

DOUGLAS DUNN IN CONVERSATION

Douglas Dunn was born in Inchinnan, Renfrewshire in 1942, and spent the first 21 years of his life in Scotland. While working in Hull University Library with Philip Larkin – an early mentor – he published his first book, *Terry Street* (1969), set in the area of Hull in which he then lived with his first wife. The book was widely acclaimed. Dunn's other books include *Barbarians*, *St. Kilda's Parliament*, the award-winning *Elegies*, *Northlight*, and *Dante's Drumkit*. He is also distinguished as a short story writer, anthologist, and editor, as well as one of the most trenchant poet-critics in Scotland. He returned here to live following the death of his first wife in 1981 and has just demitted office as Head of The School of English at St. Andrews University, where he continues to be a Professor and Director of the St. Andrews Scottish Studies Institute.

Gerry Cambridge: You began your literary career in England, in the sixties, though you were born and raised in Scotland. Tell me about the poetry scene in Scotland when you left it.

Douglas Dunn: There were quite a few poets of middle age who were very good and who subsequently attained fame, such as Norman MacCaig, Iain Crichton Smith, Edwin Morgan, George Mackay Brown, Sorley MacLean and so on – poets whom I revered. But in the early 1960s, Scottish poetry was pretty uninteresting from the point of view of a younger poet. If there were any other young poets, they were as lonely and as unknown as you were. And the place to be was anywhere except Glasgow, it struck me, and lots of other poets at the time too. I went to the College of Commerce in Glasgow at the School of Librarianship. At that time I knew Tom McGrath, who went on to edit *Peace News* and *International Times*, and wrote poetry. He has now made a name for himself as a very significant playwright. He and I would sit in the State Bar having a pint, and not weeping exactly, but just wondering where the scene was; it certainly wasn't there – unless we were it. But I for one didn't have the confidence to be some kind of *animateur*. At that time in Glasgow you met all kinds of frauds; if there's anything worse than a fraud, it's a Scottish fraud. Guys putting on American accents, saying they've just come from San Francisco; people walking around with trombone cases that didn't have a trombone in it, but contained their piece [sandwiches for lunch]; it was bad, it was sad, it was sick. It's not like that now, it's active.

GC: Were you reading much American poetry?

DD: Lots of American poetry. I lived in America for a year, when I just read American poetry, starting with Whitman. Lots of Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, James Wright, Louis Simpson, Donald Justice, X. J. Kennedy, Anthony Hecht; Edward Arlington Robinson has always been an enthusiasm of mine too;

Robinson's artistry in narrative has always interested me; Frost's too for that matter. I've always thought my poems told stories. And in Glasgow we had been reading things like *The Evergreen Review*, and little booklets from City Lights Bookshop; poems like *Howl* were passing around as if in Samizdat. I still have a soft spot for earlier Allen Ginsberg. And there was Randall Jarrell, whom people have been writing about lately as if he's been gone for a long time and has had to be rediscovered; not in my house. I'm a big fan. I photocopy his critical essays for my students, so if they've been reading this stuff that's been coming out about Jarrell in the last few weeks they must think I'm some sort of pioneer.

GC: Jarrell was a fierce critic and reviewer. Does that type of critical energy still exist anywhere?

DD: A lot of current criticism is written either for academic promotion or to try and make a name for the critic in a newspaper. Newspapers like two kinds of reviews. They like the one that's fearless and gets out and shouts and causes controversy — but not too much of that. Basically they like the flattering review. The one in between, the bland one — there's a lot of that, but editors will only print that if they have nothing else. Reviewing is pretty well conditioned by the state of the prints that reviews appear in. I'm afraid our prints have gone down the tubes. Apart from one or two little magazines. (Laughter).

GC: *The Dark Horse* wouldn't have developed had it not been for the American side. Were it purely Scottish, as one or two people have said it should be, I wouldn't have done it.

DD: The magazine that Robert Crawford, David Kinloch and Henry Hart founded, *Verse*, was transatlantic as well. That they're both transatlantic tells you something. *Verse* of course is now based not here but in America. It does special issues on younger poets from Macedonia and that kind of stuff, which is not always terribly interesting.

