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Modernity and War: Visions beyond Violence

Alan Riach (Friday 21 October 2016)

James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound dedicated themselves to aesthetic priorities that would cleave away what Pound called the “botched civilisation” of Victorian sentimentalism, outworn hierarchies of perspective and the repetitive, soporific rhythms of the iambic pentameter. In Pound’s phrase, the idea was to “Make it new!” But MacDiarmid, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Sorley MacLean and others, in the 1920s, 30s and early 40s, were dedicated not only to making it new but also to recovering and recuperating a vast neglected history of literary practice and lived experience from Scotland’s past, especially in the “subject” languages, Scots and Gaelic. For them, to make it new was to reclaim and reinvent the ancient. This is why the term “Scottish Renaissance” is so appropriate: it was a regeneration, or as Edwin Morgan puts it, a “Retrieving and Renewing”.

If MacDiarmid made the decisive break with a certain kind of familiar sentimentalism in his poems and essays of the 1920s, there are precedents for the unsentimental and hard-headed proto-Modernist attitudes in earlier work from the 19th century. No-one is more the modern cultural relativist than Robert Louis Stevenson on his international travels; the voice of the industrial worker is given by John Davidson, who also supplies a Nietzschean analysis of the world in his Testaments; in Violet Jacob and Marion Angus we hear vernacular Scots voices articulating the experiences of women as the modern world of international trade and global warfare imposes itself upon them. Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s Modernist trilogy of novels ends in the city, like Joyce and Dos Passos, leaving the farm for the small town before entering the modern industrial world. The books are marching from one world war towards another. Fascism is the ethos they oppose.

If this is a main theme implicit in modern Scottish literature, how does it sound when it becomes explicit, when writers address directly the most unmistakable fact of modernity: that it is a period of unprecedented violence, rising fascism and war?

With the approach of Armistice Day on November 11, we might take the memorialisation of the fallen out of the hands of the bishops, generals, politicians and royals, and ask: how have Scottish writers represented the experience of war?

Across its history, Scottish literature has dealt with the subject, from the gory accounts of the Wars of Independence in the epics of Wallace and Bruce, to 20th-century novels, poems and songs about modern war, from Eric Linklater's classic novel *Private Angelo* (1946) to Edwin Morgan's provocative poem "Twin Towers" (from *A Book of Lives*, 2007): "The shock-waves were a tocsin for the overweening imperium."

Among the best critical explorations of the questions raised here are to be found in Angus Calder's book of critical essays and reviews, *Disasters and Heroes: On War, Memory and Representation* (2004), Trevor Royle's anthology, *In Flanders Field: Scottish Poetry and Prose of the First World War* (1991) and his historical studies *The Flowers of the Forest: Scotland and the First World War* (2007) and *A Time of Tyrants: Scotland and the Second World War* (2012). At least two poetry anthologies, Lizzie MacGregor's *Beneath Troubled Skies: Poems of Scotland at War 1914-1918* and David Goldie and Roderick Watson's *From the Line: Scottish War Poetry 1914-1945* (both 2014), are also required reading.

There were many Scottish poets in both wars, private soldiers, officers, non-combatants, conscientious objectors. Marion Angus and Violet Jacob are only two of the women poets whose work represents the experiences of those who remained at home.

The English poets of World War I, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, are very well known and the greatest Modernist poem of the trenches is by the Welshman David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (1937). Less widely read but equally remarkable were the Scottish poets of the First World War. Like their English contemporaries, they were coming to terms with a new reality. John Buchan might be caricatured as an imperialist from his popular fiction but in "On Leave" he demonstrates an understanding and sympathy with the soldier returning to a world irrevocably altered: "I wasna the man I had been, – / Juist a gangrel dozin' in fits; – / The pin had faun oot o' the warld, / And I doddered amang the bits." With "The stink o' the gas in my nose, / The colour o' bluid in my ee," as the sun goes down in the West, the soldier attempts to make his peace with God. The Scots language, the use of the persona, the pathos inherent in the conventional verse form, all catch a moment of utter and fearful historical change.

