

## McLellan Poetry Competition 2024 - Scots Competition

### First Prize:

Lynn Valentine for "Imagine"

### Second Prize:

Alan Millar for "Bushfit"

### Highly Commended entries:

- Craig Aitchison for "Merry Dancers"
- Tom Bryan for "Aff tae Proxima B"
- Keeks Mc for "Here an Thare"
- David Bleiman for "A Sair Fecht"
- Aileen Ballantyne for "Heavy in ma Hauns"

Congratulations to all of our very worthy winning and highly commended poets.

We would also like to extend our grateful thanks to Billy Letford and Jim Mackintosh for all their hard work in selecting the winning entries in this year's competitions, and to all the writers who took the time to enter the competitions and to trust us with their words and work.

### Our Judge: Jim Mackintosh



Jim Mackintosh is a poet, editor, playwright and producer who has published six collections including *Flipstones* (Tippermuir Books, 2018) and edited or co-edited four anthologies including *The Darg* (Drunk Muse Press, 2019) celebrating the centenary of Hamish Henderson and *Beyond The Swelkie* (Tippermuir Books, 2021), a celebration in poems and essays to mark the centenary of George Mackay Brown.

Along with Duncan Chisholm and Hamish Napier, Jim brought *Beyond the Swelkie to Celtic Connections* in 2022 as a multimedia production which was then toured and returned to Celtic Connections in 2023 with an extract of the show as part of the sold out 30th Anniversary Celebration in the Royal Concert Hall in Glasgow.

His book *The Banes o the Turas* (Tippermuir Books, 2022) was a poetical translation into Scots of *Turas Viaggio* by Italian poet and friend of Hamish Henderson, Pino Mereu and was shortlisted for Book of the Year at the 2023 Scots Language Awards. Extracts from the

book form the basis of musical collaboration involving Jim and four award winning musicians. It was premiered at the 2024 Celtic Connections and is now touring Scotland.

He has undertaken several residencies including for St Johnstone FC between 2016 and 2019. He was the Makar of the Federation of Writers Scotland in 2021, the Poet in Chief of the Hampden Collection (2019-22) and the Poetry Editor of Nutmeg Magazine (2017-22).

He is the current Makar of the CATERAN EcoMuseum in East Perthshire and the Angus Glens.

His latest book published by Seahorse Publications - *We are Migrant* will be launched in Glasgow on the 1st May. The book is a series of poems examining the constant shift of humanity from my Jim's own Great Grandfather's journey as a 14 year old boy from Donegal to work on the railway tunnels of Glasgow, to the hellish existence of refugee camps in too many places across the world, to the desperate plight of people fleeing persecution, crossing dangerous waters and war zones, to the highland clearances and much more. The collection includes the poem *Tour Package* which was Highly Commended in the 2023 McLellan Poetry Prize.

## First Prize: Lynn Valentine for "Imagine"



Lynn Valentine lives in the Black Isle. Lynn's debut collection, *Life's Stink and Honey*, was published in 2022 after winning the Cinnamon Press Literature Award. Her Scots language pamphlet *A Glimmer o Stars* was published by Hedgehog Poetry Press in 2021 after winning their dialect award. She was one of the inaugural mentees of the Roddy Lumsden Memorial Mentorship Scheme 2022-23 organised by the Scottish Poetry Library and the poet Niall Campbell. In 2021 Lynn was runner-up in the Scots category of the Wigtown prize and had a Scots poem chosen as one of the best Scottish poems by the Scottish Poetry Library. She is currently working on her second poetry collection, *Fallow*, due to be published in 2026 by Cinnamon Press.

Our judge's comment: "In sic a kist stappit fu o rich verse lik this noble competition glowin oot o Arran, this poem *Imagine* wis aye itchin at ma thochts an plantin its wecht o precious objects intae ma saul wi aa its meaningful imaigery an gentle depth o Scots yet aye wi a threid o an important message fer us aa. Aiblins, mair fowk will tak tent an fin the sherpness o this *Makar* tae imagine a world whaur kin'ness is ane o oor currencies."

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### Imagine

Thon year, thi country brak itsel in hauf, laigs flailin,  
free tae rin aghly whaur thae wantit, free tae choosit  
wellies ir high-heelit buits, mebbe a pair o baffies.  
Free tae tak a hike wi ithers if thae choosit tae.

No mony o us worried about thi laigs onymair,  
thae cuid stravaig soothward, tak a sweem  
in waater is waarm as bluid ir rin a nichttime race  
wi no evin thi mune trubillt tae leuk.

Fae time tae time we micht wunner at whaur thi laigs  
hud got tae - wir thae still rinnin or mebbe hirplin noo?  
Ir wir thae daein a tango wi ither laigs thae pickit up  
oan thi bawroom dancin circuit? Markit onlie in fractions.

