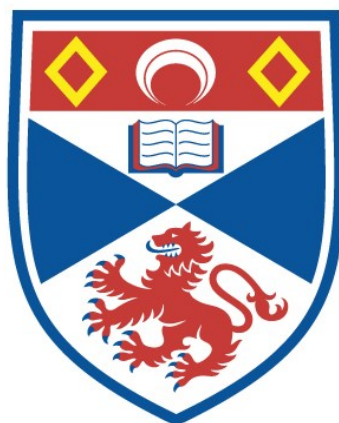


Chasing the Absence: c. 40 pp. of verse

Helen Nicholson

A thesis submitted for the degree of MFA
at the
University of St Andrews



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ABSTRACT

Chasing the Absence explores themes of absence and loss, containing poems on emotional loss, death, disconnection and other lacks or losses, including the frustrations of language, whether disfluency or the pains of realising a poem. Some poems explore connection or reconnection (eg with Scots); however, presence contains the possibility of absence. Several poems address the theme of work and making.

Specifically, the title comes from a poem in a sequence based on research into C19 Hamilton, Lanarkshire, and the entirely unknown family of my maternal grandmother: farmers, woodworkers and textile workers. The sequence grew from my struggles between duty to historical context and interpretation; awareness of projecting my emotions onto characters; and the capacity imaginatively to realise little-documented characters whose potential was limited by their socio-historical context.

Few of the poems are written metrically or in strict form. Rhyme is employed lightly, and is seldom sustained except in the few poems intended as light relief. Nevertheless, the poems are strongly patterned, mainly through attention to sound and rhythm. Two poems depend upon visual impact. Others use the page to explore distance and space, or depend primarily upon the syntax to determine pace.

The language is straightforward and direct, though diction varies. One concern is to pay attention to, perhaps to reify, objects or feelings not quite within grasp. Images relating to textiles recur. During writing, the absence of metaphor was troubling – yet the inability to find surprising yet meaningful comparisons is implicit in the intangibility of the unknown that is being chased. The pace of most poems is slow, a deliberate focusing of attention on the mundane, on what does not dazzle. In contrast to that meditative approach, some poems explore heightened energy, taking from projective verse, being propelled by kinetics, breath and typographical use of the whole page.

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I was admitted as a research student in June 2015 and as a candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in June 2015; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2015 and 2016.

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CHASING THE ABSENCE

This Room

So, after all that, after all,
that is my job. I know it now.
I'd thought it in the next room
but one. Always a door ajar,
a calling breeze. But now I know
it's here - as shiny, lush and green
as that ground elder anointed with rain.
Some leaves have a mirror sheen.
Others stare, mottled, but not the dull
I'd made them. So, that's my job:
this small room, this window view.
This shiver of cold.

Commis Chef

I was good at slicing lemon pith.
I'd take a sharp knife, thin blade,
and shave that spongy layer
until all white was pared away.

Lemon oil oozed against the steel
as was the case with orange oil
but that threatened exuberance,
the possibility of sweetness.

Wasn't the trick not to waste
anything? Goosebumps appeared
closer to the outer skin; it was my
job, my mission, to render them null.

Then my knife was ready for slicing
into precise matchsticks the orange
and yellow accoutrements. For that
is all they were. Additions to a glaze.

Twine

Oh, dear me, the mill's gaen fast,

The estate now known as Hill of Tarvit was bought in 1904

The pair wee shifters canna get a rest

by the wealthy financier and jute manufacturer Frederick Bower Sharp.

Shiftin' bobbins, coorse and fine,

From the beginning of the nineteenth century his family had been involved

They fairly mak' ye work for your ten and nine.

in the vigorous expansion of the textile industry in Dundee.

Oh dear me, I wish the day was done,

Frederick's father, John, made a fortune in jute manufacturing.

Rinnin up and doon the Pass is no nae fun.

When he died in 1895 he left around £750,000, an enormous sum.

Shiftin', piecin', spinnin' warp weft and twine,

Frederick, the youngest son, attended school in Bristol,

Tae feed and cled my bairnie affen ten and nine.

then trained as a financier in the City of London.

Oh dear me, the world's ill-divided,

He became chairman of one of Dundee's earliest investment trusts,

Them that work the hardest are aye wi' least provided,

inherited his father's jute interests and profited from the transport boom.

But I maun bide contented, dark days or fine,

When he bought the estate, he needed a welcoming family home and a showcase

There's no much pleasure living affen ten and nine.

for a valuable collection of paintings, tapestries, furniture and porcelain.

