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Modernist Montrose: Scotland's 1920s Capital of Culture!

Alan Riach (Friday 26 February 2016)

After the Easter Rising in 1916 in Ireland, after the overthrow of the Tsarist Empire in Russia in 1917, and after the end of the First World War in 1918, poets, writers, artists of all kinds began asking serious questions in Scotland. The core group in the 1920s was in the east coast seaside town of Montrose. It was the original cultural capital of modern Scotland.

Just as the violence of the second decade of last century forced people back to question what were the essential values they lived by, so the artistic priorities of Modernism returned artists and writers to fundamentals.

Violence failed. It always does. The arts give us the lasting answers.

In art, as in politics, it was becoming clear that there is always more than one story to be told. This was not always so. After, let's say, 1920, no single imperial story could ever again be maintained as the "only" one, the "superior" one. No matter how prevalent that idea had been through the "Great Game" of Empire, no matter how urgently people even today insist that the priorities of the Treasury, Westminster, London, the British economy, are finally the only ones that matter, after 1920, the knowledge that there are always other stories to be told, was inescapable.

Some welcomed that knowledge. Others ignored it. Some tried to suppress it.

The knowledge applied in different ways and contexts: gender and sexuality, language and class, social strata and economic exploitation, popular and commercial cultural forms and difficult, financially unremunerative works of art, all addressed this understanding differently. Some exploited its opportunities: film and music hall appealed to a wide audience. Some poets, composers, artists, knew that their work would be read or seen or heard and understood by few. The key element to all artistic production in the 1920s was that things were happening far below the surface of the visible. There were deeper currents than those you could see, working ever more inescapably.

The word "culture" usually means one of two things: so-called "high" culture like opera, classical music, difficult poetry, painting, sculpture; more broadly, it also means just everything you do and what brings it about, from what's on TV to how we set cutlery on a table for a meal, the languages we use, the politics we have. It is what defines us. It is what we deal with every day. It is also something we can change. It depends on what we remember, as much as what we do.

Montrose in the 1920s was the cultural capital of Scotland. There were certain women and men there then, producing works of art, generating new ideas, putting into social form political potential in ways that had radical, long-term effects that are still with us now, in the

21st century. The point is that sometimes demanding works of art with apparently minimal appeal draw deeply upon things of long historical tradition, and have lasting future influence.

In 1920s Montrose, this was striking in the work of Violet Jacob, Marion Angus and Willa Muir, and in that of artists and writers of all kinds.

For Jacob and Angus, both born in the 1860s, the essential source was the ballads. All literature arises from two human forms of expression: stories and songs. Ballads combine both. In the north-east of Scotland, the ballad tradition had its own provenance, distinct from, but related to, that of the Borders. Often, ballads tell of the experience of women: false promises, demon lovers, family loyalties betrayed, vengeance insisted upon, guilt, remorse, revenge. From this tradition, Jacob and Angus drew particular strengths and a range of imagery and reference, geographical locations and historical moments. They wrote themselves into the tradition while maintaining a modernist edge. Women made widows by war, lost love, casualties of the fishing industry, returning ghostly revenants, are recurring figures in their work.

They are often grouped together but were very different characters: Born into the landed family of Kennedy-Erskine, Violet married a soldier, travelling with him to India, South Africa and Egypt, returning in 1904. After their one son was killed in the First World War, she lived on as a lady in the House of Dun, an aristocrat, to that extent, but far closer to less well-off people than most of today's richest. As well as her poems, her novels "Flemington" and "The Interlopers" are well worth reading. Angus, by contrast, unmarried, looked after her mother and lived with her sister, yet the novelist Nan Shepherd wrote of her "wild Gypsy side" and described her as "impish as well as elfin...inhabited by the very Mischief". She travelled at least as far as Geneva and possessed a sharp sense of humour, delighted to puncture dullness or pretentiousness. Both are easily underestimated as conservative, even establishment figures, yet as the edition of their poems edited by Katherine Gordon, "Voices from Their Ain Countrie" (Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2006) demonstrates, there is much more to it. Both were writing significant work in the 1920s: Jacob, especially in "The Northern Lights" (1927); Angus, in "The Lilt" (1922) and "The Tinker's Road" (1924).

Earlier, Jacob, in "Poems of India" (1905), had produced perhaps the first really memorable subcontinental-Scottish verse. In her diaries of 1897, she had written: "I never can make out what it is. Sacrifice, fate, perhaps death itself; something that is always close, everywhere. I suppose it is death, of which there is so much. But there is an exhilaration in it, I don't know why."

In the 1890s, this key combination of sensitivity to the international world and profound understanding of distinctive Scots traditions was as much there in Jacob as in Robert Louis Stevenson. This was the central fact the 20th century would carry forward. In the 1920s, in Montrose, it comes through in all major cultural production in poetry, fiction, painting, sculpture and musical composition.

Let me risk a generalisation. The artistic – if not the social – context of 1920s Montrose was as revolutionary as Paris before the First World War.

