

PS

edited by Raymond Friel and Richard Price

number 2

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Sounds

Richard Price

The response to the first issue of *PS* has been exceptional. All copies have gone, and they went quickly. On the strength of this, the editors haven't doubled the print-run or negotiated till-point distribution rights with the publishers of *Hello*, but we have decided to keep on with the documentation of pleasurable and/or thought-provoking things. In this issue that means sounds: the melodic but lyrically surprising band Belle and Sebastian; Fred Hunter's account of recording activities in the 1960s (with its strong connections to the world of Migrant, discussed in our first issue), and the strange Latinate textures of Joseph Macleod. There is a curious gap in this – a piece on sound poetry itself, and so, for a later issue, the invitation goes out for a piece perhaps recounting a history of sound poetry in England, Wales, and Scotland since the 60s, or, perhaps more challenging, a piece on where sound poetry is now.

A digital version of *PS* will appear in due course on the poetrymagazines.org.uk site. My *An Information* column has already started to appear at www.hydrohotel.net, where future versions will be collected, too.

Waking a Lost Sound: Joseph Macleod

Andrew Duncan

In the 1930 volume of *Poetry (Chicago)* which contains the original Objectivist anthology is an essay by Basil Bunting on modern British poetry which praises Joseph Macleod (1903-84) to the skies. If not for this, the name of Macleod would still be buried in obscurity. Everyone, in the 1970s, interested in the sources of the new avant-garde, went back to that anthology; no-one could resist reading what Bunting had to say. And so people began to search for Macleod's rare and untraceable books. And so, the release is imminent of *Cyclic Serial Zeniths from the Flux*, the selected poems of Joseph Macleod, which everyone will soon be familiar with. It has a long fact-bulging introduction (by me), so this note will just deal with marginal or obscure aspects of the Macleod Story.

I have a recurring anxiety dream in which I lose control of my wordprocessor and find myself down on the lawn gazing longingly up at the window where I can see a radge/ hypercool culturato helming the next big thing. And so, did I select the right Macleod poems for reissue? A week spent in the National Library of Scotland back in January 2001 revealed that Macleod was one of the most prolific poets of the 20th century. I put together a package of 128 pages because it seemed affordable. There must be another 800 pages for someone to dig up. Why did I only pick one book from *The Ecliptic* rather than the whole thing? *We, the River*, a documentary-epic poem from about 1937, has never been printed. I really liked it, although it's unfinished and the impetus hardly sustains the whole length of something which sets out to explain the whole agricultural economy of Huntingdonshire. All I can say is that the typescripts are all in the National Library. Among many very Scottish things.

Foray of Centaurs and *The Ecliptic* are two book-length poems which form a discrete phase in the poet's work. *The Ecliptic* was written in 1928 and published in 1930, at the same time and in the same livery as Auden's *Poems*, also from Faber. Faber, inexplicably, turned down *Foray of Centaurs* (composed 1930) and went with the Wyster. Macleod rewrote *Foray* in 1936 and this is the only version we now have. By 1936, everything had changed.

I couldn't work out the significance of the geometry in *Foray* – I can register it at the level of a visual motif recurring in a film, but I can't attach a discursive meaning to it.

The figures of the Centaurs' dance in Canto I are described with a precision which suggests their physical existence prior to the poem. The bean shape of the dance echoes the "cotyledon" seed from which the Centaurs are held to grow. How does this vegetable reproduction tally with the symbolism of the Centaurs as dynamos of sexual energy? I think 'cotyledon' may include a sonic echo of 'cotillion'. However, the "incomplete circle" may be more significant, because it recurs throughout the poem. The circle motif may relate to the circuit of the year drawn by the sun – and there is a strand of sun imagery about fertility which seems central to the poem, as an abiding energy in contrast to the temporary and unnatural repressed state of the Lapiths. The odd fire religion which the Lapiths observe is also related to this. (The seasonal fires on Mount Pelion may symbolise the fire of the sun and be lit at the solstice.)

Macleod was a theatre producer in the early 1930s and had the faculty of visualising complex motion. *Foray* has this starting point of the writer imagining intricate and highly choreographed movement and then using daring language to describe it. This is why it is difficult (but repays close reading). The poetry starts from something already highly complicated, artificial, charged with meaning. It really takes off when describing dance and architecture. We could logically set out on a study of it by studying art history. Instantly we would realise that these two early poems have an affinity for the ballets russes and for everything associated with them. They belong to a sensibility which withdrew with the arrival of the Depression, which closed down the avant garde and oriented everyone, not least Macleod, towards social action and so towards documentary and ideology. Any reconstruction of the ballets russes today is likely to consult the writings of Adrian Stokes, who had the advantage of seeing the productions (at least those of the 1920s) and of mixing socially with the company. Stokes was at school with Macleod and was a lifelong friend. *Foray* is partly a series of dances.

The poetic milieu in which the two long poems belong is perfectly reconstructed by Sydney Bolt's 1967 anthology *Poetry of the 1920s*. It is unfortunate that he does not include *The Ecliptic*. There is an essay where Macleod identifies his influences as Aldington, Lawrence, and WJ Turner. Examination of the section where Bolt collects poems by these three will shed all kinds of light on the style of *The Ecliptic* and *Foray*. It also includes Herbert Read - who, as reader for

Faber, rejected *Foray*. We may reflect that Turner was a ballet critic and Read an art critic (Sacheverell Sitwell, bizarrely omitted by Bolt, wrote art history as well as poetry). Fitting Macleod into this context gives us little in the way of restrictions - it was a moment when poets could use any material and make the most dizzying jumps of association. It was also a moment when poetry was dominated by visual art - which in fact offered a shared culture as a foundation for these jumps, unit structures of a liberated awareness.

Take these passages:

There is yellow lightning among the trees
Impassible foliage-bearers, dense dreams
Of running water - itself so clear, transparent!
Uplifted trunks of a myriad buried elephants
Petrified into solid stone
Buried in clear yellow glass;
Resting upon other layers of elephants
Their trunks turned downwards in the solid rock
Pre-historic tree-ferns!

How flimsy the lighting seems,
The wavering of a candle flame in polished steel -
So still the waters, the hills, and the vegetation;
The priest of white stone, the altar,
The crepe-hung Moon!

(W. J. Turner)

Our structures are of steel and glass
their subtle struts not obvious
we build with space in space
and by ingenuity produce
our aerial houses high towers
our winding stairs -
all is in light
above-board and ought
to win the approval of the masses
[...]
No need to multiply instances.
But we must reduce the area of glass:
we have avoided darkness
our structures are transparent -
only the skeleton visible and adamant
lies like a net embedded criss-cross.
This would fail as an ambush

therefore blacken the glass
fill in the mesh
with soil and cement
any opaque element
so that their eyes cannot penetrate
partitions or discover remote
repetitions of plane and space.

(Herbert Read)

The similarity to the idiom of early Macleod is obvious. We have to underline the structural liberty - the creation from intense concrete images and dizzying jumps of association of new worlds, ambiguous and disturbing. Around 1930 the set-up was quite close to allowing the poem to go anywhere the poet wanted it to go. All these poets saw an inexhaustible significance in geometry. The creation of simple yet primal shapes - or the isolation of structure-giving forms in the real world - was essential to their creative effort. And so we return to the broken circle:

Deliberately broken cycloid, bitten pediment,
correctly ovulated entablature
and hexastyle unpinned by utile dummy or urn:
the lawn's compaction and the tailored topiary,
salvias uniform in column of platoons,
the muted parterre quasi-semi-italianate:
these masses gather, these lines join
where apsed marquee lies anchored
within the balustrade,
and the wedding breakfast is spread, and metal peacocks
share mulberries with enamelled chinese pheasants.

(*Foray of Centaurs*)

I find this just as exciting as I found Bolt's anthology when I read it about 25 years ago. Two long poems develop religions based on energy cults and lead up to the New Romantics. These are *Fall of a Tower* by Francis Berry, 1943, and *Foray of Centaurs*, 1935. The marriage ceremony in *Foray* is bizarre and unfamiliar. We seem to see a cult of pure energy, without personal gods. However, it is very similar to the energy religion described in *Fall of a Tower*. I believe that the link is DH Lawrence - to be exact, the religious system he describes in 'Apocalypse', which says that the sun is a living being. (This

Melt under earth the long bronze horns:
Stuffed with ash the tired iron urns:
Death divides your rare dear flesh -
Kiss and keep me, kiss.

I do not find this in any of the ancient myths about the Centaurs. Berry can't have read the unpublished *Foray*. The regicide does not seem to connect to the rest of *Foray* particularly. In fact - I just can't work this out.

Auden began with *The Orators*, work heavily influenced by Lawrence (*Kangaroo*). A few years later, he led English poetry off towards documentary - which is also where Macleod went, switching from ballet to documentary film as the visual source of his poems. The overlap of Macleod and Auden is interesting. The portrait of sexual frustration in *Foray* is compelling, but the mythical liberation by the irruption of rough primeval urges is both lawrentian and deeply embarrassing. It was an editorial temptation to kind of leave that part out. It's fortunate that the whole story is so distantiated and defamiliarised.

