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The Public Library

Introduction to Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to the First World War 1988 — ———

[1]

Any society is a society in conflict, and any anthology of a society's poetry that does not reflect this, is a lie. But poetry has been so defined in the public mind as usually to exclude the possibility of social conflicts appearing. The belief is widespread that poetry is not about the expression of opinion, not about "politics", not about employment, not about what people actually do with their time between waking up and falling asleep each day; not about what they eat, not about how much the food costs. It is not in the voice of ordinary discourse, contains nothing anyone anywhere could find offensive, above all contains nothing that will interfere with the lawful exercise of an English teacher going about his or her duty in a classroom.

To an extent the connection between poetry and school has been the problem. It is not that teachers deserve any less respect than anyone else out working for a living; the trouble lies in the notion that poetry has to be "taught" in the first place, and that there is a professional caste of people best equipped so to do. For to be "taught" poetry has meant to be given guidance in a classroom as to how best ultimately to pass exams about it. This has had the effect of installing in people's minds certain basic ideas:-

1. A "real" poem is one that an English teacher would approve for use in an English class.

2. A "real" poem requires some explanation and guidance as to interpretation, by an English teacher.

3. The best poems come to be set in the exams.

4. The people best able to pass these exams will be the people best able to understand and to write poetry.

The roots of all this pernicious nonsense about what a poem isn't and what it is, can be traced back to the nineteenth century invention of Literature as a "subject" in schools. This invention was based on certain specific principles:

1. The creation of a "canon" of Literature, the new subject's "set books" as it were.

2. The establishment of that canon — to be overseen by Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Schools — on the premise that Literature is a code embodying desirable social, moral and political values.

3. The exclusion from that canon of works that did not recognise this code, or did not see Literature as a code in the first place.

4. The exclusion from that canon of works whose main focus was thought properly to be that of another "subject" in the curriculum.

The important word is code. To understand Literature is to understand a code, and the teacher is the person trained to possess the code that Literature is in. This has to be accepted unconditionally, as it is the sole basis of the teacher's power to grade pupil's responses. A piece of writing that does not acknowledge the code that the teacher has been trained to possess, can not be accepted as Literature: for such writing deprives the teacher of the only basis of his power of assessment. This applies even when the "canon" has been enlarged to "allow" some writing about, for instance, working-class lives. The teacher's right to grade the pupils' responses must never be threatened; therefore the writing must never be such as might give the pupils the right to challenge the teacher's claim to possess it. Literature shrinks to Teachable Literature. Taking a fairly mild and non-poetic example, the excellent prose work Winwood Reade's The Martyrdom of Man is considered far too "literary" to be History, and far too historical to be Literature; even more damaging, it is thought far too heretical of orthodox beliefs to be thought an appropriate object for pupils' potential approval. And so it can not as the phrase goes "enter the canon".

In fact the spread of education as a right to the mass of people has paradoxically led to the deprivation, from them, of much they once held to be valid literature. Generation after generation has been "taught" that a poem itself has as it were to pass an exam before it can earn the right to be called a poem in the first place; but only those people who have passed exams about poems, can give a new would-be poem the new exam necessary to decide whether it is a poem or not. The "subject" has functioned to assure the mass of people people that until they have a licence to prove otherwise, they have no public right to make, criticise, or even 50 claim to understand, anything that might seriously be called Literature. This is a serious matter, and raises the question of what is meant by democracy.

[2]

In the years consequent on 1792 the most influential book circulating in Scotland besides the Bible and Burns's poems, was Tom Paine's The Rights of Man. This book's message was welcomed by the Paisley poet Alexander Wilson, who was soon, in 1794, to be forced into exile like Paine himself:-

"The Rights of Man" is now weel kenned,

And read by mony a hunder;

For Tammy Paine the buik has penned,

And lent the courts a lounder;

It's like a keeking-glass to see The

craft of kirk and statesman;

And wi' a bauld and easy glee,

Guid faith the birky beats

them Aff hand this day...

The power of clergy, wylie

tykes, Is unco fast

declining;

And courtiers' craft,

like snaw aff

dykes, Melts when

the sun is shining;

Auld monarchy, wi' cruel

paw, Her dying pains is gnawing;

While Democracy, trig and braw,

Is through a' Europe crawing

Fu' crouse this day.

The Rights of Man, which includes practical plans for family allowance, retirement and sickness pensions, and public works for the unemployed, was a sustained argument for republican democracy centred on three principles:

1. Men are born, and always continue, free and equal in respect of their rights. Civil distinctions, therefore, can only be founded on public utility.

