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For The Love Of Poetry - Alan Taylor

EARLY in the 1980s I was working in the reference library on Edinburgh's George IV Bridge. Unlike the National Library of Scotland, which is on the other side of the street, there were no gatekeepers to restrict access. Anyone who wanted to enter could, and did. The library was a haven for eccentrics, autodidacts, bampots, tramps, the time rich and the threadbare poor, and numberless scruffy and grumpy refugees from academe who, in the days before Google, had questions that urgently needed answers, a great many of which could be found in Whitaker's Almanack.

When not fielding enquiries I would disappear into the stacks, to bash out a review or an obit for a newspaper or edit Scottish Library Association News, or SLAN as it was known in the profession. One day I was sent an article in which its author argued that what Scotland needed was a library devoted to poetry. I published it - not least because I agreed with it - and so began the campaign which led to the foundation of the Scottish Poetry Library, one of those remarkable institutions that it is hard to imagine how we managed all these years without.

The author of the aforementioned article was Tessa Ransford. How we had not met before this is a mystery to me. Her second husband, Callum Macdonald, was a printer. His eponymous company, based at Loanhead in Midlothian, printed SLAN and, more significantly, and presumably profitably, the Edinburgh Fringe programme. Callum's heart, however, lay more in publishing poetry than in commercial printing. As Auden wrote prose to buy himself the time to write poetry, Callum used his printing business to subsidize the publication of poets he admired, including Sorley MacLean, Iain Crichton Smith, Derick Thomson, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Robert Garioch and, through his magazine, Lines Review, many others.

He was a self-effacing Gael and poetry was as much part of him as peat. For a while I worked part-time for Callum and every conversation we had centered on poetry and poets. He knew all of the Rose Street gang but never made a big deal of it. He smoked incessantly, to such an extent that when he sent proofs by post you could smell them before you saw them. Unlike other publishers, profit was never Callum's motive. That books were in print was enough for him; selling them was not something with which he was overly concerned, occasionally to the chagrin of their authors. When I suggested adorning the cover of one of Crichton Smith's books with a photograph of the writer, Callum gave me one of those looks which said: 'Who cares what Iain looks like? It's what he's got to say that's important.' When he and Tessa formed a union it must have been a raucous day in Parnassus.

The Poetry Library finally opened for business in 1984 in a room in sequestered Tweeddale Court that its collection would soon outgrow. The launch party was of one those occasions that inspires myth-makers, myself included. It was held in St Cecilia's Hall in the Cowgate on a January night so foul it would have made a perfect backdrop for the opening act of Macbeth. Haggis was served but Tessa insisted there must be a vegetarian version, which Macsween's of Morningside dutifully produced, thus accidentally inventing a bestselling dish.

As those who then controlled the cultural coffers soon came to appreciate, Tessa was not the kind of person who responded to the word 'no'. Accompanying her at meetings

of the Scottish Arts Council (SAC), I witnessed at firsthand her ability to make officials feel that not to underwrite the poetry library was not only philistine it was criminal. Her fervour was religious, her belief unshakeable. In the end, as she later recalled, the SAC was browbeaten into awarding the Scottish Poetry Library project £10,000 but only after she had prised £9,000 from another grant-awarding body. Though that sum rose in time it was barely enough to cover outgoings. Tessa's pragmatic view was that she must make do with whatever was given. Without her energy, vision, enterprise, persistence, sheer bloody-mindedness, it is doubtful whether the SPL would exist. It was all part of what she termed 'cultural activism'. 'I have wanted to make conditions which are more positive and encouraging for poets,' she once said, 'and for more poets, men and women, in the various languages and regions for Scotland.'

The impact of all this on Tessa herself was profound. Setting up the library, dealing with the deluge of gifted books and organizing volunteers was stress-inducing and, as ever where the arts are concerned, there was internal politicking and external pressure. Even as the library expanded and moved to its present site further down the Royal Mile in Crichton's Close, Tessa, in her eyrie-like flat looking out on Arthur's Seat, somehow managed to write her own poetry. This new collection brings together fugitive poems some of which have appeared previously in little magazines. Its title is taken from a statement given by the eighteenth-century radical reformer, Thomas Muir of Huntershill, to the Court of Judiciary in 1793, prior to him being sentenced to fourteen years transportation to Australia: 'I have devoted myself to the cause of The People. It is a good cause - it shall ultimately prevail - it shall finally triumph.'

