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Hugh MacDiarmid on Education

(Friday 20 May 2016)

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So here's the question: Can we confidently and categorically say in 2016 (seventy years since) that every positive proposal made here for the improvement of educational policy has been effected in practice, or at least form the priorities of all our educational institutions in Scotland?

An Open Letter to a Glasgow Undergraduate (November 1946)

Hugh MacDiarmid

My dear G.U.

While one has the right, I think, to expect that an undergraduate should be less liable than less well-educated persons to content himself – or herself – with the line of least resistance, it is impossible to deny that in modern Scotland a University education has in the vast majority of cases singularly failed to produce other than truckling conformists and abject yes-men.

One of the main reasons for this must be the way in which our students are insulated from any perception of, or concern with, national realities.

Scotland in this respect, as in many others, presents a unique case for which no other country in Europe, either now or at any previous time, has afforded any parallel.

In every other country, its national history and literature etc. – and not those of some other country with different traditions, tendencies, and problems altogether – have first place in its schools and colleges, as is natural; and it is in comparison with these – and using these as touchstones – that the student goes on to extend his range, taking in the literatures and histories of other lands and in due course achieving some knowledge of world-history and world-literature. In Scotland alone this natural process is reversed, and Scottish literature and history are not only not placed first but come in at the tail, if at all. The absurdity of this must be manifest when one takes into account the fact that even yet the vast majority of Scottish students must look to Scotland for employment – in the first place at least. Their professional

efficiency will be conditioned largely by their knowledge and experience of Scotland, and affected by those particular Scottish traditions – so demonstrably different from those obtaining in other countries – with which they have been enabled to establish only the most partial and ill-informed relations. This extraordinary state of affairs is all the more serious at a time like the present when Scotland has been reduced to such an appalling pass politically, economically and socially. Their chances of employment in Scotland, the emoluments and other aspects of that employment – status, amenities, etc. – and, above all, the content of that employment (i.e. its quality, range, and all its specific bearings) are determined by the position and prospects of the country, both absolutely, and relatively to what obtains in other countries.

There is not only this strange state of affairs in which men and women are expensively prepared for the most responsible professional careers in a country of which they are taught far less than of many other countries in which few, if any, of them can ever hope to work or even travel. As might be expected along with Scotland's political and economic decline there has been a sad falling-off in the quality of University staffs. Hardly any of our professors or lecturers have any reputation at all. They are just hacks – undistinguished donkey-workers. It would be easy to think of several professors of every other European country who have established an international reputation as authorities on some particular subject or subjects. Not so in Scotland. This is a serious matter for Scottish students, and a particularly serious matter for the Arts in Scotland – with which, as you know, I am specially concerned. It accounts among other things for the fact that Honours students are apt to send in to the editors of our University magazines sets of verses no whit better than those submitted to school magazines by the brighter specimens in Junior IV. And it accounts also for the fact that the subsequent attempts of our University educated men and women to contribute to the corpus of Scottish Letters are so pitifully poor and ineffective. No wonder the German poet Holderlin said: "Wir lernen nichts schwerer, als das Nationale frei gebrauchen," (Nothing is so difficult to learn as the mastery over our natural national gifts.)

This state of affairs has naturally in the course of generations during which it has become steadily worse, revolted all the better intelligences which have been subjected to it, and perhaps the best thing you can do if you wish to see yourself in proper perspective in this respect is just to recall a few outstanding figures who could find no place for their great gifts within that school and University sphere increasingly adscripted to gutless mediocrity. You will find that these men broke away from it all in no uncertain fashion and denounced it in the most uncompromising terms; and you will be able to compare the calibre of these men with that of any of the great horde of those who, on the other hand, "bent the knee to Baal."

Thomas Davidson, for example – the incidental founder of the Fabian Society; and one of the greatest teachers Scotland ever produced – said: "The raw material of tuition provided at our universities – young men and women who were preparing to enter the various professions, and were therefore to a large extent tied to ancient methods, some of them with already definitely formed opinions, and who sought at college merely an outfit for professional success – were not the material on which I could hope to work successfully." In this you will recognise Davidson was sharply differentiated from the whole body of our

professors and lecturers today. What proportion of the students are as sharply differentiated from the hopeless material of which Davidson spoke you will be able to estimate yourself. Davidson naturally could not fit into the Scottish university world; he was far too big a man. Excluded from it, as were Professor Sir Patrick Geddes, Mr A.S. Neill, and others, he found his life-work in America; but what he wrote of Higher Education in America in 1899 is at least equally true of Higher Education in Scotland today.

