A MAN IN CONSTANT REVOLT: HUGH
MACDIARMID'S POETRY OF
WORLD WAR TWO

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The Scottish poet Hugh MacDiarmid spent much of his long life (1892-1978) fighting against various forces in society with which he disagreed. He was, to use Bob Purdie's phrase, a man in constant revolt'.¹ Christopher Murray Grieve (MacDiarmid's real name) returned from Salonika (modern-day Thessaloniki in Greece) after World War One, where he had served in the Royal Army Medical Corps as a sergeant. It could be argued he had become a young man with a militaristic plan for his life as an artist, and he continued to see his work in such terms later on in life, as always fighting against an enemy. From the early 1920s onwards he dedicated himself completely to a programme of the intellectual and artistic revival of Scots, Scottish literature and Scotland, but even before that he was politically active from at least 1908, when he joined the Independent Labour Party. Therefore for MacDiarmid, politics and poetry were intertwined from a young age. However, he 'was bad at politics, he lacked patience and awareness of how other people thought, he alienated potential allies and he did not explain himself effectively'.² Only this paradox can explain why he was at certain points in his life an admirer of Italian fascism, a Social Credit Douglasite, a major member of the militaristic nationalist group 'Clann Albain', a Scottish Nationalist, and a Communist, amongst other things.

¹ Bob Purdie, *Hugh MacDiarmid: Black, Green, Red and Tartan* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2012), viii.

² *Ibid*, ix.

MacDiarmid published articles, 'Plea for Scottish Fascism' and 'At the Sign of the Thistle. Programme for a Scottish Fascism' in *The Scottish Nation* in 1923, extolling the virtues of the new arrival of fascism in Italy, arguing for it to be transplanted to Scotland in particular regard to 'agrarian policy' which boiled down to 'the maxim, *the land for those who work it*'.³ In addition, he spent much of the 1920s and 1930s advocating Douglasite ideas that had been ignited by his association with A.R. Orage's politico-economical literary magazine *The New Age*. At their best these tenets were an attempt to get rid of long working hours and increase leisure time and thus expand human potential. However, based on the central concept that private banking had to be abolished, they led into dark territory where Jewish business people and usury were conflated, resulting in a particularly nasty strain of anti-Semitism, which did permeate the imagery of MacDiarmid's poetry at the time. MacDiarmid continued using ambivalent references to anti-Semitism and Nazism until the early 1930s, as Hitler was coming to power in Germany.

Of course, scholars and critics have criticised him for this at times dangerous take on politics. Perhaps the most authoritative denunciation of MacDiarmid's aberrant politics is Douglas Dunn's 1980 article 'Inhuman Splendours' where Dunn maintains that 'there is no virtue in being where extremes meet when these are, politically, MacDiarmid's Fascism of 1923, his alarming use of Nazi cultural ciphers in the 1930s, his sometimes racist Nationalism, and his Stalinism'.⁴ Celebrity historian Neil Oliver did not help matters or bring us any greater understanding when in his 2009 book *A History of Scotland* he wrote of MacDiarmid as a 'wild-haired, chauvinist

³ Gavin Bowd, *Fascist Scotland: Caledonia and the Far Right* (Edinburgh: Birlinn), 132.

⁴ Douglas Dunn, 'Hugh MacDiarmid: Inhuman Splendours' in *New Edinburgh Review*, No. 58, (1980), 17.

English-hater' but also claimed that his early 1920s call for fascism in Scotland 'cast such a dark and disproportionately large shadow' over the Scottish nationalist cause.⁵ Against such claims of fascism we could quote the title of the first proposed publication of the 'Hugh MacDiarmid Book Club' in the mid-1930s: *Scotland and the Question of a Popular Front against Fascism and War*⁶ or MacDiarmid's own claim that he was 'absolutely anti-fascist [and] anti-imperialist'.⁷ Scott Lyall writes that from the mid-1930s onwards 'MacDiarmid's communism hardened [...] in opposition to the rise of European fascism'⁸ and Owen Dudley Edwards surely has a point when he observes that MacDiarmid's real target was always Scotland.⁹ Indeed, when it comes to discussions of MacDiarmid's ideology Bob Purdie notes that a 'great deal more historical context is necessary' before making such flimsy and sweeping claims.¹⁰ Many of MacDiarmid's political

⁵ Neil Oliver, *A History of Scotland* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 2009), 353.

⁶ Ann Edwards Boutelle, *Thistle and Rose: A Study of Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry* (Edinburgh: Macdonald Publishers, 1980), 211.

⁷ Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918-1939* (Glasgow: ASLS, 2004), 373.

⁸ Scott Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place: Imagining a Scottish Republic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 123.

⁹ Geddes Thomson, 'A Review of *The Age of MacDiarmid*', in *Akros*, Vol. 16, No. 47 (1981), 97.

¹⁰ Bob Purdie, 'Letters to the Editor', in *The Herald* (2009), available online:

<http://www.heraldscotland.com/comment/herald-letters/tuesday-8-december-2009-1.990597> [accessed 13/07/2014].

beliefs, both positive and misguided, originate from his ‘desire for a better way of living [...] the given world was never to be merely accepted and used, but celebrated and criticised, built upon or demolished’.¹¹ As such, beyond MacDiarmid’s most aggressive and seemingly misanthropic pronouncements lies a sense of the sacredness of life on earth and a protectiveness of the rights of ordinary people.

