



Riach, A. (2016) Modernist Shetland: MacDiarmid's quest to unify Scotland's diversity. *National*, 2016, 11 March.

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version.  
You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/150041/>

Deposited on: 18 October 2017

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Our previous essays in this series looked at Montrose in the 1920s and St Andrews in the 1930s, cultural capitals of Scotland. In the 1930s, the cultural scene was not only centred in St Andrews, though. Something new and essential was also happening in the Shetland archipelago.

## **Modernist Shetland: The Measures Taken in the 1930s**

**Alan Riach (Friday 11 March 2016)**

Shetland, the island of Whalsay: five miles long, two miles wide, gentle to look at, bare of trees but benign and shapely, covered in summer in pink flowers, thrift and campion, the blue spring squill, the rare sea aster. Other islands are threaded and studded in the waters around it, and inlets and voes run in. Streams run over it, a maze of waters and landforms, layered in archaeological depths of human habitation across millennia, active with seabirds, gulls, duck, waders, red-throated divers on the inland lochs, migrating birds from Scandinavia by the high cliffs on the east side. The rocks are schist and the fragments of the original are xenoliths still visible, present in the granitic gneiss, with crystalline limestone on the north-east coast.

In May 1933, when Hugh MacDiarmid stepped off the boat here, the days were long and lengthening, the sunlight opening further horizons and subtleties of terrain and colour on all sides. Everything was new to him. He had gone from Scotland's cultural centre in Montrose to what seemed the furthest peripheral edge, from constant dynamism to utmost isolation. He was forty-one years old and everything was left behind – or so it seemed.

How far do you have to go, how much do you have to surmount, to arrive at the perspective that allows you to see the whole world as islands in their archipelagos of connection? MacDiarmid once said that by going to Shetland he was trying to understand if the utmost diversity of Scotland could form a coherence, and that he discovered there that this was true. It delivered the potential of regeneration.

In his first year in Shetland, he explored the archipelago, immersing himself in the working economy of the people around him. He went aboard a haddock boat to the Out Skerries, five miles north east of Whalsay, with Thomas Robertson, H.M. Survey Geologist, with whom he formed a friendship and learned the words for the stones. He went as an observer on the square-sail drifter herring boat the *Valkyrie* into Yell Sound, sailing into the deep waters north of Shetland with the herring fishers in June 1936, writing on board, lying in his bunk, paper pressed to the planks of the bunk above. He visited the Faroes on the steamer

the *Tjaldur*, saw “the monstrous shapes of Litla Dimun and Stora Dimun...pyramids rising to needle-points, sheer walls of basalt, fantastic ridges with razor edges”. He praised the Faroese, returning to reappraise Shetland as geologically deep, culturally negligible. This won him no friends in Shetland but it prompted his most necessary poem of the 1930s, “On a Raised Beach”. This is one of the greatest poems in world literature.

The first draft was written in 1933, sent to MacDiarmid’s boyhood teacher, the composer F.G. Scott, then revised into a musical structure of immensely challenging, complex coherence. Its premise is Miltonic, but materialist: How can you believe in human value, in the scale of geological time? How can you affirm it? Does it truly exist? In politics and culture, mankind in totality and any single life, what is all the struggle worth? What is ultimately at stake here? What measures must you take to count its cost?

“On a Raised Beach” evokes Eliot’s “The Waste Land” only to reject it: this is not a heap of broken images, MacDiarmid tells us, but: “All human culture is a Goliath to fall / To the least of these pebbles withal.” It is the central poem in the 1935 book “Stony Limits” (the title is from Shakespeare: “stony limits cannot hold love out”). So what would it take, he asks, “to rise from the grave – to get a life worth having”?

MacDiarmid wrote his poems, trying to learn and test what human value is, as Fascism and Communism were growing their perversions throughout Europe. From socialist and republican ideals in 1916 Ireland and 1917 Russia, by the 1930s, Spain was already Fascism’s target, Stalin had begun his Terror in earnest after Lenin’s death in 1924, and what had seemed to some like Mussolini’s bright beginning in the early 1920s was caught and turned in Hitler’s rising tide. MacDiarmid was aware of most, though not all, of this.

