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

Hugh MacDiarmid was the pseudonym of Christopher Murray Grieve, a pre-eminent Scottish poet, and the leading proponent of the interwar ‘Scottish Literary Renaissance’. He is best known for *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), his extended interior monologue in Scots. MacDiarmid was also an editor, critic, and essayist. Rejecting what he saw as the stagnancy of Scottish writing under the ascendency of English literature, he promoted a revived Scots poetry that would reconnect with contemporary movements in Europe. The slogan for the *Scottish Chapbook*, which MacDiarmid edited, 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 through cosmic imagery. He was a committed Scottish nationalist and a communist, and in later collections such as *Second Hymn to Lenin* (1932) and *Stony Limits* (1934) his Scots became more colloquial, and his socialism 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 detailed expositions of the scientific and political materialism that MacDiarmid espoused in this period. MacDiarmid died in Edinburgh in 1978.

Grieve was born in the Scottish border town of Langholm. The landscapes and history of the borders where he was raised permeate many of his poems. As a young man, he was introduced to A. R. Orage’s periodical *The New Age* in which he discovered Ezra Pound’s verse experiments, Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s prose. Having worked as a journalist across Scotland and in Wales, his career as a poet began in earnest in Montrose. From here he edited the poetry review *Northern Numbers* and the magazine *Scottish Chapbook*, in which, in 1922, he assumed his pseudonym. Throughout the 1920s MacDiarmid set out his vision for a ‘Scottish Literary Renaissance’. The early Scots lyrics of *Sangschaw* and *Pennywheep* demonstrated how experimentation with the vernacular, and with a Scots lexicon dredged from dictionaries, could escape from the limitations of a parochial literature and connect with modernist currents of philosophical investigation.

*A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* is 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 tangled up in epistemological and metaphysical investigation. With a narrative frame evocative of Burns’s ‘Tam O’Shanter’, MacDiarmid drew from writers as disparate as Eliot, Alexander Blok, Dostoyevsky, and Dante Alighieri in his search for the place of the human spirit even in light of the vastness of existence.

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. With the novelist Lewis Grassic Gibbon (1901-1935) (pseudonym of James Leslie Mitchell), he wrote a satirical account of contemporary Scotland in *Scottish Scene* (1934) and continued to berate the ‘Burns cult’ among other forms of cultural provincialism. MacDiarmid’s views were often controversial and alienated many contemporary Scottish writers. Most famously, he condemned the poet, translator, and essayist, Edwin Muir (1887-1959) for doubting the possibility of an autonomous Scottish literary identity in *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).

In the 1930s MacDiarmid’s use of ‘synthetic Scots’ faded while his politics emerged more forcefully. Poems such as ‘Seamless Garment’ and his three ‘Hymns to Lenin’ address the working class directly. Though they implore their imagined audiences to see the truth of their situation and 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 meeting this task. Figures like Christ and Lenin appear frequently in the poetry from this period as they reconciled theory with practice most fully.

Politically, MacDiarmid’s twin gospels were Scottish nationalism and international socialism. He flirted with the idea of a Scottish fascism in the early 1920s, though he soon rejected it, co-founding an early incarnation of the Scottish National Party, and later joining the Communist Party of Great Britain. Even in his socialism MacDiarmid insisted on the importance of the intellectual vanguard over the validation sought through democratic processes. He often described himself as a ‘scientific socialist’ with no patience for conciliatory humanism. Perhaps as a consequence of these theoretical stances, in later collections such as *In Memoriam James Joyce* and *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961) MacDiarmid refused to mitigate the difficulty of his work. He wrote to 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’.

As a poet MacDiarmid was less productive in later life, though his fame increased 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. 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**

*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)

*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>