MacDiarmid's Burns: The Political Context, 1917–1928

Paul Malgrati

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PAUL MALGRATI

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Abstract

This article focuses on the political context which fostered Hugh MacDiarmid's iconoclastic approach to Burns's legacy in nineteen-twenties Scotland. MacDiarmid's critique of the conservative Burns cult – as he famously expressed it his 1926 poem *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* – did not stand alone in Scotland in the wake of the Great War. Instead, it was part of a wider radical movement which opposed the unionist and militarist hijacking of Burns that had taken place in Scotland during the Great War. In reaction to the bard of King, Country, and Empire, socialist and early nationalist organisations used Burns as a concrete symbol to express their ideas on peace, class, and nationhood. This post-war debate on Scotland's national bard, as this article will show, was instrumental in enabling MacDiarmid to articulate his own, literary, and revolutionary re-assessment of the 'Immortal Memory'.

Hugh MacDiarmid – alias Christopher Murray Grieve – was the most outspoken critic in his generation of the prevailing cult of Robert Burns in Burns suppers and Burns clubs.[1] The poet lambasted Burns clubs for their traditionalism; here was a coterie of philistines who prevented Scottish literature from rising above the realm of the hackneyed, the land of kitsch and kilts. MacDiarmid's charges have proved enduring, and still determine the troubled relationship between Scottish literary modernism and the supposed kailyard which preceded it.

Understandably, Grieve's reassessment of the bard's legacy has attracted the attention of literary scholars, not least Alan Riach and Robert Crawford in two complementary articles.[2] Whilst Riach concentrates on Burnsian themes and anathemas in MacDiarmid's *Penny Wheep* and *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), Crawford reveals the importance of Grieve's early involvement in the Burns Federation – the umbrella institution created in 1885 to gather most Burns clubs in Scotland and Empire – on his subsequent development as a Scots poet. Both articles already provide a rich and challenging account of Grieve's idiosyncratic approach to Burns.

Whilst MacDiarmid scholars have focused on his prolific writings on Burns they have tended to ignore, however, other critiques of the Burns cult in post-war Scotland. In the nineteen-twenties, MacDiarmid was not the only writer to yearn for an alternative account of Burns's contribution to Scottish identity. As David Goldie has recently shown, between 1914 and 1918, Burns's patriotic songs such as 'Scots wha hae' and 'Does Haughty Gaul' were used greatly by army propagandists to deliver a jingoistic message staging the fight between civilised Britain and Germanic 'Huns'.[3] Accordingly, the bard's enlistment in the Dumfries Volunteers to counter France's looming invasion in 1795 became the central fact about Burns in wartime Scotland, and a recruiting poster was issued in 1915 picturing Burns as a recruiting officer enjoining Scotsmen to 'Take his Tip'.[4] This militarist hijacking of the bard – something supported by most Burns clubs – led Scottish radicals and nationalists to develop an alternative view on Burns's legacy. Although revolutionary and iconoclastic representations of the bard were already common before 1914, their polemical content was considerably sharpened in reaction to wartime propaganda.[5] Within a few years, from the end of the war onward to the nineteen-twenties, the politics of Robert Burns became a recurring topic of ideological confrontation in Scotland.

This article will highlight the influence the post-war debate on Burns's politics had on the evolution of MacDiarmid's personal approach to the eighteenth-century bard. First as an Independent Labour Party (ILP) councillor in Montrose in 1922, then as a co-founder of the National Party of Scotland (NPS) in 1928, Grieve remained aware of the partisan polemics surrounding Burns throughout the nineteen-twenties. His political awareness, as a party activist, helped him integrate the radical critique of the Burns cult into his evolving poetry. The analysis of this relationship between the Scottish political uses of Burns and MacDiarmid's reassessment of the bard's legacy requires an interdisciplinary approach – between political history and the history of literature. The article which follows will discuss MacDiarmid's poetry and prose hand in hand with the many erudite essays, partisan pamphlets and press articles published in inter-war Scotland on the politics of Burns.

FITTING IN THE POST-WAR BATTLE FOR BURNS

Whereas the patriotic and martial consensus on Burns prevailed in the first two years of the Great War, debate emerged from 1917 onward as the radical wing of

the Labour movement returned to the national stage following strikes in Scotland's industrial centres. In January 1917, the radicals of the Clyde-based Scottish Worker's Committee published a short pamphlet which countered the imperialist hijacking of the bard and offered instead a revolutionary portrayal of Burns's life. Written by the socialist and conscientious objector John Smith Clarke, the *Story of Robert Burns* described the bard as an 'antimilitarist', an 'internationalist rebel' and 'a worthy proletarian personality to be rescued from the hands of the philistine'.[6] Clarke's depiction came into direct conflict with martial representations of Burns. Indeed, the conscientious objector claimed that 'at this hour [...] [Burns] would have occupied a cell in Wormwood Scrubs' for pacifist activities.[7] Debunking the 'Dumfries volunteers' myth' and recalling the bard's destitute and repressed situation which forced him into enlistment at the end of his life, Clarke asserted that Burns could only have joined 'a war waged by a people against their own oppressors'. Undoubtedly, he would have put 'his virile brain' to the service of 'Ireland, Egypt, India and South Africa suffering under the heel [of the ruling class]'.[8] The following year, Clarke's sentiments were echoed by *Forward,* the journal of the ILP, which reported that Burns's 'sansculottian revolutionary fervour' – always 'overlooked by Burns orators at Burns dinners' – had now impassioned Bolshevik Russia[9]. From the Somme to Red Clydeside, the bard had acquired militant attributes.

