REVIEW

Douglas Watt, *A History of Moments*, Edinburgh: 50 Fun Ltd, 2005. £4.99 (paper), 89 pp. ISBN 0-9549668-4-8.

Over the centuries, Scotland's popular history has been revitalized through a variety of literary genres. Early on, chroniclers such as Fordun and Bower and poets such as Barbour and Blind Hary put an emerging nationalistic spin on the tumultuous medieval period. In the early 1800's, Sir Walter Scott revived interest in a fading Scottish identity through his romantic *Waverly Novels*, and more recently historical novels, of which Simon Taylor's 1992 *Mortimer's Deep* is example, have reconstructed regional histories and legends through the eyes of fictional or fictionalized characters. Douglas Watt's collection of poems presents a unique view of Scotland's history spanning the centuries from the sub-Roman period to the present day. While the book jacket notes that the poems offer 'glimpses and voices from the past,' in actuality the poems are the modern voice of the author as he relates the 'history' of his journey toward his Ph.D. in Scottish history at the University of Edinburgh. The poems are his thoughtful and personal responses to the events, places, and people (past and present) that he encountered in the course of his studies.

Fundamentally, the format of the collection is original and refreshing: Watt has prefaced each poem with a brief history of the period with which each composition is concerned, and the collection is 'presented chronologically' from the Early Middle Ages to the present. He begins with 'Scottish Clouds, Athelstane,' a short reflection on the battle in which it is believed the Saltire flag originated, and bridges time to the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament. Along the way, Watt gives us "moments" in time to consider: events such as the Wars of Independence, the Reformation, the education of James VI, and the Highland Clearance; and snapshots of well known people such as William Wallace and Adam Smith, or less well-knowns like Jeannie Kinnaird and the legions of unknowns who emigrated from Scotland

throughout its history. For the reader who does not initially want to wade through a long, academic volume of Scotland's history, this format is ideal. Mixing in a bit of legend with his historical synopses, Watt has captured some of the most important moments in Scotland's past, and in the back of the collection is a timeline that offers a brief overview of some historic periods/events and some of the selections. A troubling fundamental of the book is the epigram immediately prior to the start of the collection: 'Tell me where all past years are' taken from John Donne's 'Song.' One wonders why the words of an English poet introduce a work celebrating Scotland's past. Surely a similar notion could have been found amongst the works of William Dunbar, Gavin Douglas, or Robert Burns. Also missing from the collection is a short bibliography. Watt has tempted his readers with morsels from a fascinating history, but then neglects to serve up even a short list of additional sources for those who might want to taste a bit more of any one of these topics. But perhaps Watt does this intentionally; perhaps he does indeed mean to present us simply with a few 'moments' that can be taken in all in one sitting or more slowly, one by one through daily readings.

While a review of Watt's collection could be easily accomplished by a piecemeal assessment of the individual, separate features of the book, to do so would miss the point Watt makes: poetry is rarely concerned with isolated lines and verses, but rather with the complexity of the 'whole.' Poetic complexity includes the intricacies of language, white space, context, style and the ways in which the words, lines, stanzas, and verses of a poem or a collection of poems contribute to the meaning of the whole corpus. Watt seems to have had this in mind in creating his anthology. In the same way that the work connects past and present, it also connects the similarities and relationships between literature and history. It is sometimes tempting to see history as little more than dates and events, but true skill in the discipline is in the interpretation and meanings of those events just as our reading and understanding of literature depends on our interpretation and the meanings we assign to it. Cultural context is also pivotal in both disciplines: a student of either history or literature is well aware that the time and place in which literature is written or in which historical events take place is a key to finding plausible meanings in either field. An excellent example of Watt's skill in recognizing this along with the importance of language is in his

'Be it kend til aw men' (pp. 28-9). Here Watt adopts the format, style, and language of a formal testament or will from the Early Modern Period, and the poet assumes the persona of Duncan Campbell of Glenorchy (d. 1631). While the poem is a contemporary elegy of sorts to Campbell, it is also a vehicle that permits an understanding of the issues important to someone scribing a last will and testament in the 1600s culture: squaring one's self with God, providing an inventory of one's assets and debts, and recognizing the significance of deeds and honour.

In other pieces, such as 'Rosslyn Chapel' and 'Finlarig in April,' Watt is the modern sight-seer recording his impressions of ancient monuments. We see his imagination working to recreate what he thinks may have happened in a particular place and time or, more poignantly, to lament the passage of time. This latter point of view is a significant theme of the anthology, and it is most evident in the poems in which the poet interlaces the distant past with his own past and present and with the present and future of his children. Through these poems, we are reminded of the brevity of life and the numerous types of legacies we leave behind.

Generally, it should be said that Watt's work is neither pretentious nor overly simplistic; most are in prose, and are compact and straightforward. The historical introductions are brief while still affording the reader adequate enough background to appreciate the poems. The style is predominantly contemporary and, while most of the pieces deal with Scottish subject matter, a few are purely personal. Watt's final poem is intriguing; it is set in the future and is an imagined scenario in which study has been curtailed. The closing lines speak to the multiplicity of layers that Watt has woven into his work, and so Watt shall have the last word: 'All graves are sacred ground . . . but still we did in deep of night.'

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