INTERVIEW

‘Wanderlust Women’– Three Poets
An Interview with Lesley Benzie, Donna Campbell, and Linda Jackson

On 12 May 2022, Scotland took centre stage at the University of Pisa, thanks to a meeting with Lesley Benzie, Donna Campbell, and Linda Jackson hosted in the Aula Magna Boilleau at the Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics. The three poets, introduced by Diana Devlin, read some of their compositions from the recently published collection *Wanderlust Women – Three Poets* (Glasgow, Seahorse Publications, 2022). The performance – during which Linda also sang some traditional songs – turned into a wonderful occasion for a wide-ranging discussion on some of the poets’ most engaging themes, such as poetry and memory, Scottish identity and traditions, language and languages, contemporary politics, women’s emancipation.

The pervasiveness of the theme of the journey is made clear from the very title of the collection, *Wanderlust*, a longing for wandering which became particularly crucial during the Covid lockdown in 2020, when the three women decided to work on this project as a way of coping with the restrictions imposed by the pandemic all over the world. The very nature of the meeting, where music and poetry were interwoven thanks to Linda’s marvellous singing and the musicality of the Scottish dialects (Scots and Doric), immediately highlighted that the boundaries separating these different forms of art can easily be crossed, enhancing the emotional impact of the moment.

Lesley Benzie is an Aberdonian who has lived in Glasgow for twenty-five years. Traces of her origins are still strongly present in her poetry, where she uses Doric. She has published two collections of poems, *Sewn Up* (Wisdom Teeth, 2000) and *Fessen/Reared* (2020), which Graham Fulton has defined as “lyrical, incisive, true… Gently brilliant”. She is currently involved in various literary projects, like the *Dead Scots Project* and the Doric collection *Norlan Lichts* by Rymour Books.

Donna Campbell is a well-known poet and performer. She has had poems published in various magazines and anthologies; her collection *Mongrel* was issued by Seahorse Publications in 2021. Over the past twenty years she has been working with community groups, children, and recovering addicts and alcoholics, since she considers art as a sort of therapy. She has also recently developed a creative course incorporating writing, reading, basic drawing and collage, called *Where Are You At?*.

Linda Jackson is a poet, singer, and writer who taught Creative Writing until 2019, when she founded Seahorse Publications, a small press publishing works by new and established Scottish writers. Thanks to her holistic approach to art, she offers extreme-

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ly touching performances of songs, as happened during the meeting, when she sang *La riva bianca, la riva nera* in the original. As a singer, she has published five albums and performed throughout the world.[1]

In the following pages, Lesley, Donna, and Linda are interviewed by some students of the Master Course in Euro-American Languages, Literatures, and Philologies of Pisa University: Angel Antonio De Oliveira Amata, Tommaso Giannardi, Simona Peria, Giada Pinelli, Matilde Piu, Mariachiara Rosi, Chiara Rotondo, Greta Sergiampietri, and Veronica Vannucci.

GIADA PINELLI: *Being a student of literature, I am particularly interested in the process of writing poetry. First of all: when did you start to write and why, of all forms, did you choose poetry? When did you realise the 'publication potential'? And, comparing with the beginnings of your career, what has changed in your relationship with your poetry and how? As for your writing process, how do you recognise the right idea, the spark of inspiration among all your daily thoughts and feelings? Do you immediately write it down and then go back to it to develop it better, or do you keep thinking until it takes a precise 'shape' and you start working on it only after that? Does it ever happen that you choose to keep the 'raw' version of a poem? And, last but not least, do you feel that having published several of your poems, and thus gained some fame, has changed something in your personal life and as a poet?*

