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INTRODUCTION: HUGH MACDIARMID AT 100

Scott Lyall

The essays in this special issue of *Studies in Scottish Literature* evolved from papers delivered at the conference ‘MacDiarmid at 100’, organised by The Scottish Revival Network.¹ The conference, on 31 August 2022, marked the centenary of Hugh MacDiarmid’s first appearance in print under that name in *The Scottish Chapbook* on 26 August 1922.

MacDiarmid, the chief and best-known pseudonym of Christopher Murray Grieve, made his publication debut with the English prose sketch ‘Nisbet: An Interlude in Post-War Glasgow’. Split across the first two editions of the *Chapbook*, for August and September 1922, MacDiarmid’s first publication appeared in what has been described as ‘the first real postwar year’ in Britain.² Concerned with the psychological dislocations following on from the First World War, ‘Nisbet’ is self-consciously modernist in style and subject. Sergeant Grieve served with the Royal Army Medical Corps during the war, mostly in Salonika,³ and the immediate concerns of ‘Nisbet’ are the position of ex-soldiers in the puzzling political and moral landscape of postwar urban life, with Scotland’s largest city

¹ Funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh (2021–23), The Scottish Revival Network is led by Dr Scott Lyall (Edinburgh Napier University) and Dr Michael Shaw (University of Stirling). ‘MacDiarmid at 100’ was a one-day conference organised by Dr Lyall and the network’s research assistant, Dr James Benstead. For more information on the activities of The Scottish Revival Network, visit our website: <[The Scottish Revival Network \(napier.ac.uk\)](http://TheScottishRevivalNetwork(napier.ac.uk))>.

² Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 5.

³ Grieve’s official title was ‘Sergeant-Caterer of the Officers’ Mess’, according to his letter of 20 August 1916 to former teacher, George Ogilvie. According to Catherine Kerrigan, ‘MacDiarmid’s war records have not survived, [...] so the history of his army days [...] rests heavily on accounts he gave in his letters to Ogilvie’; *The Hugh MacDiarmid-George Ogilvie Letters*, ed. by Catherine Kerrigan (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1988), pp. 8, xxi.

providing the grimy industrial background for this genre-defying work. Representations of ex-soldiers would be explored in other modernist texts, perhaps most famously – in Anglophone literature, at any rate – in the figure of Septimus Warren Smith, the shell-shocked veteran of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, published three years after 'Nisbet' appeared in the *Chapbook*. But while both Woolf's novel – an immensely more accomplished work than 'Nisbet' – and MacDiarmid's dramatic sketch have as one focus the ex-serviceman's struggle to readjust to civilian life, they also present an opposition to the political and social conditions that produced the war in the first place, and, as Alan Riach proposes in his interpretation of the text, there is in 'Nisbet' a suggestion of the wider need for moral, national, spiritual, and artistic regeneration that was an imperative aspect of the modernist imagination.

1922 was – and remains – the most glamorous year for literary high modernism. James Joyce's *Ulysses* was published by Sylvia Beach in Paris on 2 February – Joyce's fortieth birthday. In September, C. K. Scott Moncrieff's English translation of the first volume of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* was published; Proust would die two months later. In October, T. S. Eliot founded his literary magazine, *The Criterion*, which first published *The Waste Land* in the UK, and in the same month, Virginia Woolf's novel *Jacob's Room* was issued by the Hogarth Press.

MacDiarmid occupies a curious position in this starry modernist firmament. While still largely absent from critical appraisals of international modernism, he remains canonically central in historical accounts of Scottish literature. Nonetheless, some contemporary critics are sceptical of his influence on Scottish literary and cultural history, with Cairns Craig calling the post-First-World-War Scottish renaissance led by MacDiarmid – nowadays often characterised as a Scottish form of modernism – as 'the gravedigger of the Scottish past' due to its hostility to Scottish literary culture of the nineteenth century and the nation's popular culture more broadly.⁴ As a white, male modernist, MacDiarmid is eminently 'cancellable' (in the contemporary parlance of the so-called culture wars), yet there continues to be sporadic calls by Scottish literary critics to include him in the canonical company of Dead White Male poets such as Eliot and Ezra Pound.⁵ MacDiarmid is at once inside and outside the modernist scholarly machine.

⁴ Cairns Craig, *The Wealth of the Nation: Scotland, Culture and Independence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 181.

