**MACDIARMID, Hugh (1892-1978)**

Hugh MacDiarmid was the pseudonym of Christopher Murray Grieve, the pre-eminent Scottish modernist poet, and leading proponent of the interwar ‘Scottish Literary Renaissance’. His best-known work is *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), an extended stream-of-consciousness monologue in Scots verse. MacDiarmid was also an editor, critic, essayist, and polemicist. Rejecting what he saw as the stagnancy of the Scottish imagination under the ascendency of the canon of English literature, he promoted a revived Scots poetry that would reconnect with contemporary movements in Europe. The slogan for the *Scottish Chapbook*, MacDiarmid’s monthly periodical, was ‘Not traditions – Precedents!’ In early works such as *Sangschaw* (1925) and *Pennywheep* (1926) MacDiarmid used a hybrid register of literary Scots to explore metaphysical themes, often using cosmic imagery and pastoral settings. MacDiarmid was both a committed Scottish nationalist and a communist internationalist. In line with this, his Scots became more colloquial in later collections such as *Second Hymn to Lenin* (1932) and *Stony Limits* (1934), as his socialism became more overt and didactic. MacDiarmid’s later poetry is less accessible. Works such as *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955) are dense with intertextual discourse and expositions on scientific and historical materialism. MacDiarmid died in Edinburgh in 1978.

Grieve was born in the Scottish border town of Langholm to John Grieve, a postman, and Elizabeth Graham, the daughter of a farm labourer. Permeating much of his poetry are the landscape and history of the Borders, particularly the land’s violent contestation in the Middle Ages, and the transgressions of the Reivers, which continued into the seventeenth century and are immortalised in the Border Ballads. As a young trainee teacher in Edinburgh, Grieve was introduced to A. R. Orage’s periodical *The New Age*, and through that publication, to Ezra Pound’s verse experiments, Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s prose. During the First World War, he served as a sergeant in Salonika, Greece, and saw little of the violence of the Western Front. After his demobilization, having worked as a journalist across Scotland and in Wales, he began his career as a poet in earnest in Montrose. From here he edited the poetry review *Northern Numbers* and the magazine *Scottish Chapbook*, in which, in 1922, he first assumed his pseudonym. Under his given name he published his first book, *Annals of the Five Senses* (1923), a series of intense, closely observed psychological profiles in prose and poetry.

Throughout the 1920s MacDiarmid set out his vision for a so-called ‘Scottish Literary Renaissance’. In an editorial for *Scottish Chapbook* 1.8 (March 1923) he describes his programme:

The Scots Vernacular is a vast storehouse of just the very particular and subtle effects which modern European literature in general is so assiduously seeking […] It is an inchoate Marcel Proust—a Dostoevskian debris of ideas—an inexhaustible quarry of significant sound.

The early Scots lyrics of *Sangschaw* and *Pennywheep* demonstrated how experimentation with the vernacular, and with a Scots lexicon and phraseology substantially dredged from *Jamieson’s Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (1867), could transcend the limitations that might be expected of a parochial literature. Rather, MacDiarmid sought to connect with modern currents of philosophical investigation and formal literary innovation from across Europe. These early lyrics stand as his most celebrated, and accessible achievements in verse. Their combination of concentrated Scots expression, bucolic settings, and an interplay between the transient and the boundless, and the ease with which they can be memorised on hearing, has helped to sustain their reputation:

I’ the how-dumb-deid o’ the cauld hairst nicht

The warl’ like an eemis stane

Wags i’ the lift;

(‘The Eemis Stane’, *Sangschaw* (1925))

These short lines might be inadequately glossed in Standard English: In the deepest, darkest hour of the cold harvest night / The world, like an unsteady gravestone / Quivers in the sky.

Works like these are frequently regarded the high-watermark of the project known as ‘synthetic Scots’ poetry, which prompted many such innovations, and many more pale imitations.