LB: I began writing when I was around 31, so half my lifetime ago now! My initial impetus for writing was that I missed speaking in my native Aberdonian Doric. I had moved from my hometown of Aberdeen to Glasgow where I had to consciously modify my natural speech to be understood; this felt stilted initially and I was self-conscious. I don't exactly remember the point at which I decided to write but the first poem was about my father and grandmother – about personal history. Doric is often described as sing-songy and the way I wrote the words had a strong rhythm and the images came naturally, so poetry didn't feel like a choice, it seemed to choose me.
In terms of my writing process, I tend to be drawn to write about things that impact me at an emotional level, whether it's a personal experience or global injustice, the inspiration begins with how I feel about it. Although more recently I've been asked to write about, for example, travel, it again relates to how I feel. I don't think there is a 'right' idea. If there is a right or wrong, it's in the end product. Sometimes poems work and you have that 'yes' moment and other times, no matter how much work you put into a poem, it never quite resonates. I don't have one way of writing a poem, sometimes a few lines about a subject form in my head and I spend more time thinking, and a poem begins to form. Usually, the first draft is in a very raw form and then the process crafting can result in a few more drafts before you have something worthwhile. Some poems don't change much from the first draft, but most of the time they need crafting.

[1] Further information on Lesley, Donna, and Linda may be found at https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/

Being published is wonderful, especially because part of any writing is about communication. It has also helped build my confidence and sense of self.

DC: I first began writing when I was about 8 years old. I wrote many short stories and poetry. My favourite subjects at school were English and Art and, being shy as a child, I always found it easier to express myself through creativity as opposed to communicating verbally. I was in my 30s when I began to write more in a poetic format. Poetry has an immediacy to it and feels more in-depth than stories.
I did not think about the idea of the publication potential, I just wanted to be published to see if what I was writing had any merit. If anything has changed, it would have to be that I feel more comfortable with my writing. It feels more 'me'. Most of the time I have conversations with myself going on in my head and I will say something and if it has a rhythm to it, I jot it down straight away. If I do not write these ideas down, I forget. Usually I will begin to write the poem when I am going about my daily business and often I will be adding to it using the notepad on my phone. When I get home I further develop the notes/poem. This can take quite a bit of time until I feel it is finished. It is a good idea to keep the raw material until the poem is in its final draft. I am at my happiest when I am engaged in this process.
No, I do not feel anything has changed in my personal life as a result of being published, but I do feel more confident as a poet.

LJ: My poetry days began very early with an aunt that I often stayed with as a young child. My lung health was poor and her country house was thought better for me. She was a very keen reader of prose and poetry and encouraged me from childhood to keep diaries/journals – to write things down, emotions and 'special events'. I went on to study literature and eventually taught at university, so I was always reading/analysing and found respite from this in writing poetry and songs.
Not sure you 'realise' publication, mostly it is suggested by others – I always advise that small indie magazines/outlets are a good place to start. This is where I was first published and, as a tutor of Creative Writing for many years, I read numerous works that I felt should be out there (often very difficult), so I set up Seahorse Publications. It is always a marvellous feeling to see your own work in a book and the work of other writers you think should be more widely published.
Writing poetry often involves impact, whether political or personal. In my case, it is also about a state of mind/being whereby I feel my senses more responsive to the external world, whether place or people. It is sometimes about an acute awareness that *has* to be responded to. There are those poems that 'arrive' from that 'spark', almost as they will appear, only requiring a little rearranging, tweaking of rhythm and/or lexical choices. Often walking with an idea helps it to gather focus and gives a break from the relentless reworking. File it to the unconscious and then return for another look.

TOMMASO GIANNARDI: *One of the issues I most appreciated in your poems is their focus on Scottish identity. I was wondering whether there is a specific Scottish poetic tradition*

in the intertextual background of your poetry; or, to put it differently, are your models mainly Scottish models? And would you also subscribe to a female poetic pantheon?

LB: Obviously Scotland has historically birthed many famous poets and the current poetry scene is burgeoning with talent. And, although each poet brings their unique 'voice', I personally recognise that themes of Scottish identity, how our languages play into our identities and the context of who we are in a 'union' that is not of equals, do find their way into the work of many, and definitely into mine. I don't directly draw on anyone else's work, but the nature of being part of Scottish culture and its poetic heritage means it impacts you almost by a process of osmosis.
I would subscribe to the female poetic tradition – by virtue of being female, we have different experiences, roles, expectations than men and we continue to live in a society where patriarchal assumptions about the world predominate and, for me, that cannot but come through in what women write about and in how they write.