2. The end of all political associations is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man; and these rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance of oppression.

3. The nation is essentially the source of all sovereignty; nor can ANY INDIVIDUAL, or ANY BODY OF MEN, be entitled to any authority which is not expressly derived from it.

Paine argued that the "simple" democracy of ancient Athens was best replaced by the representational democracy of contemporary America:

The one was the wonder of the ancient world; the other is becoming the admiration and model of the present. This "simple" democracy of ancient Athens was simple in that all free citizens had the right, in common public assembly, to vote directly on the issues of government, face to face with those who carried them out. Moreover free citizens had the right themselves to participate in government irrespective of personal wealth. Crucial to all this was the agora, a central area in Athens where citizens met daily and amongst other things discussed their own business and that of the state. In the sixth century B.C. this agora doubled as the assembly forum where at least forty times a year issues of governance were put to the mass vote. Later the voting assembly moved ten minutes away, but its function remained the same.

Of course it was not so simple, nor so ideal. Only about a seventh of the population were “free citizens” to begin with: women, immigrants and their offspring, and slaves, were not. Yet this albeit restricted democracy had features not only unique in its own day, but in advance of those advocated for democracy in nineteenth century Britain. And it contained two ideal principles which have not lost their force in two and a half thousand years: democracy is daily dialogue, and true democracy lies in the equality and equal power of all parties to that dialogue.

The enemy of democracy, Paine argued, was the mystification of government. He argued this because mystification is the device that renders equality of dialogue impossible. With mystification, one might add, comes the caste that can be called the Keepers of the Mystery. And the Keepers of the Mystery are the Keepers of the Right to Dialogue, amongst themselves. The invention of Literature as a teachable “subject” was the invention of Literature as a mystery - thus countering the democratic potential of the sudden 52 expansion of literacy brought about by compulsory education. In fact the spread of the right to vote in Britain paralleled the spread of the right to literacy, in that both were allowed within formal codes whose names acknowledged the supremacy of the status quo which must not be challenged: Her Majesty’s Government, Her Majesty’s Inspectorate for Schools, the Queen’s English.The rights and values of monarch and aristocracy were sown into the definitions of what the people’s new entitlements to personal expression actually were. These rights and values were precisely those not acknowledged in the America where Paine and Wilson were exiled. But the Queen’s English had special difficulties to face in the Scotland that Wilson had left behind.

[3]

There was, in early nineteenth century Renfrewshire, a large number of Scots words mixed in with the English vocabulary, as the poems of Alexander Wilson and others show. But by the end of the century these words had been greatly reduced in number, and poetry written in Scots was severely restricted in content. If one looks at the annual volumes of Modern Scottish Poetry published between 1878 and 1893, one gets the impression of Scots poetry as being largely a male nostalgic hymn to hearth, established religion, domestic gems of women, and fellow wee-boys-at-heart men. Contrary to the usual reasons given for this, this restriction in content was less to do with the diminution in vocabulary than with restrictions on content akin to those imposed on Queen’s English. On the one hand Scots words and usages of any kind were barred from the diction of the classroom by teachers in their capacity as representatives of the diction of governance. On the other, changes in the language were seen as the result of an immigration substantially Irish Catholic as well as Highland Gaelic. There was a certain amount of looking back on what was seen as the once-dominant language of a single-religion people. This ignored certain realities, such as the fact that the written language used at the turn of the century by poets like Tannahill and Wilson in their informal letters to friends and equals, was almost exclusively English. More important, it concealed the fact that the poetry nostalgically looked back to was one stripped of anything that might challenge the contemporary status quo. Modern Scottish Poetry, like most late Victorian anthologies of Scots poetry, assumes a male audience not only favourable to, but members of, the established church.That tradition of Scots poetry hostile to the status quo and to clergymen of any denomination; that Protestant tradition of Scots poetry expressing conflict and difference of opinion within the church itself - all this was dropped in favour of a shy alliance of writers “allowed” to keep

their language going within the establishment as it was allowed to exist in Scotland. The angry became the pawky. It was anger at the end of a string.

