

‘Genius in a Provincial Town’: MacDiarmid’s Poetry and Politics

in Montrose

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Focusing on the Scots lyrics of *Sangschaw* (1925) and *Penny Wheep* (1926), this article explores the ways in which Christopher Murray Grieve’s activities in Montrose as a journalist with the *Montrose Review* and as an independent member of the local council helped enable the finding of his artistic voice, Hugh MacDiarmid. Using previously unpublished archival material from the *Montrose Review*, this article argues that his early modernist poetry in Scots and the radical politics that he pursued both locally and nationally were valuably stimulated by his daily engagement with the Montrose community, principally through his work as a journalist and councillor. The article examines the under-researched area of MacDiarmid’s professional working life, emphasising his vigorous localism during almost a decade in the Angus town in the 1920s. It aims to deepen our sense of a civic commitment to Montrose that facilitated his internationalist vision of an independent Scotland through a dynamic commingling of the local, the national and the universal. The MacDiarmid of *Lucky Poet* (1943) may have believed himself to be a ‘genius in a provincial town’ while living in Montrose – writing scornfully in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) that his fellow townsfolk ‘continue / To lead their livin’ death’ – but his period there also displays a dedicated striving to serve and radically transform the place in which he wrote much of his best poetry and envisioned a Scottish political and cultural renaissance.¹

MacDiarmid had two spells in Montrose. He was demobilised from the British army as a non-combatant in 1919 and went to St Andrews where his first wife Peggy was living. From the university town, MacDiarmid found employment as a reporter in Montrose with the local newspaper, the *Montrose Review*. He left his first stint in Montrose in October 1920 to work as a private tutor at Kildermorie Lodge in Ross and Cromarty. In November 1920, the poet and propagandist of the Scottish renaissance had already begun what Alan Bold calls ‘the first step in a campaign strategically masterminded by Grieve’, publishing a new group of Scottish poets in the first series of the anthology *Northern Numbers*.² He also edited and wrote much of the *Scottish Chapbook* and began working on articles that would later be collected as the controversial *Contemporary Scottish Studies* (1926), his modernist blast at Scotland’s cultural kailyard. However, aged twenty-eight and married to Peggy, he was tempted back to the *Review* in April 1921 by the promise of increased wages. His second period in Montrose, which became the focus of the Scottish renaissance, saw MacDiarmid even more surely ‘enter heart and body and soul into a new Scots Nationalist propaganda’ that he had planned as early as October 1916 from ‘somewhere in Macedonia’.³

MacDiarmid’s modernist manifesto for Scottish cultural and political regeneration, ambitiously implemented during the 1920s from the seemingly peripheral setting of Montrose, was mapped out during the First World War. Supposedly fighting for the rights of small nations, the British were also bloodily dealing with the Irish rebels of Easter 1916. MacDiarmid wanted a nationalist movement that would enable Scotland to find its true identity, not as a provincialised handmaiden to the imperialism administered in Ireland, but as an independent nation radically opposed to the metropolitan and capitalist values of the big battalions.

Subsequently helping to form the National Party of Scotland in 1928, his important visit that year to Dublin, where he met Éamon de Valera and W.B. Yeats, confirmed his wish for a Celtic confederacy against British imperialism.

Inspired by the Irish Republicans to advance the Scottish nationalist cause, MacDiarmid was also radically politicised by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. In 1920 (the year in which the Communist Party of Great Britain was founded) in his first period in Montrose, C.M. Grieve gave a lecture to the local branch of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) on ‘Lenin – The Man and His Message and Methods’.⁴ Grieve joined the ILP in 1908 when he was unsuccessfully training to be a teacher in Edinburgh. In 1911 he became a junior reporter with the *Edinburgh Evening Dispatch*, but his radical journalism didn’t find expression until later the same year with the Monmouthshire *Labour News* in South Wales. He then worked briefly as a reporter in Clydebank and Renfrew (1912), Cupar (1912) and Forfar (1913), before the war of 1914-18 intervened. MacDiarmid believed his ‘out-and-out Radicalism and Republicanism’ came from his upbringing in small-town Langholm, where he was born in 1892.⁵ However, it was not until he moved to Montrose in the 1920s that his radical Scottish nationalism found its most propitious place from which to be practiced.

Effectively and ingeniously, MacDiarmid’s managed to interrelate his political and cultural activities in Montrose through his occupation as a journalist. The Scots lyric poetry of *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep*, while not directly political in content, is the creative manifestation of the cultural and political ideas that MacDiarmid propagandised through the pages of various periodicals such as the *Scottish Nation* and in the *Montrose Review*. Established in 1811, the *Montrose Review* is one of the oldest weekly newspapers in Scotland. When MacDiarmid worked there this eight-

page Liberal newspaper would appear every Friday. Like most provincial papers, it fused mainly local concerns with reports of the most significant national and international events. MacDiarmid's job was that of editor-reporter. According to Bold, this meant that he 'wrote most of the contents'.⁶ Tempting as this may be to believe, the very structure of the *Review* and indeed all newspapers, wherein particular subject areas are assigned to individuals with the requisite knowledge and experience, makes it unlikely. It would be a surprise if MacDiarmid was found to be the author of the weekly round-up of farming news, 'Poultry Notes'.