DC: I enjoy writing in English, it's a beautiful language and is perfect for some of the poems I write. However, the Scots language can convey deeper feelings that I have, especially through the rhythms of Scots. Thus, when performing in Scots, there is more fluidity to what I am doing. The Scot's language also has words that better express my sense of belonging and Scottish identity is important to me. Coming from a long line of family who worked in the shipyards at Govan and Clydebank, I feel an infinity with what Scotland has contributed to the world through the ships and the multitude of inventions and discoveries from this country. The geographical landscape of Scotland has shaped its people and I feel very much a part of that landscape.

LJ: Scotland and its literary heritage have strongly influenced my thinking and writing. Reading Robert Burns from a young age and being introduced to the philosophy of David Hume in my teens, I feel that the Scottish Enlightenment and the Romantic Poets have inherently contributed to my own work in terms of subject matter and the political perspectives therein. The current poetry scene in Scotland is enjoying a huge renaissance with all languages being represented – wonderful. The most notable perhaps is the amount of female poets in Scotland now *finally* enjoying some critical acclaim. And yes, my Scottish identity is strong – the geography of this country and the changing light is like a feast for anyone engaged in the Creative Arts.
I enjoy much of the new poetry coming from all over these diverse islands and also European writers in translation, but I do notice that my poetry shelves teem with female poets more than Scottish ones.

MARIACHIARA ROSI: *Putting together a collection of poems by different authors usually implies a process of collaboration, a shared repertoire of themes and motifs and a mutual ideological perspective, in order to give life to a coherent work; thus, my question is about your poetic relationship and whether it could be considered as a crucial factor in the making of your latest release or not. From a technical point of view, how did you conceive your*

creative path? Did you find yourselves agreeing on the structure and on the aims of the collection? And, as far as the artistic side is concerned, do you share the same ideas on poetry – namely female poetry – its functions and its role in contemporary society?

LB: Linda was the catalyst for the collection. It was her idea and she asked us to be part of the collaboration based on the theme of writing about travel. I loved the idea and was very pleased to be involved. Writing on travel and its modes was our only brief initially but, once we began submitting, Linda, as the publisher, edited the collection. She would make sure there was a balance of different countries/cities, not too many poems on the same place. We also had to begin considering having a mix of emotional tones, lengths of poems and personal vs political too. Although we have our own unique style, I don't think that any of us would have got involved without that underpinning of positive regard for each other's work, as well as the relationships and the fact of our womanist/feminist/social justice perspective, which does lend the collection coherence. Positive regard and relationship have also proved important when touring with the book. We have spent a lot of time in each other's company and worked together to present the range of poems at different events, and that would have been very difficult without that.

DC: I believe that our poetic relationship has been instrumental in the success of the collection. We each have strong individual voices and writing styles, which gives the collection the power to speak to many different audiences. We enjoy and respect each others' work and the fact that we are friends has contributed to the success of the book. Each of us reads and critiques all of the poems, so that we can get the best out of the work. It is Linda who brings the poems together and creates a coherence that works for the final collection.
The structure and aims of the book were there at the very beginning. The impetus for the book came from the locking down of the world due to the Covid pandemic. We agreed that women had a more difficult time during lockdown, due to their workload and having to look after children, often having to help with school work and the frustrations of children not being able to see friends etc.
I do not see myself as a 'female' poet. I do not like to differentiate between male and female because I feel that it belittles women's poetry... we do not refer to 'male poets'.

LJ: In thinking about the *Wanderlust Women* collection, without doubt, I approached poets whose writing I enjoyed, whose company I enjoyed and who I knew shared similar views on the world we live in. However, alongside these considerations, they were also poets who had very different 'voices' and pathways into poetry. In this way, the collection would bring different 'sounds' of Scots and diverse experiences to readers/audiences. Like myself, these were women who enjoyed travelling and, during Covid, no one could move far and it felt to me that creating poems that recalled travel and otherness would be a release or relief.
I was aware, and still am, of the enormous impact Brexit would have on Scotland, so these poems would be a way of reaching out again into the world. These were my aims

in conceiving the book, shared with the others. We then discussed territories for the voices and content to get a balance and coherence to the finished product.
For me it was important that all poets would be female and working-class females.