GC: I'm probably representative of a common reader. I stopped buying *Verse* when it devoted a complete issue to John Ashbery. (Laughter). I was baffled by the content of most of the articles. The issue had absolutely no relation to me.

DD: A lot of reviewing in the literary magazines as opposed to the newspapers, strikes me as being done by post-graduates who are actually printing a chunk of a thesis. By and large I think Universities are a good thing, because I work in one; but their influence on literature is not always good.

GC: Why?

DD: It academises it. Full stop. Nothing more to say, really. So a writer who works in a university has to protect him or herself. Kathleen Jamie and John Burnside have just been appointed to the School of English in St. Andrews, to teach creative writing. I'll have to look after them. Make sure they don't get into bad habits.

GC: Was St. Andrews the first University in Scotland to institute a degree in creative writing?

DD: Yes. It's a one year post-graduate course; it started in 1993.

GC: In America creative writing courses are ubiquitous. Some critical opinion over there feels that's a negative thing. If there were many more creative writing courses in Scottish Universities would it be healthy?

DD: Perhaps not. But I don't think every University needs to have one; there isn't the market. We get by because we attract quite a lot of Americans who are disenchanted with what's on offer in the U.S.A. And they want to come and study at St. Andrews, in a different culture. And it's not sitting around talking about your feelings. If they do the poetry course with me then they have to learn versification, as well as study poetry of the past; one of the essays they have to write is on the history of Blank Verse, *in* Blank Verse. Or they could do a history of the rhyming couplet in rhyming couplets.

GC: And how long does this history have to be?

DD: At least 150 lines.

GC: You mentioned earlier that some of these students can't study Robert Frost at an American University. That seems an extraordinary situation.

DD: Absolutely. If it continues, American culture, never mind American poetry, will go down the drain.

GC: In the States political correctness is everything. A notion of excellence — the old notion of excellence — has been eroded.

DD: I still believe there's good writing and there's bad writing. Most writing is in between.

GC: In America, if white American males have been put forward as the writers to study, it means the disenfranchised have something to feel resentment about.

DD: I can see their point. But there's now so much very good writing, such a rich tradition of African-American writing, for example, that I don't think a young writer who's black needs to feel in the least bit timid or uncertain when faced with a so-called white canon; and I'm sure they don't — African-American writers have got such a rich tradition to support them. I teach that in my undergraduate course on Modern American Poetry. There are quite a few St. Andrews graduates walking around, probably working in accountancy, or something like that, for all I know, who could talk the tail end off a donkey about Langston Hughes; I'm proud of that.

GC: If poetry loses or has lost its general audience, will the posterity then be only in the Universities? Where in future will posterity be?

DD: Well, perhaps the role of the Academy is to help preserve our culture and perpetuate what's best in it. Of course it can make mistakes, like any other institution; it's fallible. But lots of people get educated in Universities who don't stay in Universities for the rest of their lives. Lots of my graduates in English go into all sorts of professions: police force, teaching, journalism, army, navy, accountancy, banking, finance, law, all kinds of things. They go off with a bloody good knowledge of English Language and Literature, and you hope they keep this knowledge going. It's people like that who make an educated, civilised country. And there are lots of them. They tend to be typecast as whatever, but

that's a mistake we make, I don't think they're making that mistake. Posterity isn't just in the hands of academics, but of others. If it's not then it's a false posterity. I mean, posterity is like Heaven, in a sense — you either get there or you don't. Being an academic myself, I don't trust academics to act as St. Peter.

GC: Does Eliot for instance have a general readership outside Academe?

DD: I think he does, because he's T. S. Eliot. I was looking at Eliot's poetry earlier this year. I'd just read Antony Julius' book on T. S. Eliot and Anti-Semitism, and Christopher Rick's book on T. S. Eliot and prejudice; I also sat down and re-read the poems. I found myself confirming what had been my conviction for quite some time: his best poems are 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', 'Preludes', and the earlier poems; I re-read 'The Waste Land' and didn't get much of a charge out of it; and when I came to re-read 'Four Quartets' I was bored witless. There's something false in the tone of 'Four Quartets'. I couldn't put my finger on it precisely. But it didn't excite me nearly as much as when I was young. So I don't know about Eliot's posterity. And don't ask me to speak about my own because once you start thinking about that you may as well fling yourself off a cliff.

