

## Review Essay: Independent Pamphlet Publishing

*Tessa Ransford*

*Horace in Tollcross* by Angus Calder, Kettillonia, 2000 (£2.50)

*Three Score Years & Some* by Pauline Prior-Pitt, North Uist, 2006 (£8)

*FRAS 7*, Fras Publications, Roselea, Bridge of Tilt, Blair Atholl, PH18 5SG, 2008 (£4)

*The Boy Who Came Ashore*, by Alan Gay, Dreadful Night Press, 82 Kelvin Court, Glasgow, G12 0AQ, 2006, ISBN 0-9549257 -4-2 (£5)

*Truth and Love* by Beth Junor (*Continuing Enlightenment in Scotland*), Netherbow Chapbooks, 2009, Scottish Storytelling Centre, 43 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1SR (£3)

Roger Pirsig, best known as author of **Zen and the Art of Motor Cycle Maintenance**, also wrote **Lila, an Inquiry into Morals** (1991). There he makes an argument for the need for not just balance between the static and the dynamic in a healthy society but for allowing the simultaneous operation of diversity and parallelism. In an argued passage on this, using science and theology as examples (as Dan Brown has done recently in **Angels and Demons**), he concludes with the phrase 'The pencil is mightier than the pen'. Likewise Horace, as translated by Angus Calder in his Kettillonia pamphlet in 2000, **Horace in Tollcross**, desires only that his 'verses find swift channels through life's rocks'.

Angus Calder did indeed find such a swift channel in James Robertson's Kettillonia pamphlet publishing, started the year before when James, tired of waiting for magazines to publish his poems, wanted to bring out a series of poems he had written inspired by Hitchcock in time for an anniversary year. James began publishing his own and others' poetry as well as prose in pamphlet form. He was far from the first to do this. Along the road in Fife, Duncan Glen was producing attractively designed pamphlets for numerous poets through his Akros imprint, and Hamish Whyte had been doing the same in Glasgow (continued now in Edinburgh) over many years through his Mariscat publishing enterprise. Meanwhile, the poet Gael Turnbull brought out his own poetry repeatedly in pamphlet form, a skill he had practised all his life, starting off in Canada, publishing himself and others, where he had worked as a doctor as a young man. Novelist, reviewer, biographer and poet, John Pick in Galloway annually produces a charming booklet, 6" x 4", which he sends out as Christmas presents. His 2000 pamphlet, **Now**, won the first Callum Macdonald Memorial Award for pamphlet poetry publishing in May 2001.

Leonard Woolf is quoted as claiming nearly a hundred years ago:

The pamphlet is not a commodity which it is easy to sell in Britain. The principal obstruction is the trade. The pamphlet is an awkward and troublesome kind of creature to sell and most bookshops will not look at them. The result is that the British have never acquired the habit of reading pamphlets. This is a

great pity. *The pamphlet is potentially an extraordinarily good literary form from both the artistic and the social or political point of view.*" [my italics]

Several things changed, however, at the turn of the millennium. Firstly, the publishing of poetry, always non-commercial by reason of its relatively small editions, became something publishers were no longer prepared to risk, or to sustain within their better-selling books. Many small presses and publishers were perforce turning their faces to the wall. But at the same time new technology was being adopted and accessed by individuals, who could now prepare work for print independently. Secondly, websites even made direct selling possible, rather than through bookshops which no longer wanted the burden of stocking poetry. The combination of these factors made me feel able to announce on the occasion of the first Callum Macdonald Memorial Award in May 2001, that 'the day of the pamphlet has come' and, a couple of years later, to make a video about independent poetry pamphlet publishing entitled *pamphlet power poet power*.

Robert Garioch had himself personally typeset and hand-printed a pamphlet, now of immense value, containing seventeen poems by himself and Sorley Maclean, entitled **Seventeen Poems for Sixpence**. This was in 1940, before he went to fight in the Desert campaign and was taken prisoner. It was in the days when hand-setting and printing was the only method to produce one's own work, or through a small hand-press printer, such as Callum Macdonald himself. He worked from the basement of his stationer's shop in Marchmont in the 1950s, where he began publishing **Lines Review** poetry magazine and pamphlets of poetry by local poets such as Sydney Goodsir Smith, Iain Crichton Smith, Robert Garioch, Derick Thomson and many others. Duncan Glen joined in during the sixties with **Akros** magazine and many Akros publications, followed later by his occasional journal **Zed 2 0**. Tom Leonard has been a firm supporter of poetry pamphlets, and his own first publication was a self-published pamphlet, encouraged by Philip Hobsbaum, called **A priest came on at Merkland Street**, and poets such as Edwin Morgan often used pamphlets between larger volumes.

