passing away through the deaths of the Todd figure and the aunts. The poems, crucially, were triggered by an elegiac element combined with a celebratory element, which together created a tension. These poems are now two lifetimes away from me, at least. It’s a different self who wrote them. Someone analysing the poems now could say that in their tiny way they are a social document in that they depicted a way of life that has gone. There was hand-milking, rats in the straw, paraffin lamps: it was before electricity. But documentation wasn’t my motive for writing the poems. That’s an observation that can be made of them latterly. I don’t think I had a conscious social motive so much as subjective responses which may incidentally have contained social observations.

Was there a poetic milieu when you were first beginning to write?

I think I was aware of there not being a milieu, or of not being part of one, or that any milieu was distant. I sensed that there was a cultural hierarchy in Scotland and that Edinburgh regarded itself as very superior among the poets who were writing then. But I felt utterly remote from it: partly socially, because our ‘anti-snobbery’ in Kilmarnock took the form of believing what snobs Edinburgh was filled with in a literary and artistic, as well as a social, sense.

Kilmarnock anti-snobbery? Is that snobbery?

Well, it was tied up in the snobbery. I wore a wee red blazer and a wee red cap at primary school and we felt so superior in first year to the chaps that came from up the valley who had sturdy shoes and jackets — they sometimes had holes in their jackets. We were such snobby wee bastards. And then our wee caps started floating down the Kilmarnock Water like rowan berries.

Why was that?

Because these chaps from up the valley took them off us and threw them in. [Laughter.] Oh, there was a great adjustment made. But growing up there I wasn't aware of schools of poetry until I went to Glasgow University in 1954. I remember discovering in the Dick Institute library in Kilmarnock the William MacLennan imprints of Scottish poets such as Adam Drinan, Maurice Lindsay, William Jeffrey, Ruthven Todd, W. S. Graham and G. S. Fraser. I then discovered Dylan Thomas with overwhelming excitement and, equally overwhelmingly, that he was dead. I read his *Deaths and Entrances* and would recite in the bath 'A Grief Ago ...' I didn't understand a word but it was great to declaim. But even with Thomas it was the lucidity of 'Fern Hill' and 'Poem in October' that I liked best. The first living Scottish poet I was aware of was Norman MacCaig. I wrote to him and asked if I could talk to him about poetry. He said yes, and I went through to Edinburgh and met him. This was out of desperation. Here was a living poet who could walk actual streets in Scotland.

How did you find the influence of Burns in Ayrshire culture? He was a strong presence even when I was growing up there over twenty years after you.

The odd thing was of Burns being a different person to different people. I think my mother slightly disapproved of the Scotsness of Burns. I've a poem about not being allowed to listen to the McFlannels at home, because the accents were a bit "common", but of listening to that on the farm. The farm used the language. It was as if, when you arrived, Burns had just gone out the door. He was so real to them. But, again — and this ties in with the fact that it wasn't poems to the lassies that I started writing — it wasn't love poetry but Burns the radical that Todd would quote. The appeal of Burns was his immediacy, his directness and his down-to-earthness; there wasn't anything elity, ivory tower-ish. This is why I've always had an ambivalence about being called a poet and about rubbing shoulders with poets, because a little voice in me keeps saying [lugubriously] "Beware the slippery steps of that bloody ivory tower."

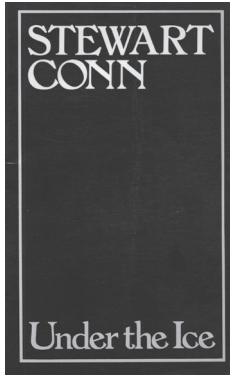
Did you feel any pressure to write, like Burns, in Scots?