GC: Is one danger for a poet-critic that he or she has to think in terms of posterity?

DD: I'd say quite the opposite. If you're a critic also you probably have a healthy disrespect for your own work. You have to have if you're going to be honest about other people's.

GC: But you do have to think about how long the work will last, and so on?

DD: When I review a new book of poems, or write one of my own, I don't think that's a question I ask myself.

GC: Is it an important question to ask?

DD: I think it's a very unfair question to ask of someone who's writing at the present time, and in the present tense. By its very nature it's a question that's in the future tense. That's a burden I wouldn't palm off on anyone. Take short views, as Auden advocated.

GC: What do you think of movements — *literary* movements — in general, and perhaps New Formalism in particular?

DD: Literary movements are usually a reaction against something perceived as negative, and so various people band together self-protectively or aggressively in favour of what they perceive to be positive. By and large that explains New Formalism. But like any movement it's prone to exaggerating its own cause. I tend to write using versification of one form or another, but I don't deny myself the freedom to write in free verse.

GC: Using forms seems much more politicised in America than in Scotland. In Scotland writing a sonnet, say, doesn't seem a literary-political act.

DD: There are some people in Scotland who would think that it was. I remember giving a reading in a University once. I had to attend a meeting at that University in the afternoon, so I was wearing a suit and a waistcoat. I turned up at the reading wearing a waistcoat and I heard somebody say, 'My God, he wears

a waistcoat, it'll be rhyme and metre all night long.' (Laughter.) What waistcoats have to do with rhyme and metre I don't know. Perhaps someone could explain it to me; I doubt it; and I doubt if I'd accept the answer.

GC: What's the value of rhyme and metre to you?

DD: It's something that helps enable a poem. If I'm writing iambic pentameter then at least I know what my variation will be on the next line; so it's a helpmate. In Robert Frost's terms, it's the net in the game of tennis.

GC: If one looks at your *Selected Poems 1963-84*, the first poem using regular rhyme and meter together doesn't occur until the beginning of your third book.

DD: Most of my earlier verse before I wrote my first book was metrical, simply because I didn't know any poems that weren't. Most of the poems in *Terry Street* are iambic pentameter, unrhymed; blank verse, if you like. In my second book there were some fairly longish poems, metrical and stanzaic; but they weren't very good, so they're not in the *Selected Poems*. Metrically I don't think I got into my stride until my book *Barbarians*.

GC: Why did you write there in particular forms?

DD: The title sequence is made up of poems about working class politics, so I used the form ironically; in other words I politicised it.

GC: Tell me about your fine poem in that book called 'The Musician.'

DD: When that man died in the village of Inchinnan, where I grew up, they found he had two fiddles; the one he played in the community hall, for Scottish country fiddle music; he was a single man, and when they emptied his house they found he'd a vast library of Beethoven, Bach and all the rest of it; that's what he played at home. It's really a poem about the hellish consequences of the demotic nature of Scottish culture. You have to be demotic and vernacular; you're not allowed to be Beethoven and Bach; you're only allowed to be Joe MacSoap, country fiddler.

GC: It's what we call in Scotland the 'I kent his faither' syndrome.

DD: Exactly. I grew up with it. It's still there, you know. Waiting for us all.

GC: Could that explain some of MacDiarmid's anger and his incredible arrogance at times?

DD: And his incredible boasting. His claim that he read 10,000 books in Langholm public library.

GC: It must have been ten times worse in Scotland when he was developing as a writer.

DD: It would have been. He was growing up in the shadow of J. M. Barrie's early stories, Crockett and MacLaren — the kailyard. So that led him to overstate the ambitions of high culture. Yet the thing I like about MacDiarmid is his high cultural arrogance. We could do with a bit more of that ... see Irvine Welsh off the scene. Norman MacCaig at readings used to say, 'I don't care if you understand this poem or not; what I am concerned about is that you hear it. Can you hear me at the back?' (Laughter).

GC: How do you feel about matters of accessibility? The New Formalists

emphasise that poetry should be accessible, and believe that's one of the ways of bringing a large audience back to poetry. In America the art has largely lost its audience outside the captive one in the universities. I don't think that holds true in Scotland.