Nae seevens ir tens fir thim without thir airms ir belly,  
nae aixtra marks fir a flick fae a heid thit didnae belang.

Bit we onlie thocht o thim in passin, lik secont-haun news  
about an auld ex thit didnae mean sae much ony road.

Thi heid o oor lan wis smairt, raisit itsel up  
a wee bit forder north wi its straicht spine, a hairt fir luvlin.  
We adorit thi heid, thi leid thit gildit fae its mooth, a leid  
thit some o us hadnae heard syne we wir bairns – auld wurds

thit we unnerstood tho we cam fae aa ower. We blossimt  
lik thi floers thit twined roon about us. We tradit in music  
an buiks – kin’ness ane o oor currencies. Thi heid’s ee  
wir a-seein, nane o us wid be left ahent, a brithers thigether.

Thi heid breathit thi purest o air, neb flarin – in oot – in oot -  
thi air fed oor trees an plants thit grew an grew, we werenae  
hungyrt, food banks closit thir doors. Thi heid’s lugs tunit  
tae aathin guid in thi wulrd, we wir wise agin.

An thi blush thit glowit fae thi heid’s cheeks licht wir toons,  
brichtend ivery room, ivery mobile phone. Thi bodie cuid haud  
itsel well despite loass o laigs. We bidit in peace, jist a shrug  
o thi shidders, a tweest o thi neck, enouch tae waarn invaders aff.

Thi airms craidilt us tae sleep, quiet hauns woke us whaun mornin  
cam roon an roon agin. Thi womb gied birth tae new wuids  
and hills, oor lan noo unpollutit. We bathit in thi clearest o seas,  
lay doon thigether - wee lambies aa in thi greenin fields.

## Second Prize: Alan Millar for "Bushfit"



Alan Millar, from the Laggan area of east Donegal. Based in Ballymoney, Co Antrim, Journalist. Writer and poet in Ulster-Scots and English. In 2021 was winner of Hugh MacDiarmid Tassie for Scots poetry and the inaugural Linenhall Library Ulster-Scots short story competition. 2023 winner of Linenhall Library Ulster-Scots poetry competition. Writes an Ulster-Scots column for the Ballymoney Chronicle called Leid Loanen. First collection of poetry 'Echas frae tha Big Swilly Swally' published May 2023. Nominated for Scots Writer of the Year, 2023 Scots Language Awards. Currently working on ACNI assisted second poetry collection, Frae Erris tae Wrath.

Our judge's comment: "Efter dargin's duin, an yer fer pickin up a buikie o verse tae loss yersel at times aa ye want is a gentle stream o thochts tae distract an Maggie did that fer me in this ane wi a hap o paintit scenes an a threid o hert-thochts. A fine distraction eyven if anely fer a wee moment."

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### **Bushfit**

*after dargin's daun*

Maggie rins frae shire watter straicht up the beach  
tae a deid otter maun hae washed doon the Bush River  
in the wile rane the nicht afore

A heddie raik ower an say  
*Maggie mon noo awa girl lay thon alane*  
an git oot the wee treats  
an git her bak on the lead

Cause there's nae caw A hae  
stranger than the caw o thon deid otter  
mooth froze apen  
gams without life poustie

Likly staule frae the broo  
ye wouldnae think sic a baste cud bae drooned  
in a teem o its ain hame place

Efter

when we hae straivaged farrit mair  
an the otter wuz by her  
A lit Maggie aff ainst mair an awa she snokes

A gie saftly bak intae the sun blue lift  
abeen Runkerry Heid an the ocean  
fur thare's nae strand frae Erris Heid tae Cape Wrath  
isnae extempore  
an nae better hansel fur missal fild me  
a ticht an ooled aule dungeon heid.

A step nae further wi sic jalousins  
'cause the doag withoot warnin' nor missal in her heid  
gaes steeple-chasin' efter a jet engined Sea-Pie  
noo in full flicht a meter aff the san'  
wha gies a fashed skreich  
an mae doag barks bak  
an noo they're taakin tae ane anither  
baste an burd blak an white  
chalk an lava bigged intae this aule coast itsell  
a byous sicht  
the younglin Sea-Pie bankin an whimplin  
oddtimes jinkin on a preen heid  
up an doon Bushfit strand

Maggie giein it the welly efter  
och wunnerful wheechin smeddum fild creturs  
sic a ramdash sic gopins o life  
mae doag jinkin on a bing o wellies bae comparison  
quarter a mile up an doon the beach ilka time easy

Till the burd naw so late  
heids oot athort the watter  
an awa aff ower the Bush mooth  
whar the smowts are busy  
about the lang gangin tae Sargasso  
mae doag breengin efter  
till the big safty staps intae her hocks in suds  
kennin what A kent aa along  
nae chance wha-sae-iver  
bit bae japers hoo she luvd the crack o't  
an me forbye

Dargin's ower, jobs a guid ane  
Monie thanks.