Dressed Herring

To make next year's luck you must hang on your door
a slender young fish in a matronly gown,
the herring you kept as the last from your barrel
or one ready dressed from an Overgate stall.

If you use your last fish you must eat all the flesh,
scrape round the fins, then pick off all the bones,
strip down the backbone, wipe twice down the tail
then leave it to dry once you've sniffed at the gills.

Roll newspaper tight from the tail to the head
so the eyes can peek out at the curve of the year.
For the dress take a measure of crêpe and some pins,
stitch pleats at the neck; let them swell from the waist.

As your lass pirouettes on the points of her tail,
well hidden by skirts as she dances with fate,
she'll keep your bairns warm and their bellies near full.
She'll defer the sea's rent, keep your miseries small.

The Work of Ivory

All the busyness
and textures of the world,
its cloaks, pillars,
scribes and citadels
surround them:

A dove carved in ivory
whispers divine wisdom
into the ear of St Gregory.

Shoulder, ear and dove are one.
The angles of his perching
and of Gregory's quill are one.

As are the cast of his eye
and the eye of the dove.
There my eye rests.

Some unknown
Carolingian master knew peace.
He devoted skilled weeks and months
to draping
that stillness.

All that chiselling,
all that dust and work -
that we may see beyond it.

Castellers of Catalunya

A scrum of stubby men as the base; above – in stacks (as per design),
 the longer limbed, the strong-wristed, capable of holding ankles
 flexed solid, feet splayed, pressed on clavicle and scapula.
 We rise in fours, twos, ones, not swayed by the next
 layer's slither up our backs. All to hold the child
 at the top – prehensile, immortal, waving,
 ready for adoration by the earthbound.
 Cartwheels! Kisses! Hi-fives! High
 on the safety of shoulders
 only if we trust enough.
 Only if we are not
 ourselves,
 alone.
 Ourselves!
 Only if we are not
only. If we trust enough -
 on the safety of shoulders.
 Cartwheels! Kisses! Hi-fives! High,
 ready for adoration by the earthbound.
 At the top – prehensile, immortal, waving,
 layers slither up our backs, all to hold the child.
 We rise in fours, twos, ones, not swayed by the next
 flexed solid feet, splayed, pressed on clavicle and scapula.
 The longer limbed, the strong-wristed, capable of holding ankles,
 in stacks (as per design) - above a scrum of stubby men as the base.

Messrs. Baskerville & Bodoni

Baskerville has thick ankles and dyes his moustache. His bowler hat sits on the sideboard, next to the devilled kidneys. Their odour bleeds into the headwear, which infuriates Mr Baskerville so he is forced into 'The Compositors' Arms for a swift half – to take away his nervous indignation. Smelling of pig, indeed. That would not have befallen Mr Bodoni, who was not only dapper but thin, so his hat would rest on the upper hooks of the bentwood coat-stand and any waft would have bypassed him. They worked well together, to the quiet amazement of their respective wives, who loathed each other with an excess of cordiality, which spilled over the Islington street in which they were both obliged to reside. Actually, the wives got on fine when they were not dressing up as Victorian ladies. It was the proximity of the bowler hats that brought about their incompatibilities. With Messrs. Baskerville and Bodoni the difficulty was of a different order. Their incongruity was simple but fundamental. Mr Baskerville lives in the present. Mr Bodoni cares only for the past continuous, and even then in the conditional. They get on well; they rarely coincide in the street.

The Company of Mapmakers

Slowly we get the picture. Graphite
can be rubbed out. We draw the odd tussock
which we may overwrite

and mark with care the crossing places.
Our tools, set square and compass,
cost us more than we realize.

Occasionally there is a public spat
about the precise topography
but we know where we are

even if the milestones are lichened.
We move by feel, or we dig,
smell the dark earth and taste the salt.

Our job is to plot the tracks
we have spent years covering.
We share the outlines, the relief

of our communal disclosures,
share the joke – what possessed
us to think we could dam

that raging river, mop up
its spume, have no salmon
leap? Our map points to smolts,

a pink tinted wash below copperplate.
If sticklebacks and pike lurk there
we will watch, make distance, move on.

Amang the Bunnet Firs*efter Wang Wei*

Bird–alane amang the bunnet firs,
A'm strumming chords, canting scat.
Wid sae growthie, ah'm dernt fae fowk.
Aiken Drum gaes haufers wi munelicht.

Category Error

a bowl of pistachios

green and mauve peek out
from salt-hard shells

I isolate
those clasped tight

they aren't safe to eat
and besides
there is no r in the month

Examination

What is delight?