⁵ For an extended discussion of these debates, see Margery Palmer McCulloch, 'MacDiarmid's Ambitions, Legacy and Reputation', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. by Scott Lyall and Margery Palmer McCulloch (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 149-59.

MacDiarmid's wider critical reputation certainly remains stymied by what Carla Sassi describes as 'the aporia generated by the academic-centred transmission of modernism, promoted as a cosmopolitan/transnational expression and yet taught within the essentially national structure of academic institutions and programmes'.⁶ In this reading, writers of the period from 'major national traditions' are often represented as modernist cosmopolitans, in keeping with the traditional critical perception of modernism as a form of metropolitan transnationalism; in contrast, Scottish modernists are cast as merely national or even sub-national, 'local' and 'vernacular', the binary margin to the metropolitan centre.⁷ As such, the cultural, political, and institutional hierarchies informing modernist critical reception have had the effect of constricting the international reputation of a Scottish modernist such as MacDiarmid.

To raise awareness of the inconsistencies and inequalities permeating modernist canon formation constitutes a feature of the more general contemporary pluralisation of global modernist studies that – rightly – refuses to mistake political and cultural power for literary value. And yet the consigning of Scottish modernism to a distinctly national sphere of discourse has a longer history that should be understood as fundamental to the academic project of 'Scottish Literature' conducted by scholars working in the field itself. The fight for acknowledgement of Scotland as being in possession of a literary tradition separate from the English tradition is not only premised on a methodological nationalism, it has become conflated with calls for self-determination in the political sphere. The revival of the literary and cultural scene will, in this analysis, form the vanguard in the drive to Scotland's political liberation.

MacDiarmid's influence on the development of this critical standpoint has been especially pervasive. To give one early example, Maurice Lindsay maintained in his introduction to *Modern Scottish Poetry: An Anthology of the Scottish Renaissance 1920–1945*, first published in 1946, that 'the Scottish Renaissance got fully under way' after the First World War and 'was started as a deliberate search after national culture, a parallel to the political Scottish Nationalist movement, by C. M. Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid)'.⁸ Lindsay makes the point explicit when claiming that his anthology, 'a

⁶ Carla Sassi, 'Prismatic Modernities: Towards a Recontextualisation of Scottish Modernism', in *Scottish and Internationalism Modernisms: Relationships and Reconfigurations*, ed. by Emma Dymock and Margary Palmer McCulloch (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2011), pp. 184–97 (p. 187).

⁷ Sassi, 'Prismatic Modernities', pp. 187, 188.

⁸ Maurice Lindsay, 'Introduction', *Modern Scottish Poetry: An Anthology of the Scottish Renaissance 1920–1945*, ed. by Maurice Lindsay (London: Faber and Faber, 1946), pp. 15–20 (p. 18).

representative culling of the best fruits of the first twenty-five years of the Scottish Renaissance', is at the same time 'an encouraging portent for a new Scotland still struggling to be born'.⁹ Lindsay, like many subsequent critics under MacDiarmid's influence, ventriloquises the poet's own propaganda that the Scottish literary renaissance will create the nation anew, saving it from decades of cultural parochialism, and will lead ultimately to Scottish political freedom.

A revisionist turn in Scottish literary studies since the early 2000s has questioned the association of cultural renaissance with social transformation leading to political independence, and has sought to redress the methodological nationalism of the subject area through a focus on critical readings that spurn the (Scottish) nation as paradigmatic.¹⁰ This approach broadly informs many of the essays in 'Hugh MacDiarmid at 100', which includes new ways of reading: the figure of Grieve the man and his main persona MacDiarmid; MacDiarmid's political positions *vis-à-vis* his poetics; his claims for a modernist renaissance in *The Scottish Chapbook*; his engagement with scientific discourse; and his linguistic and textual practices over the range of his work.

In the spirit of Michael North's influential *Reading 1922*, which is subtitled 'A Return to the Scene of the Modern', the essays gathered here are in some measure – some more explicitly than others – a return to the year of MacDiarmid's conception. The volume is not, though, a celebration or a commemoration of MacDiarmid and 1922 – commemorations often problematically recentre already canonical figures, and compound this by tending towards the uncritical (in both senses of that term).¹¹ Rather, motivated by the anniversary of his first attributed publication, this special issue is a reassessment of MacDiarmid's critical and creative legacy and methods by way of the latest scholarly approaches in MacDiarmid studies and wider related fields.

⁹ Lindsay, *Modern Scottish Poetry*, p. 20.

