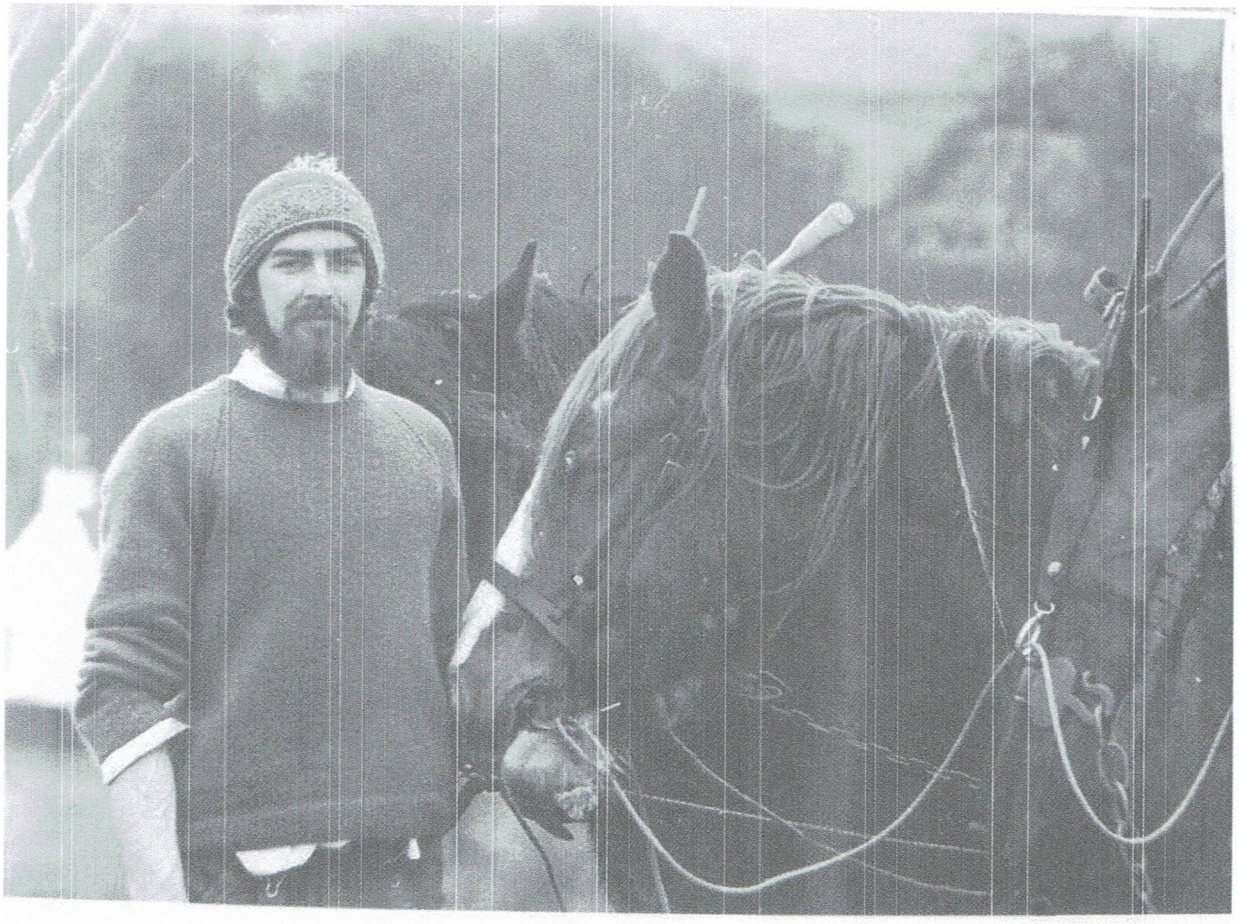
Essay by Jo Miller

'In Galloway the nicht': the writings of Logan Paterson of the Glenkens'



photograph courtesy of David Paterson

In September 2019, family, friends and others came together at the Ken Bridge Hotel, New Galloway, to share the poems and songs of Logan Paterson (1951-2013). The evening was organised by the local writing project *Ken Words* as a way of exploring Logan's writings in a ceilidh setting, through performance, photographs and conversation with those who knew him. Logan's work is inspired by his own community, and the language is a spectrum of Scots through to English. His verses contribute to a valuable historical record of rural Galloway, but also represent an individual expressive urge; he was unpublished, but not unknown.