I felt awkward and alienated in discovering that one faction expected me to write in Scots. I've always written in English. Although I had the farm in the background, I never lived on it. Or spoke the tongue. I never used broad Scots in day-to-day conversation. But those were the days when there were style sheets for Scots. I could never understand why, if this was to differentiate it from English, they wanted to eliminate all the dialect permutations of Scots and homogenise it. Another advocated reason for writing in Scots was as a springboard for independence. I have never been a separatist therefore I wasn't in tune with the political motivation for that. But the hugest change I've seen, jumping all the decades to now, is the relaxed approach and confidence with which writers in Scotland can shift between English and Scots quite naturally. I think that was a hard-earned freedom. Norman MacCaig told me in an interview that he was called a "quisling" for writing in English. That's a biting term to apply to anyone. Its vehemence makes me understand why Sydney Graham, for whom I have immense regard as a poet — who retains to my ear Scotticisms of nuance and vocabulary, and a child-like quality to his Scots which I find immensely touching within the intellectual, mature scope of the poetry — why he was just sick of all the pisspots arguing here and went south. I can absolutely understand that.

Did you ever feel that temptation yourself?

No. I was remote from it. In Glasgow I felt slightly a lost soul because I didn't write in the reconstructed Scots of the established dramatists (I was writing plays as well). And in poetry I didn't use the phonetic Scots which was very much trying to restate or reclaim the dignity of the working classes as these poets saw it. These weren't my social or cultural origins. I could observe them but I couldn't identify with them. Later I remember a climate in which you weren't really Glaswegian if you weren't using broad Scots phonetics, if you weren't Bill Bryden writing about shipyards. If you were middle class you weren't really Glaswegian; you weren't really Scottish. I've always had a bitterness at what I thought was an infringing on someone's birthright: why should that make you less Scottish, if your blood is Scottish? I don't think that applies now except in little retroactive pockets.

Your early work used a lot of rhyme and its development technically follows a particular trajectory that other Scottish poets also followed, such as MacCaig and George Mackay Brown — they both began as formalists but developed individual styles of free verse. You haven't quite followed that but your work has become freer, and you stopped using rhyme. Did you feel it too much of a straitjacket?



An influence on me technically was W. Price Turner who wrote Glasgow sonnets with very overwrought rhymes and internal rhymes, to an extraordinary extent, almost like crossword puzzles. Eventually he went south but for many months I'd visit Bill regularly in Govan on Saturday evenings and talk poetry: he would read my work and be very demanding in terms of form. He wrote in various forms like villanelles that I've never had the patience or the ability to conquer. He was so rigid and rigorous that I had to escape from the straitjacket he imposed on my poetry. It may be that I've never quite escaped. The attempt was always for clarity and lucidity. There must have come a point when I tried to change the voice from that of the earlier farm poems, because in my book *Under the Ice* I was consciously trying something different technically. One reviewer suggested I had lost whatever strength or verbal flamboyance or merit there had been before. Fortunately it did get sympathetic reviews. Since then, when I've tried to write poems which go back to the textures of the farm poems — like going back to a heavier tartan, after a lighter weave — I can't. There must be something that is subject-related.

What marks the beginning of a poem for you?

I hear my poems in my head and with many of them it's the first line that's crucial, as a springboard for what follows. That initial rhythm is integral. I have never rescinded a trust and belief in the necessity for sound-correspondences — if you like, a chiming which I don't think is necessarily as obvious to the reader as end rhyme. But although I've resisted end-rhyme, that may have put more onus on assonances, consonances, and half-rhymes in the middle of lines. I get great satisfaction when a reader notices Ah, that word or sound is echoed there and there and there and there, because it makes me feel: *I'm doing my craft!*

Were you aware of the timbre of your voice from early on?

I'm always taken aback by the number of reviews that talk about Stewart Conn's "gentle" voice because I think I'm quite strident. The funniest one was a misprint which came through in a blurb in a Bloodaxe catalogue. Donny O'Rourke had talked about "Stewart Conn's 'gravely graceful' voice" and it got turned into my "gravelly graceful" voice. I felt like Hoagy Carmichael!

The whole business of misprints can have its own queer poetry, of course.

A review I once had to do was of a reading by Hughes, Causley, and Spender. I remember describing Spender as “doge-like”, imagining the hauteur of Spender going down the Grand Canal, and the *Glasgow Herald* printed it as “dog-like”. Aberdeen University Press included in a book of mountain poems a sequence of mine called “Marriage, a Mountain Ridge” which it titled “Marriage, On a Mountain Ridge”. *Marriage on a mountain ridge* — a totally different marital experience, I’d imagine.

