

Hugh MacDiarmid and Scottish Identity

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Hugh MacDiarmid's writing career was a committed act of engagement and identification with the land of his birth. In 'Scotland' he tells us:

So I have gathered unto myself
All the loose ends of Scotland,
And by naming them and accepting them,
Loving them and identifying myself with them,
Attempt to express the whole.¹

In 'Dìreadh 1' he names Scotland as his Muse, 'the very object of my song / – This marvellous land of Scotland'.² On addressing his hero Dostoevsky in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, the poet claims that 'a' that's Scottish is in me / As a' things Russian were in thee' and at the end of the poem he learns that, like Christ, the Scottish poet must die to redeem his people from the 'livin' tomb' of their philistine individual lives and failed collective history.³ In 'Conception', the artist gives birth to a new idea of Scotland that is at one with his own identity:

So that indeed I could not be myself
Without this strange, mysterious, awful finding
Of my people's very life within my own
– This terrible blinding discovery
Of Scotland in me, and I in Scotland⁴

Informed by postcolonial theory, this essay explores the way in which MacDiarmid creates a metaphysical Scotland – an absolutist vision of a nation that he identifies absolutely with himself – out of the complexities of his own divided Scottish identity.

Introduction: The Colonial Scot

Christopher Murray Grieve's conception of the poet Hugh MacDiarmid in Montrose in 1922 simultaneously generated an idealized vision of Scotland. Grieve's plan for a renascent Scotland is as absolutist as his poetic persona. MacDiarmid's identitarian politics allowed him the hubris of believing that 'I am Scotland itself to-day'.⁵ The Scot's close self-identification with the nation could be compared with Gustave Flaubert's comment as to the inspiration behind his most famous character, '*Madame Bovary, c'est moi*'.⁶ Flaubert denounces bourgeois French provinciality through the figure of Emma Bovary; Grieve rages against a kailyard Scotland in the verse of Hugh MacDiarmid. But if Emma Bovary was defeated by the parochialism of her environment, Chris Grieve was determined not to be. Grieve attempts to make Scotland whole, healing the fractures of the past – the Reformation, the Union with England, the Anglophone Scottish Enlightenment, and Scotland's investment in the British Empire – through the force of his own self-created personality, his essential self, MacDiarmid.

However, such splitting of the personality as witnessed in Grieve-MacDiarmid implies a problematic sense of self, as if artistic creativity in Scotland can only come through the discarding of a damaged personality and a subsequent process of self-recreation. The poet's hatred of the Other in the form of the English, combined with his dual personality, displays the subaltern consciousness of the colonial subject, the very identity structure from which he is striving to escape.⁷ This schizophrenia also

signals a loathing of the actual, leading to a condemnation of what *is* in the name of what *could be*. Grieve's creation of his essential self as MacDiarmid in turn leads to his vision of the real, essential, metaphysical Scotland, in almost every way the opposite of the existent nation.

The idea of a split Scottish identity is employed in G. Gregory Smith's *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919), a book that was particularly fruitful for MacDiarmid in its delineation of the essential Scot. Smith's Caledonian antisyzygy, a 'combination of opposites' or duality of the self – 'two moods' in the national literature of fantasy and reality – productive of great creative energy, seems unlikely to strike us now as peculiarly Scottish, despite the presence in the national literature of such obvious exemplifications of the idea as James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and R.L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886).⁸ According to Smith, the Caledonian antisyzygy is an apt ideational expression of the dichotomous nature of Scottish identity and the nation's ruptured political and cultural experience:

we have a reflection of the contrasts which the Scot shows at every turn, in his political and ecclesiastical history, in his polemical restlessness, in his adaptability, which is another way of saying that he has made allowance for new conditions, in his practical judgement, which is his admission that two sides of the matter have been considered.⁹

As Robert Crawford points out, the Caledonian antisyzygy has 'become something of a cliché' in Scotland:

The standard thing to do with a Scottish writer is to show how he (or, very occasionally, she) corresponds to the well-established pattern of the Caledonian Antisyzygy. This model has been useful, but constricting. It is surely a measure of the theoretical poverty of much Scottish literary criticism that it has remained for most of the twentieth century the sole major interpretative model of the Scottish writer, and of Scottish Culture as a whole.¹⁰

Yet for MacDiarmid, Smith's essentialism was a valuable tool that enabled him to read the present as a degenerative phase caused by pernicious Anglicization. If only Scotland could find its true radically republican, internationalist identity the historical fractures of the past and the personal psychological splits of the present could be made whole.

The Uncanny Scot

MacDiarmid's *Scottish Eccentrics* (1936) is a book-length exemplification of the Caledonian antisyzygy. Here he contends that the dualistic identity of 'almost every distinguished Scot' is made up of 'extraordinary contradictions of character, most dangerous antinomies and antithetical impulses'.¹¹ However, through Union with England the canny Scot has largely replaced this older, more distinguished Scottish type. Writing in 1931, MacDiarmid dismisses the canny Scot as a cultural stereotype fostered by the English in order to further political control:

The contention is that the Union with England and other factors have favoured the wrong type of Scotland and promulgated on that basis – to the detriment and practical elimination of the finer elements of our race – a

false and unworthy myth. [...] The ‘false myth’ of the canny Scot, with its subsidiaries, the mean Aberdonian and the egregious highlander of the Clans MacSporran and Macspurtle¹²