At once similar and distinct from the revolutionary Burns, the nationalist interpretation of the bard's legacy was also revitalised in the immediate aftermath of the war. In 1919, the radical portion of the Scottish Home-Rule movement, inspired by Irish separatism, decided to create the newspaper *Liberty* to spread pro-independence and Gaelic revivalist ideas. The journal dismissed Burns clubs for complicity in the imperialist projection of the bard during the war. Moreover, it invoked a socialist and ethnic type of nationalism that connected Burns with the 'Celtic soul' of Scotland – immune to 'Anglo-Saxon' militarism.[10] To counter the 'oratorical adulatory excesses' of the unionist Burns cult, *Liberty* declared that the bard 'would have made pungent remarks about the Highlands being turned into a happy hunting ground for American pork-kings, Cockney profiteers, and foreign 'kilties''.[11] Burns, the journal asserted, would have rallied to Highland crofters 'who for nearly a century have demanded land on which to rear their families in health and plenty'.[12] In a similar vein, Ruaraidh Erskine of Marr, a prominent Gaelic campaigner, wrote that Burns suppers were but 'a mere occasion of whisky and haggis' and that Scotland's national poet would be better associated

with the 'themes and rhythm' of the eighteenth-century Gaelic poet Duncan Ban Macintyre. Only by a cross-reading of his works with Celtic literature could the bard be enjoyed 'as he is worthy to be enjoyed' – that is to say as a nationalist icon sharing 'the noble conception of a Scotland free and independent of all foreign control'.[13]

Although they suffered under radical and nationalist criticism, official Burnsians held their ground on the battlefield of culture and politics in inter-war Scotland. To consolidate the martial vision of Burns, William Will, president of the London Burns club, published, in January 1919, a booklet based on the minute book of the Dumfries volunteers.[14] The conservative Burnsian aimed to prove that the bard's volunteering was not 'a mere piece of hypocrisy meant to deceive or placate his superiors in the Excise'. Will provided many instances of the sustained assiduity Burns demonstrated in his local regiment and confidently concluded that the bard had become a volunteer 'because he was opposed to the turbulent crowd who would have "set the mob aboon the throne" and wished to do his part in preventing social disorder'.[15]

Simultaneously, the Burns movement counterbalanced its wartime unionist effort by fostering the revival of Scotland's vernacular tongue. In January 1919, John Buchan – the famous novelist and unionist politician – was invited to the Jubilee Burns supper of William Will's London Burns club, where he summoned his audience to save Scots language from decline and suggested that the Doric should be 'used in every school' of the country.[16] Following Buchan's plea, London Burnsians decided to create a Vernacular Circle to 'preserve the language of Lowland Scotland, in which the most important work of Robert Burns is enshrined'.[17] The Circle, founded in the spring of 1920, immediately organised a series of conferences on the Scots Language, which was inaugurated by Professor W. A. Craigie in January 1921.[18] Neither in the spirit of its originator, John Buchan, nor in the spirit of its chairman, William Will, did the Vernacular Circle have any Scottish nationalist connotations, at least in the political sense of the term. By reviving the Scots language, the Federation was merely holding true to what would now be called its unionist–nationalist creed. In other words, cultural activism served to compensate for Scotland's military commitment to Britain.

In this heated context, C. M. Grieve, who was both an ILP Home Ruler and a hopeful member of the Burns Federation, was to take an altogether singular position. Although he had first denounced the revivalist 'sentimentalism' of the Vernacular Circle of London – considering that Scotland's literature could not be subsumed

by a 'dying language' – Grieve was delegated by the Montrose Burns club to the September 1922 annual conference of the Burns Federation in Birmingham.[19] At the conference, where he was acclaimed for his work as the editor of *The Scottish Chapbook* (inaugurated in August 1922), he gave a well-received speech in which, in the spirit of 'A Man's a Man' he called on the Federation to promote modern Scottish writing and to concentrate 'on the solution of the great social problems of humanity'.[20] Grieve was exhilarated by the acclamations of the Burnsians and returned to Montrose thinking the cultural revivalism of the Burns Federation presented an opportunity to fulfill his avant-gardist project. The re-election as President of the conservative Duncan McNaught notwithstanding, the enthusiastic northern poet immediately wrote in his *Scottish Chapbook* that the 'time ha[d] come for a drastic reorientation of the Burns Movement' and that 'the struggle [was] real between those whose allegiance [was] to the letter of Burnsiana; and those who [were] filled with the spirit of Burns'.[21] Dividing the Federation between its conservative and what he perceived as its modernising elements, Grieve announced an important reform of the Burns movement which would aim to realise 'the whole social and political programme' put forward by Scotland's bard in his more revolutionary poems.[22] Grieve certainly agreed with socialist and nationalist critiques of the Burns movement, but at this stage he resolved to harness the Federation from within for avant-gardist purposes. In other words, a kind of radical entryism remained an option for the young poet.

Grieve was convinced that the Burns Movement was capable of reform. He swiftly identified the Vernacular Circle as the most innovative organ out of which progress could arise in the Federation. In October, he proudly described his *Scottish Chapbook* as a 'supplement [to] the campaign of the Vernacular Circle for the revival of the Doric' and praised its 'indefatigable secretary' William Will in spite of his recent pamphlet on Burns the volunteer.[23] Simultaneously, Grieve wrote his first two poems in Scots, 'The Watergaw' and the 'The Blaward and the Skelly', which appeared in the *Scottish Chapbook* under a strange signature with Celtic connotations. In the rebellious alcoves of the Burns Federation, Hugh MacDiarmid was born.