The most obvious difficulty in identifying MacDiarmid's contribution to the *Montrose Review* is the anonymity of the articles. His hand can only be discerned by what must pass for educated guesswork. As we shall see, the probability of an article being by MacDiarmid centres on its purposiveness and radical ideas. Though one cannot be sure of his authorship, the material cited here from the *Review* is characteristic of his concerns. As Glen Murray states, 'The principle of putting controversial and sometimes quite arcane ideas before a wide audience in the columns of a newspaper was one he used repeatedly.'⁷

MacDiarmid's journalism substantially aided his industrious push for political and cultural change in Scotland. Throughout 1923, the year Grieve's first book *Annals of the Five Senses* was published, the *Montrose Review* carried syndicated articles from the *Scottish Nation*, a literary, cultural and political journal devoted to Scottish interests that MacDiarmid helped to establish in that year. Syndicated articles were sold to a number of different publications to be printed simultaneously. This allowed for a larger, non-specialist readership to be reached, multiplying the potential impact of one piece. For MacDiarmid, this was crucial in his propaganda programme for Scottish renaissance. He would struggle to win a wide readership for ideologically

nationalist and short-lived intellectual journals such as the *Scottish Nation*, the *Scottish Chapbook* and the *Northern Review*.⁸ However, by 1928, the polyphonic MacDiarmid claimed that through ‘a special bureau formed for the purpose (in connection with the Scottish Home Rule Movement)’, he was reaching up to forty local weekly newspapers across Scotland by means of syndication.⁹

He further boosted his nationalist concerns in the *Montrose Review* by commenting on his own activities in different sections of the newspaper. For instance, in ‘Round the Town’ from 25 May 1923 we have a writer, probably MacDiarmid, congratulating C.M. Grieve on the *Scottish Nation*:

It is inconceivable that Scotsmen and Scotswomen will not welcome their new weekly. By all the tokens, it is assured of such a vigorous measure of support as will give it a long and healthy life and so reward the public spirit and enterprise of its promoters. No one who believes that mind is greater than matter can afford to miss a copy of ‘The Scottish Nation’ – if for nothing else than the fact of its promise of forcing the pace in the strife to compel an unrepresentative Parliament in which an alien, although neighbouring country is a ‘Predominant’ partner to hand over to Scotland her right to manage Scottish affairs in her distinctively Scottish manner.¹⁰

Such self-promotion must have been invaluable when launching the *Scottish Nation*. From a provincial setting, MacDiarmid was aiming to become the voice of a new internationalist Scotland.

He also made his radical voice heard in the council chamber of Montrose. MacDiarmid began working for Montrose Town Council on 13 March 1922 on a

provisional basis, replacing Councillor James Davidson who had resigned.¹¹ In November of that year, C.M. Grieve sought the votes of the people of Montrose in the Municipal Election with this address in the *Montrose Review*:

Journalism rightly-conceived is a training in the understanding of public affairs and in the formulation and expression of opinion. Journalists have rendered public service to Montrose before. Having been requested to stand for the Town Council, it will be my earnest endeavour, if returned, to worthily follow these precedents. I am opposed to 'secret diplomacy' in public affairs. I believe that no work should be sent out of the town which can possibly be allocated locally, and that the Council should do all in its power to increase local prosperity and relieve unemployment. A negative policy of economy is not enough. A forward policy is needed, and, in the initiation and carrying-out of such, the services of a young man may be useful. Ability and public spirit are not the monopolies of the elderly. I do not believe that a caucus can fairly represent the electorate, and foresee danger to the public interest if this caucus secures a majority in the reduced Council. I respectfully solicit the suffrages of those who, aware of the grave issues confronting local authorities in these troublous times appreciate the need not only for men who are not afraid to speak their minds (except in Committee), but who actually have minds to speak.¹²

MacDiarmid the local politician shows an understanding of the importance of his journalistic work to a knowledge of and commitment to community affairs. In a record poll he gained 1,279 votes.

In Montrose, MacDiarmid was a successful local politician, in contrast to his attempts to shine on the national stage against such as Prime Minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home in 1964, and his repeated failure to win university rectorships. In the appointment of the office-bearers for Montrose Town Council, Councillor Grieve was selected to work on several committees: the Water Committee; Dorward's House of Refuge Representatives; he was the lone council representative on the Montrose School Management Committee; and he served on the Public Library Committee. He also became a Justice of the Peace in February 1926. MacDiarmid would later remember himself as 'the only Socialist Town Councillor in Montrose'.¹³ According to Trevor Johns, however, MacDiarmid denied 'that he was standing as a Socialist. He admitted that he was a Socialist, but was not standing as an official Socialist candidate: he was an Independent'.¹⁴ MacDiarmid certainly exemplified a Burnsian independence of mind in his work as a local councillor.