Arguably the most disturbing lurch towards the Right that MacDiarmid’s writing took was in 1931, when favourably reviewing Wyndham Lewis’s *Hitler*, in *The Modern Scot*. MacDiarmid was thinking about the Scottish militaristic organisation Clann Albain, which ‘resembles the Fascist movement’ in his review, pointing out that ‘class consciousness is anathema to them [Fascists], and in contradistinction to it they set up the principle of race-consciousness [...] white supremacy’.¹² On the evidence of a few isolated pronouncements such as these, some modern revisionist historians such as Neil Oliver and Gavin Bowd feel justified in labelling MacDiarmid a crypto, if not outright, fascist. However, in the most extensive engagement with MacDiarmid’s various political permutations, Bob Purdie’s 2014 *Black, Green, Red and Tartan*, the author states emphatically that ‘he was never a fascist’.¹³ Even Tony Milligan in trying to demonstrate how deeply steeped in ‘right-wing prejudice’ the early Scottish Nationalism was in the 1920s, he states that MacDiarmid invoked fascism with ‘little

¹¹ Alan Riach, ‘Hugh MacDiarmid: Put it to the Touch: An Introduction to *Dear Grieve*’, in *Dear Grieve: Letters to Hugh MacDiarmid [C. M. Grieve]*, ed. by John Manson (Edinburgh: Kennedy & Boyd, 2011), xxi.

¹² Bowd, *Fascist Scotland*, 133-134.

¹³ Purdie, *Hugh MacDiarmid*, viii.

notion of what fascism actually was'.¹⁴ Scott Lyall instead opts for a middle-road between these two camps where Purdie 'ignores MacDiarmid's later comments in relation to National Socialism in the 1930s, just as Gavin Bowd overstates any ostensible connection between war-time Scottish Nationalism and Nazism'.¹⁵ As the remarks made by MacDiarmid himself above show, he was for a short time engaging with ideas drawn directly from National Socialist ideology. But simply because a man well-known for wide, voracious and sometimes plagiaristic reading was airing such views in the early 1930s, long before the war, does not mean that he bought into National Socialism wholesale, and certainly not Nazism as we understand it today. By 1938, MacDiarmid had vehemently rejected German fascism when he wrote 'When the Gangs Came to London', an unpublished poem that was only discovered in 1999 amongst the literary papers of Catherine Carswell by researcher Margery Palmer McCulloch. This polemical, ardently anti-appeasement poem sets the tone for much of MacDiarmid's World War Two poetry discussed in this article. It takes aim at 'this Brummagem "peace- / maker"', then Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, for attempting to appease Hitler by allowing the annexation of Czechoslovakia. MacDiarmid blames Chamberlain for easily sacrificing the 'hard-won liberties of a thousand years / on the altar of fascist violence'. Although the poem builds in rhetorical crescendo, it ends with a bathetic insult: 'Even littler / Than Hitler! / The rat

¹⁴ Tony Milligan, 'Adolf's Tartan Army: Fascists and "men of the night" in 1930s Scotland' in *Centrastus*, No. 51 (1995), 3.

¹⁵ Scott Lyall, 'Hugh MacDiarmid and the British State' in *The Bottle Imp*, Issue 18 (2015), available online: <http://asls.arts.gla.ac.uk/SWE/TBI/TBIIssue18/Lyall.pdf> [accessed 11/12/2017]

in power!'.¹⁶

By this point MacDiarmid was publically declaring that 'he hated fascism wherever he found it'.¹⁷ However, the issue is that MacDiarmid's ire was not primarily aimed at Germany, which he confided in a letter to George Campbell Hay was such a thanatic force that it could not prevail. He was also finding evidence of fascism in England: 'we are told we are fighting against Fascism but all the time English Fascism is shackling itself on us'.¹⁸ We must be clear here that MacDiarmid's blinding hatred is not of the English people, but of English imperialism and of government: in a 1942 speech delivered at a demonstration in Glasgow, he claimed that 'Scotland is a working class country and can best help the working class of England and the world by taking control of her own country to attain a decent standard of life and security for all within it'.¹⁹ This has subsequently led to MacDiarmid being accused of 'downplaying' if not a 'downright denial of the threat emanating from Berlin'.²⁰

This article is the first in-depth discussion of MacDiarmid's World War Two poems, which were found by MacDiarmid scholar John Manson in an archive amassed by the rare book dealers and publishers Kulgin Duval and Colin Hamilton. The archive was originally offered to Edinburgh University Library for free on the condition that the University create a professorship in MacDiarmid's name. After Edinburgh University's refusal to do so, the archive was sold to the National Library of Scotland. The poems within the archive

¹⁶ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'When the Gangs Came to London: On the Recent Thanksgiving for Peace' in *The Scotsman* (25/11/1999), 3.