ANGEL ANTONIO DE OLIVEIRA AMATA: *The questions of identity and gender you stress in your poetry also play a crucial role in some contemporary Scottish narrative, for instance in Ali Smith's novels. Do you think the choice of a different medium (poetry vs narrative) actually affects the way writers deal with such cogent issues, and would you say different genres perform the task of spreading awareness in different ways?*

LB: Although both forms are equally about communication, I would definitely say poetry vs narrative affects the way the writer tackles the subject matter. With narrative you have more time to describe and tell/show the story and can be more direct with how you or your character feel or what they want to say about an issue. There is often plot, story arc and resolution. With poetry you have to be economic while also infusing your language with meaning, selecting each word carefully, so that it 'says' as much as possible, without telling the reader what to think. The focus is on images and metaphors to show the issues and their consequences in action. Although poems can be narrative, they can also be snapshots with the focus on the emotional/sensing/impact of events. Messages can be more oblique and thought-provoking and the reader is left questioning and bringing their own interpretation to the meaning.

DC: I do not believe that the choice of medium affects the way writers deal with the issues that they are writing about. Whatever genre is comfortable for the writer to get to the heart of a subject is probably the right one for any given theme.
Yes, I do think different genres perform the task in different ways. Some people prefer to read a novel, a short story or poetry to explore issues and stories.

LJ: Ali Smith is one of many Scottish writers who explore feelings of alienation, including gender dysphoria, and she does this particularly effectively in *Girl Meets Boy*. James Kelman and Irvine Welsh explore other forms of alienation – social deprivation and exclusion. Kelman has written widely about the need to make the voice of the Scottish working classes the narrative voice, not the language 'caged' in direct speech punctuation.
Yes, these are prose narratives, but could have memorable impact if written in poetic prose or poetry. Challenging writing on gender, class, and race needs all literary genres to spread awareness.

CHIARA ROTONDO: *In your poems, you partly recall and partly fabricate a remembrance of place and time, in a combination of recovery and creativity, by re-interpreting your past in the re-telling and adapting it to present purposes. I was wondering how much of the poetry of memory relies on fact, and how much it depends upon imagination. And is it mainly a personal memory, or do you also grant importance to collective memory?*

LB: I think it relies on fact and imagination in equal measure. Clearly, if I'm writing about a childhood memory, I am looking back at it through adult eyes. Yet, at the same time I am trying to bring to the fore the *child's* perspective and the emotional reality and impact of the experience. So, I am drawing both on memory and my current imagination, using words and images carefully to communicate to others. I am often transforming the experience for myself, but also trying to tell the world "this is what that experience does or feels like". In terms of collective memory, in one of my own collections, I wrote a long poem about the Vietnam War, which occurred during my childhood. When I went to the War Remnants Museum in Vietnam as an adult, I was seeing their history told by them in graphic detail, images and artefacts, instead of through our Western media. I utilised my emotional reaction to being there, and the memories it awakened from my childhood of the impression the TV images had on me at the time – so it is both collective and personal.

DC: When writing about memories, it is the feeling or mood of the memory that informs the poems. To remember the facts of the past can be elusive, but the feeling is more accessible. It is not so much as fabricating details of the memories, but more about using poetic techniques to evoke the essence of what it is I am remembering. Also, it is about extracting the importance of what was happening at the time and eliminating those facts that are not important for what it is I am trying to convey.
I mostly use personal memory but feel that, through the poetry and the use of imagination, the personal can be part of the collective, in so far that I am using emotions to write the poem and this can spark memories of emotions universal to us as humans.