In poems like ‘An Ear to the Ground’, ‘Tremors’, and ‘Stoats in the Sunlight’, where does the sense of foreboding come from? Is that something you had from childhood?

I don’t know. It didn’t come from a death in the family and at that age one shouldn’t be anticipating death; it must just be some aspect of the temperament. If there’s an insecurity maybe that writ large as an insecurity about mortality.

Your first book was published in 1967 and some critics made reference to the poems being influenced by Ted Hughes’ work, though it was an influence it seems to me you quickly assimilated.

I remember hearing him read. Hughes was unbelievable: he was like this great hawk figure. You could almost see lines of electricity coming out of him. I realised then that you can’t mimic the generator that is the man behind the poetry. The next huge influence, not on how I write because he was light years removed, was Robert Lowell: it was partly the grandeur and the confessional element, though not as in baring soul and in anguish over describing intimate sexual experiences which in other hands I think became a degraded and exhibitionist confessionalism. It was the austerity linked to Baroque extravagance, the rhythms, and what he was portraying. I still think he’s a glorious poet, especially in *Life Studies* and parts of *For the Union Dead*.

I can see some effect of Lowell in the personal aspect of your poetry, which also seems to me to have a very Scottish sense of social responsibility. I also notice, especially as your work develops, a great desire to praise things.

To praise things?

Well, to praise existence. Increasingly you have done this through art, as if you set art up as a kind of temporal absolute, for example, in your poem ‘Faces’ which talks about young people on a train who are like figures from a Botticelli painting. It becomes a two-way mirror: on one

side you've got life, on the other, you've got art, and they meet in the context of the surface of the mirror which is your poem. One of the outstanding examples of that for me, and probably for others, would be 'The Luncheon of the Boating Party' which connects to the intersection between life and art I find fascinating in your work. This relates to the ivory tower elitism you were talking about earlier: the dichotomy between the so-called 'ordinary' person and the poet. You could almost say that the poet is represented by the work of art in that poem, and the ordinary individual is represented by the voices of its featured characters.

I'm interested that you should say a two-way mirror, because often at readings I use the phrase "an angled mirror". I think if a poet is speaking into a mirror face on, it's therapy or a diary entry, and it's excluding the reader or listener. Therefore I think of the poem's being an angled mirror in which each can see the other or is accessible to the other. I'm thrilled you should mention 'Faces' because it's not one uppermost in my mind. But only the poet can be aware — readers may deduce — to what extent a poem achieves what one intended. 'Faces' was a response to these young people's faces but it had an art analogy in Botticelli, though that side of the scales wasn't dominant. Even when I think back to the poem I don't think "Botticelli"; I remember these kids' faces. I don't think you would remember or mention the poem unless it was the same with you. I'm conscious of the danger of trading on a work of art and using it as the mirror instead of making your own mirror. I always want the painting to be on the wall of the reader's mind and make everything a possibility within it. I'm very aware of Vermeer, and of — the first time I looked at a Vermeer — the astonishing extent to which a lacquered, smooth surface can contain passion. I hope that's something I reveal by sometimes touching on passion in the content of my poems and yet retaining the metric form, which I hope will retain a tension in the poem. That's a quality in a particular kind of painter that I'm trying to emulate. And of course you have an instant visual image which is accessible to the reader.

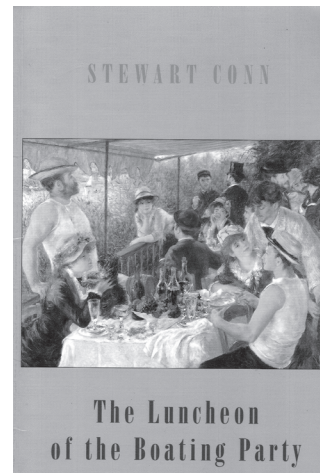
In the case of 'The Luncheon of the Boating Party', a number of its characters get to speak. I'm aware of your background as a playwright and the poem is almost like a mini-play. Could you tell me about the background to the sequence and its gestation? I admire its Chekhovian humanity: the foibles of human character come out in it in a very affectionate way, but they are clearly seen nonetheless.

