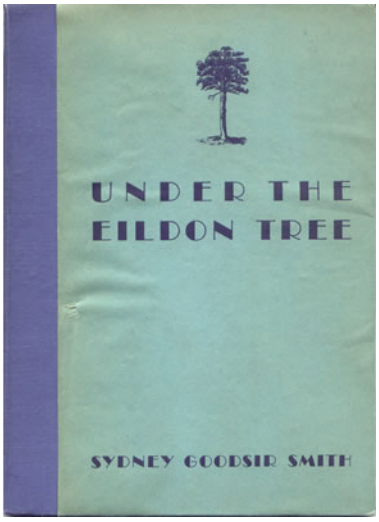
On *Under the Eildon Tree* (1948) by Sydney Goodsir Smith

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

Smith, Sydney Goodsir
Under the Eildon Tree: a poem in 24 elegies
(Edinburgh: Serif, 1948)
250x185mm, green cover with blue spine, 74pp
(Serif published a second edition in 1954)

The frontispiece features a drawing of the author by Denis Peploe.

The title page (p.9) reads as follows:

UNDER THE EILDON TREE
A Poem in XXIV Elegies
by
SYDNEY GOODSIR SMITH
'Errat qui finem vesani quaerit amoris'
PROP. LIB. II. XV
SERIF BOOKS
Edinburgh
MCMXLVIII

The Latin tag - 'he errs who asks the limit of love's madness' - is from Sextus Aurelius Propertius, born about 50BC, and integrated into Modernism by way of Pound's 'Homage to Sextus Propertius' of 1919, of which Eliot wrote: 'it is not a translation, it is a paraphrase, or still more truly (for the instructed) a persona.'

The following page notes that the edition 'is limited to three hundred and fifty copies, fifty of which have been numbered and signed by the artist and author'.

The first edition features an epigraph from Gavin Douglas (1475-c.1522).

> Your sweet mirthis are mixt with bitterness;
> Quhat is your dreary game? a merry pain;
> Your wark unthrift, your quiet is restless,
> Your lust liking in langour to remain,
> Friendschip torment, your traist is but ane trane:
> O love, quidder art thou joy or fulishness,
> That makis folk sa glaid of thair distress?

Douglas translated the Aeneid into Scots, and prefaced each of its twelve 'books' with a substantial prologue; the epigraph is from that for Book IV. The final two lines appear as a coda to Elegy XXI. Smith edited a selection of Douglas's works for the Saltire Society in 1959.

In the second edition this epigraph is accompanied by two stanzas from the ballad 'Thomas the Rhymer'. Neither are given in Smith's *Collected Poems* (1975).

At the end of the final poem is written:

> Quod S. G. S., Makar,
> Embro toun, Dec. 1946-Feb. 1947

The page width allows all of Smith's lines, some of which are relatively long, to be printed unbroken. The paper itself is thin, and there is an amount of see-through.

The Title

In the anonymous medieval ballad 'Thomas the Rhymer', Thomas spies 'a ladye bright / come riding down by the Eildon Tree'. She is 'the Queen o' fair Elfland', and she challenges Thomas to kiss her:

> 'Betide me weal, betide me woe,
> That weird shall never daunten me.'
> Syne he has kiss'd her rosy lips,
> All underneath the Eildon Tree.
>
> 'Nou ye maun gang wi me,' she said,
> 'True Tammas, ye maun gang wi me;
> And ye maun ser' me sevin year,
> Throu weill or wae as may chance to be.'

Thomas gains access to Elfland by daring to love its Queen; but the poem is silent about what he does or learns there, and of his return to the world. It ends simply with the lines:

> And till seven years were gane and past
> True Thomas on earth was never seen.

Other than the title, the only reference to the poem in Smith's sequence comes at the very end (Poem XXIV):

> Syne the hill opened
> And the licht o' the sun beglaumert
> The een like the leam o' virgin snaw,
> And the derkenin and the dawin
> Were the sevinth year.

Smith's sequence can be read, then, as the story of the poet's seven years in Elfland when he is in thrall to its Queen, recalled and narrated as he is about to step back into the world of men. Its subject is a double death - while in 'Elfland', his death to the world, and when released back to the world, the death of his ecstatic self.

The sequence is twice described as a 'lustrum', in poem III:

> Here is ending, here the end,
> The ultimate great sang
> Rounds aff the lustrum.

and poem XXIV:

> A lustrum endit.

'Lustrum' is 'a ceremonial purification rite of the Roman people made every five years, after the taking of the census' (*Chambers Dictionary*, 1998). In this sense the poet's experience is further widened to become an act of collective purification, or at least that of an individual having a collective relevance.

The Decade – 1940s

The mood of ending, exhaustion, and an unwillingness or inability to face the future that pervades *Under the Eildon Tree* can be related to the immediate post-war period – the exhaustion and poverty of the European states (both the victorious and the defeated), the liberation of the concentration camps and the two atom bombs dropped on Japan.

