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Modernist St Andrews: What Really Happened in the 1930s?

Alan Riach (Friday 4 March 2016)

"In or about December 1910, human character changed." So wrote Virginia Woolf in 1924. Well, not everything changed in a single month, but you know what she means. Something very broad and deep had begun to shift forever. We looked last week at what was going on after the First World War in Montrose, the cultural capital of Scotland in the 1920s. By the 1930s, people had moved. A handful of dates and events give signs and indications of the currents of the decade.

In 1930, Freud published "Civilization and Its Discontents" and Gandhi began his civil disobedience campaign in India. In 1932, there were hunger marches in Britain and in 1933, Hitler was coming into power in Germany. In 1936, the Spanish Civil War began and the long fight against fascism started in earnest. In 1937, Picasso painted "Guernica", Shostakovich completed his fifth symphony and in 1939, James Joyce published "Finnegans Wake" and the Second World War began.

If we want a historical period for the modern movement, it might as well be 1910-1939, though anti-fascism remained a necessity long after World War Two became the Cold War, and has never really gone away.

In Scotland, in the 1930s, the cultural centre split and shifted, relocating from Montrose and fixing itself in two vastly different places: Shetland and St Andrews. Save Shetland for next week and let's look at St Andrews.

In 1930, a wealthy American, James Huntington Whyte, New York-born, Scots by adoption, opened a new art gallery in North Street and the Abbey Book Shop in South Street, specialising in contemporary European novels and magazines. He started publishing a new periodical, "The Modern Scot", making a determined effort to encourage Scottish writers, artists and intellectuals to take up residence in the town and take forward the ideas of the cultural Renaissance MacDiarmid had started in Montrose in the 1920s. He invited the artists William McCance and Agnes Miller Parker. Edwin and Willa Muir arrived in 1935. The composer F.G. Scott had taken annual summer holidays with his family in St Andrews since 1931. The art critic and journalist John Tonge, author of "The Arts of Scotland" (1938) also lived in North Street.

“The Modern Scot” was produced over six years, publishing poems and fiction, drama and essays on art and culture, economics and political commentary, history and music, as well as book and film reviews. Pro-independence political commentary aligned with new creative work of all kinds and essays on European literature and culture along with new translations of Franz Kafka, Herman Hesse and Paul Eluard. As Tom Normand notes in his study “The Modern Scot: Modernism and Nationalism in Scottish Art 1928-1955” (2000), Whyte wrote a number of editorials for the magazine which urged its readers to think “fundamentally” about the principles of nationalism, and to consider how in Scotland it might be different from darker forms emerging in continental Europe. What distinguished Scotland, he argued, was and should be a refusal of racialist or supremacist overtones. Unity in diversity was the key to this ideal, and since some accounts have noted that Whyte himself was of Polish-Jewish descent, his opposition to the rhetoric of blood and soil and his commitment to contextualising art in a democratic political movement may well have had personal resonance.

Parts of Willa Muir’s study of sexual, religious and class repressions, “Mrs Grundy in Scotland” (1936) appeared in the magazine, and then in full as one of a series of books (with the generic title “The Voice of Scotland”) initiated by Lewis Grassic Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid. Their intention was to invite a range of contemporary authors to write book-length essays on contentious themes and questions of the day. Thus Compton Mackenzie wrote “Catholicism and Scotland”, reminding predominantly Protestant readers that their greatest Scottish heroes, Wallace and Bruce, were pre-Reformation Catholics. Neil Gunn wrote “Whisky and Scotland” rehearsing all the ceremonies, rituals and traditions whisky-drinking once entailed, intrinsically celebrating sensitivity and care alongside carefully applied intoxication and language at play. Victor McClure wrote “Scotland’s Inner Man” about what good food and a healthy diet actually was and might again be in Scotland. Eric Linklater wrote “The Lion and the Unicorn: what England has meant to Scotland” and William Power wrote “Literature and Oatmeal”.

These book-length essays are still pertinent and worth searching for. It was the last in the series, Edwin Muir’s “Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer” that triggered the rage. Muir concluded that the only way to take Scottish literature forward was to write exclusively in English. Gaelic would not serve, Scots was inadequate: only English could address an international readership, as was evident in the literary triumphs of W.B. Yeats and James Joyce. Not only MacDiarmid, whose Scots-language poetry had been so revolutionary in the 1920s, but also the composer F.G. Scott, were furious. Scott’s brilliant settings of

MacDiarmid, Burns, William Soutar, George Campbell Hay and others, encapsulated a Scots musical idiom in compositions self-consciously drawing on modernist innovations from Schoenberg, Satie and Stravinsky, while keeping the traditional sense of Scots song in play: check out the 2007 recording on Signum Classics CD096. Scott met both Edwin and Willa, and wrote of their meeting: "I had a long and very exciting talk with the pair of them, told them that I disagreed with everything in the book" and argued definitively that there were poems in Scots, not least those of Burns, that were by any standards "major". Edwin, Scott reported, could not contradict him. Willa "turned extremely grave and silent".

In the long run, Muir had a point: Yeats and Joyce have an international cachet still not fully extended to MacDiarmid, Soutar or Grassic Gibbon, and there are still many folk unwilling to recognise Scots as a language no less valid than English.

