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## **AS OTHERS SEE US: GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS AND SCOTLAND (PART 1 OF 3)**

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In our political world, uncertainties are everywhere, so it's worth asking, what remains essential, these days?

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-89) only spent two months in Scotland, in 1881, but his legacy to modern Scottish literature is one of those essential things. He was thirty-seven years old when he visited and was to die only eight years later, aged forty-five. His residence produced one frequently anthologised and thoroughly memorable poem, "Inversnaid", the work of a fine literary technician and a serious moralist who cared about what's truly valuable and demands lasting respect.

Hopkins, a Jesuit priest, arrived in Scotland on 10 August 1881, sent to the parish of St Joseph's, Glasgow, for a fortnight or so, he thought. Glasgow came as a relief after his last posting to Liverpool, which he found deeply depressing: "Liverpool is of all places the most museless. It is indeed a most unhappy and miserable spot." He was utterly dispirited because of the overwhelming poverty and squalor, the ubiquitous condition of mass industrialisation.

Glasgow was also, for Hopkins, "a wretched place" but "I get on better here..." The streets and buildings were "fine" and the people "lively". He was working mainly among the poor, he reported: warm-hearted, often drunk. He performed twenty-eight baptisms in his two months there.

He had been promised two days in the Highlands but, he said, he "never had more than a glimpse of their skirts". On 28 September, he visited Inversnaid, on the eastern shore at the north of Loch Lomond, an isolated place at the end of a long road that ends at a hotel which had been catering for tourists since Walter Scott made the Trossachs a major attraction with "The Lady of the Lake" in 1810.

Hopkins was more likely to have been curious because of Wordsworth's poem, "To a Highland Girl / (At Inversnayde, upon Loch Lomond)", written during his Highland tour of 1803, which describes the place closely: "Those trees, a veil just half withdrawn; / This fall of water that doth make / A murmur near the silent lake". Yet Wordsworth's poem as a whole is more concerned to sing the praises of the

young woman's natural beauty and the poet's feelings of rapture at having encountered her, than with the wilderness beyond the domestic setting that frames her in his vision. Its companion-pieces, "Stepping Westward" and "The Solitary Reaper", move Wordsworth into deeper territory, and the last-named, with its famous central question, "Will no one tell me what she sings?" is one of the most moving poems about the gulf between the observing, listening poet and what he hears and sees, the life of the woman and the world to which he is a witness.

Wordsworth is securely of the Romantic era, but Hopkins's poems were not published until 1918. To many readers, he was considered in the context of Modernism, rather than that of late Victorian innovation. For F.R. Leavis, in his influential critical study of 1932, *New Bearings in English Poetry*, Hopkins could be discussed most fully in the company of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

In Scotland, from the 1920s through to the beginning of the twenty-first century, four poets were peculiarly sensitive to Hopkins's greatness and responded to his work and vision in four very different ways: Hugh MacDiarmid, George Mackay Brown, Edwin Morgan and Margaret Tait. We'll look at Hopkins in relation to Morgan and Tait next week. But start with MacDiarmid and GMB.

Hugh MacDiarmid (C.M. Grieve, 1892-1978) was aware of Hopkins's poetry as soon as it appeared and in his first book, *Annals of the Five Senses* (1923), he was quoting from "God's Grandeur" and "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*". Very quickly, MacDiarmid identified Hopkins's quality and made use of him, both as an influence in his own poetry and praising him as a poet others might learn from. In Hopkins, MacDiarmid found religious intensity, human compassion, and a sense of the inhuman wilderness offering a corrective value to society's worst self-diminishment in the industrial cities. But he also found a radical challenge to 19th-century conventions of versification and poetic form, especially if you were used to Tennyson and the familiar beat of the late Victorian metronome.

MacDiarmid's earliest poems are in English. When he began writing in the language we call Scots, the verbal tone, metrical regularity and general poetic idiom leapt a long way from Hopkins, yet certain affinities of vision remain clear. For example, "The Innumerable Christ" starts with a Hopkins-like question that links the limitlessness of space with an unorthodox religious quest for spiritual destiny: "Wha

kens on whatna Bethlehems / Earth twinkles like a star the night, / An' whatna shepherds lift their heids / In its unearthly licht?" And when the earth is cold as the moon, and all humanity long since dead, out there in illimitable space, "On countless stars the babe maun cry / An' the crucified maun bleed."