Willa Muir published her proto-feminist study, “Women: An Enquiry” (1925) and began work on her Montrose-set, European-ranging novel, “Imagined Corners” (1931). Her husband Edwin published his Nietzschean essays “We Moderns” (1918), followed by “Transition: Essays on Contemporary Literature” (1926), and his poetry appeared in “First Poems” (1925) and “Chorus of the Newly Dead” (1926). Fionn Mac Colla began work on his novel, “The Albannach” (1932), which complemented the Highland fiction of Neil Gunn, “The Grey Coast” (1926) and “Morning Tide” (1930), while Lewis Grassie Gibbon was already thinking about “Sunset Song” (1932)

Meanwhile, international ideas of surrealism were touching the artist Edward Baird, a native of Montrose, whose “Figure Composition with Montrose Behind” (1926-27), “Birth of Venus” and “Portrait of a Young Scotsman (Fionn Mac Colla)” (both early 1930s), signalled a Modernism in painting that was being matched in different ways by J.D. Fergusson, William Johnstone, William McCance and William Crozier.

Not all these artists and writers were based in Montrose, but they were all connected, distantly or closely, with the one person who lived there and galvanised everything: Hugh MacDiarmid.

The sculptor William Lamb met Violet Jacob in 1924, sculpted a bust of her and both giggled over another bust he was making of MacDiarmid: “When I do that portrait of him I shall revenge myself by making it look like him. He in many ways looks quite fearsome – indeed diabolical... His face contains a great amount of character – mostly bad.”

MacDiarmid was C.M. Grieve, a local reporter on the “Montrose Review”, who stayed in the town from 1920 till 1929 and, for better or worse, made modern Scotland possible.

He did three things that changed the whole scene. First, he published his poems: “Sangschaw” (1925), “Penny Wheep” and “A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle” (both 1926). He was drawing on similar sources as Jacob and Angus and others, but his distinction was to take into full account all that the 19th century’s most shattering thinkers and social analysts had delivered: Darwin for the priorities of biology, Marx for the pre-eminence of economics and society, Freud for individual and sexual psychology, Nietzsche for ideas about power, slave-mentality and self-determination. Once he’d swallowed the ideas that came from these boys, and grasped the literary value of the era’s key-texts, Joyce’s “Ulysses” and Eliot’s “Waste Land”, and made the long traverse through Jamieson’s “Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue”, he produced the poems. Light and quick, dense and tortured, crazily funny and deadly serious, short lyrics or book-length philosophical excursions, they are hard work but, like all great art, the more you read them, the better they get.

MacDiarmid did a few other things in the 1920s, from his Montrose headquarters: he wrote an astonishing quantity of prose journalism, reportage for the “Review” but also essays on every possible topic in the world of Scottish cultural production. Many articles were for the “Scottish Educational Journal”, addressed specifically to teachers, collected in a book as “Contemporary Scottish Studies” (1926). Issues of the journal would sell out regularly because people were so eager to see what establishment figures he was turning his

metaphorical guns on next. But he was firm in his support of younger writers, as editor of the three anthologies “Northern Numbers” (in 1920, 1921 and 1922), and numerous short-lived periodicals. He also made time to found the Scottish branch of the international writers’ organisation PEN (1927), and to be a founding member of the National Party of Scotland in 1928, which emerged as the SNP in 1934 and, to the incredulity of some, became the government in Scotland in the early 21st century.

MacDiarmid wasn’t idle. And he wasn’t alone. What happened in Montrose in the 1920s started the hunt that tracks us even now. Political reality needs poetry and the arts far more than some would have us believe. Because, in the arts, political honesty is defined by how clear meaning is made and given, even when it’s hard work and difficult. Politics on its own, though, is usually no more than subterfuge and obfuscation. As Edward Dorn puts it: “Either we define our allegiances to certain honorific aspects of human nature or we don’t.”

That’s the only revolution that matters. And the only one that really delivers the goods.

[Boxed off:]

Evening in the Opium Fields, from “Poems of India” (1905)

Violet Jacob

As pageants, marshalled by a masterhand,
So are the poppy-fields; in rose and red
And foam of white and livid purple spread,
Mile upon mile, they stretch on either hand;
Dark by the well the heavy mangoes stand,
Where labouring oxen pace with dusty tread
And dripping water-skins climb up to shed
Their gush upon the irrigated land.

So cool the labyrinthine channels run,
Flooding the grey stems with a maze of gold;
For, as he nears his end, the dying sun
Does all the plain within his arms enfold;
Beneath the mango-trees long shadows creep,
Like sleep’s tread falling through the flowers of sleep.

“Ideas o’ Their Ain: Montrose and the Scottish Renaissance” was an exhibition hosted by Montrose Museum & Art Gallery from 2014 to 2015. Copies of the catalogue of the exhibition are still available from the Museum.

BBC Scotland’s 3-part television series, “Scotland: The Promised Land” will be broadcast from mid-March. It addresses post-First World War politics, international emigration and the cultural Renaissance of the 1920s. Watch out for it!