

## Scotland, poetry and translation

How do you combine two perfectly legitimate aspirations for the 'holiday part' of the five or so weeks off teaching and examining teachers at university level are granted, namely the wishes to enjoy a couple of weeks away from it all, in the great outdoors, and – in my case – with plenty of living water to swim in, and the wish to participate in conferences? Easy! You register for a conference (or two) in a part of the world you feel like going back to / discovering, and you arrange your time around your various commitments, some of which are commitments to yourself. This is what I did in the second part of July. The conference organised at the University of Stirling on Poetry and Translation (16-19 July 2008) is one in a series of biennial conferences known as 'Poetry and...'. (See <http://www.poetryandtranslation.stir.ac.uk/>) Apparently accommodation on campus is not quite what participants had hoped for, given the price they paid (cramped little rooms, and mosquitoes aplenty because of the lakes or lochs close to residences). But I had booked a room in a nearby B&B (was there with my mother), and it was all we could dream of and more. Incidentally the University of Stirling is next to Bridge of Allan, the 19<sup>th</sup> C fashionable watering resort on the river Allan, and a good three miles away from Stirling. The climax of the conference was a ceilidh in Stirling castle, to me a moment of almost perfect enjoyment in the swirling of traditional tunes (nicht wahr, Eric and Véro ?).

I gave a paper offering a fairly critical view of the EmLit project (European Minority Literatures in Translation), which I still otherwise fully support and have been an active actor of. I pointed to the (unavoidable?) arbitrariness in the selection of minority languages, to the sociological discrepancy in their current status, and to the major flaw of relying on relay translation. This being said, I still insisted that it was well worth buying the book (only 15 euros, 10 £) and / or checking the website, [http://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/acad/sa/artresearch/entertext/issues/entertext3\\_3](http://www.brunel.ac.uk/about/acad/sa/artresearch/entertext/issues/entertext3_3)

It brought together poets and translators from all parts of the world, often functioning both as poets and as translators, and sometimes like Lawrence Venuti, also being internationally known translato-logists. I was impressed by the number of poets who wrote across cultures, even when writing in their mother tongue, and I now have a small dossier of translations for *Le Journal des Poètes*. Here is one by Maureen Almond, where the crossing over is in time rather than space.

Maureen Almond

### **Ode to Ambition**

*(after Horace Ode 1.31 Quid dedicatum)*

So what should poets ask of academia  
once erudite façades have all been built?  
What honours do they seek, what aspiration  
ferments their thought until new words pour out?

Not the flowery praise of scholar-poets;  
not fruits of southern fame meant as a lure  
to so-called fertile ground where poetry houses  
are slowly starved of funding, that's for sure!

Let those with sponsors labour on their epics,  
let them trim verse back not let it roll.  
Let them toast their dry nouveau-success  
gained from emptying hearts and baring souls.

I've no desire to ride their trendy wagon,  
go celestial, have strange places for my head.  
I'd rather have a cocoa then rest easy  
in my loosely-sprung, uncontroversial bed.

So let me keep my common-grounded lyrics,  
my colloquial tone, my gritty northern voice.

Let me prize these gifts in ripe old age.  
Simple talent; good reason to rejoice.

**Ode à l'ambition**

*(d'après Horace Ode 1.31 Quid dedicatum)*

*Qu'attendent donc les poètes de l'université  
une fois érigées leurs façades érudités ?  
Quels honneurs cherchent-ils, et quelle aspiration  
féconde leur cerveau que coulent mots nouveaux ?*

*Pas l'hommage fleuri de poètes fonctionnaires ;  
pas les fruits d'une gloire du sud qui attire  
vers des terres dites fertiles où des maisons  
de poésie se meurent faute de subvention !*

*Que les sponsorisés s'échinent en épopées,  
qu'ils tortillent leurs vers sans les laisser couler.  
Qu'ils toastent à l'envi leur sèche success-story  
gagnée en cœurs vidés, en âmes dénudées.*

*Je n'ai nulle envie d'être du dernier bateau,  
planer zen, placer ma tête dieu sait comment.  
J'aime bien mieux ma foi une tasse de cacao  
et mon lit déformé, loin de tout différend.*

*Je m'en tiendrai donc aux vers du quotidien,  
à un ton familier, à mon parler rugueux.  
J'apprécie ces dons dans ma maturité.  
Talent simple, bonne raison d'être content.*



Coping a drystone wall (near Dunkeld)

Ten days later I attended a conference on literature of region and nation at the University of Aberdeen, and gave a paper on the use of Liege Walloon to translate Scots dialect, with Liz Lochhead's play *Mary Queen of Scots Got her Head Chopped Off* as illustration. I learned a lot from the issuing debate, there being quite a few knowledgeable Scots writers among participants.

In between (and to some extent during the conferences too) I roamed the countryside and found great places to swim in rivers, and spent four days with a friend who is also a great poet, and a

devoted drystone dyker, and just great lady, Kate Armstrong. About whom more on some other occasion. Meanwhile, one of her recent poems.

Kate Armstrong  
**Tollund Man**

Another fine museum, light  
Everywhere. Clarity, order, space.  
Wood, metal, heavy things made delicate  
In perfect perspex boxes. We walk with a sense of fate,  
a knowledge of what we do and why we came.

Here lies Tollund Man. So dark, you'd think all the light  
In the world had sunk. Much like a tree stump in a peat bog  
but human, small; we eye each other sideways,  
glance at our hands. We do not know his name,  
or his name for the ones from that distant race  
who stripped him, cut the black gash in his throat.  
The room is silent. Nobody lingers.  
This whole museum is his cairn.  
We pile our prayers over him, wrap him  
in our guilt, shovel our ignorance like grave-diggers  
to keep him from the light, the light from him,  
to make him go. There are no fingerprints upon his case.

***Homme de Tollund***

*Encore un beau musée, lumière  
partout. Clarté, ordre, espace.  
Bois, métal, objets lourds rendus délicats  
dans des vitrines en plexiglas. Nous avançons dans un sentiment de destin,  
sachant ce que nous faisons et pourquoi nous sommes venus.*

*Ici repose l'Homme de Tollund. Si noir, on dirait que toutes les lumières  
du monde ont sombré. Un peu comme une souche dans une tourbière  
mais humain, réduit; nous nous observons en coin,  
coups d'œil sur nos mains. Nous ne savons pas comment il s'appelle,  
ni comment il appelait ceux de cette race lointaine  
qui l'ont dévêtu, lui ont tranché la gorge.  
La salle est silencieuse. Personne ne s'attarde.  
Le musée tout entier est son cairn.  
Nous entassons sur lui nos prières, l'enveloppons  
de notre culpabilité, pelletons notre ignorance comme des fossoyeurs  
pour le protéger de la lumière, et la lumière de lui,  
le faire partir. Pas d'empreinte sur sa vitrine.*

Christine Pagnouille