

# Violet Jacob

(1 September 1863 – 9 September 1946)

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BOOKS: *The Bailie Macphee*, by Jacob, as Violet Kennedy-Erskine, and Walter Douglas Campbell (London: Heinemann, 1891);  
*The Sheep-Stealers* (London: Heinemann, 1902; New York: Putnam, 1902);  
*The Infant Moraliser*, by Jacob and Lady Helena M. Carnegie (London: Grant, 1903);  
*The Interloper* (London: Heinemann, 1904; New York: Doubleday, Page, 1904);  
*The Golden Heart and Other Fairy Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1904);  
*Verses* (London: Heinemann, 1905);  
*Irresolute Catherine* (London: Murray, 1908);  
*The History of Aythan Waring* (London: Heinemann, 1908; New York: Dutton, 1908);  
*Stories Told by the Miller* (London: Murray, 1909);  
*The Fortune-Hunters, and Other Stories* (London: Murray, 1910);  
*Flemington* (London: Murray, 1911);  
*Songs of Angus* (London: Murray, 1915);  
*More Songs of Angus and Others* (London: Published at the offices of "Country Life" / New York: Scribners, 1918);  
*Bonnie Joann and Other Poems* (London: Murray, 1921);  
*Tales of My Own Country* (London: Murray, 1922);  
*Two New Poems: Rohallion, The Little Dragon* (Edinburgh: Porpoise Press, 1924);  
*The Northern Lights and Other Poems* (London: Murray, 1927);  
*The Good Child's Year Book* (London: Foulis, 1927);  
*The Lairds of Dun* (London: Murray, 1931);  
*The Scottish Poems of Violet Jacob* (Edinburgh & London: Oliver & Boyd, 1944);  
*The Lum Hat and Other Stories: Last Tales of Violet Jacob*, edited by Ronald Garden (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1982);  
*Diaries and Letters from India 1895–1900*, edited by Carol Anderson (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1990).  
Editions: *Flemington*, edited by Carol Anderson, Association for Scottish Literary Studies annual vol-



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umes, no. 24 (Aberdeen: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 1994);  
*Flemington*; and, *Tales from Angus*, edited by Anderson, Canongate Classics, no. 83 (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1998).  
OTHER: Hans Christian Andersen, *The True Story of My Life*, translated by Mary Howitt, preface by Jacob (London: Routledge, 1926).

An important poet and novelist in the Scottish modernist vernacular revival, Violet Jacob was respected by her literary contemporaries for creating some of the finest Scottish literature of her time. In the tradition of James Hogg, Sir Walter Scott, and Robert Louis Stevenson, her short fiction and novels portray passionate conflicts in carefully realized local settings, and her haunting, poetic evocations of northeastern Scottish dialect and characters witness her love of the landscape and culture of the region. New editions of two of her novels appeared in the 1990s, but more editions, a biography, and other correctives to the neglect she suffered in the last half of the twentieth century are long overdue.

Born in Angus on 1 September 1863, Violet Augusta Mary Fredericka Kennedy-Erskine was the second of four children of William Henry Kennedy-Erskine, the eighteenth Laird of Dun, and Catherine Kennedy-Erskine, née Jones, of Carmarthenshire, Wales. Her paternal ancestors, whose history she later detailed in *The Lairds of Dun* (1931), included Sir John Erskine, friend of John Knox and moderator of the General Assembly in 1564, and David Erskine, an eighteenth-century anti-Unionist judge. William Kennedy-Erskine died when Violet was seven.

Educated at home, Violet Kennedy-Erskine spent most of her early life in rural Montrose, and the speech, habits, and modes of thought of the region's people informed much of her work. Her first book, the comic narrative poem *The Bailie McPhee* (1891), was co-authored with Walter Douglas Campbell and included her illustrations.