From the *Montrose Review* throughout the 1920s we find MacDiarmid engaged in a local socialist politics, both in the council chamber and in public lectures and debates round the town. A good example comes from a letter Grieve sent to the correspondence column of the *Montrose Review* of 23 February 1923. Entitled 'Proposed Wage Cuts', the letter rails against a 'reduction in the wages of officials and workmen' in the town, Grieve's pronouncements amounting to the now unfashionable idea of class war:

The argument that such reductions in the remuneration of public employees are made in the interests of the ratepayers is entirely specious, and will not bear a moment's consideration. The present trade depression and widespread unemployment are mainly due to the reduction in the workers'

purchasing power caused by wage-cuts [...] No section of workers can have their wages reduced without endangering the standard of living of their fellows. Each wage-cut anywhere is triumphantly cited by employers and employing authorities elsewhere as a reason for further and further cuts, and so the vicious circle is kept going round.¹⁵

Councillor Grieve again drew attention to the wages question at the monthly meeting of Montrose Town Council on Monday, 14 May 1923. He protested against the inadequate wage of full-time employees saying, 'It was simply a starvation wage, and the Council was not justified in taking advantage of [the] unemployed in this way.'¹⁶ These examples show MacDiarmid radically engaged in the minutiae of Montrose politics, always clear, as I have argued at length elsewhere, in his understanding that the local is the universal.¹⁷

MacDiarmid's first child, Christine, was born on 4 September 1924. His letter of resignation from council work was accepted four days later.¹⁸ However, the promise of burgeoning family responsibilities had done nothing to tame his politics. Early in the same year, for instance, at an ILP meeting at the Co-operative Hall in Montrose on Sunday, 13 January 1924, Hospitalmaster Grieve gave a lecture on 'The Dangers of Moderation', a typically MacDiarmidian stance.¹⁹ A *Montrose Review* report of 18 January gives an outline of the poet's political ideas:

Mr Grieve said that they were diluting their principles and modifying their demands in a fashion that could have only one result – the stultification of their movement. They might gain social reforms very valuable in themselves, but that had nothing to do with their objective, which was the

realisation of Socialism. If as a consequence of moderation, by means of better wages and conditions generally, they raised the working classes to conditions of comfort equal to those at present enjoyed by the middle classes, and, so merely changed the proletariat into a bourgeoisie [*sic*] he would regard it as the greatest catastrophe in history. He regarded a Trade Unionist who voted Labour, but was not a Socialist, as a more dangerous enemy than the die-hard Tory.²⁰

It is doubtful that ‘the working classes’ would agree with MacDiarmid that an increase in material prosperity is disastrous, but his attempt to introduce international socialist concerns within a small-town domain not noted for radicalism is courageously characteristic of his politics in Montrose.

Another way in which MacDiarmid managed to combine his socialist commitment to a particular locality with a sense of responsibility for the global was through his participation in the Montrose branch of the League of Nations. As Secretary of the League of Nations Union, MacDiarmid attended an open-air ‘No More War’ demonstration at the Town House in Montrose on Friday, 10 August 1923. From the *Montrose Review* of 17 August we read that Councillor Grieve was appalled at the ‘extraordinary lethargy’ shown in Montrose toward the aims of the League.²¹ Having been formed the previous winter the local branch still had only thirty members, whereas the less populous Ferryden had over sixty members. In the words of the *Review* writer, Grieve lambasts the ‘Christian Churches’:

They had cut a sorry figure during the last War when they manifested themselves as mere ‘blind leaders of the blind’, impotent to give any

message to the stricken peoples. If that was all that the Christian Churches could do after 2000 years of advocacy of Christianity, they might as well resign themselves to the continuance of war and the destruction of civilization and Christianity.²²

When writing 'After Two Thousand Years', from *Second Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems* (1935), he may well have remembered his political disillusionment with the kirks of Montrose:

The Christians have had two thousand years
And what have they done? –
Made the bloodiest and beastliest world ever seen
Under the sun.²³

It is apposite that MacDiarmid should have criticised religious involvement in the League of Nations Union so soon after he joined the organisation. Six months later, on Friday, 8 February 1924, MacDiarmid resigned from his offices as Secretary and Treasurer because he was no longer prepared to work with what he saw as the implacably conservative local churches. At this time, he was also beginning to write a lyrical Scots poetry that would challenge the Christian view of the universe.

Poetry, journalism and radically modern ideas constantly criss-cross during MacDiarmid's period in Montrose. An excellent example of this emerges in a talk he gave on 17 February 1924:

Vistas of Science – Hospitalmaster Grieve is to address Montrose Brotherhood in the YMCA Institute on Sunday afternoon, when he will deal with the great discoveries which have recently revolutionised scientific thought – relativity, the Bohr-Rutherford theory of atoms, etc. – and relate these to the individual outlook in general, and to religious belief in particular.²⁴

Coming in 1924, the preoccupations of this ‘Vistas of Science’ lecture predate by some considerable time the use of scientific vocabulary in MacDiarmid’s later poetry of facts. However, this address was made only one year before the appearance of the modernist metaphysics of his first collection of poetry in Scots.