In his critical prose, MacDiarmid was keen to herald Hopkins, both as a poet whose practice was so characteristically brilliant technically as to connect him to the Modernist movement, and also as a poet all the more impressive for having perceived the need for such innovation as early as he did, thirty or forty years before Pound, Eliot and the Modernists were in full flight. He celebrates Hopkins's "amazing technical inventiveness and verbal power" and "vivid eloquence". In a 1932 essay he praises "Inversnaid" for its "exact notation" of the particularity of the specific part of Scotland it describes, its "appropriate spirit".

In 1931, MacDiarmid devoted an essay to Hopkins in *The Scottish Educational Journal* (a periodical addressed primarily to school teachers). Here, he describes him as "a true poet of a very rare and valuable kind – a metrical and verbal experimenter of unquestionable genius" who "anticipated the experiments of our contemporary 'ultra-moderns'". The passages he quotes highlight those qualities of Hopkins with which he felt most affinity, including "Pied Beauty" in its entirety and extracts such as this, from "Epithalamion": "We are leaf-whelmed somewhere with the hood / Of some branchy bunchy bushybowered wood" where a "Marbled river, boisterously beautiful, between / Roots and rocks is danced and dandled, all in froth and / water-blowballs". That passage surely suggests MacDiarmid's astonishing poem "Tarras", which describes a stretch of boggy moorland in the Scottish borders as if it were a female body, and the poet determined to become intimately part of it: "Ah, woman-fondlin'! What is that to this? / Saft hair to birssy heather, warm kiss / To cauld black waters' suction. / Nae ardent breists' erection / But the stark hills'!"

"Water Music" begins by rejecting the music of James Joyce's Dublin Liffey and welcoming the sounds of his own three rivers running together in the small town where he was born, Langholm, in the Borders: "Wheesht, wheesht, Joyce, and let me hear / Nae Anna Livvy's lilt, / But Wauchope, Esk and Ewes again, / Each wi' its ain rhythms till't."

It's worth putting that alongside another MacDiarmid poem in praise of the Esk, but written in English, just to show Hopkins's influence at work in a more visible way. This is the opening of "The Point of Honour (On watching the Esk again)": "I would that once more I could blend her / With my own self as I did then / Vivid and impulsive in crystalline splendour / Cold and seething champagne." He describes the river as "Cut water. Perfection of craft concealed. / In effects of pure improvisation. / Delights of dazzle and dare revealed / In instant inscapes of fresh variation." The poem ends with the river rushing forward beyond vision, and the poet, with the wagtail and robin, left behind:

So life leaves us. Already gleam

In the eyes of the young, the flicker, the change,

The free enthusiasm that carries the stream

Suddenly out of my range.

George Mackay Brown (1921-1996) lived almost all his life in Stromness, on the main island of Orkney. He spent some years in Edinburgh, graduating from the university in 1960, then enrolling at Newbattle College, where his mentor was another Orcadian, the poet Edwin Muir. Muir encouraged him to study Hopkins for a post-graduate degree, though Muir later said he didn't think Brown would ever have become a professional academic.

Brown's absorption and deployment of what he learned from Hopkins can be seen especially in his early poems, in a craftsman-like practice in his writing which is evident too in his many books of short stories and novels and in his ground-faith of religion: he converted to Catholicism in 1961. His conviction in the sacred, the delivery of value through daily, seasonal, yearly and longer cycles, sustained him through a life of personal conservatism. He was in many respects the opposite of MacDiarmid. MacDiarmid proclaimed his desire to always be where extremes meet and said of himself that he was a violent man who would fight when attacked. He was always in the cultural and political fray of modern Scotland, pushing for Scottish independence and a socialist republic, while advocating the most avant-garde of literary ideas. Brown usually kept out of such debate, was amiable and gentle, almost always to be found through his working adult life at home in Orkney, writing through

the mornings, taking an afternoon walk, visiting friends and being visited, enjoying a beer in the evenings. He wrote a regular column for the weekly local newspaper, *The Orcadian*, which suggests his commitment to his local community, who generally held him in high regard and with great affection.