This 'birth' was celebrated in January 1923 with a special Burns issue of the *Scottish Chapbook* in which MacDiarmid called once again for reform of the Federation. The last page of the issue, in particular, asserted his singular position in the wider debate surrounding Burns's legacy, where a socialist sonnet celebrated the conservative Duncan McNaught. Beginning with a eulogy of the old President of the Burns

Federation '[...] who hath established / a means to realise Burns' noblest dream' MacDiarmid then invoked a 'Burns international! The mighty cry / Prophetic of eventual brotherhood', and finished with a quotation of the final universalist lines of 'A Man's a Man'.[24] Under the poem, a small text summarised the meaning of Grieve's praise: 'McNaught's life-work has been to create the necessary machinery [the current Federation]. His successor must be a man capable of employing that machinery to consummate the great ideals associated with the name of Burns'.[25] Unfortunately for MacDiarmid, there were many in the Federation for whom the 'great ideals' of Burns were associated neither with the red flag nor with an independent saltire.

Disappointment loomed for Grieve. It began in February 1923 when he gave a polemical lecture to the Vernacular Circle of London which criticised Burnsians' conventionalism for 'retaining the braid Scots in a kailyaird'.[26] This reference to the late nineteenth-century Kailyard School of Scottish fiction, which produced many hackneyed depictions of Scotland's rural life, was meant to act as an intellectual repellent. Summoning the Vernacular Circle to dismiss sentimentalised visions of the past, Grieve ended the lecture by asserting his belief in 'the possibility of a great Scottish literary renaissance', based on a bolder approach to the Scots language. MacDiarmid's critique of the traditional side of the Vernacular Circle, which was not as progressive as he had first thought, was harshly received by his audience. The report of his talk, printed in the 1924 issue of the *Burns Chronicle* (the journal of the Federation) sternly concludes: 'the lecture provoked the greater criticism than any other lecture delivered to the Circle'.[27] Six months after his success at the Birmingham conference of September 1922, this was a hard blow for the Montrose poet. His disappointment soon turned to bitterness as he came to realise his isolation both inside and outside the Burns Federation.

Beyond the literary sphere, the partisan battle fought over Burns's legacy, which rejected any compromise between conservatism and socialism, served to exacerbate MacDiarmid's seclusion. In the elections of 1922 and 1923 – despite Conservative victories across the UK – the Labour movement emerged as the largest party in Scotland on each occasion, sending many cadres of Grieve's ILP to Parliament. MPs like Thomas Johnston, David Kirkwood, George Buchanan and James Barr were deeply attached to the bard's patriotic and plebeian image, as expressed a few years earlier by John S. Clarke.[28] They had placed Home Rule for Scotland at the heart of their programme. On 9 May 1924, five months after the government of Ramsay

MacDonald was formed, the first Labour Home Rule bill was introduced by George Buchanan in the House of Commons. His plea was seconded by Tom Johnston who invoked, in a patriotic flight, the 1787 letter written by Burns to Dr. Moore in which he expressed how 'the story of [William] Wallace [had] poured a tide of Scottish prejudice into [his] veins'.[29] This was not enough, however, to convince the House of Commons where Labour lacked an absolute majority. In spite of the protestations of David Kirkwood and James Maxton, the closure of the debate was refused and the bill was finally talked out.[30]

The propagandist effort of *Forward* did not cease, notwithstanding Labour's failure. In January 1925, John S. Clarke published a new pamphlet on *Robert Burns and his Politics* which depicted the bard in positive terms as an 'extremist' social reformer opposed to the conservatism of the Burns Federation.[31] Against the ex-President of the Federation, Duncan McNaught, who, in a 1923 article, had countered the left-wing representation of the bard's honest poverty by showing that in 1795 he earned more than twice the income of a parish schoolmaster, Clarke retorted that such a 'statistician' exercise was beside the point.[32] What mattered was that such a revered poet had been forced by necessity to become an exciseman whilst 'the Parliament was voting an additional £65,000 per head to this debauchee [the Prince of Wales] for his wedding'.[33] Clarke concluded, invoking Burns' republican legacy, that 'if the study of Burns has not taught Dr. McNaught that worth and merit ought to come before mere blood that "has crept through scoundrels ever since the flood" then the teaching of the poet has been lost on him'.[34]

Such an irreverent comment against the ex-President of the Burns Federation – praised two years before in MacDiarmid's *Chapbook* – did not go unnoticed. In the 1925 *Burns Chronicle,* Duncan McNaught answered Clarke and 'the huge army of open-air preachers of social reform' whose intention was 'to represent Burns as the outstanding Extremist of his generation'.[35] Against them, McNaught asserted that Burns's works '[would] be searched in vain for a single line that expresse[d] the slightest sympathy with the doctrines of Bolshevism, Communism, and Socialism'.[36] According to the conservative Burnsian, the bard's true political creed 'w[ould] be found in "Does Haughty Gaul", a composition which effectually dispose[d] of the mythical tradition that [Burns] was a disloyal subject and a Revolutionist'.[37] McNaught's point was clear: seven years after the war, the character praised by the Burns Federation was still a British volunteer more aligned with Stanley Baldwin's new Tory Government than with the party of Ramsay MacDonald.

TURNING BURNS AGAINST HIS CULT

Such ideological contention thwarted MacDiarmid's wish to find a compromise between established Burnsian circles and his avant-gardist aspirations. Marginalised within the Burns Federation as a radical firebrand, the ILP councillor of Montrose was also estranged within the wider Labour movement which ignored – if it did not resent – the Scottish revivalist impulse.[38] Nevertheless, MacDiarmid was not completely isolated in the cultural sphere. In 1924 and 1926 he would be awarded two distinguished literary endorsements which comforted his reformist approach to the Scots language and to Burns's legacy.

