



Riach, A. (2017) The conflict between Scottish poets in the 1930s. *National*, 2017, 15 Sept.

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Deposited on: 01 May 2018

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William Soutar and Edwin Muir

Following his revaluation of Hugh MacDiarmid in the last two essays, Alan Riach looks at the achievement of two of MacDiarmid's contemporaries and finds very different characters and qualities.

Important as it is to emphasise the scale of MacDiarmid's achievement, it's equally important to see it in context and value the writing of his contemporaries. For MacDiarmid and for many others, a crucial figure in the first half of the century was the composer Francis George Scott (1880-1958). Scott's correspondence with MacDiarmid, Edwin Muir and other major figures of the Renaissance, is an essential, centralising body of work only partly collected to date. One of the most vital poets whose work Scott set to music was William Soutar (1898-1943), whose *Diaries of a Dying Man* (1954) and extensive journals and "Dream Books" record his dreams and daily experiences after he became confined to bed with the disease of spondylitis, from 1930 till his death in 1943.

Born in Perth, he joined the navy, later graduating from Edinburgh University in 1923, by which time his first book of poems had appeared. His poems in English retain a spare, poised, limpid quality, most powerful in compressed expressions of pathos and compassion. "The Children" (1937) is about the effect of the bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War, and might be read with Picasso's great painting of the subject in mind. The endless expression of horror in the painting and the restraint of Soutar's poem, working together, create an uncanny effect: "A wound which everywhere corrupts the hearts of men".

Many of Soutar's English poems keep this poise between specificity and universality. Their constant point of reference is children, the next generations. "To the Future" begins:

He, the unborn, shall bring

From blood and brain

Songs that a child can sing

And common men...

And ends its three verses praising “sure simpleness”: “Sunlight upon the grass: / The curve of the wave.” In “Autobiography”, Soutar describes the expanding, then increasingly limited perspectives to which his life confined him: from womb, to bed, a room, then travelling up and down the earth, then back to a garden, a room, a tomb, and “the world’s womb.” The effect is not morbid but a solemn and unswerving recognition of a common life, built on unknown ancestors, promising unknowable future generations.

His poems in Scots include marvellous “Bairnrhymes” – poems for children to memorise and recite, playful, linguistic fun, full of eldritch humour and turns of dramatic expression, like the piano pieces, the earliest of Bartok’s sequence “Mikrokosmos” (1926-39), or Erik Chisholm’s “Scottish Airs for Children” (from the 1940s), or Ronald Stevenson’s “A Wheen Tunes for Bairns tae Spiel” (1963). These are all available for purchase, so if you’re thinking of learning to play the piano, why not start here?

Soutar’s riddles and “Whigmaleeries” like “Coorie in the Corner” and “Bawsy Broon” are loaded with charm, energy and fascination. His finest work in Scots, though, is unmistakably adult. “Birthday” is a ballad-like allegory describing three mysterious “men o’ Scotland” who ride into the night through a dark, unspecified landscape, and suddenly see a unicorn, a promise of life renewed, a glimpse of what might be. They ride on, now transformed into a company, looking squarely at each other, living for the future this new vision might deliver. “Ballad” (“O! shairly ye hae seen my love...”) captures a shuddering moment of terrible understanding of the lover’s mortality. Maybe the most unforgettable of all his poems is “The Tryst” (1936). It evokes an inexplicable visitation from a beautiful woman, who arrives and departs without words (“luely” just means “softly” and “caller” means “cool”):

O luely, luely cam she in

And luely she laid down:

I kent her by her caller lips

And her breists sae sma’ and roon’.

A' thru the nicht we spak nae word

Nor sinder'd bane frae bane:

A' thru the nicht I heard her hert

Gang soundin' wi' my ain.

When she leaves, she takes with her, finally, “a’ my simmer [summer] days / Like they had never been.” It has been set (more than once) to music, with one particularly beautifully nuanced and accented version by James MacMillan.

MacDiarmid included “The Tryst” in *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* (1940) and dedicated his poem, “Tam o’ the Wilds and the Many-Faced Mystery” to Soutar, marking his respect and liking for Soutar’s commitment, imagination and firm grasp of material reality. They both understood the Scots language as essential in the regeneration of Scottish literature and the validation of the speech of Scots children, in all its different forms throughout the country. F.G. Scott endorsed this emphatically in the Scots idiom of his musical settings of their poems, alongside those of Dunbar, Burns and others. But an argument was coming. In 1936, Edwin Muir (1887-1959) published a book entitled *Scott and Scotland*, in which he asserted that the only possible way forward for Scottish literature was for Scottish writers to write exclusively in English. Only by doing so could an international readership be addressed, he said, and thereby Scottish writers could be valued alongside their Irish contemporaries, Joyce and Yeats.

MacDiarmid’s response to this was violent opposition, for he himself had written major work in Scots, and he insisted on revaluing the traditions in Gaelic and indeed Scottish literature in French and Latin. He insisted that Scotland’s literature was written in more languages than English and that English was not adequate to encompass the experiences of these other languages. When he edited *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry*, he included work in Scots, English and translated from Gaelic and Latin – but nothing by Muir. There are surprises. One of the most striking poems in the anthology is “The Path of the Old Spells” translated from the Gaelic of Donald Sinclair (1886-1932), a still undervalued playwright and poet.

