

## Richie McCaffery



### *'Among the Buiks'*

WRITING THIS FEELS LIKE I AM TAKING PART in a therapeutic programme designed to cure me of my bibliomania and the first step is to admit my addiction. In my mid-teens I had been reading a lot of Thom Gunn's poetry. On a dreary, rainy trip to Robin Hood's Bay in Yorkshire one day on a family holiday, I was rootling round the now defunct Old Chapel Bookshop when I found a small, sickly-yellow volume. Inside, on the beautiful letterpress title-page it read: *Fighting Terms / Poems by Thom Gunn / Fantasy Press, Oxford / 1954*. I knew this was Gunn's first full collection. I suspected it might have a value exceeding its £2.50 asking price. I bought the book because I loved Gunn's poetry; only afterwards did I discover it was one of about 200 copies of the uncorrected first printing and probably worth forty times what I paid for it.

I still own that book. The real frisson of its discovery was not its value, but that I now owned the rare first book by one of my favourite poets, something that only a hundred people could boast, with the remaining hundred copies scattered in libraries across the world. I am interested in the market value of poetry books mainly because it shows me one, albeit very problematic, way in which poetry is prized in a world that often overlooks or undervalues it. Market value in itself is not a very useful gauge of literary merit, however. For example, I own a copy of the Scottish poet Ian Abbot's only collection *Avoiding the Gods*. Signed by Abbot to Angus Calder, monetarily speaking this book is worth little more than the £2.99 I paid for it in *Oxfam*. It is one of the most treasured books in my collection: I've never seen another signed copy and Abbot died only months after its publication.

Julian Barnes has written about the fetishisation of books in his *Guardian* article, 'My Life as a Bibliophile', on book-collecting. One of my poet-friends refuses to get any of their books signed, believing that a signature commodifies a book as a collector's item. Having recently read Dennis O'Driscoll's essay-cum-memoir collection *The Outnumbered Poet*, I was pleased to find that O'Driscoll was a poetry autograph hunter much like me, often using a book-signing as a means to engage some of the poets he admired in conversation—or not, as the case seems to have been with the rather thrawn William Empson.

Often a good conversation starter with a poet you admire at a reading or festival is a rare copy of one of their early books. At Ledbury I gingerly approached Robin Robertson, then in full flow commanding a group of rapt fans. After a couple of awkward minutes of hovering at his shoulder and waiting for the right moment he turned in frustration to look at me, but before he could even bark 'What do you want?' I held up my copy of his first pamphlet *Camera Obscura*. His face smoothed into a picture of warm surprise and benevolence. We talked about the book and its composition for the next five minutes, with Robertson recounting how it had been

a year or two since he'd last been asked to sign a copy. He was also horrified to hear I'd bought mine in a charity bookshop for less than the price of a pint of beer.

At StAnza I first approached John Glenday to sign my copy of *The Apple Ghost*. Again the novelty and relative rarity of the book ensured a good conversation. Inspecting my copy, Glenday said that it was exactly as he liked to see it, without any sign of ever having been read and without the usual divot on the front cover where it had been used to prop up a wonky table! Not all poets like being presented with copies of early books, however. Alan Riach has a story of Norman MacCaig refusing to sign a copy of *Far Cry* (containing work in his New Apocalyptic phase), a book which, like Graham Greene's *Babbling April*, was violently disowned by the older writer. After he became a priest, one-time Decadent poet John Gray is said to have bought up copies of his collection *Silverpoints* (1893) to burn, and MacCaig was also known to destroy copies of his early works. He offered Riach £10 to buy the book on the spot. Riach refused, claiming that 'it isn't worth that much, Norman'. Having a book signed can also mean that it is forever linked to you, which is not always desirable. I have frequently found a poetry book I've wanted only to discover the title page has been ripped out, presumably to hide the identity of the original recipient. I read many more poetry books than I can retain on my already parlous shelves, so it is a fear that a warm dedication in a book I've jettisoned might come back to haunt me.

I have never made money from selling rare poetry volumes. I have been known to trade in the odd rare novel or non-fiction book to fund my poetry purchases. These include the first edition of Sebastian Faulks's *Birdsong*, bought in Durham for £4 and sold for £180, and an early edition of the first English translation by Engels of Marx's *Das Kapital*, bought for £1 in St Andrews and sold in Oxford (of all places!) for £300. I am an unusual collector: I am not fastidious at all about the condition of the books I buy. The real lifeblood of my collecting is dedications and associations. Often the most unprepossessing book hides a remarkable history. One recent example was not a poetry book, but a copy of Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* signed 'To Topsy with love from Lytton'. Topsy, it transpires, was the wife of F. L. Lucas, thus connecting the book quite firmly to the Bloomsbury circle. One of my most prized poetry association copies is a stained and dog-eared copy of Burns Singer's *The Love of Orpheus* signed as follows to the poet Sydney Goodsir Smith:

For Slugabed, the auld sinner  
from Singer, the beginner.