In October 1924, the conservative poet John Buchan included Grieve's 1922 poem 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' in his revered collection of Scots poetry *The Northern Muse.*[39] Like MacDiarmid, Buchan's views on the Vernacular Circle had grown more pessimistic since the London Burns club Jubilee of 1919. He explained, in his introduction, that Scottish literature was doomed by a 'vile sixpenny planet' whose 'baneful influence' condemned any linguistic revival attempt to 'pastiche' and 'sentimentalism'.[40] Nonetheless, the negativity of Buchan's forewords was counterbalanced by the rest of his book. Whilst dismissing the possibility of a Doric revival, *The Northern Muse,* encapsulated five hundred years of Scottish poetry and provided the few modern poets it included with both a status and a stately heritage. The message was of importance for MacDiarmid. For the first time, a renowned author agreed with him in condemning the kailyardic 'sentimentalism' which had tinged Scottish poetry since Burns's death. Although Buchan's conservative views differed from MacDiarmid's radical buoyancy, *The Northern Muse* invigorated the latter's literary undertaking in spite of his growing disagreement with the politics of the Burns Federation.

In 1925, John Buchan prefaced MacDiarmid's first poetry book – *Sangschaw*. The Tory poet compared Grieve's 'conservative and radical' use of Scots to Burns's verses which 'borrow[ed] words and idioms from the old masters' whilst treating Scots 'as a living language'.[41] Simultaneously conservative and radical was a fitting description indeed. In *Sangshaw*, MacDiarmid's lengthy poem the 'Ballad of the Five Senses' was dedicated 'To Sir Robert Bruce, President of the Burns Federation, in appreciation of his efforts to foster a Scottish Literary Revival'. Straddling two worlds, the ILP councillor of Montrose still had to choose between his allegiance to the Burns Federation and his yearning for modernity and radicalism.

A few months later, in early 1926, the publication of William Power's *Robert Burns and other essays and sketches* would afford new support for Grieve's reformist views.[42] Like MacDiarmid, Power was an enthusiastic member of the Vernacular Circle of London who nevertheless opposed the idolatry and the conservatism of the Burns Federation. In *Robert Burns,* Power opens his study of the bard's work and legacy with a damning depiction of the political constitution of the Burns movement: 'the average Burns club, he writes, is solidly middle-class in composition and sentiment, and a proposer of 'The Immortal Memory' would be reasonably safe in combining his laudation of Burns with a denunciation of Socialist doctrines'.[43] The conservatism of the Burnsians, according to Power, went hand in hand with their traditionalist views and their pernickety interest in obscure details of Burns's life. Furthering his argument, the Scottish author goes on to mock the 'wrangling bench of poets, critics, ministers, doctors, M.P.'s, bailies, journalists, scribes and Pharisees, publicans and sinners, and deadheads and "buddies" and axe-grinders of all sorts' who, 'for nearly a century' have been tearing the bard's 'poor corpse to pieces afresh at every Burns supper'.[44] Power proposed to tackle such idolatry by broadening the spectrum of Burns studies and comparing the bard's poetry to the verses of Scottish medieval Makars like William Dunbar and the themes of European poets like Heinrich Heine.[45] Alongside Grieve, Power thought a radical approach to Burns could foster a modernist exploration of the wider national and European ensemble in which the bard's poetry resided.

Amidst the increasing political tension in Scotland which left it increasingly problematic for a socialist to dine together with dinner-jacketed bardolaters, MacDiarmid's growing reputation amongst Scotland's heterodox *literati* encouraged him to sever his ties with the Burns Federation. MacDiarmid's second book of Scots poetry, *Penny Wheep,* was published one month after the May 1926 General Strike. This volume shunned any association with the Burnsian establishment. On the dust-jacket of the first edition, a few comments (arguably written by Grieve himself) indicate: 'Mr M'Diarmid is one of the very few genuine poets who have used the medium of the Scots doric within the last 130 years [...] In doing so he has revivified the body of Scots poetry and put a spark of hope into its almost moribund heart'.[46] These bold few line, which indirectly dismissed the rest of contemporary Scottish poetry for their lack of authenticity, seemed to place MacDiarmid in direct line of descent from Burns who had died one hundred and thirty years earlier.[47]

Grieve's idiosyncratic and audacious interaction with the poetry of Burns against the crowd of his worshippers and imitators was achieved a few months later, with the publication of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. As Kenneth Buthlay notes, the first line of MacDiarmid's masterpiece, 'I amna fou' sae muckle as tired – deid dune', is a reference to Burns's refrain 'We are na fou, we're nae that fou' from his 1789 piece, 'Willie brew'd a peck o' maut'.[48] The presence of the bard's shadow in this opening line introduces Burns as the source from which MacDiarmid's poem derives its original impulse whilst simultaneously advancing its innovative quality. Indeed, the poet's daring use of the dash – strengthened by the spondee 'deid dune' – breaks the rhythm of the traditional ballad stanza he uses to open his poem. Such a rhythmical rupture contrasts with the deferential reference to Burns's song and asserts MacDiarmid's intention to deform Burns's traditional image.

