

Jessie Sheeler, 1939–2022
Greg Thomas

In 1961, Jessie Sheeler co-founded one of the most significant small poetry presses of the post-war era from a basement flat in Edinburgh's New Town. Then Jessie McGuffie, she was the partner of Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925–2006), whom she had met three years earlier on “a wet evening...in Hanover Street,” as she recalled in a 2014 biographical note. McGuffie was from the Edinburgh family who ran the famous Edinburgh pub the Doric Tavern (formerly McGuffies Tavern) and was reading Classics at Edinburgh University. In 1960, Finlay's poetry collection *The Dancers Inherit the Party* was dedicated to McGuffie but by the following year he was moving away from his early lyric verse towards a form of poetic expression that brought visual form to the foreground.

It was this new-found interest that led Finlay and McGuffie to create Wild Hawthorn Press, while they were living at her flat in Fettes Row. The press would continue to publish Finlay's illustrated poetry booklets, poem-cards, and other works of text-based art until his death in 2006—at first, it also published international modernist writers such as Louis Zukofsky and Lorine Niedecker. The first issue of Finlay and McGuffie's similarly iconic little magazine *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse* appeared the following year, 1962, and presented the first examples of visually oriented, “concrete” poetry to British audiences. In Jessie's 2014 note, provided to the Fleming-Wyfold Foundation in 2022 by her partner Euan McAlpine, she described the early days of press and magazine:

“The Wild Hawthorn productions from Fettes Row were done by a mixture of laying pages out on the floor, cutting things up and fiddling layouts, having got local artists to do art works for us....There was a photo-offset printer at that time in Dundas Street and I got them to do the first productions as well as *POTH* [*Poor.Old.Tired.Horse*] in due course. Selling the books was quite difficult. Jim Haynes at the Paperback Bookshop took them, one or two others took one, but mostly they sold through the network of writers and artists who were interested in contemporary arts.”

In 1963, Jessie met Dick Sheeler, an ex-student of Zukofsky's doing his national service on the USS Tanner, which was then docked in the Forth. They became a couple during his brief stopover from the states and married in Spring 1964 after Jessie had moved to North Carolina to be near the Tanner's new location. Bad feeling with Ian was put aside and in 1965 Jessie and Dick were invited to live with him and his new partner, Sue Swan, at Gledfield Farmhouse in Ardgay, Ross-shire. Gledfield was an important precursor to Ian and Sue's poetry-sculpture garden at Little Sparta, with works installed in the grounds and a pond dug out. Dick used his carpentry skills to help Finlay construct his first, wooden sculptural poem, a column reading “ajar” that stood in the house's stairwell.

The Sheelers left Gledfield in Spring 1966 but not before a daughter, Amy, had been born in an upstairs bedroom (two more children, Cluny and Ian, would

follow.) The same year, Ian and Sue moved to Stonypath in the Pentland Hills, later christened Little Sparta, and the rest is well-known. Living in England for some time but ultimately returning to Scotland, Jessie remained a keen documenter of Ian and Sue's work on the grounds of their new home over the coming decades and became a dedicated member of the Little Sparta Trust upon its establishment in the mid-1990s, remaining involved with its work for over 20 years. Thus, she was in a perfect position to publish the first illustrated survey of the garden, *Little Sparta: The Garden of Ian Hamilton Finlay*, in 2003. A guide to the garden followed in 2015, with photographs by Robin Gillanders and a comprehensive list of artworks by Patrick Eyres. These projects were testament to an enduring friendship and creative connection with its roots in the heady days of the Edinburgh counter-culture and the small-press boom of the 1960s.