At thirty-one Kennedy-Erskine married the somewhat younger Arthur Otway Jacob, a lieutenant of the Twentieth Hussars from Maryborough (now Portlaoighise), Ireland. While accompanying him to various brief postings in Britain she gave birth to their only child, Arthur Henry Jacob, in 1895. Shortly thereafter the family moved to Mhow in the Malwa region of central India, where they spent the next four years. Violet Jacob studied Hindi, explored the countryside, volunteered at the military hospital, and observed religious festivals and ceremonies to the extent that the constraints of official British society in India allowed. Jacob never questioned the imperialist premises of the Raj, but she did record in her diaries several instances of British bad behavior. She took an artist's pleasure in the landscape, natural phenomena, and details of Indian life.

Most of Arthur Jacob's subsequent postings were in England, with the exception of a brief assignment in South Africa and two years in Egypt. The family lived for a time in Herefordshire, the setting of several of Violet Jacob's works of fiction, and spent another

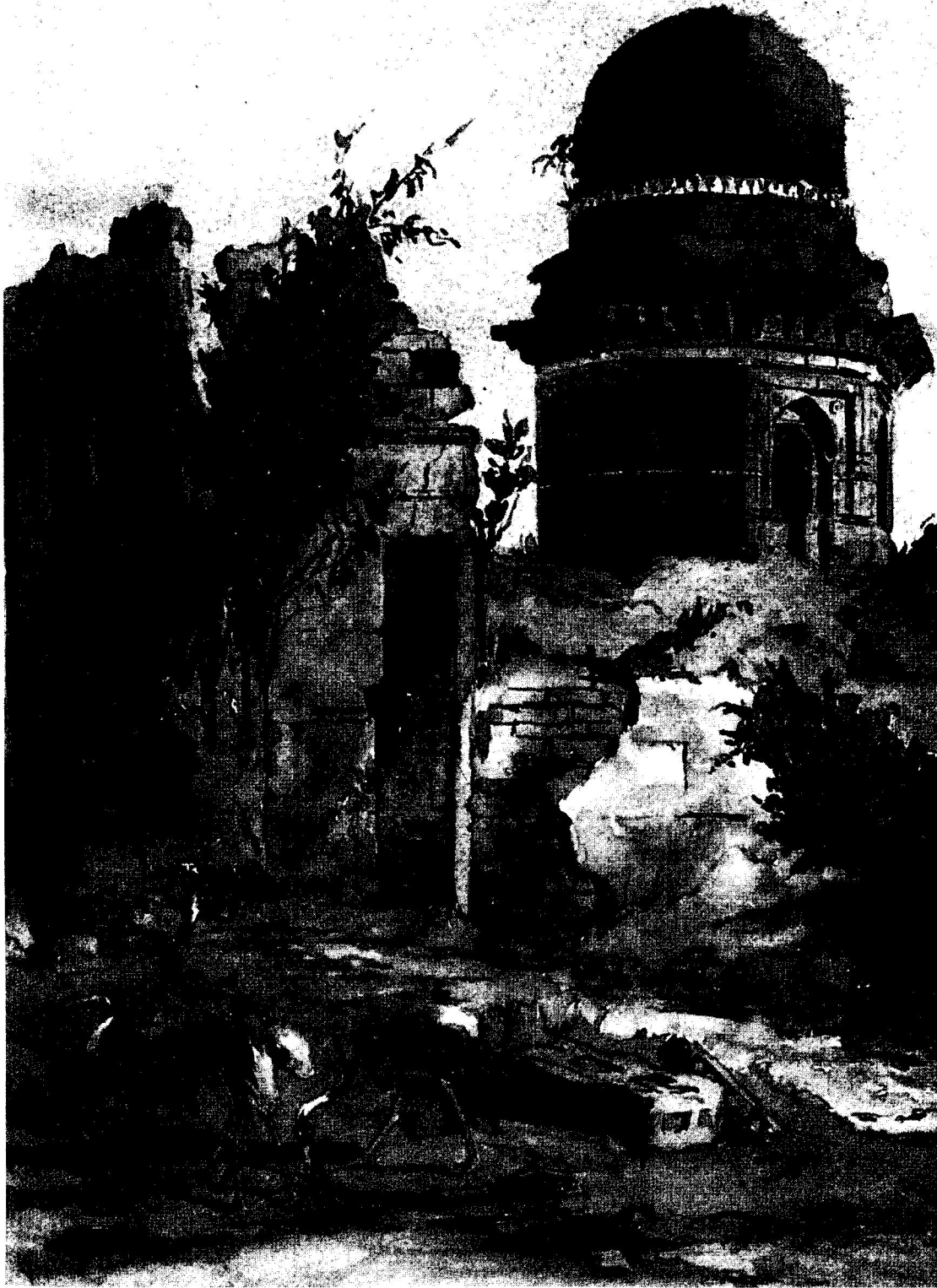
period in Shropshire, where she became acquainted with the poets A. E. Housman and Hugh MacDiarmid.

