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Scottish Poets on Film and Film Poetry

Alan Riach

On March 15, I presented an event for the Aye Write! literary festival, “Scottish Poetry Legends on Film” at Glasgow’s Kelvin Hall, where the National Library of Scotland have their Moving Image Archive. The idea was to introduce a few of my favourite poets on film and say a few things about poetry and film, and film as poetry. The complete films are available for viewing at the NLS at Kelvin Hall: a great resource.

We began with a 1996 film directed by Elly Taylor with the great American writer and activist Maya Angelou talking about Robert Burns. The potent opening image was of a young black woman approaching across a desert landscape, reading a book, an edition of Burns’s poems. The iconography is familiar, as if we were watching a spaghetti western but with this young woman instead of Clint Eastwood and a book of Burns’s poems instead of a Colt 45. Maya Angelou’s marvellously direct, lucid, passionate, and perennially relevant commentary places Burns not only in our own Scottish national popular provenance but also in the international context of poets working for liberation, in one way or another. There are two key elements: a resilient sense of humour and a capacity for song, for music-making. And there is, as there always is, severe and cruel opposition.

Maya Angelou was explicit, overt and emphatic about Burns, Scotland, her own history and the aspiration towards dignity and independence. In Scotland today the impact of the meaning couldn’t be stronger. But the familiarity of Burns and the cliché that might attach to the argument that social justice shall one day prevail, might debilitate the message and make it seem tired. It might bore people: here we go again with the “Scots Wha Ha’evers”. But what Elly Taylor’s film and Maya Angelou, speaking as a writer, a poet, and as a human being in a very specific history, deliver to the present, to us now watching, is exemplary. This is what she says:

“My name is Maya Angelou. I grew up in dirt roads like this in a southern state in the United States of America. I was a mute. I was poor and black and female and the only key I had which would open the door to the world for me was a book. I read everything. I fell in love with poetry and amazingly, in a small village, a hamlet, in Arkansas, I met Robert Burns.

“It was for Wallace, for the movement, and the struggle for freedom, that Robert Burns wrote ‘Scots Wha Ha’e’. There’s a feeling, there’s a thrill, around this place, there’s a thrill in any place in the world, any geographical location where men and women struggled, sometimes

won, sometimes lost, the battle for freedom. Freedom is such an impulse in the human spirit that it is understandable from Birmingham, Alabama, to Birmingham, Britain, from Dumfries in Scotland to Dunbar in Ohio.

“I worked with Martin Luther King as his northern representative and was a friend and sister to Malcolm X. The African-American struggle for freedom reminds me, all the time, of the struggle for freedom all over the world. It was because of my identification with Robert Burns, with Wallace, with the people of Scotland, for their dignity, for their independence, their humanity, that I can see how we sing, ‘We shall overcome...’”

The clip culminated with a choir of black women singing “We Shall Overcome”. Again, this might have seemed facile self-assurance, but the film (as only films can do) presented, over and alongside the song and the choir, photographs of black people subjected to brutality, slavery, lynching. Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” was an unheard presence behind what was seen and heard.

That film appeared in 1996. And, in 1997, there was a significant referendum in Scotland.

We went back another decade to 1982, for the next two clips. These might be described as “witnessed interviews” or “writers talking”. First we had Liz Lochhead in a film directed by Tina Wakerell. We saw her talking to a group of schoolchildren, and reading her own poetry at the Tron Theatre alongside Siobhan Redmond. So, she’s seen first in a fairly formal, relaxed but self-conscious, teacherly context, then in a theatrical context of performance, and then we also see her at home, surrounded by piles of paper and notes in the domestic context.

Maya Angelou drew attention to Burns and song, song as one of the most important survival strategies anyone could have. Liz Lochhead in this film draws attention to the musical component in her methods of composition. In her own words, “The ‘donnée’ is just a line, a line of actual poetry that just comes into your head for free, that’s your free gift that starts you off that comes into your head almost as a tune. As a poem gets nearer, the rhythm gets stronger and that’s what it is. It’s about rhythm. And the rhythms I use are not metre. You know, by ‘metre’ what would be meant would be ‘tum-ti-tum’ – you know? Metre is rhythm made regular, done to a pattern. Now sometimes one uses that in a poem but not all that often. Modern poetry is more often about trusting rhythm and learning to use it. It’s listening while you’re writing and getting it down, just as exactly as you can.”

Famously, in that generation of great poets who began publishing seriously in the 1950s, there was a predominance of men, which then overlapped with the predominance of women in the generation of great poets coming from the 1970s on. And this has something to

do with the ways in which the great themes – the big ideas – questions of slavery and freedom, for example – have application in the domestic, as much as the social and political spheres. But that doesn't mean a rejection of great poets of the past, it arises from them. They all have their own music. So we moved next to one of the great poets of that older, overly masculine generation, someone Liz Lochhead fully and gratefully acknowledged with great affection and respect: Norman MacCaig.

In this film, MacCaig is reading his poems at a gathering of a group called "The Heretics" (recently reunited) in the informal setting of a bar. We also see him being interviewed directly by a young Alistair Moffat. This is 1982. He's referring to the SDP, the Social Democratic Party, as was then, and to a Scotland where the SNP were far from where they are now. There was no Scottish Parliament and, to many of us in 1982, there seemed no possibility at all that independence was a real prospect.