WD Cocker (1882-1970), a journalist with the *Daily Record* who served with the Highland Light Infantry, was taken prisoner in 1917 and sent to work in a factory manufacturing barbed wire. His *Sonnets in Captivity*, written in English, keep a detached and

formally distanced perspective: “Endurance! That’s the outstanding wonder! / What finely tempered steel we mortals are!” In “The Call”, he writes:

They did not put off humanity when they put on a uniform.

They could weep, too.

They also had bad news in letters, and cried at night in their dug-out or billet – those devoted lads.

They were not soldiers; they were men,

The best God ever created on this war-scarred earth.

Not as the world calls soldiers.

Military pomp, pride, pageantry and gorgeousness of arms –

It moved them not...

The limpidity of the verse, the tight diction and the sharp line-breaks register the restraint of emotion and effective understatement.

Poets with immediate experience of the war included Roderick Watson Kerr (1893-1960), who, when his poems were first published, was immediately compared with Siegfried Sassoon. “From the Line” begins: “Have you seen men coming from the Line, / Tottering, shuddering, as if bad wine / Had drugged their very souls...” And Joseph Lee (1875-1949), a Dundee man who became editor of the People’s Journal, enlisted with the Black Watch and saw battle in France, was writing and drawing pictures from the trenches before he was taken prisoner. “The Green Grass” is blatant and bitter: “The grass grows green on the long, long tracks / That I shall never tread – / Why are we dead?”

The family of Ewart Alan MacKintosh (1893-1917) came from Alness in Easter Ross, but he was born in Brighton, educated in London and Oxford, learned Gaelic and was awarded the Military Cross at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Invalided home, he was offered a promotion, teaching cadets at Cambridge, but opted for further service and was killed in 1917. His earliest poems read like heroic glorifications of war but quickly he recognised the horror and waste he was witnessing, and began writing anguished parodies and Brechtian deflations. “Departure of the 4th Camerons” begins: “The pipes in the street were playing bravely / The marching lads went by...” but in “Recruiting” he writes: “Go and

help to swell the names / In the casualty lists. / Help to make a column's stuff / For the blasted journalists.”

One of the most unforgettable poems of death in battle was “When you see millions of the mouthless dead” by Charles Hamilton Sorley (1895-1915) who himself was killed in the Battle of Loos. Foreshadowing Hamish Henderson, Sorley’s poem “To Germany” begins with the recognition that all soldiers share a common experience: “You are blind like us.” Yet it offers some hope that in peace, such commonalities might be replaced by the virtues of understanding sympathetically the differences that constitute cultural diversity: “When it is peace, then we may view again / With new-won eyes each other’s truer form / And wonder.” The thread that runs from the Scottish poets of the First World War on into what followed renews commitment to the realisation of hope in a nation of unrealised possibility.

Exactly this message is the meaning of the words at the end of Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s *Sunset Song*: “They died for a world that is past, these men, but they did not die for this that we seem to inherit.” Or, what we do now, if it’s the right thing, is the only real way to honour them, because whether we like it or not, we are history: we will become it, but we can make it too. Over to you, reader.

In the Second World War, Hamish Henderson wrote not only the beautifully sustained sequence *Elegies for the Dead in Cyreneica* (1948) but also a number of ballads and songs that quickly passed into anonymous familiarity and were sung by soldiers on innumerable occasions without reference to their author. Corey Gibson’s book, *The Voice of the People: Hamish Henderson and Scottish Cultural Politics* (2015), brings these two aspects together in a comprehensive overview of his achievement. Major poets who came to prominence after the war remained connected by their experience of that war, often in North Africa: Sorley MacLean, Edwin Morgan, Robert Garioch, George Campbell Hay, GS Fraser. Not least among this company is Douglas Young, international scholar, translator, SNP Party Chairman in the 1940s, whose opposition to fascism combined with a stand against UK conscription of Scots led to two jail sentences, and whose *Naething Dauntit: Collected Poems*, edited by Emma Dymock, has just been published. His work demands review.

