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Hugh MacDiarmid: Part One: The Revolutionary

In the first of two articles, Alan Riach reconsiders the work, value and legacy of the writer some have described as the most important single figure in 20th-century Scotland.

Immediately after the First World War, Hugh MacDiarmid (C.M. Grieve, 1892-1978) edited a series of three anthologies called *Northern Numbers*, placing the young war poets alongside older, more conservative, establishment writers. Evocations of a Romantic, pastoral Scotland were exposed as outdated sentimental fantasies when read beside poems that evoked the horrors of war and the degradations of post-war industrial Scotland. At the same time, women were writing from the home front of their own experience of broken promises and loss. MacDiarmid also published work by Marion Angus and Violet Jacob in these anthologies, and the third book in the series was made up of poems by ten men and ten women: an equal representation.

The revolutionary breakthrough into modernity came in 1922, with a handful of MacDiarmid's short poems. He had written poems in English but when he began writing in dense, difficult Scots he created work of intense, compact power, little sticks of gelignite that exploded all expectations. In form, they drew on the ballad tradition but injected it with philosophical questions, egocentric assertion, a sense of cosmic mystery and potent sexuality, everywhere drawing on Freud, Marx and Nietzsche as much as on the Scottish tradition.

When MacDiarmid began writing, it was precisely this sense of a new dispensation, an urgent need to write Scotland into the new century, that motivated him and many of his contemporaries – in music, painting, sculpture and literary and cultural criticism. This was the period MacDiarmid named “The Scottish Literary Renaissance”. Social and political vision informed literary production in the works of novelists such as Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Neil Gunn, Naomi Mitchison, Catherine Carswell, Willa Muir and Nan Shepherd; poets such as William Soutar, Edwin Muir; playwrights such as James Bridie, Ewan MacColl, Joe Corrie, Ena Lamont Stewart. In the same era, there was a flourishing of work by composers F.G. Scott and Erik Chisholm, artists William McCance, William Crozier, William Johnstone, Edward Baird, sculptors William Lamb and Pittendrigh MacGillivray. All the writers addressed political issues directly and their poetry, fiction and drama had to find new

forms in which to develop their ideas of what Scotland – and Scottish literature – might be. We will return to them in more detail later, but it is important to register the surge of creative energy rising through the 1920s and 1930s.

That imaginative revolution involved both reawakened national purpose and a commitment to egalitarian socialism. The word Renaissance in this context signifies a regeneration of cultural and political purpose. It might be considered alongside other contexts which were also political and artistic: the Harlem Renaissance, roughly contemporary, asserting and demonstrating the cultural authority of black writers, artists, musicians, photographers, poets, and scholars, in New York, in a world of white political and cultural predominance; or the Bengal Renaissance, which began in the 19th and continued well into the 20th centuries, an anti-British imperialist political and cultural rejuvenation of Indian self-determination. In every instance, as with the 16th-century Italian Renaissance, the defining characteristic of the movement was a rediscovery and reapplication of the past, and a new sense of purpose for the future.

Try to imagine MacDiarmid's short lyrics published in the early 1920s hitting your consciousness as if for the first time.

“The Bonnie Broukit Bairn”: The human earth moves in the night sky, a small globe among the spectacle of the inhuman planets and stars in their orbits around it and in a sudden shift of understanding, the images turn into those of a poor child standing outside in tears, looking in through a window at a group of supercilious, chattering yah-yahs at an evening's swanky party. The parade of the excessive wealth and vacuous blether of the young man in the red suit, the young woman in green silk and the rich old widow with her feather boa, is worthless before the human value of the neglected child.

“Empty Vessel”: A young woman who has lost her baby sings of her grief and almost inexpressible sorrow as the sunlight bends over her and the winds curve out across the earth's surface: again, humanity is central in the elemental universe.

“Ex Vermibus”: A mother bird feeds its chicks worms, telling them that the nourishment they will get by eating these slimy creatures of earth, will give them the power to fly from dawn till dusk, and light up the sky with their songs. The poem is the worm. The reader will sing her or his own song and set the sky on fire.

“The Sauchs in the Reuch Heuch Hauch” (was there ever a more delightfully challenging rebarbative poem-title?): A group of willow trees grow twisted and mis-shaped by prevailing winds. They seem comic distortions and stand in wayward, oblique, diagonal shapes, at the opposite end of the spectrum from the magnificent, tall, strong oak trees of the great English artist John Constable. They are ugly, perhaps, yet beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and these thrawn, twisted things are permanent living symbols of stubborn resistance to all authority, Rome, England, God or even the sun itself.

MacDiarmid’s short lyrics in Scots – these are brief summaries of four of them published in his first two books, *Sangschaw* (1925) and *Penny Wheep* (1926) and then the book-length bagatelle or “gallimaufry” of lyrics, philosophical meditations, comic, satiric, digressive, festive, verse-explorations of a Scottish national male psychology, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), were explosions in the cultural scene. Fully adult concerns of sexuality, moral choice, war and the priorities of peace and domesticity, the sometimes bitter business of what men and women are, the riotous or anarchic energy of nerves in astounding powers of delight, run through all these poems vitally. Their language is as intensely alive as anything in English or Scottish literature since the late 16th or early 17th centuries. These are lines 2108-2116 of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*:

– *Darkness comes closer to us than the light,*
And is oor natural element. We peer oot frae’t
Like cats’ een bleezin’ in a goustrous nicht
(Whaur there is nocht to find but stars
That look like ither cats’ een),
Like cats’ een, and there is nocht to find
Savin’ we turn them in upon oorsels;
Cats canna.