DD: I don't think it holds true in Britain in general — especially when you consider the audiences that Norman MacCaig attracted, or that the West Indian poets attract, or Carol Ann Duffy, or Simon Armitage, and quite a number of other poets too, who're all very adept at public readings. Reading a poem aloud to an audience is gestural as much as precise. A poem can have an impact, but you can't expect an audience to understand all the nuances. (Assuming there are any.) Poetry for performance is making one point and it makes it or not. Nothing wrong with that. But if I was to read out a chunk of the long poem I've just finished, about the sinking of the Russian Fleet, it would go down like a lead brick; like the Russian Fleet, in fact (laughter). It's meant just to be read, although parts of it would be effective enough read aloud, I suppose.

GC: So there are page poems and performance poems?

DD: What I tell my students is there are three places where poems must happen and a poem must happen in these three places simultaneously for it to be a good poem. It happens between the ears, that's intelligence; behind the left nipple, heart and feeling; between the tongue and the teeth, the noise it makes. Somehow you've to get these three to work together. A poem just happening between the ears is a poem for the study, an academic poem; just behind the left nipple, and nowhere else, it's slop; and if it's just happening between tongue and teeth, you'd be as well learning a musical instrument. The reader has a right to expect these three things simultaneously.

GC: Can poetry be taught?

DD: You can teach what the poet should expect of his or her work and what the reader should expect.

GC: Should the reader expect accessibility?

DD: I think lots do. But the reader should expect to do some work too. It shouldn't be like a crossword puzzle, though.

GC: Should a poem be a self-contained universe, so that a reader doesn't necessarily have to bring any recondite knowledge to the poem? Should the terms for understanding a poem, even a difficult poem, be present within the poem?

DD: I'd go along with that to a certain extent.

GC: A friend of mine — a literary editor, no less, who usually reads novels, tried a book of poems by one of the younger Scottish poets. She was baffled by it. She thought it should have been published with footnotes to understand it. Is there a danger that poetry is going to be largely seen as a wee republic all of its own which has its own rules and laws, which, if you haven't studied poetry at University or whatever, you can't get inside; therefore it excludes the general reader, in a way that a novel doesn't do?

DD: I can see your point. I find it infuriating if a poet seems to know that he or she is cleverer than I am, but once you re-read (and maybe more than once) then if it's good, it can dawn on you what the poet's doing, and you realise that you've actually been informed by a genuinely new poem. A poet's cultural baggage and erudition can interfere with a poem. It could be a case, though, that it's not your baggage, or that the poetry's drawn from unfamiliar sources — if you think the poetry's worthwhile then you may well feel obliged to get to know its origins. Where any art can go wrong is when it gets too detached from its community. One of the strengths in Scotland, paradoxically, has come from this syndrome 'I kent your faither'. It keeps you vernacular so you don't get ideas above your station. On the other hand, I think it's a responsibility for a poet to have ideas above his or her station; otherwise poetry is not doing anything to extend the consciousness of a community. So some poetry can be challenging, some is just preaching to the converted. I don't find the latter sort terribly interesting. I think poetry is much more like poetry when it is challenging. I think poetry readings on the whole are a good thing but if there's a tendency for them to become the main channel of communication it can become a bad thing, limiting and too dependent on performance.

GC: MacDiarmid fought against 'I kent your faither-ism' all his life. Did you ever meet him?

DD: I heard MacDiarmid read in the early sixties; he gave a reading to the Scottish County Libraries Circle, and I asked a question. I don't think he heard the question, because he was deafish. And I just got a strip torn off me; it was very disheartening. I thought it was a fairly intelligent question about his poetry.

GC: Can you remember what it was?

DD: I just remember the humiliation of the answer, which wasn't an answer to the question but was just a denunciation of anyone under the age of sixty. I've never had an intimate interest in MacDiarmid's poetry. I've always acknowledged him as a source of energy. In a sense, he was a father figure. But the only way to survive with MacDiarmid is to be a prodigal son.

GC: MacDiarmid was a great audio-didact, and you yourself have written about the relative hardship of your time in Hull with your first wife, 'mad for an education'. A poem of yours such as 'The Student' is about the difficulties of auto-didacticism; having to fight against circumstances to educate oneself. Are those early days where you get that interest from?

