



ANTHOLOGY - Five Poems by Norman MacCaig

A note on the Poet..

Born in Edinburgh in 1910, Norman MacCaig trained as a schoolteacher and remained so in Edinburgh for most of his life. He married his wife Isabel in 1940 and they raised a family of two children. When the Second World War broke out he refused to serve in the army such was his hatred for killing. For this he spent some time in prison.

During his life he published sixteen books of poetry and won many awards. Writing poetry that is often clear and simple he deals with the natural world in a refreshingly honest way. He loves the physical world and many of his poems feature the smaller animals and the landscape of the Highlands in Scotland. During his childhood he spent every summer there and perhaps this is why he wrote so many poems about country people and the fauna and flora of the Highland region.

He was particularly interested in frogs and once wrote,

“I love you for being a toad
For crawling about like a Japanese wrestler
And for not being frightened.”

His love of animals comes through his poems e.g. *Frogs*, *Praise for a Collie Dog*, and *Interruption of a Journey*. However he is never soppy and deals honestly with the natural suffering and death of animals. You may find his attitude a little hard to take but try to remember that he is writing from another time and with a less sentimental understanding born of a farming background.

His poem *Aunt Julia* is a lovely poem about his Gaelic speaking aunt whom he could never communicate with. While he could not communicate with her the description of her in the poem shows exactly the sort of generous and lively and loving woman she was.

Themes

In this little collection of five of his poems MacCaig deals with a variety of themes. There is **celebration** and **humour** in *Frogs* and *My Last word on Frogs*. He really adores these little creatures and sees many human characteristics in them. He delights in the elegant way they move and sees the funny side of them.

Delight in the natural world and love of animals are the themes of *Praise for a Collie Dog*. He gets to the heart of this wonderful animal and again invests it with human characteristics “Even her conversation was tiny..”

Another theme in this poem is the **harshness of life**. At the end of the poem, MacCaig describes the sorry end that the collie comes to but he accepts it as part of the harshness of life where everything must come to an end. The **harshness of life** is again seen in *Interruption of a Journey*. The poet



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knocks down a hare and injured it so badly that he had to put it down. He notes it as very important event in his life and feels deeply for the stricken animal. **Although there is suffering in MacCaig's poems, there is never any cruelty.**

The central theme in *Aunt Julia* is **Love and Loss**. His aunt Julia is a woman from olden times. She has never learned English and sticks to the old ways. She lives in the Highlands of Scotland and does not care too much about how she looks to others. She is herself and proud of it. In the last stanza we see how sad the poet is at her loss.

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The central theme in Aunt Julia is Love and Loss. His aunt Julia is a woman from olden times. She has never learned English and sticks to the old ways. She lives in the Highlands of Scotland and does not care too much about how she looks to others. She is herself and proud of it. In the last stanza we see how sad the poet is at her loss.

Frogs

Frogs sit more solid
Than anything sits. In mid-leap they are
Parachutists falling
In a free-fall. They die on roads
With arms across their chests and
Heads high.

I love frogs that sit
Like Buddha, that fall without
Parachutes, that die
Like Italian tenors.

Above all I love them because,
Pursued in water, they never
Panic so much that they fail
To make stylish triangles
With their ballet dancer's
Legs.



My Last Word on Frogs

People have said to me, You seem to like frogs.
They keep jumping into your poems!

I do. I love the way they sit,
compact as a cat and as indifferent

to everything but style.
And I love the elegant way they jump and
The inelegant way they land.
So human.

I feel so close to them
I must be froggish myself.
I look in the mirror expecting to see
A fairytale Prince.

But no. It's just sprawling me,
Croaking away
And swivelling my eyes around
For the stealthy heron and his stabbing beak.

Praise for a Collie Dog

She was a small dog, neat and fluid –
Even her conversation was tiny:
She greeted you with a bow, never bow-wow.

Her sons stood monumentally over her
But did what she told them. Each grew grizzled
Till it seemed he was his own mother's grandfather.

Once, gathering sheep on a showery day
I remarked how dry she was. Pollóchan said, 'Ah,
It would take a very accurate drop to hit Lassie.'

And her tact – and tactics! When the sheep bolted
In an unforeseen direction, over the skyline
Came - who but Lassie, and not even panting.

She sailed in the dinghy like a proper sea-dog.
Where's the burn? – she's first on the other side.
She flowed through fence like a piece of black wind.



But suddenly she was old and sick and crippled...
I grieved for Pollóchan when he took her a stroll
And put his gun on the back of her head.
(Note Pollochan was the poet's friend)

Interruption to a Journey

The hare we had run over
Bounced about the road
On the springing curve
Of its spine

Cornfields breathed in the darkness,
We were going through the darkness and
The breathing cornfields from one
Important place to another.

We broke the hare's neck
And made that place, for a moment,
The most important place there was,
Where a bowstring was cut
And a bow broken forever
That had shot itself through so many
Darknesses and cornfields.

It was left in that landscape.
It left us another.

Aunt Julia

Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic
very loud and very fast
I could not answer her –
I could not understand her.

She wore men's boots
when she wore any.
- I can see her strong foot,
stained with peat.
Hers was the only house
where I've lain at night
in the absolute darkness



of a box bed, listening to
crickets being friendly.

She was buckets
and water flouncing into them.

She was winds pouring wetly
round house-ends.

She was brown eggs, black skirts
and a keeper of pennies
in a teapot.

Aunt Julia spoke Gaelic
very loud and very fast.
By the time I had learned
a little, she lay
silenced in the absolute black
of a sandy grave
at Luskentyre.

But I hear her still, welcoming me
with a seagull's voice
across a hundred yards
of peatscapes and lazybeds
and getting angry, getting angry
with so many questions
unanswered.