It is puzzling how a bloc which venerates modernism leaves out all the native modernists and stops with Eliot and Pound. It seemed to me after reading Bolt that British poetry had gone seriously wrong in 1930, with thirty years of wandering in the wilderness before things got back in the groove in the 1960s, with a generation of students who had swallowed Read's doctrine that the Modernist Revolution was what *really* happened in the 20th century. The reconstruction left out dance, which didn't leave a record of recoverable objects - but in general Read was right, I think. You can get fed up with his Mottram-like partisan zeal, but if you look at the rival line represented by late Auden, Betjeman, John Fuller (Auden's editor), Fuller's friend James Fenton, and Glyn Maxwell, it seems like we've had 50 years of the wrong people in charge. While this background doesn't bring us a step closer to the youthful Macleod of 1928, it does help to explain why Macleod's name is unknown. I understand that James Keery has now extended his re-analysis of the poetic history of the 1940s back into the 1930s, still puzzling over silences in the official version.

Intersound and Stream Records **Fred Hunter**

In the early 1960s I was working in the tours division of the Central Office of Information (COI) escorting and, later, planning, visits for government-invited guests from around the world. COI also served British diplomatic missions abroad with press, radio, film and reference materials. When some Canadian women broadcasters visited I met the brother of one of them, an artist called Kelly Clark and, through him, met John and Helen Cassidy. After being loaned to the radio division one winter I determined to work in radio full time. Later, I produced a five-minute weekly topical tape called *What's New?* and *Science Today*, a fortnightly 15-minute feature programme using freelance interviewers to record and present the latest developments in British science, medicine and technology. I did the same with a 5-minute talk programme on motoring, making it a fortnightly feature programme, test-driving new cars and interviewing racing drivers and manufacturers. These were broadcast on English-speaking radio stations around the world. To assist me I could hire freelance staff, mainly from Commonwealth countries, as script writers, interviewers and producers. John Cassidy was one, a South African, recently married to an Australian artist and designer, Helen, living at 167 Oxford Gardens, W10.

Joining the Guild of Motoring Writers of Great Britain and Ireland, enabled me to borrow the latest cars from British manufacturers, which would later prove invaluable when recording poets around the country. On my daily drive into work from Putney, I used these cars to collect other colleagues en route to the COI in Lambeth. One of them stayed in the Wandsworth home of children's writer and broadcaster, Elisabeth Beresford and her husband, the tennis commentator and antique specialist, Max Robertson, who later would team up with me and the Cassidys, to create Stream Records. At the COI there were poets like Barry Cole (press) and Hubert Witheford (reference), from New Zealand, Desmond Seward (tours) a writer of coffee table books on French themes, artist F. Cromwell Cooke (tours) whose wife ran a gallery in Fulham, Guyanan novelist Wilson Harris (radio) (NOT to be confused with his English namesake the former editor of the *Spectator*), writer Ivan van Sertima (radio), now a professor of African Studies at Rutgers University in the USA, and Peter Greenaway (films), film-maker, to name a few.

Poetry

The first poetry reading I ever attended was at Cambridge, in 1957, when the American poet, Robert Frost received an honorary degree. Here I have to point out that Frost described his readings as "barding around saying poems in a conversational performance". At an English Speaking Union dinner for Frost that year T. S. Eliot described him as "perhaps the most eminent, the most distinguished Anglo-American poet now living" amending his view of twenty-two years earlier, in his London Letter to *The Dial*, that Frost's poetry, "specializing in New England torpor.... is unreadable". That was when I was first aware of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath who, I'm sure, attended the reading held in Plath's last year at Cambridge.

Sixties London seemed awash with poets reading: at the Partisan coffee bar or at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, then in Dover Street. Tony Godwin's Better Books was a poetry platform, run first by Bill Butler, until he went to the Unicorn bookshop in Brighton in 1964, by Barry Miles until 1965 then by Bob Cobbing. (Tony Godwin was later editorial director of Penguin Books). Bernard Stone's Turret Books, was another venue as well as pubs and places like the Arts Lab run by Jim Haynes from 1967-1969. Then there were the meetings of The Group, run after 1959, by Edward Lucie-Smith in his Sydney Street home. The Poetry Book Society, an offshoot of the Arts Council, held a series of readings at the Mermaid Theatre in Puddle Dock, in the City in 1961, and there were regular readings at the headquarters of the Poetry Society (no relation!) in Earls Court.

Then, in 1963, Patric Dickinson directed the Festival of Poetry at the Royal Court Theatre, Sloane Square, where the American poet, and publisher, Jonathan Williams, devised a programme of American poetry with Eric Mottram. Although not featured in the published programme for that particular evening, Robert Lowell read his poetry, and later I recorded some of his translations. Seats cost 7/6d, less than forty pence, and I attended five or six sessions. An old friend from Cambridge, Michael Ratcliffe, previewed that event in "Poets on Stage" in *The Sunday Times* of 7 July, 1963, and Naomi Lewis's review "Bards on the Boards" commented on how many attending "were young."

That year Dickinson also directed the tenth Stratford-upon-Avon Poetry Festival on eight Sundays from June 30 onwards, when Stevie Smith and C. Day Lewis were the only poets reading their own work. It was at one of Jonathan Williams's parties in Well Walk, Hampstead, that I first met William Burroughs who later kindly autographed my first Olympia Press editions of his *The Naked Lunch*, *The Soft Machine* and *The Ticket that Exploded*. Hampstead was also the venue of a recording we made of Allen Ginsberg and Alex Trocchi reading from Burroughs's *The Naked Lunch* at the St. Pancras Arts Festival, in 1967, now preserved for posterity on CD.

Early in March, 1963, the American poet William Carlos Williams died and Jonathan Williams organised a reading at the American Embassy and commandeered one of its pamphlets as a Jargon Press "special" to commemorate the event. As Jonathan had long known Gael Turnbull, founder of the magazine *Migrant*, it's most likely that I met his friend, and co-editor, Michael Shayer around this time and ventured forth with him in one of my press cars to attend a poetry reading in East Anglia. Soon after that Michael asked me to publish a small run of photocopied, typed and handwritten, pages, of a triple stapled pamphlet of *Poems from an Island*, under the COItus Press logo. Later I did the same for his friend, Roy Fisher's, *The Ship's Orchestra*. The first poet I recorded was T. S. Eliot's last public speech, in 1964, (before his death in January, 1965), when George MacBeth and Christopher Middleton were awarded the first Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prizes for 1964 at the first World Book Fair in the Earls Court exhibition hall (available on CD). 1965 saw us recording the Symposium on Education, Automation and Creativity organised by the artist, poet and teacher Melville Hardiment which attracted author B. S. Johnson, poets Edward Lucie-Smith and Eric Mottram and playwright Arnold Wesker, but only a twenty-two page transcript survives.

In retrospect that London art/poetry scene appears amazingly open and fresh: you could pack the Albert Hall, at a week's notice, for the first International Poetry Incarnation in June, 1965, which Mike Horovitz and Alex Trocchi forced into being, with Jeff Nuttall and John Latham notoriously painted blue all over; Horovitz's Live New Departures group read to jazz accompaniment; Bob Cobbing produced his sound poems and his Writers Forum poets, to name a few. In Nottingham there was Stuart Mills' Trent bookshop or, in Newcastle, Tom Pickard's Morden Tower Book Room. You could hear avant-

garde music by Stockhausen at the Commonwealth Institute in Kensington High Street while at the Whitechapel gallery, under Bryan Robertson, you could see contemporary American and international artists.

Indica gallery/bookshop, in Mason's Yard, run by Barry Miles, was another centre of activity, with the bookshop moving in 1966 to Southampton Row where the International Times was published and Stuart and Deirdre Montgomery had a first-floor flat. There they founded the Fulcrum Press, from 1964 to 1973, publishing first, Keith Owen, then Basil Bunting's *Loquitur*, in 1965, with the cover designed by Richard Hamilton, and other poets from around the world. To maintain sales of Fulcrum books Stuart once said he covered "every major town three times a year" packing his car full of books when he went on poetry readings. About that time the Cassidys lived at 167 Oxford Gardens, W10, and they'd meet people like Yoko Ono at friends (possibly John and Barbara Latham) and Rudy Nureyev, the Russian ballet dancer, at a party as he lived a block or two away from them. So far as they were concerned he was a great dancer but just another person – as was Yoko. Helen talked to Jimi Hendrix in Biba's shop in South Kensington just hours before his death. He wasn't surrounded by fans or paparazzi and they just chatted about clothes.

InterSound Records (ISR)

Although InterSound was not incorporated until October 30th, 1967, by our accountant Michael Henshaw, we were recording long before that. A recently discovered list of recordings reveals an early John Sharkey called *Beckett Poemsequence*, combining tape with photocopied poems, which, like Shayer's and Fisher's books, were not for sale.

