

IAIN CRICHTON SMITH AT 70

Iain Crichton Smith was born in Glasgow on New Year's Day in 1928, but lived most of his formative years on the Hebridean island of Lewis, an experience which has marked much of his later work. He is a novelist, short-story writer, and poet in both English and Gaelic; his novels include the seminal Consider the Lilies, about the reaction of an old Gaelic woman to the Clearances, and his many short stories often feature Murdo, Smith's invented Gaelic eccentric. His short story 'Murdo' may be one of the funniest, and most terrifying, stories written. But he is perhaps best known for his poetry, which has won many awards and prizes and is marked by, among other things, its lyrical grace and distinction, that of a Gael steeped in the Classics and in English. His Collected Poems appeared from Carcanet in 1992.

Gerry Cambridge: Iain, we're sitting in MacDiarmid's room in Brownsbank Cottage, under numerous portraits of the man himself, and you're sitting rather comfortably in his armchair. Did you ever meet him?

Iain Crichton Smith: Only once or twice. He was very gentle. I don't think he said very much. Actually my main contact with him was a long time ago when I wrote an essay on his work which was called 'The Golden Lyric', because he had this poem 'A'e Gowden Lyric' stating that that is worth more than practically anything else in the world. I was surprised to find that I got a long letter from him after that rebutting practically everything I had said in this essay. And I thought well, it's very strange that he should bother, you know, to go to these lengths. I think he was very protective of his own reputation. Of course I think he was a great poet. I think his early lyrics, and the Drunk Man, are works of genius.

GC: He also had a tremendous self-belief. I remember watching a film that was made about him, and there was a scene in it with Norman MacCaig, here in Brownsbank, I think, and MacDiarmid was saying, 'Of course nobody can dispute that I am a great poet, because it is indisputable.'

ICS: He said to Sorley MacLean, of course everyone knows that we are the two greatest poets in Scotland. There was a terrifically egotistical poem that he wrote, 'At the Cenotaph' and he says there, "Keep going to your wars, you fools, as of yore — I'm the civilisation you're fighting for" which I thought was extraordinarily egotistical. But I think he genuinely thought that he was probably the greatest poet in the world; maybe he was, maybe he was; it wouldn't sound silly to say he was.

GC: The contrariness of his temperament makes you wonder how he would respond to Nationalism now it's been taken up as a general cause in Scotland.

ICS: Oh, I'm sure he would be against it. I think he probably thought that was one of the tasks of a poet, to be against the established order. But the thing about MacDiarmid of course was that, in a way he could afford to be against the established order: he had nothing to lose. He didn't have any property, for many years he was starving. For instance, Sorley MacLean says in one of his poems that when writing about modern times he suspects that he himself is a bourgeois, I suppose because he became a headmaster, head of department. MacDiarmid didn't really have anything to lose at the time. He gave no hostages to fortune in a way, so if someone had said to him, well, you've libelled me, or whatever, and you've got to pay £20,000 he could afford to laugh because he didn't have £20,000, and was never likely to get £20,000, so he didn't care what he said, and it gave him a terrific freedom. They were pretty well

starving when they were up in Shetland; they had the local people bringing them fish and so on.

GC: Yes, I remember Valda telling me about one time when MacDiarmid was trying to write a book to a deadline, and she found mouse droppings in the porridge, which was all they had to eat; she decided against telling him about it, because it would disturb the work, and served up the porridge. That was in Shetland, I think. Speaking of islands, I wonder if we can talk a little about your own background, on Lewis?

ICS: Well, I spent most of my life on Lewis from about the age of 3 to about 21, 22, when I left to go to Dumbarton to teach. My father had died when I was about a year old and my mother was living on a widow's pension, and there were three of us, so we were actually very poor. I think she was getting something like eighteen shillings a week. A lot of people up in Lewis have crofts, but we didn't. My mother was quite religious in a very austere way, a very Free Church sort of way; Lewis is religious like that. For instance, when you're growing up there, you're not supposed to do anything on a Sunday; about five years ago I was up in Lewis, and I was reading this novel in my cousin's house on a Sunday, and he's very Free Church. I went to the toilet and when I came back he had taken this novel away and replaced it with a book called *Dying Thoughts*. (Laughter.) The Free Church religion of course is very austere, they don't have any music in the churches and they don't have hymns, they just have psalms. My mother for instance didn't like us to go to dances.