Those most active in promoting this Scots were often those most opposed to what was actually happening in areas like Glasgow and Paisley. It was not a simple matter of locality and national culture. For with the industrial revolution had come the emergence in Britain of the proletarian urban dictions, and diction had become in Renfrewshire, as elsewhere in Britain, what it has never ceased to be since: not simply a matter of locality, but of class. The proletariat of the West of Scotland, Protestant or Catholic, freethinking or of any other religion, of immigrant stock or not, - all could be seen as forming linguistically a colony within a colony. The new middle-class of the towns and city - who identified most with Queen's English in their diction - were often those most insistent on "good Scots" in their literary hobbies. The contempt that was heaped on the speakers of the new urban diction of the West of Scotland was based on class, and sometimes religious, prejudice as much as a desire for a return to the mythical "pure" diction of a pure race of pre-proletarian Scottish folk.

This carried into the twentieth century, as some of it has carried to this day. In an essay on John Davidson published in 1933, T.D. Robb, teacher at Paisley Grammar, and author of Deletiae Poetarum Scotorum, had this to say:

Davidson, as you know, adhered to English all his life, though a Renfrewshire Renfrewshire man for over thirty years. And well he might! For what has the Doric of the populous centres of the county become? It is not Scots at all, but a thing debased beyond tears. It is a mongrel patois due to lower class immigration from Ireland, from Lancashire mills, and the meaner streets of Glasgow. Traditional vernacular is gone. The streets are sibilant with "huz yins," "wis youse," "wees wis"; ungrammatical with "I seen, I done." Bernard Shaw's immortal line of blank verse (put into the mouth of a prize fighter),

he seen me comin' and he done a bunk ,

if heard in passing through the streets, would hardly raise the eyelid of surprise. For God's sake, - to speak it with reverence - let such horrors cease to be printed as Doric....

Regret it as we may, the Doric of Renfrewshire is not only dead, but in an advanced state of putrefaction. "An ounce of civet, good apothecary!" So when one hears working class speech, whether from Scotland, Ireland or England, one should call for civet - i.e. perfume. One should call for civet, because in doing so one would be quoting from King Lear Act Four Scene Six - and if you knew that, dear reader, you were as cultured a man as T.D. Robb. One was familiar with the "canon" of English Literature.

But Robb was no eccentric then, as he would be no eccentric now. The Scottish National Dictionary, in its introduction of 1936, echoed his view:

Owing to the influx of Irish and foreign immigrants in the industrial area near Glasgow the dialect has become become hopelessly corrupt.

Not simply changed, but corrupted, debased. Having lost its original value. A people, in other words, for whose words issuing from their own lips one should have no respect. They had lost the right to equality of dialogue with those in possession of Queen's English, or "good" Scots. But in fact the

urban dictions had, and have, connections not simply local, but world-wide. To see this one has to return to America, and Tom Paine.

[4]

It is no accident that the American democracy Paine so admired was made up of a mix of immigrants and their early descendants. With a new people came a new diction, and a new diction could serve as the means for an equality of dialogue. It made for an ease of conversation, one that allowed Wilson when settled in America informally to call not only on the similarly exiled author of The Rights of Man, but on President Jefferson himself. American society today is hardly a model of equality of wealth; but the openness of its Public Information Act, which contrasts so starkly with the obsessive Official Secrets Act in Britain, stems from the equality of dialogue on which the republic was founded. Similar contrasts can be made here between Britain on the one hand and Canada, Australia, and New Zealand on the other.

But the democracy of America, like those elsewhere, had been created at the expense of a native population. And just as in Ancient Athens, this democracy itself existed on the back of slave labour. There is an economic link, too between these nineteenth century American - and Caribbean and African - slaves, and the British urban proletariat: one group laboured long hours to extract raw materials which the other laboured long hours to finish into manufactured goods. This historic link survived in the language of the groups, and in the Literature of the children and grandchildren of those slaves and proletariat writing today. In Scotland the links are the more close because of the colony-within-a-colony aspect already mentioned. The language presents writers with a similar range of options, prompts similar highly political questions: whether the use of English modelled on middle-class English writers is an acceptance of colonial status; whether the use of words from the pre-colonial era is justified when the pre-colonial vocabulary is now obsolete or greatly reduced; whether a model of the language as spoken, with mainly Anglified vocabulary but non-English syntax and/or sound, is restricted to being the model of an individual speaker speaking. Always the criticism of “provincialism”: but it’s an international pattern, and not just in the former English Empire. It is simply the right to equality of dialogue that is being fought for. Yet when one sees the historic connection between slave and proletariat embodied in the language, one sees more clearly the actual nature of derisive laughter at working class speech and accent today: one sees what forces are behind the vehemence with which a child will be told to alter his or her language when addressing a superior; one sees too clearly the connection between “lighthearted” guides to “slang” and the lovable cheery black servants of pre-war American films.

