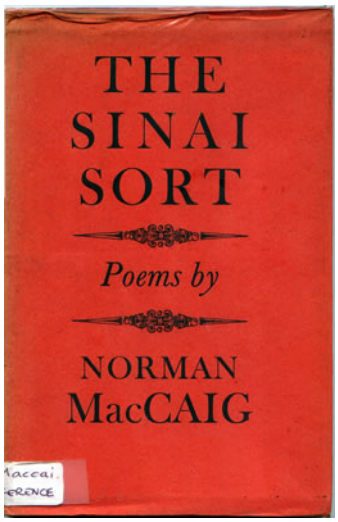
On *The Sinai Sort* (1957) by Norman MacCaig

Ken Cockburn



Preface

This essay was one of eight written for the Scottish Poetry Library's website, offering an introduction to 20th century Scottish poetry by considering the work of the eight poets represented in the painting Poets' Pub (1980) by Alexander Moffat. Covering the decades from the 1920s to the 1990s, a collection by each poet is considered in detail under the headings The Book, The Title, The Decade, A Contemporary Reading and Further Reading.

1920s, Hugh MacDiarmid, *Sangschaw*
1930s, Sorley MacLean, *17 Poems for 6d: in Gaelic, Scots and English* (with Robert Garioch)
1940s, Sydney Goodsir Smith, *Under the Eildon Tree*
1950s, Norman MacCaig, *The Sinai Sort*
1960s, Edwin Morgan, *The Second Life*
1970s, Robert Garioch, *Doktor Faust in Rose Street*
1980s, George Mackay Brown, *The Wreck of the Archangel*
1990s, Iain Crichton Smith, *Ends and Beginnings*

The essays were written in 2003 by Ken Cockburn for the Scottish Poetry Library's website, where they were available from 2004 until c.2010. They are presented here with some abridgements, corrections and amendments.

The Book

MacCaig, Norman
The Sinai Sort
(London: The Hogarth Press, 1957)
220x145mm, hardback, reddish-brown cover with black print, 62pp

The volume lacks acknowledgements regarding poems previously printed elsewhere, or any commentary by way of preface, afterword or even cover 'blurb'. Each poem begins on a new page. The book contains 44 poems, all printed on one or two pages.

Of these, MacCaig chose to include only 5 in *Old Maps and New: Selected Poems* (1978). *Collected Poems* (1990) reprints only 28 of them - although MacCaig chose to include 10 previously uncollected poems written around the same time. MacCaig certainly omits some of the weaker poems, but the claims of stronger pieces are also ignored, such as the opening poem 'The Man in the Seed'; 'Descending Word' has some very fine lines; and the opening stanza of 'A Glass of Summer' is a wonderful description of a summer Highland scene.

The Title

The phrase 'the Sinai sort' occurs in the poem 'Golden Calf', the fourth poem in the book and, at 48 lines, one of the longest. The first stanza reads:

> If all the answer's to be the Sinai sort,
> The incorruptible lava of the word
> Made alphabetic in a spoutstorm, what
> Mere human vocables you've ever heard,
> Poor golden calf, could overbear, I wonder,
> The magniloquence of thunder?

The story of the golden calf is found in the Old Testament, Exodus chapter 32; the King James Bible gives this synopsis.

1 The people, in the absence of Moses, cause Aaron to make a calf. 7 God is angered thereby. 11 At the entreaty of Moses he is appeased. 15 Moses cometh down with the tablets. 19 He breaketh them. 20 He destroyeth the calf. 22 Aaron's excuse for himself. 25 Moses causes the idolators to be slain. 30 He prayeth for the people.

MacCaig's poem is an address to the calf, offering sympathy for it, though the 'I' of the poem also plays the role of Moses, deadening love, beauty and art. The poem deals with the unresolved conflict between what might be described as righteous principle and pragmatic compromise leading to the decline of both, the edging forward of the desert. Whether the poem is intended to resonate with contemporary events (the state of Israel being barely ten years young when the poem was published) is unclear.

A number of poems in the collection refer back to the Old Testament, specifically:
'After Eden' (Genesis 3, 23-24, the expulsion from Eden);
'In No Time at All' (Eden again, though less directly);
'Botanic Gardens' (as 'After Eden', but this time with a playful contemporary slant);
'Another Flood' (Genesis 6-9, the Flood and Noah's Ark);
'Stone Pillow' (Genesis 28, the story of Jacob's ladder, his vision of heaven).

The cruelty of the God of these poems is mitigated somewhat by other poems which draw on the redemptive emphasis of the New Testament: 'Particular You', 'Landscapes Old and New', 'Descending Word', 'Dying Landscape', and 'Spectroscope'.