In *Scottish Eccentrics*, MacDiarmid sees the character of the post-Union Scot as having ‘undergone a very remarkable change’ that ‘may itself be only another exemplification of this peculiar working of our national genius’ for a contrariness at odds with the image of the canny Scot.¹³ The stereotypical Scots of the United Kingdom, encapsulated in the canny Scot myth, ‘are regarded for the most part as a very dour, hard-headed, hard-working, tenacious people, devoted to the practical things of life and making no contribution to the more dazzling or debatable spheres of human genius’.¹⁴ For the MacDiarmid of *Lucky Poet* (1943), this post-Union, monochromatic Scottish identity is mirrored in the drab empiricism of the nation’s presiding philosophy: ‘Scotland’s most pressing problem is undoubtedly the continued sway (in the head, if not on the lips) of the Common Sense Philosophy.’¹⁵ MacDiarmid seeks the replacement of this culturally and politically disabling fallacy of the canny, pragmatic Anglo-Scot encouraged by Enlightenment metropolitanism with his own Celtic myth of the massively erudite and disinterested, divinely inebriated Scoto-Gaelic poet, the essential metaphysical Scot.

The ‘clichéd image of the “canny Scot”’, as Alan Riach points out, is a form of music hall ‘tartan mockery’ successfully incarnated in MacDiarmid’s *bête noir* Harry Lauder.¹⁶ MacDiarmid mentions Lauder often in his work, believing him to have ‘played England’s game and held Scotland up / To ridicule wherever you’ve gone’.¹⁷ MacDiarmid’s difficulty with Lauder is twofold. Firstly, the cultural image that Lauder presented of Scotland to the world was so hopelessly reactionary that it

compounded the political provincialization of the Scots and effectively denationalized them:

The reason why the Harry Lauder type of thing is so popular in England is because it corresponds to the average Englishman's ignorant notion of what the Scot is – or because it gives him a feeling of superiority which he is glad to indulge on any grounds, justified or otherwise. 'Lauderism' has made thousands of Scotsmen so disgusted with their national characteristics that they have gone to the opposite extreme and become, or tried to become, as English as possible; 'Lauderism' is, of course, only the extreme form of those qualities of canniness, pawkiness and religiosity, which have been foisted upon the Scottish people by insidious English propaganda, as a means of destroying Scottish national pride, and of robbing Scots of their true attributes which are the very opposite of these mentioned. It is high time Scots were becoming alive to the ulterior effect of this propaganda by ridicule.¹⁸

For MacDiarmid, Lauder is a Scottish Uncle Tom contributing to English nationalism's cultural and political domination of Scotland. MacDiarmid thought of Lauder as a Scottish stereotype, harmful to the nation's sense of itself. He jealously hates Lauder because the entertainer has become what the poet wants to be, the voice of Scotland. Only, for this Scottish nationalist poet searching for the essential, metaphysical Scot, Lauder is the false voice of a degraded nation: 'The problems o' the Scottish soul / Are nocht to Harry Lauder'.¹⁹

Secondly, Lauder was remarkably popular and rich. According to Lauder's biographer Gordon Irving, 'When he did a broadcast at Christmas in 1925, he was given the highest fee ever paid at that time by the British Broadcasting Corporation. It

was in the region of £1,500.²⁰ Lauder's is a true rags-to-riches story, from a small house in Portobello, where he was born in 1870 and where his father worked as a potter, to friendship with Andrew Carnegie and Charlie Chaplin and knighthood in 1919. MacDiarmid's beginnings were similarly modest, but he was never to receive the plaudits that Lauder won and worked in a field which, as a self-proclaimed highbrow, he considered to be infinitely more important to the national culture:

The fact that this over-paid clown gets £1,500 a week is a shameful commentary on the low state of public taste. It represents a salary which, divided up into good reasonable sums, would provide for 150 intellectual workers yearly amounts of £500 each. £500 a year is considerably more than the average that has been earned by any of the writers, artists, or musicians of whom Scotland has any right to be proud during the past 200 years. One of the finest of modern Scots, John Davidson, commits suicide because he cannot stand any longer the daily humiliations to which he is exposed through his inability to lower himself successfully to cater for the mass; Harry Lauder – who has done nothing worth doing and is not fit to blacken Davidson's boots – earns £1,500 a week, a 150th part of which would have kept Davidson in comfort and enabled him to add work of permanent value to the world of letters. Burns, towards the end, is sore depressed for £5. But Harry Lauder earns every week more than double all Burns received for his immortal poems – and has the indecency to take it and think he is worth it.²¹

Lauder not only thought he was worth the money he earned, he propagandized for the system from which he benefited so handsomely and to which the communist

MacDiarmid is opposed. In an article in the *Democrat*, which proclaimed above the title of its hundredth issue ‘We are out to fight the policy of red revolution’, Lauder tells us ‘how money is made’:

We are beginning to realise that we cannot get something for nothing; that work is the cure for most wrongs – good, honest work for an honest and fair wage. Money is only made by those who control it, keep it, and put it to its proper use. A man who never tries to save and never tries to put his money to its best advantage will never make any and never deserve to: hence the reason that Communism will never be a practicable thing. We are none of us alike; some work and some don’t and never will. I myself have never been a ‘ca’ cannyist’. I have worked my hardest all my life, and I don’t regret a single day spent. Communism would mean the absolute negation of the principle of self-help, and, moreover, of human nature.²²

Irving tells us that after some bad contractual experiences in London, Lauder ‘made up his mind that he would never again see other artistes on the same bill earning more money than himself’.²³ For the MacDiarmid of ‘Ode to All Rebels’

Ilka man that blethers o’ honest toil,
And believes in rewards and punishments,
In a God like Public Opinion,
And the sanctity o’ the financial system

is a 'devil' and the task of the rebel 'is to destroy them a'.'. ²⁴ In attempting to destroy Lauder, the elitist MacDiarmid is aiming his polemical guns at the most famous Scot of the day and the false, capitalist Anglo-Scotland that he cannily represents.