¹⁷ Bowd, *Fascist Scotland*, 174.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

caused much media controversy when they were published in book form in 2003 under the title *The Revolutionary Art of the Future*, for example in *The Herald*, which carried the headline ‘Why MacDiarmid welcomed the London Blitz’.²¹ These poems are little discussed by scholars even today with the exception of Scott Lyall’s *Hugh MacDiarmid’s Poetry and Politics of Place* (2006) which only devotes a couple of pages to their analysis. They have caused much confusion and are invariably taken as evidence of a crazed mind that is ‘insanely murderous, utterly callous and politically inept’, calling for London to be bombed by the Germans and glorying in the prospect of the decline of the West.²² Lesley Duncan, in another sensationalist article for *The Herald*, remarked on the poems’ power to disconcert, even now, and they do provoke visceral reactions, especially if the reader is English and feels personally attacked.²³ To try and defend these poems would be foolhardy and misguided but it would also be a great mistake to dismiss them as mere misanthropic doggerel: they demand a response, they are calculated to provoke and challenge political stasis.

There are two key aspects to bear in mind when approaching these poems: that MacDiarmid was working by this point from the assumption that German fascism was doomed, that Nazism was an ideology shot through with such a self-destructive death-wish that it could not win out and that these poems are part of MacDiarmid’s continued fight against

²¹ Lesley Duncan, ‘Why MacDiarmid welcomed the London Blitz’ in *The Herald* (11/04/2003), n.p.

²² John Manson, Dorian Grieve and Alan Riach, ‘Introduction’ in *The Revolutionary Art of the Future: Rediscovered poems by Hugh MacDiarmid* (Manchester: Carcanet & The Scottish Poetry Library, 2004), xviii.

²³ Duncan, ‘Why MacDiarmid welcomed the London Blitz’, n.p.

‘a capitalist society that ceaselessly creates the conditions for war and limits the educational opportunities of those who will fight and be killed in them as so much cannon-fodder’.²⁴ His primary concern, as we have seen, lies with the working classes and his Modernist belief that they deserve to get a life worth having, which is continually denied to them by political systems of privilege and power. In writing about MacDiarmid’s letters, Alan Riach argues that in periods of political darkness, MacDiarmid saw the job of the poet as one of the most serious roles in society, that ‘the unacknowledged legislators have far greater constituencies than the acknowledged’.²⁵ This is because the constituencies of a poet can extend beyond their own lifetime and one of the key concepts in MacDiarmid’s work is his address to future generations, which we will return to. At the front of MacDiarmid’s mind at all times were ‘the cultural questions, the language and literary questions that [will be] the decisive factor in the national regeneration’ after the war.²⁶ For Scott Lyall, MacDiarmid’s aim by ‘rebelling against established institutions and received ideas of all kinds’²⁷ was to achieve a ‘new cultural topography’ in Scotland.²⁸

MacDiarmid’s poetry of this era is directly polemical, incendiary and shocking and it should be considered in the

²⁴ Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid’s Poetry and Politics of Place*, 29 & 188.

²⁵ Owen Dudley Edwards; Dorian Grieve, & Alan Riach, ‘Introduction’, in *Hugh MacDiarmid: New Selected Letters* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001), xxx.

²⁶ Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Political Speech* (Edinburgh: Reprographia, 1972), 9.

²⁷ Scott Lyall, ‘MacDiarmid, Communism and the Poetry of Commitment’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Hugh MacDiarmid* (2011), 72.

²⁸ Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid’s Poetry and Politics of Place*, 5.

context of MacDiarmid acting, in the words of Lyall, as a 'cultural worker' whose primary interest is in 'the evolution of humanity'.²⁹ Put another way, these poems are a consistent addition to MacDiarmid's body of work in that they are marked with what Alan Massey has termed MacDiarmid's 'quasi-paternal' protectiveness of core values and that MacDiarmid is willing here to 'savagely' counter-attack 'those he has identified as injurers' of his vision of what the world could and should be.³⁰ One way of beginning to understand these poems could be found in the writings of MacDiarmid's friend Fionn Mac Colla, who compared Nazism with the Reformation in Scotland in his 1967 philosophical polemic *At the Sign of the Clenched Fist*: 'the colossal non-sequitur in the suggestion made to us that because [...] the *morals* of the pre-Reformation clergy were bad, therefore the *doctrines* of the Reformers were true?'.³¹ As such, we see Nazism in a binary context as representing absolute evil and the winning side, the Allies, as absolute good. We read MacDiarmid's poems in this binary light as well, with no time for any suggestion of the failings of England. MacDiarmid himself, let us not forget, was writing in this binary way, the alarming subtext of all of these poems being his mistaken belief that salvation might lie in Stalinism. Although a poem such as 'Of the Cheka's Horrors' acknowledges the monstrous crimes of the Soviet secret police, it seems to insist on pursuing the Bolshevik line simply out of perversity and freedom of expression, something ironically suppressed under such a regime:

²⁹ Lyall, 'MacDiarmid, Communism and the Poetry of Commitment', 76.

³⁰ Alan Massey, 'Creation Shall Not Be Injured: Notes on the Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid' in *Agenda* Vol. 24 / No. 4, Vol. 25 / No. 1 (1987), 44.

³¹ Fionn Mac Colla, *At the Sign of the Clenched Fist* (Edinburgh: M. Macdonald, 1967), 53.

Yes. They are murderers and thieves.
 [...]

Then I can't as a Bolshevik pass?

That's just why I am, you ass!