“It cannot be said of our people,” he wrote, “that they are backward or niggardly in the matter of education. In no country is so much money expended on schools and colleges. And yet our people are very far from being educated as they ought to be. Ignorance is still widespread and not only the ignorant but the whole nation suffers in consequence. In spite of our magnificent system of public schools and our numerous colleges and universities, the great body of our citizens lack the education necessary to give dignity and meaning to their individual lives, and to fit them for the worthy performance of their duties as members of the institutions under which they live. Our public schools stop too soon, while our colleges do not reach more than a small fraction of our population. Moreover neither school nor college imparts that education which our citizens, as such, require – domestic, social, and civic culture. What is imparted is defective both in kind and extent. Even more regrettable is the fact that our schools and colleges for the most part confine their attention to persons who have nothing to do but study, who are not engaged in any kind of useful or productive labour. This results in two evils: (1) education for the great body of the people must stop at an early age since the children must go to work as soon as possible; (2) education is withheld from those who are in the best position to profit by it; for every teacher with sufficient experience knows that people who have a knowledge of practical life and its duties are far better and more encouraging pupils than those who have not... Thus it comes to pass that the lives of the great mass of our citizens are unintelligent, narrow, sordid, envious, and unhappy. Thus, too, it comes that our politics are base and our politicians venal and selfish. The labouring classes are, through want of education, easily cozened or bribed to vote in opposition to their own best interests, and so to condemn themselves to continued slavish toil and poverty, which means exclusion from all share in the spiritual wealth of the race.”

Geddes, a far greater man and writer and more potent influence than Davidson, and indeed one who is likely to emerge in the near future (if there is one) as one of the master spirits of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was at one with all Davidson wrote along these lines. But Geddes went far further. “Everything I have done,” he said, “has been bio-centric; for and in terms of life, both individual and collective; whereas all the machinery of state, public instruction, finance, and industry ignores life when indeed it does not destroy it. The only thing that amazes me, therefore, as I look back over my experience, is that I was not caught and hung many years ago”.

Geddes’s ideal for education was the renewal and vast extension of *lehrfreiheit and lernfreiheit* – complete liberty of teaching and of learning, i.e. the very antithesis of what obtains in Scotland today, which Geddes described as “penal servitude in schools of respectable futility” and, again, as “that verbalistic empapment upon which for so many centuries we have been specialising”.

And I think, on due consideration, you will find it hard to disagree with Geddes when he said after 1914-18 War (and it is all of incomparably greater urgency today after our Second World War) – that “the renewal of the universities into active centres of material reconstruction of ruined Europe, for moral re-education of its disillusioned peoples, will be of greater value than any number of peace treaties or imposition of war reparations. Such a university arousal will even penetrate Germany herself and shake her proudest citadels, rise above them, and drop ideas into them more fully than can our airmen. And with her specialisms surpassed because co-ordinated; with her State philosophy overpowered because out-thought, her pride-illusion cured, she will increasingly be brought back to reason, and even to human loyalty, from her fanaticism of an imaginary superiority – thus returning to her good for present evil, and good for previous good... By deliberate selection from tendencies surviving until the present, and by judiciously planned reconstruction of them, we may shape the future. Hence the first requisite of foresight is true and clear ideas about the past.

Yet sympathy with the cares and anxieties of fellow-beings struggling in the present is and must remain the driving force of noble action. The citizens of the New State will therefore be characterised by the gesture of alternately facing the present, the past, and the future. From the past they will draw sustenance for the mind, from the present fuel for the heart, and from the future resolution for the will. A generation trained in these mental habits will see the hell latent in the paleotechnic peace, patent in war, yet will foresee the third alternative with realistic vision and of set purpose plan and design its advent. To avoid the Scylla of paleotechnic peace and the Charybdis of War, the leaders of this coming polity will steer a bold course for Eutopia [sic]. They will aim at the development of every region, its folk, work, and place, in terms of the *genius loci*, of every nation, according to the best of its tradition and spirit; but in such wise that each region, each nation, makes its unique contribution to the rich pattern of our ever-evolving Western civilisation”.

That was why Geddes in the '90s started the Scottish Renaissance. That was why after the 1914-18 War I restarted it (with Geddes's approval and help). That is why I am asking you now to throw all your weight in with us in this great cause. Other countries may be left to their own students, who know them; Scotland is our job. And do not be put off if that means adventuring in strange directions. I have mentioned Holderlin. Those who condemn synthetic Scots and the modernist experiments of our Scottish Renaissance writers, artists, and composers – as not in keeping with Scottish taste and tradition – ought to remember how as far as the practice of poetry is concerned Holderlin's increasing preoccupation with German national values had its parallel in a change of technique in his poetry. For he abandons the regular classical metres of the great elegies and odes and begins to write in free rhythms. The development is not absolutely contemporaneous with the emergence of his national beliefs in a sharper form. But as his theory of the national, or natural, develops it brings after it the change.

And the writers of the Scottish Renaissance must follow the same course and be able, like Holderlin, to say: “I think I shall not simply give a commentary on the poets up to our time, but that poetic style altogether will take on a different character, and that the reason

why we remain unnoticed is that for the first time since the Greeks we are beginning again to compose in a national, that is, natural, truly original way.”

We in Scotland have not remained unnoticed, but our activities have been, and still are, largely misunderstood and misrepresented. That will be put right. These things take time. You can still come in on the ground floor. We give you a hearty invitation. It is a pity to have had a university education, and not put it to some real use.

Yours for Scotland,

Hugh MacDiarmid