For MacDiarmid, the travesty that is the canny Scot stereotype is dangerous because it immobilizes Scottish identity within politically controllable colonial confines. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha sees such stereotyping as an integral part of the theoretical doctrine of colonialism: 'An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of "fixity" in the ideological construction of otherness.'²⁵ By parading before us 'the strange procession' of heterogeneous Scottishness collected in *Scottish Eccentrics*, MacDiarmid is attempting to break that 'fixity' and allow a much more fluid idea of national identity. However, his eccentrics, notable failures like William McGonagall and Christopher North, seem merely to be the dualistic flip-side of the stereotypical snobbish superiority of the English – MacDiarmid's book follows on from Edith Sitwell's *English Eccentrics* (1933) – and the eminently empirical and imperial Brit.

MacDiarmid's masculinist conception of the nation also perpetuates stereotypes: there is, for example, only one woman in *Scottish Eccentrics*, Elspeth Buchan, an eighteenth-century religionist. MacDiarmid's analysis of the character of Scottish women tends to reinforce the canny Scot myth he is attempting to break. He contends that they 'have perhaps played a greater part, influenced the activities of the men to a greater extent, than the women of any other European nation':

Can the absence in modern Scotland of all the rare and higher qualities of the human spirit be attributed to this undue influence of the female sex? It may have something to do with it. It is, at all events, worth recalling that Galton in his study of genius maintains that it seldom comes where the

mother's influence is strongest. Scotswomen are overwhelmingly not the sort to be 'fashed with the nonsense' of any attention to the arts, or other precarious and comparatively unremunerative activities on the part of their offspring, as against due concentration on the business of getting on and doing well in a solid material sense.²⁶

Riach suggests that, 'Far from implying misogyny, a close reading might demonstrate MacDiarmid's complicity in feminist theories about the social construction of sexual identity.'²⁷ However, given that MacDiarmid's whole body of work may be seen as an attempt to re-masculinize a Scotland that has been feminized by its role as the weaker partner of the Union, this contention is difficult to support. The problem with MacDiarmid's conception of identity, whether female or national, is that in its reliance on the antiszygy trope it centres the dualism of colonial discourse within the very subject that is seeking to escape this paralyzing schism.

MacDiarmid's essentialism emanates in part from his own religious, psychological and creative needs which, in a megalomaniacal manner, he projects on to *his* nation. However, the nationalist poet also wishes to make whole in the present a problematical inheritance from the past: the political and cultural fissures of the Union and the Anglophone Scottish Enlightenment. Such are illustrated by the metropolitan Dr Johnson – whose Dictionary (1755) contributes to the process of British linguistic standardization – on a visit to Enlightenment Edinburgh in 1773:

The conversation of the *Scots* grows every day less unpleasing to the *English*; their peculiarities wear fast away; their dialect is likely to become in half a century provincial and rustick, even to themselves. The great, the learned, the ambitious, and the vain, all cultivate the *English* phrase, and the

English pronunciation, and in splendid companies Scotch is not much heard, except now and then from an old Lady.²⁸

MacDiarmid attempts to surmount such ruptures in tradition by writing a Scots poetry that seeks to re-establish a distinctly Scottish national voice. However, his search for the metaphysical Scot in Montrose in the 1920s denies the Anglo-Scottish element of Scottish identity through the essentialism of a totalizing project that attempts to uncover the real Scotland. Writing ‘Towards a Scottish Renaissance’ in 1929, MacDiarmid proposes that we

take a typical Anglo-Scot, opposed to Nationalism, ignorant of Scots and still more of Gaelic, and carefully catalogue all that he takes for granted as reasonable, natural, and inevitable in any connection – and repudiate the lot, and take up the very opposite positions.²⁹

From a postcolonial theoretical perspective, such absolutist repudiation of alterity, the striving after cultural and political unity, is the theoretical armoury for the very political and cultural imperialism that MacDiarmid is seeking to counter. By portraying Scottish cultural identity since the Union as dualistically fractured and failed, through acceptance of Gregory Smith’s dichotomous antisyzygy as the essence of the true Scot, MacDiarmid mirrors metropolitan culture’s deliberately distorted vision of its Other, the peripheral or marginal culture. MacDiarmid’s essentialism helps keeps the Enlightenment imperial dualism of centre and margin alive and is ultimately, therefore, a self-defeating theory for the marginalized culture to embrace.

The Catholic Scot

The failure to achieve a unified identity in personal, cultural, political and metaphysical terms in modern Scotland is the subject of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, a work which Tom Nairn has described as ‘that great national poem on the impossibility of nationalism’.³⁰ Published in 1926, this modernist poem is the culmination of MacDiarmid’s experience of the First World War and the reading, thinking and writing that began ‘Somewhere in Macedonia’, from where he intended to return and ‘enter heart and body and soul into a new Scots Nationalist propaganda’.³¹ MacDiarmid’s thinking at this time of war had turned towards Neo-Catholicism, about which he wrote essays on ‘Neo-Catholicism’s debt to Sir Walter Scott’ and ‘The Indisserverable [*sic*] Association’ between Scottish culture and Catholicism.³² Even at this early stage – these ideas are from a letter to George Ogilvie dated 20 August 1916 – MacDiarmid is not only concerned with acquiring Scottish cultural omnipotence, but also with the idea of failure in the national culture:

I have my ‘The Scottish Vortex’ (as per system exemplified in *Blast*), ‘Caricature in Scotland – and lost opportunities’, ‘A Copy of Burns I want’, (suggestions to illustrators on a personal visualization of the national pictures evoked in the poem), ‘Scottish colour-thought’ (a study of the aesthetic condition of Scottish nationality in the last three centuries) and ‘The Alienation of Our Artistic Ability’ (the factors which prevent the formation of a ‘national’ school and drive our artists to other lands and to foreign portrayal).³³

The Scottish Renaissance group that MacDiarmid was to have such an influential part in promoting had many Catholic converts within its ranks, such as Fionn Mac Colla, whose novel *The Albannach* (1932) and non-fictional work *At the*

Sign of the Clenched Fist (1967) castigate the cultural blight of Scotland's Knoxian heritage and who converted in 1935, and Compton Mackenzie who converted in 1914 and whose novel *Sinister Street* (1913-14) climaxes with the hero Michael Fane coming to the faith: 'Rome! Rome! How parochial you make my youth.'³⁴ Mackenzie later wrote the personalistic *Catholicism and Scotland* (1936). The self-proclaimed atheist MacDiarmid never converted to Catholicism, but many of his earlier ideas accord with what William Storrar calls 'the parrot cries of the Scottish *literati* about the continuing blight of Calvinism on the nation's psyche'.³⁵ For instance, this is MacDiarmid in 1928:

I assert without fear of contradiction that the general type of consciousness which exists in Scotland today – call it Calvinistic or what you will (it has, at any rate, been largely coloured and determined by the unique and peculiarly unfortunate form the Reformation took in Scotland) – is anti-aesthetic to an appalling degree, and none the less so because it is, *ipso facto*, constitutionally unconscious of its disability, and naively disposed to set up its own gross limitations as indispensable criteria. I make no apology for my central position that no amount of theology or morality can compensate for the lack of active creative perceptiveness in a people.³⁶

The drunk man laments the cultural influence of Calvinism in almost pathological terms, suggesting a disease particular to the artist that has communal side effects:

O fitly frae oor cancerous soil

May this heraldic horror rise!

*The Presbyterian thistle flourishes,
And its ain roses crucifies...*³⁷

The theoretical MacDiarmid of the Scottish renaissance, aiming to unify Scotland against political and cultural provincialization, believes that

It will not do to identify Scottish nationality and traditions wholly with Protestantism. There has always been a considerable native Catholic population, and most of the finest elements in our traditions, in our literature, in our national history, come down from the days when Scotland was wholly Catholic.³⁸

By emphasizing the cultural bountifulness of Scotland's pre-Reformation, Catholic past, MacDiarmid is attempting to counter the influence of Protestantism in dynastically and politically uniting the nations of the United Kingdom and so undermine its power to continue to do so in the present. When Linda Colley asks, 'Who were the British, and did they even exist?' the answer she supplies is emphatic: 'Protestantism was the foundation that made the invention of Great Britain possible.'³⁹ Similarly, of the metropolitan, Anglophone Scottish Enlightenment, Alexander Broadie says, 'Moderate Protestantism was the Enlightenment baptised'.⁴⁰ For MacDiarmid, looking to heal the ruptures of the past, these are good political and ideological reasons to exaggerate an attachment to Catholicism and correspondingly overestimate the cultural damage perpetrated by the religion of his birth.

The Metaphysical Scot

The drunk man begins his metaphysical odyssey in search of the absolute by wrestling with Scottish Presbyterianism and its cultural consequences. In the process, he betrays his own Calvinist inheritance through his elect attitude to his fellow nationals and the national culture. The real Scotland has lost its spirit and has been buried underneath the dross of a fake tourist culture. Even Scotland's most famous export, whisky, has been watered down and now 'the stuffie's no' the real Mackay'.⁴¹ Whisky is a metaphor for the deplorable condition of a nation from which the essence has been stolen to benefit others, leaving Scotland 'destitute o' speerit'.⁴² It is the drunk man's self-imposed task to expose this counterfeit culture in order 'To prove my saul is Scots'.⁴³ He will do so by treating of 'what's still deemed Scots and the folk expect', such as whisky and Robert Burns, before moving on to metaphysical 'heichts whereo' the fules ha'e never recked'.⁴⁴ For the drunk man searching for the essential nation and its worthy inhabitant, the metaphysical Scot, '*Sic transit gloria Scotiae*' – all the glories of pre-Reformation Scotland have passed away – to be replaced by the kailyard offerings of Presbyterian ministers and the canny music hall caricature of a Scot, 'Harry Lauder (to enthrall us)'.⁴⁵

In *A Drunk Man* MacDiarmid feels impelled to represent Scotland because the nation is intrinsic to his identity. The drunk man's sense of self is compiled of 'a composite diagram o' / Cross-sections o' my forbears' organs' and although this uncanny Scot attempts in self-disgust to exorcize this haunting by his ancestors, 'yet like bindweed through my clay it's run'.⁴⁶ On examination of himself, the drunk man finds his innermost, spiritual identity to be irredeemably connected to a metaphysical Scotland:

My ain soul looks me in the face, as 'twere,

And mair than my ain soul – my nation's soul!⁴⁷

Similarly,

*Scotland, responsive to my thoughts,
Lichts mile by mile, as my ain nerves,
Frae Maidenkirk to John o' Groats!*⁴⁸

The drunk man, seeking a metaphysical nation made complete and undivided through the creative endeavours of the essential Scot, is bound body and soul to the whole of a fractured Scotland.