For about a month, from mid August, Sharkey and Gustav Metzger, a London-based artist, ran the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) at various venues and we recorded a conference in the Africa Centre, King Street, on September 9 and 10, 1966. While never part of the ISR catalogue, seventeen 7-inch tapes of the discussion were recorded. It attracted artists from America, Austria and elsewhere, including the first appearance in London of Yoko Ono, before she became Mrs John Lennon. Artists attending also initiated many "happenings" and one, in a Carnaby Street gallery, allowed me to cut her out of one of her brown paper bags to

the musical accompaniment of the newly-formed art college band called the Pink Floyd whose "light show" involved dripping paint onto slides and projecting the results onto a screen while Yoko sat unusually silent and impassive. It was not unusual, during the Sixties, for painters, poets and musicians to perform regularly together in public.

Another "happening" by sculptor John Latham, whom I later joined on his Artists Placement Group aimed at placing artists in industry, featured one of his "skoobs" (books spelt backwards) being burnt in public. Helen performed in Latham's "battle" between order (hardback books) and chaos (paperbacks) at the Roundhouse, refusing to give up her dressing room to the, then unknown band, The Cream. Over a decade later, when I was lecturing in a London art college, I was intrigued to overhear BA Graphic Design students moaning about their project that term based on DIAS, but I did not reveal my part in that event. Both Metzger and Sharkey, as organisers, were later charged with "making an exhibition of a lewd, indecent and disgusting nature" at a DIAS event at St. Bride's Church, Fleet Street, and fined £100.

On 23 June 1967 ISR approached Eric Walter White, the secretary of the Poetry Book Society, about recording the International Poetry '67, directed by Ted Hughes and Patrick Garland, for our archive of modern poets reading their own work, and this was agreed. John Cassidy had to contact the twenty poets to get their approval to this scheme which most did. The readings were held from July 12 to 16, in the Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Purcell Room, and we paid a total of ten guineas (£10,50) for recording them. These were offered, as tapes, in a foreign language version of Giuseppe Ungaretti (Italy), Hans Magnus Enzensberger (Germany), Pablo Neruda (Chile), Yevtushenko's first wife, Bella Akmadulina (Russia), and Yves Bonnefoy (France). On the second tape were W. H. Auden, John Berryman, William Empson, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Graves and Stephen Spender, and Charles Olson, former rector of Black Mountain College in the USA.

ISR also recorded the World Design Science Decade conference held at the London School of Economics from 17 – 19 July addressed, among others, by scientist Denis Gabor, artist Richard Hamilton, and actor/director Jonathan Miller as well as the American architect, R. Buckminster Fuller. I remember Fuller visiting the Architectural Association and being highly critical of students' plans for square-sided

buildings in Antarctica where, as Bucky, said "the winds always blow".

In July, 1967, ISR was unsuccessful in persuading the organisers of the Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation (DLR), Drs R. D. Laing and Joseph Berke, to let us record their proceedings (at a cost of £170 - over £2,000 at 2007 values), but we were later called upon to arrange the transfer of the tapes, recorded at the Roundhouse, onto twenty-two L.P.s. Speakers included Gregory Bateson, David Cooper, Stokely Carmichael, Allen Ginsberg and Herbert Marcuse. DLR set up a special bank account to pay for the venture with Dr Berke and Cassidy jointly signing cheques, easing the pressing company's fears of being prosecuted for "pornography" - most likely caused by Allen Ginsberg's four-letter words. Artists, poets and musicians, were regularly arrested, as Barry Miles reminds us in his 2002 memoirs, *In the Sixties*.

During 1968, under the ISR logo, we produced records for the Saga Psyche label of Allen Ginsberg reading with his father, Louis, at the ICA, the then poet laureate C. D. Lewis in his Greenwich home, and the actor Jack Emery reading a Remnant, a selection of Samuel Beckett from a one-man show he had toured around the country. All received good reviews and money for producing these records subsidised the early Stream Records of poets, helped by a contribution of £1,250 (equivalent to £15,000 in 2007) from Max Robertson, in 1968. That year I also interviewed novelist Kingsley Amis about his new novel *I Want It Now*, which had a television presenter called Ronnie Appleyard as a major character and we also discussed his approach to his poetry (available on CD).

Stream Records

In 1967 Fulcrum published the American Ed Dorn's book *The North Atlantic Turbine* and this became the only poetry L.P. on the Living Disc label as that name was later restricted to ISR's recordings of conferences and suchlike. Helen used the same design as the book dust jacket for the sleeve, but individually marbled them in a tub. Helen also took most of the photos for the publicity brochures and the sleeves. We screenprinted the sleeves manually onto cardboard covers which we sent off to be laminated, and glued. Helen remembers sound recordist Bob Woolford being involved in selecting the tape recorders we used, Kudelski Nagras.

To cut down on "ambient noise" most recordings took place at night, or at weekends, in people's homes. Dorn was recorded in Tom Raworth's home near the University of Essex; Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts* in the Montgomerys' flat above Indica Books, and Lee Harwood's *Landscapes* in his home in Hove and the critic for *Records & Recording* for March, 1969, noted: "He reads them rather well, with long but unhistrionic pauses and a cleverly faked aura of improvisation, against a subliminal background of apartment noises: doors slamming, traffic blaring, footsteps, children, and so on. These do not become obtrusive. But lend atmosphere to his pleasantly low-key performance." The "cleverly faked aura" was reality injecting itself into the reading!

Bunting received praise from Cyril Connolly in *The Sunday Times* in February that year saying every word shone "like hoarfrost" while *Audio Record Review* for May described Bunting's reading as "beautiful and striking high quality of this impressive performance". In *The Observer* the "EGO briefing" column for February 16 liked Dorn's "chatty selection in a pleasing Mid-Western twang. Digs at property and politics, and witty on England" also what "Sir Herbert Read rightly called *Briggflatts*: the score of a great oral symphony" but felt the reader "listening to Robert Duncan reading Letters could be forgiven for smashing it."

However, for Richard Holmes, in *The Times* of May 10 the Duncan record was "magnificent" and he described the Finn, Anselm Hollo's *Coherences* as "full of odd humour and strange romance". By the time Stuart Montgomery recorded his book of poems, *Circe*, in 1970, as *Certain Sea Words*, he offered a token to the reader enabling them to buy the record for only "7s6d or \$1 if ordered before 30 June 1970". Raymond Gardner, in *The Guardian* (July 1, 1970) stated that Montgomery's recording was "proof that the new oral poetry can carry the sustained thought... it is an experience of sound and rhythm, the listener receives meaning rather than a precise literary image". Of the seventh Stream record, Tom Raworth's *Little Trace Remains of Emmett Miller*, published by Trigram Press, Jeff Nuttall wrote that "Raworth is a diamond cutter. His poems can be turned under the light endlessly showing new colours".

Stream's output – and intent – was best summed up in a notice by Michelene Victor in *Time Out* for April 18-May 2, Number 61:

On the records the voice becomes the total focus, working on different levels: the words themselves, their 'meaning' in the movement of sense; the movement of form, as created by cadences, phrasing and emphasis; and finally the quality of the voice, the instrument itself. By the way a poet reads, you are directed to the different elements in his work.

All seemed to be going well for Stream until about 1971 when there was a fire in the Cassidys' home, by then at 10 Bramley Road, W10, where all the work was done, and most of the stock went up in flames but sufficient tapes survived to enable future poetry lovers to hear the seven records on CDs, plus some of the others.

Belle and Sebastian

Hazel Frew

Right from the start there was something tangibly different, even quietly rebellious about Belle and Sebastian. Musically, creatively and commercially they followed their own path and from the first set themselves apart from the prevailing music scene in Glasgow in the mid to late nineties.

Emerging at a time when Scottish music was dominated by Americana influenced guitar bands, most notably Primal Scream, and the 'Bellshill Beat' of Teenage Fanclub and BMX Bandits, Belle and Sebastian brought their own musical style to the fore. Revitalising and overhauling expectations, the accepted route or career path, extending the lyrical and musical boundaries.

Stuart Murdoch's vocal combined with the band's use of instruments created a modern retro sound that brought to bear a disparate mixture of influences such as The Smiths, Love, Donovan, Felt, Northern Soul and Motown, while still making it their own, clearly original.

The inclusion of strings, electric piano and trumpet set them apart. Teasing hints of Nick Drake's *Cello Song* are clearly evident on the first album, *Tigermilk*. There are echoes of Arthur Lee and Love in Mick Cook's trumpet sound, and the use of electric piano and organ brings a soulful feel to their music. The guitar is completely clean with no hint of distortion, reminiscent of early Rock and Roll, Johnny Marr, or acoustically of Nick Drake. Richard Cole on drums has a particularly light touch, using brushes. This combination brought an usually whimsical feel at a time of guitar-heavy Brit Pop, an overtly masculine genre.

Breaking too with this tradition, Stuart Murdoch's voice, with its slight lisp, is quiet, melodic, epicene, fey, connecting him to a dispossessed youth, proud to have bowl-cut hair do's and be shy sandshoe gazers ('bowlies' being a favourite term of his, appropriated for the 'Bowlie Weekender', a 1999 music festival set up in Pontin's Holiday Camp in Camber Sands, East Sussex, by Belle and Sebastian). His lyrics plumb the school experience of being an outsider, a quiet, rejected, sensitive rebel. Mixed with this perhaps knowing naivety is also an element of art school cool, paving the way for bands like Franz Ferdinand a decade later.