Many of the poems in *Sangschaw* (1925) and *Penny Wheep* (1926) adopt a cosmological viewpoint of the universe and suggest a Creation from which God has mysteriously withdrawn, leaving only small traces to be discerned through the spiritually penetrating ‘keethin’ sicht’ of the Scots lyrics:

But mebbe yet the hert o’ a man
When it feels the twist in its quick
O’ the link that binds it to ilka life,
A’e stab in the nerves o’ the stars,
'll raise a cry that’ll fetch God back
To the hert o’ His wark again?
– Though Nature and Man ha’e cried in vain
Rent in unendin’ wars!²⁵

Chambers Dictionary defines the cosmological as ‘according to the cosmology of general relativity, the principle that, at a given time, the universe would look the same to observers in other nebulae as it looks to us’.²⁶ Such a theory is at work in ‘The Innumerable Christ’ from *Sangschaw*:

I’ mony an unco warl’ the nicht
The lift gaes black as pitch at noon,
An’ sideways on their chests the heids
O’ endless Christs roll doon.²⁷

What MacDiarmid seems intent on doing in these early Scots lyrics is undermining the Christian idea that God is central to the purpose of the universe, so clearing the way for the historical destiny of the essential metaphysical Scotland to be revealed by the poet-saviour of *A Drunk Man* and *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930).

‘Ballad of the Five Senses’ is similar to ‘The Innumerable Christ’ in its attempt to decentre the Christian subject and open up new ways of seeing. Perceiving ‘wi’ his senses five’ the ‘bonny warl’ / That lies fornenst a’ men’, the balladeer understands that to see God he must move beyond the material and sensual:

Oot o’ the way, my senses five,
I ken a’ you can tell,
Oot o’ the way, my thochts, for noo’
I maun face God mysel’.²⁸

The idea that the poet must face God alone with no material intermediaries is a reminder of MacDiarmid's ascetical Protestant lineage. However, this religious atheist transcends even that stark creed: 'I cam' unto a place where there / Seemed nocht but naethingness.'²⁹ Such existential loneliness, moving beyond the idea of God and finding only an abyss of silence, is mirrored in 'Empty Vessel' from *Penny Wheep* in which 'A lass wi' tousie hair / Singin' till a bairnie / That was nae langer there' finds the universe indifferent to her loss and grief: 'The licht that bends owre a'thing / Is less ta'en up wi't.'³⁰ Similarly, the other planets of the cosmos cannot even spare a thought for 'Earth, thou bonnie broukit bairn!'³¹ The balladeer understands that such metaphysical emptiness has been filled by humanity in its own image; as such, for Man, 'God Himsel'' is only 'A way o' lookin' at himsel''.³² If God is the reflection of humanity seen through the mirror of its own religious desires, then the exciting scientific discoveries occurring in MacDiarmid's lifetime, explored in his 1924 'Vistas of Science' lecture in Montrose, bring with them new modernistic approaches to subjectivity and reality.

These early poems may deal with the absence of God, but the figure of Christ is a dominant one throughout. In *A Drunk Man* Christ remains central to the poet's concern that humans should strive to be more spiritually alive than the 'feck o' mankind' ordinarily show themselves to be, the poet-Christ becoming an unforgiving Calvinistic *Übermensch* figure.³³ The earlier Scots lyrics, however, display a compassionate tenderness to Christ. 'O Jesu Parvule' from *Sangschaw* shows the Christ child in His mother's arms – 'His mither sings to the bairnie Christ' – yet failing to find comfort, a prefiguration of the sadness, sacrifice and pain He is to suffer in His adult life:

'Fa' owre, ma hinny, fa' owre, fa' owre,
A' body's sleepin' binna oorsels.'
She's drawn him in tae the bool o' her breist
But the byspale's nae thocht o' sleep i' the least.

*Balloo, wee mannie, balloo, balloo.*³⁴

'I Heard Christ Sing' imagines the crucifixion and the song of the spirit that emanates from the lips of the physically broken Jesus – 'the bonniest sang that e'er / Was sung sin' Time began' – while 'The Innumerable Christ' again links Christ's death-agony with the wail of sorrow he gives for humanity as a 'Babe'.³⁵

What these poems suggest is a clinging memory of and affection for the religion of MacDiarmid's childhood. However, his political objection to the involvement of the local Montrose churches in the League of Nations in 1924 may have hastened a developing atheism that subsequently became a more persistent outlook:

My parents were very devout and as a boy, a small boy, I had to go to church several times every Sunday, and I had to go to Bible class and Sunday school and so on, you see. And it wasn't until I was... about fifteen or sixteen, that I repudiated the lot. I didn't quarrel with my parents about it. There would be no point in that. But I just made it clear that I disassociated myself completely. I became a complete atheist, you see – and still am. But I'd had all this indoctrination that I'd been subjected to up till then and it's still part of my vocabulary.³⁶