Can't one have one's likes and dislikes

In theft and murder as well [...] ³²

Peter Porter has praised these poems as being the work of 'an argumentative poet [...] a poet of ideas' ³³ whose real aim is to shock us out of complacency and the received line, or to 'shake the masses of our people out of their indifferentism', even in profound disagreement. ³⁴ These poems are more important than has been previously thought because they were some of MacDiarmid's last original poetic efforts: the bulk of work he published after World War Two was the result of his most sustained period of creativity on Whalsay, Shetland, during the 1930s, or else it was additions to longer poems such as *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955) and *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961). It is also worth remembering that by this point MacDiarmid was an impoverished and marginal figure in Scottish cultural and political life and that, judging by the incendiary content of these poems, it is unlikely that they would ever have been published. If they were, it is unlikely that they would have been in any way influential on the thinking of MacDiarmid's co-patriots. It may seem paradoxical that at a

³² Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Of the Cheka's Horrors' in *The Revolutionary Art of the Future* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd & The Scottish Poetry Library, 2004), 26.

³³ Alan Riach, 'Editing Hugh MacDiarmid' in *Scottish Poetry Library Newsletter*, No. 37 (2001), 10.

³⁴ Purdie, *Hugh MacDiarmid*, 15.

time when MacDiarmid was calling for ‘giantism in the arts’,³⁵ he was also returning to his journalistic roots by writing in note-book form short, topical poetry on the themes of imperialism, tyranny and freedom. Bob Purdie reminds us that MacDiarmid saw the war as representing a fall of the world’s great imperial superpowers, presenting ‘an opportunity for Scotland to emerge from stagnation and to reassume its status as an independent European nation’ and that this came from his utopianism and his innate sense of optimism.³⁶ In this light, MacDiarmid needed to write belligerent verse, drawing on facts, figures and newspaper reports, to project his anti-war stance, even if at times this engendered alarming stances or results. For instance, in ‘Surely It Were Better’ the reader is hit with one of MacDiarmid’s most infamous rhetorical questions:

Is a Mussolini or a Hitler
Worse than a Bevin or a Morrison
– At least the former proclaim their foul purposes
The latter practise what their words disown.³⁷

As John Manson points out, there is an unpublished chapter of MacDiarmid’s sprawling 1943 ‘autobiography’ *Lucky Poet* which deals with his frustration of the official language of his times, how he considered it little more than ‘propaganda, craven euphemism, panglossing, bombast, semantic blank-fire’.³⁸ Although some of these criticisms could easily be applied to MacDiarmid’s own writing, it does show us that he

³⁵ Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Company I’ve Kept: Essays in Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd, 1966), 56.

³⁶ Purdie, *Hugh MacDiarmid*, 22.

³⁷ MacDiarmid, ‘Surely It Were Better’ in *The Revolutionary Art*, 50.

³⁸ John Manson, ‘Hugh MacDiarmid rediscovered’ in *Scottish Poetry Library Newsletter*, No. 43 (2004), 5.

was trying to achieve a new register or utterance in his poetry. Paul Addison supports this view by claiming that even in left-wing circles at the time, the parlance of political writing and opinion was ‘decidedly woolly’.³⁹ MacDiarmid had little time for the often public-school educated English left-wing poets who belonged to the ‘Pylon school’. He was particularly caustic in his assessment of W. H. Auden as a ‘complete washout’ for ‘saving his bacon’ by moving to America during World War Two, while poets such as MacDiarmid stayed and played their part in the war effort.⁴⁰ That said, in many ways ‘Surely It Were Better’ is an extreme example of the disillusionment captured in Cecil Day Lewis’s oft-quoted 1943 poem ‘Where are the War Poets?’:

It is the logic of our times,
No subject for immortal verse –
That we who lived by honest dreams
Defend the bad against the worse.⁴¹

Also, both Ernest Bevin and Herbert Morrison, wartime Ministers of Labour and Supply respectively, were not entirely uncontroversial figures themselves. Here MacDiarmid attacks their forced conscription of Scottish men and women, who were often moved into unsympathetic work in the South of England, far away from their families. MacDiarmid’s stance is similar to that of the Scottish nationalist politician-poet Douglas Young who effectively martyred himself to two terms

³⁹ Christopher Cairns, ‘Unlikely companions in war struggle’ in *The Scotsman* (25/11/1999), 3.

⁴⁰ Hugh MacDiarmid, ‘Metaphysics and Poetry: An Interview with Walter Perrie’ in *Selected Prose* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), 281.

⁴¹ Cecil Day Lewis, ‘Where are the War Poets?’ in *Collected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape & Hogarth Press, 1954), 228.

in prison for a cause, to show that according to his understanding of the repeated breaking of the terms of the Treaty of Union 1707, the English government had no right to force the Scottish people into the war effort.

The contexts of these poems, both personal and national, are crucial. MacDiarmid himself was nearly fifty when he found 'the meshes of National service closing over me'.⁴² Unlike Young, who refused both counts of military and industrial conscription, MacDiarmid seems to have accepted his fate out of sheer poverty. He left Whalsay for the last time and found himself in the Scotstoun, Clydeside area of Glasgow, working long, tiring and dangerous days in the Copper Shell-Band Section of Mechan's Engineering Company where he was seriously injured in two industrial accidents. He was then transferred to the Merchant Service where he worked on and off fleet-ships in Greenock as a postal officer.⁴³ That MacDiarmid was nearly entirely unsuited to this line of work almost seems to be the point. In a letter from his wife, Valda, in 1942 she commiserates 'It doesn't look as if you're going to get much time for your work, which is the main thing'.⁴⁴ It is conceivable that his conscription was an attempt to break his spirit and silence him creatively. Certainly, MacDiarmid was thought of as a sufficiently subversive figure to be watched and monitored by MI5 as early as 1931 and the very existence of these poems is testament to his intellectual

⁴² MacDiarmid, *New Selected Letters* (Manchester, Carcanet), 199-200.