Yet in spite, or perhaps because, of the drunk man's close identification with his country, his attitude to his fellow nationals is disdainful. MacDiarmid often behaved in a similar way in his public pronouncements on other famous Scots, such as Burns and Lauder, for instance. If he is Scotland then he must oust anyone else who may have a claim to national precedence in order to clear the way for his own vision of the nation. The absolutist MacDiarmid in pursuit of a metaphysical Scotland creates a cultural vacuum – not the so-called fractures of the nation's past – through his idea of a failed Scotland that he can then fill with his saviour-like presence. Illustrating MacDiarmid's Calvinist inheritance, the visionary drunk man sees himself as elect in comparison with the majority of Scots, represented by his spiritually unenlightened drinking companions Cruivie and Gilsanquhar:

What are prophets and priests and kings,
What's ocht to the people o' Scotland?
Speak – and Cruivie'll goam at you,
Gilsanquhar jalouse you're dottlin!⁴⁹

J.K.S. Reid, in his introduction to Calvin's *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, reminds us that

Calvin affirms that there is clearly a difference of condition amongst those who have a common nature. In the darkness common to all, some are illumined, while others remain blind. The question Calvin raises is how this differentiation comes about. His answer to the question is equally clear: we must confess that 'God, by His eternal goodwill, which has no cause outside itself, destined those whom He pleased to salvation, rejecting the rest; those whom He dignified by gratuitous adoption, He illumined by His spirit, so that they receive the life offered in Christ, while others voluntarily disbelieve, so that they remain in darkness destitute of the light of faith'.⁵⁰

In a metaphysical poem soaked with references to Christ and Calvary, the visionary drunk man is clearly in thrall to his Presbyterian formation. Combined with a sense of elect superiority, this leaves the drunk man somewhat at odds with his Scottish environment and its myth of Burnsian egalitarianism. Paradoxically, his elect, elitist self-identity may be an attempt to dismember within himself the spiritual remnants of a Christianity – inherited from his small-town Border childhood – that bears resemblance to Burnsian socialism:

O gin they'd stegh their guts and haud their wheesht
I'd thole it, for 'a man's a man' I ken,
But though the feck ha'e plenty o' 'a' that',
They're nocht but zoologically men.⁵¹

David McCrone tells us that ‘In the Scottish myth, the central motif is the inherent egalitarianism of the Scots’.⁵² He proceeds to analyse Burns’s poem ‘For a’ that and a’ that’ which

seems to strip away the differences which are essentially social constructions. In spite of these (the ‘a’ that’), Burns is saying, people are equal. His meaning of equality is, however, ambiguous. He is calling not for a levelling down of riches, but for a proper, that is, moral appreciation of ‘the man o’ independent mind’. It is ‘pith o’ sense and pride o’ worth’ which matter, not the struttings and starings of ‘yon birkie ca’d a lord’. The ambiguity of his message is retained to the last stanza – ‘that man to man the world o’er shall brothers be for a’ that’ – an appeal to the virtues of fraternity rather than equality in its strict sense.⁵³

The ‘ambiguity’ of Burns’s poem is mirrored in the paradoxical nature of Calvinism. On the one hand, it inculcates a spirit of equality in its adherents; on the other, it predestines some to salvation while damning the rest. MacDiarmid’s sense of elect superiority – a psychological mechanism to compensate for an inferiority complex connected to his feelings about his provincialized, self-repressed nation – would leave him impatient with the concept of fraternity. For W.N. Herbert, ‘the antiszygy which most fiercely powered’ MacDiarmid’s life and writing was ‘love and revulsion for himself and his nation’.⁵⁴ If MacDiarmid is one of the elect then he is free to ‘adopt a thorough antinomian attitude’ towards ‘all sorts of vibrantly commonplace people’, in particular the bulk of post-Union Scots:

To save your souls fu’ mony o’ ye are fain,

But de'il a dizzen to mak' it worth the daen'.

I widna gie five meenits wi' Dunbar

For a' the millions o' ye as ye are.⁵⁵

Alan Bold tells us that as a boy the poet 'was awarded several certificates for Bible knowledge' and that local minister and poet T.S. Cairncross was 'Arguably the greatest influence on Christopher Grieve's boyhood'.⁵⁶ Bold confirms that 'the intellectual elitism of MacDiarmid is an extension of the doctrine of the elect so crucial to the Calvinistic tradition of the Scottish kirk'.⁵⁷ MacDiarmid says of the religion of the Covenanters that 'It holds me in a fastness of security', implying that the 'waves of their purposefulness' give meaning to life, saving the adherents of extreme Presbyterianism from metaphysical despair, but also suggesting that at the existential limits the atheist poet comes home to the religion of his childhood: 'In weather as black as the Bible / I return again to my kind'.⁵⁸ As he grew older, MacDiarmid was to leave behind that security of religious belief. However, he never completely abandoned the frame of reference of Christianity, in particular the Calvinistic outrage at what he saw as a lack of spiritual growth in the majority and a concomitant feeling of elect superiority that he belonged to the few who have or even can evolve spiritually:

Aye, this is Calvary – to bear

Your Cross wi'in you frae the seed,

And feel it grow by slow degrees

Until it rends your flesh apairt,

And turn, and see your fellow-men

In similar case but sufferin' less

Thro' bein' mair wudden frae the stert!...⁵⁹

Born a Calvinist, the drunk man spiritually comprehends the physical agony and metaphysical torment of the crucified Christ and knows that suffering is the lot of humanity. However, the elect modernist poet, infected with a double dose of elitism, believes himself to suffer more than ordinary Scots, particularly in a Calvinist culture that he considers – and that his view of modern Scottish identity as failed helps render – artistically sterile.