GC: When you were growing up in Lewis did you feel different or slightly apart from other youngsters?

ICS: Only in that when I was growing up my mother was very protective of me. My father had died of tuberculosis and I was getting a lot of bronchitis. She thought that I had to be protected or I would end up with tuberculosis. Accordingly, I was kept at home a lot of the time and was in bed a lot because of this bronchitis. This meant that I did a lot of reading. I think that was probably the main difference between myself and the other boys in the village. I was reading poetry and prose. One of my favourite novels was *Oliver Twist*. The other boys — in those days you could leave school at 14 — would go to the fishing, but if you passed this bursary exam you could go to the Nicholson Institute in Stornoway, so I went there at the age of 11. I was still reading poetry, and composing poetry, but I never showed it to anyone. There was no tradition of writing in my family at all. And there was no tradition of writing poetry in the schools, because in those days Scottish education was very austere. You didn't have anything to do with creativity. I kept the work I did in a big notebook but I never showed it to anyone.

GC: Was there any tradition of writing poetry on Lewis?

ICS: The Gaelic poet Derick Thompson was the son of the headmaster. He used to write poems but I didn't know about him till much later. There was a tradition of writing poems but it was mostly in Gaelic. These were done by what were known as village poets; if some event happened in the village they might commemorate it in a poem. Some of these poems were quite humorous.

GC: When you went to school at the age of five you've said you were taught a foreign language, English. You're fully bi-lingual but have you ever felt there's any dichotomy in yourself between the two languages?

ICS: Och yes. Up til the age of five I only spoke Gaelic. When I was growing up, there were no Gaelic books for children. Consequently all the books that I was reading were children's books written in English. I remember — looking back on it now it seems very strange — once reading a book about an English public school, and there was this boy

who was in the hospital, and he was very ill, and he could hear the sound of a cricket bat hitting a ball through the window. I'd never seen a cricket match in my life, never been to England in my life. You would have thought that the whole thing was quite alien to me, and yet I was practically crying over this boy, in his English public school. What I was reading was in fact what maybe someone down in England might have been reading, though I did read additional Scottish books like Robert Louis Stevenson's. On the other hand, I read a lot of Dickens. I was very fond of Dickens. Then again in school when you went they never told you anything about your own island, about the history of the island, it was all English really. You were moulded by English history, English literature, totally moulded by it. I have written a lot in Gaelic, but generally speaking, I've written far more in English. I taught until 1977, but when I left teaching I had to earn my living by writing and you couldn't do that in Gaelic. So one reason is economic; the other reason is that I'm away from the heartland of Gaelic now; I'm living in an area where Gaelic is not really spoken as a daily thing and I think for writing poetry especially you have to feel a taste of the language where you are; if I'd been back in Lewis now, I might have written more in Gaelic than I do, because people there speak more Gaelic from day to day.

GC: Is there any technical cross-fertilisation in your work from the Gaelic to the English?

ICS: I think probably there is an echo from the lyrical qualities of Gaelic. Gaelic poetry is very auditory. A lot of it was oral, was spoken rather than written down, and it may be that some of that passes into my English poetry. What you get in Gaelic poetry is a lot of assonance, and assonance which is actually natural to the language. You can pick out a poem by even a village poet, and that poem is full of natural assonances which he hasn't deliberately put in, they're just part of the language.

GC: The tradition of Gaelic is very formal.