But it isn’t just the right to equality of dialogue in the present that has to be established, but equality of dialogue with the past. A person must feel free to go back into the past that is Literature, go where they like and meet equally with whom they will. If a model of Literature has been created that prevents this, that model should be removed, and with it the metaphors that restrict the open nature of people’s access. There has been enough of Literature as a “path” through the ages, as a “course” entrusted to those appointed to “its” charge. Let a writer have the authority to address any reader - and any reader to read any writer - without either feeling that valid dialogue can only take place in a code acceptable to a 56 transmitter of the code of governance - in other words, within the code of governance itself. Let a writer have the authority to be nobody else but themself, if they so wish: to make direct reference to specific particulars of their own life, as lived, names and all. But

the code of governance of the “canon” specifically excludes any person from being “nobody else but themself.” This is the heart of the mystery: it is the “unwritten constitution” of what is “taught” as British Literature. Unwritten indeed.

The ludicrous nature of McGonagall’s work, for instance. McGonagall’s naivety was not in being nobody else but himself. It was in being nobody else but himself in a code that did not allow him to be nobody else but himself in the first place. But why should a code of governance exclude anyone from being nobody else but themselves? What could be the point of this? The answer, it seems to me, is that a code of Literature could not be thought desirable in which anyone might imagine that by being nobody else but themselves, they were the equal of anyone else. It would not be thought desirable, that is, to a government expressly founded on the principle that not everyone is equal to anyone else at all, but there is a “natural” inequality which people have to be taught. One has to recognise that the concession of parliamentary democracy in Britain was not the concession that all human beings are equal. At this point I am driven to try to define what I mean by all human beings being equal. Of course to try will be an act of gross impertinence on my part, as I am a human unlicensed to define such things as what a human is. However. I will try to do so in two paragraphs, in as simple a language as I can. This isn’t easy, but it is worth a try.

[5]

I would not describe myself as “the” human being; that would mean I thought that no other human being existed, or that others weren’t quite as much a human being as I am. I understand fully that I am just “a” human being, just as anyone else is just “a” human being as well. But of course like you the reader, whoever you are, I am not just anyone else - I am “this” human being that nobody else is.

The stages can be seen like the stages between being a baby - when the universe is no more than the baby itself - and being an adult. Growing up is learning to accept you are just “a” human being, that others are like yourself equal in that they are human and that they exist as well. The trouble starts when people are taught they can go from being “the” human being when they open their eyes on the world, to being “this” human being in adulthood, without having to swallow that they are just “a” human being in between. Then they think that whatever it is makes them “this” human being is what stops them being just “a” human being in the first place.

This, in my opinion, is the model of the basis of British government that has produced a specifically British model of education that has produced a specifically British model of Literature. To go simply to the model of education: a tawdry chain of privilege runs downwards from the likes of Eton and Winchester, down to the expensive private schools of Scotland and elsewhere, down finally to the less expensive schools of town and city, whose pupils, though they may not be the equal of those from Eton and Winchester, can at least know they are distinctly superior to the scruff in the free school down the road. Inequality of status of diction has been one peculiarly British way of sorting people into a hierarchy of worth. But enough of that too, it has been but one way amongst others. Sufficient to say, and to say it with double force in Scotland, that no language is more sacred than the people who speak it; more to the point, no language is more sacred than the people who don’t.

A Literature in which it is possible for a writer to be nobody else but his or her own self, would not be “an enormous extension to the present model of Literature” or some such; it can only happen within a new model of Literature altogether, one that rejects inequality as a constituent of personal

being to begin with. So it isn't the addition of "community" to "high" culture. That assumes their separation; that is the product of the old model of "subject", of "path", of ownership of certain values by certain people. But if you are free to go where you like as an equal in Literature, then you don't "cross into zones" and put on a "serious literature" or "local literature" hat. You don't have to give any explanations to anybody as to why you're there; nor does the writer have to give any explanation to you. It's all one Literature, as it is all one world.

This is what makes the use of King Lear, for instance, as a way of putting people "in their place", so awful: King Lear is, among other things, about a monarch's coming to terms with the fact that he's a human being the equal, no more, of all others; having to face the reality of his place in a world where dogs, horses and 58 rats can have life when his own daughter can't. This recognition of the equality of human beings is part of what makes it impossible to be the "property" of any particular person or class. James Thomson's poem The City of Dreadful Night also takes this equality as given, which is why it connects as easily with a "community" as with "high" art.