DD: Not quite so autobiographical as that. I became interested because I was working in Hull for the Workers Educational Association; being the kind of person I am, and working for an organisation like that, I wanted to find out more about it. This led me into reading about the Mechanics Institutes in the West of Scotland, and how they were very active in Paisley, Renfrew, Greenock and round about at the time of the so-called Scottish Uprising of 1820, which happened in the aftermath of the Peterloo Massacre.

GC: You've often shown sympathies in your poems to those who have aspirations beyond the possibilities Society allows them.

DD: Well, I came across a lot of that in my boyhood. People in the village where I grew up, who obviously were much more intelligent than their employment suggested; my father, to say nothing of lots of our neighbours, and who never had an opportunity; my uncles and my aunts and my mother were obviously of an intelligence which would have led them to university had they been young in the 1990s. My generation were all beneficiaries of the 1944 Education act which made it possible for us to stay on at school after the age of 14; before that it was impossible, unless your parents had the money; or unless a boy or a girl was tremendously gifted, identified as such, and given a scholarship to go on to a Grammar School, it didn't happen for them. It's a myth in Scotland to think that it did because it didn't. There was a lot of waste before the 1944 Education Act; I've always been aware of that. My politics are Left; I haven't changed in that. I don't support the New Labour Party. They make me sick. Those poems have a lot to do with my family background. I had uncles who used to lean on the mantelpiece and say, 'There'll be no Socialism in Scotland except on the bayonets of the Red Army'. Which would be hooted down because we weren't communist, but the old fashioned Labour Party. I once took Don Paterson and Robert Crawford to Perth Prison, to read to the inmates; I think they both were dumbfounded by the intelligence of the questioning. These guys had read the novels of Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, and you name it, in detail; they were in for a really serious literary session. One of the things that's always impressed me about Scotland is the amount of intelligence around; and much of it's wasted, because of this demotic thing that says 'going to University is for snobs and posh people but not for me.' If they went to University they'd soon get rid of the snobs and posh people; simply talk them out of existence.

GC: How important a figure is Edwin Muir to you?

DD: Quite important.

GC: Do you agree with Muir in *Scott and Scotland* as far as the future of Scots is concerned?

DD: I think he exaggerated his case. The commission was to write a polemical, controversial book. Of course, Hugh MacDiarmid was behind the series in which the book appeared. So Edwin Muir followed his brief and ended up being called the leader of the White Mouse Faction in Scottish Literature for his troubles. MacDiarmid significantly did not finish the book he was writing, or at least it never appeared, though Alan Riach told me that the manuscript had been discovered and was in the National Library of Scotland; it would be very good for it to be published. It apparently became enormously long, so he transcended the brief which he had given to others. Eric Linklater wrote a very good book in that series called *The Lion and the Unicorn*, about Scotland's relation to England which again is very polemical, and led Eric Linklater to overstate his pro-Scottishness. If you look at the series, all these books overstate their case, and

were obviously following the brief MacDiarmid gave them as to the nature of the series. Edwin Muir's book is a very successful polemic, inasmuch as we're still talking about it 60 years later.

GC: MacDiarmid never forgave him for it.

DD: MacDiarmid set him up, in my opinion.

GC: You think? Why, if he set him up to do that, would he fall out so unforgiveably with him?

DD: MacDiarmid had to get rid of Edwin Muir one way or the other. Otherwise there would be two people on the platform. You must remember that MacDiarmid went through a tremendous nervous breakdown in the mid 1930s. If you've seen those photographs of MacDiarmid in his kilt and Scottish outfit in Princes Street Gardens, taken I think by Helen Cruickshank, in Gordon Wright's pictorial biography — a very remarkable book — my God, there was somebody who'd gone off his rocker. There's very little illumination cast on that period of MacDiarmid's life in the late Alan Bold's biography, of which otherwise I think very highly. The mental hospital in Perth won't allow access to MacDiarmid's medical records for that time. I think it's important that we do get access to these medical records because he's such an important figure in Scottish culture. We need to know what went wrong before more people are misled by his influence, in my opinion. He was a bizarre man.