## Highly Commended: Craig Aitchison for "Merry Dancers"



Craig Aitchison has published fiction in publications including Northwords Now, Tangled Web and Southlight. The Scottish Poetry Library chose him to respond to Sir Walter Scott's 250th anniversary. His poetry has appeared in Poetry Scotland, New Writing Scotland, Nutmeg and the Tapsalteerie Collection 'Sleekit'. He received a New Writers Award from the Scottish Book Trust for writing in Scots. In 2023 he won the Badenoch Prize, the Wigtown Poetry Prize for Scots and the Burrell collection's Hidden Treasures competition.

Our judge's comment: "Ye hae me aa intrigit an oan the edge o a lichtsme stravaig when ye stairt wi a mention o a Vauxhall Viva an ah'm nae expectin whaur the hook intae ma hert will be. Yet thir it wis – shimmerin wi a lowe o fine embers in the norlin lichts abuin the vyce o this Makar – fair gowstie wi yer rocklie saul."

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### Merry Dancers

Ice on The Struie. Vauxhall Viva skitin.  
Keep gaun through the mirk, seekin the sicht  
o aerials on the hill, ledders streekin  
intae mirk. In the riggin o the nicht,

finally, the lichts o Wick. Next mornin,  
knackert, gettin messages, the wifie  
kens he's the new man. The Radio station  
plays in the shop, fisslin vyces frae the sea.

He listens tae the distress frequencies,  
leans in for they three meenits, twice an oor.  
prayin for the uisual - Nae fish, nae fish -  
whiles wishin he wis on a rowin trawler.

Late on Christmas Eve, waves fu, tappin morse  
oot intae the mirk. Ian Fleming last.  
Walkin hame, lichts skinklin in the harbour,  
tae wife an bairn, siccar an soond, fast



asleep. Next day, gifts unhappit, belly  
fu, efter the Queen's speech - "real happiness  
comes from serving" – news on the telly  
says the ship Ian Fleming has been lost

at sea. Three men deid, drooned, includin  
the radio operator whae bidet  
at his post, sendin SOS, again

til the dawnin ken an the derk dreidet  
seelence came ower. A last look ower  
the Yule messages afore slippin doon.

Some nichts when the northern lichts were glowin  
bricht, frequency filled wi crackling soond,  
signal dwinet an driftit. Like listenin  
through wads o cotton wool. Sky shimmerin.

## Highly Commended: Tom Bryan for "Aff tae Proxima B"



Tom Bryan is a widely-published poet, fiction and non-fiction writer. He was born in Canada and lived and worked in the USA but has been in Scotland continuously for nearly five decades. His mother was a war bride from Edinburgh. His father was of Irish homesteading background in Canada.

Tom has done writing residencies in Scotland and England. As a former Brownsbank Writing Fellow, he lived and worked from Hugh MacDiarmid's cottage near Biggar, which was a natural setting to foster a further interest in Scots writing. He doesn't speak Scots but enjoys writing in it. Many of his mother's family and ancestors were good Scots speakers.

He now stays in Stewarton, East Ayrshire and can see the hills of Arran from just down the street! He trained as a librarian but has worked many other jobs to support his writing habit including salmon farmer, philosophy lecturer, writing tutor and care worker. He is a widower and grandfather, aged 74.

Our judge's comment: "Nah, this Makar is richt. Wir nae gaun tae Proxima B. Wee maun aa work thegither tae save oor precious birlin blue baw. An mebbe wi a sherp stick craftit oot o the finest o the Leid we can mak difference – mak this oor promise tae oor bairns!"

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### AFF TAE PROXIMAB?

Oor puir auld gangrel planet  
( Whaur langsyne mah kinfowk wrocht,  
chaavin awa up tae thur oxters in ugsome clart)  
is noo (sae Ahm telt) croodit an wastit.

Bigheids wha ken aathin  
speir us tae git oor act thegither,  
stert flittin tae Proxima B!

Proxima coories doon in yon 'Goldilocks Zone',  
nae too close tae its ain starnies  
Nae ower het nor cauld.  
Haud on, haud...

Proxima's nae exactly Proxima if ye ken mah craic.  
4.2 licht years awa, 25 trillion miles.  
Taks 250,000 years, jist there, nae back!  
Forbye, it's a trauchle breengin through  
galactic Pitmirk, gey wersh, darg an roch.

Sorry, Maisters wha 'ken it aa', caa me glaikit  
bit oor true hame is Airth, aye, warts an aa!  
We maun aa work thegither  
Tae save oor precious birlin' blue baw

## Highly Commended: Keeks Mc for "Here an Thare"



Keeks Mc is a Glaswegian poet and performer who uses colourful and descriptive Scots to provide raw, acerbic social commentary and vivid, eloquent observations around modern societal, feminist and inclusionary topics.

