

THE BREVITY OF LITERARY STANDING: as Alasdair Macrae points out in his essay-review on the late, and to my mind, great Iain Crichton Smith, a poetic reputation can these days fade rapidly when the poet no longer exists as a living presence. There are exceptions, of course: I've just returned from Orkney, my first visit to the islands since the day of George Mackay Brown's funeral in April 1996; there, George still feels very much a living part of the place—or a living absence—though his wider fame is possibly more for his fiction and other writings than for his poetry. The interest stirred up by Ron Ferguson's recent biographical accounting, *The Wound and the Gift*, demonstrates the reading public's depth of engagement with the Orkney writer. Would there be similar interest in a biography of Iain? He is, surely, equally a major writer—and in fiction, too: read his breathtaking short story 'Murdo' if you doubt it—and one whose work issued from a far less settled world view owing to his own island childhood and the choices he made as a result. This, you could say, makes him much more typical of a 'modern' Western sensibility: provisional, uncertain, agnostic and self-reliant. And what of Hugh MacDiarmid? He once remarked that, in Burns, Scotland had a great popular poet; it was his, MacDiarmid's, ambition to be Scotland's great *unpopular* poet. It seems he has thoroughly fulfilled this ambition. One gets little sense of him at present in the air in Scotland, nor, either, of those other related figures, Robert Garioch and Sydney Goodsir Smith.

It's to be seen how Edwin Morgan's poetry—the poet died just over a year ago—will fare. The poet was in the news recently, but not for his work. He left over £2,000,000 in his will, which caused journalistic mutterings that this socially-minded poet had been, lifelong, a secret venture capitalist. But no; the bulk of it was a portfolio of investments left to him by his parents. Under the terms of Morgan's will around half of it was donated to the Scottish National Party. Most of the remainder is, remarkably, for the establishment of an annual prize to publish the work of a Scottish poet under the age of thirty, though I gather 'Scottish' will be interpreted generously: if you live here, or if your granny, say, was Scottish, you can be considered so. The dearth of gifted young poets here, at least in terms of winning England-based literary prizes, has been something of a truism for the past fifteen years. Three interesting Scottish poets still in their twenties appear in this issue: Claire Askew, Richie McCaffery and Niall Campbell. It will be fascinating to see if the spin-off from EM's bequest kick-starts a new, age-related poetry renaissance north of the border; if money can be the handservant of the art and not, as one can sometimes think in more cynical moments, its master.