

# The Welcome

## Edwin Morgan

Edwin Morgan, poet, translator, playwright and critic was born in Glasgow in 1920. He is currently Poet Laureate for Glasgow and in this capacity, wrote *The Welcome* for the occasion of the IFLA Conference, Glasgow 2002:

A fanfare for librarians, in verse –  
With no bum notes, whether florid or terse –  
That's what the poet engages to deliver,  
The word-enroller and the rhythm-giver.  
Books have come and gone and come again,  
Though some are written by a virtual pen.  
Guard your Elzevirs, but also log  
Titles from Pantagruel's catalogue:  
The Bagpipe of the Prelates, The Ape's Paternoster,  
Or any other monster from the roster.  
Borges thought the great starry array,  
The universe, was but a library.  
Muster and master its infinite folios  
And you could think you knew what no one knows.  
We want it all; the universe itself  
Expands, shelf beyond Hubble-bubbling shelf!  
Starburst of outreach – access – information –  
We're on the very edge of a space station  
Where ignorance will not be bliss but drastic,  
Where learning curves must learn to be elastic,  
Where we must search, and find, and use the things  
That our search engine – oh, be patient! – brings.  
Digitize a gilded Book of Hours,  
Its not the same, but there it is, it's ours,  
And long dead times revive and look at us  
As we interrogate their calculus.  
Page or tape or disk or means unknown  
Lie in wait wherever light is thrown,  
To spread that light for everyone to see  
And step by step enter immensity.

Glasgow, London, Europe, everywhere –  
The poet's words may vanish into air  
But they are words of welcome. May your meetings  
Flourish braced by good old Mungo's greetings.  
Perhaps he hears you, snoring by the Clyde,  
With tree and bird, fish and bell at his side.  
Well, you may find his story in a book,  
In a library, if you know where to look.  
From Mungo's cell to cyberspace, reality  
Is a tango of intertextuality.  
Have a fine dance with it this week, unlock  
Your word-hoards, take heart and take stock  
Of everything a library can do  
To let the future shimmer and show through.

## Explanatory Notes

Line 7. *Elzevirs*: Louis Elzevir (1540–1617), Dutch publisher who pioneered pocket editions of classic authors. Elzevirs were recognized for the quality of their scholarship, typography and design and sold all over Europe.

Line 8. *Pantagruel's catalogue*: see Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Book 2, Chapter 7. Penguin, 1970. ISBN 0 14 044047 X. Pantagruel, the last giant and the principal character in this satirical work visits Paris where he finds the Library of Saint-Victor's Abbey 'most magnificent'. Rabelais lists comic titles of books in this library, including *The Bagpipe of the Prelates* (Line 9) and *The Ape's Paternoster* (Line 9). In reality, the library was probably the most important in France.

Line 11. *Borges*: see story by J. L. Borges 'The Library of Babel' in *Labyrinths: selected stories and other writings*. Penguin, 1989. ISBN 0 14 018029 X. Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), Argentinian writer, worked as a librarian in a municipal library from 1938–1946, but was relieved of his post for political reasons. In 1955, after the overthrow of the Peronist regime, he became director of the National Library of Argentina.

Line 23. *Book of Hours*: medieval manuscript books of devotions for private use, especially during the Canonical Hours, the seven hours through the day when medieval Christians prayed.

Lines 34–36. *Flourish*: Let Glasgow Flourish is the city's motto. Mungo is the familiar name of Kentigern (c.518–603), patron saint of Glasgow. There are many legends relating to this saint and images from some of them are incorporated into the city's coat of arms.

Here's the Bird that never flew.

Here's the Tree that never grew.

Here's the Bell that never rang.

Here's the Fish that never swam.

*The Bird* commemorates the wild robin which St. Mungo's old master tamed. It was accidentally killed but Mungo took the dead bird and prayed over it whereupon it was restored to life and flew to its master.

*The Tree* in the legend was a hazel branch. As a boy in the monastery Mungo was left in charge of the holy fire in the refectory but fell asleep and some of the other boys, being envious of him, put out the fire. When he woke, Mungo broke off some frozen branches from a hazel tree and caused them to burst into flames by praying over them.

*The Bell* may have been given to St. Mungo by the Pope. By the 15<sup>th</sup> Century 'St. Mungo's Bell' had become a notable institution in Glasgow with citizens leaving an endowment to have the bell tolled to call the inhabitants to pray for their souls. Its ultimate fate is unknown. A replacement purchased by the Magistrates in 1641 still exists in the People's Palace.

*The Fish* with a ring in its mouth is a salmon. The ring was a present from Hydderch Hael, King of Cadzow to his Queen Languoreth The Queen gave the ring to a knight and the King in turn took it from the knight while he slept and threw it in the River Clyde. The King then demanded the ring from Languoreth on pain of death. The Queen appealed to the knight, who could not help; he confessed to Saint Mungo, who sent a monk to fish in the river and bring back the first fish caught. This was done and St. Mungo extracted the ring from its mouth.