While in India, Jacob had begun writing *The Sheep-Stealers* (1902), a novel about two early nineteenth-century Welsh border outlaws and their lovers. It was followed by a children's book, *The Infant Moralist* (1903), co-authored with Lady Helena M. Carnegie and illustrated with Jacob's drawings; *The Interloper* (1904), a novel about love and inheritance set in early-nineteenth-century Scotland dedicated somewhat enigmatically "To An Undying Memory"; and another children's book, *The Golden Heart and Other Fairy Stories* (1904).

Jacob dedicated *Verses* (1905), her first independently written volume of poetry, "To the Ideal Critic" and inscribed the first poem "To H. M. C.," her former co-author Carnegie: "in each other's eyes we seek / And find the thing that each would say." The poems meditate on infinity, love, and life after death, and their language and metric schemes are reminiscent of Alfred Tennyson, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, Oscar Wilde, and, to a lesser degree, of Housman, Sappho, A. C. Swinburne, "Michael Field" (Katherine Harris Bradley and Edith Emma Cooper), and W. H. Henley. "The Ballad of Hakon," for example, echoes Morris's Scandinavian poems, and the story told in "The Mill-House" is reminiscent of his "Golden Wings" in *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1858). Other poems—"The Valley of the Kings," "In Lower Egypt," and the concluding nine "Poems of India"—reflect encounters with cultures not her own. "Night in the Plains," the second of the "Poems of India," draws on Jacob's experiences at the hospital in Mhow. More strikingly, "The Distant Temple," the last poem in the sequence, concludes the volume with a wistful expression of homesickness for India, not Scotland or Wales:

Sound of the temple drum,  
Like distant beating of the march of fate,  
Through the long years your voice is never dumb,  
Calling, at sundown, from the temple gate  
To me, who cannot come.

Jacob followed *Verses* with *Irresolute Catherine* (1908), a novella set in Wales about a woman torn between a prosperous but overbearing cattle merchant and a "man of the soil"; *The History of Aythan Waring* (1908), a novel, also set in the Welsh countryside, about a man falsely accused of murder through the machinations of his stepmother; the children's book *Stories Told by the Miller* (1909); *The Fortune-Hunters, and Other Stories* (1910); and her most complex and best-received novel, *Flemington* (1911), a tale of the Jaco-



*Jacob's drawing of an ancient temple on the Malwa plateau in India (from Jacob's Diaries and Letters from India 1895-1900, edited by Carol Anderson, 1990)*

bite Rebellion in eighteenth-century Scotland. The novelist John Buchan called *Flemington* "the best Scots romance since [Stevenson's] *The Master of Ballantrae* [1889]."

