

EDDIE MORGAN 1920–2010

Eulogy by George Reid, 26 August 2010, Glasgow University

Today, in this great university of which he was part for so many years, we remember Eddie Morgan with affection and with love.

We honour a world class poet who was one of our own.

A master of versatility and variety in verse. A poet of this parish who was universal in his outreach. Whose imagination knew no bounds. A whittick of a writer who could start in a tenement close and then take this city and country off on intergalactic journeys.

A great humanist Scot who, despite all the pyrotechnics of his poetry, always wanted to explore existence and what it means to be alive.

Nothing was beyond Eddie's frontiers:

Starlings in George Square, randy apples, strawberries glistening in hot sunlight, Marilyn Monroe, a single cigarette — *No smoke without you, my fire* — The Forth Bridge, Gorgo the cancer cell eating away at his body, Jesus undergoing sexual urges, the Loch Ness Monster — *Sssnnnwhuffffll? nwhuffl hhnwfl hnfl hfl?* — love on the Cathkin Braes, St Mungo with Matt McGinn, the domes of St Sophia in Istanbul, Russian futurism, sonnets from Glasgow and from Scotland, and that very model of public poetry at the opening of the Holyrood Parliament — *Open the Doors! Light of the day, shine in; light of the mind, shine out!*

It was only with Edwin Morgan that I discovered poetry could be about anything. That ordinary life could be a subject of wonder.

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I knew Eddie in the 60s and 70s when I lived in the West End of Glasgow. I met him first at a soirée organised for Hugh MacDiarmid. Eddie was never quite comfortable in such company.

Sandy Moffat's famous painting of the Poets' Pub quite properly shows him sitting off to one side from the other Greats of Scottish Literature — distinctive in his white suit, crimson shirt and enormous specs — listening, watchful, diffident, different. "I was never part of that crowd," he said.

Yes, he shared their Scottishness and their commitment to self-government. But he never had the acerbic certainty of MacDiarmid. He was gentler, inclusive, far more interested in the future than the past, committed to a process of transformation which was both national and personal.

Eddie was an only child, born into a loving, conservative, presbyterian family, the focus of his parents' hopes and fears. He was bullied at his first school, Rutherglen Academy.

Thereafter, at Glasgow High, he alarmed teachers by the vast amount of homework which he turned in, though it was helpful in securing a place at this University in 1937. His mother worried about his self-absorption, his father about his lack of prowess in football, but that was nothing to the alarm he caused when, called up for National Service, he announced that he was a conscientious objector. The family lawyer was summonsed and, after some negotiation, he served his time with the Royal Army Medical Corps in the Middle East.

Eddie returned to Glasgow University in 1946, graduating the following year with first class Honours in English Language and Literature. He had the offer of an Oxford scholarship but stayed where he was comfortable, here at Gilmorehill, in a lifelong career from junior lecturer to professor.

Eddie's city was changing and so was he. The old slum city was coming down, new perspectives were opening up.

*A mean wind wanders through the backcourt trash
Hackles on puddles rise, old mattresses
Puff briefly and subside. Play-fortresses
of brick and bric-a-brac spill out some ash.
Four storeys have no windows left to smash.*

For years Eddie chronicled the transformation of this great city, capturing individual moments in time, making the seemingly mundane quite universal. But he was in transformation too.

*Love is the most mysterious of the winds that blow.
As you lie alone it batters with sleeplessness at the winter bedroom window.*

Eddie had been aware of his homosexuality since his schooldays, was by no means at peace, and had gone through a series of casual affairs which had caused him intense misery:

*'Ah wahnt tae see ye.' My scalp contracts,
the phone sweats in my hand, yet somewhere
I'm loosened, melted, knowing his violence
to be his love, which I cannot reject.*

All that was transformed in 1963 when he met John Scott, a storeman who came from a working class Catholic family. For the first time, Morgan experienced enduring, lasting love.

*There were never strawberries
like the ones we had
that sultry afternoon....*

Dear man, my love goes out in waves...

A Second Life. The simultaneous flowering of Morgan's interests, the liberation from a Presbyterian past, was extraordinary. He discovered Black Mountain poets like Olson and Creeley. Beats like Ginsberg and Kerouac. Russian modernists from Mayakovsky to

Voznesensky. Concrete poets from Brazil and Portugal. The Beatles, pop culture, and the language of the streets.

