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## Education, Scotland and GUM in the 1940s

Alan Riach (Friday 13 May 2016)

Election over. Votes counted. Results in. And all those promises and prospects?

Education being the key, and living as we do now in a world of competitive league tables, teaching to exams, “excellence” (whatever that is in the real world), perhaps it’s time to pause on what the word might mean.

A handwritten manuscript of an essay by Hugh MacDiarmid entitled “An Open Letter to a Glasgow Undergraduate” was recently given to Glasgow University Library and now resides in the Special Collections Department. It was first published in the university magazine GUM (vol.57, no.2, November 1946, pages 8-9) and given prominence, printed immediately after the editorial. The National will publish it in full next Friday: today’s article is to set a context for it, and to anticipate its questions.

Just after the Second World War had ended, in GUM’s March 1946 issue (vol.56, no.4, pp.112-13), there was a satiric poem entitled “In Glasgow the Other Day: Mr MacDiarmid Visits Kelvingrove”. It was in part a parody of MacDiarmid’s poem, “Glasgow 1960” which had been published in the “London Mercury” in 1935. MacDiarmid’s funny little squib offers a vision of the future in which the poet is astonished, arriving in Glasgow after many years away, to discover that the newspaper headlines are advertising Scottish authors’ opinions on a Turkish poet’s latest work. Buses are crammed with folk heading to Ibrox stadium for a public debate between two professors (one Scots, one Spanish) on “the law of inverse effort” – that is, “when there’s a conflict between imagination and reality, imagination wins” as in, you can walk along a plank on a floor but place it across the gap between two tall buildings and you start imagining that you’ll fall. (Or as in, despite the opposition, “Yes we can!”)

The GUM poem, signed “Marx der Mutt”, comically describes MacDiarmid visiting the Picasso-Matisse exhibition that Tom Honeyman organised at Kelvingrove in 1946, Scotland’s first major breakthrough Modernist art exhibition: “Picasso popular...in Glasgow! Camarade Picasso / Whose work represents (no matter what the parrot-crying / Pontiffs of Burlington House may have to say upon the matter) / The ne plus ultra of scatological art...” and goes on to refer to “the crass and unforgivable stupidity / Of the City fathers / Who cannily disregarded the seminal genius / Of the native Master-Builder, Rennie Mackintosh...” and ends: “Picasso popular...in Glasgow? ...Possibly, / But certainly not more so than the Evening Times, / And the position of Bud Neill...”

Bud Neill, of course, was the comic cartoonist and creator of Lobey Dosser, Sheriff of Calton Creek, in the Evening Times of the 1940s and 50s, who (since 1992) has been sitting on the only two-legged equestrian statue in the world, taking his nemesis Rank Bajin off to the jile, though in reality heading for The Halt Bar across the street, in Woodlands Road, in Glasgow’s west end.

So in the satirist's reworking of MacDiarmid's already-satirical squib, Picasso is plonked down in a contemporary post-war Glasgow, his work appreciated less by bus- and tram-filled football supporters or cartoon-addicts than by the eccentric and solitary self-appointed genius poet, and, presumably, students and readers of GUM.

They must have been a highly literate lot, marinated in good humour, with a strong supply of healthily derisive laughter, the readers of GUM in 1946. Even better was coming. MacDiarmid's essay appeared later that year. The essence of his argument is that institutional and especially tertiary education is failing to do its job because it doesn't equip young people with the knowledge they need of what Scotland is, has been, and might yet be. Most have to go south or abroad when they graduate, even when they want to stay in Scotland and make it a better place. However, MacDiarmid's range of reference, his balance of reasonableness, vitriol and spleen, his sympathy and humour, the quotations he brings in and the passion of his delivery have to be read to be savoured. The truth of his argument has to be tested. And the extent to which things have changed since 1946, particularly at Glasgow University, but more broadly in Scotland, needs to be gauged. Things have indeed changed, but some of his points are still awfully, shamefully pertinent.

Given the front page news of *The National* yesterday (*A Scottish Dream Dies*, May 12, 2016), nowadays it's not only that some good folk are still having to leave Scotland, it's that good folk – including Gaelic-learning children – are being deported.

But stay with GUM for a while first. There was no immediate response to MacDiarmid's essay but in March 1947 (Vol.57, no.6, pp.19-20), there was a little essay entitled "Eng.Lit." attributed to "Civis" which offered some criticism of how English literature was taught at GU: some Anglo-Saxon, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton. The comment was: "I do not question the quality of his [the student's] learning, only its relevance. [...] Even if we agree that Shakespeare is the pillar of the temple, yet that temple is still under construction." It concludes: "I suggest that honours students should devote themselves to the study of these three questions. How many people read 'literature'? What do they read instead and why? What do we think they should read and why?" And there is the suggestion that honours students might even benefit from learning something about the practice and "technique" of creative writing itself.

It wasn't until nearly a year had passed before MacDiarmid's essay got a response, but it was worth the wait. In "The Forum: Your Opinions" there appeared "The Contemporary Challenge" by "Tacitus" (not identified: possibly a student at the time), in vol.58, no.2 (October 1947). It began: "Almost twelve months ago GUM published an open letter to a Glasgow Undergraduate from Hugh MacDiarmid. If there is any reader who keeps back numbers or who has any idea where to find them he would be well advised to look up that article and to give it the attention it deserves. It was a tragic comment on the apathy of the age that it had to be written in 1946, almost twenty years after George Malcolm Thomson wrote that savage little book, *Caledonia or the Future of the Scots*, a book all Scottish nationalists should read and re-read and thoroughly digest."

