

Edinburgh Park: Twelve Poets

Twelve Poets at Edinburgh Park



The bronze busts of the twelve Scottish poets displayed at Edinburgh Park were commissioned and gifted by New Edinburgh Ltd. (NEL, the development company behind Edinburgh Park) to the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in 2004. Building on the grid design of the Park's master architect Richard Meier, NEL decided that the rhythm set up by the lochans and the regular planting of trees would be ideally complemented by the addition of a set of uniformly spaced busts. [Sadly, not all of the original iconic trees - the Lime boulevards, blocks of Maples, and Chestnuts by the lochans - have survived.]

Notes are provided below on each of the 12 chosen poets (in chronological order) along with links to short readings of some of their works:

<https://shop.nationalgalleries.org/books/twelve-poets-at-edinburgh-park-paperback/>

Hugh MacDiarmid (b.1892, Langholm) is the pen name of Christopher Grieve a preeminent Scottish poet of the first half of the C20th - a 'grumpy' founding member of SNP. After serving in WWI, he achieved notable success especially for his masterpiece, which was written in the vernacular, '*A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*'. This extended rhapsody ranged from an investigation of his own personality to an exploration of the mysteries of space and time. Hugh became increasingly involved in metaphysical speculation and accepted Marxist philosophy. His poem '*Scotland small?*' explains how people who see Scotland as small or uninteresting are not looking hard enough. Hugh's '*The Bonnie Broukit Bairn*' is read by John Laurie. As poet, writer, and cultural activist, Hugh remains a controversial and influential figure.

Often called a doyenne of Scottish literature, **Naomi (Lady) Mitchison (b.1897, Edinburgh)**, wrote over 90 books of historical and science fiction, travel writing and autobiography. She came from a socially and intellectually privileged background. Her mother's family, the Trotters, were major landowners near Edinburgh. Her father J.S. Haldane was a distinguished scientist. Her brother was the even more famous polymathic biologist J.B.S. Haldane. Naomi worked energetically for political and social causes. A force of nature, she was a county councillor and delegate on the Highland Advisory Board working on post-war regeneration in the Highlands. And ... she had seven children. She was a storyteller, in the traditional sense. Naomi aspired to explore the past and interpret the present, to create a sense of communality of shared experience, for the common good.

A great love poet of the natural world, **Norman MacCaig (b.Edinburgh, 1910)**, wrote accessible, short, simple, and often humorous poems in modern English. These described living creatures, animals,

people, and places while demonstrating Norman's incredibly keen perception. Almost alone among his contemporaries Norman wrote virtually nothing but poems. A lifelong pacifist - during WWII Norman served a term in prison for his beliefs. He refused to fight because he did not want to kill people who he felt were just the same as him. Always suspicious of literary and political dogma he remained true to the lyric impulse. Whether writing about his beloved Assynt or the great city of Edinburgh, it has been noted he combined 'precise observation with creative wit', writing with 'clarity, compassion and a certain humane elegance of the mind above all else'. His poem '[I remember you](#)' is sung by soprano Susan Jiwey.

Sorley MacLean (b.1911, on the island of Raasay, off Skye). Promotor of Gaelic culture. Sorley's first major text, '*The Cuillin*', is a long political poem which uses the famous mountain range on Skye as the symbolic basis for a meditation on political commitment in a Europe that was being torn apart by the competing ideologies of the 1930s. In WWII he served in Libya and Egypt before being seriously wounded at the battle of El Alamein. On discharge he published his second seminal work '*Poems to Eimhir*'. Both texts are highly complex, combining references to Gaelic song, poetry, music and history with the art and politics of other parts of Europe. Sorley asserted the right of Gaelic artists and Gaelic speakers to participate in the mainstream of European culture transcending linguistic boundaries. Julie Fowlis sings '[The Choice](#)' Sorley's poem about a man whose love is marrying another.

William Sydney Graham (b.1918, to a working-class family in Greenock) was a Scottish poet, who rose to prominence alongside Dylan Thomas' sudden rise to fame and the blossoming of the neo-romantic group of poets. Neglected in his own lifetime Graham's reputation has grown in recent years, in part due to Harold Pinter's often-expressed enthusiasm. Having been rejected for national service on medical grounds, Graham had various jobs before settling in Cornwall. There he made many [friends](#) amongst the artistic community centred on St. Ives. Their abstract works began to influence his poems. This, together with his linguistic obsession over the problem of communication, gave his work its own distinct character. Later he made a strenuous effort to change own style, to simplify his language and to deepen its meaning. The subject matter of Graham's greatest poem '*The Nightfishing*' is concerned with how a night in a herring boat out on the North Sea expressed the glory of being alive upon the dangerous waters of creation. *Nightfishing* has been compared to a musical work. Although it recounts an actual voyage, it is often seen as a voyage from life through death, towards resurrection – a fusion of the seen and the unseen.

Hamish Henderson (b.Blairgowrie, 1919) was a soldier, academic, folklorist, political activist, songwriter, translator communist and intellectual. Hailed by some as the most important Scottish poet since Burns. Hamish lived an epic life against the backdrop of some of the defining social, political and cultural battles of the C20th. During WWII, although he originally argued strongly for peace, he became convinced that it could not be reached and so threw himself into the war effort. He received a commission in the Intelligence Corps. and became an adept, effective interrogator due to his command of six European languages and deep understanding of German culture. While taking part in the Desert War in Africa, he wrote the poem '*Elegies For the Dead in Cyrenaica*' which encompasses every aspect of soldiering in the N. African campaign. Each elegy pays tribute to the men who fought with and against him, their lives portrayed with great sympathy and compassion, while at the same time the desert itself becomes the unforgiving enemy. Being an accomplished folk song collector, he was a seminal figure in the Scottish folk revival. Here is Robyn Stapleton's hauntingly beautiful version of Hamish's '[The Freedom Come All Ye](#)' a magnificent song ending with his [vision](#) and hopes for the survival of humanity on this beleaguered planet.