Jacob's attachment to a style of writing that the critic J. H. Millar in 1895 had derisively labeled the "Great Kailyard Movement"—a sentimental and idealized view of Scottish life (*kailyard* means "cabbage patch" in Scots)—appears in the elegiac cadences and varied stanzaic and metrical forms of *Songs of Angus* (1915), her second volume of verse. In his introduction to the book Buchan praises Jacob's use of dialect to express distance, resignation, and irretrievable loss:

It is the rarest thing, this use of Scots as a living tongue, and perhaps only the exile can achieve it. . . . above all it is a living speech, with the accent of the natural voice, and not a skilful mosaic of robust words. . . . The dialect is Angus, with unfamiliar notes to my Border ear, and in every song there is the sound of the east wind and the rain. . . . The metres are cunningly chosen, and are most artful when they are simplest; and in every case they provide the exact musical counterpart to the thought. Mrs. Jacob . . . has many moods. . . . But in them all are the same clarity and sincerity of vision and clean beauty of phrase.

Jacob celebrates the landscape and environs of Angus in "The Howe o' the Mearns," calls forth the emotions of young men in love in "Tam i' the Kirk," mocks hypocrisy and pretension in "The Beadle o' Drumlee," and offers crafted tributes to youthful idealism and intensity in "The Tod," "The Gowk," and "The Whustlin' Lad." She memorializes complex experiences of loss and estrangement in "The Lang Road" and "The Water Hen"; grieves for dead lovers in "Logie Kirk," "The Jacobie Lass," and "Maggie"; records a mother's vision of her dead child in "The Lost Licht"; and portrays the final reflections of a dying old man in "The Gean-Trees." "Craig Woods," one of her best elegies, provides an exemplary miniature of her ability to alternate homely concrete details ("braw reid puddock-stules") with elusive suggestions of spiritual presences. An old shepherd recalls

Craig Woods, i' the licht o' September sleepin'  
And the saft mist o' the morn,  
When the hairst climbs to yer feet, an' the sound o' reapin'  
Comes up frae the stookit corn,  
And the braw reid puddock-stules are like jewels blinkin'  
And the bramble happs ye baith,  
O what do I see, i' the lang nicht, lyin' an' thinkin'  
As I see yer wraith—yer wraith?

Cognate shifts of register and lilting onomatopoeic rhythms appear in the monologue "Tam i' the Kirk":

O Jean, my Jean, when the bell ca's the congregation  
Owre valley an' hill wi' the ding frae its iron mou',  
When a'body's thocts is set on his ain salvation,  
Mine's set on you. . . .  
He canna sing for the sang that his ain he'rt raises,  
He canna see for the mist that's 'afore his een,  
And a voice drouns the hale o' the psalms an' the paraphrases,  
Cryin' "Jean, Jean, Jean."

Jacob dedicated *More Songs of Angus and Others* (1918), her third volume of poetry, to the memory of her son, who had been killed in the Battle of the Somme in World War I. Some of her best memorials abandon attempts to find higher purposes in the carnage for simpler and more authentic pleas, as in "Glory":

But gin ye see my face or gin ye hear me,  
I daurna' ask, I maunna' seek to ken,  
Though I should dee, wi' sic a glory near me,  
By nicht or day, come ben, my bairn, come ben!

Similar sentiments are expressed in "Jock, to the First Army," "The Twa Weelums," "The Field by the Lirk o' The Hill," "Montrose," "The Road to Marykirk," and "The Kirk beside the Sands."

Other poems, less overshadowed by the war, include another old man's farewell in "The Last o' the Tinkler" and flytings such as "A Change O' Deils," in which a young woman heeds her grandmother's advice to abandon the "deil" (devil) she knows for another she does not: "a change o' deils is lightsome, lass!"

In her fourth poetry volume, *Bonnie Joann and Other Poems* (1921), Jacob blurs the boundaries between the living and the dead in her elegies "The Daft Bird" and "Halloween," alternating these recollections with courtship poems such as "Adam" and "The Wise-Like Chap," broadly satiric verses in the tradition of Robert Burns such as "Pride" and "Bailie Bruce," and sympathetic representations of tramps, tinkers, alcoholics, and pregnant servants. In "The Tramp to the Tattie-Dulie" a vagrant envies a scarecrow's free wardrobe and sedentary existence:

"Yer heid's a neep, yer wame's a sack,  
Yer ill-faured face gars bairnies shak',  
But yet the likes o' you can mak'  
A livin' frae it,  
Sma' use to me! It isna fair  
For though there's mony wad declare  
That I'm no far ahint ye there,  
I canna dae it!"