The early poems are soaked in the ‘vocabulary’ of MacDiarmid’s memory of his years in Langholm. Unlike the often evocative poems written about Langholm and Whalsay, the Scots lyrics of *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep* produced in Montrose offer no obvious poetics of place.³⁷ Indeed, *A Drunk Man*, also written in Montrose and published on 22 November 1926, is a denunciation of Scottish provincialism that may have isolated him somewhat from those colleagues at the *Review* who were aware that Grieve had become MacDiarmid four years earlier: the strain of his ‘double life’ as poet and journalist is evident in *To Circumjack Cencrastus*.³⁸ Only with the retrospective ‘Montrose’ (1961) do we find poetic allusion to the town’s positive influence on his work:

‘Guid gear gangs in sma’ book’ and fegs!
Man’s story owes more to little towns than to great,
And Montrose is typical of Scotland’s small grey burghs
Each with a character of its own time cannot abate.³⁹

However, MacDiarmid’s time in Montrose was, in part, so productive because in some deep-rooted psychological and emotional manner it reconnected him to the folk-memory of his earliest childhood: the native Scots tongue, the religious imagery and the insistence on rural rather than urban settings. This last point is particularly pertinent when examining *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep*. In both collections only one poem, ‘Glasgow’ from *Sangschaw*, has an obviously urban, industrial setting, and it is written in English. This intensely local colouring that flows through MacDiarmid’s work flowered most abundantly in Montrose.

His concern with the local is prevalent in the pages of the *Montrose Review*. As far back as 1920, in MacDiarmid's first brief period in the town, we find in the *Review* an attempt to open up hidden areas of the town's history and resources to the unaware local reader. On 26 March 1920, in a section called 'Among My Books', 'Montrosian' admires the wealth of material to be found in Montrose Library:

The two outstanding items of interest in the list under consideration are undoubtedly the two additions to that most valuable feature or adjunct of the Library – the Local Corner – wherein already lies ample material, not otherwise readily obtainable and in certain cases elsewhere unobtainable, for the future historian of the burgh. The majority of readers scarcely appreciate it at its true value, I fear.⁴⁰

The 'two outstanding items of interest' are George Beattie's 'John o' Arnha' – 'certain passages of which', thought Grieve in 1924, 'as graphic and vigorous' as Burns's 'Tam o' Shanter' – and 'a copy of the electioneering bill relating to the candidature of Horatio Ross of Rossie for the representation of Aberdeen in 1837'.⁴¹

The following week, in the same column, the writer is already apologising for having 'bit off perhaps more than I can conveniently chew' in detailing the contents of the Local Corner.⁴² This indicates even more strongly that the writer is MacDiarmid, as abandoning projects amidst the welter of all his other activities is characteristic. However, 'Montrosian' then goes on in more detail to point out the worth of the Local Corner:

First then, a word on the genesis and value of the Local Corner! The value of such a feature cannot be overestimated. It is – or rather should be – the most vital branch of the institution. Its uses and functions are inexhaustible and grow with the years. Local education stands indisputably in need of a new orientation in regard to this matter. The historical section of the curriculum is comparatively valueless as matters stand. History like charity should begin at home. The matter need not be laboured here. A greatly extended appreciation of the place and importance of local history is already developing. If these notes serve to accelerate the movement in Montrose, they will have been written to splendid purpose.⁴³

Beginning with his boyhood exploration of Langholm Library, MacDiarmid would understand the value of local libraries in his autodidactic pursuit of material through which to ideologically fashion a radical Scottish Republic. The central idea of this piece on the Local Corner, that ‘History like charity should begin at home’ – echoed in his promise in 1934 to ‘be faithful in small things first’ – is a perfect exemplification of MacDiarmid’s concerns in Montrose: literature, journalism and politics in a local environment.⁴⁴

When standing for election to Montrose Town Council in November 1922 one of the main ideas that MacDiarmid proposed was that trade should stay local: ‘I believe that no work should be sent out of town which can possibly be allocated locally.’⁴⁵ On the same day that his election address appeared in the *Montrose Review* a letter from Grieve was printed in the correspondence columns. Entitled ‘Harbour Board Representation’, it concerns the building of new dock gates and the dredging of the harbour. Grieve’s contention is that in commercial operations many local

councillors are putting their own private interests before that of the public and that as a result business in Montrose is suffering:

Montrose Harbour history is an amazing record of the ‘rigging’ of public affairs to suit private interests, and the desuetude of local trade is largely due to the selfish and short-sighted policy of men ostensibly representing the community but actually furthering their individual interests (and, on occasion, indulging their individual spleens) – regardless of the general consequences to the burgh, and employing when necessity arose the most unscrupulous means.⁴⁶