The sheer numbers of band members – seven, more live - all treated equally was also a factor in creating a kind of workers co-operative approach, egalitarian in both credits and profits. Unlike The Fall's Mark E Smith, Stuart Murdoch encouraged all the members to be intrinsically of equal importance to the whole, not merely as passing players. Over the years this has shown itself in a more equal spread of song-writing credits.

There was definitely a kind of DIY ethos to Belle and Sebastian. They never followed the set career path of other bands, playing bars and small venues, recording demo's and working their way up to larger venues by playing support, nor bowing to outside pressure or management influences. Instead they created a scene around themselves, a kind of west-end mythology, retaining their mystery, never giving too much away. Their album covers utilising Stuart Murdoch's photography, not images of the band, with sleeve notes that quietly emphasise their attractive difference.

Their first gig was at a party in a Hillhead flat in 1996. After the release of *If You're Feeling Sinister* the band played a church in Gibson Street in Glasgow's west end, albeit with the members of BMX Bandits, Teenage Fanclub and other dominant Glasgow music scenesters present. Hardly the traditional route, but creating a necessary elite mystery and charm to them. The slightly amateurish feel of those early performances only adding to the interest.

Belle and Sebastian are clearly Stuart Murdoch's baby, it was his vision, commitment and dream that led to their formation, but while this is true, he couldn't have achieved the reality without the certain formation of key members: his friendship with Stuart David while they were on an unemployment training scheme; spotting guitarist Stevie Jackson playing with The Moondials in the Halt Bar in Glasgow and writing to secure him for the fledgling band; the 'fate' of meeting Isobel Campbell, her name coinciding with his choice for the band, and as a cellist, someone Stuart coveted for inclusion.

Belle and Sebastian were always different, whether in formation, dynamic, music, or career. They turned down supporting Radiohead in 1997 because it wasn't something they wanted to do. These sort of choices have created the lasting impact of the band. Allowing them to break the mould when they need to, unusually working with Trevor Horn as a producer, or for a Todd Solenz film when they wanted to. They

are able to retain an original quality without compromising their vision and achievements.

While clearly influenced by certain music styles or songs they have always managed to create something new and fresh, in a similar way perhaps to Noel Gallagher. Tracks such as *I'm A Cuckoo* owe something to the past, in this case Thin Lizzy's *The Boys are Back in Town*; the song *The State That I Am In* has a parallel to *American Pie*, but both clearly resonate in the present tense. This playful amalgamation of sounds and influences hinting at something you already know but not too explicit, conjures up the duality of Belle and Sebastian's success story. Influenced but unique, retro yet modern, gentle but ballsy: a combination of attributes that has brought recognition, admiration and longevity, as well as their own niche in the Scottish and International music markets.

History and Discography

Belle and Sebastian were formed in Glasgow in January 1996, reputedly in an all-night cafe, where the members met and spent a lot of time together. The concept of the band and their name (taken from the French cartoon) was front man and singer/songwriter Stuart Murdoch's, and it was he who wrote most of the band's early songs.

Stuart Murdoch was born in 1968 and grew up in Ayr, Scotland. He and Stuart David (bass guitar) met on a government training scheme and recorded demo's together. These were picked up by a Jeepster Records talent scout who was involved in the Stow College Music Business Course in Glasgow, run by Alan Rankine, an ex-Associate (the 1980's band fronted by Dundee based singer Billy McKenzie).

Stow releases a record, usually a single, once a year on the college label Electric Honey Records, but in the case of Belle and Sebastian there was enough material to record a whole album. This first recording was called *Tigermilk*. It was recorded in three days and one thousand copies were released on vinyl alone. Original copies of *Tigermilk* are now highly sought after and have sold for over £400 a copy.

In August 1996 Belle and Sebastian signed to Jeepster Records and recorded their second LP *If You're Feeling Sinister*. The band's key line up being Stuart Murdoch (lead vocals), Stevie Jackson (guitar), Chris Geddes (keyboards), Stuart David (bass guitar), Isobel Campbell (cello), Richard

Cole (drums) and Sarah Martin (violin). They were also joined by various musicians, including Mick Cook (trumpet) who later became a full time member.

During the summer of 1997 the band released three seminal EP's: *Dog on Wheels*, which charted in the UK at number 59; *Lazy Line Painter Jane*, charting at 41; and *3...6...9 Seconds of Light*, charting at number 32. The album *The Boy With The Arab Strap* was released in 1998 and entered at number 12, the year Belle and Sebastian also won "Best Newcomer" at the Brits.

In 2000 the band released the LP *Fold Your Hands Child, You Walk Like A Peasant*. Their single *Legal Man* reaching number 15, allowing them to perform for the first time on Top of The Pops, a life-long dream for Stuart Murdoch.

In January 2001 the band toured the UK, USA, Spain, Japan and Brazil. Stuart David, having left to concentrate on his own band Looper and writing novels, was here replaced on bass by Bobby Kildea of V-Twin. In the same year the band released the single *Jonathon David* and in 2002 *I'm Waking Up To Us*. The latter produced by Mike Hurst.

2002 also saw the band record *Storytelling* which was the soundtrack to the Todd Solenz film of the same name. That year Isobel Campbell left the band to pursue solo projects, including *The Gentle Waves*, and the 2006 Mercury Music Prize nominated collaboration with Mark Lanegan (The Screaming Trees). That same year Belle and Sebastian parted company with Jeepster Records and signed with Rough Trade.

In 2003 the band recorded *Dear Catastrophe Waitress* with 80's producer Trevor Horn (Buggles, Frankie Goes To Hollywood) and the single *Step Into My Office Baby*. The band then toured relentlessly in the USA, Japan and Australia, returning home to perform a free show in Glasgow's Botanic Gardens, to an ecstatically adoring crowd on a hot summer's day. *Dear Catastrophe Waitress* was nominated for a Mercury Music Prize and the accompanying single *I'm A Cuckoo*, for the Ivor Novello Award.

Their latest LP *The Life Pursuit* was released in 2006.

Stuart Murdoch

Interviewed by Richard Price

Belle and Sebastian's Stuart Murdoch was interviewed by Richard Price in Glasgow on 2nd February 2007, using questions developed by Hazel Frew and Richard Price as they worked on the Belle and Sebastian feature for *PS*.

SM: One two, one two; see, you can always see the little, the little one two flicker. You see that flicker and that move, you're OK. Nothing can go wrong.

RP: I feel I'm in safe hands now. One of the things I'd like to talk about [is the] context of the first days, the mid nineties just before the band was forming. How were you writing? Were you in a band? What was the band scene before Belle and Sebastian came about?

SM: Aye, I was, I was trying to get going, I was writing an increasing number of songs and I was very dubious and suspicious of bands in general, but of forming a band you know I saw plenty of bands around. I used to go and see a lot of groups. I used to sit on my own at the bar and watch three or four groups a night sometimes, say, two or three times a week. My girlfriend used to live over a bar, and so we used to get in free all the time. You know you could actually hear the bands and any band you liked you could simply run downstairs and watch them, because you could hear them coming through the floor. And so I think the early nineties was a good time for groups. That was kind of before, in Glasgow at least, cos that was before a lot of bands came out and got popular like the Delgados and Mogwai, Arab Strap. You know they were just bubbling under, there was a lot going on. And so I liked it but at the same time I felt outside of it.

RP: How did the people in the bands relate to each other? Were they each others audiences? [...] Was it a melting pot or was it pretty much a group of well-formed strands?

SM: I think it... My experiences of Glasgow from the mid-eighties onwards is that there's been different melting pots. I've seen maybe three or four scenes or melting pots, whether that be the kind of art school scene, or the very kind of anorak scene, the mid eighties or a kind of artsy scene or the people that hang around the Grosvenor Café and drink coffee all day scene. You know there, there was a variety of these melting pots.

RP: You have some sharp things to say about the School of Art in one of your records, one of your recent records. Is there a tension between the idea of an art rock and what you've been trying to do?

SM: No, not really. I love art rock, I do I love it. I think, perhaps I was painting that. I used that turn of phrase either for a good rhyme, or... yeah a little dig at something or other just you know to make the character seem like she stood out from that kinda vibe. Personally I love so many. There's Roxy Music, they were playing in the background earlier. They're an original art school band. I love that pretence of bands trying to become art.

When you slip inside a character or slip inside a song you do you become removed and say things that aren't you obviously and that's fine, it's fun. I must say though our particular group was not affiliated with art school or college. It really did feel that we were a variety of drop-outs, people recovering from dole years or people just falling out of secondary school really. There was a mixture and then we did, we felt this, we did put a little shell around ourselves, sometimes that's necessary to make something new. You do have to feel separated from all around you.

RP: What's the Stow College connection? Were you actually at Stow?

SM: No, I wasn't at Stow College. I was in an unemployment training scheme. Really I went out of my way not to kind of learn anything on this scheme and they went out of their way not to teach you anything which was fine. It was a mutual agreement that was... that was perfect. They paid your dole money and then you sort of amused yourself. And Stuart [David] the bass player was on the same course. But independently Stow College happened to get a tape. I think one of the people, they used to liaise with our course, and somebody from our course took a tape of the stuff that I was doing, a demo tape, and they got interested at that, at Stow College for their, for their scheme, that they had every year. Richard, Richard [Cole] was on the course, that's our drummer. He happened to be on the course and also our soon to become manager, Neil [Robertson], was at Stow College as well, so those two were at Stow College sitting in the classroom like oversize schoolboys. I mean really like with their knees tucked up to their chins. It's so funny, they never changed over the years, to me they never changed in ten, twelve years. They just looked exactly the same.