Is there a duty of delight and, if so,
to whom is it owed?

To what extent do you fulfil that duty,
and how?

How could you extend that capacity?

Devise a training programme and a suitable method of assessing
its efficiency and effectiveness.

What measurement system would you recommend?

Is there any specialist vocabulary the intending student should be aware of
before attempting this question?

Underfoot

Bog cotton

Bog-myrtle

Bog Asphodel

Mat-grass

Deergrass

Purple moor-grass

Hare's-tail cottongrass

Hair moss

Woolly Fringe-moss

Little Shaggy-moss

Heath Plait-moss

Soft-Rush

Cross-leaved heath

Advice to Gaelic Cultural Studies Students

Next time you knock on the door
of an old lady with good Gaelic,
renowned as a tradition-bearer,
four miles from the main road
who looks out to Canna, Eigg and Rum;
once you've established your connections
and that, no, she never used a *cas-chrom*
and, no, she can't say she - personally -
saw the *each-nisge* at Lochan Dubh;
once you praise her hot buttered scones,
or slip in *co-dhiùs* as common ground;
then, when you feel warm enough to ask
what she misses most from the old days -
don't be surprised if it is trying on hats
in Arnott's, Pettigrew's and Copland & Lye.

My Bonnie Prince

I most loved the cool, undulating blue
of your coat, your kilt and your buckles
(a relic from my Bobby Shaftoe phase).

In my dreams your bonnet was soft as felt.
A deeper blue, you held it at your side.
I knew you had come for me, cap in hand

despite your kingly claims. How proud I was
to take you back to Glenfinnan, show you
your monument and viaduct after the Games.

Back home, star of the Cocktail Bar display,
your mirrored back crossed belt and sash.
Oh Charlie, you cut a dash and you knew it.

Then I let you share my bath. Not even goodbye.
You just made off. They say you're now in Skye.

Food of Love

If I learned to cook well, would you love me?

Would you notice each new amuse-bouche?

Would you skip the hors d'oeuvre for the entrée?

Or ditch me for someone more louche?

Speech Therapy

It's hard to confuse a pimp with pumpernickel
though some might try. The pith in the teeth
and the urge to spit make it seem easy.

But it's not. Mark my words and my presence
in heaven. Pray I won't get there before I can
sweeten most meat with cinnamon and kale.

Kale sweetens? But not when you want it to.
Most times the 'k' sticks in my throat, won't
slide past my lips without a kick under the table.

The 'c' in cinnamon won't escape easy either.
That simple adder swells to anaconda,
s s s lowly.

Say it sing-song: ride the dragon, breathe fire,
pretend you're from Alabama or Abalone,
offer up gurgles, growls, gutturals, fricatives.

Sugar beet turns belly fat sour if sizzled at dawn.
Star anise gives a green edge to that exquisite
hardness of tooth by the gum. Mark my words.

Heroic Couplets with Handkerchief

To write the perfect parody of Pope
You need more graft and steely wit than hope.
If cribbing from the 'Dunciad' won't pass
Don't dream of scribbling on the bus, pre-class.
It's not enough to find the easy rhyme -
A stratagem that's rarely thought sublime.
To match the jewel of the Enlightenment
Employ 'strong sense' and rigorous argument.
Don't look to Latin or to Strawberry Hill
For inspiration. Look round. Take your fill
Of sleazy deals, small hurts, and all that's vile
On which it's fruitful to expend your bile.
And if you think your foggy, snot-filled brain
Is master to the task, then think again.

Soft Argument

The day you died, we'd a soft
argument about guillemot wings.
You won. I like to think I let you.

I never saw a guillemot, nor
its wings. Nor was there a 'you'
or a 'we' in such proximity.

But, my dear, it is such a comfort
to imagine us, our shy wings
untied - us, unstoppable,
bickering about lanolin.

Fat Lady in Ra Ra Skirt at Tate Britain

We see her first with the Victorians.
Proserpine, with captive pomegranate,
 speaks to her, as does *The Lady of Shalott*.
 She owns their homage with a curt nod.

She sits down, fat lady in ra ra skirt.
 Otherwise Sabbath-sober, her hem
 lifts above her left ankle. She points her toe.
 A single frill cools the back of her calf.

Her jacket's subtle ruche sheds light,
 shade - scarlet, veinous and arterial
 red, plump tomato. Raspberry smear
 toenails, paint layered over each ridge.

From a distance she admires but avoids
*James Hamilton, Earl of Arran, later Third Marquis
 and First Duke of Hamilton, aged 17.*

His connoisseur eye looks way past her.

