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Hugh MacDiarmid: Part Two: The Legacy

In the second of two articles, two days before the 39th anniversary of his death on September 9 1978, Alan Riach reconsiders the work, value and legacy of the writer some have described as the most important single figure in 20th-century Scotland.

The two places most closely revealed in MacDiarmid's writing are his native town of Langholm in Dumfriesshire and Shetland (he lived on the island of Whalsay): the former on the southernmost edge of Scotland, and the latter among the northernmost archipelago of islands in the North Sea. This geographical range indicates the comprehensiveness of MacDiarmid's vision of Scotland and his sensitivity to the different components of the national identity. Neither in terrain nor language are the Borders and Shetland close, yet both are parts of Scotland.

His very early poems are in English, formal sonnets in which rain-beaten stones in the Highlands see-saw the weather, conjuring images of "oblivion and eternity together"; or a free verse portrait of a Roman soldier at Christ's crucifixion, obliterating his guilt in wine and the flesh of prostitutes; or a surreal image of Time as a broken column, the end of linear chronology brought about by the unprecedented destruction of "order" and the slaughter of the First World War.

When he returned to Scotland, two other epoch-making events had broken the old idea of Time as an imperial certainty, with its centre legitimised at Greenwich, near London: the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916 and the Russian Revolution in 1917. With the former, a Celtic nation asserting its independence from British rule set one example; with the latter, an ideal of communist egalitarianism asserting the overthrow of class and social hierarchy set another. MacDiarmid wanted Scotland to act politically on both.

His most immediate literary models came from W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) in Ireland and, later, Saunders Lewis (1893-1985) in Wales. By the early 1930s, the Establishment saw him as a cultural public enemy. His first wife had had enough, took their children and left him. Almost suicidal, he met in London Valda Trevlyn, the woman who became his second wife and with her and their son, found haven on the island of Whalsay in Shetland. Here, in "On a Raised Beach", austerity and value become his subjects:

It is reality that is at stake.
Being and non-being with equal weapons here
Confront each other for it, non-being unseen
But always on the point, it seems, of showing clear [...]
What happens to us
Is irrelevant to the world's geology
But what happens to the world's geology
Is not irrelevant to us.
We must reconcile ourselves to the stones,
Not the stones to us.
Here a man must shed the encumbrances that muffle
Contact with elemental things, the subtleties
That seem inseparable from a humane life, and go apart
Into a simple and sterner, more beautiful and more oppressive world,
Austerely intoxicating; the first draught is overpowering;
Few survive it.

In a 1942 essay, “Scottish Arts and Letters: the Present Position and Post-War Prospects” (published in *The New Scotland: 17 Chapters on Scottish Re-construction, Highland and Industrial*), he welcomed a new generation of Scottish writers, including Sorley MacLean, W.S. Graham, Sydney Goodsir Smith and others who were only then beginning to publish, asserting: “The Scottish renaissance was conceived in the First World War, and leapt into lusty life in the Second World War.” His later, book-length poems, *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955) and *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961) are vast – and exhausting – celebrations of the variety of languages, artistic forms of expression, scientific developments, cultural differences and senses of humour as far as it is possible to know them, and throughout history, going back, as he says at one point, to the conversation between the Norse god Thor and the All-Wise Dwarf, which exists in a manuscript dating from over five centuries before Shakespeare. Cheekily, he asks, “You remember it?”

MacDiarmid's gambit here is to invite the reader to imagine what the extent of knowledge might be, the pleasure of aesthetic and intellectual engagement, and to value the contents of libraries, museums, archaeologies of human life, not as acquisitions, property or prestige, but as things that help us to live more fully. When he writes, "Poetry is human existence come to life" he's indicating a kind of quickening. It's a common metaphor. When a footballer starts to run with the ball in a certain way, co-ordinating purpose, speed, direction, then kicks and scores, you'll still hear people say, "Pure poetry!" MacDiarmid's later poems are an invitation to recognize that quality in world history and all forms of cultural expression.

On September 9 1978, in the evening, at the very end, in Chalmers Hospital, Edinburgh, Chris Grieve, then in his 87th year, turned for a last look over the Edinburgh skyline, and closed his eyes and passed away. Looking over that Edinburgh skyline today, what would he make of our brave new Scotland? And the literary and cultural life of the nation he fought so hard and so long to revitalise?

In the 1920s, national self-determination became a cultural priority. In 1926, MacDiarmid declared that the Scottish Renaissance was "a propaganda of ideas". The ideas involved immediate experience of the modern movement in the arts internationally and how that experience might flourish in Scottish terms. He declared that it would be "utterly wrong to make the term 'Scottish' synonymous with any fixed literary forms or to attempt to confine it". In other words, he wanted a distinctive national culture of non-prescriptive self-expression, free but not directionless. He set out "to increase the number of Scots who are vitally interested in literature and cultural issues; to counter the academic or merely professional tendencies which fossilise the intellectual interests of most well-educated people even; and, above all, to stimulate actual art-production to a maximum."

Did he succeed?

The Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney believed so. "There is a demonstrable link" Heaney wrote, "between MacDiarmid's act of cultural resistance in the 1920s and the literary self-possession of writers such as Alasdair Gray, Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead and James Kelman in the 1980s and 1990s. He prepared the ground for a Scottish literature that would be self-critical and experimental in relation to its own inherited forms and idioms, but one that would also be stimulated by developments elsewhere in world literature."

