

Two Scottish Women Poets

Poems by Marion Angus and Violet Jacob

Suggestions for learning and teaching Scottish literature and language

James Alison

These notes focus on ten poems (five by Marion Angus and five by Violet Jacob) which first appeared in various publications over the period 1910 to 1933. They are now available within an extensive selection of the poets' work: *Voices From Their Ain Countrie: The Poems of Marion Angus and Violet Jacob*, edited by Katherine Gordon (ASLS Annual Volume 36, 2006).

The purpose of the notes is to offer some ways in which the poems may be read and explored by students, and also to draw attention to other poems in the collection. The suggested assignments are not designed as practice examination questions but are aimed approximately at SQA's Higher Grade and Advanced Higher Grade English courses. Some deal quite generally with matters of theme and style while others look at the effect of key choices of image, vocabulary, grammar, rhythm and rhyme. We believe that selectively used they trigger interesting and worthwhile ways of getting to grips with the texts. The chosen poems, which present different facets of the poets' achievement, are:

Marion Angus

- 'Mary's Song', p.70
- 'Alas! Poor Queen', p.83
- 'Waater o' Dye', p.90
- 'The Sang', p.93
- 'The Blue Boat', p.98

Violet Jacob

- 'Tam i' the Kirk', p.201
- 'The Wild Geese', p.226
- 'Hallowe'en', p.252
- 'The End o't', p.255
- 'Baltic Street', p.258

RANGE

- S5–S6. Higher and Advanced Higher Grade

KEY TEXT

- *Voices From Their Ain Countrie: The Poems of Marion Angus and Violet Jacob*, edited by Katherine Gordon (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2006). Page references throughout are to Gordon's edition but several of the texts can also be found in the collections recommended below.

RECOMMENDED

- *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, edited by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan (Edinburgh University Press, 1997)
- *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets*, edited by Catherine Kerrigan (Edinburgh University Press, 1991)
- *Scotland: A New History*, Michael Lynch (Pimlico, 1992)
- *Modern Scottish Women Poets*, edited by Dorothy McMillan and Michel Byrne (Canongate Classics, 2003)
- *Dream State 2nd Edition*, edited by Donny O'Rourke (Polygon, 2002)
- *The Concise Scottish Dictionary*, (Scottish National Dictionary Association, 1999)
- *Ten Northeast Poets – an Anthology*, edited by Leslie W. Wheeler (Aberdeen University Press, 1985)

Association for Scottish Literary Studies, c/o Department of Scottish Literature, 7 University Gardens
University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QH, Scotland

Tel/Fax: +44 (0)141 330 5309

Email: office@asls.org.uk

Website: www.asls.org.uk

LEARNING AND TEACHING ASSIGNMENTS

1. PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES

These are focusing assignments which may be undertaken in discussion or writing before students respond to the ten poems.

Marion Angus and Violet Jacob are often considered together as a pair, and with some reason. Scots by birth and upbringing, they were contemporaries who started writing before the First World War and continued until the 1930s. They were deeply attached to their native Grampian area; frequently, though not exclusively, they wrote in the Scots dialect of that region. The contrasts between the two women are, however, as important as the similarities. They led very different kinds of lives and there is no evidence that they knew each other well or were influenced by each other's work. Katherine Gordon's introduction and notes supply helpful background and biographical information. As you explore these poems you will encounter intriguing issues of gender, place and language.

- **Gender:** 'women poets' ... how many poems by women have you read? If you have not come across many women poets, why might that be so? Is there any value in distinguishing the work of poets by gender? Is it possible that some types of themes may be preferred by women poets? For example ...?
- **Place:** locality ... some but not all of the poems draw inspiration from the language, landscape, lore and ways of life of a particular place – the districts of Angus, Kincardine and Aberdeenshire in the northeast of Scotland. Find out what you can about this area.

Have you ever felt the effects of home sickness? Think of your own locality. In four paragraphs sum up what you see as its distinctive strengths and weaknesses.

- **Language:** do people in your own home district use distinctive forms of Scots expression? What sorts of people? For what purposes? On what topics? Are these usages dying out?