Always open to innovation and experimentation, **Edwin Morgan (b.1920, West End of Glasgow)** wrote concrete poetry, computer poetry, experimental poetry, traditional forms, libretti for opera, and poems about technology and science fiction. After interrupting his university studies to serve in WWII as a non-combatant conscientious objector with the Royal Army Medical Corps, he returned to Glasgow where he graduated, and then lectured until his retirement. My favourite of Edwin's poems is '*The Loch Ness Monster's Song*'. It begins: 'Sssnnnwhufffffl?/ Hnwhuffl hhnwfl hnfl hfl?/ Gdroblboblhobngbl' and ends 'blm plm,/ blm plm,/ blm plm,/ blp.' According to Morgan, this represents the conversation of the Loch Ness Monster who surfaces to seek out the companions of his (her? its?) youth and, seeing nobody, has a brief swearing session before returning below water. [Visit [Loch/Ness/Song](#) for an amusing, spoken version.]

A number of **Iain Crichton Smith's (b.1928, Glasgow)** poems explore the subject of The Highland Clearances, as does his best-known novel '*Consider the Lilies*'. In this modern classic, Iain captures the thoughts and memories of an old woman who has lived all her life within the narrow confines of her community during one of the cruellest episodes of Scottish history - the Highland Clearances. He was prolific - writing a huge number of poems (well over 900). His mother had a desperate struggle against poverty, bringing up four children alone on the island of Lewis. She became a herring gutter, following the catch around the ports. An understanding of Iain's creative work is to be found in that community with its Free Church allegiance, and the hard life between land and sea. Iain is bilingual, writing in both English and Gaelic. One of his recurring preoccupations is the tension between the old dogmatic narrowness of religion in the Highlands and the challenge of modern thought and behaviour. A regular theme that rings through all he has written is a concern for common humanity. Listen to a short extract from '[Napoleon and I](#)' - one of Ian's best stories, about an old married couple where the husband has gone mad and thinks he is Napoleon.

Poet and author **Douglas Dunn (b.Renfrewshire, 1942)** trained as a librarian and worked in England and the US, but returned to Britain in 1966 during the Vietnam draft. His plays, short stories and poetry have won many awards. His collection of poems '*Elegies*' contains 39 short, emotionally-charged poems, written after the death of his wife, which capture the pain and transformative event of death. Douglas has said that he tells his students a good poem should work in the mind, in the heart and in the ear, and that "The reader has a right to expect these three things simultaneously." Douglas reads his poem '[Wondrous Strange](#)',

Tom Leonard (b.Glasgow, 1944) has written plays, sound poetry, political polemic and a biography. He is best known for poems in Glasgow speech with phonetic spelling, as heralded by his epoch-making '*Six Glasgow Poems*'. His work frequently deals with the relationship between language, class and culture. Here Tom reads what is arguably his best-known poem '[The Six O'Clock News](#)'. Alongside his literary output, Leonard was vocal on several political issues - being highly critical of British involvement in Iraq and Kuwait, also in the Gulf War. Equally Tom has voiced support for a cultural boycott of Israel in response to its policies towards Palestine. Tom previously supported an "independent Scottish Socialist Republic" but opposed the 2014 independence referendum criticising both the SNP and the referendum process.

Elizabeth Anne (Liz) Lochhead (b. Motherwell, 1947). A "*funny, feisty, female, full of feeling*". Multi award-winning Scottish poet and playwright. Liz grew up in the mining town of Newarthill. There wasn't a lot to do, so she spent her time reading. Wrote her first poem '*The Visit*' after entering the Glasgow School of Art. Liz has been the National Poet of Scotland. The pleasing and soothing sound of her voice, along with her relish for articulating ideas in a variety of ways and rhythms, added to her outspokenness have made Liz enormously popular. Her writing is often inspired by portraying fantastical events in a realistic tone and manner, thereby giving her subject matter a contemporary social relevance while displaying her talent to find the ordinary in the apparently grand. A common theme that is considered to run throughout her work is a feminist perspective. Whilst Liz considers herself a feminist, she does not consider herself a feminist writer despite a lot of her work focusing on women. She avows that female perspectives and experiences are not expressed enough in Scotland. Here Liz reads her rap poem '[Men Talk](#)', which deftly uses a variety of stylistic devices to describe how women are perceived from the perspective of a man.

Jackie Kay (b.Edinburgh, 1961) to a Scottish mother from the Scottish Highlands and a Nigerian father. Jackie was adopted as a baby by a white Scottish couple. Growing up in the affluent Glasgow commuter suburb of Bishopbriggs, she suffered racism from children and teachers at her school. As a teenager she worked as a cleaner, working for David Cornwell—who wrote under the pen-name John le Carré. Jackie now identifies as "a mother, a lesbian, black, a writer, Scottish". In her twenties she gave birth to a son, (the father is a writer), and later had a 15-year relationship with poet Carol Ann Duffy. During this relationship, Duffy had a daughter. Jackie has published numerous poetry collections and a memoir - '*Red Dust Road*', about her quest to find her birth parents. Jackie remains one of Scotland most popular writers and is one of the foremost poets writing in Britain today. [Nicola Sturgeon reads Jackie's 'The Promise'](#).