His writing reaches back into previous generations, right back to figures from the medieval saga literature, especially St Magnus, who appears in a number of his poems and his finest novel. He learned a great deal from Hopkins. The affinities are there in sharpness of imagery, sacral attitudes to daily life, and acknowledgement of the facts of violence and sacrifice.

His earliest poems show the influence most clearly. For example, in “The Storm”: “The sea – organ and harps – wailed miserere; / Swung me in fluent valleys, poised / On icy yielding peaks / Hissing spume, until / Rousay before me, the stout mast / Snapped” and with an “evil joy the storm / Seized us! Plunged and spun!”

In the poem for his father, “Hamnavoe”, Brown describes the small fishing town in a brilliant constellation of pictures: the morning is “barbarous with gulls”; in the pub, beards are “spumy with porter”; boats drive “furrows homeward, like ploughmen”; and houses go blind with curtains drawn “for a / Grief by the shrouded nets”. This was the world his father knew: “And because, under equality’s sun, / All things wear now to a common soiling, / In the fire of images / Gladly I put my hand / To save that day for him.”

In “The Poet”, we are invited to contemplate the “cold stare” that returns “to its true task, the interrogation of silence.” Yet reading Brown’s *Collected Poems* is to be invited into a well-populated universe, full of saints and sinners, drinkers, farmers, sailors, fishermen, wanderers, stay-at-homes, wives and husbands, grandparents and children, men in the pubs, ladies taking tea. It is a profoundly conservative world, yet it’s a world in which the absolutes of modernity – uranium mining that could destroy agriculture and fishing grounds, a nuclear industry threatening Armageddon – are as final in their implications as the biological facts of birth, reproduction and death are inescapable in their eternal practice.

Mackay Brown’s poems don’t always employ the vertiginous speed and flashing velocities of Hopkins but they are curious about people in a way Hopkins’s

poems are not. The attractions, then, are much more to do with the craft of verse, the reassurances of ritual and observation, qualities of neighbourliness and the idea of life's ineffable magnificence. His most approachable book is *An Orkney Tapestry* (1969), a collection of poems, essays, short stories and short play-sketches that are equally balanced between a commitment to their own art and a loyalty to the people of the islands he describes. In that sense, Brown is a writer of place and community in a way Hopkins was not. But the recognition of the world's wildness and the observant practice of neighbourliness, are there in both their visions of how the world is, and what it might be bettered by.

**[OFFSET:]**

For Hopkins, Inversnaid was gloomy: "The day was dark and partly hid the lake, yet it did not altogether disfigure it but gave a pensive or solemn beauty which left a deep impression on me." He approached by boat, a small tourist steamer, saw the waterfall of Arklet burn from the deck and, landing at the pier, climbed up the edge of the fall and walked along the path inland for a while, returning by the same route, beside the stream flowing down to the loch. The poem uses Scots words ("brae", "burn") and evokes sounds that seem to require a Scots inflection (the alliterative "r") as well as his own distinctive vocabulary ("coop" and "comb"). Rhythmically, the onomatopoeic effect is joyful, a liberation into a wet, wild, undomesticated and non-urban nature, where living bodily in a physical world is exhilarating and salutary. Two-and-a-half years before this, in Oxford, Hopkins had begun to write what he described as "something, if I cd. only seize it, on the decline of wild nature, beginning somehow like this: 'O where is it, the wilderness, / The wildness of the wilderness? / Where is it, the wilderness?'" The poem gives us the answer.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Inversnaid

This darksome burn, horseback brown,

His rollrock highroad roaring down,  
In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam  
Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

A windpuff-bonnet of fawn-froth  
Turns and twindles over the broth  
Of a pool so pitchblack, fell-frowning,  
It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning.

Degged with dew, dappled with dew  
Are the groins of the braes that the brook treads through,  
Wiry heathpacks, fitches of fern,  
And the beadbonny ash that sits over the burn.

What would the world be, once bereft  
Of wet and of wilderness? Let them be left,  
O let them be left, wildness and wet;  
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.