Some poems start as a slow burn. Others come rapidly. This was one of the latter. I'd thought Renoir was very pretty on shortbread tins but I'd never really rated him beyond that, I think because of the proliferation of images on plates and t-shirts and posters, until there was a touring exhibition from the Phillips collection in Washington DC at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1988. I was meeting a friend there. I went in and I saw for the first time, on the end wall, *The*

Luncheon of the Boating Party. I was utterly bowled over by it. I remember it was as though torrents of light came out of it: something which can't be conveyed in reproduction. I realised almost instantaneously that this was something that would lend itself to being written about. I embarked on a series of pieces all different lengths, and I think most of the people in the painting spoke. Then came the stage of realising, gosh, this could be a poem sequence; reducing them, and trying to have an overall unity; therefore the number of lines was made similar; then there were several crossroads. You mentioned the background as a dramatist. Does one take the working-man figure and make him speak in a Glasgow accent; do you exaggerate the upper-class person and give him a cut-glass diction? I decided, No. So it preserved a unity, and all these characters were speaking but through me, and the bonus of taking that decision was that I could then speak through them. So it's a two-way mirror in that sense. I hoped that syntactically and in the rhythm of the pieces each would have a different voice but there was no attempt to disguise the totality of the voices as mine. I was lucky that the original impetus must have given me the guts or the sap of it, because I don't think that could have been added later. There also came a point where I didn't want to invent anything that was inconsistent with reality and at that stage, and only then, I got a catalogue raisonné giving an account of who the characters were and the origins of the painting and the circumstances. Therefore I knew that one character was

the son of the proprietor and that the figures were painted cumulatively — they didn't all sit there at once; that one girl did complain that another girl had sat for Degas; that she may have been the model for all three, and that this became a bone of contention in one of them speaking. As well as the very obvious debt to Renoir's painting, another influence was a biography by his son in which there were two black and white photographs: one of Renoir in a wheelchair, in arthritic old age — they had to tie the brushes to his wrists with bandages so that he could paint; and the other, again of him as an old man, with his wife and the son, Coco, as a boy. The poem became retrospective, and after the first three

characters in the sequence had spoken Madame Renoir speaks and we realise that at the time of her speaking Renoir is dead. Finally, Renoir speaks as an old man. So it took a retrospective focal point. I was deeply emotionally involved in it. Some critiques have said the poem's about art, or about the dilemma or the indomitability of the artist: I'm delighted such theorising is there but my impetus to write it was intuitive, dominated by sympathy for Renoir — the physicality that he succumbed to, his body like parchment on his canvas as against the ripe apple bodies and bosoms of the nude girls all round him. There's a warmth of colour

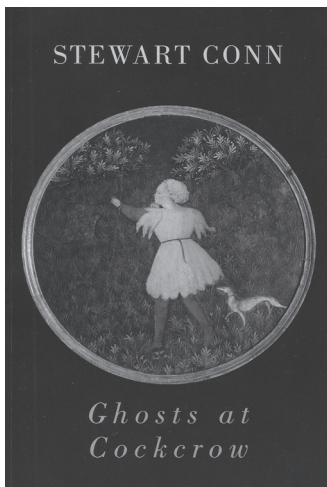


temperature, there's a warmth in him, it's a warm light that radiates, and the poem is meant to be radiated with warmth and affection which I hope is mine but filtered through the painting. I suspect it may be as much a love poem as anything more explicit aimed at a single individual.

The "unknown man" of Section III, when he speaks, says of overhearing another character that he "Might have been / From another planet. Still, / It was a magical afternoon." I find those lines very evocative, in the context of the poem, of transience and the peculiarity of mortal life —

— and the magical ordinariness, or the ordinary magicalness! It's interesting that you notice that, because when I read the poem in public I tend to finish on that line.

The word "magical" in that context still has its ancient power and full voltage, especially when used in that part of your poem which is otherwise adjectivally bare.



I don't read the next one because I would rather hear the poem his wife speaks in her voice, rather than my delivering it. And I actually find — silly thing to say about one's own work — I find the Renoir one so heartbreaking that I couldn't bring myself to read it aloud. Because it's a life and death love poem.