⁴³ Alan Bold, *MacDiarmid: Christopher Murray Grieve: A Critical Biography* (London: John Murray, 1988), 383-390.

⁴⁴ Valda Trevlyn Grieve, 'My dearest Christopher' [Letter dated 25/02/1942] in *Scarcely Ever Out of My Thoughts: The Letters of Valda Trevlyn Grieve to Christopher Murray Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid)* (Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2008), 106.

resilience. Angus Calder, strangely enough in *The People's War*, a book all about debunking received myths of the war, makes the mistake of describing MacDiarmid's wartime work as an act of 'personal immolation', as if he went of his own volition.⁴⁵ In fact, without the intervention of MacDiarmid's poet-friend Helen Cruickshank, who was by this time well-connected in the Civil Service, he would have ended up working as a road-mender. It is hard to imagine his middle-class Modernist contemporaries such as T. S. Eliot, Basil Bunting or Ezra Pound being forced to undertake such menial work.

One of the most controversial of MacDiarmid's war poems is the sensationally-titled 'On the Imminent Destruction of London, June 1940.' The received notion, propagated as we have seen by writers like Neil Oliver is of MacDiarmid during this era as an Anglophobe taking bludgeoning swipes at the Establishment and England from a Scottish nationalist margin. This is difficult to gainsay, but there *is* more to this poem than mere murderous rage. Even considering that this poem pre-dates the Blitz, the opening lines are designed to shake us out of any conventional attitude towards violence and destruction:

Now when London is threatened
With devastation from the air
I realise, horror atrophying in me,
That I hardly care.⁴⁶

On the surface this seems blunt and callous, but there is a lot going on here. The moment of 'horror' connects this poem to a canon of poems that treat London as a place of spiritual

⁴⁵ Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-45* (London: The Literary Guild, 1969), 513.

⁴⁶ MacDiarmid, 'On the Imminent Destruction of London, June 1940', in *The Revolutionary Art*, 42.

despair, physical disease and suffering, such as William Blake's 'London.'⁴⁷ The speaker is saying that his sense of horror is beginning to wane, not that he is totally without a capacity of experiencing horror. The numbing to a continual onslaught of horror is well-known to happen in times of intense fighting or conflict. The following stanzas operate as a thought-process, rationalising why London above all places should be bombed. Our primary reaction of shock needs to be countered by sensitivity, as if MacDiarmid was deliberately testing our capacity for reason and sensitive apprehension, in the face of the attack, not only of what is depicted but his own reported attitude to it:

For if any further place as is inevitable
Must in this way be burst asunder, burned, and lost
It may as well be London as any
- Nay, London far better than most.

Other places may be blasted to bits
And it simply does not matter.
But London, London, what countless shackles
Must with its shattering shatter!

This poem is trying to persuade us of MacDiarmid's fears, of London representing the stronghold of English imperialism and the need for a society where power is devolved to nations such as Scotland, but it is not calling for war or bombing, nor is it revelling in bloodshed or destruction. Conversely it appears to be a call *against* war. It says that unless the great cities of imperialism are destroyed, war will continue, because small places simply do not matter to those in power. MacDiarmid's 'amanuensis' on Whalsay, Henry Grant Taylor, captures the humanist dilemma that the poet faced by both

⁴⁷ Grieve; Manson, & Riach, 'Introduction', xi.

being exhilarated by the impending collapse of imperialism and empire and horrified by an awareness of the deaths of innocent people: 'when the Blitzkrieg started the poet was rather delighted [...] he thought the old order was being smashed up', however this was quickly offset by his fear that 'the war can only make for a bestial submergence and perhaps final dissolution of all decent values'.⁴⁸ MacDiarmid saw the leading empires of the world as being based on excessive wealth generated by excessive violence, and his desire to do away with this was in many ways an extension of his Douglasite utopianism. He saw their destruction as being the means by which people could be liberated from oppression. Peter McCarey has written that in the case of both World War One and Two, MacDiarmid believed that there was a choice to be made between 'status quo or the apocalypse [...] Hugh MacDiarmid, of course [...] plumped for the apocalypse.'⁴⁹

In the bombing of London, MacDiarmid foresees two oppressive regimes exhausting themselves. He does not want to see London reduced to rubble: he wants to shock people into an awareness of the possibility of it happening if affairs continue unchanged. While it is well-documented that MacDiarmid enjoyed the pre-War artistic and bohemian company and pub-life in London,⁵⁰ here he views it as the capital of an empire that has marginalised and persecuted Scotland and the rest of the world. There are many occasions in MacDiarmid's letters particularly where he expresses, alongside Sorley MacLean's opposition to fascism, an equal or even greater resistance to the British bourgeoisie:

⁴⁸ Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place*, 131.

⁴⁹ Peter McCarey, *Find an Angel and Pick a Fight* (Geneva: Molecular Press, 2013), 75.

⁵⁰ MacDiarmid, *The Company I've Kept*, 217.