RP: To go back to the art school thing, one of the sounds I think I'm picking up is a kind of, it's a kind of early seventies, late sixties

it's almost a French sound. It's something that maybe Stereolab do with female voices behind it. It's a kind of pulsing beautiful accompaniment. Is that part of what you feel is a kind of art school sound? What's all that about, the French connection?

SM: The French connection, in, in our music? I don't know, it's just a, just an appreciation as much as possible of, of French pop music as opposed to British or American. It's just a slightly different slant. I wasn't obsessed by it but I was interested more in French films than anything else. So maybe just a little bit of Gallic pretence.

RP: Your interest does extend to everything doesn't it? ... the covers, the stories within the albums. There's a real sense that you're trying to create a whole atmosphere and a lot of that is a French photographic iconography as well, the French clothes.... I'm not making it up am I?

SM: No, no I think the important thing to emphasise is the atmosphere thing, we're certainly trying to create an atmosphere with the records, with the songs and with the images, absolutely.

RP: You mentioned the 1980's as a time when there was an important Glasgow scene. Is that the world of Postcard, the Pastels? Are they important, were they important to you at the time?

SM: Yeah, tremendously, especially Postcard. But then I was after Postcard. So I didn't come to Glasgow til 1985 when, you know Postcard was already a distant memory. It seemed to be a long time even though that was only 3 years or something. It seemed that I'd missed the bus, the boat whatever. And so I built the Postcard world up in my mind as a kind of halcyon days of the early 80's and venerated it. The Pastels were still around and the Pastels they were a really good group. I think they're underrated from that time because they were much more interesting than the twee groups that were becoming popular in music magazines. They had much more to them. They had a bit of bite and decent songs. To be honest Stephen [McRobbie], over the years I got to know him and he's a, he was a really good support for me actually in the early, so the song writing and what have you. He was uncynical and supportive.

RP: And is he still a presence for you?

SM: Oh yeah. It's more rarely these days. I see him around quite a lot. Sometimes we meet up and have a chat, see what's going on. The Pastels are I think producing music much more sporadically

now that they have families and kids and things and but Stephen is still a centrepiece of a certain Glasgow music scene. He's still working away at the record shop and stuff like that.

RP: What about you, how do you keep the band together? How does the band keep itself together? How does it work as a collective, if you like, if that's what it is?

SM: Keep our band together... It's funny it's more like gravity these days. We don't even need any glue. We just, we are, we are a group and we stay together for reasons of necessity. Everything from what we are going to put in our mouths to what comes out of our mouths, what we think and feel. There's no problems there. I think, ten years, then we're taking a break from each other but the group's never been in better form, mentally or otherwise. So it's great, it's nice, it's good fellowship actually. You know whenever we meet up, occasionally we meet up to discuss business matters, or whatever, and it's just good crack, which is great. It's a rare thing.

RP: I'm struck by the way that you talk to your fans. You have quite a calm and quite an enthusiastic and encouraging relationship with your fans. Is there one person who does most with the fans or... how does it work?

SM: Everybody has their own relationship, you know, with the fans and it's all pretty pally, it's all pretty comfortable. Some people in the group, you know, they DJ a lot. The guys are away DJing in Japan or South America or wherever you know when we're not busy and obviously meeting fans all the time you know and they seem to have a lot of time for them so everyone meets them on their own sort of level. Yeah, we like to involve them sometimes and it depends whose initiative it is, for instance there's been a few schemes, like I've done the treasure hunts in the past which involved liaising with the fans. I think that's part of the privilege of becoming a semi-successful group that you can say OK you guys if you're enthusiastic about this group I wanna channel your enthusiasm into fun stuff and so we have picnics or treasure hunts or writing homework or something [laughs].

RP: One of the things which recurs, I think on every album and it's also one of the things you've been describing just now [is] this [presence] of teachers and students. A lot of the songs are about kids who don't really fit in with their friends, or what they might hope to be their friends, and also the teachers themselves aren't able to cope with them. There's a kind of failure there in the teachers, [...] a distrust of teachers, of you advising kids to shrug and keep teachers at a distance to some degree.

SM: You know when you think about it's almost quite an easy picture to paint. It's almost a little bit of a cliché to rebel against teachers because when you analyse it, I'm thinking about it now, I myself probably would prefer the company of an average school teacher much more than I would the company of the average citizen who has grown out of the classroom. I mean to be honest, because teachers usually hold quite an enlightened, liberal view. At least a lot of them do. So really it's just sort of occurring to me it's a metaphor for something but it's a shame it always has to be teachers, it's almost like they are always such an easy target. It's more like the bosses or the establishment, or somebody at work, or business, this kind of thing. They're kind of shadier characters to draw aren't they really? It's a more difficult relationship to represent, it's more subtle and that's why the bastards get away with it, you know.

RP: [Laughs] Yeah I sense the... My take on the songs about work situations is that you're playing with the vocabulary of work, but you're maybe not really saying anything that much about work. Whereas in the educational ones, yes you're using education as a sample of how power relationships work, but you're definitely saying something about education, and it recurs. [...]

SM: If I start to think about the early songs then it does make you think, wow, what was I up to? Why did that seem so important at the time? To be honest I think schools and colleges and that kind of thing, it's something everyone has gone through, at least most people have gone through, so you can relate to it instantly, rather than describing a certain work situation. And, I wonder why else...[...] I probably had had a chip on my shoulder as well because I was failing in further education all over the place.

RP: Do you think it's just about worked out [now]?

SM: Aye, I'm all right. I'm more interested in education than I have been for years. Simply, you know, learning stuff. I think if I was to talk about that kind of stuff, write a story about that it would be quite different. It might be about kids with a real thirst for knowledge, someone who gets on really well.

RP: A lot of the songs have the comfort of a melody, very, very beautiful melodies but they contrast that with some quite spiky, dark subjects. What's going on there?

SM: I think that was, if there was any conceit or any preconceived notion of what the group or what my songs should be about then,

right from the start, then it was to think up the prettiest melody and, but, set spiky words to them. Set people thinking, maybe have people nodding off on the melody and then second, third time round suddenly think what is this person talking about? You know what, the character is having a dark night of the soul but the melody is very major and pretty. So that was something that did occur to me. Not too much, I mean, I was swept up with song writing around '94, '95 and didn't really tend to think about stuff. I just kept moving forward, trying to write better songs and then when the group came along there was no time to think either. [I] just got on with it but that was one thought that did occur to me was contrasted prettiest melodies with the, with the darkest notions.

RP: One of the things I suppose you've had to cope with is the idea of celebrity. And that is one of the themes in your songs as well. In a recent song it's the idea of I hate to see you as someone who almost made it. There's also people who couldn't make it because they had a stroke, or there's [the satirical edge in] the so called "Stars of Track and Field". It's almost like you're interested in people who feel the loss of celebrity, or the inability to be a celebrity. And there's a kind of comfort in the records about trying to retune people away from the whole idea of celebrity. Is that a fair reading?

SM: Not really sure. Never, never thought about it too much. Personally I'm interested in people doing good, good stuff. I love reading about people, you know, the lives of artists. I love reading about the lives of athletes. I love people doing good stuff. I do like famous people, I'd say, people, politicians or kings or people who had interesting lives. I like it. I like reading about them. That's probably as far as it gets for me. And you mentioned those individual songs and they probably, each of them have a different take and were written from a different time. And I'm sure the first one is simply from venerating somebody, or a group of people, that were above me in the social echelon at the time and still feeling this feeling, maybe 10, 15 years on and it being poignant enough to put into a song, that was, you know, "Stars of Track and Field". But then the more recent one "Dress up in you" is certainly written from the perspective of one female singing about another female so it's... probably we'll produce a record with a female singing that sometime, that song.

RP: So you don't feel you're cross-dressing in that song? I mean it's quite funny to hear you talk about knitting jumpers. You see that as a very gendered song?

SM: No I... yes. Well as I say it was written from the perspective of a female singing and sometimes when we do it - it wasn't really meant to be on the last record - and when it crops up sometimes when we do it live I feel [the most] cross-gendered I've ever felt, which is fine. Like I say, I'd like to [it to be sung by a woman]. My friend sang it, a girl called Alex. She sang it and it was really nice to see her singing it with the group.

RP: Might that be one way to go: to write more for other people?

SM: Yeah, yeah, as long as it's on my own terms. I'm not interested so much in trying to hawk songs around the pop world. Mind you saying that I'd be quite happy if somebody picked one up, you know. You know I think the songs are too quirky for people to pick up. You'd have to box it in somehow. But, yes it certainly gives you a wonderful freedom. I started a project in parallel with the last LP and it kept me really fresh during that period of writing *The Life Pursuit*. I was writing for specifically female singers. So I was writing a batch of songs along with it. It was a productive time and each time I would write a song for somebody else and it was like a break, it was a complete break and I'd come back to something that I thought was Belle and Sebastian and then I would go back to the girl group.