ICS: The early poetry is very formal. The Gaelic bard learnt his forms, he actually was taught them. But Derick Thompson has shown some years ago that modern Gaelic is developing towards free verse. It's leaving behind this formality. It's following the trend of English poetry. There's been an extension of subject matter: for instance, I wrote a poem about Freud in Gaelic. Now that's the type of thing that probably wouldn't have been written about earlier on. A lot of the subject matter in earlier Gaelic poetry was quite fixed, for instance there were a whole lot of poems about chieftains, saying how generous they were, how manly, how heroic, and so on, and a whole lot of expressions just like in Homer which can fit into the metric of these Gaelic poems. Nowadays Gaelic poetry has differentiated, and you find people writing about the city in a way they couldn't have done in the past: Derick Thompson has lived in Glasgow most of his life, and he's writing about Glasgow as Glasgow is, but in the olden days you'd get someone going to live in Glasgow from the Highlands, and they'd still be writing about the Highlands, as if they couldn't look out the window, and see Glasgow. So that's another change: more urban poetry in Gaelic. So generally it's becoming like Scottish or English poetry. Some people object to this looser Gaelic poetry, they say it's not true Gaelic poetry, that it has lost a lot of its music. But then you get people saying that about English poetry. I'm sure this is a fair criticism. There is a loss of music. I think the question of music is important: maybe because I'm from a Gaelic background, I sometimes miss the music. I know that Auden said that Tennyson was probably the stupidest poet who ever wrote, and Eliot said, well, if Auden had been a scholar he'd have known of poets stupider than Tennyson (laughter). But the thing is that Tennyson is very musical. In Taynuilt we have a garden and put

out bird food, and two doves sometimes come and eat the food, and they always come together, and sometimes you hear these doves cooing over the village, and one day that line from Tennyson came back to me, 'the moaning of doves in immemorial elms'. That was a memorable line which absolutely described the doves, and then there's 'the murmur of innumerable bees.' Would anybody write like that now?

GC: Anyone writing like that would be at the mercy of editors. So if the general taste of editors has moved from that, then that type of work is not being seen by an audience. *The Dark Horse* tries to have a fairly contrary view about poetry, and not to be swayed by hype, of which there's a tremendous amount, and give a sort of counterbalance to prevailing ideologies. Let's face it, most literary magazines are so poor that even the contributors probably don't read them. If they don't, why should a member of the general public?

ICS: And some of the poems are quite difficult, but once you've disentangled them, it doesn't seem worthwhile. Whereas with a poet like Eliot it does seem worthwhile.

GC: Your poetry in English is often very lyrical, often with a marked Latinate quality to it. Could you comment on that?

ICS: As far as the Latinate quality is concerned, I had a Latin teacher in the Nicholson Institute in Stornoway called Mr Traill. Mr Traill was a wonderfully enthusiastic teacher, and was able to create enthusiasm. I was always very fascinated by Virgil and especially by the Dido-Aeneas episode. But I loved the background to Latin.

GC: It's the precision of it, isn't it? And it can be a great help if you are writing poetry in English, by returning you to the roots of the language.

ICS: I remember once reading a critic discussing three of my very favourite lines of Shakespeare, and they come at the end of Hamlet; Hamlet's saying to Horatio, "Absent thyself from felicity a while / And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain/ To tell my story"; he's telling Horatio he must stay alive. I hadn't realised this, but this critic was pointing out that these lines are a combination of Latin-derived words and Anglo-Saxon words, and that's where their power comes from: the first line composed of Latin-derived words, and the second entirely from Anglo-Saxon; and of course Hamlet's dying as well, so Shakespeare uses all these short words to give the impression of someone who hasn't got all their breath; so I think that Latin-derived words used along with other words can be very moving and interesting in poetry.

GC: I'd like to talk just a little about your use of form in English. You've tended to move away from formality towards free verse. Why is that?

ICS: My idea of poetry in the early days, especially the formal work, was that the metrical form I considered to be a kind of cage, and the inspiration of the poem was fighting against the form and being controlled by the form and this gave a kind of tension to the poetry. Then I moved away from this formality into freer verse, mainly I think because of the influence of D. H. Lawrence, who I felt was trying to get the pressure of the moment into poetry — the essence of what was happening at a particular moment. I felt that maybe this is what I should be doing and that the formality sometimes lost the essence of the moment as it passed.

GC: It's a development which has been echoed or repeated by other Scottish poets — George Mackay Brown, Norman MacCaig.