2. READING ACTIVITIES

You may tackle some or all of the poems, and can move between the two poets in any order that you choose. For each one, we suggest that you read the poem over carefully for yourself, identifying words or phrases that puzzle or intrigue you. Nine of the poems are written in more or less dense forms of Scots. You will find Katherine Gordon's Glossary helpful, and also the *Concise Scots Dictionary*, in getting at meanings. Preferably someone should then read the poem aloud. Thereafter in group or class discussion try to come to some agreement about the point and effectiveness of each poem. You may also be interested to explore the poems of some contemporary women writers in McMillan and Byrne's anthology *Modern Scottish Women Poets*.

2.1. MARION ANGUS

'Mary's Song' (p.70).

- Think about the poem's title. To whom might it refer? Are there clues in the text?
- What seems to be the point of the images relating to 'barley breid' and 'elder wine'?
- Discuss the relationship of the second verse to the rest of the poem.
- Comment on the syntax of lines 4 and 12. What do they suggest about the relationship between Mary and her 'beloved'?
- Read also 'Naomi' (p.153).

'Alas! Poor Queen' (p.83)

- Dauphin, Duc de Guise, Master John Knox, Liddesdale, blinded eyes ... these allusions help us to identify the queen concerned. Why do you suppose the poet does not choose to name her directly? Find out something of the history on which this poem draws, e.g. in Michael Lynch's *Scotland: A New History*.
- What is the stylistic effect of the sequence of 'and' phrases in stanza 1, and of its repetition, slightly modified, in stanza 4?
- Why do you think there are lines in Scots in stanza 3?
- 'Consider this...' The poet invites you to sit in judgment on the queen's career. How sympathetically do you feel she is presented? (You might look also at Angus's poem 'Corrichie' on p.152)
- Produce your own version of this poem in a Scots idiom familiar to you.

'Waater o' Dye' (p.90)

- This is one of the most mysterious of Angus's poems. The challenge is to identify the nature of the 'she' and her hold over the speaker. Tease the evidence out carefully.

If you want an impression of the terrain of 'Waater o' Dye', see Ordnance Survey Explorer sheet 395, Glen Esk and Glentanar. You will also find photographs at

www.geograph.org.uk

The co-ordinates of the Water of Dye are NO6082, and those of Hill of Wirren are NO5273.

- Comment on the contribution of verse 3 to the structure of the poem.
- Note images that contribute to an otherworldly dimension in the poem.
- Why do you suppose the last line is in italics?
- For a related theme read and discuss 'The Fox's Skin' (p.58).

'The Sang' (p.93)

- What have the 'lad's' gifts got in common, and what do they suggest about him?
- Comment on the point and effectiveness of lines 11 and 12.
- In Scots 'hae gaen' (line 19) is normally the present perfect tense of the verb 'gae' (go) but occasionally it can derive from the verb 'gie' (give). Read the poem carefully and decide which verb best suits the girl's situation.
- Why do you suppose 'he was nae the lad for me'? Think also of the girl's attitude in 'Mary's Song' (p.70).
- 'He pit his hert-brak in a sang.' In Scots or English compose the kind of lyric he might have made, to any tune that suits you.

'The Blue Boat' (p.98)

- Comment on the structure of verse 1 as a beginning to the poem.
- How old do you think the speaker is? Can you deduce anything about her relationship to the laddie?
- How would you describe the way she spent her money at the Fair? What do verses 3 and 4 tell us of her state of mind?
- Consider what it is about the 'can'el licht' that the speaker 'daurna face'.
- Explore other images of candles and candlelights in Angus's poems.

Some general assignments on the Angus selection

- Four of the five poems are dramatic dialogues in which women comment on their lives. Try to identify some differences and similarities in their experiences and attitudes. How far do you find a prevailing mood?
- Assess the impact of locality in these poems, with reference to images of animals, plants, weather, and landscape features such as rivers.
- Consider also any uses of folk and supernatural lore in the five poems.
- For a further sampling of the variety of Angus's work read 'George Gordon, Lord Byron', p.72; 'Wee Jock Todd', p.96; 'The Silver City', p.103; and 'The Blue Jacket', p.147.

2.2. VIOLET JACOB

'Tam i' the Kirk' (p.201)

- What effect is achieved by the choice of vocabulary and rhythm in the first verse of this poem?
- The speaker speaks in the first person, but also mentions in the third person a lad in the church who 'canna pray'. Consider whether the lad and the speaker are one and the same, or are different individuals. What does the poet achieve through this treatment of her theme?
- Consider the repetitions of the phrase 'he canna'. What might be the cause of the lad's inhibitions? Whose is the voice mentioned in verse 4?
- Find out something about the use of the *red rose* image in poetry and comment on the effect of its juxtaposition to the *Buik o' the Word*. Who might have placed the rose there?
- What do we learn of Jean from the poem?