One of the consequences of MacDiarmid's teleology in its application to the national identity is the idea that the real Scotland is somehow hidden in the muck of materiality and can only be revealed when the country discovers its true spiritual destiny. Until it does so it will languish in cultural and political desolation, 'Scotland turn Eliot's waste – the Land o' Drouth'.⁶⁰ Addressing Dostoevsky, the drunk man states that God-bearers or '*Narodbogonosets* are my folk tae'.⁶¹ (MacDiarmid's real Christian name, Christopher, means Christ-bearer.) However, the religion of his birth has fallen on hard times – 'the trade's nocht to what it was' – like the nation it once led.⁶² MacDiarmid wittily suggests that 'Unnatural practices are the cause', understanding that the demise of religion can be attributed to changes in the sexual climate and material inventions such as contraception.⁶³ As such, 'baith bairns and God'll be obsolete soon / (The twaesome gang thegither)'.⁶⁴ If religion is 'the stane the builders rejec'' in the construction of modernity but is still 'the corner-stane' of human understanding of life then, despite the Calvinistic nullity they have made of the present culture, the God-bearers of Presbyterianism – Scotland's 'chosen people' – can ensure that 'Scotland sall find oot its destiny / And yield the *vse-chelovek*', literally the all-man or pan-human.⁶⁵

Ideally, the spiritual evolution inherent in Calvinism will elicit, for the first time since the Greeks, a supremely independent and whole person, Nietzsche's dream of transcending the human with a new over-man. Hence, the imperialistic goal of Scottish history, the historic mission of the nation, is to effect the unification of humanity through the East-West synthesis with Dostoevsky's Russia, producing through this combination of different national values a spiritually regenerated, truly enlightened human identity. Quoting Sir Richard Livingstone, MacDiarmid attempts a similar synthesis of East and West in 'Dìreadh III' of 'the Scots with the Chinese', this being 'the best chance / Of reproducing the ancient Greek temperament', the resultant effulgent Sun of *Republic* being born of a cultural amalgam that will combat what the poet sees as 'the perilous night of English stupidity'.⁶⁶ As with other modernists, MacDiarmid's dreams of human perfectibility savour unpleasantly of almost eugenicist and racist solutions to the perceived political problems of modernity in order to return to the imagined cultural superiority of the classical Greek citizen. Concerned with the degeneration they believed to be implicit in modern democracy, some modernists were attracted to eugenics as a way 'to assume responsibility for a creation recently orphaned by God'.⁶⁷ MacDiarmid's cranky idea of selective national crossbreeding is an extreme example of a politics that seeks to rid Scotland of the influence of the Saxon. Like the evolutionary eugenics of Woolf, Eliot and Yeats, it is ultimately religious in its desire for an essential national identity.

With *To Circumjack Cencrastus* MacDiarmid continues the idea of his nation as spiritual reformer of the world, a place where 'the religious attitude has found / In Scotland yet a balancin' ground' that will see 'North, South, East, West nae mair opposed'.⁶⁸ Imagining an absolutist Scotland, the poet wants

To see it frae the hamely and the earthly snatched

And precipitated to what it will be in the end
A' that's ephemeral shorn awa' and rhyme nae mair
Mere politics, personalities, and mundane things⁶⁹

In MacDiarmid's nationalist vision, a metaphysical Scotland, conjoined with Russia, will challenge the world supremacy and materialism of imperial Anglo-Saxondom.

From nineteenth-century *Pax Britannica* to twenty-first-century *Pax Americana*: after 1930, the communist MacDiarmid opposes the totalitarian rationalizing project of the East – revolutions theoretically inflamed by the Enlightenment-inspired materialism of Marx – to the imperialistic Protestant liberal capitalism of the West, which also lays claim to Enlightenment foundations. MacDiarmid was fond of saying that the Scots, or rather the Gaels, were originally from Stalin's Georgia: 'We are Georgians all. / We Gaels'.⁷⁰ But the elision of terms through which the poet identifies himself performs a brand of cultural imperialism of its own, the Presbyterian Scottish Borderer becoming the pre-Union Catholic singer of Highland Gaeldom. As late as 1953, coronation of Saxe-Coburgian Elizabeth (purportedly the) II, MacDiarmid still thought of himself as 'The Man for whom Gaeldom is waiting', believing that 'Lowland Scotland is a battleground / Between Europe and Gaeldom'.⁷¹ MacDiarmid's Calvinism wants everything 'that's ephemeral shorn awa'' from Scotland including, it seems, his own cultural identity and the actual development of the nation. Like many other Scottish artists, MacDiarmid liked to bemoan the cultural deleteriousness of Calvinism. However, his own 'religious attitude', which seeks the revelation of metaphysical reality beyond the ephemerality of material actuality, coupled with his Calvinistic credo of the elect, blights Scottish cultural identity in the present with the apparent failures of the past. Present in MacDiarmid is the reverse of the imperialistic Enlightenment duality written of by Murray Pittock:

The perceived Germanicity of Protestantism also contributed to the paradigm whereby Highlanders/Celts were stereotyped as Catholic, which most were not. This in turn helped reinforce the mythology, sedulously fed by many of the Enlightenment writers themselves, in which Lowland Scotland was ethnically Germanic, and Highland Scotland Celtic.⁷²