LJ: I have written journals and diaries for fifty years; I always have them with me when travelling, but acknowledge that even something written on the evening of an event or a journey is still a 'selection' from the wealth of sensory information travelling to the brain. Thoughts arise and it is the task of the writer to use both 'facts/truths' and imagination to write. It is perhaps the emotional impact that first directs the focus of the recall and thereafter the poem itself may go in a direction that follows that emotional 'truth'. Currently, I am completing the second of a memoir trilogy on my life as a musician and trying to catch the facts and details as far as possible, but individual agendas and perspective will always influence the outcome.
In *Wanderlust Women*, we wrote about places and the universals of love, family, reactions to war and trauma – these personal 'memories' hopefully resonate with others.

MATILDE PIU: *About the genesis of* Wanderlust Women, *you have explained that it was conceived during the ongoing Covid crisis, as a reaction to travelling restrictions. Being a condition shared by all of us, we can understand the symbolic import of the theme of the journey. But can you tell us something about its usage in describing or exposing specific social and political issues? In what way may it be particularly suitable to this aim? And also, do you reckon that even nowadays there is a gender connotation, or gender-related issue, not only in travelling, but also in everyday commuting by public transport?*

LB: When it comes to being socially and politically aware, it is almost impossible for that aspect of me not to be reflected in many of my poems. In terms of the 'journey' as a theme, obviously in this collection we focused on places we have been or modes of travel as a starting point. Depending on the place, its history and my experience, the 'journey' can lend itself to raising or reflecting on social and political issues. It can also reflect my own personal journey as a woman throughout my life, and how the world reflects what being a woman in various places means back to me. Undoubtedly there continues to be a gender connotation on transport, in the street, and in the workplace anywhere we travel in the world.

DC: I think the book is a celebration of the world and the freedom of movement, particularly throughout Europe. However, with Brexit, that freedom has been lost and it feels like we have become an island isolated from the rest of the world. The UK seems very small and has somehow been cast adrift, much to the detriment of everyone who lives here.
Some of the poems deal with observations of political and social injustices in some countries, and I think it would be wrong not to recognise this when writing about a specific country.

LJ: I read the world as a resisting reader in terms of social injustice along gender, race, and class lines. Therefore, as a writer travelling, I cannot be unaware of social and political issues. In my songs, prose and poetry there is often a clear statement or *leitmotif* about these matters. My aim is to avoid being didactic, but just express what I perceive and feel when aware of abuses of power socially and politically. Writing is a different medium to bring attention to critical issues in the world which may be omitted or, indeed, misrepresented in the media and official political forums.
There are different levels of gender-related issues in the world: some countries appear to be still lodged in the dark ages with respect to gender freedoms. However, I would also argue that it is a global issue with much work still to be done. In 'modern' Britain's transport system, I have witnessed serious abuse and more concealed commentary relating to gender and have seen similar abuses in many parts of Europe.

SIMONA PERIA: *Your poems focus on travelling and wandering, and in them you discover both new and familiar places. What role do you think poetry plays in connecting and reconnecting with the places you visit? Do you think being poets (and writing poetry on the subject) gives you a different approach to travelling?*

LB: Though I have always loved travel, even before I wrote poetry, I definitely think/feel that writing poetry about travel, the journey, and the place reconnects me to the whole experience in a way that nothing else does. Poetry by its nature is about me tapping into and allowing my sub-conscious, deeper senses and feelings about an experience to emerge. I do write when I'm away, but not all the time and not always about the place I'm in. I am sometimes too busy experiencing the journey or place and its impact is too immediate for me to write about it there and then. But I can then connect and

reflect and draw on memories of the experience later, through images, emotions, and sounds, and bring it to life and connect with it all over again. Occasionally, I am more intentional and will research for my writing while I'm travelling.

DC: I think poetry can transform the places that have been visited and, instead of just going to a place, poets, perhaps, are more likely to discover the essence of places and connect with that in a creative way and will express that essence in language. I believe the poet is consuming journeys on a subconscious level and the impact will reveal itself when given time to digest and come to the fore.