The imagery borrowed from the New Testament tends to be more concerned with ideas rather than stories, and the images tend to resonate within, rather than define, the main content of the poems.

Two contemporary reviews of the book both comment on the title. Walter Keir in *The Saltire Review* wrote that '[MacCaig's] metaphors, although always rich and suggestive, are occasionally arbitrary, as some may think his title, at once cryptic and too overburdened with overtones'. John Holloway in *The London Magazine* limited himself to 'an ironical title, I suspect'.

The Decade – 1950s

To generalise greatly, the 1950s, in Europe at least, were the most settled and prosperous decade since the century began. After two world wars, a disastrous economic depression, violent revolutions and ideological struggles, Europe had settled into the uneasy peace known as the Cold War, with western European capitalism running neck-and-neck with eastern European communism in the race to rebuild the continent economically and

culturally following World War Two. Compared to the interwar years, it was a time of social conformity, a kind of 'back-to-basics' after the vast upheavals of the previous forty years. But all this was contained within a world which, for the first time in human existence, had the capacity to destroy itself overnight, by way of the atom bomb.

MacCaig, like Goodsir Smith, writes very much as an individual, but without referring to contemporary events. The poems are given a 'timeless' quality by referring to landscapes, established biblical events, existential situations. There is a sense here of an individual trying to understand and control only his own individual situation; broader social matters are not his concern.

A Contemporary Reading

I.

What follows are notes made during a first reading, a spontaneity of response as an attempt to evade the strict formal control exerted on and by these poems.

a diffuse, Protean, active God, ungraspable in any single form... metaphysical and 'real' or 'concrete' poems, the former often using very concrete, direct images within a more abstract flow, the latter with a metaphysical undercurrent... darkness, brightness, 'dramatised' or staged, ie words repeated, in new contexts, developed... the poem coming and going in and out of focus, within the steady formal precision... abstract, but with reference to the immediate, 'my ordinary coarse ground'... always an 'I' present, or returned to, the individual mind... immediate situation in the background, ideas foregrounded... ideas in things... ditto, atmospheric, but perhaps the idea is weaker, or has got lost... seems disconnected, abstruse... 'field mouse and unicorn', the real & tiny, the mythical & huge, presented in the same moment without differentiation... jaunty but unengaging, too clever... speed and simplicity (of syntax)... passion (secret, forbidden?)... again good opening but soon loses its direction... experiencing miracles is ordinary (part of their being miracles?)... visions, and bodily sensations... 'you', the reader, or a person (lover) known to the poet?... writing as an incomplete process, without God and the reader... like a dated 'symbolist' painting. Unconvincing overall, good individual images... future tense, a process intuited but not yet occured... 'you', another person (absent lover?), the reader, the summer, God?... observation -> speculation... importance of order ('gravity')... absence, transience, but the actuality, uncancelled, of what has been, he

asserts... absolute particularity of the other. Significance of difference, rather than identity or 'match' - weakness or failure of metaphor. Individuality without solipsism, not 'private nowhere' but necessity/authority of 'the one law', truth & governance, solitude & connectedness, humanity's godliness - no absolutes or generalities other than those generated & realised by the individual according to universal (?) human principles. and to do this necessarily abjuring metaphor-!... 'immortal ordinariness', the divine as part/aspect of the human... observing the present, including the writing of this poem, acting in the future, with & without him, waving 'perpetual goodbye'... 'the one law' (does he ever define what this might be, or is it his substitute for God?)... human activity creating a sense of the divine, paradox that the former is transient, the latter not... 3rd person, relatively unusual. Direct, simple, effective. Solitude of creation, community of 'publishing'... his comments on the importance of the 'idea' in art (one wonders whether he appreciated conceptual art?!)... God and order, how are they defined / understood (moon and stars, immutable pulls beyond reason, have to be accepted (?) intuitively)...

II.

First with *Riding Lights* (1955), and then with this collection, MacCaig sought to distance himself from the so-called Apocalypse movement of the 1940s with which he had been associated. Characterised by verbal excess and metaphorical wildness, aspects of it feed through into MacCaig's later work, particularly his acute and often surprising though always apt metaphors; and in fact there is less of an abrupt change of tack between MacCaig's first two books, published in the 1940s, and the two volumes he published in the 1950s, than his later public statements insisted upon. (Here the only previously published title he acknowledges is *Riding Lights*.) *The Sinai Sort* is a collection of great formal control, and, within limited parameters, variety as well. Each poem is written in stanzas, and within the poem each stanza is a regular length and follows the same rhyme scheme. However from poem to poem the number of lines per stanza varies, as do the number of stanzas that make up the poem, and the rhyme scheme, and I don't think there are two poems in the book which are 'clones' of each other.