I note what you say about the War but do not agree although the Germans are appalling enough and in a short-time view more murderously destructive, they cannot win – but the French and British bourgeoisie can, and is a far greater enemy. If the Germans win they could not hold their gain long – but if the French and the English bourgeoisie win it will be infinitely more difficult to get rid of them later.⁵¹

This prompted the critic Gavin Bowd to state that MacDiarmid's 'anti-Englishness and anti-Imperialism' led 'to a downplaying, if not downright denial, of the threat emanating from Berlin.'⁵² However, such a claim is highly problematic. Douglas Dunn suggested that MacDiarmid looks like 'an armchair fuehrer'⁵³ and Neal Asherson's stance is that he was 'a racist [...] it is perfectly clear that he thought that heredity could determine national culture.'⁵⁴ But we must look again at MacDiarmid's own words, and more recent criticism. Despite intemperate pronouncements by MacDiarmid himself, Bob Purdie finds that MacDiarmid 'subtly distanced himself from this blood and soil rhetoric' of other Scottish nationalists such as Lewis Spence and felt that under war conditions 'racial antipathies had flared up from time to time' yet he remained

⁵¹ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Letter to Sorley MacLean, 5/6/40', in *The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. by Alan Bold (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd, 1984), 611.

⁵² Bowd, *Fascist Scotland*, 160.

⁵³ Dunn, 'Inhuman Splendours', 20.

⁵⁴ Neal Asherson, 'MacDiarmid and Politics', in *The Age of MacDiarmid: Essays on Hugh MacDiarmid and His Influence on Contemporary Scotland*, ed. by A. C. Davis & P. H. Scott (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company, 1980), 233.

‘as open to the English as any other friends.’⁵⁵ Behind MacDiarmid’s surface pose of ‘Anglophobia’ lies a much more considered stance of resistance to the super-structures of governments, the military, and economic power. Despite MacDiarmid’s early, mistaken calls for ‘race-consciousness’, by this point, his war is not based on race, but on systems and structures of government. He was willing to risk, as he wrote in a letter to Roland Muirhead in 1928, becoming an unpopular fighter, if that meant being an enemy of accepted things as they were.⁵⁶ Against accusations of narrow and isolationist nationalism, MacDiarmid – using the pseudonym Arthur Leslie – wrote that he believed that while he concentrated on ‘his own immediate neighbourhood’, his ‘comrades’ in other nations would do likewise and produce an era of ‘integrated communism.’⁵⁷ As has already been pointed out, the primary issue we should be confronting is the fact that MacDiarmid seemed so uncritical of communism and Stalinism, not the erroneous idea that he was by this point a supporter of fascism. By 1949, his pronouncements saw him included in George Orwell’s list for British Intelligence of suspected communist sympathisers and his single most controversial political action was to re-join the Communist Party in 1956 after the bloody Hungarian Revolution of that year in which the world began to understand the great potential brutality of communist regimes.

One of MacDiarmid’s later poems, ‘Aberfan and Viet-Nam’, dating from 1966, shows us that he was not blind to the global humanitarian crisis, and intended to shock people out of

⁵⁵ Purdie, *Hugh MacDiarmid*, 65.

⁵⁶ Hugh MacDiarmid, ‘Letter to R. E. Muirhead, 8/2/39’, in *The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. by Alan Bold (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd, 1984), 300.

⁵⁷ Hugh MacDiarmid, ‘The Politics and Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid (1952)’, in *Hugh MacDiarmid: Selected Prose*, ed. by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1992), 201.

sorrow and into indignation and action. However, the poem is also motivated by MacDiarmid's communist tenets, as it shows one superpower (the USA) in a much more negative light than pro-communist North Vietnam:

- The disaster that befell
The children of Aberfan
Is nothing compared with Viet-Nam's
Where there's an Aberfan every day
- Is that nothing to you,
All people who could stop
This insensate and bestial war
In a moment if with one voice
You condemned its perpetrators?⁵⁸

MacDiarmid uses the local here as a means of shocking us out of cultural myopia. Likewise, his poems about World War Two, written largely before the Blitz and before a global awareness of the Holocaust, are rhetorical attempts to make his readers more aware of the neglected and wasted local potential in the midst of global conflict. The violence advocated in these poems is rhetorical hyperbole, intended to jolt the reader into thinking independently. The crucial difference between the disaster in Aberfan and Vietnam in MacDiarmid's eyes is that, while innocent and ordinary people suffer in both, the latter was a direct result of military aggression and political imperialism.

Throughout his poetry from 'The Eemis Stane' onwards, MacDiarmid returned to the image of the war memorial or the gravestone. The grave or memorial is the focal point in poems such as 'The Skeleton of the Future', 'Five Minutes Silence', 'At My Father's Grave', 'At the Grave of

⁵⁸ MacDiarmid, 'Aberfan and Viet-Nam' in *The Revolutionary Art of the Future*, 69.

William Livingston' as well as 'At the Cenotaph' and 'The War Memorial'. MacDiarmid's repeated message has been to not waste time, money and energy on the dead, or to repeat the mistakes of the dead, but to unlock the potential of the living:

We knew them – queer that side by side in the ranks
The immortal heroes alone should all have been slain
And only the worthless, the unemployables, the scum
Like us spared to come home again.