ICS: The poet I admire most and find closest to myself is Robert Lowell. His early poetry is very formal and he was also constrained to a certain extent by his religion. Then later on he too began to develop away from very strong formal poetry — his early poetry was so formal it almost looked as if it was willed into existence — but his later poetry, from *Life Studies* onwards loses that tremendous formality, and tries to break

into free verse. Another way in which I associate myself with Lowell is again the derivation from Latinate themes. There's a lot of classical stuff in Lowell, for example the wonderful poem about the old man falling asleep over *The Aeneid*. It's the union of the classical with the quotidian that fascinated me in Lowell and also the tension of the earlier poetry. Even *Life Studies* is still fairly formal, but his last book, *Day to Day*, I didn't like it at all, he had lost all the tension, it was like a kind of diary. I felt something had gone wrong there.

GC: I'm interested that you talk about an American poet as more of an influence, because there is sometimes a feeling — and perhaps MacDiarmid partway promulgated it — that a Scottish poet has to write out of certain tenets of Scottishness. Poets such as Sydney Graham [W. S. Graham] couldn't settle in that, and left Scotland.

ICS: I never felt MacDiarmid as an influence on myself, mainly because his best poetry was in Scots, though of course he wrote some good poetry in English. Scots to me was not a language that I knew intimately. I could read it with a glossary, and I still think he's a great poet, but for me Scots is not a natural language so I couldn't really be influenced by MacDiarmid. The other poet whom I admired the most, before Lowell, was W. H. Auden, because he could do anything, use any technical form with the most wonderful fluency; someone said that it was almost as if he'd taken some sort of drug which helped him write in that way; he made poetry look so easy. Before that there was Eliot, but I always felt that Eliot was too perfect altogether. I felt for a long period that in the twentieth century you couldn't write poetry unless you were mad, or disturbed, and there were so many people like that, Lowell himself, Plath, Anne Sexton. People began to think that poetry had to be an unnatural activity, that you could only write if you were mad. Suddenly you see someone coming along like Heaney, and he's quite a normal personality. Poetry then becomes quite a normal activity. But there was a period when people thought that you could only write very good poetry if there was something wrong with your psyche.

GC: You yourself have known what it's like to deal with dangerous material.

ICS: Yes, I had a breakdown. You're going deep into yourself in modern poetry, poetry being such a highly individual thing in the 20th century. There's not a common collection of symbols that poets can draw on. Consequently they're mining their own personalities to a great extent, and this can be very dangerous.

GC: Did your breakdown make a difference to your writing or to yourself?

ICS: Well, I joined the human race. The first review of my first book, *The Long River*, said that all that the book of poems lacked was humanity. I think for a long period I was very introverted, but afterwards I seemed to become more relaxed as far as people were concerned. Lowell apparently was a very very intense person. He was once staying with Michael Longley in Ireland. Apparently Longley was making the breakfast one morning and he heard Lowell say, "An whaddya think of the sonnets of Thomas Wyatt?" This was about eight in the morning. (Laughter).

GC: Could you say something about the tensions which may have lead to your breakdown?

ICS: The thing about being brought up inside a dogma is that it's very comforting. My own mother for instance had this kind of certainty because of her religion. I was always moving away from this, and always thought that poetry ought to be something not dogmatic, but provisional, and almost temporary. I think this can be quite a dangerous position to be in, that every day for you has to be a provisional day and that you can't rely on a dogma behind you in order to see you through the day. I think when you move out into the open sea like that, especially for me, it's quite difficult. In that period the

man who I was very interested in, and who greatly influenced me was the philosopher Kierkegaard, who I wrote a poem about. He left the comfort of liberal Christianity in the 20th century, and was moving towards a kind of existentialist position. When I was in university I was interested in the existentialists; they seemed to me to be post-Christian. They realised the extremity of life; that you had to live on the edges without any protection from an ideology of any kind. Then I also grew up in the period of Fascism, which was a terrible ideology; so all these things turned me against all kinds of systems. The thing about a system is that it can only go so far, and cuts a slice out of reality, and this is the system [enclosing a space between his palms] but there are areas, wild areas, which aren't colonised; therefore all systems must tend to be inadequate; when I was growing up on Lewis, for example, the children's swings were chained on a Sunday so that they couldn't be used. The system there seems to be inadequate and wrong. That's why I turned against systems.