Of course, the question of war has been addressed in different genres. Isobel Murray’s *Scottish Novels of the Second World War* (2011) is essential reading. Plays such as Peter Arnott’s *White Rose* (1985), about the only woman Russian fighter-pilot at the siege of Stalingrad, Gregory Burke’s *Black Watch* (2006), or Gerda Stevenson’s *Federer versus*

Murray (2012), explore issues of camaraderie, heroism, self-sacrifice, solidarity and the idea of the family, asking the essential questions: What is at stake? What is it worth? What are we fighting for?

Throughout the Cold War, and since the 1990s, the rise of the era of Information Technology and “globalisation” or “cosmopolitanism” or “corporatisation”, the gulf between rich and poor throughout the world has increased along with the commodification and desensitisation of the world. The work of artists and writers is to oppose that. It seems like a simple proposition but it’s the greatest struggle there is, and the most subtle. This is the war we’re all engaged in right now, knowingly or otherwise. Many literary works explore the complexities of loyalty and betrayal in this context, including major novels by Allan Massie and Stuart Hood. A simple, sterner judgement comes from Hugh MacDiarmid, in this powerful summary of the military ethos in his poem on the Spanish Civil War, *The Battle Continues* (1957) and related work, such as “England’s Double Knavery”:

All soldiers are fools
That’s why they kill each other.
The deterioration of life under the regime
Of the soldier is a commonplace; physical power
Is a rough substitute for patience and intelligence
And co-operative effort in the governance of man;
Used as a normal accompaniment of action
Instead of a last resort it is a sign
Of extreme social weakness. Killing
Is the ultimate simplification of life.

This regime, which MacDiarmid characterizes as the “animus of war”, is intended “to enforce uniformity”: “To extirpate whatever the soldier / Can neither understand nor utilise”.

He knew what he was talking about. He had had enough experience to talk about it authoritatively. During the First World War, he served in the Royal Army Medical Corps in the British Army, in Salonika, in Greece, and witnessed death closely. His fury at the rise of fascism leading to the Spanish Civil War in 1936 and the escalation of Nazism in Germany, was expressed in poetry of indignation and exhaustion. He had seen so many young men killed before that seeing another generation trooped out for the Second World War appalled him. And he knew how abhorrent it was – is – to begin to become indifferent to the increasing commonness of bad beliefs, to care less and less about the murderousness they lead to, and he saw it happening all around him. The focus of his anger was the uniformity enforced by militarism, fascism and imperialism, and this energised his creativity, his vision for a future in which the priorities of culture might be actively affirmed. The same could be said of the next generation of poets: Henderson, MacLean, and many others, a company of major Scottish writers recording the wars of the modern world with a vision of what might best come after them. That vision is needed more than ever today.

In the “Author’s Note” to his autobiography *Lucky Poet* (1942), MacDiarmid quoted “a forgotten poet of ancient Egypt” who wrote: “I have seen violence, I have seen violence – / Give thy heart after letters...”

[Off-set in box:]

“When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead”

Charles Hamilton Sorley

When you see millions of the mouthless dead

Across your dreams in pale battalions go,

Say not soft things as other men have said,

That you’ll remember. For you need not so.

Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know

It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?

Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.

Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.

Say only this. "They are dead." Then add thereto,

"Yet many a better one has died before."

Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you

Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,

It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.

Great death has made all his for evermore.

[NEXT WEEK: John Purser returns with a series of three essays on Scottish composers, Cecil Coles, William Wallace and Erik Chisholm, each of whom responded to war distinctively in their music. How much wiser would it be, instead of placing red flowers on cold stones, to commemorate the dead and what they died for with new performances and recordings of the work of such composers?]