Another is my copy of Edwin Muir's *Themes on a Time Variation* signed to the composer Francis George Scott: 'For F G Scott / from the land of the forgotten / Edwin Muir'. When I briefly lived in Winchester in Hampshire I managed to find a copy of Lionel Johnson's *Poems* that had belonged to someone who had been a correspondent and a friend of Johnson's when both attended Winchester College. This level of research would not be feasible for the bookseller with hundreds of books to price, but it is thrilling for the buyer with more time on their hands. Inscriptions tell their own stories, from the affectionate examples in books gifted by John Tonge to William Soutar, or in a copy of Douglas Young's *The Burdies*

signed 'il miglior fabbro Sydney Goodsir Smith from Douglas Young', to my tatty copy of Norman MacCaig's *Surroundings*, ex-libris Mark Ogle (the Edinburgh poet). On the blank endpapers it contains an abandoned draft/notes of a poem by Ogle from the late 1960s:

Deep in the silent galaxies  
powered by the fierce pistons of mind  
flowing through the sweat stretched veins,  
this smothering cloak of knowing  
hovers behind the eyes, hesitates,  
then spills over  
houses, trees, country, city, sky.

Though I try to control my collecting and make it more specific, it is a futile undertaking. I do not collect one particular poet so much as a whole generation or scene. Even then, my collecting isn't limited to the books themselves, but includes the things I find in books: ex-libris plates, calling cards, postcards and letters. I have letters from Hugh MacDiarmid, G. S. Fraser, Stuart MacGregor, George Campbell Hay. I have books once belonging to Naomi Mitchison, Compton Mackenzie and Siegfried Sassoon. I find it hard to resist what I see as a bargain, which is why I own a small portion of Alastair Mackie's, Alexander Scott's, Sydney Goodsir Smith's and Angus Calder's libraries. These books came up for sale in local charity shops or bookshops in Edinburgh or Glasgow; I couldn't let them pass me by. I recently bought a copy of Tess Gallagher's first collection *Instructions to the Double* and discovered it belonged to the Edinburgh academic Susan Manning, who died in 2013. This shows just how necrophagous collecting old books can be. It makes me see the inscription in my copy of Tess Gallagher's *Dear Ghosts* in a more sober light: 'for Richie / as you ransack your own ghost closets / Tess'.

In the age of Amazon and the bookseller who derives much of their knowledge from the internet, truffle-hunting for rare books is something of a dying art. There are a few places in Scotland that I would cite as the last bastions of the 'gentleman/lady' bookseller, whose knowledge is based on years in the trade and a passion for their stock, not the neurotic fear that they might let a valuable book slip through their hands. Deserving of particular praise are Bill Anderson of Bouquiniste Books, St Andrews; Jennie Renton and Richard Browne of Main Point Books, Edinburgh; and Sally Evans and Ian King of King's Bookshop, Callander. These shops are glowing examples of the best of the book-trade; in them, good conversation, rare books and bargainous discoveries are still possible. Jennie Renton receives my highest honour for services to my book collection for having sourced for me an excellent but very affordable copy of the 1943 William MacLellan first edition of Sorley MacLean's *Dain do Eimhir*—previously known as my 'snark'. My latest 'snark', which I suspect will remain that way for years to come, is the first edition of Hugh MacDiarmid's first book, the self-published 1923 *Annals of the Five Senses*. A copy recently sold at Lyon and Turnbull in Edinburgh for £275 before commission: well out of my league. I should add that I am a collector who firmly operates on a beer (even shandy) wallet, despite occasionally having a taste for champagne. The sale of Bruce Ritchie's world-class collection of literature at Lyon and

Turnbull in 2013 shows what is possible for the canner collector who might have more knowledge and discernment than money to spend.

Since so much of the poetry I read is about mortality, these spots of time recorded in books act as *memento mori*: powerful reminders of both the authors and past generations of readers of poetry. Sometimes, like an impressive heraldic family tree, the history of a book is written in its front-endpapers. The poet Alexander Hutchison recently dedicated a copy of a Hugh MacDiarmid pamphlet to me which had been given to him by Duncan Glen in the 1980s; Glen in turn had originally had it signed by MacDiarmid himself in the 1960s. I have still to come down from the thrill of finding a drunkenly signed copy of W. S. Graham's *Collected Poems*, containing a letter from Nessie Dunsmuir (the poet's widow) on the topic of Graham's public readings and poor health. The inscription was to the Dundee University academic Dr. Hilda Spear:

To Hilda, from W S Graham.  
Up to read at your wee school.  
I clasp you to my bosom.

It might well be misguided to attach such personal value to these books. After all, Julian Barnes says that his own bibliomania was at heart a type of misdirected neediness. In the 2003 documentary 'Keep Me in Your Heart', American singer/songwriter Warren Zevon is rushing to record his final album before his death from lung cancer. At some point in the film, an interviewer remarks on Zevon's book-collecting; Zevon paraphrases Rilke, saying that we are not just buying the book, we are buying into the belief that we'll have the time to finish it. My books offer me a tangible link back to the poets I read and most enjoy, and whom, unlike O'Driscoll, I was often not able to meet. Part of the joy is in the detective work and resultant alternative narratives produced in figuring out who all these people were and how they knew each other. I remain an inveterate collector, with this particular W. S. Graham book clasped firmly to my bosom.

Note: *Since writing this article, Richie McCaffery has found a copy of his 'snark'—Annals of the Five Senses. Bought for roughly 10% of the hammer price of the Lyon and Turnbull copy, Richie's copy is ex-libris journalist Robert 'Bob' Brown.*