To avoid pastiche, MacDiarmid needed to ensure that Burnsian sentimentalism did not sterilise his singular spiritual effort. In the third stanza, glancing at the sky after falling on the ground, the drunk man suddenly worries at the sight of 'the vilest saxpenny planet' (l. 12) shading its gloomy light over him. Already mentioned by John Buchan in *The Northern Muse,* the 'sixpenny' star signifies the 'destitute' (l. 20) state of 'a' thing else ca'd Scottish nooadays' (l. 19) and the deadly danger faced together by the drunk man and his country in their inability to stand and sing a new Scottish song. As it appears on l. 70–73, this dying sun which overshadows the future of Scotland and the destiny of the poem is nothing else than the 'The Star o' Rabbie Burns' – the name of the unofficial anthem of the Burns Federation, played at every Burns supper and whose refrain, famous in the nineteen-twenties, launches into:

> Let kings and courtiers rise and fa',
> This world has mony turns
> But brightly beams aboon them a'
> The star o' Rabbie Burns.

The immobility of Burns's star, shining in spite of all risings and revolutions, is precisely what MacDiarmid wants to tackle. Burns may have inspired the first line of *A Drunk Man,* but the gloomy star of the Burns cult now stands in the poem's way. It must be destroyed.

Here begins the most famous, or infamous, attack suffered by the Burns movement in Scotland's literary history. The drunk man's series of anti-Burnsian charges, aiming to free MacDiarmid's poem from the 'sixpenny' influence of 'Rabbie's' star, are striking in their radicalism and in their capacity to subsume, over less than one hundred lines (from l. 37 to l. 120), the multifarious strands of criticism levelled at the Burns movement since the Great War. Blending the xenophobia of *Liberty* with the anti-imperialism of the ILP, the drunk man's charge violently starts:

> You canna gang to a Burns supper even
> Wi'oot some wizened scrunt o' a knock-knee
> Chinee turns roon to say, 'Him Haggis – velly goot!'
> And ten to wan the piper is a Cockney. (40)
>
> [...]
>
> Croose London Scotties wi' their braw shirt fronts
> And a' their fancy freen's rejoicin'
> That similah gatherings in Timbuctoo,
> Bagdad – and Hell, nae doot – are voicin'
>
> Burns' sentiments o' universal love,
> In pidgin English or in wild-fowl Scots,
> And toastin' ane wha's nocht to them but an
> Excuse for faitherin' Genius wi' *their* thochts. (52)

The Chinese guest, the Cockney Piper and the upper-class English pronunciation of 'similah' demonstrate the alienness of many self-proclaimed Burnsians, who, according to MacDiarmid, indulge in a superficial representation of Scotland whilst ignoring most of the bard's work. Not only does the drunk man denigrate Burns suppers as the celebration of kilted aliens and philistines, but he also denounces their superficial internationalism as the scarcely concealed self-glorification of the Empire's bourgeoisie. Traditional toasts to the 'Imperial Forces' every January in London and Edinburgh emphasised, according to MacDiarmid, the complicity between the 'braw' middle-class members of the Burns Federation and their 'fancy

freens' who made profits in the colonies whilst celebrating the bard's notion of 'universal love'.[49]

Finally, the anti-Burnsian sequence of MacDiarmid's poem culminates in a meaningful Christian parable:

> Odd Burns Clubs tae, or ninety-nine o' them,
> And haud your birthday in a different kip
> Whaur your name isna ta'en in vain – as Christ
> Gied a' Jerusalem's Pharisees the slip
>
> – Christ wha'd ha'e been Chief Rabbi gin he'd lik't! –
> Wi' publicans and sinners to forgether,
> But, losh! the publicans noo are Pharisees,
> And I'm no' shair o' maist the sinners either. (92)
>
> [...]
>
> As Kirks wi' Christianity ha'e dune,
> Burns Clubs wi' Burns – wi' a'thing it's the same,
> The core o' ocht is only for the few,
> Scorned by the mony, thrang wi'ts empty name. (112)

In a similar fashion which recalls William Power's 1926 essay, the drunk man compares Burns worshippers with publicans turned into Pharisees and sinners. Blinded by their artificial religious zeal (if not by excessive alcohol consumption – according to the pun on 'pub-lican'), Burnsians have turned away from the bard's lesson in political radicalism and literary temerity. Against the 'sixpenny' Kirk of literary Pharisees, which MacDiarmid had failed to reform from within, Scotland, Scottish letters and Burns's legacy were altogether in need of a complete Reformation. Concluding his attacks against the Burns cult, the drunk man finally declares: 'A greater Christ, a greater Burns, may come' (l. 120). The rest of the poem will stage this second rising of a new Christ-like and Burns-like redeemer: the drunk man himself.

Now that the 'sixpenny planet' has been dealt with, Burns's legacy and contribution to MacDiarmid's poetical impetus can be re-defined in a more subtle and positive way. Socialist, internationalist and modernist, Burns's purified and positive

influence is first outlined in the drunk man's recalling of the May 1926 General Strike, during which the Scottish thistle and 'the hail braid earth had turned / A reid reid rose that in the lift / Like a ball o' fire burned' (l. 1164–66). For a couple of weeks, the rising of Scotland's working-class had transformed Burns's 'saxpenny planet' into a 'red red rose'. The use of Burns's most famous love chorus to evoke a failed uprising is significant. If the sentimental rendition of 'A Red Red Rose' is reprehensible when used to obfuscate Burns's radicalism, the naïve comparison of the revolution with Burns's refrain is accepted by MacDiarmid as a faithful reference to the bard's revolutionary impulses.