He is composed in black and grey,
 starched lace cuffs, silver scabbard,
 slim legs gift-wrapped at the knee.
 Her jacket clashes with his orange hose.

Lonestone

lonestone
greystone hardstone
eggstone speckledstone
smoothstone curvingstone
curlingstone pivotstone perfectstone
polishedstone surfacestone
shellstone shorestone
oldstone coldstone
unknownstone

Quicksand and Lime

The silt was fine that year.

The way it coated my toes

like a friendly slurry

was a comfort as I slipped through.

I would have gone to any depth

for that hugged warmth.

Of course, it was the rock ledge

that held me.

I couldn't kick it away,

hated its flinty rasp.

It saved me,

woke me with its cold.

In My Garden

Say 'three blind mice'
and you're on an upbeat.
It's not just the gleeful echo
or the plinky-plink school piano.
You know, when you repeat yourself,
these guys are going somewhere.

Say 'three dead fledglings'
and the organ stop is muffled.
You're already turning your face away,
dropping tissues as shrouds on the grass,
feeling with a poo-bag pulled over your hand,
the first body for the bin, thrapple to tail,
with a prayer for the unsung song.

Haars and Sea Frets

A haar is cold.

A sea fret may not be.

It may hold warmth.

Or it may not.

But a haar

will never warm you.

Elegy*i.m Kenny John Nicholson, d 17.2.1968**feadag, feadaige* (n, m)

a plover

a flute, a whistle

the third week in February.

feile, feile (n, f)

an oration

a prayer, an entreaty

the lowing of deer.

an sàs (adv)

hooked

in custody

embedded, as a needle in cloth.

sùgh, sùghan (n, m)

juice, sap, moisture

sense, meaning

dearest object, darling

huge receding wave.

CHASING THE ABSENCE:

THE HAMILTONS,

a sequence of poems in response to research into unknown family

Chasing the Absence

You buy a yellow book centred with yourself,
 then a folding-back on either side:
 space for parents, their parents' parents.
 All their messinesses and false starts.
 Neat as a map of London underground.

-0-

How can I know their smell
 if I don't know mine?

How many layings out in that house,
 how many wedding feasts?

-0-

What I read as North Duarte
 turned out to be North Quarter Farm

Four censuses at least,
 the four unmarried Hamiltons
 kept on the tenancy,
 kept house and farm together.

Five windows – plenty space for

Andrew John Margaret and Robert

James, the married younger brother,
 his wife and six surviving children
 share just two windows in 1881.

Four remnants share them by 1911.

-0-

They called it the coalroad –
 Quarter – the miners' rows
 Are now bungalows.

-0-

The Missing

Trackside graffiti:
 Save Gartcosh / Save Ravensc

Hamilton Palace
 underlaps Asda car park

10 Union Street - sixty years
 No trace - Sixties' flats.

-0-

Why at first I thought their names
 would stick...

-0-

I found their graves by counting the absences
 the blips in the rhythm
 ...of Ellen's fecundity
 according to the census

my job to remember them.

-0-

Why am I allowing all those holy squabblers
 into my heard? All those schismatics -
 Burghers, Anti-burghers, New Lichters,
 Covenanters - jostling for space
 as if I were Andrew Hamilton himself,
 making room for them.

-0-

The Duke and his baubles.
 Keir Hardie (a Quarter miner for a time).
 John MacLean (whose funeral, fictionally attended by the husband,
 will one day be a set piece in Helen Hamilton's ugly marriage):

all soaked up my time in archives,
 stole my

attention.

-0-

Which brackish relation discarded Andrew's library?

Why was there no son or clever daughter to receive his lore?

-0-

Lost, last Saturday, between
 Hamilton and Fir Park, Motherwell,
 And New Century Theatre, Motherwell,
 Gold Seal (Red Stone). - Reward,
 Hamilton, 10 Union Street, Hamilton.

(*Hamilton Advertiser*, Friday, 29 April 1904)

Hamiltons on the randan?

Theatre with Pictures

or music-hall?

Careless of carnelian and gold?

My kind of Hamiltons!

They don't know.....
they've less than a year till they're back in black
in deep and double mourning.

-0-

The closer I look, the wider I swerve.

I should be pacing Low Waters,
Union Street, the lost Palace,
But I'm back on the moors,
and sphagnum underfoot.

0-0-0

James Hamilton buries his babies

Had he been English and wealthy
he would have hired mutes,
but being a joiner and acquainted with wood
he made their coffins himself.