The idea that councillors pursued their own private interests rather than seeking the good of the burgh was one MacDiarmid returned to in an interview with *Scottish Marxist* in 1975, maintaining that ‘in a Capitalist society a body like a Town Council must be a bourgeois body and subject to all the grafts and the pressures of business interests’.⁴⁷ In the 1920s, however, this independent Montrose councillor proposed a radical politics that believed in prioritising and transforming the local. An editorial appearing in the *Review* in January 1924 suggests a ‘Montrose First’ movement that chimes with the idea at the heart of MacDiarmid’s election address to keep trade local: ‘The essence of the contention advanced is that steps should be taken to ensure that no work that can be done locally should be sent out of town, and that all money earned locally should be spent locally – other things being equal.’⁴⁸ MacDiarmid’s commitment to Montrose is evident in these examples of his work as a councillor and journalist, this political localism informing and ideologically augmenting the intimately local language and setting of his modernist Scots lyrics.

MacDiarmid's lyrics in Scots anticipate, in less obviously intellectual but no less effective terms, the metaphysical concerns of *A Drunk Man*. However, they do so in a way that seems more connected to the local community and the bonds of family, both in the Langholm past and the Montrose of the 1920s, which helped to nurture such work. So we find 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' from *Sangschaw* combining metaphysical tenderness towards the Earth with love for the dedicatee of the poem, Peggy. However, by 1930 MacDiarmid's personal world was breaking apart, with the split from Peggy and his children with her, Christine and Walter (born in 1928), perhaps provoked by his excessive workload in Montrose. Marital breakdown would lead him, via Depression London, industrial Liverpool, and rural Sussex, to the starkly inspiring landscape of Shetland, writing along the way a marxist poetry of a more alienated nature than the optimistic Montrose lyrics. For instance, 'The Watergaw' from *Sangschaw* fuses the natural beauty of a rainbow, symbolising speculation as to a possible hereafter, with a poet thinking more sorrowfully and empathetically of his father's death than the later Leninist intellectual of 'At My Father's Grave' (1931). Even the quirky publishing history of 'The Watergaw', first appearing in the *Dunfermline Press* in September 1922 as the work of Grieve's 'friend', suggests something of the exuberance of MacDiarmid in Montrose.⁴⁹ Many of the Scots lyrics also suggest loving relation with the countryside and farmland of rural Scotland, perhaps inspired by Langholm and the Scottish Borders, but surely marshalled into poetic life by the beauty of Angus:

Wi' sae mony wild roses

Dancin' and daffin',

It looks as tho' a'

The countryside's laffin'.⁵⁰

As in 'Wild Roses' from *Penny Wheep*, MacDiarmid's Scots lyrics can be reminiscent of Burns in their coupling of the natural radiance of the local rural scene with love for a girl among the rigs of barley.

These beautiful poems are written in a Scots not necessarily as synthetic or artificial as one would at first suppose from MacDiarmid's dictionary-dredging compositional method. J. Derrick McClure argues that the 'MacDiarmidian Revolution' is following a Scottish poetic tradition in its synthetic approach: 'That MacDiarmid wrote in a wholly "synthetic language", or even one which is, as language, much more recondite than that of his immediate or his eighteenth-century predecessors, is simply untenable.'⁵¹ The demotic nature of much Scottish literature suggests that some of the Scots words of *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep* would have still been used in the High Street and port of Montrose and the surrounding farmlands of Angus in the 1920s, just not in such stunning combination as appears in MacDiarmid's lyrics.

This point is borne out when examining the *Montrose Review*. As William Donaldson's important study of *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland* (1986) makes clear, the provincial press in Scotland was an assiduous carrier of poetry and fiction written in Scots, illustrating 'that use of the Scots language was much more extensive and important than might otherwise be concluded on the evidence of a book-culture produced for an all-UK literary market'.⁵² In the *Review* of the 1920s the populist tradition of Scots writing uncovered by Donaldson from 1840 to 1900 is still active, if in somewhat diluted form. As a local journalist, MacDiarmid would have been soaked in this atmosphere of Scottish popular writing, something his ultra-

modernist tendencies would renounce but which, nonetheless, deeply informs such modernism as was exemplified by his work in the 1920s. Despite the authoritarian elitism of much of MacDiarmid's propaganda for a Scottish renaissance – 'It is in the power of a handful to create or re-create a country in this powerful spiritually dynamic way, and to convict their antipathetic fellow-countrymen of a species of imbecility in the face of the world' – his modernist, synthetic Scots poetry is an adaptation of populist forms drawn from a well of localism inherent in the journalistic culture of provincial Scotland.⁵³