RP: Are you a poetry reader?

SM: Not greatly, I must admit, not hugely. I'm not even that great a reader [of anything] these days to be quite frank, which might shock you, but [...] to go even further, I met a girl in a shop yesterday. I was getting DVDs and this girl came up and said that she was a big fan of the group. And she said what are you doing? And I said, well I'm looking for a film that's going to turn my day around, you know. And she said well what film. And I said I don't know, when I find it I'll tell you. And she said well why not try the records. I said I don't buy records. I really...her face dropped. I thought she was like pretty shocked or something and then I felt like apologising. But it's just the way it is. If you're concerned with making records then you don't really want to hear a load of new records or sometimes poetry feels like too hard work especially when you're concerned with any form of writing during the day. Then just to be frank - books - I end up going back to the ones these days that I loved because you want to be guaranteed a good time and I tend to watch more films than anything else.

RP: I feel pretty much the same way but it's records that I like and love the most: people are making things out of the things that excite them and energise them and that is by no means a linear line

back through a specific art form. It's a complete misconception. I am struck that poetry comes up now and again in the songs. And I'm also wondering whether rhyme - some of the rhyme's very, very funny and some of them you just, you can't quite believe you've said it. Do they lead you into a storytelling situation that suddenly opens another door? Are you led to some degree by rhymes and by the rhythm that the song is making into a different story?

SM: Very rarely. I couldn't no, I couldn't honestly think, no, I don't think so. Maybe more the, maybe more the rhythm, The rhythm of the record. But then you'll know yourself it's something that when you have a rhythm in a, you've thought a rhythm in a poem you're led on and then you find a space and then you just keep going at it and what comes out is, you never think, you never planned it. It just comes out. I often think that being a songwriter and being able to dress up words with a tune you get away with far more than you would. I often look at the words. The words, believe it or not, they're more important to me, they always have been. The blueprint for anything that you're doing, the substance of what you're doing. But recently I sometimes look at the lyrics and think could I stand up and speak this like a poem and the answer's almost always no. And then again you have to ask yourself why would you? But then sometimes, even more worryingly sometimes you stand up and go could I get up like I used to in the bar, the whole bar and sing this as an acoustic number and strip it down and then sometimes the answer's maybe and then sometimes the answer's no. But then I guess what happens is you have moved on and then when your thinking of a song perhaps you're thinking of a complete pop song and maybe that's what you're in love with. You're in love with a complete finished shiny, shiny pop song and you've been able to think about that because you've had 10 years training at it. And so, and maybe if you were to start with a song, a folksy song that you could get up at a pub and completely entertain people with this would never become that shiny pop song. So it's interesting the way things evolve.

RP: Do you think your voice has changed as well? I hear mebbe, Nick Drake-y, Donovan flavours at the beginning of the story of Belle and Sebastian but I don't hear those so much now. Is that because your voice itself has changed, or because your interests have changed?

SM: A little bit of both probably. My interests have changed and that's led to my singing changing and being put in a different place. And singing a little bit harder and sometimes singing a little bit in character so stylistically it changes. If there's some pretence there

then that's completely fine you know because it's all part of the fun. I can remember coming in one morning with a new song and [saying to the] guys I'm going to sing this kind of funny. I hope it doesn't put you off. But I'd woken up with the song. I'd heard it in my sleep and I knew the way I was going to have to sing it to make it sound any good and so, that's all part of the fun.

RP: How are songs built up in the studio? How do the different instruments and the different members of the band cohere? How is a song made together?

SM: Well, if you take the last LP for instance [*The Life Pursuit*]. A variety of things can happen but we form the sound in the practice room. Sometimes the songwriter will hear a completed sound, finished, and we will aim towards that with the guidance of the songwriter and then sometimes the sound will be a mesh of what people bring to the song. So it's a mixture of that but a song's pretty much finished in the practice room. And then the idea is you go and try to make the best job of it in the recording studio. So, sometimes when you hear people saying 'Oh Trevor Horn did this with this record' or he's done that, or this person's done that, and just think well, actually it's all done in the practice room. But that doesn't mean their job is any less valid and we're completely thankful but people are off when they think oh, it was this producer that made this sound or this. It doesn't happen in a 4 week period or a 2 week period in the studio. It happens months before when you're writing the bloody thing.

RP: One of the things that strikes me is [the] soul [behind] the records, I mean soul records. And one of the roots of soul is in a testifying religious music. It's about testifying that God exists, that God is to be celebrated and I think that is there in some of your lyrics. But there is also that dry wit, that quite hard sometimes even a cruel wit. How do you square those things?

SM: Well again, I don't think of it so much. I think maybe it's cliché that people perhaps think that religion, or organised religion, doesn't contain wit and is a sort of boring thing. I believe pretty much that all good stuff comes from God, including wit. And I think God is around us egging us on to create heights of endeavour, or fun, or cheekiness. All these kinds of things are good I think is... I remember Stuart David in our group, the bass player, he was, I just got from him that he thought he would have nothing to do with religion, which is fine, but he just thought it was so boring. He thought it equalled everything boring. Over the years I've come to think that it equals everything non-boring!, that God is everywhere pushing the buttons when you're making something, when you're

getting on with somebody, you know when you're having a drink, when you're having a laugh. You know it's just a different way of looking at it.

RP: Do you want to talk about the project that you've been working on for a woman singer, using your lyrics?

SM: The girl thing properly started, I was in Sheffield, a few years ago, I was playing a concert and I was on a run, out running. I was out running, I do a lot of running, and I was out running off up some canal, and it was dark. I really enjoy these circumstances, being in the middle of a strange city, in the middle of the night, in the middle of winter running up a canal and I like to get lost and all that kind of stuff. So I got a tune going in my head which sometimes happens, it just arrives and it seemed like a pretty good upbeat 60's pop tune and then I suddenly realised that it wasn't me that was singing it. I could hear somebody else singing and so I wrote the words down and that was the first so-called girl group song. That was, well, it was actually four years ago now, is that 2003? Yeah four years ago so it's been err, erm what's the word, generating, or just...[...] evolving?

RP: And do you think you've got an album's worth of songs there?

SM: Oh yeah, definitely. But it's evolved further. I mean I could have made an album. I could have made a so-called girl group album instead of *The Life Pursuit* at that time. You know that was coming together and I wanted to at two different stages in the last four years but the band always came in and took up too much time. So by the time I had real free time, which was in September there, and the songs were all kicking about I realised that the songs had enough of a common theme or thread, or came from the same world, that they demanded to be joined together with a narrative and so that's what I've been trying to do recently.

RP: Do you mean a connecting narrative, or that it's a sequence of songs?

SM: No I'm talking about film. Yeah. [...] I'm talking about musical film. I've never written a film before but I've had someone to guide me and it feels, it almost feels that it's been my destination for a while.

RP: But you've been involved in a soundtrack though before haven't you?

SM: Yeah but I think that has maybe 3% relevance to what I'm trying to do just now.

RP: And how on earth are you going to do it? I mean a film is a completely different thing. What's the next step to get that made?

SM: Just pick up your camera you know and get some people together. I'm not being completely flippant, I've made pop videos. It doesn't have to have the production, it doesn't have to have Hollywood production on it, but I would like it to. But I think maybe I'll make the, I said recently I'll make the record first, I'll make a record first. Hawk the songs and then see what happens from there. I finish, I want to finish a draft of the script, make a record of the songs, and anything could happen from that point, you know. I could get a degree of funding from somewhere.

RP: What's Scotland like now to you?

SM: I'm completely, I'm absolutely enraptured with Glasgow since I came home. I love it. I love it here. I just, maybe that would be the same for any city, having travelled so much, but I love being at home. I eat it up every day, I sort of consume it, geographically and otherwise. I've got to, I almost have to run every day or go for a long walk every day and I take the train out to sort of funny places and then I run back, or I cycle back [...to] Glasgow. So I'm doing a lot of that kind of stuff, really trying to soak up, mop up, my city like a sponge and I constantly feel like I'm eavesdropping or recording sort of mental pictures. So that's .. you know I feel optimistic about the present time. Much more optimistic than for instance the average news bulletin would make you believe. I think there's a hysteria to news, I think that's one down side to the world of communications becoming so vast and easy is that we hear bad stuff from all over the world at all times and it feeds a kind of hysteria. It's almost like if there's any kind of them and us situation this will be fuel to hatreds. Sometimes you're better just switching off and looking around you and realising that people aren't hateful at all. [...]

Coercive Insurrections?

From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory Since 1960 by Michael Gardiner (EUP)
reviewed by Richard Price

This book is an attempt to assemble an identifiably Scottish critical theory from examples of manifesto-like discourse, poetry and fiction from the last fifty or so years. Michael Gardiner is especially interested in the works of Alexander Trocchi, Kenneth White, Muriel Spark, Edwin Morgan, Janice Galloway and James Kelman and reads their work as theoretical (among other things). As such, it is a companion piece to Ross Birrell and Alec Finlay's *Justified Sinners: an archaeology of Scottish counter-culture (1960-2000)*.