In the years since his death it has become more possible to see how this happened but there remains, of course, a homely distrust of MacDiarmid's greatness. Lazy critics and reactionary snipers are easy to find. Many Scots have the bad habit of self-belittlement. MacDiarmid can look after himself. When access to a major artist's finest work is foreclosed, however, it's the people who suffer from ignorance and obfuscation. Most literate Irish persons, I'd suggest, would take it for granted that James Joyce and W.B. Yeats are great and important writers. Why can we not find the easy strength to carry the weight of our great Scottish artists as confidently?

Perhaps MacDiarmid, looking out over Edinburgh today, would ask questions designed to discomfort. If the arts are Scotland's greatest asset, how are they enjoyed and experienced? He would have scorned the reverse-snobbery in self-righteous anti-elitism: fudge and obfuscation. He had, and still would have, no time for any politician (or anyone at all) who failed to see that the arts are not leisure pursuits but the most vital forms of self-expression people have. He had, and still would have, unquenchable indignation at the commercialisation of health and education, and only contempt for the tyrants of greed and exploitation as common today as they were in the 1930s, and more visible. And what would he have said of our "national" broadcasters?

The legacy therefore is twofold. MacDiarmid succeeded in helping so much to be more possible now than before he came on the scene. At the same time, so much of that possibility only remains in no more than pitiful potential. It's up to us to help bring it about.

Partly as a result of the re-imagining of Scotland by MacDiarmid and other writers, artists, composers, critics and historians, the 20th century saw the irreversible development and re-establishment of cultural and political self-consciousness and ideals of self-determination in Scotland. The beat goes on.

At the heart of that beat is a regenerated sense of national identity and international connection, both with a sense of historical depth. There's an ancient theoretical model which helps to sum all this up: the X-axis and the Y-axis. MacDiarmid's insistence on nationality in the widest international context emphasises this. Let's say the X-axis is a horizontal plane on which lots of things happen in relation to each other. The study and understanding of literature on this axis is relational or comparative. For example, you read Stevenson alongside Bram Stoker and Conan Doyle, or Lewis Grassie Gibbon beside Joyce and Proust. And that's fine. But then there's the Y-axis, which is vertical, goes deep down. On this axis, you can link

Gibbon back to Stevenson, Stevenson to Scott and Burns, Burns to Fergusson and Ramsay, and Ramsay back to Dunbar and Henryson. At any point of the Y-axis you can stop for an X-axis moment – consider Burns beside Anglo-Scot James Thomson and Gaelic Duncan Ban MacIntyre – but you have to have an emphasis on the sense of long traditions that go into the past, cross over and come forward from it, from Stevenson forward to MacDiarmid and Edwin Morgan. There's no reason why both shouldn't be available. So long as a British – or any other – imperium isn't foreclosing the choices and pleasures involved and leaves room for the loose ends and origins to be visible.

The Welsh poet David Gwendallt Jones (1899-1968), whom people refer to simply as Gwendallt, was almost an exact contemporary of MacDiarmid, T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams. How many readers of these poets know Gwendallt's work? Very few of his poems have ever been translated and I only know some from *The Penguin Book of Welsh Verse*, translated by Anthony Conran. One poem, "Rhydcymerau", is freighted with the authority of responsibility for family, people, places, a language and a culture. "Rhydcymerau" seems to be a place-name but it also means "the ford where the waters meet". The word also has the suggestion to me of another meaning: "the crossing-over place of the Welsh people" – the ford of the Cymru. He talks about the forestry plantations of trees and the imposition of imperial financial power onto the area and family he came from. He talks of his grandparents, an uncle and cousin, and the place where they lived. This is how the poem ends:

And by this time there's nothing there but trees.

Impertinent roots suck dry the old soil:

Trees where neighbourhood was,

And a forest that was once farmland.

Where was verse-writing and scripture is the south's bastardised English.

The fox barks where once cried lambs and children,

And there, in the dark midst,

Is the den of the English minotaur;

And on the trees, as if on crosses,

The bones of poets, deacons, ministers, and teachers of Sunday School

Bleach in the sun,

And the rain washes them, and the winds lick them dry.

This is very different from the image of the alienated artist we're familiar with from Eliot and even Joyce. The artist is not "refined out of existence" but bears the weight of conscious connection with his or her society, family, language and national history. And this is to do with a feeling for home or belonging.

The poet Andrew McNeillie has a poem called "Cynefin *Glossed*". Now, "Cynefin", I'm told, means precisely that, a sense of belonging, at-homeness. And McNeillie has his own mixed loyalties – his father was a fine novelist from Galloway in Scotland, but he moved south; and McNeillie grew up in Wales but also lived in Ireland for a long time, so his own experience leads him exactly to what this poem is asking us to consider. This is "Cynefin *Glossed*":

What is another language? Not just words

and rules you don't know, but concepts too

for feelings and ideas you never knew,

or thought, to name; like a poem that floods

its lines with light, as in the fabled

origin of life, escaping paraphrase.

So living in that country always was

mysterious and never to be equalled.

For example, tell me in a word how

*you'd express a sense of being that
embraces belonging here and now,
in the landscape of your birth and death,
its light and air, and past, at once, and what
cause you might have to give it breath?*

The political structure of “British” identity does not allow for the specific national loyalty voiced by MacDiarmid or Gwenallt. And something more than “Britishness” produced McNeillie’s profound question about language and identity. Poets intuitively understand this. The evidence is there. But as scholars, whose business is research and recovery, teaching and conveying the information that matters, we are required to look more deeply into national traditions and areas of work that have been covered up or forgotten. This is what MacDiarmid taught us to remember. The cultural lesson is also and always the political lesson. The dead always demand this of the living.