GC: I'm fascinated by what you were saying about provisionality, because I wonder how that fits into the idea of poetry and what one would try to make lasting in a work of art; because if you're writing poems you're trying to put things into a pattern which if the work is to be lasting will be ratified by time.

ICS: There's a poem by Robert Graves about how reality imposes itself on children, 'The Cool Web', and how reality would impose itself on you if you didn't have names to control things; it seems to me that to live without an ideology is going to be very hard because you don't have a system by which you can explain events which happen to you; that's why I say each poem will be different maybe from every other poem, because there wouldn't be any ideology informing the poem. It's hard to explain, but I take your point about the form. Maybe that's why I moved away from formality towards free verse, and tried to find in free verse the moment which will be not governed by an ideology or any forethought at all. You remember it from your own childhood really, when things seem to come on you much more intensely, with great scent, noise, or whatever. Then you lose this, eventually. I suppose eventually we'll have to be able to live without ideologies if we're going to survive. It seems to me that ideologies in general tend to be harmful and religious ideologies extremely harmful; most of the wars you find nowadays have a religious background.

GC: One of your latest poems reacting against dogma would be your long poem in Habbie Stanza, *The Human Face*.

ICS: It's a sort of extended essay on what's happening in the world today in terms of violence. A lot of the images are drawn from Northern Ireland where it seems to me dogma has gone to insane lengths. I know people in Northern Ireland who can't see beyond their own worlds at all; there's no give in them, and they live in this very compressed world of dogma, which is a tremendous protection. What I arrived at was that the reason for all these dogmas began with fear. If you don't have the kind of personality which can exist on the day to day then you may have to create a dogma and run for shelter. This dogma will tell you how to react whatever happens in life. So in a sense there's something cowardly in dogma. The non-cowardly thing would be to look out at the world afresh and analyse it afresh without fear. This would be the opposite of ideology or dogma; they are also irrational, and drive people to do irrational things; for instance in the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism you might get a Rangers fan who refuses to mow his lawn because it's green; to him, this is probably a reasonable thing to do but to anyone else looking from the outside it's totally insane. You see things happening in religion which are totally insane, where they spend all their time talking about where an altar should be, or what kind of pews they should

have, these kinds of mechanistic things. In the Free Church for instance, women must always wear hats when they go to church. So if a Free Church minister — and there is one — were to say I'll allow you to come inside the church without a hat, this would be from inside the system a tremendous revolutionary thing to do, almost like the French revolution, but for an impartial observer it would be peanuts. So all these things get exaggerated out of all proportion.

GC: You have frequently lampooned religion. I remember reading a hilarious poem of yours in which a Kirk Elder is saying, after a long diatribe about how to live, that furthermore Jesus had not been quite as strict as the Kirk would have wished him to be.

ICS: This is exactly true. This is why in the Free Church most of the lessons are given from the Old Testament, because the Old Testament god is a god of punishment, a terrifying god.

GC: Nationalism too is a potential dogma. Where do you stand on Scottish Nationalism?

ICS: I think I would be a nationalist, in the sense that it would allow the Scots to be totally themselves. I'm only thinking of nationalism in terms of allowing people to develop from their own culture as fully as they can. Hugh MacDiarmid for instance said that English Literature was not a tremendously good literature. I disagree totally. To me English Literature is one of the greatest literatures of the world, even though I come from a Gaelic background I'm willing to concede that, and I grew up really reading English literature. On the other hand, I believe there should be a possibility for Gaelic literature to be reckoned important and to expand. And Scottish literature. This of course was why MacDiarmid was so important, as Eliot said, because he wrote in Scots he became a great poet. But nationalism to me is to have the self-confidence to expand your own culture but at the same time being aware of other cultures. The kind of nationalism I want is not a narrow nationalism; MacDiarmid himself in some ways wasn't narrow; he was translating poetry from German and Russian and so on. MacDiarmid had a big mind, his wasn't a small Nationalism, but he could be eccentric, and I think a statement like that about English literature is an eccentric statement.