Gardiner has a sarcastic, dismissive style: those he disagrees with he describes with such words as "inane", and he doesn't waste too much time on representing counter-arguments or even saying why he disagrees with them. He is intriguing but not explanatory in his use of Deleuze, whose phrases are quoted almost as proof, though they come over to this reader more as shibboleths and non-sequiturs. Gardiner emphasises David Hume's scepticism about causality but, with a rather journalistic habit of co-locating different events that are then offered as therefore related (apparently because one happened a little time after another), he appears in thrall to a timeline version of history. The practice of documenting facts and their connections is passed over for the magic of chronological litany: while problematising cause-and-effect at the beginning of the book, Gardiner then whisks and wishes the problem away with what can look very like a randomised dot-to-dot version of cultural history.

In this way, when the phrase "it is no coincidence" appears (as it does, several times), it begs the question "Are you sure?". The archaic but rather browbeating word "thus" recurs *many* times, in most cases without factual ballast to steady and support its use. Heckling logical positivism doesn't make it disappear: trying to show why it is a problem within critical theory might be a better idea. It might even be beneficial to take a self-conscious irrationalist perspective, to admit to the *pleasures* of the magical mystery tour, but to acknowledge it as such. There may also be significant currents of and engagement with logical positivism in Scottish literature, as the material, science- and procedure-based approaches in Morgan appear to show and, for example, as exemplified in the less futurist-optimistic work of the communication-centred Informationists, published in Gardiner's *Interference* magazine in the early 1990s.

[A digression: a recent book, Anna Wierzbicka's *English: Meaning and Culture* argues for a post-Enlightenment proliferation

within the "British Englishes", in vocabulary concerning fairness, right and wrong, precision and accuracy, and the foregrounding in discourse of the perceiving subject's limitations.]

In Gardiner's book, brief reference is made to Walter Scott's allegedly unionist narratives but perhaps John Galt's quite different technique for displaying fictionalised historical narrative through a pre-existing non-fiction informational mode (*The Statistical Account*) would have offered 'prehistorical' context for siting the Situationist-like techniques Gardiner suggests took place in the modern period. The faux editorial apparatus in *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* could also be considered in this scene-setting way, though both examples are, admittedly, rather bookish.

Although Gardiner rightly problematises the idea of a 'Scottish' cultural theory, he sometimes uses I think a false depiction of decadent English culture as a foil, perhaps the intention being to mobilise misguided Scottish sentiment. Gardiner is quite wrong, for instance, to assert that, in regard to Edwin Morgan and Ian Hamilton Finlay (immense though their achievement is), there was no comparable sound and concrete poetry originating from England in the 60s (Bob Cobbing, Dom Sylvester Houédard, John Furnival, various presses, work displayed at the ICA, the Brighton concrete poetry conference and so on, seem to have slipped his mind). He is similarly incorrect about 60s and 70s English publishers being "content to settle for Philip Larkin". On the contrary this was a boom time in English poetry publishing within the small press and the mainstream, with a vast range of work being published in England, and that included many of the Scottish writers Gardiner rightly admires. By the same token the author emphasises the involvement of Scots in the riots in Paris in May 1968, which may well be true (is it?), but he takes this as a given: more documentation might have been wiser to defend the assertion. Sometimes Gardiner chastises Scotland to unintentionally comic effect: Kenneth White's Institut International de Géopoétique "is much larger than most people in Scotland imagine" he writes. How does he know what Scots imagine? Most people? How large did "they" think it was to begin with? Did "most people" know it existed to begin with? Why is it important that they should know, or important that they do not? Large in what way? Pillars?

Even on Gardiner's timeline terms, there are significant gaps. There is more to say about what propelled Finlay in the earliest days, for example. In another context Gardiner is right to spotlight extremely interesting magazines such as *Merlin* and Trocchi's *Sigma Portfolio* but too little is said about Migrant Press, one of the lo-fi precursors of both Finlay's *Poor. Old. Tired. Horse.* and his Wild Hawthorn Press. Migrant's constructing of a large and open network of writers can be seen as a contribution to one of the ways that small press communities work, a philosophical and cultural model

even, and perhaps there is a link here to the Common Sense philosophy Gardiner champions. There are also counter-arguments, which would see the small press network as, on the contrary, a specialist Enlightenment one rather than a generalist one; or in fact a hybridised culture which operates within several paradigms simultaneously; in any case, the point is not registered here because the historical detail is missed, and the idea of a non-unitary body of critical theory is contrary to the polemic energy of this nevertheless thought-provoking book.

Reference to Morgan's *Sov Poems* (1961) would beneficially recalibrate the date-stamping Gardiner wishes to do for translation transmission and perhaps for the use of a modern urban Scots, too (*Sov Poems* was published by a press jointly based in California and Worcestershire – Migrant again - which would, however, again undermine the author's argument about the poverty of English publishing at this time). I think Tom Leonard's work, though briefly mentioned in this book in terms of Glaswegian poetry, is under-discussed beyond the usual mapping of 'dialect' to power relationships (important, but ground already covered elsewhere); a missed opportunity.

Curiously for a text that seeks to problematise a unified idea of Scotland, Gardiner uses the "we" form of address in his discourse, assuming or even coercing into being a collectivity – and a radical, clued-up collectivity – his text doesn't actually appear to believe in. Perhaps a re-thinking of the precise vocabulary and grammar of critical theory is in order if there's to be a progression in the larger ideas and historiography of theory itself.

An Information **Richard Price**

Booked

A fascinating sampler of recent Austrian poetry: *The Night Begins with a Question: XXV Austrian Poems 1978-2002*, edited by **Iain Galbraith** (Scottish Poetry Library), which could be twinned with **Margitt Leibert's** translations of *The Poems of Georg Trakl* (Anvil). As Tony Frazer has said, the Austrian mainstream seems nearly as experimental as other countries' avant-gardes. **Trakl** was a poet of the early decades of the 20th century whose poems are inhabited by a kind of illuminated or stained glass medieval noir, sinister monks and stylised landscapes with ripe pinpoints of colour. **Plantarchy** edited by **JUSTin!katKO** is a magazine that collects a great range of contemporary work within various traditions of the avant-garde, with a particular interest in (or, understandably, impact of) visual text (Jeff Hansen, Geof Huth, Aaren Yandrich, Camille PB and others). Also good to have, in issue 2, Keith Tuma's reflection on Anglo/Scottish/ American avant-gardes of the last forty or so years. A very interesting magazine indeed, although the dayglo *Blast*-ish bright pink of the covers might cause a radioactive incident. See: plantarchy.us (no www prefix) for more details (as well as for information on the related *Critical Documents* series). Two new books from Perdika Press: *N* by **Nicholas Potamitis**, "having abandoned alexandrines / for a thing less overdetermined left instead / to clinicians to vaunt the value of such"... and **Adam Simmonds' Ganymede**, "who wanders the mystery / as the world downloads all". More information at perdikapress.com. Issue 8 of *Lampport Court* is edited by **Chris McCabe** and includes poems by David Miller, Simon Smith, Frances Presley, William Allen and many others (including one Richard Price, coexistent with the current writer). **Gordon Jarvie's** *The Tale of the Crail Whale and other poems* (Harpercroft), illustrated by Hilke MacIntyre is a modest unassuming short collection of poems largely about sea creatures and has a pleasing deliberately naïve design. **Hamish Whyte's** new (tall!) collection, *Window on the Garden*, delicately produced by Essence Press (www.essence.co.uk) with a birchtree pattern cover by Morven Gregor, has the quietly observant modernism of Schuyler and Williams at the window; the nature notes are also registering the nature of perception. **Don Paterson** (through a W. N. Herbert prism?), **Paul Muldoon**, **Geoffrey Hill**, **J. H. Prynne** and **John Ashbery** are the targets in the (affectionate?) parodies of *Other Men's Flowers* by "Ron Paste", issued by landfillpress.co.uk. I especially like the dusty professorial stress punctuation in the Hill piece and the shrieky collage in the Prynne. Also from Landfill, *I haven't been anywhere, man* by Linh Dinh: In "My Local Burning":