GC: But didn't he praise Edwin Muir as being the most significant critic in Scotland?

DD: Throughout the 1920s. But I've got a soft spot for Edwin Muir. He worked in Renfrew, and I went to school in Renfrew for a while, and I had a part time job once in Lobnitz's shipyard, just after I left school, before I went into the library; I thought I was going to be an odd job man, but it turned out I was a scout for the card games, to alert them when the gaffer was coming ... Lobnitz's built specialised ships like tugs and icebreakers. Edwin Muir worked there, as a clerk. I didn't find that out until afterwards. Otherwise I'd have loved to have gone and had a look at the ledgers. Some of them for a couple of years would have been in Edwin Muir's handwriting. So I have a soft spot for Edwin Muir. On the other hand I agree with Seamus Heaney, who gave a lecture now published in *Verse* about Muir's poetry. He thinks there's something wooden and predictable about his versification. I think that's fair. On the other hand, Muir was a very good mythmaker. I've always liked Muir without knowing quite why. I wrote an essay on Muir about Nationalism and Socialism which appeared in *Radical Scotland* when James Robertson edited it. A lot of Edwin Muir's incidental journalism and letters haven't been published. Peter Butter's edition of the letters really ought to have been a bigger book. Muir's only been written about by enthusiasts. He hasn't been tackled by a critic prepared to discard some of the softer elements of his reputation. Also he detached himself from Nationalism and his Socialism became Christianised, around the time he was writing *Scott and Scotland*; these were really the things that MacDiarmid couldn't forgive him for. Muir realised

that he wasn't really a Scot; he was Norse. George Mackay Brown took that from him.

GC: Alan Riach said in a letter that "MacDiarmid was the most important thing to happen in Scotland since 1707."

DD: Well, MacDiarmid was the most important thing to happen in Scotland since 1707 for Alan Riach, because Alan Riach makes his living from MacDiarmid. If someone in another walk of life was to talk about chocolate biscuits in that respect simply because he was a manufacturer of chocolate biscuits, we'd laugh at him, but because he's talking about Hugh MacDiarmid, some stupid people might take him seriously. I get angry about this — and I don't get angry very often, and when I get angry it's not very spectacular — but if a man who was a Communist and a Fascist and flirted with Nazism was the most important thing to happen in Scotland since 1707 and people really believe that, then God help us. What the Scottish Parliament has to do through its various agencies is try and eradicate the psychology which makes it possible to say that, by giving us confidence in the present, so we don't have to look back to an icon like Hugh MacDiarmid.

GC: Have you ever been tempted to write in Scots?

DD: No. Some of the dialogue in my short stories and radio and TV plays is written in the ways that people speak; my English is the way I speak, that is, in a Scottish accent. I find it very difficult to justify writing in any other tongue. If I felt like it I could write in French, but I don't. I've got quite a large Scots vocabulary, and I'm a scholar of Middle Scots, albeit not a very good one. I can reflect the way people speak in fiction and drama, and if I had to do it in a poem I would, but I've no inclination to write a poem in Scots. I'm a philologist, that's my profession, but to me Scots is a dead language; I'd sooner write in Gaelic, but I don't know it well enough.

GC: What do you think of literary publishing in Scotland?

DD: As Randall Jarrell said of Ezra Pound's versification, 'Ezra Pound's versification is very interesting; there isn't any.' Well, I suppose there's Canongate, they've done some good things, and Polygon have done good things; but as Giles Gordon wrote recently, publishing in Scotland is so under-capitalised that if a publisher has success they can't keep the author.

GC: What about the small magazine scene in Scotland?

DD: Well, it strikes me that all the worst ones get all the money. The best ones get what's left over. That's simply due to habit.

GC: A few years ago I interviewed Iain Crichton Smith. He felt that a Scottish poet had to be published in English literary magazines to establish any sort of reputation. It's as if Scotland in terms of its little magazines is regarded by its most established writers as mediocre. Will that situation in Scotland improve now that we have our own parliament?

DD: It really ought to. Someone should have the confidence to invest in publishing in Scotland.

GC: One of the things that holds *The Dark Horse* back is that it's underfunded. One can't get it above a certain level.