Yet MacDiarmid and F.G. Scott won the argument. Gaelic, Scots and English are undeniably the three languages most of our literature has been composed in for centuries. There is a significant Latin tradition, important poetry in French (by Mary Queen of Scots, for example) and the first poem we might identify as Scottish, "The Gododdin", was written in what we call Old Welsh or Cymric. The understanding that multilingualism, a plurality of languages, is characteristic of Scottish literature in a way that distinguishes it from the more familiar "one nation, one language" imperial ideal, is generally acknowledged, and open. The linguistic diversity of contemporary Scottish writing is proof. Such understanding and evidence would welcome the idea that new writing informed by Polish might become a vital part of the Scottish literary scene. Who can prove it won't?

Muir's argument was answered by MacDiarmid in his own writing, but it would be wrong to dismiss the work of the Muirs because of this incident.

Willa's two novels, speculative essays, a study of the Ballads and a memoir, "Belonging" (1968), secure her an important place in the story of modernist Scotland. They are fully discussed in Aileen Christianson's thoroughly-researched study, "Moving in Circles: Willa Muir's Writings" (Word Power Books, 2007). The novels "Imagined Corners" (1931) and "Mrs Ritchie" (1933) were both set in Montrose and published before she and Edwin arrived in St Andrews, but they inaugurate the decade memorably.

"Imagined Corners" takes place before the First World War, describing the marriage and constraints set upon Elizabeth Shand, who, when she meets Elise Mutze, begins to sense

her own consciousness opening to all that Europe might mean, and sets off to the continent with her new friend at the novel's conclusion. Oppressions abandoned, they embark optimistically for new possibilities, but the date of the novel and the date of its publication insist that we understand the devastation that will come on this world, and exactly what their hope will have to endure to survive.

"Mrs Ritchie" takes us through the war, centred on a character of increasingly monstrous presence, an inhabitant, both victim and perpetrator of the repressions Elizabeth and Elise fled from. Her husband, son and daughter, wreak tragedy upon her as she does upon them. The bleak, terrible strength of the novel hinges on the confrontation of the conservative Victorian world Annie Ritchie comes from and the post-war, shell-shocked, modern world her son returns into. The heroine ends in delusion, both her men dead, her daughter running for her life.

Both novels in different ways confront nineteenth-century conventions with Modernism. There is nothing easy in their challenges and they are all the stronger for that.

Born in 1890 in Montrose, Willa's parents came from Unst, in Shetland, and while she grew up in Montrose, her sense of displacement was to be a continual fact in her life. She married Edwin in 1919, and from 1921-22 she was with him in Prague, from 1922-23, in Dresden, then Italy; in 1924, Austria, and from 1924-26 back in Montrose. Here she produced "Women: An Enquiry" (1925), the first of the feminist essays. Muir identifies "detachment" as one of the great liabilities of the modern world: people become "detached" and what follows? "Religion becomes a creed, morality a code of law, government a party machine". Art loses the capacity to be art and is crippled by "theories of aesthetics".

Her feminism has been criticised because she identifies certain innate qualities as belonging intrinsically to men (self-conscious detachment) and women (unconscious sympathy). Yet the complementarity she proposes, of structured organisation and intuitive understanding, is real enough in broad terms and the power of her judgement still comes through: "The financial machine in our own day is an excellent example of the masculine activity pushed to extremes: it has been successfully detached from human values so that it exists for the production of money and not for the production of goods and services to humanity. The mere individual has ceased to be of any importance, and even the inventions and discoveries of his intelligence are valued only in terms of money."

We might argue that such "detachment" is not only the provenance of men, but the effect Muir describes is nonetheless horribly familiar. The terrible thing is, of course, that we're now almost a hundred years further down the line: if anything, the situation is worse, and even more urgently needing redress.

Next week: Modernist Shetland – "To rise from the grave – to get a life worth having"

[Boxed off:]

From the opening of Willa Muir, "Imagined Corners" (1931)

That obliquity of the earth with reference to the sun which makes the twilight linger both at dawn and dusk in northern latitudes prolongs summer and winter with the same uncertainty in a dawdling autumn and a tardy spring. Indeed, the arguable uncertainty of the sun's gradual approach and withdrawal in these regions may have first sharpened the discrimination of the natives to that acuteness for which they are renowned, so that it would be a keen-minded Scot who could, without fear of contradiction, say to his fellows: "the day has now fully dawned," or "the summer has now definitely departed."…

The season for summer visitors was over, although summer still lingered, and the burgh of Calderwick was busy about its jute mills, its grain mills, its shipping, schools, shops, offices and dwelling-houses. The larks, the crows and the gulls, after all, were not ratepayers. It is doubtful whether they even knew that they were domiciled in Scotland…

On this clear, sunny day in early September – a good day on which to become acquainted with Calderwick – a bride and a bridegroom were due to arrive in the town, the bridegroom a native, born and brought up in Calderwick, the bride a stranger. Human life is so intricate in its relationships that newcomers, whether native or not, cannot be dropped into a town like glass balls into plain water; there are too many elements already suspended in the liquid, and newcomers are at least partly soluble. What they may precipitate remains to be seen.