"If it feels and looks like racing, / And crashes, hallelujah, like racing, / Then it's World War III all right," or, in "Too Late Late Capitalism": "Addendum: this farmers' market's a chain. / The ships are gone, the chowder remains." || **Hazel Frew's** debut collection *Clockwork Scorpion* (Rack Press): poems which are wry and contemplative at the same time. In this universe constellations become comfort food and romantic dinner exists on the fine line between friendship and love. Strong visual images – a baby in foil in a pocket, a comet "projecting a dusty beam / at the earth's cinema" – disconnect, reconnect, fascinate. This is poetry gradually, carefully, reflectively opening "the serrated lid / on a new country," a pleasurable, memorable poetry. More info at: www.nicholasmurray.co.uk/RackPress.html. **Alexander Hutchison's** *Carbon Atom*: charms, incantations, classic satire, contemplation, bawdiness – rumbustious here, elegiac there – poetry of range and depth. Watch out for a Salt book later this year and for Andrew Duncan interviewing him in *Don't Start Me Talking* (also Salt). *Carbon Atom* is published by Link-Light, 47 Camphill Avenue, Langside, Glasgow, G41 3AX. **Penelope Shuttle's** *Redgrove's Wife* (Bloodaxe) collects the first poems after several years silence following the death of Shuttle's husband Peter Redgrove (and the death of her father at about the same time). Shuttle's poetry is both sophisticated, in the sense of the rich vocabulary of material culture it deploys, and primal, demonstrating that list and near-spell like forms (among others) still have immense power in them if they can be renewed with this kind of vigour. Here the risk of me-me in elegies is beautifully refracted and tenderness, respect, admiration captured in the dazzle and re-orientation. This is a very fine collection indeed. **Edwin Morgan's** *A Book of Lives* (Carcanet) collects the sequence *Love and Life* in the Cathures stanza he has invented, with its interesting formal cross between improvisation and disciplined pattern; occasional poems; several political pieces; a brief history of the world, no less; and a dialogue between a cancerous cell and a healthy one. "Never ask, never find" is the motto and warning of the book and there is a strong and moving sense (for me) of Morgan entreating his readers not to shut the doors he has more than helped open and managed to keep open: "if it's dark – still speak true." || Poems old and new in the latest issue of **Duncan Glen's** *Zed₂0* (reprinting a poem by Amy Lowell and a song by Aphra Behn; new work by Gordon Jarvie, Jennie Daiches and many others; translations from the German of Nelly Sachs, the Gaelic of Rob Donn Mackay and the Hungarian of Lajos Aprily; and interesting commentary on modern typography. Contact: Akros Publications, 33 Lady Nairn Ave., Kirkcaldy KY1 2AW. The Californian **The New Review of Literature** (Vol. 4 no. 1) collects new poetry by Ray DiPalma, Catherine Wagner, John Kinsella, Leslie Scalapino and one of the last poems by the late

Barbara Guest. Simon Smith guest-edits a British feature, which includes translations by Tim Atkins and Charles Bainbridge, a remarkable cross-threading of Gilgamesh and the first days of the Gulf War in Andrea Brady's "from Sweatbox", Kelvin Corcoran - "I walk out of the dream, the war on abstract nouns", Andrew Duncan, Harry Gilonis, Chris McCabe, Anthony Mellors, David Rees, Fiona Sampson, Catherine Simmonds, and Matthew Welton; oh, and Richard Price. More information at nrl@otis.edu . Is there a link between Robin Fulton's distinctive way of being surprised by the person in his poem who turns out to be him and **Rae Armantrout**, whose *Next Life* (Wesleyan University Press) records "Someone insists on forming sentences / on my pillow / when all I want is sleep"? In certain points of tone, yes, though Armantrout's very short lines and leaner drawing of the scene, suggest distance, too. In any case this is a quizzical sometimes funny philosophical collection of poems concerned with, among other things, the tyranny of taking in information (and so obliterating other): "Anything cancels / everything out".

It's A Record

Etran Finatawa's debut ***Introducing*** (World Music Network) crosses two quite distinct cultural groups from Niger (the Tuareg speak Tamashek, one of the ancient Berber languages of northern Africa and the Wodaabe speak Fulkulde, a language of West Africa). They have in common a nomadic life and here fuse and complement their music: electric guitar that can sound exhilaratingly urban (reminds me of a fast version of what I think is Chicago blues), local instruments (tendé, calabash) and the Wodaabe members' polyphonic singing. We saw them at Womad 2006 in Reading (sadly, the last to be held within reach of a railway station now it's moving to Malmesbury) and, especially live, they receive the Katie Price Vigorous Wave Award for exciting music. Some translations of Bammo Agonla's lyrics: "Hello miss / How are you in the morning? / How are you in the afternoon? / And in the evening?" And: "You want to know what I think of you? / You are even more beautiful than a cloud." || The songs on *Real Life*, the first album from **Joan Wasser's** new band **Joan as Police Woman** are often as if by an older or more experienced woman (a police woman in that sense, perhaps) encouraging a younger lover to dare in love and Life in General. Now and again there are harmonies, sometimes very deep, and these and some whispered backing singing surprise and tingle. The lyrics though occasionally exotic ("the birds of prey are mating") tend to be tightly limited to a direct address to the person who is being gently led into risk / love / celebration ("The Ride") and even self-celebration ("Eternal

Flame"). Although "Christobel" drives a Patti Smith cry of near exultation, only this time it's frustration, across the piece the voice is one who is authoritative in love, who can encourage through experience but knows enough not to smother. The singing is piano-
led in places (is there even a European lieder undertow to this Brooklyn record?). There are also muted brass and other jazz effects. The voice is warm, slow, exquisite, with the control of enjoyed languor (only Antony of Antony and the Johnsons, who makes an appearance, sounds suitably and uncontrollably adulatory). || **Amy Winehouse** may have crossed under the flightpath of Joan as Policewoman, in the other direction, because this record, *Back to Black*, has strong American sounds. It's another English classy retro-excavation of the late 50s and early 60s, that period offering up aural ore here in the shape of, say, Dinah Washington and Barbara George, but with a more explicit vocabulary as the singer deals with alcohol addiction and concurrent boyfriends. Just because it's number one doesn't make this a bad record; far from it in this case; "My Tears Dry on Their Own" a particularly exciting track (how does it seem to be so breathless, fast, but so sophisticatedly assured, undeceived; remarkable). There's a spectral quality to the first LP from **The Good, The Bad, and the Queen**: perhaps the title is not so much a joke as a reference to the ghostlike Man With No Name americana of the spaghetti Westerns (note the Clint Eastwood reference in Gorillaz, and the Magnificent Seven cowboy-love of The Clash); it's mixed up with the (southern) Albion-search that goes back to the Kinks and flickers in Blur, the Libertines and Babyshambles. Maybe the plaintive Ray Davies tones that Damon Albarn evokes are part of that elegiac mood, too. For me, it's *too* spectral – it doesn't have the guts of Blur's *Think Tank*, its percussive test-department surprises and Specials shouts, the delicate eclecticism, nor the tenderness – but the occasional dub-reggae effects are OK if underdone and the condemnation of contemporary England eloquent; it's a good start but never breaks into a run. **The Fall's** *TLC Post-Reformation* finds **Mark E. Smith** as gleefully puritanical as ever (perhaps enjoying the gothic squalor so he can then denounce it), and the near-title track, "Reformation", manages to tarmacadam itself with a German techno-headache melted in with (can this be intentional?) the throbbing drive for the county border on Springsteen's *Nebraska*. Smith hollers "Cheese State!" ("Cheese State-uh", with that extra syllable he has) over the freeway/autobahn imperative and you, I mean I, can't help join in-uh. **Ballads of the Book**, a various artists album of new work (Scottish writers' lyrics set and performed by Scottish musicians) includes words by John Burnside, Bill Duncan, Rody Gorman, Alasdair Gray, Ian Rankin, A. L. Kennedy, Robin Robertson, Hal Duncan, Ali Smith, Laura Hird, Louise Welch and others (see

www.chemikal.co.uk). The superconcentrate of lyrical content in quite a few of the texts can push things a little beyond the baggage allowance for musical take-off - Edwin Morgan's simple "The Good Years" an exception - but it's a very good beginning for writers' collaboration with popular culture. Alan Bissett's clunky voice-over on his collaboration with Malcolm Middleton, the glistening dance track "The Rebel On His Own Tonight", despite the charge and wit of the poetry mars one of the highlights of this record - but this is an album of interest, sung largely in Scottish rather than transatlantic accents. The folk tunings of many of the tracks are earnest but they also give what could be a very disparate album a satisfying cohesion. **Darren Hayman's *Table For One: The Dessert Menu***, collects five new tracks from the Table sessions (see www.hefnet.com) with Hayman's sensitivity to local England's breathtaking changes under late capitalism well demonstrated, and there's more than a fair share of eroticised commodity-fetishes ("Short Skirt On"; "She Wants to Be A Cowgirl"). Keyboards are in more of a backseat and guitars are back, as they were in his recent show at the 100 Club with the hastily convened "Darren Hayman and the Secondary Modern" - an assured and warm performance and a winning flutter through both the Hayman back-catalogue and what I hope is the next album.

Contributors

Richard Price's poetry includes *Lucky Day* and *Greenfields* (both Carcanet) and *Earliest Spring Yet* (Landfill Press).

Andrew Duncan is a poet and the author of *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (Salt).

Fred Hunter served in the 5th Royal Tank Regiment in Korea 1953-54, was for seven years courier and tour organiser for VIPs visiting England, worked for the Central Office of Information, 1966-73. He was Head of its London Radio Services 1969-73, at which point he joined the London Broadcasting Company as assistant editor responsible for setting up Independent Radio News. He has also been a lecturer in media studies (he founded the first course in Britain in radio journalism) and holds a PhD in Journalism.

Hazel Frew's debut collection is *Clockwork Scorpion* (Rack Press)

Raymond Friel's collections include *A World Fit To Live In* and *Seeing The River* (Polygon).

PS

the prose supplement to Painted, spoken

Andrew Duncan

Hazel Frew

Raymond Friel

Fred Hunter

Stuart Murdoch

Richard Price

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