DD: You know MacDiarmid's poem about the latest Turkish epic selling like hot cakes? Let's not kid ourselves, that's not going to happen. But it would be nice if there was a decent literary magazine actually on sale in the bookstalls; if you could get it in Waverley Station, in the newsagent, and you weren't dependent on subscriptions, but there was sufficient interest in a monthly magazine to actually have it bought regularly. People put the emphasis on publishing original work rather than reviews and criticism. Personally I think a magazine has to be a blend of both. We need a literary magazine that actually discusses literature.

GC: Will the new Scottish Parliament make a difference to how Scottish poetry is viewed?

DD: I hope the Scottish Parliament will make a difference. But the difference it makes to Scottish poetry is hardly the most important thing about a Scottish Parliament; there are more important things than Scottish poetry. This is something that people who are involved with poetry forget, that poetry is not the most important thing in the world. It's a significant aspect of our culture, and that's it.

GC: What is the most important thing in Scotland?

DD: What the Scottish Parliament has to do over the next few years is instil the country with confidence, particularly in its own institutions, and that they are capable of running their own affairs. Once that happens, then Scottish publishing for example — to take a relatively minor example of what's at stake — may well attract the capital that's necessary for it to become properly economical, not constantly having to sell its authors to English publishing houses.

GC: Could the Scottish Parliament intensify negative aspects of Scotland's inherent Nationalism?

DD: On the whole I think Nationalism has been a very positive force in Scotland over the last two or three decades. The negative aspects of Scottish Nationalism are a kind of aggressive complacency, that sort of boasting; but that's an expression of insecurity, I think, of a lack of confidence. With the existence of a Parliament I would expect that to be eroded and dwindle away.

GC: Louis MacNeice said that 'this middle stretch is difficult for poets'. You're now fifty-six. How are you finding it?

DD: One thing I find is that there are relatively few poets of my generation around. Stewart Conn has just published his new *Selected Poems*. That's pretty impressive I think. One reason I haven't published much recently reminds me of something Larkin said to me. I remember quite a lot of what he said, because he was wise in his conversation. I said to him, 'You don't seem to have written anything for ages; what's happening?' 'You can't write a poem unless you've a poem to write. I've been trying to write one but can't. There's nothing worse before you go to bed at night after three hours writing than to feel that you've

spent the last three hours engaged in self-parody.’ I think I was feeling that. I rather think that’s what MacNeice meant by the difficulty of the middle stretch. On the other hand, I seem to have written quite a lot over the past few years.

GC: So do you hope for what John Berryman called ‘that mysterious late excellence / which is the crown of our trials / and our last bride’?

DD: Berryman didn’t really give himself much chance. I’ve got this funny feeling, you know, that I’ve done my poetry, written my poetry; been there, done that, don’t want to go back. I think we’ll see what happens to my two books to be published next year.

GC: Could you finish by telling us a little about them?

DD: ‘The Donkey’s Ears’ is a long poem, about 170 pages, stanzaic, and rhyming, about the cruise of the Russian Fleet in 1904-05, which was destroyed by the Japanese Navy at Tsushima — Tsushima translates as ‘The Donkey’s Ears’. It’s spoken by one Politovsky who was the Flag Engineer on the Russian flagship. I began it in 1982, and left off it until 1997. The conditions of its composition will be given in a Note to the book, which will be published next May. The second book is a collection of shorter poems (although some go over the page two or four times), and it’s called *The Year’s Afternoon*. It will appear next autumn. Having served a stint of some five years as Head of the School of English at St Andrews, and as Director of the St Andrews Scottish Studies Institute, I notice that almost all of these two books were written at night. So they could come across as nocturnal. Bits and pieces, though, were written during afternoons when I was in my office and supposed to be doing other things, but my time and phone calls were ‘protected’ by obliging and delightfully helpful secretaries. Some lines were even jotted down during meetings of such monstrous if also necessary occasions as those of Staff Council, Faculty Planning Committee, Academic Council, and Senatus Academicus, to say nothing of the Clerical Regrading Appeals Committee, or the Special Lectureships Committee, and this, and that. When I stop jotting notes and lines on napkins at academic dinners etcetera, then that’s when I’ll know I’m finished.

But still, and all, “Oh my love is like a red, red rose ...”