It is this ability to 'slip between the rocks' which is so desirable in pamphlets. It allows a poet to produce a sequence, a themed series, a collaboration with others or with artists or photographers, an exploration of personal or local history, a batch of new poems to give to their readership or even just their friends, even a re-publication of a selection of previous work, perhaps with notes, as I myself did in **Noteworthy Poems** (Akros 2002). Pamphlets indeed allow us, as professional, serious poets, to take responsible action towards our readership, which is something quite different from a public-relations engineered 'market', for books which can be published only with subsidy and therefore inevitably under a control-and-limit top-down policy. However, the nature of the pamphlet is also to be ephemeral and, when the limited copies printed have been distributed or sold, it may not be easily tracked down.

Gradually year by year, since the millennium, awareness of the pamphlet poetry option has increased and more and more have joined in. The Callum Macdonald Memorial Award, with its parallel website business, has had articles in library journals, newspapers and free journals, Christmas Fairs at the National Library of Scotland, annual events at the Edinburgh International Book Festival and Word Power's Radical Book Fair, fairs at StAnza poetry festival, and stalls at the Scottish

Poetry Library's small presses day. Lesley Duncan, poetry editor of **The Herald** has included poems by many pamphlet poets in her daily poem slot and presided over the judging for the award. We have reached a stage when we no longer have to plead for or defend the pamphlet. Indeed, by selling on our website we offer a better deal than most books of poetry will receive in terms of availability for sale. Very quickly we included visual material and poems themselves from the pamphlets on the website and are now also introducing voice. However the website, [www.scottish-pamphlet-poetry.com](http://www.scottish-pamphlet-poetry.com), (originally set up by John Cant) was re-created and is maintained and operated by the voluntary work of poet/writer Hazel Cameron. She will not be able to continue much longer in this role and we will need to find some way of funding the sales via the website in future.

Pauline Prior-Pitt had won the Callum Macdonald Memorial award in 2006 with her personally-designed and handmade 15 cms-square pamphlet **North Uist Sea Poems**, which culminated in her witness account of the great storm of January 2005: 'Never before such a torn island / and the west coast shoreline gnawed to the bone'. Made in the same way and to the same format, **Three Score Years & Some** gathers poems to do with ageing from some of her published books, where she states in the foreword that she is 'now a firm believer in the merits of the poetry pamphlet'. Indeed her entry to the Callum Macdonald Memorial Award for 2009 was an ascetically-designed pamphlet of poems on the theme of Death.

Pauline takes much care with choice of paper and ink, favouring a linen texture for the cover and delicate lettering. An attractive feature of her pamphlets, too, is that they are hand sewn with the central tie and its colour part of the aesthetic. Despite their gentle humour, which always neatly hits the nail on the head, Pauline's poems are in tune with human sorrow and *lachrimae rerum*. I cannot resist quoting her poem 'Grandchild', beginning at verse three, because my own children set me tests to have a conversation with someone for more than an hour and not mention my grandchildren!

And then your own love affair begins.  
He is exceptionally beautiful of course  
and everyone will want to see the photographs,

.....

And your dear grandmother friends  
who know all about this obsessive love  
indulge you, agree he is exceptionally beautiful.

And you discover that their incessant chat  
about their grandchildren is compelling  
and the war can wait.

This seems a simple, conversational poem, but Pauline knows where to put the emphasis to carry the tone, and her seemingly innocent last line turns the poem into something much more serious.

The British Library has this year (2009) introduced a pan-British pamphlet award, though not on the same basis or for the same reward as the Callum Macdonald Memorial Award. It is, however, funded by the same major sponsor, the Michael

Marks Charitable Trust. Lady Marks was inspired by the success of the Callum Macdonald Memorial Award and wanted to offer something similar for the whole UK. Our pamphlet ethos has from the first been a democratic one of a community of poets supporting and encouraging one another, in the realisation that what is good for all is good for each. We feel that the particular integration of poetry and production is what makes the pamphlet uniquely attractive and desirable as an *objet d'art*. Our award has been for £500, being assessed as enough to produce another pamphlet. Only this year have we raised it to £750. Next year will be our tenth award and the National Library of Scotland plans to exhibit the winning pamphlets from each of the ten years, in which we have welcomed between thirty and fifty entries to the award, all published in the preceding calendar year and having some 'Scottish connection'. The archive of award pamphlets in the NLS has accumulated over these years to contain well over 300 pamphlets. The Scottish Poetry Library's collection, going back through the past century stands at over 600 pamphlets. Pamphlets quickly go out of print, so the accessible resource in the SPL is an essential one.