What an outpouring. The explosion of language in *The Second Life*, winning the Chomondeley Award for Poetry in 1968. *From Glasgow to Saturn*, Poetry Book Society Choice of 1973. *Rites of Passage*, 1976. *The New Divan*, the next year. *Poems of Thirty Years*. 1982. *Sonnets from Scotland*, 1984. Translations from Attila Jozsef 1985, winning the Soros Award [which Eddie blew on a day-trip by Concorde to the North Pole to meet Santa Claus). *Themes from a Variation*, 1988. Reflections on his work and life, *Nothing Not Giving Messages*, in 1990. On and on and on to *A Book of Lives* in 2007 and *Dreams and Other Nightmares* this year.

Sonnets. Concrete poetry. Sound poetry. *Planet Wars*, the virtual story of life on earth. Opera librettos. Jazz performances. Translations from Russian, Hungarian, French, Latin, Spanish, Portuguese. Racine and Mayakovsky in Scots.

And all this time – Gilmorehill as comfortable and familiar to him as an old pair of slippers – lecturing, tutoring, teaching at this University. Apart from alarming the resident experts on Milton – Eddie was alleged to portray Satan as the hero of *Paradise Lost* – he was extraordinarily popular with students and generous in his time for them. It was not unknown for biochemists and civil engineers to come to his lectures. He liberated lives. One headmaster writes this week: “Morgan’s secure Scottishness and vibrant internationalism have given me my sense of place and identity.” Another: “He propelled me into a wonderful world unknown...”

*The Universe is like a trampoline.
We chose a springy clump near Arrochar
And with the first jump shot past Barnard’s Star.*

Eddie’s poetry, like the spacecraft which fascinated him – he was one of the first people to put his name down for a journey to the Moon – was a constant voyage of exploration into what is yet to be. His favourite quotation was from Shelley:

Poets are the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present.

In 1990 Eddie got rid of one shadow from his own past. As a 70th birthday present to himself, he publicly announced that he was gay. The dangers of his earlier life, when homosexuality was still a criminal offence and entrapment a real danger, were now firmly in the past.

What is astonishing thereafter is, as he edged into his eighties and on towards ninety, just how youthful and vibrant much of his writing was. He tackled the chances and choices of life with renewed vigour.

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There were honours of course. An OBE. Poet Laureate of this city. The Queen’s Medal for Poetry, with the Sovereign and the gay Scottish Republican from Glasgow hitting it off just fine. And in 2003, Jack McConnell naming Eddie as this country’s first Makar.

With the Holyrood saga finally coming to an end, I asked him whether he would write a poem for the occasion. "Come and chat about it," he said.

He had, of course, prostate cancer. When he asked how long he had, the consultant said it could be six months or six years. "I think I'll take the six years," said Eddie. In fact, he had a joyous ten years.

*Now that you are down to one room,
Your world the room with the modest window,
Have you started thinking about it?*

— *About what?*

*What we mentioned before.
First and last things...*

Eddie never thought about it. When I met him that day in Lyndoch House in Bearsden, he said that life wasn't that important. What you did with your life was. He had his table, his Bluebird typewriter, his good book-booty and a "raucus caucus" of gulls outside. It was enough.

He offered tea and jaffa cakes. He particularly liked, he said, the "orange jelly" —he liked the phrase – under the chocolate. He asked me to paint mind maps of Holyrood: Patrick Geddes, Enric Miralles, the tendrils of the building fusing with the land, a domestic not a patrician parliament. Eddie took me back to *Respublica Scotorum* a conversation decades earlier — *A Far Horn Grew to Break the People's Sleep*.

We were not there yet. But the idea of a gentler, more inclusive, more international Scotland, comfortable in its own skin, was emerging.

Open the doors ,he said, and begin.

Eddie Morgan has opened the doors for a whole generation of Scots. He has expanded the frontiers of Scottish poetry. He has expanded the frontiers of Scotland itself.

Eddie has now gone through what he called the bead curtain of his life. He didn't want candles. He wanted it bright, the whole thing switched on. He wanted to go into George Square with floodlights.

*Push the boat out, companeros
Push the boat out, whatever the sea...*

Eddie, farewell. And thank you.

ENDS