¹⁰ For example, Gerard Carruthers, David Goldie and Alastair Renfrew, eds, *Beyond Scotland: New Contexts for Twentieth-century Scottish Literature* (Amsterdam: Brill | Rodopi, 2004); Alex Thomson, "'You can't get there from here": devolution and Scottish literary history', *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 3 (2007); Gerard Carruthers and Colin Kidd, eds, *Literature and Union: Scottish Texts, British Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Scott Hames, *The Literary Politics of Scottish Devolution: Voice, Class, Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

¹¹ See Andrew Frayn, 'Modernist Centenaries, Anniversaries, and Commemorations', *Modernism/modernity*, 7.2 (2022), <[Modernist Centenaries, Anniversaries, and Commemorations | Modernism / Modernity Print+ \(modernismmodernity.org\)](https://modernismmodernity.org/modernism/modernity-print/)> [accessed 27/09/2023].

Alan Riach's analysis of MacDiarmid's first publication, 'Nisbet: An Interlude in Post-War Glasgow', opens the issue and offers a reading of the text in light of the discombobulating psychological fractures pervading the modernist period following on from the First World War. As he points out, 'Nisbet' is an eccentric homage to Grieve's friend, John Bogue Nisbet, who was killed in the war. Grieve also served in the war, and the postwar fragmentation informing modernist aesthetics would animate the creation of Grieve's most fully-formed and best-known persona, Hugh MacDiarmid. For Riach, the self-dramatisation at the heart of 'Nisbet' as an experimental work of modernism concerned with the multiplicities of human personality is a key context for the performance of the piece as a play by Project Theatre in Glasgow in 1932. Riach's account of the dramatisation of 'Nisbet' sheds an intriguing light on a little-known aspect of MacDiarmid's first publication.

My own essay examines the periodical in which MacDiarmid's first work was published: *The Scottish Chapbook*. The *Chapbook* is the most significant of Grieve's several journal projects. Not only was it the venue for MacDiarmid's first publication under that name, it was in the *Chapbook*, too, that MacDiarmid published his early experiments in Scots language poetry, such as the innovative lyrics 'The Watergaw' and 'The Eemis Stane'. Grieve used the *Chapbook* to announce a Scottish literary renaissance and the periodical is now identified as marking the beginnings of Scottish modernism. However, my essay points to the problematic critical conflation between the idea (and personnel) of a Scottish renaissance and the more recent conceptualisation of the renaissance as a form of Scottish modernism. While many critics have followed MacDiarmid in arguing for the formative modernism of *The Scottish Chapbook*, I suggest that apart from MacDiarmid's own work, the bulk of the creative contributions in the *Chapbook* cannot be categorised as modernist in a meaningfully formal sense and consequently that the periodical was not the origin of a modernist Scottish renaissance.

Many of the essays in this issue deal explicitly with the linguistic textures and writing methods of MacDiarmid's poetry – both early and late. As Patrick Crotty points out, commentary on MacDiarmid's Scots lyrics of the 1920s has previously concentrated on the most easily identifiable of their many sources – the Scots lexicon. The poems however draw life also from a wide range of other textual material, both written and spoken, and are not infrequently to be understood as critical or exploratory responses to the verbal formulations that serve as their starting points.

After a brief survey of the diverse modes of intertextuality in *Sangschaw* (1925) and *Penny Wheep* (1926), Crotty's essay discusses the sources of 'The Watergaw', and argues that none of these is more important to its meaning than Sir James Wilson's *Lowland Scotch as Spoken in the*

Lower Strathearn District of Perthshire (1915), from which it (famously) borrows its distinctive lexis. Crotty's new reading lends retrospective support to MacDiarmid's own impatience with biographical interpretations of his inaugural Scots lyric.

Michael Whitworth's essay analyses MacDiarmid's Scots poetry of the 1920s from the interdisciplinary perspective of the connections between literature and science. Much of the previous critical focus on MacDiarmid's poetry in relation to scientific discourse and source materials has pertained to his work from the 1930s, especially the importance of geology in 'On a Raised Beach'. Here, however, Whitworth considers MacDiarmid's references to the moon, the stars, outer space, and the wider physical cosmos in his poetry from *Sangschaw*, *Penny Wheep*, and *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), asking what purposes these references serve, and whether they draw on contemporary astronomy, particularly the curved spacetime of Albert Einstein that was widely publicised and popularised from November 1919 onwards. Whitworth's essay draws a comparison with Thomas Hardy's similar poetic invocations of extraterrestrial space and suggests that one way of understanding the 'cosmic' is that it counterpoints an interest in the local, whether linguistic or topographical. In the process of his investigations, Whitworth uncovers fresh sources for MacDiarmid's interest in astronomy in the 1920s.