The poems in *The Sinai Sort* vary between those in which MacCaig allows all the ideas to reside in things, without commentary or speculation; and purely speculative poems where the images are called up if not completely at random then certainly within a very wide scope. The former poems are probably the more satisfying and complete poems, and although the latter

have their pleasures, surprises and strengths too, they rarely work so well as complete pieces.

MacCaig draws on the Old Testament, on Christ's message of the Word from the New Testament and, in an isolated but beautifully realised instance, on the Greek pantheon ('Clachtoll'). God is not so much a separate, discrete identity, though he is effectively addressed as such in 'Another Flood', as human potentiality to be realised by attentiveness, intuitive perception and thought. The 'moonraker' of the first poem, which sets the tone for the rest of the collection, articulates an irrationality directed by an external force (the pull of the moon), so not simply wilful, random or purely subjective / solipsistic.

Most of the poems feature an 'I', who rarely seems to adopt an identifiably different persona. This 'I' often address a 'you', though exactly who this is is never clear. It varies (sometimes within the same poem) between a person known to the narrator; the reader; the subject of the poem, eg 'summer'; and God, ie a concept of intelligence beyond the mind of the poet. While this 'flexibility' within individual poems opens them up to a variety of speculations, overall I have a sense of a non-committal address, an unwillingness to engage completely with the other. This is probably least problematic as regards the idea of God, whose indefinability MacCaig, with his typical love of paradox, enjoys trying to define while acknowledging the hopelessness of his task. As regards the reader, compared with his near-contemporary W.S.Graham, MacCaig does not address them nearly so directly, but does give hints of his awareness of their necessary presence:

> Now like a tree I fruitless stand and house
> Dreams of dead worlds in my dependent boughs…

the 'boughs' being 'dependent' both on God for the inspiration of mind which will lead to the poem's creation, and the reader (of the future) to read and thus re-animate the ideas, the thinking which has created the poem. This is still a relatively unusual quality to find in 20th century poetry, beyond the exemplary Graham who took this relationship of writer to future and thus imaginary reader as one of his main themes. It's with regard to the other person that MacCaig's poems seem least convincing and effective. He is very good at evoking places (city, country, sea), the natural world, and his own existential experiences and thought processes, but is less good, here at least, at presenting other people. Andrew Duncan has written that '[MacCaig's] failure to write involving love poems places a limit on the whole enterprise', and the love poems in *The Sinai Sort* come across as evasive and clever,

rather than heartfelt. 'Gifts' is superficially an attempt to be honest about the limits of his love, but what starts out as an address to a lover seems to have moved on to something more metaphysical by the end, and the other is forgotten. There are recurrent if fleeting images of illicit love in the book, and while to some extent they chime with MacCaig's acknowledgement of insoluble existential problems, they also seem to realise an unwillingness on MacCaig's part to acknowledge, at least in print, his own feelings, rather than his own thoughts where he seems to be much more comfortable. Without wishing to get involved in biographical fact or speculation, for all the precision and sensitivity of his writing, MacCaig is unable to write of love, either its joys or pains, and indeed perhaps more broadly of human relationships. Compared to his companions in Poets' Pub he is reticent in the extreme; and even Edwin Morgan, who did not come out as a gay man until the age of seventy in 1990, was able to write and publish, from the 1960s onwards, veiled but honest and moving poems about his own experience of love.

Further Reading

MacCaig, Norman
Collected Poems: a new edition
(London: Chatto & Windus, 1990)

MacCaig, Norman
The Way I Say It
(Dublin: Claddagh Records, 1974)
LP: poems read by the author; sleeve notes by Jack Rillie.

McNeill, Majory
Norman MacCaig, A Study of his Life and Work
(Edinburgh: The Mercat Press, 1996)

Edinburgh Review
no.71, November 1985
Anonymous review of Collected Poems by Norman MacCaig, pp.139-142.
Includes a comparison of the use of the first-person by MacCaig and W.S. Graham.

The Saltire Review
vol.4 no.11, Summer 1957
Review of The Sinai Sort by Walter Keir, pp.75-7

The London Magazine
vol.4 no.9, September 1957
Review of The Sinai Sort by John Holloway, pp.72-3

Jabberwock (Edinburgh Univeristy Review)
Summer 1957
Article by Norman MacCaig, 'Poetry and the Public', pp.18-20