LJ: Writers have used travel as a means of poetic stimulation for hundreds of years. I am no different. Different skylines, seascapes, architecture, language and interpersonal relationships deliver a plethora of ideas to work with. I do not always travel with intent, and yet I cannot but be affected and this emerges in writing. There is also a reconnecting with place. My poem "Enniscrone" is about a near-death experience that I had in Ireland having swum from Enniscrone beach. The poem, written thirty years later, is the first time I could 'revisit' that event and that has been quite cathartic. When writing or rewriting, one can be transported back to either revisit/replay the experience, or indeed reflect on how your present self reads or feels about that situation/event now.
I do think all people who approach the world *creatively* will often use the stimuli from travelling to create and recreate.

GRETA SERGIAMPIETRI: *In the two Kenyan poems, "Kenyan Flight" and "The Great Rift Valley", the lyrical voice seems to undertake a vertical movement connecting the air and the ground, respectively epitomised by the airplane and the valley's natural details – the verdant hills, volcanoes, lakes, and precious stones. However, this movement from above seems to repeat itself at the end of the second poem with the verb 'flying' in a sort of circular structure of the journey, which acquires a more metaphorical meaning, growing into an identity quest by human beings who re-connect to their most ancient roots associated with "hominid fossils". To what extent do the African landscape and, more specifically, the power of nature play a crucial role in this human quest for identity?*

LB: For me the human quest for identity doesn't really make sense if we are only considering personal/political history and culture. Our cultural identity grows out of the environment and landscape around us. In addition, despite the hostile press it receives, combined with the environment and nature, 'migration' is pivotal to the variety of ethnicities on planet earth.
In terms of being there, I can't conceive of anyone not being completely awed by the African landscape, where the power of nature is omnipresent and inescapable. I really felt it challenges the false sense we can have of ourselves in modern, technologically developed societies where meeting most of our needs is relatively easy. The very fact that we can treat nature purely as a resource, even at the cost of our own extinction, is like a collective denial that we are *of* it. I was very aware of how disconnected we often are

from the source of our own becoming. Flying over the Great Rift Valley in a 12-seater plane, I was particularly conscious of my vulnerability, and at the same time it was as if the immensely powerful primal force of that vast rift/fault line in the earth was drawing me to it and vibrating through me. When I first wrote the poems, I wasn't consciously aware of the circular structure, but now I recognise that they reflect my intimate sense that we are of that earth and also that it is to the earth we return.

VERONICA VANNUCCI: *In general, when we refer to the different fields of poetry, performance, and music, we tend to synthesise everything with the term 'Art'. Since, in your case, these elements are inextricably intertwined, how do your two artistic souls come together? To Donna Campbell: Do you consider yourself first a performer or a poet, or would one simply not exist without the other?*

DC: I agree that one would not exist without the other. Generally, the performance poetry that I do is more autobiographical; they have an emotional depth to them that doesn't appear in what I call 'page poetry'. With performance poetry I feel the poems are in my body, often different parts of my body, where I believe we hold memories, particularly of trauma. I feel very much alive during performing. I do not get the same feeling when reading from the page. The poem feels outside of me as opposed to the performance poetry which feels inside of me.

To Linda Jackson: What role does traditional Scottish music play in your repertoire as a singer?

LJ: In my teens I sang traditional Scottish ballads professionally and, while I enjoyed doing that (and still do), like most teens my musical taste shifted and I grew towards blues and gospel music of the American South, then rock and back to blues, but my biggest influence was the narrative experimental songs of Joni Mitchell. Blues men and women, singer song-writers, traditional Scots Border ballads. All telling stories.
Ironically, I have since read widely about 'presenting the line'. The unaccompanied singing of psalms by presbyterian Scots may be the ancestor of 'lining out', a hymnal singing style of 19th-century slaves practised in Southern churches. It has been suggested that 'lining out' is the forerunner of the 'call and response' of Gospel singing. Over 40,000 Gaels were cleared or emigrated in the 18th and 19th centuries to the Carolinas. Most of them would also be well aware of the folk/ballad tradition. The central belt of Scotland has had a rich blues music scene for many decades now and many gospel choirs. I am and have been involved in both as well as writing many contemporary themed songs in the traditional ballad format.[2]

[2] See https://glasgowbluesplayers.co.uk/linda-jaxson; www.lindajaxson.com.