The tramp does not forget to snatch the scarecrow's hat when he departs.

In "The Tinker's Baloo" a tinker's wife sings to her son a wry balladic tribute to his father's theft of a speckled rooster:

Sleep, an' then, come Sawbath,  
A feather o' gray ye'll get  
Wi' specklies on it to set i' yer bonnet  
An' gar ye look brawer yet.  
Sae hide yer heid, my mannie,  
Haud yer whist, my doo,  
For we'll hae to shift or the sun's i' the lift  
An' I'm singin' baloo, baloo.

"H. K. G.," who reviewed *Bonnie Joann and Other Poems* for *The Canadian Forum* (September 1922), nullified the praise that Jacob "displays that characteristic Scottish gift to sing of familiar and homely things with freshness and personal insight" by adding the arch pronouncement that "the only hope for the future is for poetry in the English tongue."

The eleven stories in Jacob's next book, *Tales of My Own Country* (1922), evoke timeless qualities in strongly marked characters drawn from every level of the rural Scottish class hierarchy, blending formal elegance and "modernist" detachment with deep respect for the pathos and ironic humor of country life. In *The Northern Lights and Other Poems* (1927) she again presents satires and tributes, such as "Tae Some Lasses" and "John MacFarlane," but the best poems in the volume return to the liminal realms where the dead haunt and comfort the living. In the title poem, for example, a boy sees visions of dead spirits in the "northern lights" that are "past the sicht o' muckle men / And nane but bairns can see." In "The Jaud" an old lady visits the neglected grave of a "fallen woman," where she remembers her rival's beauty with a mixture of admiration and envy:

"... But lave me tae bide my lane  
At the fit o' the freendless queyn;  
For oh! wi' envy I'm like tae dee  
O' the world she had that was no for me  
And the kingdom that ne'er was mine!"

In "The Cross-Roads" an outcast haunts a church that had denied him a proper burial and begs a hapless worshiper to

"... rise and gang tae the kirkyaird heid  
And plead yer best  
Whaur they wadna bury the ootcast deid  
For a sad saul spent wi' the weird it's dree'd, and I'll maybe rest!"

In "The Licht Nichts," one of Jacob's most personal lyrics, an unnamed lost child—"ma best, ma bonniest and ma dearest"—had once sung happily "I' the licht nichts o' the year":

# VERSES

BY

VIOLET JACOB

(MRS. ARTHUR JACOB)

AUTHOR OF 'THE SHEEP-STEALERS,' 'THE INTERLOPER'



LONDON

WILLIAM HEINEMANN

1905

*Title page for Jacob's first poetry collection (courtesy of  
The Lilly Library, Indiana University)*

Ye were sae glad; ye were aye sae like the laverock  
Wha's he'rt is i' the lift; . . . .  
What thocht had you o' the ill-faur'd dairk o' winter  
But the ingle-neuks o' hame?  
Love lit yer way an' played about yer feet,  
Year in, year oot, the same.

.....  
But whiles—and whiles—i' the can'lelicht an' the starlicht  
I'll wauken it tae hear  
The liltin' voice that's singin' doon the braes  
I' the licht nichts o' the year.