Now, George Malcolm Thomson (1899-1996) was the author of seven books about Scotland in the 1920s and 30s and is the subject of a valuable biography by George McKechnie: *The Best-Hated Man: Intellectuals and the Condition of Scotland between the Wars* (2013). *Caledonia* was a provocation: “Scotland is a land of second-hand thoughts and second-rate minds. The first fact about the Scot is that he is a man eclipsed. The Scots are a dying people.” As soon as it was published, it provoked an immediate response from MacDiarmid, writing as C.M. Grieve, in the form of another small book in the same “Today and Tomorrow” series as *Caledonia*. Instead of the Roman name for Scotland, MacDiarmid took the Celtic one, and his subtitle has a very different emphasis: his book was called, *Albyn or Scotland and the Future*. So, instead of a civil state and its population, MacDiarmid’s title gives us a language, history and geography, a lasting identity negotiated through space and time. This is what he means, I think, when he talks in the book about “the Scottish psychology”: not something racially defined or purist in any sense but something that characterises and occupies the people who live here, whatever mongrel breed we are.

The central contrast between the books is that where Thomson deplores the Irish immigrants coming to Scotland in the 1920s, MacDiarmid welcomes them, arguing that their presence and contribution to Scotland will bring resistance to the establishment and health and vitality to the culture. Scotland will remain but its population will change over generations as it always does. Thomson’s book was too pessimistic for MacDiarmid. There are signs of revival, MacDiarmid argued. In his last pages, MacDiarmid writes: “It is significant that *The Scotsman* and other Anglo-Scottish papers dealing with the new Draft Bill, are increasingly conceding the ‘advantages’ of sentimental nationalism, but simultaneously warning that ‘realistic nationalism’ will be reactionary and profitless – ‘what Scotland wants is not a Parliament of its own, but more employment, new industries,’ etc., as if the present system were supplying these, and nationalism threatened the supply. Happily, as I have said, the Scottish Home Rule Movement is rapidly re-orienting itself along realist lines, but the degree of realism achieved has not yet reached through to the financial backwork of our affairs, the real manipulation area, without control of which ‘self-determination’ is only a delusion and a snare.”

Remember, it was only in the year after this was written that the National Party of Scotland was formed, with MacDiarmid one of its founding-members, and another six years went by before the establishment of the SNP. So what we’re looking at here is really the preface to the prelude to the introduction to where we are now.

MacDiarmid, or Grieve, ends *Albyn* like this: “Whether ‘dreamers of dreams’ can still prove themselves ‘movers and shakers of the world’ or not, the protagonists of a Scottish Renaissance are dreaming the dream outlined in these pages, and have already earned at least the right to say to their countrymen in the words of Jaures: ‘It is we who are the true heirs of the ancestral hearth: we have taken its flame while you have kept but the cinders.’”

MacDiarmid was not in total disagreement with everything Thomson said, however, and in *GUM*, in 1947, “Tacitus” chose this quotation from *Caledonia*: “It is perfectly true that the proportion of students at Scottish universities to the population is about four times

England's but no number of half-wits will make an educated nation, though they may be decked out in a veritable rainbow of degree-hoods and can marshal whole alphabets after their names." The author then commented: "MacDiarmid re-echoed this cry of distress at the sight of the intellectual backwaters and creative vacuums that our universities have become. If his cry made the slightest impression there has been no visible sign of it." The arts syllabus remains conservatively intact, we are told, with "not even a glimpse of a piece of real creative work". And in the broader context, what relevance does it have?

A new town is being built in East Kilbride, the author speculates, what would Patrick Geddes have said about this? The GU union is no more than "a spiv's paradise" (a Bullingdon Glasgow?) and students are apathetic to the wider issues of the world. "Perhaps there is an underground movement in the university, working out a true alternative to our archaic educational system, plotting to wipe out the hideous blotches that our industrial cities are – if there is it is high time it came to the surface. What is far more likely is that they are mapping out the shortest route south and preparing for a hasty getaway when the degree-machine issues their permits." And he offered the final question: "It may be that 1947 marks the nadir of this university's depression... it may be... or are the pessimists right? ...will nothing but a well-placed atom bomb shake the smug complacency and apathy that pervade its every inch?"

It's probably as well that the author remains unidentified.

Meantime, here's a taster from MacDiarmid's essay:

"In every other country, its national history and literature etc. – and not those of some other country with different traditions, tendencies, and problems altogether – have first place in its schools and colleges, as is natural; and it is in comparison with these – and using these as touchstones – that the student goes on to extend his range, taking in the literatures and histories of other lands and in due course achieving some knowledge of world-history and world-literature. In Scotland alone this natural process is reversed, and Scottish literature and history are not only not placed first but come in at the tail, if at all."

Next week, there's the full text of "An Open Letter to a Glasgow Undergraduate" to look forward to, or prepare to deplore.

[Boxed off:]

**Ode (1873)**

**Arthur O'Shaughnessy**

We are the music makers

And we are the dreamers of dreams,

Wandering by lone sea-breakers,  
And sitting by desolate streams  
World-losers and world-forsakers,  
On whom the pale moon gleams:  
Yet we are the movers and shakers  
Of the world for ever, it seems.