The magazine **Sphinx**, exclusively for pamphlets and pamphlet poets, produced by Happenstance Press in Fife under Helena Nelson, has contributed immensely to the pamphlet scene, as has the pamphlet-type magazine, **Fras**, also started in 2004 in Perthshire by John Herdman and Walter Perrie, which has now reached number 10. There have also been pamphlets devoted to one author, Walter Perrie and John Herdman themselves, as well as several others including translations by Robin Magowan, by David Black, a Kenneth White essay and poems by Brendan McMahon. The aim of the editors is to 'foster excellent writing from Scotland and abroad in poetry and prose in any of Scotland's languages and to place Scottish writing within a wider, and especially a European, cultural context.' **Fras** number seven appeared in 2007. It opens with 'a wee note' which is a hard-hitting denouncement of modern educational attitudes, referring to an essay in the issue by Louise Gamble, a nurse, entitled 'Dying of indifference'. This is an eighteen-page essay, central to the issue, enclosed on either side by three of Walter Perrie's brilliant renderings of La Fontaine into Scots and by Christine Crow's tender yet intellectual 'In Memorial Malcolm Bowie', with two poems in Scots by her fellow-Fife writer, William Hershaw, one a translation via English of a Friesian poem. This one issue aptly demonstrates the sheer intellectual probing of *Fras*, the interest in poets who translate, who think deeply, who are intimately involved with language. *Fras* is carrying on a tradition which has been somewhat lost in recent years, just as has the attention to human detail in nursing: 'Nursing was a way of life rather than a career'. So was writing.

**Sphinx** has made a point of showcasing the work of small publishers such as diehard in Callendar, Duncan Glen and **Fras** itself. **Fras** has carried interviews with Duncan Glen and others in its 'Conversations with Scottish Writers' series. **Sphinx** has no wish to serve only Scottish-connected writers. **Fras** has a Scottish focus but states:

We decided that...we could publish a small, occasional literary journal and satellite pamphlet publications on a financially tolerable shoestring ....We made up our minds ... that we would publish only quality writing from Scotland and elsewhere by writers of any age and that we would be beholden to no one. (...) Both in the magazine and in the pamphlet publications we aim at a reasonable balance between poetry and prose, and between the various components of

Scottish linguistic culture and its cross-fertilization by foreign influences.’ (John Herdman in **Sphinx**, issue 6).

More small groupings for pamphlet publishing are now forming, while many of the poets who have successfully experimented with the pamphlet form have also published in established magazines and with commercial publishers. This does not imply that the pamphlet is merely a stepping-stone stage. Rather it is a continuing and acceptable alternative or parallel route.

Small presses and pamphlets overlap more or less in the same sphere and with a similar ethos. Duncan Glen published a pamphlet in 1999 entitled **This is no can of beans, a prospect from the window of a small-press publisher**. In it he mentions Ian Hamilton Finlay’s Wild Hawthorn Press, Stuart Montgomery’s Fulcrum Press (which published Bunting’s **Brigflatts** in 1966), Serif Books in Edinburgh, and William MacClellan, who championed MacDiarmid. Glen quotes **The Times Literary Supplement** which commented in 1970: ‘If anybody wants an example of what the little presses can do for literature, he should study Duncan Glen’s **A Small Press and Hugh MacDiarmid**... MacDiarmid was, in fact, very largely outside the accepted poetry publishing circuit...’ Stefan Themerson, in a preface to a catalogue of **Little Press Books in Print, January 1974 published in the United Kingdom**, stresses how ‘the concrete objects created by little presses, whatever you find in them, have become poetic events, poetic happenings in their own right.’ The efforts of the **Envoi** pamphlets and magazines as well as those of **Outposts** from Howard Sargeant have been appreciated widely. I have also in my possession a unique pamphlet, Nessie Dunsmuir’s (W.S. Grahams’ wife ) **Ten Poems**, written in the 1940s and published in 1988 by Greville Press Pamphlets, Warwick. Elspeth King at the Stirling Smith Museum held a series of talks last year on chapbooks and publishing, where she brought to attention the important and wide-ranging Scottish publishing output of Eneas Mackay in Stirling in the first half of the twentieth century. Elspeth has continued the work of pamphlet and booklet publishing at the Stirling Smith Museum.

The argument that small presses can produce poetic happenings is not, however, the only argument for pamphlets today. Rather, the argument for pamphlets today is as much a practical and financial as a literary one. Pamphlets are practical: they can be produced independently; they can be carried easily; they offer a personal and varied range of styles and content; they can be given away without huge losses to the author; they can be sold, relatively cheaply, at readings and fairs and cross-media events, as well as through the internet. They present a cooperative rather than competitive front and are free from the jockeying for subsidy. They give poets independence, allowing many hundreds of poets to be published who would otherwise have been effectively silenced and who each find their own path to a readership and some to more high profile acceptance, as with Jan Hadfield who won the T.S. Eliot award this year, having started out with a pamphlet she published herself. Dorothy Lawrenson is another young poet-artist of talent and enterprise who produces her own pamphlets. Christine De Luca has produced both her own work and pamphlets for other Shetlandic poets and the collaboration between Hugh MacMillan and artist Hugh Bryden in Dumfries produced this year’s winner of the Callum Macdonald Memorial Award. Runners-up included translations from German lyrics into the Doric by Mary Johnstone and work by Priscilla Chueng-Nainby, a Chinese poet living and working here.