MacCaig describes the central subject of his poems as the nature of people: "Unless they're about people, they're parlour games, so people first. But what's always fascinated me and plenty of other people is what's real. That tree out there is a very different tree to me as it is to every single other person. What's real?" Crucial, then, are "the reality of objects and people, which are always modified by your own experience and of course by your own imagination." Then he qualifies this: "As a matter of fact, I have no imagination at all. That's why I'm such a phlegmatic, happy, philosophical idiot!" Asked whether, therefore, he'd describe himself as a reporter, he replies sharply, "Yes."

Asked about contemporary Scottish poetry, he comments, "You take up a book or a magazine in England with poems by about twelve people, you could switch the names round, but the best half dozen up here are completely and absolutely different." Why? "Because we are a fissiparous and carnivorous people. Partly. And partly because one of them's in Orkney, one of them's in Oban, one of them's in Aberdeen... And they won't join anything." But then again he qualifies this quickly: "All the poets in Scotland are nationalists."

"Why do you think that is?" he's asked.

"Because they despise politics. And what on earth has Scottish nationalism to do with politics?" As for his own politics, he says, "I vote for the Scottish nationalists. I've never voted for anybody else. With the sure conviction that they wouldn't get in, of course. But I wanted a certain number of Scottish nationalists down yonder, just to be a kind of horsefly on the black backside of Westminster."

Then he defined the relation between poetry and politics like this: "When politicians are speaking, they use words purely for their emotional reactions, penny-in-the-slot reactions.

Most people have unexamined ideas and unexamined emotions, even, so when a fellow says ‘SDP’, clap-clap-handies if you’re that sort of fool, or boo-boo-boo if you’re that sort of fool. They don’t know what SDP stands for, what these politicians believe. You know why? Neither do the politicians. They only use words emotively. Unexamined ideas and unexamined emotions are the cause of most of the trouble in the world. And poetry makes you regard words in both these aspects and you don’t get these idiotic penny-in-the-slot responses.”

Asked, finally, who are the main people in society, other than politicians, for evincing these “penny-in-the-slot” responses, MacCaig was clipped and precise: “Oh, the religious chaps. Of whatever kind.”

This was a film made by Scottish Television, with no director credited. Pause on that. These are films that could so easily be broadcast on terrestrial TV today. And just as importantly, there’s no shortage of good poets, good scholars, good artists and archivists, who might be filmed and broadcast presenting their work, and the library resources. It would be welcome relief from the litany of deadbeat “celebrity” autocue readers whose authority is exaggerated beyond belief. There’s so much we can learn from these poets, these film-makers, these films. Compiling these clips with Sheena MacDougall and Ruth Gilbert of the NLS, we were only selecting a handful of examples. There’s a vast treasure store in the NLS archive.

The final film we looked at was different again – not an extract, but a film, complete in itself, by the Orcadian film-maker and writer Margaret Tait in 1964, a portrait of another man of an even older generation, and one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, Hugh MacDiarmid. But this is Tait’s work. She was a writer of distinction, both as a poet in film and more conventionally in words, in stories and poems that MacDiarmid himself printed in his magazine, *The Voice of Scotland*. Tait’s selection of images, angles, the words and music on the soundtrack, and her editing of the sequences has clearly been meticulous. Although the film seems almost arbitrary, a home-movie rough cut, it’s both dense with images and fluid, fluent, quickly moving, both sharp and mesmerising. It lasts just under 10 minutes and can be found easily, free-to-view, online. MacDiarmid behaves with characteristic eccentricity. We see him both alone and in company, with his wife Valda and friends in an Edinburgh pub. Valda herself is seen close-up. In her face and eyes, something of her own self-determination comes through.

The film itself is a poem with a musical structure. There is literally music in it, by FG Scott, but there is also a beginning and ending provided by the poem, “You Know Not Who I Am” in a translation MacDiarmid made into Scots from the German poet Stefan George. The film begins with the first part of the poem and it ends with the concluding lines. But its content engages different aspects of early 1960s Scotland, suggesting MacDiarmid’s singular role. It

opens with forthright piano notes and chords, both bold and curious, then a Scots voice singing, then as MacDiarmid turns on a radio, and as he's seen writing, we also hear the English voice of the BBC giving us "official" or "approved" information in received pronunciation utterly distinct from the Scots of the poetry we've just heard. The books in MacDiarmid's cottage suggest a different world of information. The camera takes us along the clocks on the mantelpiece, to the fire in the hearth, the pot plants growing in their earth: all images of time passing, slow growth, burning resolution, all quietly noted in passing, nothing overtly symbolic. Later we see MacDiarmid outside, on the edge of a pavement, then stepping up and walking along a wall, then down some stone steps to the edge of the sea, by rippling waves, dark encroaching waters, and finally throwing stones, with a glimmer of laughter, a ripple of his shoulders, a cheeky glance suggesting mischief, disguising an accomplishment unspoken. Then we return to the cottage. The door opens. He goes in. The door closes. The light goes on through the window.

We are left to contemplate what has not been seen, the invitation of the invisible, as well as the attractions of the visible. What was inside that multitude of books? What was he writing? What has this film, these films, each in their different ways, allowed us see, and helped us to imagine?