There comes to mind Adorno's statement that 'to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric'. *Under the Eildon Tree* is one attempt to write poetry nonetheless, but of a type which in its obsession with the individual is a rejection of the collective politics which led the world to ruin. Smith, who

worked with Polish exiles in Scotland during the war, was made aware by them of Stalin's brutality in eastern Europe: indeed it is Smith whom Sorley MacLean credits as ridding him of his attraction to Stalin's brand of communism.

A Contemporary Reading

The sequence consists of 24 poems, numbered I–XXIV, each with an individual title. They vary in length from 19 to 206 lines, and many are subdivided into numbered sections, between two and six. In total the sequence is about 1400 lines. Of its form Norman MacCaig has written: 'Its elegies are paragraphic, not stanzaic, in form: the metre is iambic, but the measure is the cadence and not the foot; the lines vary widely in length; and they are unrhymed.'

There is no obvious narrative or character development. The poems describe a given (if heightened) state of mind rather than a process, and there is no real sense of transformation. This stems from the concept of the sequence (see The Title, above), and the opening poems suffer from an insistence on stating that this is a farewell or an ending. In effect the sequence is a working through of what has already happened, rather than something happening in the course of it. Lowell's point that 'a poem is an event, not the record of an event' has been missed. There is a lack of dramatic tension, and too often we are in the presence not of love but its shades: 'Dido' (XVI) as history painting rather than narrative drama or character study, or the static backward-looking monologue of 'Tristram' (XX).

The main subject is love, more specifically, 'Luve's arcane delirium' (XXII, iii). The sequence offers sudden changes of mood and tone, but for all the stated 'delirium' Smith offers only two moods, ecstatic and wistful. When he does them well, the poem comes to life, but there are many passages in which both moods seem too much like a habit to be convincing. MacCaig acknowledges such weaknesses, but tries to turn them into strengths: 'in the *Eildon Tree* [Smith] has learned to make use of the hollowness and inflation of rhetoric, within a context, to underscore, by his own recognition of its falseness, the sincerity of the feelings out of which the total poem is generated'. For this reader the self-deflatory ironical asides become tedious, the poet talking to himself rather than to the reader, and trying to get away with overblown rhetoric by pointing it up as indulgent.

References are made to, indeed individual poems built around, celebrated lovers from a wide range of history, literature and myth. The cast includes Robert Burns and his 'Highland Mary'; Orpheus and Eurydice; Cuchulainn, Eimhir, and Fann; Dido and Aeneas; Tristram and Iseult; Anthony and Cleopatra (though the latter remains off-stage). These are interspersed with more personal poems, and the main voice / persona of Smith as the archetypal poet-lover-fool is always returned to. The broader cast underlines the ability his character has gained to empathise with other mythical lovers, and the fact that his individual circumstance is one which has been played out many times before, and will continue to be in the future. The opening poem sets up the theme of the impermanence and continuity of love, and of poetry: even if the lovers are inconstant, and the individual example is lost, the general pattern will continue to be lived and restated.

This is the lover's sequence, rather than the beloved's. In *Dain do Eimhir*, MacLean repeatedly describes the world in terms of the beloved and his love for her; the world is understood, vastly expanded, by way of a connection to another person. In *Under the Eildon Tree* the beloved is often a passive, silent figure, the recipient of the lover's boisterous desire or satiated tenderness. Eurydice - the beautiful, desired, almost attainable ghost - is the best example of this. The figure of Sandra in the following poem (XIII) is the most immediately present and vital of all the female characters, and it's here that love most animates the world. The longest poem of the sequence, in its fourth section (of five) the couple go to bed together, but Smith avoids describing their intimacy. At first this might seem like a failure of nerve, but instead he creates a vision of the entire city (Edinburgh) 'at it', the lights in the windows going on and off in a sexual rhythm; then extends this to 'Continents and empires / Gien owre entire / Til the joukerie-poukerie'. The section ends with a vision of the moon as Diana moving over the town, a chaste blessing on the satisfaction of desire. It's this transformation of the contemporary which brings the poem to life; the obsessive lover's act taking over the city, and the world beyond it, that expresses the intensity of love active in the world, rather than done and dusted in memory. Still, Sandra never speaks, and the most tender moment of the poem comes at the end when she is observed, asleep, by the poet.

Love itself - its 'authentic' self, rather than mere 'phantasie' - is said to be:

> ...citadelled, of course, i' the hert.
> There, was its keep and donjon dour,
> Its battlement waas, its oubliettes,
> Its dernit vennels, drawbrig and the lave!