Quite often in the poems which feature Art it provides consolation; the narrator is aware of the transience and brutality of ordinary existence and yet that is posited as something art allays. Would that be almost a religious consolation on your part?

I think now it's a humanistic faith; I don't think it's religious. I was never atheist; my problem was the personal god. You put your finger on something there: I think the 'Angel with Lute' comes as close as any poem I've ever written, which is why it closes my latest collection, *Ghosts at Cockcrow*. In that poem it's the artist's kiss that sustains the angel, and that's the role of art, but it's also the affection behind the kiss, and the inextricability of the affection for the loved one and for the portrait of the loved one, with what that implies of the death of the loved one. All these are in the mix.

Did you feel a lot of tension between your identity as a poet and your work in radio?

I think latterly. Initially there was a spontaneity with the poetry. I was very lucky, because there was enough of an affinity between my poetry and my work in radio — producing drama, poetry, features — for them to be complementary. I was also fortunate that my work in radio gave me access to poets. One of the most rewarding aspects of my BBC life was that it encouraged new writers. I left in 1992 partly because I saw the writing on the wall in terms of Scottish editorial autonomy for Scottish work. But what was rewarding was not just broadcasting poetry: I got a lot of abuse from people for not broadcasting their work, in the same way as any editor would; you can't do everything that comes in. But in radio there is a particular criterion. I couldn't see the point of simply duplicating poems that had appeared in print or could as adequately appear on the printed page. It was very difficult to find poets who wrote for the medium. Edwin Morgan, obviously, was in the van of any development, with his enquiring mind and the sheer range of his skills; he did his sound poetry, his concrete poetry. Radio Three did a wonderful programme of Eddie's poems, which was pure radio. Other than that, Rory Watson sent me stereo poems in columns, one for the left-hand speaker and one for the right-hand speaker. This was such a joy: that someone was catering for the medium. But a lot were just sending in poems which had previously appeared. So what gave me the greatest satisfaction was I suppose being economically helpful to writers by commissioning them to write plays, which meant that a poetic element or poetic charge in them was expressing itself through the work, possibly broadening the range of that writer's work and reaching an audience, especially if one could then sell it down South and it was being heard nationally. Douglas Dunn took to radio like a duck to water with plays which weren't written in verse, but in which one could recognise the fingerprint of a poet. Alasdair Maclean, too; though I fell foul of him because he sent in a play about the war which so duplicated other things that I had to reject it. There was a lovely seam of slightly surrealist "somethings" for radio by Iain Crichton Smith. He wrote pieces for radio which had a humour which would have been undetectable on the page. George Mackay Brown as well: I did his *A Spell for Green Corn*. In his room in Orkney was this manuscript. He let me look at it; he let me take it away; it wasn't for radio; I don't even know it was for theatre any more than his piece *Saint Brandon*; they were things on the page that happened to have a dramatic structure. It struck me that if George's linking passages on the page were put in the mouth of a narrator, this could work as a radio drama. I said, "Well George, I think the first scene's a bit long, and that narration; and that bit there, is it necessary?" and so on. George nodded sagely throughout and I've a feeling he puffed at a pipe at that time. And at the end he nodded, so I went away back to Edinburgh and provisionally booked the studio and thought about actors, and then the script came back in. And George hadn't changed a single comma. So it went on as this unchanged commissioned work for radio. It was wonderful. There was also Robert Nye, with a play called *Reynolds Reynolds*

which took its title from the last words Edgar Allan Poe was meant to be muttering when they found him in the gutter before he died; Robert Nye wrote wonderful radio plays. As did Jessie Kesson before him. That period meant that I could have in harness my own poetry and experience the excitement of working with other poets. Subsequently it became more difficult when my own theatre work became more demanding. And when the administrative burden became insuperable, I couldn't do it. When I woke in the morning knowing I had to go into the BBC and work out the cost of the office carpet by the square foot, I just handed in my resignation.

What was your reaction to being appointed as the first Edinburgh Makar in 2002?