In similar vein, the drunk man tries to replace the Burns Federation's fake cosmopolitanism with a genuine internationalist association. Translating the *Comintern* – the Communist International created in Moscow in 1921 – into an enthusiastic literary project, MacDiarmid celebrates, towards the end of the poem, his desired new alliance with Russia by a long address depicting his intellectual encounter with the novelist Dostoevsky. Both writers appear as 'puir gangrel buddies waunderin hameless' (l. 2219) under a snowy sky illuminated by 'stars [that] are larochs of auld cottages' (l. 2220). This 'gangrel' ('vagrant') friendship with Dostoevsky is an implicit reference to 'The Jolly Beggars' in which Burns describes 'randie, gangrel bodies' drinking in 'poosy Nansie's' inn.[50] According to Kenneth Buthlay, the phrase 'gangrel buddies' is an accurate Scots translation of the Russian *skitalets* ('wanderer') – a term associated with a recurring theme in late nineteenth-century Russian literature.[51] By providing the phrase that best encapsulates their Scoto–Russian relationship, Burns enables the drunk man's swift encounter with Dostoevsky. This trans-secular and trans-national friendship, affirming Scotland's place within European literature, results in the climatic line of the poem: 'The Thistle rises and for ever will' (l. 2231). Between the drunk man and the Russian novelist, MacDiarmid's cult-free Burns retains a central place in the inter-nationalist trinity of Scottish modernism.

After years of awkwardly languishing in the interstices of the Burns Federation, Home Rule and Labour, MacDiarmid had finally achieved a successful separation between Burns and his cult. A regenerated bard, liberated from his conservative worshippers, could still act as a powerful impetus for new political and poetical projects. However, MacDiarmid's masterpiece while a work of remarkable poetic intensity was also a fragile ensemble. The year 1927 brought political disappointments which would cause the modernist poet from Montrose to reject the drunk

man's conservation of Burns's radical legacy. Instead, MacDiarmid raised an angrier voice against the anti-modern attributes of the eighteenth-century bard.

TWILIGHT OF THE IDOL

In May 1927, Labour raised new hopes of convincing Stanley Baldwin's conservative majority to vote for self-government for Scotland. On 13 May, James Barr, Labour MP for Motherwell, introduced a second Home Rule bill before the Parliament. Launching into a patriotic plea, the Labour MP quoted Burns's letter of 10 April 1790 to Mrs Dunlop, which stated: 'Alas, have I often said to myself, what are all the boasted advantages which my country reaps from the Union that can counterbalance the annihilation of her independence and even her very name'.[52] Barr furthered his argument by criticising the 'wholesale bribery' of the 1707 Act of Union, reciting Burns's most patriotic song – 'Sic a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation'.[53] Unfortunately for Scottish Home Rulers, Barr's speech failed to convince Tory backbenchers. Frederic Macquisten, Conservative MP for Argyll, answered Barr that although he shared Robert Burns's 'tide of Scottish prejudice' he still thought the Union, in preventing endless wars, had been beneficial overall for the British Empire.[54] Macquisten was followed by the Conservative majority which dismissed Home Rule.

Back in Scotland, Home Rulers started losing faith in Labour's capacity to make their wish come true. Grieve was peculiarly bitter and gradually came to discard his ILP allegiance. In May 1927, a few days following Barr's failure, he wrote a series of vehement articles for Roland Muirhead's nationalist Scottish Secretariat which were published together under the title *Albyn or Scotland and the future*.[55] Advocating a 'realistic' approach to nationalism as opposed to a 'sentimental' belief in the willingness of Labour to deliver Home Rule to Scotland, Grieve's book simultaneously contrasted the 'magnificent potentialities' of William Dunbar's medieval Scots to the self-conscious vernacular of Burns, whose influence 'ha[d] reduced the whole field of Scots letters to a 'kailyaird'' and reduced Scots poetry 'to a level that is beneath contempt'.[56] *Albyn* thus broke with *A Drunk Man's* attempt to save Burns from his cult and incriminated the bard and bardolaters alike. Burns was now personally responsible for failing to retrieve Dunbar's authentic language and for producing a 'wholly negligible' corpus of English poetry which had irreparably weighed upon nineteenth-century Scottish literature.[57] The bard's radical message was more than

outweighed by the harmful influence that his conventional legacy had had upon the stunted development of Scottish literature and the creeping anglicisation of Scottish nationality. Time had come to declare Scottish modernism independent from Burns's influence. 'Not Burns – Dunbar'; MacDiarmid had further distanced himself from his former icon.[58]

Grieve made his rupture with Burns and the Burns Federation concrete, three months after James Barr's failure, by co-founding the Scottish branch of PEN (Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists and Novelists).[59] The vast majority of Scottish modernist writers (William Soutar, Neil Gunn, Edwin Muir, Helen Cruickshank, Lewis Spence, and William Power – amongst others) joined Grieve's PEN, which was the very opposite of the Burns Federation.[60] On the one hand, the Federation was a nineteenth-century creation established in the rural areas of Lowland Scotland and with a reach into the remotest parts of the British Empire. With their shared liberal–conservative and unionist–nationalist views, members of the Federation celebrated Burns as an unsurpassable genius. On the other hand, Scottish PEN was assertively modern, Scottish in constitution, European in outlook, fiercely socialist, often nationalist and composed of a young, urban cultural elite which seriously intended to challenge Burns's legacy. To make sure their opposition to the Burns Federation was noticed, members of Scottish PEN immediately instituted 'Makar's dinners' aiming to 'commemorate great Scots poets other than Burns'.[61] Significantly, in September 1927, the annual conference of the Burns Federation, which was held in Derby, overlooked the creation of Scottish PEN; no mention of the newly founded body appears in the minutes of the event.[62] Such silence was grounded in obvious reasons. The creation of Scottish PEN reveals how various attempts at promoting Burns's social-radical message since the mid-1910s were progressively transmuted by MacDiarmid and his followers as a means of directly contesting the established powers in the Scottish literary scene during the mid-1920s.