Alan Gay is a yachtsman and former Lothian outdoor activities director. He lives in East Lothian and was aware of the forthcoming 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Eyemouth disaster of 1881 in which most of the fishing fleet was destroyed in a storm which drove the boats onto the rocks of the shore. On an original tack, Alan seeks in **The Boy Who Came Ashore** to give voice to those who drowned, rather than simply to retell the story or to join those who remained to mourn. Through a variety of poetic form and reportage, drawing on his own familiarity with seamanship, he pieces together the fragments, historical or imaginary, into a colourful mosaic, seeking to understand what happened from a nautical as well as from a human point of view, in a manner that is both sympathetic and unadorned. We sense ourselves in the vessels alongside the fishermen whose loss of life and living over a century ago still haunts us.

**The Boy Who Came Ashore** is an example of a researched series of poems published in pamphlet form; another is Hazel Cameron's **The Currying Shop**. She jointly won the 2008 Callum Macdonald Memorial Award with this pamphlet, which was inspired by that name having been given to Bridge of Weir in Renfrewshire in connection with its long historical association with the leather industry. Jim Carruth's first pamphlet, **Bovine Pastoral**, a runner-up for the award in 2004, deals with the decline of dairy farming in Renfrewshire. Hazel's and Jim's pamphlets were produced by their own efforts. These three are excellent examples of this genre of poetry pamphlet and demonstrate the sheer range and depth of material that can be found in them.

More importantly, pamphlets are stating that there is a wealth of poetry around, producing a range of different kinds of work, including translation, creating a real, nurturing tilth for Scottish cultural life, seeping into academic as well as community fields and encouraging cross-referencing with the other arts. Gerry Loose's **Nomad** series of pamphlets, for instance, included one entitled **Exile**, in 2004, which consisted of two-way translations between Scottish PEN members and immigrant writers in Arabic, Persian and Albanian. More and more diverse poetry rather than less is to be desired. Less silencing of would-be poets, less neglect of collecting together the work of those regularly appearing in magazines, less lack of self-esteem among the aspiring and less putting on a pedestal of the few are all needful changes for the better in our literary world.

I shall end by mentioning an enterprise started by Donald Smith of the Scottish Storytelling Centre. A storyteller, historian, theologian, novelist, poet, playwright and cultural administrator, he has become a pillar of the cultural scene, thanks to his deep knowledge of literary and religious history at a national and a local level. He conceived the idea in 2007 of a series of pamphlets which would continue discussion of the major themes of the enlightenment, about which so much has been written over the centuries and which is constantly evoked as Scotland's brightest hour. He began with an essay of his own, **Truth and Value**, followed by one I wrote, **Truth and Beauty**, followed by Graham Dunstan Martin on **Truth and Language**, and then Beth Junor's **Truth and Love**. Truth is therefore the core of these essays. How does truth manifest itself in our values, in our aesthetics, our language and our personal relations in the present decade in Scotland? It is a brave task, and braver to undertake it in the form of a pamphlet essay rather than an academic book, journalistic research or political treatise. Donald's aim is to publish the series together in due course, but at

present it is a 'continuing' series, as are the topics being considered (Donald is presently writing a fifth: **Truth and Trinity**).

In the tradition of C.S. Lewis, Beth Junor considers in **Truth and Love** different kinds of love: the Erotic, Agape or love of humanity, Philia or friendship. She concludes: 'I have written here only of the presence of love, not of love's absence. Love's absence has a much stronger and more straightforward relationship with truth'. I would have liked her to elaborate on this further but she continues: 'A consciousness of which form {of love} demands or receives most of our life's energy is an important part of self-knowledge and the question of which *should* is an important moral question for each individual'. Beth provides a bibliography which stretches from Aristotle to Obama: enlightenment indeed.

Perhaps pamphlets have something uncomfortably and challengingly to do with truth, whether practical, moral or aesthetic. **One Word of Truth** is the title of Solzhenitsyn's Nobel speech (1970), published in a neat pamphlet by The Bodley Head, where he claims that violence depends on the lie but 'one word of truth can outweigh the whole world.' If this can be so, then pamphlets will find their 'swift channel' through the rocks of bureaucracy and consumerism, to help to create dynamic change in a parallel, simultaneous, diversified, life-giving, continuing movement.

For further information see [www.scottish-pamphlet-poetry.com](http://www.scottish-pamphlet-poetry.com)  
[www.spl.org.uk](http://www.spl.org.uk)

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