But Muir had a point. Anglophone literature has an international acceptance denied to most writing in Scots and Gaelic. And Muir's work itself still stands. Born in the Orkney island of Wyre, his childhood on his father's farm, the Bu, was idyllic, made more so by his later experience of the squalor of industrial Glasgow, where close members of his family – both parents and two of his five siblings – died, and later still by his travelling through Cold War Europe. In the 1920s, his aphoristic and critical writing in *We Moderns* (1918), *Latitudes* (1924), and *Transition* (1926) established him as a driving force in critical reevaluation in the Scottish Literary Renaissance. His autobiographical writing, *Scottish Journey* (1935), *The Story and the Fable* (1940; later revised as *An Autobiography*, 1954), and his three novels (*The Marionette*, 1927; *The Three Brothers*, 1931; *Poor Tom*, 1932), extended his range and developed his mythical sense of the parallel worlds of “the story” (the material biographies of human lives) and “the fable” (the universal allegory in which all lives take part).

The theory might seem simple yet it was appropriate for its era. The human story is a vital corrective, delivering a sense of common vulnerability, in the particular contexts of cold war alienation and anxiety. Muir's translations – or rather, the translations by his wife Willa Anderson, which Edwin helped with and gave his name to – of Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers*, and Kafka's *The Trial*, *The Castle*, *America* and *Metamorphosis*, marked the moment when existential, alienated, pessimistic European literature irrevocably entered Anglophone sensibility.

Following T.S. Eliot's notion of the dissociation of sensibility in emotion and language, Muir's poems were of a different character to either Eliot or MacDiarmid, utilising neither the forms of fragmented narrative modernism, nor revitalised Scots ballad-like depiction and introspection, or explicit political command. Muir's poems are always clear syntactic structures, using sentences, verse-paragraphs and logic that seem both internal (dreamlike) and external (depicting scenes, unspecified places, conflicts), but deliver moral judgements with terrible pathos. “The Good Town”, from his book *The Labyrinth* (1949), like C.P. Taylor's play *Good* (1981) or Len Deighton's novel *Winter* (1987), shows closely how an entire society is overcome by evil disposition and ultimately, a social practice of cruelty and murderous discrimination:

...once the good men swayed our lives, and those

*Who copied them took a while the hue of goodness,
A passing loan; while now the bad are up,
And we, poor ordinary neutral stuff,
Not good nor bad, must ape them as we can,
In sullen rage or vile obsequiousness.*

Perhaps this is something only Muir could have described so accurately, in such neutral language, giving an unstressed pathos to the conclusion:

*Our peace betrayed us; we betrayed our peace
Look at it well. This was the good town once.*

These thoughts we have, walking among our ruins.

The European context and the English language allowed Muir this distanced, cool, melancholy objectivity. Closer to home, “Scotland 1941”, from *The Narrow Place* (1943), gives a panoramic national history that culminates in utter despondency, in which Burns and Scott are “sham bards of a sham nation” and yet, at the end, Muir has told a story that still might “melt to pity” the “iron tongue” of the historian. Change may come, but Muir is not hopeful. “Scotland’s Winter” and “The Horses”, both from *One Foot in Eden* (1956), are the anthology favourites. In “Scotland’s Winter”, everything is stilled into bias and all hope is thwarted:

*Now the ice lays its smooth claws on the sill,
The sun looks from the hill*

Helmed in his winter casket,

And sweeps his Arctic sword across the sky.

In this world, mere people, neither good nor bad, are ignorant and exiled from their history and human potential, yet “content” (the word is itself a condemnation) with their “frozen life and shallow banishment.” In “The Horses” the pastoral imagery of the farm – the Orcadian Eden of childhood – remains, or arises once again, in the aftermath of nuclear winter and the obliteration of modern technology, and into this recuperating world, “the strange horses” arrive, coming “from their own Eden”: “Our life is changed: their coming our beginning.”

There is hope in Muir’s poems, and it counters the characteristic despair and fearfulness of the Cold War. And yet the emblematic authority of the imagery, the poems’ symbolism and understated emotions, frustrations, angers, trepidations, are carried by an oblique and dispassionate language, a steadiness of diction, grammatically secure and safely balanced, in which the urgencies of feeling are pressing at the limits.

One foot in Eden still I stand

And look across the other land.

The world’s great day is growing late,

Yet strange these fields that we have planted

So long with crops of love and hate.

Time’s handiworks by time are haunted...

The grim sorrow of many of these poems is entirely just. The effects brought about by Muir in his sustained vision and syntactic balance are unlike anything else in contemporary Scottish poetry. MacDiarmid was right when he said that poetry in Scots could gain effects impossible to poetry in English, but the opposite is also true: poetry in the English language can do things poetry in Scots can’t do, and at his best, Muir proves it.

Considering the era of warfare MacDiarmid, Soutar and Muir lived through, world wars and cold war, one musical legacy that sets itself against the prevailing ethos of violence should be noted here. Settings by the pacifist composer, Ronald Stevenson (1928-2015) are collected on the CD *A'e Gowden Lyric: Songs by Ronald Stevenson* (Delphian DCD34006). The title song – “A'e Gowden Lyric” – takes a few lines from a longer poem by MacDiarmid, itself a small part of the book-length collection, *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930), and makes an intense and piercingly beautiful assertion of the eternal value of a “golden lyric” and how it can surpass in significance all the military might and political power of any castle's soaring walls, transmitting human quality across all such barriers that separate the peoples of the earth. It is one of the most adult, prayerful, secular, heartfelt songs:

Better a'e gowden lyric

Than the castle's soaring waa

Better a'e gowden lyric

Than onythin' else avaa!

All militarist authority, all imperial power, is worth nothing compared to the piercing beauty of this, what Wordsworth called “the still, sad music of humanity”. When heard, even without the words, played on a fiddle with piano accompaniment, it is (like the tune of the second movement of Sibelius's third symphony) one of those things that everyone should give themselves a present of, and keep in their heads – and hearts – forever.