The following Burns season, hostility between Scottish modernists and Burnsians was worsened by an unprecedented polemic about the bard's legacy. Speaking at the Glasgow branch of the nationalist movement on 21 January 1928, Grieve pronounced the Burns Federation 'impotent' and asserted that the bard's memory had to be forgotten for 'at least one hundred years to give it a chance of realising the aims for which Burns wrought'.[63] Whereas the drunk man had attempted to preserve Burns's radical and literary cause from the Burns cult, MacDiarmid now turned Burns's cause against Burns himself.

The Montrose poet provoked an outcry amongst cultural and political authorities. Rev. John McColl, from the Glasgow Haggis club denounced Grieve's intervention as 'a blasphemy to the name of our national bard', adding that 'in spite of all his hardships, Burns was not a class poet, although he was claimed as such by some of our misguided politicians of a fiery order'.[64] Similarly, Sir Joseph Dobbie, the newly elected President of the Burns Federation, answered Grieve that his radical interpretation of the bard's aims was inadequate since Burns had never wanted 'a fierce conflict between two classes'.[65] Interestingly, Labour officials joined Burnsians in countering Grieve's provocation. James Brown, Labour MP for South Ayrshire, encouraged Burns lovers to ignore the 'disgruntled critics [who] sneer[ed] this annual worship at the shrine of the poet's fame'.[66] Along the same line, the ex-Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, speaking at the London Burns club, countered Grieve by stressing that 'Burns was too tenderly human and too sturdily manly ever to become remote from the living generations of Scotsmen'.[67]

As expected, Grieve received support from his modernist friends. In his journal *The Modern Scot,* William Power congratulated MacDiarmid – a 'Knox of literary criticism' – for 'breaching the Burnsian peace'.[68] 'Worshipping Burns as a god', according to Power, condemned Scotland to 'retrogression'. The only way forward was to 'discredit' the Burns cult and 'separate [it] from literature entirely'. Similar sentiments were echoed in April 1928 by the young novelist Neil Gunn who backed MacDiarmid's patriotic rebellion against 'Anglo-Scots [...] toasting Burns comically'.[69]

The Burns furore of January 1928 marked a turning point in MacDiarmid's political evolution. Labour's rallying to Burns's worshippers against Grieve highlighted the gap that now separated him from his former socialist acquaintances. If the ILP's radical fascination with the bard had fostered MacDiarmid's critique of the middle-class Burns cult in the early nineteen-twenties, his outright rejection of Burns's legacy from 1927 onward drove him away from his former party. The rupture was made explicit in March as MacDiarmid wrote, in the nationalist *Pictish Review,* that John S. Clarke and Scottish socialists had 'contributed nothing of the slightest consequence to Socialist thought' but sterile 'Burnsian "A Man's-a-manism"'.[70] As a result, on 23 June 1928, Grieve co-founded a new socialist and pro-independence party which appealed to most nationalist members of Scottish PEN: the National Party of Scotland (NPS).[71] In the course of his journey from the ILP to the NPS, the politics of MacDiarmid's interpretation of Burns had utterly changed.

CONCLUSION

Scottish PEN, an activist cultural body, and the NPS, a party of *literati*, provided MacDiarmid with two platforms to spread his work and refine his thoughts far from the burden of Burns's influence.[72] After failing to reform the traditionalist Burns Federation and abandoning his aspiration to preserve the bard's radicalism from traditionalist readings, MacDiarmid finally declared his independence from Scotland's national poet. Except for a few minor essays and articles, Burns would rarely be mentioned in his later prose and verse.[73] Grieve's confrontation with the bard's legacy had been indispensable to his attempt to assert himself both as a radical and modernist poet in a context where Burns was an obvious point of cultural and political reference. In 1928, however, Grieve's literary status was being established and his wrestling with Burns's shadow became less central to his own development as a partisan poet. The torch of anti-Burnsian criticism was left for other writers to take up.[74]

Singular though MacDiarmid's relationship to Burns may seem, its evolution from emulation to rejection remains deeply connected to the wider cultural politics of post-war Scotland. Since the Burns Federation was the main Scottish cultural institution bequeathed by the nineteenth century and because the bard's legacy was a crucial element of contemporary arguments on class, war, language and nationhood, the Burnsian stage provided MacDiarmid with his initial opportunity to enter the national debate through avant-garde poetry. Moreover, it also facilitated his literary career through his pursuit of partisan polemics. Coming back from war as an ILP activist, a Burns Federation member and a Burns enthusiast, Grieve left the nineteen-twenties as an NPS cadre, a Scottish PEN organiser, and a Burns iconoclast. The transitions in MacDiarmid's own personal allegiances – cultural and political – mirrored those of inter-war Scotland: from tradition to revolution, Empire to Nation, English to Doric and from bard to makar.

Notes

1 I wish to thank Professor Colin Kidd and Professor Robert Crawford for helping me mould this article.

2 Alan Riach, 'MacDiarmid's Burns', Robert Crawford, (ed.) *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) pp. 198–215; Robert Crawford, 'MacDiarmid, Burnsians, and Burns legacy' *Burns and Other Poets*, David Sergeant and Fiona Stafford (eds) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 182–94. See also Scott Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place: Imagining a Scottish Republic*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 157–59.

3 David Goldie, 'Robert Burns and the First World War', *International Journal of Scottish Literature* 6, Spring/Summer 2010, pp. 1–20.

4 Ibid., p. 6.

5 Christopher Whatley, *Immortal Memory: Burns and the Scottish People*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2016), pp. 143–66 offers interesting details about uses of Burns in the early Labour movement.