He knew from his hand
the curve of each skull, the tilt
of each neck; how to carve
hidden comfort for each bairn's rest.

So he measured, sawed and sanded,
laid rare strips of camphor to ease their breath,
smoothed with his plane
all that was possible to smooth.

And his laceworker wife fashioned
the winding sheets. Stitched her own
crape and mourning ribbons. These she made
while tending to croup by candlelight.

Naming Protocol

John, the cabinet maker,
rubs linseed gently
on a secret drawer,
for the memory
of his older John.
Helen, the milliner,
tiptoes round the shades
of Ellen and Helen.
And all the while,
their mother muffles them
with handkerchiefs
and their burden of names.

Crape Protocol

for a sister six months

three with crape

light transparent stuff

in the manner of gauze

raw silk gummed

twisted on the mill

crimped

woven without crossing

unlucky

to keep it in the house

its black lustreless surface

reflecting no light

On My Father's Side

My great grandfather's brothers
carried his kist barefoot,
the water's chill on their toes,
a wreath of toe-tacks on his coffin lid
as they bore him inchmeal,
safe, to the other side.

Echo in Hamilton Mausoleum

Whispered sound reverberates
almost kindly in the ear.

It taps the anvil with quiet care,
uncoils the sleeping ammonite.

Bigboy visits Hamilton Mausoleum

Ken yon knobhead mausoleum?

Aff ra M74 westbound?

Ah hid masel in yon once,
 slithered ower the rails,
 past the lionguards.

Left ma tag

- Bigboy.

Noo am on the tour.
 That guy frae the museum let us in.
 He gabbed for a bit.
 Built by '*El Magnifico*', tenth Duke,
 walls fifteen feet thick.
 Three doors - life, death, immortality -

that's me, ken. Serene as fuck.

Swagger in, cauld blast,
 a' dead wind.
 A' they empty niches,
 then up inside.

An he blabbed on –
 there wiz a sarcophagus there. frae Egypt.
El Mag put one ower on the British Museum,
 so they say.

 Nabbed the best for hissell,
 nae matter they'd tae chop aff his nibs
 at the knees tae squeeze him in. Or mebbe no.

They wiz Masons big time, a' whispers.
 Bronze doors the spit o thae in Florence an marble

Sae he gies us the banter an asks if we want a go.

Want a go?
 A' I want is tae be there –
 mysel,
 so ah can shout an holler
 an tak a' the space
 an feel yon echo.

Thirty seconds when the bronze doors were in.
 Thirty seconds

Echo in ma ribs,
 in ma boots,
 in ma guts,
 in ma skull.

An ah can birl an holler
 an stamp, an the wa's
 tak a' ma sound.
 A' ma FURY.

An if he was born noo

a' the duke wid dae is
 birl an swig an stamp an holler.

an then

the quiet.

But yon museum guy
 Coonted me oot. He'd ha skelped mi.

Naething's nae as good

as the power

o that lord in there.

Andrew Hamilton According to his Proverbs

Never seek a wife till ye ken what to do wi' her.
Nathing to be done in haste but gripping of fleas.

Andrew Hamilton, chiding

You read that fine piece Naismith himself
wrote on my death (which I know,
even if you don't, is not The End).
You could not hold my multitudes.

I saw you pick – like the crows –
the eyes and flesh that suited you:
*“Owing to his peculiarly quiet and unassuming
disposition, not many people were aware....”*

and then
*“He was born in this neighbourhood,
and his long life was quiet and uneventful.
He was unmarried.”*

I saw you make me fusty, shy. Whoring?
I smiled at that one – with me an elder.
Though I like that you thought
of ways to give me pleasure.

It was fine. I kept good company,
I walked the coal road with Scott
and Burns and the Covenant in my head.
I was not bounded by my time.

Riposte to Andrew Hamilton

You are a peaceable man, Andrew Hamilton,
but you make me pick a fight with you.

I had you as a gifted recluse,
scratching at your research,
hiding in the *Advertiser* as A.H,
holding back, shy of Miss Jessie Wallace,
stammering at all but your Ayrshires,
living by your Bible and Jamieson's
but *there* you are –
making speeches at dinners, weddings,
gracing the platform at literary soirées,
tapping your foot to the Quarter Flute Band.

Who could resist “The Victim of Love”?
You wrote it, published it, then hid it. From me.
You shunned photographic portraits.
You set trails of coincidences
so improbable I won't recite them here.
You played tag and tease,
led me down the coal road,
led me on, played with me.
Made me read Walter Scott,
DAMN YOU!