MacDiarmid’s masterpiece, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, was an extension of these early experiments. Through the wandering thoughts of the eponymous drunk man MacDiarmid meditates on a series of symbols, including the thistle and the moon, and explores the relationship between the personal and the universal. MacDiarmid’s rapid shifts in mood and register saw a diagnosis of Scotland’s cultural and political malaise wilfully bound up in broader epistemological and metaphysical investigations. The arbitrary and earth-bound distinctions of nationality are placed alongside the most overtly unbounded and transcendental of thoughts:

He canna Scotland see wha yet

Canna see the Infinite,

And Scotland in true scale to it.

The implication, that the nation is as good a platform as any in our consideration of philosophical absolutes, is repeatedly reaffirmed in this long poem. With a narrative framework evocative of Robert Burns’ ‘Tam O’Shanter’, MacDiarmid draws from writers as disparate as T. S. Eliot, Alexander Blok, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Dante Alighieri in his efforts to position and extoll the human spirit even in light of the vastness of existence. Among these literary references he includes a host of contemporary pop-cultural references, most prominent among them, Sir Harry Lauder, the Scottish vaudeville performer. Contemporary political and social events are also featured; the General Strike is addressed in an extended ‘ballad’ section. The breadth of his frame of reference in this poem is testament to the expansive role he imagined for the poet in modern Scotland:

A Scottish poet maun assume

The burden o’ his people’s doom,

And dee to brak’ their livin’ tomb.

In this formulation, the poet’s task is to sacrifice him or herself for the cause of cultural vitality and against the encumbrance of tradition and history.

In an effort to overcome mounting financial and personal troubles, MacDiarmid spent most of the 1930s living on the Shetland island of Whalsay, isolated from the literary and political cultures to which he had been so attuned in the previous decade. With the novelist Lewis Grassic Gibbon (pseudonym of James Leslie Mitchell) (1901-1935), he wrote a satirical account of contemporary Scotland in *Scottish Scene* (1934) and continued to attack the ‘Burns cult’ among other forms of perceived cultural provincialism. MacDiarmid’s views were often controversial and alienated many of his contemporary Scottish writers. Most famously, he condemned the one-time ally, poet, translator, and essayist, Edwin Muir (1887-1959) for doubting the possibility of an autonomous Scottish literary identity in his long-form essay on the past and present of the national literary culture, *Scott and Scotland* (1936). In later years MacDiarmid also had public disputes with the poet Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006), with the folklorist Hamish Henderson (1919-2002), and with the beat writer Alexander Trocchi (1925-1984). These controversies were more than a by-product of his tendency for polemics and hyperbole; they were critical to his conception of the role of the poet in society. In *Drunk Man* he famously wrote:

I’ll ha’e nae hauf-way hoose, but aye be whaur

Extremes meet – it’s the only way I ken

To dodge the curst conceit o’ bein’ richt

That damns the vast majority o’ men.

His penchant for the ‘extreme’ was, then, strategic – it was appropriate to the task of the politically committed poet: challenging the securely-held and pervasive conceits that perpetuate cultural and social stagnancy. The position might be further clarified by one of MacDiarmid’s more controversial pronouncements on the importance of poetry and its transformative potential: ‘[I] would sacrifice a million people any day for one immortal lyric. I am a scientific Socialist. I have no use whatsoever for emotional humanism’ (*The Uncanny Scot*). In one of the most influential of his concepts, MacDiarmid developed the notion of the ‘Caledonian antisyzygy’ – first described in Gregory Smith’s *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919) – which he conceived as a national disposition towards embracing contradictory views and impulses, and which, in the early twentieth century seemed wholly appropriate to the times.