The radio was there, but not in every house. People would gather together to listen to the news reports, as the decade gathered its storms.

Such things as war impinged as they would but it was the life of the islands that mattered in the end. MacDiarmid came to praise Shetland folk as frank and kindly, but, he said, “They are a secret people, not by active concealment, but because they are so natural and unselfconscious in their unobtrusive but very real differences that these habitually escape the observation of the impatient and uninstructed... This does not mean that the people are unsociable – they are far from that – but simply that they are independent and self-reliant.” Visitors from the South may think their lives hard, but “So it is with all the outward appearances in the Shetlands: a very vivid and generous life lies behind them” – “a different tradition of existence”. This is what he called “Halophilous living by these cold northen seas” – a halophile being an animal that requires the salt in the air.

“I was better with the sounds of the sea / Than with the voices of men / And in desolate and desert places / I found myself again. / For the whole of the world came from these / And he who returns to the source / May gauge the worth of the outcome / And approve and perhaps reinforce / Or disapprove and perhaps change its course...”

In 1939, MacDiarmid gave practical help to a group of Whalsay cottars, opposing the County Assessor’s raising of rates. At their request, MacDiarmid argued forcefully for them, in meetings and in letters, pointing out that they shouldn’t be charged any rates at all, as they had no public amenities. When the appeals were dismissed, the Assessor, Thomas Johnston, wrote a letter to the Lerwick paper to justify himself, and MacDiarmid replied, noting of Johnston and the “reactionary Council” who supported him: “I repudiate all the ‘conventional lies’ which are used to dignify Mr Johnston’s business – and mask his personal responsibility for what he does. I am simply and solely concerned with the ultimate fact that on no matter what specious pretexts in the home country of the wealthiest empire in the world, and at a time when national service is being appealed for on all hands or made compulsory, the administrative system finds it necessary to ‘put the screw’ on the poorest of the poor and wring a few more shillings out of people below the subsistence level. That is what it all boils down to, and I have no hesitation in stigmatizing it as a shameful and intolerable state of affairs and condemning lock, stock and barrel the system under which it takes place and the officials who work that system.”

The same imperative is there in the poetry. In “The Wreck of the *Swan*”, the crew are facing “the black-squall and the hurricane” while “Up to their waists in water on the foredeck, / And sweeping all hands in a heap on the lee-scuppers, / Their arms and hands clawing up through the boiling surf / Still grasping wriggling fish and gutting knives... / Time the public knew what these men have to face.”

There were then, MacDiarmid tells us, nearly 100,000 of them at sea, and if you consider the fishing industry to include shipbuilders, rope, net and box manufacturers, fish-friers, buyers, retailers, salesmen, railways and road transport, coal, salt and ice industries, you might say that around three million folk depended on the trawermen for a living.

Again, the specific working economics connect to literary perception and social vision. Making these connections allowed MacDiarmid accommodate all Scotland in his vision. Towards the end of “Stony Limits” is the poem “Lament for the Great Music”, which takes us from Shetland south and west to mainland Scotland, out from the pre-eminently Norse influences and into the Gaelic and Celtic worlds, connecting beyond them with the archipelago of ancient Greece. As Greece once was, so Scotland's archipelagos and

Highlands are now, a singular “fold of value in the world”.

In 1937, MacDiarmid made an extensive tour of the Western Isles. His letters allow us to track his journey through the Hebrides, visiting Skye, Raasay, South Uist, Canna, Eigg, Barra, and Tobermory on Mull, and on. In 1939, he published *The Islands of Scotland*, the first book of its kind to shift the focus decisively away from the Hebrides. Up till then, they were the islands romanticised to the point of cliché and associated most in the popular imagination with the nostalgic and ill-fated destiny of Bonnie Prince Charlie. MacDiarmid devotes fifty pages to Shetland, twenty to Orkney and twenty-five to all the Hebrides – vastly disproportionate, you might argue, but also, perhaps, a necessary counterbalance, emphasising contemporary living conditions as well as lasting qualities of social life and spiritual identity to be found nowhere else in the world. This is anti-romantic, in one sense, but realism is not its only strength.

MacDiarmid’s entire understanding of identity had been fashioned anew from his experience of the archipelagos of Shetland, the Faroes, Orkney and the Western Isles, and then as this applied to Scotland as a whole, and beyond that to all the world, through all time.

