When did you feel that you would become a writer?

Growing up on the open moors of Southern Scotland, the light, the land, the elements, the people, these things made me a writer. At school in Edinburgh, the tension between rural and urban life and language, that’s part of it too. I remember very clearly, I was fourteen, when a lyric came to me, to fit in with the rhythm of walking and where I was going. It arrived complete, it came out of nowhere. I was a channel for the words. I still compose like this sometimes, though I might change more lines when I get home.

Did your parents encourage your interests in writing or did they react against your literary and creative leanings?

My parents think I am an amazing poet. But seriously, our house had plenty of books. My father was an expert on jet engines, he left the RAF to go to university when I was at school, he was one of the war veterans who had a grant to study. My mother has a doctorate in architectural history. And she never underestimates the power of the arts. Till recently they ran an art gallery in the Scottish Borders. So there was a love of learning at home. My love of poetry came from hearing my grandfather recite William Dunbar and Robert Henryson in his strong Angus voice. He spoke very rich broad Scots. My great-grandmother composed poetry and my grandmother could remember many of her verses.
What about your university years? Was there any writer or friend who encouraged your writing?

University gave me the chance to learn and translate Anglo-Saxon, middle English, and medieval Latin poetry, and to read widely, everything from the seventeenth century metaphysicals to contemporary American writers. I met real live poets there for the first time: Norman MacCaig, who was Writer in Residence while I was a student, and Sorley Maclean, whom I knew well because his daughter Ishbel and I are friends. I would go to Wester Ross, Skye and Raasay with the Macleans which had a tremendous influence on me. Reading Sorley’s own translation of his ‘Poems to Eimhir’, I can remember that moment, where I was sitting, everything about that morning, it was a terrific experience. He was not well known at the time, of course, he wasn’t lionised till about a decade later. I would be nineteen when I met him and I used to take a few poems to show him every time I stayed with the Macleans. He used to mark them with little signs that looked like Chinese ideograms, to show the poems he liked best. Three strokes of the pen was the best sign.

Sorley came from a tradition where some of the greatest poets were women, Sileas na Ceapaich or Mairi Mhor nan Oran. To him, and to my husband, William Gillies, another Gael whom I met through the Macleans, it was natural that a woman should compose poetry. That made a big difference to me, writing in the 1960s and early 1970s when all the big poets seemed to be men.

When I left Scotland to study in South India, I met several contemporary Indian writers who were writing in English or in the regional languages, particularly those of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Again, it was not mainstream tradition, but it was powerful work. At the time, the Indo-English writers seemed to predict a great future.
Valerie Gillies by Nicola Nannini
I was a postgraduate student analysing the response of British and Indian writers to India. There were few points of similarity because they were writing about different Indias.

India had a tremendous influence on my writing. I was a bit overawed to meet the internationally famous authors from the South, R.K. Narayan or Raja Rao. At the same time, my studies included a year attending the course in Sanskrit aesthetics at Maharajah’s College, Mysore, and this experience, together with reading South Indian aestheticians of the day who wrote in English, like M. Hiriyanna and Ananda Coomaraswamy, formed my ideas for a working life as an artist. My understanding of all the arts and my ability to collaborate in cross-media work dates from this experience.


Do you accept this idea that a poem can be originated first in a sound or a rhythm or in a larger formal intuition rather than in some urging message to be expressed?

Yes, the sound comes first, it makes me think of those days in South India when the conch-shell sounded to wake up the divinity and to destroy ignorance at the same time. In Mysore we talked about ‘dhvanyaloka’ in Sanskrit aesthetics, it means ‘sounding’ as the origin of all the arts. You continue to hear what you have heard in the deep silence. I can hear that rhythm emerging before I compose anything.

Western thought comes nearest to it in the line of the psalm, ‘abyssus abyssum invocat…’, ‘deep calls to deep…’ where it reverberates. Paul Celan’s last poem has it, describes it as
deep upon deep

the Invisible
summons the wind
into bounds

In my latest collection, *The Lightning Tree*, I’m talking about something similar in the poem ‘The Routing Well’, a local well which forecasts storms at sea although the coast is seven miles away. Again, the longer poem, ‘Coomlees Farm’, has it in the last verse:

Maybe you experience on a Monday in Coomlees
a slow humming from the numinous coomb,
one voice, one landform, chanting an audible *om*…

While I’m translating I am a singer of that sound, too. I try to keep to an accurate translation, but I relive it like a singer who feels the song. Then what may be the original voice of Dante or Leopardi comes sounding through everything.