The poem, by some Community versus High Art ways of looking at things, might be thought ripe for the "elitist" tag. It has subtitle quotes from Dante and Leopardi, and links with other European writers such as Novalis; it can even be seen, in terms of its underlying shape and tone—its long circular movements of thought, its building up of counterpointed blocks of logic, its brooding seriousness throughout; its pauses, its final climaxes presenting images that summarise the preceding themes—as being organised like a "typical" symphony of Thomson's contemporary, the Austrian composer Anton Bruckner.

But even my discussing this might be thought "elitist" to some and a bit uppity to others. To the latter in one way I am "breaking the code" of literary criticism by moving from literature into music, but as it's classical music I've moved into, that's probably all right so long as I seem to be verifying the "authority" of both. But it would not be all right for me to say that it doesn't actually matter a damn whether you actually like Bruckner or not; it doesn't matter whether you've even heard of him. To say so would be me being nobody else but myself, telling you that you have the right to be nobody else but yourself as well: this, at the expense of the authority of the "canon" of classical music. But whether or not Bruckner ever wrote a note of classical music doesn't matter in the sense that it has nothing to do with the value of you—or me—as human beings. Neither music, nor literature, nor any other art, puts value into people. Yet it's because of this very fact as a given (although we have been taught to assume the opposite) that I claim the freedom to mention Bruckner if I want to, without being called "elitist": I happen to like his music a lot, that liking has led me to see a connection with Thomson that might interest you, and my liking for Bruckner is part of "this" human being that is me and nobody else. Which is an aspect of the way that James Thomson proceeds in The City of Dreadful Night.

Once you accept that the model of Literature is based on universal equality of human existence, past and present, then you can travel in Literature, as a writer or as a reader, wherever you like. And it is not a "broad-based subject"—"Open Literature" or "Social Studies"—with a new caste charged to grade the responses of those who approach "it", that I'm talking about; for it is that very system of grading and exams which turns the living dialogue between writer and reader into a thing, a commodity to be offered in return for a bill of exchange, i.e. the certificate or "mark". But no caste has the right to possess or even to imagine it has the right to possess, bills of exchange on the dialogue between one human being and another. And such a dialogue is all that Literature is.

The place where a democratic freedom of encounter with Literature has occurred is in the free public libraries. It is not that they haven't operated censorship, but the public libraries have remained the one place where anyone can build his or her own relation with the literary world. It was in the public library in Pollok that I built mine. The Five-to-Seven department, just a green tin cupboard with about eight shelves, and the books facing out the way. You had to wrap your books in newspaper, and you had to show your hands. Then the day when I could use the Junior Department for the 7-to-14 year olds, a whole wall under the window. Real books at last, that wouldn't be finished as soon as you got home. Of course the time came when the Junior Department wasn't what I wanted, but I wasn't old enough yet for the adult. I got to know the names of the the A to C authors in the adult section that adjoined the Junior wall at the far end. The adult fiction went right round two walls of the building, with non-fiction in standing shelves between. What a day that would be, when you could get into that. My mother let me take the bus to Govan to use the Junior Department at Elder Park. It seemed enormous, as big as Pollok's adult section; it had a very quiet atmosphere I'll never forget, with really heavy stone walls, and the pillars you went in at the entrance. It was there I got to know Dickens. Then the adult section at Pollok. Then the Stirling, the Mecca of them all.

The public libraries gave me the education I wanted. Like most Scottish writers I know of my generation, I went to School and got British—mainly English— Literature. I went to the library and borrowed American, Russian and European. And these were the ones that mattered as far as I was concerned. When the hero of Crime and Punishment ran down the stairs of a close after the murder, I knew what it was he ran down. All the poetry that meant anything to 60 me in my middle teens when I first got to like poetry—all of it that meant anything to me, I got out the library. You could choose what you wanted there, read it in your own house, say exactly what you wanted about it, or—most precious right of all—you could say absolutely nothing about it whatever. In my early twenties I worked in a university bookshop. I hated it. You might as well have been selling bananas, and the pay was rubbish. A non-union place, I was young, and it took the work inspectorate to call and pin up the minimum work shop rates for me to find out I was being paid less than the legal minimum for shopworkers. I decided to try to get to university, and studied at night to make up my Highers. At dinner time I would sometimes make it to the library at St George's Cross, and get a quick half hour in the reading room. Other times in the Mitchell Library at Charing Cross, not getting on with my Highers but sitting with a book called The Annotated Index to the Cantos of Ezra Pound, writing in tiny pencil in the margin of my own copy of Pound's poems, the references from the index. This was my education.