GC: Perhaps it was just a desire to have a reaction.

ICS: Yes, perhaps to be in the limelight and have a reaction. He would make outrageous statements, but his poetry was big, and his ideas too. He said that he thought the nation that was closest to Scotland was Russia, and he said in the *Drunk Man* that he was asking for a share of Dostoevsky's 'appalling genius'. Then again someone like Sorley MacLean will say, 'Gaelic cannot be translated'. I think MacDiarmid was saying that English is distant from us in relation to the historical languages of Scotland, like Gaelic. And that English's preconceptions in literature are, compared with Scottish preconceptions, middle class, that English literature lacks the kind of intensity you get in some Russian literature, like Dostoevsky, say, or Gogol. There is an intensity there which MacDiarmid feels makes Russian literature closer to Scots literature than to English literature.

GC: You could say that a number of Scottish poets who began writing in English felt a sense of poetic exile. But as soon as MacDiarmid starts to write in Scots, the change is stunning in his work. That's why he had the effect on writing in Scots that he did. It wasn't just because he used Scots. It was because he wrote in it so superlatively compared with his contemporaries, or most of them.

ICS: Yes, and there are wonderful words in Scots which are total pictures, such as in

the time of the 'yow-trummle', the period of the trembling of the ewes in March after the sheep-shearing, and he says that Scots is full of words like that which incorporate a whole world. They're very pictorial words and there are more of them perhaps in Scots than there are in English.

GC: MacDiarmid also wrote some wonderful poems in English too, in strange language, mining scientific terminology, such as at the beginning of 'On a Raised Beach':

All is lithogenesis — or lochia,
Carpelite fruit of the forbidden tree,
Stones blacker than any in the Caaba,
Cream-coloured caen-stone, chatoyant pieces,
Celadon and corbeau, bistre and beige,
Glaucous, hoar, enfouledered, cyathiform,
Making mere faculae of the sun and moon
I study you glout and gloss, but have
No cadrans to adjust you with, and turn again
From optik to haptik and like a blind man run
My fingers over you...

ICS: Well, if you took the poetry of MacDiarmid, and copied out all the words in all the poems, the range of his vocabulary would be greater than practically any other poet, because he had whole sections with specialised terms. He just simply loved words. I think that is the mark of a poet, to love words for their own sake, the range of English words, Scots words, words of specialised vocabularies.

GC: Exile has been a main theme in your poetry. One of your books was called *The Exiles*. To what extent do you feel yourself to be exiled from Lewis, from the ideology you were born into?

ICS: I think I feel that if the Gaelic had been stronger when I was younger I would have been writing in Gaelic all the time. So I'm exiled from that and the ideology in which I grew up. I also feel a terrible sense of waste, that a lot of the people from the islands had to leave the islands to go to places like Canada, and so forth. Many of them became alcoholics, many of them died of starvation. There was a lot of wastage of really good people. From my own family, just to show what exile was like, I had an uncle who was in South Africa, another uncle who was in Vancouver in Canada, an aunt in Fortwilliam in Canada, a cousin who had been in Canada and came back home. My older brother spent most of his life in Rhodesia, later Zimbabwe, and my younger brother went to New Zealand and died in Australia. So my whole family was full of people who left, and stayed away.

GC: Another poet who sometimes wrote about the destruction of Gaelic culture was Norman MacCaig, whom you knew well. He has been called a great 'corrective' influence on Scottish letters, because of what could be called his classical sanity. Was he an influence on you?