It came utterly out of the blue. I still thought of myself as a dramatist but was concerned — because I was writing less drama, and had lost faith in myself after a play called *Clay Bull* — that my voice was not getting across. I've never been presumptuous enough to call myself a poet or have the full confidence to feel I can rub shoulders with poets I admire. It's nice when others call me a poet, but I would have been very hesitant; and suddenly I was asked to be Edinburgh's first official Poet Laureate. I was hesitant only because I wasn't born in Edinburgh and don't write in Scots; twenty years ago I would have been assassinated. I think the climate has changed. I wish my mother had still been alive, because given her Edinburgh background she would have been thrilled. It wasn't something I had connived at or applied for, or knew anything about, and the fact that it wasn't a political appointment but was made by my peers meant I couldn't consider turning it down. I spent a lot of time rushing up and down Kafkaesque council corridors but there was no obligation to write civic poetry, more one to try to heighten the profile of poetry in Edinburgh. The main tangible outcomes were co-editing a book of children's poems, and editing an anthology marking the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh's 500th anniversary. The appointment seemed in a way a validation of me as a poet, so I could hold my head up and not worry except as to whether my own poems merited that validation. It gave rise to one specific sequence, 'Roull of Corstorphin', Roull being possibly Edinburgh's first recorded poet. But the timing came when I was instinctively writing more poetry and fewer plays. So it was a blessing.

You've mentioned your mother a number of times, but there's less about your mother than your father in your writing. Yet obviously she had a strong effect on you. Would you say that the poetry in you came from one or t'other or both parents?

Any more than from Knox or Columba? [Pause.] My mother had the Waverley novels — they're out there in the hall — in a very nice collection and my father

had a signature-stamp. To keep me quiet on a rainy day I was given an ink pad and I stamped all my mother's Waverley novels, which were her pride and joy, with my father's signature — and I don't think he ever read two consecutive words of Scott. It was only years later that I realised what an unbelievable sort of cultural desecration that was in terms of his imprint on her cultural entity. My mother was from Edinburgh, attended Edinburgh University, and she married this minister from Glasgow, and all her life I think she felt exiled from Edinburgh. She kept getting letters from ladies with names like Cissy Bootberg, who we thought were figments. Yet after my father died and she returned to live in Edinburgh, shortly after I was moved to Edinburgh from working at the BBC in Glasgow, these figments turned out to be real. These extraordinary ladies out of a picture book, Edinburgh ladies, would visit her and come for tea ... It brings tears to my eyes thinking of her after all these decades of utter loyalty to my father, and of desperately trying to eliminate the glottal stops of myself and my sisters: that she was back in her birthplace and element.

One could say that with your father from Glasgow, your mother from Edinburgh, and your Ayrshire background, you've experienced a number of the disjunctions in Scottish society. It reminds me a little of Thomas Hardy, another writer conscious of social strata. He said of himself that he was a poet of "impressions". What sort of a poet are you?

I'm a poet of precariousness, I think. I've just come back from a poetry conference in Vilnius. Visiting such countries and meeting their writers is a reminder of the charmed lives that we bear, compared to the awareness that there were 120,000 Jews killed, by Russians and Germans, in Vilnius and its surrounding forests, and of the absence and yet presence of the murdered in the streets of Vilnius I was walking through. Further, that this happened within my lifetime. And there's a pietà for Television Tower workers who were killed by the Russians who stormed it as recently as 1991. The KGB-then-SS building was a couple of blocks from the hotel I was in, and that has carved on the outside wall the names of people who were tortured and killed. Similarly, having been to poetry festivals in Zagreb two years ago and Tetova in Macedonia last year, all sorts of things impinged on me. One is how recently Serbo-Croat was the national language in Tetova. And the Macedonia conference was in Albanian because that was the language of Tetova University: the implications of the use and choice of one language over another. I've one tiny sequence called 'Kosovo' in which there's a snippet that draws on a newspaper report and describes a girl called Milena, who was shot. A Croatian writer to whom I showed this castigated me for preserving the name, which he said was Bosnian, and that I should lose the name — which to me removes the identity of the girl and defeats the purpose of the poem. He was also quite incensed about one section about the children of Bosnia; he resented my partisan-ness as he saw

it; why was my poem not about the children of Croatia? I tried to explain that it's not at their expense but simply a general cry on behalf of the innocents. But there these issues are so close to the surface and so related, literally, to life and death. So I was very aware that I didn't exist in a social or cultural ambience that exposed me to what these writers were exposed to. If I am resisting evil or advocating the Rights of Man I am, in a sense, doing it in the abstract rather than against someone who's kicking in my front door. Others have much wider experience.