The focus of Fiona Paterson's essay is MacDiarmid's later poetry, in particular the epic *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955), where MacDiarmid proposed a 'Vision of World Language'. Paterson adopts a contemporary archipelagic conceptual outlook to highlight how MacDiarmid's work written during his time living in Shetland (1933 to 1942) rejects the extreme essentialist nationalism of caricature. Instead, Paterson relates MacDiarmid's interest in islands and their unique cultures – he published *The Islands of Scotland* in 1939 – to a literary technique that pulls words and phrases from multiple regional and national contexts and sources to suggest the connections between cultures that yet remain highly differentiated. The result, for Paterson, is a decentralised perspective that is more truly global than the metropolitan centralism of much canonical modernism.

James Benstead's article is interested in MacDiarmid's controversial use of citation, which he connects to the geographical peripherality of Whalsay, the Shetland island where MacDiarmid lived for most of the 1930s. For Benstead, MacDiarmid's use of citation is not plagiarism but a conscious strategy in which can be discerned an evolution from a place-based peripherality to a formal peripherality inhering in what Benstead terms the poet's 'citational poetics'. In Benstead's reading, the centring of previously marginal source material, such as words and phrases from magazine advertisements, within the poetic text illustrates MacDiarmid's placing together of borrowed materials as a consistent strategy in his work, one that

stretches back to his earlier Scots poetry. This also has implications for readers of MacDiarmid's poetry, who are situated in a linguistic environment in which traditional textual hierarchies are overturned, as is the very notion of cultural centre/periphery hierarchies themselves.

Alex Thomson's essay casts a sceptical eye on the development in the 1990s and early 2000s of a Scottish postcolonialism that assumed for Scotland a cultural and political marginality akin to that of colonised nations and peoples, a theoretical development emerging from Scottish Literature's foundational methodological nationalism. This is, for Thomson, an ambiguous critical legacy of MacDiarmid's strategic provincialisation of the nation through an ostensibly anti-imperial nationalism and his depiction of nineteenth-century Scotland as a literary desert, when the country was at that time central to the British Empire and produced writers of global influence and renown. Thomson offers a contemporary reassessment of MacDiarmid's politics against the background of recent scholarship on the history of decolonisation and the legacies of empire in Europe, and in the context of ongoing calls for political and epistemological decolonisation within cultural institutions of the global North, to unsettle assumptions about the anti-colonial implications of MacDiarmid's work.

In MacDiarmid's rise to canonical status in Scotland, through the 1960s and up until his death in 1978, his status bordered on the mythological for many of his acolytes. Critics now abjure such hagiography, but the mystery of Hugh MacDiarmid remains, and, even more intriguingly, that of the man behind the mask: C. M. Grieve. Alexander Linklater's essay suggests a psychological correspondence between Grieve's creation of MacDiarmid and MacDiarmid's creative use of source materials – a topic explored from various angles by Crotty, Whitworth, Paterson, and Benstead – in the compilation of his poetry. Linklater goes in search of the 'biographical puzzle' that is Grieve/MacDiarmid, suggesting that the relationship between pseudonym and biographical author would become one of the strangest in modern literature, rivalled for peculiarity only by the heteronyms of Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa.

The final item, given here as an appendix to the critical apers, is Paul Malgrati's translation of a key document in contemporary recognition of MacDiarmid's poetry. Denis Saurat's essay, 'Le groupe de "la Renaissance Écossaise"', was first published in French in *Revue Anglo-Américaine* in 1924, but it has not previously been available in an English translation. Saurat's essay is more often cited than read closely by critics keen to draw on the piece as an endorsement for a revival of Scottish literature and culture along forward-thinking European lines. However, as I point out in my introduction to Malgrati's translation, Saurat's assessment of the Scottish renaissance is marred by the racist discourse of the period, which was itself an aspect of MacDiarmid's lexis. Malgrati's new translation ought to

give impetus to a more balanced and informed view not only of Saurat's contribution to the critical development of the Scottish renaissance in its own time but to future analyses of MacDiarmid's work. It is to be hoped that all the essays in this edition will play a similar role in revising MacDiarmid studies.

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