In the 1930s MacDiarmid’s use of ‘synthetic Scots’ faded while his politics emerged more forcefully. Poems such as ‘The Seamless Garment’ and his three *Hymns to Lenin* address the working class directly. Though they implore their imagined audiences to dispel false consciousness and embrace the spiritual as well as economic emancipation that might be pursued through socialism, they also comment on the role that the poet might play in advancing this agenda. Figures such as Christ and Lenin provided MacDiarmid with a symbolic reconciliation of philosophy and life and, therefore, with appropriate subject matter for a poetic programme concerned with commitment in both its politics and its art.

Politically, MacDiarmid’s twin gospels were Scottish nationalism and socialist internationalism. He flirted with proposals for a Scottish fascism in the early 1920s, though these were soon side-lined in favour of his ascendant interest in the politics of Scottish Home Rule, and the Communism of the Third International: MacDiarmid was among the founders of the National Party of Scotland, an early incarnation of the Scottish National Party, and later joined, was expelled from, and rejoined the Communist Party of Great Britain. In his socialism, MacDiarmid identified with the Marxist-Leninist line most clearly identified with the Soviet Union during this period, though in his interpretations of Lenin’s vanguardism, and especially its applications in the arts, his Marxian thought was idiosyncratic.

MacDiarmid insisted on the historical significance of the intellectual vanguard and was abhorred the obsequiousness that comes with the pursuit of popular endorsement. Perhaps as a consequence of these stances on revolutionary strategy, in later collections such as *In Memoriam James Joyce* and *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961) MacDiarmid refused to mitigate or conceal the difficulty of his work. He wrote to Rainer Maria Rilke’s dictum, that the poet ‘must know everything’, and in pursuit of this ideal he deployed scientific terminology, unacknowledged literary references, and epic visions of a potential ‘world language’. In this regard he was perhaps quite typical of the developments in classic modernist poetics in the 1920s and 1930s: he was comfortable with contradiction, and in fact, convinced of its usefulness in articulating the complexity of the world that poetry ought to envisage. MacDiarmid is often cited among the giants of European modernist poetics, though he is also very strongly associated with Scotland, and remains a touchstone in discourse around cultural politics and the experience of late modernity in that country.

MacDiarmid was less productive as a poet in later life, though his fame increased in this period and he remained a vociferous cultural and political commentator. His last twenty-seven years were spent living with his second wife, Valda, at Brownsbank, a small cottage near Biggar, South Lanarkshire. He died in Edinburgh in September 1978.

**Biographical sources**

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

MacDiarmid, Hugh (1984). *The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

**Selected works by MacDiarmid**

*Annals of the Five Senses* (1923)

*Sangschaw* (1925)

*Penny Wheep* (1926)

*A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926)

*To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930)

*First Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems* (1931)

*Stony Limits and Other Poems* (1934;1956)

*Second Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems* (1935)

*Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas* (1943)

*In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955)

*The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961)

*The Uncanny Scot: A Selection of Prose* (1968)

*Selected Prose* (1992)

*The Complete Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid* (2 vols) (1993)

*The Raucle Tongue: Hitherto Uncollected Prose* (3 vols) (1996-1998)

[Painting] Portrait of Hugh MacDiarmid by Robert Heriot Westwater (1962)

Main Image for Encyclopedia entry.

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Link: [http://www.nationalgalleries.org/object/PG 2604](http://www.nationalgalleries.org/object/PG%202604)

[Painting] ‘Poet’s Pub’ by Alexander Moffat (1980)

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Link: [http://www.nationalgalleries.org/object/PG 2597](http://www.nationalgalleries.org/object/PG%202597)

[Film] ‘Hugh MacDiarmid: A Portrait’ by Margaret Tait (1964)

Running Time: 8.27 mins

Link [to film]: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8f3BbuqaiY>

Link [to Scottish Screen Archive entry]: <http://ssa.nls.uk/film.cfm?fid=6220>

[Audio] ‘The Watergaw’ introduced and read by MacDiarmid

Link: <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=1557>

[Audio] Various poetry readings recorded in 1969 including full reading of ‘A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle’

Link: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/MacDiarmid.php>