Our judge's comment: "Aye gaein hame – the endin o this fine scribevin yet aiblins the stert o anither stravaig ower neu dremes. Oor past is archivit yet the journey when scribevit in sic a fine wey o daein is aye welcam."

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### Here an Thare

The ceils are differ  
The Scots isle haed auld astragal  
an the clachan in Fraunce  
haes bauks  
The soonds are fair unalike  
The big white hoose oan the bank  
oerleukin the bay  
wis peacefu  
but ne'er quate  
Thare wis aye the plee o the sea-maws  
an lappin or skoil o the swaws  
The auld flesher's hoose  
facin oantae the squere  
is sae seelent ye kid hear a preen drap  
an the odd wheep o a skirl katogle  
wid hae ye jumpin oot yer skin  
The vaam is alike in thase buildings but  
Slicht foostiness an smeek  
fae the fire that Ah've aye burned wee scraps in  
tae see thaim colour, curl an dance

than sometimes flot up the lum  
tae be uised as garments or blankets by the whippitie stouries  
that bide in the nooks an crannies up thare  
The big fowk at the saunds  
uised tae mak thair brose in the fishin  
but left it tae suit the bee-bos o the veesitors about fowerty year agae  
sellin rock an whigmaleeries  
amangst dodgems an crazy golf  
In the cottoun shuir nocht haes cheynged  
baur the maks o caur occasionally parked in the squere  
or tractor trundlin by  
Tourists are few  
weel oot-nummered by the hey turses  
an eed wi suspesicion by the local wilkies  
an gairisons o sunflouers  
Whiche'er kringlet road Ah tak  
shore or ferm  
Ah'm aye gaein hame

## Highly Commended: David Bleiman for "A Sair Fecht"



David Bleiman is an Edinburgh poet writing multilingual poetry. Winner of the Sangschaw competition 2020 and McCash 2023. His poems feature on the Poetry Society and Scottish Poetry Library websites. Pamphlets including "This Kilt of Many Colours", available from [poetrykilt.bigcartel.com](http://poetrykilt.bigcartel.com)

Our judge's comment: "The auld alliance when wyvit thegither in sic a wey an wi the imagery o Daumier haudin it bi the nib yer no far aff it. No far aff the twa heezin forrit haun an haun wi a nod fae this auld makar-judge wha's aye willin tae follae the inner-maist mindins o sic a fine Makar."

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### A Sair Fecht

after The Heavy Burden, Honoré Daumier

The wean, a raggetie lass,  
jist five year auld, mebbie,  
coories in tae the wumman's shedda,  
hings oan the coat o maman.

Jildie, jildie mammy!  
The washerwife, laidit wi her cairry,  
faulds intae the blouster,  
haud doon, camshauchelt.

The mither, disjaskit,  
wabbit, hirples along,  
the lassie, fidgin fain, breenges oan.  
Whit wey? We cannae ken.

Daumier an aw, trauchles  
a wechtie pauchle o hert-peety,  
signs his nem oan the causey  
that heezes the twa forrit.



Plus vite, maman, j'ai faim!  
The lassie feels the nip o hunger,  
or is her weanish faimish jist  
tae set efter her mammy's shedda?

## Highly Commended: Aileen Ballantyne for "Heavy in ma Hauns"



Aileen Ballantyne is an award-winning poet and journalist from Cowdenbeath in Fife. Her investigative reporting for "The Guardian" has been commended, twice, in the British Press Awards and she's been the staff Medical Correspondent of both "The Guardian" and "The Sunday Times". Her poetry often draws on her experience in journalism, giving voice to the people behind the headlines. Her series of poems on the Lockerbie disaster won the prestigious Mslexia Poetry Prize, while her poem on the last hours of Mary Queen of Scots won the Scots category of the Wigtown Poetry Prize. You can read more of these in her poetry collection: "Taking Flight", published by Luath Press and [learn more about Aileen and her writing on the Scottish Poetry Library](#).

Our judge's comment: "Aa the sorra o natur in ilka pynt o this bonny wee poem yet scievit wi a tender thocht o connections atween, makar, faither an the wee beastie an forbye fins licht an hope fer us aa oan oor life-traivels."

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### Heavy in ma Hauns

Ah gan ootside tae watch ma dad,  
spade-cuttin wurms intae wee bluidit bits  
fir the hedgehog.

He fun her last nicht, doon the auld trainline,  
rolled up in a baa, nae movin,  
ablow the dockens an purple lupins.

He held oot his bunnet.  
Ah felt the wecht o her,  
heavy in ma hauns.

Ah mind the stiff-brush  
o her cauld birsles in ma palm,  
the milky-white skin,  
an the touch

o they twae white-thistle puffbaas  
we fun aside her  
the next mornin,



an ma dad, tryin  
fir a week  
to keep them alive fir me.