Spared to come home and appreciate to the full
The services our fallen comrades gave.
A country fit for heroes to live in. Certainly
It takes a lot less courage to lie in the grave.⁵⁹

Written from the perspective of the poet's own wartime hardship, the speaker is not repudiating the heroism of the fallen or undermining their humanity, instead he is objecting to the posthumous propagandistic exploitation of their names, actions, bodies and lives. In fact, what MacDiarmid appears to imply here with the line 'It takes a lot less courage to lie in the grave' is that, as an atheist, he sees death as merely the curtailment of suffering. You have to be alive in order to suffer and MacDiarmid's argument is that for the very poorest, in particular the Scottish working classes, it takes a great deal of courage to compel yourself to go on living in such uncaring times. Despite the poem having MacDiarmid's trademark haranguing tone, it is worth noting that he sides with the 'scum' and not the 'immortal heroes'. Joan Littlewood's 1941 remark to MacDiarmid in a letter that 'others are singing "Roll out the Barrel"' in air-raid shelters, saying that now is not the time for

⁵⁹ MacDiarmid, 'The War Memorial' in *The Revolutionary Art of the Future*, 39.

propaganda – we feel such behaviour is insulting,’⁶⁰ implies that for all of the shock and visceral emotion, of what David Goldie calls MacDiarmid’s ‘splenetic’ wartime anger, these poems are radically different from the vaudevillian sing-song and ‘keep calm and carry on’ government propaganda.⁶¹ They could be taken as misanthropic or anti-democratic, yet MacDiarmid might defend his anti-democratic stance as being against those ‘pre-conditioned by mass media’ and ‘subject to hidden persuaders.’⁶² In fact, these poems dramatise the poet’s frustration with ‘ordinary lives’ precisely because he ‘wants no life to be ordinary’, the ‘objective is to change human nature’ for the better.⁶³

Hamish Henderson has described MacDiarmid’s war poems as the actions of a social surgeon cutting away ‘the rotten flesh of contemporary society’ with his ‘draconian surgery.’⁶⁴ In *Lucky Poet*, MacDiarmid indeed stated that his task during the war was to ‘dream of creating a poetry which will operate on mankind.’⁶⁵ Similarly, in a late interview captured in Oscar Marzaroli’s 1972 documentary *No Fellow Travellers*, MacDiarmid can be heard admitting that his work

⁶⁰ John Manson, ed., *Dear Grieve: Letters to Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh: Kennedy and Boyd, 2011), 297-298.

⁶¹ David Goldie, ‘Hugh MacDiarmid: The Impossible Persona’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 129.

⁶² Hugh MacDiarmid, ‘Hugh MacDiarmid & Duncan Glen: A Conversation’, in *Akros: Special Hugh MacDiarmid Issue (Part 1)* Vol. 5, No.13 (1970), 33.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Hamish Henderson, ‘Byspale in Benghazi’ in *Cencrastus*, No. 51 (1995), 10.

⁶⁵ Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet: A Self Study in Literature and Political Ideas* (London: Methuen, 1943), 407.

was always written with a future, more technologically advanced society in mind.⁶⁶ In this light we can turn once more to 'On the Imminent Bombing of London' and read the line 'London is like a foul disease' not as an attack on ordinary people at all, not an attack on human life, but a clarion call to be aware of imperialist ideology, of how it stifles human potential for its own advancement, and of how this is represented in the industrial and post-industrial phenomenon of 'the city'.⁶⁷

Another poem that attacks the convention of commemorating the war dead is '*from Five Minutes Silence*'. Here, MacDiarmid uses the minutes to argue what he thinks this solemn silence really represents. The poem closes with the speaker thinking about those who have died and those who have returned from World War Two, and the poet casts his mind back to his own military experience as well:

And I remember how I too
 A quarter of a century ago
 Became one man in a similar horde
 Not because I was valiant and brave
 And full of faith in my action
 But carelessly, helplessly until I hoped to be killed
 In order that I would no longer
 Have to suffer the intolerable sense
 Of shame for being a man,
 One billionth part of what was called
 'The Civilised West.'⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Oscar Marzaroli (dir.), *No Fellow Travellers* (Films of Scotland and the Scottish Film Board, 1972).

⁶⁷ MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet*, 407.

⁶⁸ MacDiarmid, 'Five Minutes Silence' in *The Revolutionary Art*, 47-48.

The speaker bears the guilt of survival, in a complex anger at the society that engendered the war itself. Alan Bold is correct to say that at the heart of MacDiarmid's most politically uncompromising poems lies the urge to be at war 'with misery' and the political super-structures and regimes that make and prolong human suffering.⁶⁹ MacDiarmid despairs of the fact that the 'Civilised West' has been at war since before any living memory, but still the poem is not purely fatalistic. Rather, it acts to stir the reader out of mere acceptance of the world covered 'in marching men.' The speaker seems to be addressing a new generation, in what might indeed be described as a 'quasi-paternal' way, to move them to reject old political and martial systems of governance. If there is one major, consistent thread to be found throughout MacDiarmid's work, it is the commitment to fighting for ideals most pithily and memorably put across in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*:

A Scottish poet maun assume
The burden o' his people's doom
And dee to brak their livin' tomb.⁷⁰

Both Douglas Dunn and Margery McCulloch have found, in varying degrees, a 'reforming, missionary'⁷¹ voice as well as a 'totalitarian' search 'for sheep to lead'.⁷² McCulloch is nearer

⁶⁹ Alan Bold, 'MacDiarmid: The Man Himself', in *Chapman*, 22, Vol. V, No. 4 (1978), 22-25, 24.