(Poem XIV, ii)

Love is a medieval castle: static, monumental, and belonging to the past. It is a curiously dead image for what is being presented as life's essence, yet it's linked to the neo-medievalism of Smith's language. If English was the language of authority and Empire, then to write in Scots was anti-authoritarian and anti-imperial. However spoken Scots, by the 1940s, had suffered two centuries or more of decreasing use, both in terms of the number of speakers and the situations in which it was used. MacDiarmid in the 1920s created 'synthetic Scots' by integrating words and phrases indiscriminately from any region and time-period. Smith, raised and educated in New Zealand and England, had no experience as a Scots speaker and, though greatly inspired by MacDiarmid, learned his Scots from medieval poetry. It may be that, in going back to this 'source', Smith saw in such work a model of linguistic and emotional authenticity, and drew his metaphors from it accordingly. MacCaig wrote of Smith's early work that 'the thought was not in the language: it was dressed in it. And very often the garment was several sizes too large.' This remains true of at least parts of *Under the Eildon Tree*, as rhetoric replaces personal statement, variety and range replace intensity, and archaic vocabulary and imagery deflect an engagement with the present.

Despite this focus on the past, the sequence occasionally refers to contemporary events. Stalin is addressed directly in 'Slugabed', (V). The opening section presents the poet, 'Sydney Slugabed Godless Smith', as a good-for-nothing smoking in bed at noon, physically inactive yet mentally agile and vividly present. The notion of ending, elsewhere a dramatic dead weight, is here used for humour (that it should have taken western civilisation five centuries to produce this). He imagines Stalin's 'sermon' upon his indolence crossing Europe to arrive 'Swack! at my front door'. If in *Sangschaw*, as one poem-title puts it, 'God Takes a Rest', in Smith's world the gods have woken up to exercise a despotic power over humanity, which in turn no longer believes it possible to aspire to a godlike status. The lethargy of the lovesick poet leaves him incapable of stirring to change the world, but presents itself as a doomed romantic act of resistance against the insistent demands of contemporary tyrants.

In 'Moriturus te Saluto' (XI) the poet is entertainer, patient, specimen, accused, for various authority figures – empress, judge, soldier, queen, lawyer, surgeon. All control their own 'theatre' – courtroom, arena, operating room – in which the lover is an unwilling participant. These figures finally coalesce into a 'divine white chirugeon / Masquit and gauntelate as for

barrace' (a surgeon dressed as if for a jousting tournament) who the poet recognises as death:

> Madam, I ken ye fine. I'm pleased to meet ye,
> My maistress with the satin smile,
> My dumb and dizzy blonde,
> O Mors!

Smith moves with great fluidity through his range of characters, voices, situations and references (at 45 lines it is by no means one of the longer elegies), and there are various elements of surprise: the revelation of the surgeon / knight figure as female; the medieval figure of Death realised as a film-star, a dumb-blonde; and an erotic charge to this recognition. The closing address to Death, as to an equal, reveals a courage on the poet's part elsewhere buried beneath rhetoric, and the poem lifts at the end with this recognition, rather than the resigned elegiac fall Smith prefers elsewhere.

If the lover is merely a plaything of the powerful, cast into dangerous situations for their amusement, his recompense is an intensity of emotion; his redemption, that love frees him from the meaningless or unreturned worship of the gods. This disgust with authority spreads to all forms of rational thought – the poet's inspiration can only be diluted and corrupted by such – and leads to an underlying anti-intellectualism, oddly in keeping with that of the totalitarian figures the poem dismisses elsewhere. The expression of subjective inspiration rooted in the past, coupled with a rhetorical protest against 20th century political tyranny, took root as a strand in Scottish literary thought at least until the 1970s, by which time poets from the west of Scotland – first Edwin Morgan, then Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead and others – had absorbed the formal lessons of Concrete Poetry and the demotic speech patterns of North American writers, to develop contemporary spoken speech (without being self-consciously concerned as to its place within the spectrum of 'Scots') within new poetic forms which looked outward and forward rather than inward and backward.

Further Reading

Smith, Sydney Goodsir
Collected poems 1941-1975
(London: John Calder, 1975)
With an introduction by Hugh McDiarmid

Smith, Sydney Goodsir
Under the Eildon Tree: a poem in 24 elegies
(Glasgow: Scotsoun, 1977)
Audio tape. Introduction by Alexander Scott; read by Alexander Scott and Donald Campbell.

Smith, Sydney Goodsir
The Deevil's waltz: Sydney Goodsir Smith reads his poetry
(Dublin: Claddagh, 1978)
LP, with an introduction by John Montague, and a cover photograph of the author. Includes elegies I, III, V, XIII and XXIII.

Smith, Sydney Goodsir
The drawings of Sydney Goodsir Smith, poet
collected by Ian Begg; edited by Joy Hendry
(Edinburgh: Chapman/Tuckwell Press, 1998)
Published on behalf of the New Auk Society. Includes poems, photographs of Sydney, and introductions to his artwork and life. With index including provenance of the drawings.

For Sydney Goodsir Smith
(Loanhead: M. Macdonald, 1975)
A book of tributes published following Smith's sudden death in January 1975, with contributions from: Robert Garioch, Alexander Scott, Norman MacCaig, David Murison, Hugh MacDiarmid, George Mackay Brown, Iain Crichton Smith, Sorley MacLean, W.R. Aitken, Denis Peploe

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MacCaig, Norman: 'The Poetry of Sydney Goodsir Smith', pp.14-19