According to David Daiches, ‘there was little fruitful inter-relation between Gaelic and non-Gaelic culture in eighteenth-century Scotland’.⁷³ This ‘split’ in the culture between the sophisticated *literati* of the metropolitan Enlightenment and the ‘deeper cultural traditions of Scotland’ suggests ‘that the problems and paradoxes of Scottish culture in the eighteenth century were not only bound up with the past but also prefigured the future’.⁷⁴ For MacDiarmid in 1965, the cultural life of Robert Fergusson’s Edinburgh, during the Enlightenment and in the present, ‘boils merrily along among the common people, but is frozen stiff before it reaches the educated section of the population’.⁷⁵ The emphasis on the universal significance of the local at the heart of MacDiarmid’s radical politics defies the cultural and political inferiorism of the geographic and class-based discrimination of the metropolitan Enlightenment by backing history’s losers, those marginalized by the British state’s imperial policy of political and cultural standardization. However, reinvented as a bard of Gaeldom, the non-Gaelic-speaking MacDiarmid simply transposes the dualisms of the Scottish Enlightenment that his Calvinism inherits. As such, he is one of Scotland’s ‘sham bards’ who, like Edwin Muir, renders contemporary Scotland ‘a sham nation’.⁷⁶ This metaphysical MacDiarmid doesn’t see Scotland whole, he sees himself idealized – and calls his vision Scotland.

Conclusion: The Postcolonial Scot

MacDiarmid's metaphysical Scotland, like Flaubert's character Madame Bovary, is a fictional creation that aims to transcend the bounds of the actual. The Scottish poet's horror of the provincial is, in part, the detestation of this component in himself, coming from small-town Langholm and living all his life in marginal locations.

MacDiarmid's insistence that modern Scottish identity is flawed arises from his own insecurities and is both a mirror of and a contributory factor in the Scottish cringe that many post-MacDiarmid Scottish intellectuals have tried so hard to dispel.

However problematical, MacDiarmid's (de)construction of Scottish identity, his puncturing of Scottish myths, can also be positive. As I have argued elsewhere, his troubling of national and personal identity is postcolonial in its insistence on the universal importance of seemingly peripheral peoples like the Scots.⁷⁷

With Scotland's recent devolutionary settlement meaning the Scots can again play some part in the governance of their own country, scholarly interest has been sparked about the Scots abroad in the previous two centuries and the part they have played in the creation of other nations.⁷⁸ In the 1920s and 1930s – during MacDiarmid's best periods in Montrose and then Whalsay in Shetland – the loss of Britain's imperial mission, coupled with a new wave of emigration provoked by increasing poverty at home, led some to believe, as Richard Finlay notes, 'that Scotland would soon cease to exist as an identifiable nation'.⁷⁹ MacDiarmid's massively energetic response to this crisis was an ideological attempt to reorient Scottish identity away from a false universalism that took no cognisance of the condition of Scotland. As this essay has emphasized, this can lead MacDiarmid into an essentialism that formulates the real Scotland as everything the nation has failed to be – Celtic, radical, republican and independent. However, in the present climate of

renewed Scottish cultural and political vigor, it is perhaps such absolutism of vision that gives MacDiarmid's work the claim – almost – to 'have succeeded':

See behind me now

The multiplicity of organizations all concerned

With one part or another of that great task

I long ago – almost alone – most imperfectly – discerned

As the all-inclusive object of high Scottish endeavour

The same yesterday and today, and forever.

Fianna Alba and the Saltire Society,

The Scottish Socialist Party and Clann nan Gaidheal,

And a host of others all active today

Where twenty years ago there was not one to see.⁸⁰

Notes

Works frequently cited have been identified by the following abbreviations:

CP1 Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, Volume 1, ed. Michael Grieve
and W.R. Aitken, 2 vols. (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993)

CP2 Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, Volume 2, ed. Michael Grieve
and W.R. Aitken, 2 vols. (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994)

SE Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Eccentrics*, ed. Alan Riach (1936; repr.,
Manchester: Carcanet, 1993)

RT2 Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Raucle Tongue: Hitherto Uncollected Prose*,
Volume 2, ed. Angus Calder, Glen Murray and Alan Riach, 3 vols.
(Manchester: Carcanet, 1997)

¹ MacDiarmid, 'Scotland', *CP1*, 652.

² MacDiarmid, 'Dìreadh I', *CP2*, 1168.

³ MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, *CP1*, 145, 165.

⁴ MacDiarmid, 'Conception', *CP2*, 1070.

⁵ MacDiarmid, 'The Difference', *CP2*, 1277.

⁶ 'Flaubert was often asked who had been his model for Madame Bovary, but he invariably replied that he had invented her. "*Madame Bovary*," he always declared, "*c'est moi!*"' Francis Steegmuller, *Flaubert and Madame Bovary: A Double Portrait* (1939; repr., London: Constable, 1993), 339.

⁷ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'In a Word: *Interview*', *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London/New York: Routledge, 1993), 1-23, for the tussle between essentialism and anti-essentialism in the subaltern's attempt to escape from the colonial place.

⁸ G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1919), 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Robert Crawford, *Identifying Poets: Self and Territory in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 42.

¹¹ MacDiarmid, *SE*, 284.

¹² MacDiarmid, 'Whither Scotland?' (1931), repr. in *RT2*, 269, 271.

¹³ MacDiarmid, *SE*, 284.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 285.

¹⁵ Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas*, ed. Alan Riach (1943; repr., Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), 387.