ICS: It was mainly the fact that he was publishing in English magazines. In Scotland it's a terrible thing to say but people don't think you're being successful unless you're publishing in English magazines. I remember during the 50s and 60s he was publishing a lot in English magazines, and I felt that was very important, to be able to move outside Scotland and publish in English magazines. In that sense he was an influence on me. But he had very clear ideas about poetry; he wanted poetry to be very

lucid and very clear, and I'm not at all sure that I'd agree with that, but certainly one of the great things about him was this clear-headedness about what he wanted from poetry and what he disliked. On the other hand he could be persuaded about poets, because I remember one night — he didn't like Whitman — thought that Whitman was a rhetorical wind-bag — he had a copy of Whitman in the house, and I picked out some poems of Whitman's where Whitman is very very detailed, and uses wonderful images, very often about his time in the Civil War. Lines like 'These so, these irretrievable.' MacCaig hadn't actually concentrated on such lines before, and he was greatly taken by them. So he didn't like rhetoric; he liked clear poems. Norman latterly became a bit of an icon in Scotland and in Scottish literature and I think the fact that he was witty, cutting, a no-nonsense kind of mind, *highly* intelligent, I think this had an influence on Scottish writing. And also his power of observation, which was quite extraordinary. I think before Norman in Scottish literature we had mainly lyrics which lacked detailed observation, which is one of the things Norman contributed more than anything.

GC: Where did he take it from?

ICS: I think it was natural to him. He would talk like that. There are some writers who talk as they write. Henry James apparently did, and T. S. Eliot. And MacCaig talked in images, it was completely natural. He said it came from his mother's side. The other thing about MacCaig was not just that he talked in images, but when he was reciting poetry it was almost as if he was tasting the words, tasting the actual words. So his poems were just natural extensions of the way he talked.

GC: MacCaig was renowned for not doing much re-writing. Do you?

ICS: No. I do a little bit more now than when I was teaching, but I don't re-write a lot. I would rather throw away the poem if I feel it's not right. I've thrown away lots of poems.

GC: John Crowe Ransom was a poet who when he re-wrote his stuff, the re-writes were terrible, really terrible, although he had all sorts of academic justifications for them.

ICS: Auden was the same. There's the famous one, 'We must love one another or die.' He changed it to 'We must love one another and die.' Of course, that's just a cliché. In the first, he's using "die" in a different way, saying, we might as well not be alive, we'll shrivel up if we don't love one another. I think a lot of changes in poems are for the worse.

GC: A critic called Gerald Dawe has written: 'There's a yearning for grandeur in Crichton Smith's poetry...': you were telling me recently about your reaction on reading Neruda for the first time.

ICS: It was a poem about putting out a plate for the poor. When people are sitting at a table to eat, they put out an extra plate for the poor. The poem was so magisterial, and you instantly knew this was written by a great poet, not just a good poet. You do sense this. You obviously sense it with Shakespeare, all the time with Shakespeare, and I think Walcott.

GC: What is this quality? Is it the authority of it?

ICS: I think so. It's an absolute mastery and confidence of medium, but it's also beyond that a human confidence, a confidence of vision — a largeness which you get in Milton and Wordsworth and the very best.

GC: Do you have any sense of yourself as being one of the foremost living Scottish poets, along with Edwin Morgan?

ICS: I don't think I do have that sort of sense. You always feel when you look back

at the stuff you've written that it's never good enough. In both prose and poetry I feel I should have taken more time. A lot of the stuff I was doing I was doing when I was schoolteaching; I didn't have terribly much time, and I feel that if I had been a writer instead of teaching that my work would have been better. But I think the older you grow the more dissatisfied you become with what you've done. You feel, well, maybe I've done a few stories, and a few novels, and a few poems, in both languages, but that's out of a huge amount. On the other hand, it may be that that's the way I write, and had to write, and to write differently would have been the wrong way for me.

GC: Have you any projects at the moment?

ICS: Well, I've written this long poem, coming out in October, and it's called 'The Marble and the Leaf.' Actually the starting off point was when I was in Rome one day and I saw this Judas tree in beautiful leaf, and it was the spring, with all the Roman Marble round about. This got somehow inwoven into the fact that it's also a poem about Donald, my wife, so a sort of love poem, as well as an attack on imperial Rome, and brings in quite a lot of classical stuff. I was just coming out of a depression when I was writing the poem. It seemed to write itself to a great extent. It's one of the poems I'm most happy with. I quite like it anyway.