My Janet Hamiltons

Janet Hamilton, respectable

Eldest daughter still at home:
 stitched by day, scoured by night,
 took the pledge, sang in church -
 uncle an elder, father a wright.

Janet Hamilton, transgressive

What if you drank?
 Or tickled, down there?
 Struck for fair wages,
 stitched wild seams.
 Fell for a Pape,
 refused to stay home.
 Away for a while,
 got rid of the bairn.

Janet Hamilton, at rest

You earned your early place
 in the family lair. A single stone dove
 swoops down, especially to you.
 You kept the peace in that house.
 They say you worked your fingers
 to the bone, and well beyond.

Janet Hamilton, counterfactually

You should have been an Edwardian,
 cheered our boys, raised your own,
 tutted at flappers, relished your vote,
 ended your days on the NHS.

But you died a Victorian, thirty-eight,
 “*Greatly regretted and much loved*”.

Janet Hamilton Invisible

I am invisible because I left no mark.
I'd no certificates or published books.
What I got up to on a Saturday night
did not interest the local paper.
In the lair in Bent Cemetery, you'll find me
squeezed onto the stone with the rest of them.
Look for me in the hand mirror
I gave wee Helen when she was twenty-one,
before she was lost in marriage.
You have it now.
Make of me what you will,
I wasn't just a text for you to play with;
I shivered, I laughed, I enjoyed my food.
I saw you condescend at 'pinafore machinist'
in the census. But I was skilled, quick.
One of mines is in the museum –
no-one records the machinist's name.
I had no children so could not settle into myth.
I could read, Uncle Andrew taught me well.
But I was hemmed in. Stitched.
A neat embroiderer.

Spirit Flower of Janet Hamilton

The clock gives me a metronome beat
but everything swirls in the spirit world.
She is light, Janet Hamilton. So clear
she makes my brush precise. She floats
on the point of her toes. What were fingers
shoot streams of flame. She glows.
Her thumb ridged by a constant thimble
is now air. Mine smears a gentle wash
on paper, before she leads me to sable.
Don't think you will see a shrivelled bud.
This sister, spinster, pinafore machinist -
taken by apoplexy at thirty eight - grows yet.
She is beyond words, but moves my hand
in rhythmic dance with her spirit mood.
She was always at something, always doing,
but here she is pure colour. In my trance
she floats, circles, swoops like a kingfisher.
How quickly my earthly hand is guided.
Her voice is not her coarse speech
but, in soaring flutes of vermilion,
she speaks. She knows all our tongues.
Let me keep a brush and clean palette
for you. Do not fear the flowers I will paint,
nor their petals, nor their stamens, nor the pollen
you think may stain you. The bristling stalk
will not pierce you. You are everywhere,
come, flower of Janet Hamilton, come.

Helen Hamilton in Old Age, 1961

What I remember of your damp old age
is a whispery blue chiffon scarf, polka dots
machine-stamped in stiff, pure white,
taupe wool-rib stockings, rolled tight
to the knee. Frayed elastic and thick slippers.
You would pee majestically on the fire rug -
great streams of hallowed piss. I can still hear
the torrent, inhale the lift of a baggy skirt.

Tucked into your corner cot you told me
your visions of the Baby Jesus, calling you,
Helen Hamilton from Hamilton, possessed
of the best-turned ankles in Hamilton,
wife to the carter's son from Riccarton,
now in Hell. Him. His name never spoken.

Notes to Poems

Twine (p3)

Found poem. Sources are *Oh Dear Me* (The Jute Mill Song) by Mary Brooksbank and extracts from *Hill of Tarvit Guide Book*, The National Trust for Scotland.

The Work of Ivory (p5)

Response to a C9 carved ivory book cover in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna: St Gregory with Scribes. The carving depicts a dove perched on the shoulder of St Gregory the Great when he wrote his Commentaries. The dove is said to have transmitted the divine voice to Gregory.

Among the Bunnet Firs– efter Wang Wei (p10)

A Scots version of Wang Wei's *Bamboo Grove*. The poem was written for a series of lunchtime workshops convened by Prof. Robert Crawford and run by Dr Garry MacKenzie, School of English, University of St Andrews. Thanks are due to Xi Zhao for providing background information about classical Chinese culture and poetic forms.

bird-alone: quite alone, without companionship; *bunnet firs*: Scots pines; *canting*: singing softly; *wid*: wood, cluster of trees, small forest; *grounchie*: luxuriant; *dernt*: pp of dern: To hide or conceal like a bird among heather or of concealing a fault. To eavesdrop. To loiter; *gaes haufers*: shares, goes halves; *munelicht*: moonlight

Underfoot (p13)

Bog plants used in *step into another world*, installation by Caroline Dear, Cupar Arts Festival, 2016.