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- ¹⁶ Alan Riach (ed.), 'Survival Arts', *SE*, 324.
- ¹⁷ MacDiarmid, 'Sir Harry Lauder', *CP2*, 1287.
- ¹⁸ MacDiarmid, 'Scottish People and "Scotch Comedians"' (1928), repr. in *RT2*, 114.
- ¹⁹ MacDiarmid, *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, *CP1*, 248.
- ²⁰ Gordon Irving, *Great Scot! The Life Story of Sir Harry Lauder, Legendary Laird of the Music Hall* (London: Leslie Frewin, 1968), 123.
- ²¹ MacDiarmid, 'Scottish People and "Scotch Comedians"' (1928), repr. in *RT2*, 114-15.
- ²² Harry Lauder, 'How Money is Made: Sir Harry Lauder and Cure for "Ca Canny"', *Montrose Standard*, 18 March 1921, 6; first appeared in the *Democrat*.
- ²³ Irving, *Great Scot!*, 137.
- ²⁴ MacDiarmid, 'Ode to All Rebels', *CP1*, 507, 508.
- ²⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (1994; repr., London/New York: Routledge, 1995), 66.
- ²⁶ MacDiarmid, *SE*, 160-1.
- ²⁷ Riach (ed.), 'Survival Arts', *SE*, 334.
- ²⁸ Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775), in Johnson & Boswell, *Journey to the Hebrides*, 3rd ed., ed. and intro. Ian McGowan (1996; repr., Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 2001), 143.
- ²⁹ MacDiarmid, 'Towards a Scottish Renaissance: desirable lines of advance' (1929), repr. in *RT2*, 80.
- ³⁰ Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: New Left Books, 1977), 169.
- ³¹ Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Hugh MacDiarmid – George Ogilvie Letters*, ed. Catherine Kerrigan (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), 8, 13.

³² Ibid., 8-9.

³³ Ibid., 9.

³⁴ Compton Mackenzie, *Sinister Street* (1913-14; repr., London: MacDonald, 1949), 880.

³⁵ William Storrar, *Scottish Identity: A Christian Vision* (Edinburgh: The Handsell Press, 1990), 53-4.

³⁶ ‘The Conventional Scot and the Creative Spirit’ (1928), repr. in *RT2*, 55.

³⁷ MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, *CP1*, 152.

³⁸ Hugh MacDiarmid, ‘Albyn: or Scotland and the Future’ (1927), repr. in *Albyn: Shorter Books and Monographs*, ed. Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), 29.

³⁹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, 3rd ed. (1992; repr., London: Vintage, 1996), 58.

⁴⁰ Alexander Broadie, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Historical Age of the Historical Nation* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001), 49.

⁴¹ MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, *CP1*, 83.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 84, 164.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ J.K.S. Reid, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (London: John Clarke, 1961), 11.

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- ⁵¹ MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, *CP1*, 85.
- ⁵² David McCrone, *Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Stateless Nation*, 4th ed. (1992; repr., London/New York: Routledge, 1998), 90.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 91.
- ⁵⁴ W.N. Herbert, *To Circumjack MacDiarmid: The Poetry and Prose of Hugh MacDiarmid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 224-5.
- ⁵⁵ MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet*, 78; MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, *CP1*, 107.
- ⁵⁶ Alan Bold, *MacDiarmid: Christopher Murray Grieve: A Critical Biography* (London: John Murray, 1988), 34, 30.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ⁵⁸ MacDiarmid, 'The Covenanters', *CP1*, 551; MacDiarmid, 'Envoi: On Coming Home', *CP1*, 381.
- ⁵⁹ MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, *CP1*, 134.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶² *Ibid.*
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*; see Clifford Longley, *Chosen People: The Big Idea That Shaped England and America*, 2nd ed. (2002; repr., London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003) for the influence of Protestantism on the imperialism of England and the United States.
- ⁶⁶ MacDiarmid, 'Dìreadh III', *CP2*, 1190.
- ⁶⁷ Donald J. Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4.

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- ⁶⁸ MacDiarmid, *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, *CP1*, 289.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid.
- ⁷⁰ MacDiarmid, 'The Fingers of Baal Contract in the Communist Salute', *CP1*, 679.
- ⁷¹ MacDiarmid, 'The Poet as Prophet', *CP2*, 1372.
- ⁷² Murray G.H. Pittock, 'Historiography', *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 266.
- ⁷³ David Daiches, *The Paradox of Scottish Culture: The Eighteenth-Century Experience* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 97.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., 10, 8, 97.
- ⁷⁵ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Edinburgh's Smoky Scene' (1965), repr. in *The Raucle Tongue: Hitherto Uncollected Prose*, Volume 3, ed. Angus Calder, Glen Murray and Alan Riach, 3 vols. (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), 436); see Robert Crawford, 'Robert Fergusson's Robert Burns', *Robert Burns and Cultural Authority*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Crawford (1997; repr., Edinburgh: Polygon, 1999), 1-22 for the subversive vernacularism of Fergusson's resistance to an Anglophone Enlightenment academia.
- ⁷⁶ Edwin Muir, 'Scotland 1941', *Collected Poems* (1963; repr., London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 97.
- ⁷⁷ See Scott Lyall, 'The Politics of Place in the Work of Hugh MacDiarmid' (PhD diss., University of St Andrews, 2004).
- ⁷⁸ See, for instance, Michael Fry, *The Scottish Empire* (East Lothian/Edinburgh: Tuckwell Press/Birlinn, 2001) and the same author's '*Bold, Independent, Unconquer'd and Free*': *How the Scots Made America Safe for Liberty, Democracy and Capitalism* (Ayr: Fort Publishing, 2003); see also T.M. Devine, *Scotland's Empire 1600-1815* (London: Penguin/Allen Lane, 2003). For an overview of Scottish

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⁷⁹ Richard Finlay, *Modern Scotland 1914-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004), 90.

⁸⁰ Hugh MacDiarmid, ['I Have Succeeded'], *The Revolutionary Art of the Future: Rediscovered Poems*, edited by John Manson, Dorian Grieve and Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, in association with the Scottish Poetry Library, 2003), 56.