

**Introduction to Kilmeny, a short story by Gerda Stevenson,
based on the poem of the same name by James Hogg.**

My name is Gerda Stevenson. I'm a writer, actor, director and singer-songwriter. I was born and brought up in the Scottish Borders, where I heard Scots spoken in the street, and at the local primary and secondary schools I attended. I was also exposed to literary Scots at home. My parents are English (from Lancashire), and my father, the composer Ronald Stevenson, had a deep interest in Scottish poetry. He set the words of many Scots language poets to music – including works by Hugh MacDiarmid, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Helen B Cruickshank and William Soutar. As a bairn, I was especially thrilled with Soutar's poem *BAWSY BROON*.

Dinna gang out the nicht:

Dinna gang out the nicht:

Laich was the mune as I cam owre the muir;

Laich was the lauchin though nane was there:

Somebody nippit me,

Somebody trippit me;

Somebody grippit me roun' and aroun':

I ken it was Bawsy Broon:

I'm shair it was Bawsy Broon

My Dad used to take me and my wee sister for walks in the woods, where there was a particular old Scots pine tree, and we'd bring our miniature dolls and dolls' furniture, to play with among its huge roots. Dad would sit on

the grass, leaning against the tree, and while we played, he'd read out loud to us the poetry of Walt Whitman and James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd. It was way above our heads, but I loved listening to the words, and the rhythms, and I've never forgotten Hogg's *KILMENY*:

*BONNIE Kilmeny gaed up the glen;
But it wasna to meet Duneira's men,
Nor the rosy monk of the isle to see,
For Kilmeny was pure as pure could be.*

Hugh MacDiarmid – another Borderer, from Langholm, lived nearby, and was a regular visitor to our family home. I remember being deeply moved by his poem *EMPTY VESSEL*, and I made a painting of it when I was a teenager:

*I met ayont the cairney
A lass wi tousie hair
Singin till a bairnie
That was nae langer there.*

*Wunds wi warlds to swing
Dinna sing sae sweet,
The licht that bends owre aa thing
Is less ta'en up wi'it.*

So, although we didn't speak Scots within our family, I grew up being intensely aware of the language – its different registers, its ability to express the world around me, and, crucially the world of my imagination.

As an adult, working in theatre, radio, film and TV, I've engaged with many Scots language texts, classic and contemporary. I've been in several productions of David Lyndsay's great 16th century play, *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaites*, which contains some of the most sublime dramatic poetry in Scots I've ever had the privilege to speak, a Scots with French resonances, as well as wonderful, rich demotic Scots. And I've also acted in Scots language plays by Liz Lochhead, Hector McMillan and Edwin Morgan.

So when I myself write in Scots, I draw upon the sound of the language as I heard it spoken growing up in the Scottish Borders, but I also employ my awareness of literary Scots – the literature I grew up with, and have worked with, in my professional life. Beginning always from a basis of Borders Scots, I nevertheless, at times, also use a mixture of registers and dialects, something close to MacDiarmid's 'synthetic Scots' approach – the approach employed by Edwin Morgan, for example, in his Scots translation of Racine's play *PHEADRE*. I had the fortune to play the title role in a production of Morgan's *PHAEDRA* at the Lyceum in Edinburgh. In this text, Morgan deliberately uses a whole gamut of Scots vocabulary, boldly crossing regional boundaries. And why not? It's all rich grist to the mill of language and creativity, as far as I'm concerned!

I write both in English and Scots. I feel very fortunate to have access to both: there are some things I can express more vividly, and with greater

authenticity in Scots rather than English, and vice versa. It's a question of instinct: the voice always dictates the language – whichever seems right.

I've always loved the work of my fellow Borderer James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd. He was born in 1770, and died in 1835, and he's best known for his brilliant novel, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, which was championed by the great French author, André Gide. Hogg was a deeply human writer of songs, poetry and short stories too. I love the combination of boldness and subtlety in his multi-layered work, and his warm humour. I'm also very drawn to the metaphysical, and the supernatural aspects of his writing, evident in his haunting poem *KILMENY*, which is open to so many interpretations. Kilmeny is a young woman, so at odds with the material world that she can't exist in it.

I wanted to write a contemporary re-telling of Hogg's *KILMENY*, in prose – a short story focusing on the theme of the environment, connecting with the past and present literary traditions of my native Scottish Borders. My narrative is very different from the one in Hogg's poem, which I use as a jumping off point. Hogg mysteriously leaves things hanging – for example, although he mentions the name, he doesn't tell us who Duneira's men are. So I've created characters and relationships, and although I've retained that sense of mystery, I've given my story a specific setting in time and place – my native rural Scottish Borders, during the pandemic.

I'm reading the story in the recording, and sound designer Rob MacNeacail has created a multi-layered soundscape, reflecting the metaphysical world Kilmeny inhabits.

Gerda Stevenson, 2nd April, 2021.