Advice to Gaelic cultural studies students (p14)

cas-chrom (pron/stress: **caschrom**): foot plough; *each-nisge* (**yachooshge**): supernatural water horse, a malign shape-shifter, found in the sea, sea lochs and fresh-water lochs, sometimes appearing as a handsome man; *co-dhiù* (**co-yoo**): however, whether, in any case.

A much-reproduced Victorian photograph shows crofters using a *cas-chrom* in Tarskavaig, Skye, near the location of the poem.

Lochan Dubh: (**Lochan** dthoo) proper name, literally small black loch. This does not exist as a place name near the location of the poem, though there are several lochans with rushes and a Loch Dubh.

Pettigrews, Arnotts and Copland & Lye: Pettigrew & Stephens, Arnott's (later Arnott Simpson's) and Copland & Lye were prominent Glasgow department stores in the 1930s, no longer trading.

My Bonnie Prince (p15)

Promotional material for Drambuie in the 1960s included plaster statuettes of Bonnie Prince Charlie (Charles Edward Stuart, the Jacobite Young Pretender). These were intended for display in licensed premises, not for immersion in hot water.

Fat Lady in Ra Ra Skirt at Tate Britain (p20)

The paintings responded to are: *Proserpine* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1874; *The Lady of*

Shalott by John William Waterhouse, 1888; and *Portrait of James Hamilton, Earl of Arran, Later 3rd Marquis and 1st Duke of Hamilton, Aged 17* by Daniel Mytens the Elder, 1623.

The first draft, an exploration of ‘red’, was written well before I began the Hamilton ancestor project. I put it away. By the time I looked at it again, I had started my search for the Hamiltons, and was astonished to discover that I had written about – and forgotten about – an earlier Duke of Hamilton. By this time, my search for meaning and connection had manifested itself in a series of bizarre coincidences and connections, of which this became one. By then, I was exploring the character of Andrew Hamilton, a tenant farmer, occasional poet, antiquarian and genealogist, who contributed long articles to *The Hamilton Advertiser* on the genealogy of the noble family of the Hamiltons, whose seat, the now-demolished Hamilton Palace, dominated the town.

Elegy (p26)

Found poem. Extracts are selected from entries in *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary*, compiled by Edward Dwelly.

The Hamiltons

Characters and Objects

The main characters and objects in the sequence are:

Andrew Hamilton (1821-1898): Tenant farmer. Tenant of the Duke of Hamilton at North Quarter Farm, a dairy farm with a herd of Ayrshire cows. Church of Scotland elder, at Quarter Parish Church. A locally well-known antiquarian and local historian, contributing long articles to the *Hamilton Advertiser* under the byline A.H. Vice-President, Quarter Literary Association (later Quarter Literary & Scientific Association). Edited the Association’s journal and wrote poetry. Unmarried. Eldest brother of James Hamilton. Paid for the family lair and gravestone. Made a Will.

James Hamilton (1831-1905): Journeyman joiner (wright). Lived at 12 then 10 Union Street, Hamilton. Registered voter. Married, 9 children, of whom six survived infancy. Died in June 1905.

Ellen Hamilton (1841-1905): Née Hawkins. Laceworker, then wife of James Hamilton, above. Died in April 1905.

Janet Hamilton (1863-1901): Pinafore machinist. Second daughter of James and Ellen Hamilton. Single, remained at home. Died suddenly of apoplexy, days short of her 38th birthday.

Helen Hamilton (1879-1961): Youngest child of James and Ellen Hamilton. Milliner, then married, living in Glasgow then Stirling. My grandmother.

Alexander Hamilton, 10th Duke of Hamilton, 7th Duke of Brandon (1767-1852): No relation. Briefly ambassador to the court of St Petersburg. Lord High Steward at coronations of King William IV and Queen Victoria. Supporter of Napoleon; ensured his son married into the Bonaparte family. Trustee of British Museum and art collector. Extensively rebuilt and extended Hamilton Palace and built Hamilton Mausoleum. Known locally as *El Magnifico*.

Bigboy (1997-): Unskilled local lad and graffiti artist, with little chance of work in post-industrial Lanarkshire.

Male unemployment in March 2016: GB: 5.2%. S. Lanarkshire: 6.3% (inc. Hamilton). N. Lanarkshire: 7/5% (inc. nearby Motherwell & Ravenscraig steelworks, closed,1992). Source: Nomis area-based official labour market statistics.