Writing of 'Contemporary Scottish Poetry' in 1929, his last year in Montrose before leaving to work in London for Compton Mackenzie's *Vox*, a thirty-seven-year-old MacDiarmid praises his own artistic endeavours in the Angus town by claiming that 'no language in which great literature had been produced had been so hopelessly degraded as Braid Scots before the synthetic method began to recondition it a few years ago'.⁵⁴ To 'recondition' implies no clean break with a populist past but an attempt to develop and evolve still workable linguistic material in the modernist culture of an independent, internationalist Scotland of the future. Is the Scots language mere evolutionary 'Cast-offs' the poet of 'Gairmscoile' asks: 'But wha mak's life a means to ony end? / This sterves and that stuff's fu', scraps this and succours that?'⁵⁵ The atheist poet's spiritual evolutionism has no sympathy with the popular misconception of Darwinism ('The best survive there's nane but fules contend'), this socialist propagandist of Scottish renaissance being politically opposed to such imperialistic metropolitan universalism: 'We are told that Scots, and, even more, Gaelic, have had to give way owing to over-ruling economic tendencies – but had they? Are these tendencies good in themselves? Is mankind made for economics or economics by mankind?'⁵⁶ He replies with the MacDiarmidian credo of the crucially

symbiotic relationship between the particular and the universal, the core of his poetry and politics in Montrose: ‘The logical conclusion of the process our opponents defend is the negation of not only nationality, but of personality. In the last analysis this is a *reductio ad absurdum* of their case.’⁵⁷

For a poet identifying himself so closely with Scotland, the spirit of the nation, the Dedalusian conscience of the race, cannot be (re)created in a foreign tongue – ‘Wull Gabriel in Esperanto cry / Or a’ the warld’s undeemis jargons try?’ – but must come instead from the irrationally national ‘*herts o’ men*’.⁵⁸ MacDiarmid’s switch from writing in a contrived, post-Georgian English to lyrical Scots is energised by his immersion in the local concerns of the Montrose community, his jobs with the *Montrose Review* and the town council reinforcing his drive to internationalise Scotland. His synthetic Scots is no reactionary, backward step, but a modernist stance that draws on the populist tradition of local Scottish literature in order to radically refashion the cultural and political state of the nation:

For we ha’e faith in Scotland’s hidden poo’ers,
The present’s theirs, but a’ the past and future’s oors.⁵⁹

Notes

I am grateful to the staff of Montrose Public Library and Angus Archives, Montrose for helping me trace MacDiarmid’s steps in the town.

¹ Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas* (1943), edited with an introduction by Alan Riach (rpt Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), p. 411; Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, in *Complete Poems*,

Volume I, edited by Michael Grieve and W.R. Aitken, 2 vols. (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), p. 88.

² Alan Bold, *MacDiarmid: Christopher Murray Grieve: A Critical Biography* (London: John Murray, 1988), p. 107.

³ MacDiarmid, letter to George Ogilvie, 20 August 1916, *The Hugh MacDiarmid – George Ogilvie Letters*, edited by Catherine Kerrigan (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), pp. 13, 8.

⁴ See *Montrose Review*, 13 February 1920, p. 5.

⁵ MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet*, p. 225.

⁶ Bold, *MacDiarmid*, p. 120.

⁷ Glen Murray, ‘MacDiarmid’s Media 1911-1936’, *The Raucle Tongue: Hitherto Uncollected Prose, Volume I: 1911-1926*, edited by Angus Calder, Glen Murray and Alan Riach, 3 vols. (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p. xiii.

⁸ ‘MacDiarmid edited the [*Scottish*] *Chapbook* (14 issues, monthly, August 1922 – November/December 1923), *The Scottish Nation* (34 issues, weekly, 8 May 1923 – 25 December 1923) and *The Northern Review* (4 issues, monthly, May – September 1924)’, Editor’s ‘Commentary’, Hugh MacDiarmid, *Albyn: Shorter Books and Monographs*, edited by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p. 360.

⁹ MacDiarmid, letter to George Ogilvie, 20 January 1928, quoted by Murray in ‘MacDiarmid’s Media 1911-1936’, *The Raucle Tongue: Volume I*, p. xvi

¹⁰ ‘Round the Town’, *Montrose Review*, 25 May 1923, p. 5.

¹¹ See Montrose Town Council Minutes, M/1/1/31, 1921-22, in Angus Archives, Montrose, p. 129.

¹² C.M. Grieve, ‘Montrose Municipal Election: To the Electors’, *Montrose Review*, 3 November 1922, p. 4.

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- ¹³ Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Company I've Kept: Essays in Autobiography* (London: Hutchison, 1966), p. 158.
- ¹⁴ Trevor W. Johns, 'MacDiarmid the Montrosian', *Montrose Review*, 17 April 1986, p. 14.
- ¹⁵ C.M. Grieve, 'Proposed Wage Cuts' (letter), *Montrose Review*, 23 February 1923, p. 4.
- ¹⁶ 'A Wages Question', *Montrose Review*, 18 May 1923, p. 6.
- ¹⁷ See Scott Lyall, 'The Politics of Place in the work of Hugh MacDiarmid' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of St Andrews, 2004).
- ¹⁸ See Montrose Town Council Minutes, M/1/1/33, 1923-24, pp. 276-77; see also 'Hospitalmaster Grieve Resigns', *Montrose Review*, 29 August 1924, p. 5.
- ¹⁹ MacDiarmid became Hospitalmaster on 9 November 1923, a job involving the distribution of funds to charitable causes. I am grateful to Fiona Scharlau of Angus Archives for her explanation of the role of Hospitalmaster.
- ²⁰ 'The Dangers of Moderation', *Montrose Review*, 18 January 1924, p. 3.
- ²¹ 'No More War Demonstration: League of Nations Meeting in Montrose', *Montrose Review*, 17 August 1923, p. 7.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ MacDiarmid, 'After Two Thousand Years', *Complete Poems, Volume I*, p. 559.
- ²⁴ 'Vistas of Science', *Montrose Review*, 15 February 1924, p. 5.
- ²⁵ MacDiarmid, 'Au Clair de la Lune', *Complete Poems, Volume I*, p. 25; 'Sea-Serpent', p. 50.
- ²⁶ *The Chambers Dictionary*, ed. Sandra Anderson and others (Edinburgh: Chambers Harrap, 2000), p. 369.
- ²⁷ MacDiarmid, 'The Innumerable Christ', *Complete Poems, Volume I*, p. 32.

