

A Hantle o Verse

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The political regeneration of Scotland since devolution has been reflected in any number of cultural developments exploring what it means to be a 21st Century Scot. Pride of place goes to the current Golden Age of Scottish drama, The National Theatre emerging hand in hand with world class writers such as David Harrower, Andrew Greig and Gregory Burke.

Prose too has found a certain buoyancy: Canongate publishes Booker winners and Barack Obama; Polygon's jewel is Alexander McCall Smith. Of course, this new-found self-assurance has concentrated the public mind on all things Scottish, including language. Perhaps the most complete expressions of this are Matthew Fitt's cyber-punk sci-fi novel "But'n'Ben A-Go-Go" and Suhaayl Saadi's Scots-Asian rag-a-rock epic "Psychoraag".

What does not sit easily with this contemporary flowering is the shortbread tin lid view of Scotland as a sentimental rural idyll, or as one big, happy tenement community. Unfortunately, these editions – fine in themselves - sit firmly in this backward-looking tradition.

Both contain a number of chestnuts which are already familiar to generations of teachers: ballads ("Sir Patrick Spens"), urban legends ("The Wee Malkies"), family dramas ("A Dug A Dug") and national archetypes ("Auld Lang Syne") are all well represented. However, the other poems included add little to these "well kent faces", portraying the Scots language as a patient who may not yet be dead but is fading fast. The introduction to the first volume says it all:

"[Only including poems written in Scots] would also give us the chance... to present the Scots language to children in a way their great-grandparents may have spoken it, using words... which are almost forgotten now."

This is a fairly sweeping claim, especially when imprints such as Fitt's "Itchy Coo Press" are doing much to produce exciting modern Scots resources for schoolchildren of all ages.

Contemporary Scottish poets such as W.N. Herbert who challenge are not represented here, simply because they engage with Scottish identity in an uncomfortably political way. Even those writers included who are alive and frequently kicking – such as the excellent Liz Niven – are merely used to perpetuate the vision of Scots as a museum

piece, a view reinforced by the illustrative photographs from – I would guess – the 1950s at the latest. The impression is that these books are produced by the National Museum of Scotland to be sold to none-too-curious tourists.

These *are* nice anthologies, and if you are after a window into history – some would say mythology – then they are useful for aw that, an aw that: but they should be approached cautiously, and as a teaching resource which presents the vibrancy of a new Scotland and its confidence in its language, there are other far more relevant resources available.

Raymond Soltysek