

Obituary, 1996 RSA Annual Report

It is hard to imagine the literary landscape of Scotland, or world for that matter, without the solid implacable presence of Norman MacCaig. As a poet he had no pretensions, his views on aesthetics and life committedly 'low fallutin'. As a man he was just himself, incapable of anything which did not spring from something inside that was vintage MacCaig.

He said he could never have been a dramatist because he could not write in any voice but his own – genuine Suilven, or nothing. He would pooh-pooh accusations of courage over his conscientious objection during the war: 'I just didn't want to kill people – and I wouldn't do it. Nothing to do with heroism.' Getting him to do something he did not want to do was like trying to relocate Suilven in industrial Lanarkshire.

To the end he relished life, good company, good stones, especially the eccentric pronouncements or actions of other poets, MacDairmid, Sorley Maclean or Ian Crichton Smith, whose suitcase became legendary during the Seventies because Ian would book into a hotel and dump his suitcase, meet Norman *et al* somewhere and end up staying at Leamington Terrace. 'It's the most expensive suitcase in the world', Norman would remark, loving the irony. Maybe now he is dead we will find it easier to call him a great poet. He would dismiss such allegations: 'Hah!' he would snort, but was mildly stung when literary 'kritiks' accused him of lacking passion and warmth. But try locating another poet who writes so much about love of people, wildlife, Scotland, poems impelled by deep affection and respect for the world he lived in (except for academics, landowners, the nobility and politicians, whom he despised with Calvinist virulence).

Norman's poems have an intimate greatness, touching people as no poet since Burns has done. Many poets strive after greatness, Norman not at all. He despised the notion that art was only about high-flown rhetoric, epic ambition and huge concepts. In an essay, *My Way of It in Chapman* 20 years ago, he said, yes, well art is all that, 'but what about the other great deal, whose cause, purpose and effect is pure celebration of a woman or a chair or a landscape? Are we to dismiss these as trivial? If so, I have written a good many trivial poems, and here's one' – quoting *Ringed Plover by a Water's Edge*. He always encouraged younger writers, although we often endured severe scoldings for literary self-indulgence or excesses. But people mattered more to him than poetry, and when we went to his door, or met him in the pub, it was us he was interested in, although if he thought we wrote well that was a plus. His friendship with McDiarmid also testifies to that: as poets they could not be more different and exchanged vicious flytings – but were only practicing 'the art of vituperation'. Norman was a very polite man, and hated offending people. The 'classic bores' (who bore you rigid about

something you are passionately interested in) got the full butt of his derision, as did people he thought cruel. He was also merciless to interviewers who asked stupid questions chewing them up with stubbornly unco-operative answers. Someone should compile a montage of these wonderful moments on radio and TV.

Without trying to, he has spread the word about poetry to many for whom it meant Burns, or not even that. He commemorated our lives, our culture, our landscape, those ordinary bits other poets looked down their noses at. He is the poet of celebration supporting and sustaining us. Our memories of him, and the great diversity of his work, can never be taken away from us.