6 John S. Clarke, *The Story of Robert Burns*, 2nd edition, (Glasgow: Scottish Workers' Committees, 1920), p. 2. The *Story* proved successful enough to be re-edited in 1920.

7 Ibid., pp. 11–13.

8 Ibid., pp. 14–15.

9 *Forward*, 19 January 1918.

10 Richard J. Finlay, *Independent and Free: Scottish Politics and the Origins of the Scottish National Party, 1918–1945*, (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1994), p. 39.

11 *Liberty*, February 1920.

12 Ibid.

13 *Liberty*, February 1921.

14 William Will, *Burns as a volunteer*, (Glasgow, 1919).

15 William Will, 'Burns as a volunteer', *Burns Chronicle*, 29, (1920), p. 7, p. 14.

16 *Burns Chronicle*, 28 (1919), p. 64

17 Minutes of the London Robert Burns Club, 7 June 1920, Special Collections, Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

18 Ibid. and *Burns Chronicle*, 30, (1921), p. 125.

19 *Montrose Review*, 16 December 1921.

20 *Montrose Review*, 8 September 1922.

21 *The Scottish Chapbook*, September 1922, p. 38.

22 Ibid.

23 *The Scottish Chapbook*, October 1922, p. 39.

24 *The Scottish Chapbook*, January 1923, p. 17.

25 Ibid.

26 *Burns Chronicle*, 33, (1924), p. 122.

27 Ibid.

28 James Barr, *Lang Syne: Memoirs of the Rev. James Barr*, (Glasgow: Maclellan, 1949), David Kirkwood, *My Life of Revolt* (London: G. G. Harrap, 1935), and Thomas Johnston, *Memories* (London: Collins, 1952) all mention the influence of Burns on the politics of their authors.

29 *Hansard*, HC Deb. 9 May 1924, Vol 173, col. 800.
30 Ibid., cols. 870–74.
31 John S. Clarke, *Robert Burns and his Politics*, (Glasgow, 1925), p. 9, p. 60.
32 Duncan McNaught, 'Burns Fiction', *Burns Chronicle*, 32 (1923); John S. Clarke, ibid., p. 27.
33 John S. Clarke, ibid. pp. 28–29.
34 Ibid.
35 Duncan McNaught, 'The politics of Burns', *Burns Chronicle*, 35, (1925), pp. 60–65.
36 Ibid., p. 60.
37 Ibid., p. 61.
38 In *Forward*, 6 February 1926, J. S. Clarke qualifies Doric revivalism as 'reactionary'.
39 John Buchan, *The Northern Muse*, (London: Nelson & Sons, 1924), p. 371.
40 Ibid., pp. xxvi–xxix.
41 John Buchan, Preface to Hugh MacDiarmid, *Sangschaw*, (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1925), p. x.
42 William Power, *Robert Burns and other essays and sketches*, (London and Glasgow: Gowans & Gray, 1926).
43 Ibid., p. 9.
44 Ibid., pp. 9–10.
45 Ibid., pp. 16–19, pp. 27–30, p. 34, pp. 41–42
46 Hugh MacDiarmid, *Penny Wheep*, (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1926).
47 See Alan Riach, pp. 202–03 for a longer analysis of Burns references in *Penny Wheep*.
48 Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, Kenneth Buthlay (ed.), (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2008), p. 52.
49 This sequence notwithstanding, MacDiarmid himself was not immune from Scottish imperialist tendencies. See Colin Kidd, *Union and Unionism: Political thought in Scotland, 1500–2000*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 285.
50 Robert Burns, 'The Jolly Beggars', l. 8–10.
51 Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man*, p. 208.
52 *Hansard*, HC, Deb 13 May 1927, Vol 206, c. 871.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., c. 875–76.
55 Alan Bold, *MacDiarmid*, (London, 1988), p. 227; C. M. Grieve, *Albyn: or, Scotland and the Future*, (London: Kegan Paul & Co., 1927).
56 Ibid., pp. 19, 37, 43, 81.
57 Ibid., pp. 18, 38.
58 Ibid., p. 35.
59 Alan Bold, pp. 227–78. MacDiarmid sent out letters to propose the creation of a Scottish PEN to prominent Scottish writers only three days after Barr's failure. This highlights the correlation between the two events.
60 Ibid.
61 William Power, *Should auld acquaintance …: an autobiography*. (London: Harrap, 1937), p. 204.
62 *Burns Chronicle*, 2nd Series, 3, 1928, pp. 164–76.
63 *Daily Record*, 23 January 1928; *Edinburgh Evening News*, 26 January 1928.
64 *Daily Record*, 26 January 1928.
65 *Glasgow Herald*, 26 January 1928.
66 Ibid.

67 *Daily Record*, 26 January 1928.
68 *The Scots Observer*, 4 February 1928.
69 *The Scots Magazine*, April 1928.
70 *The Pictish Review*, March 1928.
71 Alan Bold, pp. 230–33.
72 The expression 'party of literati' comes from Christopher Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism: Scottish Society and Politics, 1707 to the present.* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 19.
73 MacDiarmid's later essays on Burns can be found in *At the Sign of the Thistle*, (London: Nott Organisation, 1934) and *Burns today and tomorrow*, (Edinburgh: Castle Wynd Printers, 1959).
74 About the critique of Burns's legacy in the works of Catherine Carswell, Lewis Grassic Gibbon and James Barke, see Richard Price, 'Burns and the Scottish Renaissance', Kenneth Simpson (ed.), *Love and Liberty*, (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1997), pp. 128–44.

University of St Andrews