Tessa obviously feels a kinship with Muir who remained an outsider throughout his life, a thistle ever ready to prick those in sore need of it. Like him, too, she is an omnivorous intellectual whose interests and passions range wide and deep. She is not content with the status quo but her way of affecting change is benign. Education is the root to enlightenment. Others of her heroes - and heroines - include philosopher George Davie, artist Ian Hamilton Finlay, town planner and scientist Patrick Geddes, and Julia Budenz, an American poet based at Harvard who liberated Tessa's thinking and made her appreciate that when she returned to Scotland she had to change her environment, personal and national.

The poems in *A Good Cause* are often inspired by people (the poet Adrian Mitchell, publisher Duncan Glen, helpmate and accountant Eric Wishart, Martin Ford, the Aberdeen councillor who stood up to Donald Trump) and places (Edinburgh, Barra, Orkney, Uist, Sutherland, Raasay). Few poets are as technically adept as Tessa. She is always eager to find a neat fit of form and subject and in general she achieves this. Poetry is a practice as well as an art and each new poem is a challenge to be addressed, to be sculpted into shape. Tessa poems, as she once acknowledged, 'are built on thought, pattern and gestic rhythms in varying proportions to one another, depending on the poem in question. I am often inspired most when ideas and experiences throw light on one another'.

A Good Cause includes poems from every stage of her career and reflects different aspects of her life. Her father, who fought in the First World War, and who thereafter 'would never hunt or shoot or even go fishing', is recalled in 'To remember or not':

He loved life, was a graceful dancer and witty charmer.
He courted my mother for seven difficult years -
while she grieved her beloved brother and lost her youth -

yet together they cared for others in faith and love.

She was born in Bombay, now known as Mumbai, in 1938. She spent ten formative years in the Far East, becoming fluent in Urdu and Punjabi. Her father was Master of the Mint, which minted all the coinage for the forces east of Suez. Though she loved and admired her parents Tessa's upbringing was difficult, in particular the years she spent as a boarder at St Leonard's in St Andrews, while her mother and father remained in India. In 'As I trod those stairs', she writes:

I was not an orphan, yet for weeks on end
I was, for years in boarding school.
The chill lies thick there in my body still.
How could it? What are stairs, is stone?
For me a sign of fear and being alone.

Religion is another enduring theme. Her first husband was a missionary, which horrified her parents who had a laissez-faire attitude towards the church. Like Richard Holloway, Tessa views the Bible as one might Palgrave's Golden Treasury. Her belief is similar to that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his notion of 'religionless Christianity'. A major influence was the philosopher John MacMurray, who taught her at Edinburgh University. 'The simplest expression that I can find for the thesis I have tried to maintain is this,' he said. 'All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action for the sake of friendship'. In 'Religion in Scotland' Tessa writes:

In Scotland we suffer from religion
our religion is to suffer
unless we suffer we are not loved
by the gods of our fathers

When this poem was written is unclear. My guess is that it was some years ago when religion, particularly presbyterianism, cast a pall over the country. That is no longer the case. The Scotland in which Tessa Ransford grew to maturity as a poet and which she did so much herself to change has become history. A Good Cause marks its - and the poet's - progress. Towards its end, there are poems - 'Trees for Yes', 'Hope' - which acknowledge this, though there are others - 'Yeats's Grave', 'Marginalia', 'Endings' - in which valediction is the prevailing sentiment. But the library Tessa created is never far from her thoughts. In 'A Tryst' she compares her achievement with that of an unnamed seafaring ancestor who sailed to Australia in a Clyde paddle-steamer:

If he overcame the dangerous currents and oceans,
attacks by pirates and running out of fuel,
I could surely sail on with minimum funds
when I had a chart, a vision and a goal
with a volunteer crew of experts, friends and faithful
navigators; like ancient Celtic adventurers
we set afloat a curragh of poetry practitioners.

A Good Cause
Tessa Ransford
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