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- ²⁸ MacDiarmid, 'Ballad of the Five Senses', *Complete Poems, Volume I*, pp. 36, 38.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- ³⁰ MacDiarmid, 'The Empty Vessel', *Complete Poems, Volume I*, p. 66.
- ³¹ MacDiarmid, 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn', *Complete Poems, Volume I*, p. 17.
- ³² MacDiarmid, 'Ballad of the Five Senses', *Complete Poems, Volume I*, p. 40.
- ³³ MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, Complete Poems, Volume I*, p. 100.
- ³⁴ MacDiarmid, 'O Jesu Parvule', *Complete Poems, Volume I*, p. 31.
- ³⁵ MacDiarmid, 'I Heard Christ Sing', *Complete Poems, Volume I*, p. 19; 'The Innumerable Christ', p. 32.
- ³⁶ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Radio Telefis Eirann, "The Arts: Hammer & Thistle", An Interview with Micheál O hUanacháin, 23 February 1978', in *The Raucle Tongue: Hitherto Uncollected Prose, Volume III: 1937-1978*, edited by Angus Calder, Glenn Murray and Alan Riach, 3 vols. (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), pp. 594-95.
- ³⁷ I am grateful to Prof. Alan Riach for elucidating this point.
- ³⁸ MacDiarmid, *To Circumjack Cencrastus, Complete Poems, Volume I*, p. 236.
- ³⁹ MacDiarmid, 'Montrose', *Complete Poems, Volume II*, edited by Michael Grieve and W.R. Aitken (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), p. 1407.
- ⁴⁰ 'Among My Books', *Montrose Review*, 26 March 1920, p. 3.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*; MacDiarmid, 'The Scottish Muse' (1924), rpt in *The Raucle Tongue, Volume I*, p. 186; see also Robert Crawford, 'MacDiarmid in Montrose', in *Locations of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry*, edited by Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 33-56 for the influence of Beattie's poem on MacDiarmid.
- ⁴² 'Among My Books', *Montrose Review*, 2 April 1920, p. 5.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ ‘Fidelity in Small Things’ (1934), rpt in *Albyn: Shorter Books and Monographs*, edited by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), p. 351.

⁴⁵ C.M Grieve, ‘Montrose Municipal Election: To the Electors’, *Montrose Review*, 3 November 1922, p. 4.

⁴⁶ C.M. Grieve, ‘Harbour Board Representation’ (letter), *Montrose Review*, 3 November 1922, p. 8.

⁴⁷ MacDiarmid, interview in *Scottish Marxist*, 1975, rpt in *The Raucle Tongue*, Volume III, p. 572.

⁴⁸ ‘Montrose First’, *Montrose Review*, 25 January 1924, p. 4.

⁴⁹ See Bold, *MacDiarmid*, p. 137.

⁵⁰ MacDiarmid, ‘Wild Roses’, *Complete Poems*, Volume I, p. 55.

⁵¹ J. Derrick McClure, *Language, Poetry and Nationhood: Scots as a Poetic Language from 1878 to the Present* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2000), p. 100.

⁵² William Donaldson, *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland: Language, Fiction and the Press* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986), p. xii.

⁵³ Hugh MacDiarmid, ‘Towards a Scottish Renaissance: desirable lines of advance’ (1929), rpt in *The Raucle Tongue: Hitherto Uncollected Prose, Volume II: 1927-1936*, edited by Angus Calder, Glen Murray and Alan Riach, 3 vols. (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. 80.

⁵⁴ MacDiarmid, ‘Contemporary Scottish Poetry’ (1929), rpt in *The Raucle Tongue*, Volume II, p. 169.

⁵⁵ MacDiarmid, ‘Gairmscoile’, *Complete Poems*, Volume I, p. 73.

⁵⁶ Ibid.; MacDiarmid, ‘Towards a Scottish Renaissance: desirable lines of advance’, *The Raucle Tongue*, Volume II, p. 78.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ MacDiarmid, 'Gairmscoile', *Complete Poems, Volume I*, p. 74.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 75.