Earlier you mentioned the tension between Knox and Columba in relation to your parents as factors in your poetry. The poet-critic Michael Hamburger once suggested that in every contemporary poet there's an anti-poet and a poet and that the sensibilities of each are present often in the same poem, and that poetry is made from the tension between these two. The anti-poet has a great distrust of poetry. The poet is the lyricist who wants to praise things. Do you regard yourself as primarily a lyric poet?

I have great doubts about being a poet or not as we speak, on the evidence of the work or on what one hopes for in the future. But when I'm writing there comes a point when I'm suddenly aware that this is what I am and this is what I was made to do. There comes a point where instead of clambering up or going up in the ski-lift you're actually skiing downhill. It's an apt metaphor, because gracefulness of expression is something I aspire to in poetry not as a means in itself but as tapping an experience. I think gracefulness of line in any art is meaningful.

How do you gauge that gracefulness?

By looking at the poem on the page and sensing there are key moments that relate to one another, but the test for me has to be the sound of the poem and the emotional appropriateness of its cadences. Every poet is defined by his or her music. I'm very hesitant about giving advice at workshops because every writer is so different. It's like hill climbs. You have the complication of choosing the route, crossing that stream, going up that rock face, but you're doing it all to have that marvellous view from the top.

Is that a useful metaphor to you for writing poems?

Not consciously. I'd be more literal. I get slightly worried about one thing exclusively representing something else.

That reminds me of what Norman MacCaig said about Surrealism: when anything can be anything else, nothing makes any difference. I sense in a lot of your poems that you're trying to state something straightforwardly, as if you feel a sort of moral imperative to limit

the meanings which might be taken from your poems. There's a feeling for clarity and for consequence. The lyric "I" in your poems generally seems to be your autobiographical self. A lot of poets would claim a persona at that point.

At times I do ... But yes, especially in the familial poems the first person, as you say, tends to be recognisably myself. Or to appear to be so ... for there's always that element of — maybe not deception — but of illusion; call it what you will. In theatrical terms, of side-lighting or a gauze intervening between the literal self and the one depicted in the poem. And ideally transforming it, however minutely.

Ian Hamilton's book Against Oblivion is about the whole idea of posterity, about the persistence of this idea as an ultimate value of the worth of poetry, and about what poets eventually hope is the fate of their work. What do you imagine for your own work in this respect?

[Mock-lugubriously] Written on water.

[Laughter.] *But that's presumably not what you hope.*

Oh, I know poets whose aspirations are to *walk* on water. But rather than thinking of another collection for the world or for posterity, I'm now much more conscious of poems for a specific person, Judy my wife, and addressed to her or recollecting shared moments, and I hope not simply being a marital diary but transforming these into pieces which may have some shape and entertainment value, and be touching for others who can relate them to their own experience. It may be an acknowledgement of ageing on my part. My study's about to be moved because we've got plasterers coming in and things are going to be put out. It struck me that when I croak, everything will be put out. My sons will be aware that the old boy wrote poetry and they'll be quite touched by some of them and know that some refer to Judy, but it would be a terrible obligation for them to have to carry a flame of some kind. So anticipating my study being cleared is a metaphor for the eventual final clearance of one's life. There is the hope that poems will survive but more and more to me writing poetry is like the heartbeat: it's for the present, and it's my heart expressing itself while it can beat. Which I suppose is why many of them are about transience, about the affections, and about art. I think all one can do is the best one can with whatever talent one has been given and for which one can take no credit.

Like MacCaig's response to whether he was "proud" to be Scottish? He said, "Pleased, if you like. How can you be proud of something which had nothing to do with you?"