How does this fit into a wider Galloway and Scottish scene? There is a long tradition of self-taught poets and song-makers working within their own localities, which in Galloway goes back to the Borgue poet William Nicholson (1782-1849) and beyond. The success of Robert Burns (1759-96) and James Hogg (1770-1835) gave others confidence to make poetry about daily life, often drawing on oral tradition. The subsequent explosion of regional poetry during the 19th century was also due to the new print press and newspapers, in which local poets were often

published. However, Scottish poetry has sometimes been seen as entering a period of decline in the nineteenth century, with writing in Scots criticised for its use of parochial dialect and the sentimentalism of the kailyard, but this has been reassessed more recently. Valentina Bold considers the self-taught tradition, which reached its peak with Hogg, as the most important strand in the poetry of the period and one with a lasting impact on Scottish literature. Kirstie Blair also comments that a focus on individual poets has neglected the 'distinctive Scottish verse culture' of Victorian times, both urban and rural. Poets in the countryside established a connection with the land and its people, celebrating the value of rural life and agricultural work, often in local dialect; 'everything they wrote, whether or not it passed muster as art, is potentially of value to ethnologists and historians'.[1] Such writing is useful to poets' own communities within and beyond their own lifetimes, and so it is with Logan Paterson.

But he is not an isolated example in the Glenkens. For instance, a book of poems by shepherd Thomas Murray of Moorbrock (Carsphairn) published in 1897 ran to three editions, with one of the poems persisting as a song in SW Scotland up to the present day. I myself have copies of the notebooks of other local collectors and makers of verses in the 20th century. Women have been poets too, if not always publicly, as seen in a little book of the life and writing of Bunty Templeton (1924-2014), also of Moorbrock. One of her poems laments the decline of the Scots language:

> What pride has taen ower?
> Oor Scots words near gaen
> Only a remnant o Lallans remains...

It could be argued that Logan was writing at the tail end of this tradition, but there is a role in every community for people who chronicle what's going on around them, capturing and communicating things for the rest of us. The following song (written c.1990), for example, documents one of the last hand sheep clippings in the district, which he himself attended. In his own creative voice, Logan locates the event in the landscape of the Forrest Glen and captures the sociability of the occasion. He recites the names of those present, the tasks involved, and the all-important food and drink required:

> It was the last neebourin[2] in the Glenkens. I wis in at the tail end o that in the early '70s. Folk helped each other out. There wad be a gang o' clippers - shepherds an others. I've seen fifteen people in the buchts[3] o Knockreoch, and it wis a sorta privilege tae be there.
>
> Well, there wis Jamie McWhan, he worked at Blawquhairn. There wis Davie Bertram, he wis the herd at Faskie [Stroanfasket]; he pulled the sheep, I wis the catcher. Willie

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[1] Cowan, E.J. 2019. 'Identity' in *Dumfries and Galloway: People and place, c1700-1914*, eds. E.J. Cowan and K. Veitch, Edinburgh: John Donald, pp.31-69.

[2] *neebourin* - a gathering to mutually assist on a farm

[3] *bucht* - sheepfold

Bertram, he was clippin. An' Arnold Sharp, he wis clippin. Alan McFegan, he wis the herd at Knockreoch, [and] Dick Cross, they a' clipped on a stool wi shears, it wis hand clippin. I wis the youngest, aye. We used tae go up tae the hoose aboot half past six an' get yer breakfast - bacon, eggs, a fried tattie scone, fried breid, sausage; plenty. Ye were needin it, for this wis tae take ye through tae denner time. The herd's wife wad make a can full o' tea, scones, aboot three o'clock, an' then [at] half past five, six o'clock ye'd get yer tea. It wis very special, workin up there. Cos they did it for nothing - no-one got paid. It's the Rhinns o' the Kells. Beautiful sheep, an' jist workin mornin till late, an' the sun settin behind them like heaven!