I did get in to university, and at the second attempt got the degree in English and Scottish Literature that gave me the bit of paper that now matters to me. That paper I renew every year for £5; the membership card to Glasgow University Library. That library is specialised, and offers a specialised view of the world. Its filters have excluded literature by working-class people, though there are books in plenty about "them". You have to go elsewhere for original literature itself.

In some ways it's here that the public libraries come into their own, and in others it's where they have been more frustrating. The public libraries have been where millions including myself have received that education beyond basic literacy that actually mattered to them; but while the public have been out front borrowing the books, through the back there has always been that world you see over the librarian's shoulder when they go to phone, those rooms with half-open doors marked

“Private” that they put the light on in when they go through. Always when I have requested a book at the issue desk of the Mitchell Reference Library in Glasgow, and when someone has later appeared to hand the book over at the counter, there has been that pleasant smile between us as if Isn’t it lucky a wee fairy turned up with the right book just round the corner. And always I’ve thought at the back of my mind, I wonder what it looks like where you’ve been.

It was therefore a great thing to me when I was given the job as “Writer in residence” at Paisley Central Library. Besides running writers’ groups and meeting people who wanted a response to their writing, I was given the freedom to go wherever I wanted behind the counter, and unlike the staff who are always having to be librarians, I could stop wherever I wanted and read whatever I liked. Paisley, besides being a public lending library, holds the main large collection of non-borrowable books in Renfrew District Libraries: books that are too rare or flimsy to be going in and out on public loan. They are all available for the public to read through in the reference section—but like any other reference library, you can’t really get to know the collection from a cabinet index. You don’t feel like asking the librarian to fetch you up twenty books to see what ones you like. It’s only by physically having them in your hand you can get to know the range of them. That privilege was given me in my job, and this anthology from the local poetry collection in the reference-room gallery is the result.

[7]

I didn’t have any particular plan in mind when I started on this anthology, not in the sense of trying to look for specific themes. Certainly whenever I came on a biographical reference that would say something like “Unfortunately the poems of this period show his extreme radical views” I would be on the lookout for that poet’s poems during the period referred to. But in general that was not my way of doing things. Basically I just read the poetry collection from A to Z, together with other anthologies in the gallery, and the collections of mainly nineteenth-century “Paisly Pamphlets” that have been bound in leather volumes. The selection I have made, allowing for the fact that some of the poets are represented by groups of poems written over a number of years, still follows a chronological forward progression. The poets were either born in the County of Renfrewshire—which during the period extended from what is now south-west Glasgow, to Greenock—or spent a period of their life there. I have added a few poems not to be found in the Paisley collection, and the county border has been stretched about a mile to take in Marion Bernstein’s house in Paisley Road, Glasgow.

The main forerunner to the present anthology is David Brown’s two-volume Paisley Poets of 1889 and 1890, and the two volumes of The Harp of Renfrewshire published in 1819 and 1876. A good deal of biographical information came 62 from David Brown, some came from David Semple’s centenary edition in 1875 of Tannahill’s poems, some from the introductions to the individual books, some from the newspaper cuttings and handwritten entries put inside the books by librarians or the original owners who donated them. I have done a lot of work, sometimes in other libraries, to extend the notes that introduce each poet’s contribution to the anthology. Paisley is not a town that I feel has suffered chiefly from a dearth of historians; I am not one of these, and mistakes and omissions will no doubt be found. If the reader has read this fare, he or she will understand that I do not intend either to discuss “the path” of Renfrewshire Poetry through the nineteenth century, or to suggest that this anthology is such a path. It is an area, through which you can make your own paths. But the anthology is large, and for those who want them I have suggested some short thematic

journeys in the Guide to Themes that immediately follows this introduction. At least as useful as this, I hope, will be the List of Sources at the back of the anthology. If any poems interest you enough to make you want to see more of the writer's work, you will find, listed under author, the name of the book from which the poem was taken together with the book's reference number in Paisley Central Library. Of course Glasgow and Edinburgh people interested in this way will get most of the books in the Mitchell and the National Library of Scotland. At the time of writing with the possible exception of John Davidson all the poets are out of print; the majority have been so for over a hundred years.

I am grateful to JD Hendry, Director of Arts and Culture for Renfrew District, for not only welcoming the project but making sure I had all the time and any facilities needed to complete it. All the staff at Paisley Central Library I thank for their consistent friendly help during my erratic comings and goings. Of the many individuals who have been of help, I want to thank especially my friend the writer James Kelman. At times his words of encouragement have been crucial.

Paisley Central Library November 1988