Almost every one of MacDiarmid's best poems is structured through an enactment of dramatic tension, beginning with a moment of piercing personal isolation, revealing human vulnerability, loss, grief, risk taken, cost demanded, price paid, followed by a greater vision of what this signifies in the global or cosmic totality, the worth of such risk, its consequence of tragedy or gain, its delivery of fulfilment of potential or devastation of possibility. Consider a selection of poems and see how this structure applies. In "The Eemis Stane", the midnight earth in the cosmos is rich with human stories and truths that cannot be read from a distance; they are like words on a gravestone, covered by moss, lichen and snowdrifts of time and false rumour. A similar structure pertains in "The Watergaw", threading three points in time: the moment of the poet's father's death, the moment of seeing a broken shaft of rainbow in the stormy sky, and the moment of writing (and reading) the poem itself. The structure recurs in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* repeatedly, in *To Circumjack Cencrastus* and throughout his career.

Lenin is crucial for MacDiarmid in the 1930s, as he delivers the moment of liberation that at the same time opens and closes possibility. MacDiarmid demands that we think about what the moment might lead to, if it succeeds, which is all the more difficult now, a century later, knowing how badly it failed. "The Dead Leibknecht" gives us the argument in miniature: working people liberated from factory regimentation (for industrial dehumanisation, we might substitute military uniformity of mind, mass media, the deadened imagination, religious fanaticism, capitalist indifference or numbness to history) – but is the result of the revolution freedom to build better lives or destruction of all that might be? The skull lies smiling under the earth. The memento mori is sinister, mocking, or maybe rather a permanent reminder of the value mortality places on each one of us, insists that we recognise and act upon. This is at the heart of his greatest later works, "On a Raised Beach", "Lament for the Great Music", *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* (which he edited in 1940), the wild and wayward "autobiography" *Lucky Poet* (1943), *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955), *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961) and *Direadh I-III* (1974).

At the centre of MacDiarmid's poems is a political, politicised vision. To balance the freedom people need for self-expression with the ways and means to bring that human expressiveness about, we're going to need the help of forms and structures. To ensure freedom, we need regulation – so what sort of regulations would you like?

MacDiarmid's argument was that the nation-state is a political identity both small enough to work as a self-determined economy and big enough to confirm diversity of identities within itself. In company with other nations, world-wide, the priorities this structure can endorse might oppose or subvert those of bigger, uber-nations, seeking to dominate others, exploiting natural resources and repressing human expression. These fundamental beliefs fostered his commitment to Scotland's independence in the co-operating context of world communism. The vision was aggressively idealist but MacDiarmid was not a dreamer: he was embroiled in political meetings, elections, publications, standing as a party candidate on various occasions.

MacDiarmid's nationalism was an act of resistance. Without social revolution, he argued, nationalism was useless. Before the First World War, he was a member of Keir Hardie's Independent Labour Party and later of the Communist Party of Great Britain, convinced that an international socialist solidarity could be brought about.

So here we have a major poet who stands beside the other major politicised artists of the 20th century: Picasso, Stravinsky, Joyce, confirming their belief in both common humanity and the most wildly experimental formal artistic, musical and literary innovations to break from the conventions of the 19th century and enter modernity on their own terms.

His early work triggered what he called the Scottish Renaissance in literature, the arts and political ideas. He set about doing this in three ways. He wrote the poems, he edited anthologies and periodicals, and he produced innumerable essays on all sorts of subjects, literature, history, all the arts, education, politics, on particular Scottish writers and international Modernism, in newspapers and periodicals, throughout Scotland, in London and elsewhere. The most famous series of these essays was collected as *Contemporary Scottish Studies* (1926). He was the most wide-ranging, intellectually demanding, infectiously curious and profoundly optimistic of the Scottish writers of his generation and of the great modernists.

MacDiarmid was the single most important Scottish writer of the 20th century. His work was the reinvigoration of the poetic, political and intellectual world. He was a founder member of the National Party of Scotland, demanding reinstated independence, and he was a member of the Communist Party, aligning himself with Vladimir Mayakovsky, Nazim Hikmet, Pablo Neruda, and in later years translating Eugenio Montale, Giuseppe Ungaretti

and Salvatore Quasimodo. His internationalism matched his conviction in the ideal of national self-determination and these political beliefs informed all his poems.

By the 1930s, however, he had made so many enemies as a cultural provocateur that he was unemployable, isolated, living on an island in the Shetland archipelago far in the North Sea, scorned and spurned by the establishment. Here he wrote the central poem of his career, a philosophical enquiry into human value in artistic and political terms, measured against the scale of geological time: “On a Raised Beach”. Difficult and austere, the poem is finally triumphant and points a way through, forward towards the future. It begins with the first person singular and ends in the first person plural. This was a time of extreme isolation – he suffered physical and nervous breakdown and was near to death – and yet he survived, and his poetry is a record of the survival of human value through the most difficult circumstances of the 20th century.

MacDiarmid was notorious, speaking his mind, welcoming younger writers who were dealing directly with contemporary reality and its ugly facts, blasting the establishment at every opportunity. Scottish literature had been submerged in British identity, had become a minor part of English literature, both in the way it was read and evaluated and in the aspirations of most of its working writers. The result, in MacDiarmid’s opinion, was the creation of an uncritical, sentimental and anodyne culture, politically supine and generating what Nietzsche would have called generations of people fully possessed by a “slave-mentality” not just in literary terms, but generally. MacDiarmid set out to destroy that complacency forever.

Did he succeed? Next week: The Legacy.