*Would you speak about a period of gestation which precedes the actual composition or writing of a poem?*

O yes, the springs of a poem are fed below the surface, they can leap up after a long time in the subterranean dark. My poems for the sources of rivers celebrate this, like ‘The Source in the Snow’ from the slopes of Ben Lui – a truly alpine place, where the first water of the River Tay emerges from beneath the ice.

*Would you comment on the following observation made by Wallace Stevens in his ‘Adagia’: ‘After one has abandoned a belief in god (sic), poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption’.*

Wallace and his ‘Necessary Angel’, that’s a favourite book on
my shelf. His necessary angel is good but this quote is not so good. One trip to Asia would show millions of people believing in things which western scepticism has tried to banish. I mean, I speak from the heart, I see poetry as heart knowledge, as a way of experiencing life. I see the *via creativa* as a step on the way, it puts spirit in all my work. This is what a spiritual journey is about. The poems are a gift. It’s the divine nature to give gifts, it’s ours too. I learnt while following two great rivers from source to sea, overflow is the source of art!

An artist’s work is to see the unity of creation again, to experience a healing between us and creation. That’s why I can identify so completely with a place that I write a poem about it.

I like when Meister Eckhart talks about our need to recover the experience of the sacred wilderness, to soar like eagles. That’s opening the spirit to great things, divine things. He sees creation as a grace, ‘gratia gratis data’, grace freely given, the first grace. A creation spirituality is one where energies catch fire, it’s a good world view for an artist. We’re here to connect to the source. And then to the grace in each other.

I’ve not spoken about this in an interview before, it’s more autobiographical than I usually am … I came from a free-thinking, agnostic background, where my grandparents were of the generation whose religion sank in the mud of the First World War. I went to school in the presbyterian black and rebelled strongly against that institution. As a student I read seventeenth century sermons and divine poems and went off to find out where these poems of meditation came from. My spiritual father was an Irish Cistercian monk in an abbey in the Lammermuir hills. By twenty-one I’d become a Catholic and considered entering a community of contemplative nuns. Marriage and family life turned out to be my calling, but thirty years on, I am a devout catholic whose daily
practice is contemplation. And the love of silence. It’s the other side of the coin from all my words.

Of course, I went to a Hindu university and I love and see the beauty in Hindu and Buddhist traditions... as the Vatican Council suggested we should. For me, any faith is not about the weight of the church’s history or about institutions or beliefs or rules, it’s about the power of the spirit. There’s a need for interfaith dialogue. If we are grounded in our own tradition, we can speak to each other. If we don’t do that, it will be fundamentalism which will grow, not the spirit.

There’s a great similarity between Advaita Vedanta and Western contemplative thought, for example, in the idea of non-duality. And I can see how Eckhart’s creation spirituality fuses with Sanskrit aesthetics. Ananda Coomaraswamy brings that out clearly. Ideas from both civilisations can work on the practice of any of the arts, and especially poetry.

Are you afraid to be misinterpreted or that your poems can be mismanaged by the critics?

Writers always ask for better criticism, it’s like turkeys asking for a happy Christmas. I think our current situation in Scotland is one of writing in isolation, in an absence of mutual criticism.

The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his essay ‘On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth’, says that ‘the word of the poet is autonomous in the sense that it is self-fulfilling...To speak of truth in poetry is to ask how the poetic word finds fulfilment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind’. Would you agree with this statement or would you rather accept the Platonic objection to the truthfulness of poetry: ‘Poets often lie’?

Poets never lie. Otherwise they would write fiction.
Can you tell me anything about your experience as a translator of poetry?
I cut my hair. Dante’s influence made me cut my long classical braid in favour of flowing renaissance locks. No, seriously, when you are translating someone for a while you enter into their mindset and the world view of their time. I felt really down after a summer spent translating Leopardi, I saw the whole world through his eyes. And I felt really impassioned while translating the seventeenth-century Gaelic woman poet, Sileas na Ceapaich with her love poems and battlesongs.