The Buchts o Knockreoch

Well up on the moor where the laverock[4] does sing
And the pee wee[5] does cry and sooch[6] wi its wing
Whaur the whaup[7] it does hing frae the threids o the win
Is whaur ye'll fin the buchts o Knockreoch

CHORUS:
O the buchts o Knockreoch, the buchts o Knockreoch
Close by tae the Rhinns o the Kells
Bring memories tae me o yon fine Glenkens men
Whae wrocht in the buchts o Knockreoch

The hirsel[8] was gathered in the early morn
And all of the ewes were to be hand shorn
It was a privilege to work at Knockreoch yon day
And be part of that time honoured neighbourly way

Davy fae Fasket he bolted tae me
And I laid a ewe by each stool clippers knee
And Jimmy McWhan rolled fleeces sae neat
And tramped them in the bag at Knockreoch

We wrocht fae sunrise tae nicht time at nine
And 40 score ewes o their fleeces were done
And weary were a' that slipped doon the brae
That wrocht yon day long at Knockreoch

Yin day I'll return tae yon buchts yinst again

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[4] *laverock* - lark

[5] *pee wee* - lapwing

[6] *sooch* (also locally 'shuch') - a whistling or rushing sound of something moving at speed (e.g. bird's wings, running water)

[7] *whaup* - curlew

[8] *hirsel* – flock of sheep

Whaur noo aw the shearin is din by machine
Nae mair jolly neighbours gien a helpin hand
It's a gey lonely day at Knockreoch

Logan grew up in New Galloway, and always had an interest in local characters and traditional farming practices, especially working horses and their relationship with their handlers. This extract conveys his powers of observation and description:

> 'Hup!' and 'yine!' - music to my ears - the traditional commands from the Galloway horseman for 'move right' and 'move left' evoke memories from the 1970s when the art of competition horse ploughing had all but died out, and memories of the few men who kept it going with their expert audience of old champion ploughmen, medals glinting on silver watch chains adorning dark waistcoats. Thumbs tucked in trouser pockets, arms spreading, jacket displaying the source of their pride.
>
> A pair of white horses glinting like spectres, muntin bells[9] tinkling in the frosty morning mist. The horses' breath like dragon smoke, the steam rising from their backs and the chink of chains. And then the smell – warm horse mixed with the musk of newly sculpted soil and the gentle sound of plough cutting through the recently hoof-shaken sod. God speed the plough.

In this final short lyric, apparently intended as a song, Logan identifies himself, and his life's journey, with Galloway.

I was born in Gallowa

CHORUS:
I was born in Gallowa, I was reared in Gallowa
Weel I wrocht for Gallowa, an it is there I'll dee-o

But in atween the twa
Mony a gloamin, mony a daw
Mony a drink and mony a freen
Have pairtnered me in Gallowa

Mony a steg[10] ower mony a mile
Mony a crack, mony a smile
Mony's the change I hae seen
In ma time o in atween

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[9] 'mounting' bells on the horse's harness

[10] *steg* - striding out

Thanks *to the following for their assistance: Dave Paterson and other family members, Jane McBeth and Andrew Mellor of Ken Words.*

References

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Two Micro Fictions by Ian C Smith

Vitruvian Man

In Luna Park, the Giggle Palace, a large roofed area enclosed between the Big Dipper and Scenic Railway, tamer rides, stalls, outside, featured numerous attractions: snaky steep slides to toss you about at speed, full-length mirrors distorting reflections, and other gimcrack novelties. When I was a skinny seventeen, revolving cylinders lured me. A couple of metres in diameter, open-ended, their slow-paced revolutions tumbled fun seekers drunkenly. A uniformed sailor spread-eagled himself inside one, limbs rigid as he slowly turned upside down before the comparative relief of rotating upright once more. He stopped for a while then stepped up again so I positioned myself at the other end facing him. This was an undisguised stand-off. We were the same height, he older. I think we reached sixteen revolutions eyeing each other silently before he quit. By then a crowd had gathered as if watching sport, a sideshow within a sideshow. I completed an extra turn, one for each of my years, then quit also, entire body trembling, spent, elated as I picked up my loose change.

Stepping into the past sheepishly, grey-haired, but not bad for my age, I try it again, telling my sons about this long-ago feat which fails to impress them. After one revolution I quit before embarrassment, blood pounding my temples, muscles, arms, legs, shrieking in lactic distress after almost collapsing, fingers engorged, alarmed by time's downslide, amazed by my youthful self as if he were someone else, which he was, now so far beyond reach, my boys' interest already moved on.