Hamilton Mausoleum: Commissioned by 10th Duke of Hamilton to house the remains of his ancestors and his own sarcophagus. Construction of the 123 ft high Roman-style domed structure began in 1842 and was completed in 1858, six years after the Duke's death. It has a 15-second echo, one of the longest in the world (30 seconds when the bas-relief bronze doors were in place) and Whispering Wa's (walls).

Hamilton Palace and Grounds: The palace, which is very close to the town of Hamilton, was built in 1695 and was greatly (and grandiosely) enlarged by the 10th Duke to become the largest non-royal residence in Europe. Demolished in 1927, partly due to of prohibitive costs of upkeep (art sales in the 1880s paid off gambling debts) and subsidence caused by extending seams of the family's own coal mines. A health club and the Asda superstore and car park now stand on the palace site. Most of the grounds have been incorporated into Strathclyde Country Park.

Hand mirror: Art nouveau hand mirror, c1900. Round mirror in a stained wood casing, painted motif of tulips, triform, red. One of very few possessions Helen Hamilton brought with her when giving up her home in old age. It was passed on to my mother and inherited by me in 1983. No stories attach to it.

The Hamiltons: Notes on Poems

Chasing the absence (p26-29)

Save Gartcosh / Save Ravenscraig : graffiti outside Motherwell rail station. Gartcosh Steel Mill was closed in 1986, Ravenscraig in 1992.

randan: (**randan**):spree, celebration, drinking session

back on the moors: a reference to my own background. I was brought up in the Highlands. In contrast to the unknown, urban, central-belt Scots-speaking central-belt Hamiltons, my father's family, whom I knew well, were rural Gaels and islanders.

James Hamilton buries his babies (p30)

i.m.

John Hamilton, 5.5.1862 – 28.6.1862, cause of death – bronchitis.

Helen Hamilton, 24.1.1867 – 30.5.1868, cause of death – measles, bronchitis.

Ellen Hawkins Hamilton, 18.4.1869 – 9.2.1870, cause of death – chronic bronchitis.

strips of camphor: camphor has decongestant properties; the wood is strong-smelling, as I know from the camphor chest passed on to my cousin, James Hamilton Larcombe, and then to me, following his death in February 2016.

Bigboy visits Hamilton Mausoleum (p35)

bisset: himself; *birk:* revolve rapidly, whirl round, dance; *skelped:* slapped, smacked; *naething:* nothing.

Andrew Hamilton According to his Proverbs (p37)

Found poem taken from Scottish proverbs. Then number of proverbs was whittled down in successive drafts as Andrew Hamilton's elusive character became more apparent to me. Proverbs were taken from the appendix of Scottish proverbs in Mackay, Charles. *A Dictionary of Lowland Scotch*. London: Whittaker, 1888.

Andrew Hamilton, chiding (p38)

William Naismith (c1830-1914) owned the *Hamilton Advertiser*, which he founded in 1856. He regularly published articles by Andrew Hamilton, who also contributed local information to *Naismith's Hamilton directory for 1878-79*. Authorship of the obituary, published in the *Hamilton Advertiser*, 14.5.1898, has not (yet) been checked, but it is so fulsome it was probably written by a good friend.

Scott, Burns, Covenant: Andrew Hamilton was a devotee of Sir Walter Scott and conducted much research into C17 covenanters. As the *Hamilton Advertiser* reports on 15.5.1969, he contributed an essay to the *Quarter Literary Association Journal* in 1869, on 'The Female Ballad' and song writers of Scotland. He is therefore likely to have been fond of Burns.

Riposte to Andrew Hamilton (p39)

Jamieson's: In a letter to the *Hamilton Advertiser* dated 30.6.1863, on 'Old Scotch Words', A.H. writes, "On turning to 'Jamieson's Dictionary of the Scottish Language' I find that...".

Janet Hamilton Invisible (p41)

one of mines is: Scots/Scottish form of 'one of mine is'. I had taken a decision not to try to mimic the likely speech of the Hamiltons, but here Janet insisted.

Spirit Flower of Janet Hamilton (p42)

Written after visiting an exhibition of paintings by Georgiana Houghton, Courtauld Gallery, summer 2016. Houghton, a spiritualist medium, created largely abstract watercolours in the 1860s and 1870s. While there is no evidence to link the Hamiltons of 10 Union Street, Hamilton with spiritualism, the present-day Hamilton Spiritualist Church is at 19 Park Road, just off Union Street, close to where the house had been. The houses or tenements were replaced by flats in the 1960s.