Do you consider your translations as a kind of versions or interpretations of the original poems or would you rather say that you tried to be as faithful as possible to the poets’ ideas and verbal inventions?
The latter. In English or Scots I’m trying to echo the sound which Dante makes. The different melody of each language, that’s endlessly fascinating.

Do you believe in what Goethe called ‘elective affinity’?
The passages I choose to translate run parallel to events in my own life.

What are your ideas about poetry? Do you think that when we look for consolation or redemption in art we must be sceptical about its value?
Writing poetry is part of the journey I make to find original blessing and beauty, it’s part of a whole cosmology. Yes, poetry is a consolation, it’s one of many. That means it increases hope and joy. So how do I live out of a consolation experience which is a moment of creativity? With energy to go forward, to communicate with others. I can take a poem out to schools or children’s hospitals, or into colleges or psychiatric wards or any place it’s not been before, as an opening for mind and spirit.

My work for Artlink in the hospital arts makes me identify
with the ‘outsider’ artists. To be part of a team bringing poetry and visual arts workshops to people in locked wards who can’t get out to access the arts, that gives me an idea of the true power of poetry. And it cuts free from the falsity of fame. ‘Poetry is strong enough to help’. I don’t see the point of poetry if you’re not going to take it somewhere. What people write is full of surprises.

Again for Artlink, the exhibition of poems and photographs from the book *Men and Beasts* which my colleague and I set up in the hospital gallery earlier this year, was seen and enjoyed by 10,000 people going about their everyday lives through the hospital corridors. All through the winter months.

*What do you think about the contemporary literary situation in Scotland?* We’re inventing Scotland at the moment. Perhaps my real country is poetry.

We may be seeing the beginnings of a new relationship between Scots/Gaelic/English poetry, re-inscribing a few of those narratives. Time for an origin myth for modern Scottish poetry.

*Do you consider yourself a Scottish poet or a British poet writing in the United Kingdom?*
I am a Scottish poet writing in the post-Ukanian period.

*Do you see any possibility to treat Scotland and its literary production in a post-colonial way?*
Surrealism occurs in Scotland more than post-colonialism. But our cultural history is deformed by colonisation. We also feel guilty about post-colonialism if it means how the Scots maintained the Empire. So do the Irish. If we look outside Europe, we can’t talk about de-colonising in the same way as India can.

Are we really all the new trans-cultural? Or are we just swooping
on the chance of a free drink in the multicultural hospitality tent? I think we do have a specifically national imagination. 

Would you like to summarize your feeling about the importance of the relationship between imagination and reality for your poetry?

Some say the imagination is evidence of the divine. As for reality, if that means things in the human realm, in the realm of time, then I’m still trying to find out what it is.

The Trimontium Trust, enthusiasts of all ages dedicated to the understanding and discovery of Roman Scotland, recently made me their poet laureate. They call me ‘poeta vatesque sola Trimontii’, ‘sole poet and seer to the place of the three hills’. So I’m poet laureate to 200 acres of open fields and the Eildon Hills. I consider it a tremendous honour, to be described both as makar and as seer. That’s how imagination (seeing) and reality (true locality) unite for me now. And any time there’s a new find at Trimontium, I’ll be celebrating it with a well-turned verse, as I always do.

Would you please find a single word or character which distinguishes your writing?

I can hear Norman MacCaig’s voice saying ‘Animal energy!’ But I suppose it’s my characteristic to be elemental, mine is an outdoors poetry. It always has been, from the Indian days of Each Bright Eye in the 1970s, by way of following the river for Tweed Journey in the 1980s, to The Ringing Rock in the 1990s, right up to today’s storms and fireballs in The Lightning Tree. Yes, ‘elemental’ is the word.

And my poems are where they should be. The site-specific work I’m doing now, those inscriptions for sculpture, you can find across Scotland, exposed to the elements, cast in bronze or carved in stone. I never sign them, they’re pure praise of the genius loci.