The major result of MacDiarmid’s multi-faceted understanding of Scotland’s plural, multilingualistic identity was his editing “The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry”, published in 1940. In this, poems in English and Scots appear alongside translations from Latin and Gaelic. In the same years as he was working on “The Golden Treasury”, he was putting together the pieces and passages that would ultimately form what he hoped would be the biggest poem in history, comprehensive yet open. He sent the typescript of an early version of what was to become “In Memoriam James Joyce” to T.S. Eliot in 1938, from Shetland, when he was forty-six years old, though it was not to be published till 1955, when MacDiarmid was sixty-three, and he had been working on it right up to its publication. This magnum opus, what he called a “vision of world language” – not a single language for all people but a multiplicity of forms of cultural expression changing through time across all nations and localities – had begun to come together in Shetland, and bridged forward across the Second World War, pointing towards where we are now in the twenty-first century, with so much information at our fingertips, and so much in the system so badly still in need of redress.

It was regeneration of another kind: archipelagic identity. Unity in diversity, indeed. Rejuvenation, after the Second World War. Another Renaissance.

MacDiarmid's Shetland writing should be balanced by Mark Ryan Smith's *The Literature of Shetland* (published by The Shetland Times, Lerwick, 2014), an excellent historical overview and analysis of the archipelago's own writers that also takes into full account famous visitors to the islands, including MacDiarmid and Walter Scott. Among the Shetland writers who repay full attention are J.J. Haldane Burgess, William J. Tait and contemporaries such as Christine de Luca, Robert Alan Jamieson, Jim Mainland, Lollie Graham and Jen Hadfield. This should be complemented by Simon Hall's *The History of Orkney Literature* (John Donald, 2010). See also the online resource: Writing the North: The Literature of Orkney and Shetland: <http://www.writingthenorth.com/>

[Boxed off:]

One of Shetland's finest native writers was **J.J. Haldane Burgess (1862-1927)**, blind poet, novelist, violinist, historian and linguist, who assisted Jakob Jakobsen's research into the Norn language in Shetland, some of whose findings found their way into MacDiarmid's "On a Raised Beach". Thus the indigenous tradition and the work of the 1930s modernist resident intersect.

### **Da Blyde-Maet**

Whin Aedie üt da blyde-maet for himsell  
An her, pür lass, 'at dan belanged ta him,  
Whin nicht in Aeden wis a simmer dim  
Afore he wis dreeld oot ta hok an dell,  
Hed he a knolidge o da trüth o things,  
Afore da knolidge koft wi what's caa'd sin?  
Afore da world raised dis deevil's din,  
Heard he da music 'at da starrings sings?  
Some says 'at Time is craalin laek a wirm  
Troo da tik glaar dey caa Eternity,  
A treed o woe an pain it aye mann be  
'At Fate reels aff frae ever fleein pirm

Bit Joy an Hopp in aa dis life I see,  
It's plain anyoch ta see ta him 'at's carin,  
T'o Time is spraechin, laeck a fraeksit bairn,  
Ipo da bosim o Eternity.  
  
We'se aet da blyde-maet yet, an it sall be  
O mony anidder, deeper, graander life,  
An Time sall learn troo aa dis weary strife  
Ta sook da fu breests o Eternity.

Or in English: The Glad-Food (the meal eaten when a woman first rises from child-bed)

When Adam ate the glad-food for himself / And she, poor lass, who then belonged to him, / When night in Eden was a summer twilight / Before he was evicted, / Had he a knowledge of the truth of things, / Before the knowledge tainted with what's called sin? / Before the world raised this devil's noise, / Did he hear the music that the stars sing? / Some say that Time is crawling like a worm / Through the thick slime they call Eternity, / A thread of woe and pain it always must be / That Fate reels off from the ever turning pirn. // But Joy and Hope in all this life I see, / It's plain enough to see by he who cares, / Though Time is screaming like a fractious child, / Upon the bosom of Eternity. / We shall eat the glad food yet, and it shall be / Of many another, deeper, grander life, / And Time shall learn through all this weary strife / To suck the full breasts of Eternity.