

GERRY CAMBRIDGE

*The Clear Vision of Norman MacCaig*

WHEN HE DIED AT THE AGE OF 85 IN 1996—a year that also took Sorley MacLean and George Mackay Brown—Norman MacCaig was something of an institution in Scotland. He had been one of the most prominent poets associated with the “Scottish Renaissance” of the 1950s and ’60s, focused mainly on Edinburgh, and almost entirely male—though he differed from such contemporaries as MacDiarmid and Garioch in writing only in English. It was a poetic culture of whisky drinking, chain smoking, vituperation, literary spats and radicalised Socialist politics, a context in which MacCaig was renowned for his acerbity. He once called another poet known for his nationalistic pulp-teering—not MacDiarmid—to his face, “a palpating marshmallow.” When I was first coming to grips with Scottish poetry quarter of a century ago, published interviews with MacCaig confirmed, at least, his discomfiting unpredictability; the persona was schoolmasterly, stern and intimidating. The several readings of MacCaig’s I attended—he was one of the most sought-after readers in Scotland—bore this out. At one such in Irvine, Ayrshire, around 1984, he listened with an unconcealed mix of exasperation, incredulity and disdain to the hyperbolic encomium of the MC, all the while smoking fiercely and scrutinising the audience. He was a practised reader and, with his sculpted features—his bone structure was extraordinary—and white wisps of flyaway hair, an impressive presence. His voice, particularly as he aged, was a kind of aural rare malt, smoky and grained; even now, twenty years later, it echoes behind particular poems when I read them, as it doubtless does for many others. His readings and his many school visits played a part in his popularity, in a culture in which art is almost invariably linked, understandably, to personality. MacCaig was very much a personality, like most of his eminent poetic contemporaries; each emerges from the drab plain of uniformity like a Suilven or a Stac Pollaidh—the astonishing mountains that MacCaig loved in north-west Sutherland. George Mackay Brown once lamented the loss of individuality in contemporary culture; this levelling seems true of the poetry subculture too. Whether this is an impression without foundation because one is part of it, the years will show. In a climate in which the arts have to some degree become the maidservant of social improvement and cohesion, poetry seems, paradoxically—in a culture where almost anything goes—respectable. It has largely lost its old scrawny—and not to be romanticised— independence. It exists now in a context of prizes, residencies, hype and awards. . .

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