Four years later Jacob dedicated her carefully researched family history, *The Lairds of Dun*, "To the Memory of my Brother, the Nineteenth Laird" (Augustus Kennedy-Erskine had died at sea at age forty-two). The book traces the Kennedy-Erskine line from its rise

to regional prominence in the fourteenth century to the generation of her grandparents. Among her ancestors were many Royalist and Presbyterian soldiers and several usurpers and murderers. The family's status and fortune declined gradually after the title passed to Alice Erskine, Jacob's great-granddaughter. (Pasted into the front endpapers of Northwestern University's copy of *The Lairds of Dun* is a snapshot of an old woman in a wide-brimmed hat sitting with a dog in front of a large house; it is signed "Violet Jacob and Sammy.") Some of the characters in Jacob's fiction are obviously modeled on her ancestors.

Jacob's husband died in 1936. That year Edinburgh University awarded her an honorary LL.D. She spent the last decade of her life at Marywell House in Kirriemuir, Angus, near her ancestral home. In 1944 the firm of Oliver and Boyd published *The Scottish Poems of Violet Jacob*; wartime paper rationing prevented a companion volume of her short stories. Jacob dedicated the volume "To the Comrade Beyond" (presumably her husband) and added seventeen new poems, including eight elegies for the war dead. In "The Baltic," one of the new poems, a boy tells his dismayed mother that he has seen and heard his father, who is away at sea:

"And what did he ca' yon foreign land?"  
 "He tell'tna its name tae me,  
 But I doot it's no by the Baltic shore,  
 For he said there was nae mair sea."

Jacob's selection and arrangement of her poems highlight the concision and intensity of her work. The volume also brings into sharp relief a few motifs that recur again and again in her poetry: the joys and agonies of courtship, the lost "foreign country" of the past and its environs, and the hopeless yearning to hear a healing word from the dead. Her best poems display these motifs in masterpieces of apparent simplicity and subtle indirection.

A portfolio of Jacob's manuscripts, diaries, drawings, and short stories discovered in the 1970s indicated that she was at work on two novellas, "Banny Firelocks" and "The Lum Hat," when she died on 9 September 1946. The novellas were included in *The Lum Hat and Other Stories: Last Tales of Violet Jacob*, edited by Ronald Garden, in 1982. Her letters, diaries, and watercolor drawings of Indian flora and architecture were edited by Carol Anderson and published in 1990 as *Diaries and Letters from India 1895-1900*. A thorough study of Jacob's life, work, and influence on other aspects of Scottish modernism has yet to appear.

Independent-minded and multiply gifted, Violet Jacob was a "modernist" despite her love of ancestral traditions, for her moral vision of the world was tragic and ironic at its core. Her artfully stylized and psychologically heightened poems and her championship of vernacular forms influenced as well as complemented the work of contemporaries such as Jessie Anderson, Mary Symon, Rachel Annand Taylor, Marion Angus, Bessie MacArthur, and Helen Cruikshank and contributed to the Scottish renaissance associated with MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassie Gibbon. The range and extent of her work make a compelling case for "recuperation" of the woman MacDiarmid described as "the most considerable of contemporary vernacular poets." In his introduction to *Songs of Angus* Buchan characterized her as a poet who possessed

a rare distinction. She writes Scots because what she has to say could not be written otherwise and retain its peculiar quality. . . . Some of us who love the old speech have in our heads or in our note-books an anthology of modern Scots verse. It is a small collection if we would keep it select. To my own edition of this anthology I would add unhesitatingly Mrs. Jacob's "Tam i' the Kirk," and "The Gowk."

Jacob's intense sense of place and critical devotion to Scots culture enabled her to represent that culture with telling authenticity. Her cosmopolitan experiences and her empathetic ear for the special intonations of the regions she visited made her one of the more subtle and distinctive artists of her time.

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- Marion Lochhead, "Neglected or Forgotten: Four Women Novelists," *Library Review*, 25, no. 7 (1976): 251-253;
- Hugh MacDiarmid, as C. M. Grieve, "Violet Jacob," in his *Contemporary Scottish Studies, First Series* (London: Parsons, 1926).

#### Papers:

Violet Jacob's manuscripts are in the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. Many of her drawings are in the library of the Royal Botanical Gardens, also in Edinburgh.