'The Wild Geese' (p.226)

- Who are the two speakers in this dialogue?
- Why is one accused of 'leein', and then asked for forgiveness?
- What images of the Scottish landscape are shared by the speakers?
- Discuss the impact of the image of geese in lines 13–15. (Find out about the seasonal migrations of pink-footed geese between Scotland and Iceland and Greenland. The Montrose Basin wildlife reserve is adjacent to Jacob's childhood home at House of Dun: www.swt.org.uk). You may also consider Helen Cruickshank's 'Wild Geese' and Margot Adamson's 'The Passing of the Wild Geese', both in *Modern Scottish Women Poets*.
- The poem ends in tears. Do you find it too sentimental for your taste? The singer Jim Reid has given it immense popularity through a folk song treatment. See for example *Jim Reid – Yont the Tay*, Greentrax 2005, CDTRAX272.

'Hallowe'en' (p.252)

- Look closely at the ways in which place and time switch in this poem.
- Identify the aspects of the Hallowe'en festival that are alluded to.
- In verse 4 what is the antecedent of 'it', the 'new' kist or the 'auld' kist? Give reasons for your view.
- 'An' you an' me their lowe hae seen...' What does the poem suggest about the speaker's relationship with Lachlan? Do you think, for example, that the speaker is a man or a woman? The anthology *Modern Scottish Women Poets* offers a moving selection of women's poems on the First World War.
- 'The heid horseman': see also Violet Jacob's poem, 'The Heid Horseman', p.208. Find out what you can about the bothie system of farm life, e.g. in *Farmlife in Northeast Scotland 1840–1914*, Ian Carter (John Donald/Birlinn, 1979).



'The End o't' (p.255)

- Consider the images used in lines 1 to 4. How effective do you find these as an opening to the poem?
- The speaker refers to two other persons. What are her feelings towards each of these?
- '... for wha wad hae them?' (line 16). To what does 'them' refer, and what is the point of the question?
- 'Oh, aince forgotten's ... licht begun' In genre and sentiment what do these two phrases have in common, and what sort of mood do they convey?
- Examine the complex stanza form used in this poem. How effectively do you think Jacob handles it?

'Baltic Street' (p.258)

- Consider what the 'blame' (line 1) might be.
- What qualities are attributed to the two types of girls mentioned?
- Explore the contrasting images of verse 2.
- What impression of Montrose does the speaker convey? (see also 'Montrose', p.230; 'The Wind Frae the Baltic', p.249; 'Faur-ye-Weel', p.270; and 'The Baltic', p.295)
- What opinion do you form of the speaker? Write in prose or verse the English girl's reply to him.

Some general assignments on the Jacob selection

- 'Tam i the Kirk' and 'The End o't': Tam and Charlie? ... muse on any possible linkages you see between these two poems.
- The selection comprises four dramatic monologues and a dialogue. Comment on the differing tones and attitudes of the speakers in these poems.
- The love of place features strongly in three of the poems. Examine how it expresses itself in each.
- For a further sampling of the variety of Jacob's work read 'God is Great', p.197; 'The Beadle o' Drumlee', p.206; 'Craig Woods', p.225; 'The Neep Fields by the Sea', p.276; and 'The Jaud', p.279.

2.3. TAKING MARION ANGUS AND VIOLET JACOB TOGETHER

- As women poets, as writers about a particular place, and using a particular range of language, do Angus and Jacob seem to you to have much in common, or not?
- Writing 70–90 years ago, do they still seem to you have something stimulating and true to say?
- Do you find both poets equally appealing (or not) or do you have a preference? Can you explain why?
- Explore some of the work of living Scottish women poets such as Liz Lochhead, Sheena Blackhall, Carol Anne Duffy, Meg Bateman, Jackie Kay, Kathleen Jamie and Kate Clanchy. See *Modern Scottish Women Poets*, edited by Dorothy McMillan and Michel Byrne (Canongate Classics, 2003); *Dream State 2nd Edition*, edited by Donny O'Rourke (Polygon, 2002).
- As a conclusion to your choice of poems and assignments, you might discuss the points being made in Alison Prince's three poems 'Women and Poetry' numbers 1, 2 and 3, in *Modern Scottish Women Poets* pp.122 and 123.