⁷⁰ MacDiarmid, 'from *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*' in *The Poetry Foundation*, available online: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46796/a-drunk-man-looks-at-the-thistle>, [accessed 11/12/2017].

⁷¹ Catherine Lockerbie, 'Poet who saw through the life of "peace in our time"' in *The Scotsman* (25/11/1999), 3.

⁷² Dunn, 'Inhuman Splendours', 20.

the mark in saying that MacDiarmid did want to influence his social surroundings through his work, but the idea that he was looking for recruits to proselytise seems unlikely, considering that so many of his poems are about the lone outrider poet commenting on society from its margins. As we saw in 'The War Memorial', the closest MacDiarmid comes to belonging to a group is aligning himself with the undesirable 'scum' that survived World War One. It is reminiscent of John Berger's claim that 'solidarity' is something that only has a valid context in hell and not heaven.⁷³ As Alan Riach points out, while MacDiarmid had some followers, he did not 'rule over a whole cultural scene' and his years on Whalsay show how vulnerable he was at that time.⁷⁴ It is only since his death and the publication of his unpublished work, a biography and his letters, that it appears MacDiarmid was a towering figure.

However, even if MacDiarmid is aiming his ire at the British Empire in these poems, the problem of the much greater threat of fascism remains. To a modern reader with a panoramic view of the horrific events of World War Two, MacDiarmid's obsession with England instead of the global spread of fascism does seem wilfully perverse and negligent, yet these were clearly MacDiarmid's greatest priorities as a Scottish nationalist. In a letter to Sorley MacLean, quoted already, he wrote that he thought fascism, with or without war, could not last, that it possessed too much of a death-drive to sustain itself for long. This idea is neatly distilled in the lines that describe Hitler as the kind of man who 'would chop up a

⁷³ Tilda Swinton, Colin MacCabe and Christopher Roth (dirs.) *The Seasons in Quincy: Four Portraits of John Berger* (Derek Jarman Lab, 2016).

⁷⁴ Alexander Moffat, & Alan Riach, *Arts of Resistance: Poets, Portraits and Landscapes of Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2009), 27.

Stradivarius violin / To grill a steak.’⁷⁵ He also used Nazism as an objective correlative for disease and cancer in his poem of the mid 1930s ‘Ex-Parte Statement on the Project of Cancer’. By the time MacDiarmid was writing these war poems, the threat of fascism was well established and he believed that it was already in its terminal stages. He therefore either satirises it generally, or else makes it a means with which to attack the English establishment. A good example of the former is ‘While Goering Slept’, a squib where two caterpillars challenge themselves to be the first to crawl the length of a sleeping Goering’s mouth:

Thrice they went, and the same worm won
Though the other failed to see it run.
Then, ‘Tell me how you do it, pray?’
‘It’s easy,’ the winner replied, ‘By heck!
You go the whole length of the lips. I take
The short cut round the back of the neck.’⁷⁶

Although this seems no more than a squib, it makes the claim that Nazism is essentially based on loud-mouths and hot-air and its radicalism comes from the fact that the poet is not moved into righteous indignation but irreverence, suggesting that such a regime is beneath his contempt. This is a more extreme version of the attitude Brecht adopted in his drama of the era, and can also be seen in Charlie Chaplin’s 1940 film *The Great Dictator*. David Craig has compared the war work of Brecht with MacDiarmid and found that both use humour and satire in similar ways. The principle here is that in times of oppressive earnestness, the most effective weapon is laughter. For Brecht, as a communist writer, the political context was

⁷⁵ Grieve; Manson, & Riach, ‘Introduction’, xvi.

⁷⁶ MacDiarmid, ‘While Goering Slept’ in *The Revolutionary Art of the Future*, 41.

one of opposition to ‘the most savage of all reactionary antagonists – German fascism.’⁷⁷ MacDiarmid’s work, by contrast, was, according to Craig, allowed to ‘splurge all over the place in the un-urgent, fumbling, amateurish milieu of Scottish nationalism.’ It is an error to say simply that MacDiarmid’s work lacked focus or consistency. Against such accusations of inconsistency we could put Edwin Morgan’s point that ‘I don’t think he, so much as life itself, was being inconsistent.’⁷⁸ Indeed, in these war poems, MacDiarmid attacks people he thinks inconsistent, such as the clergymen of the Church of England who preach peace while owning ‘armament shares’:

Who speaks of sacrilege in England’s shrine
Where boys are taught sweet Christmas carols to sing
And next forced on to human butchering
And all war’s horrors by the same suave swine?
Con men, gangsters, corrupters of youth, condign
Must be the punishment of those who bring
Successive generations to the bloody bull-ring
Blandly in the name of the dud-Divine.⁷⁹

An important touchstone that shows the consistency of MacDiarmid’s views is his 1972 pamphlet *A Political Speech* where he clearly states his ‘auld enemy’ is ‘English

⁷⁷ David Craig, ‘MacDiarmid the Marxist Poet’, in *Hugh MacDiarmid: A Critical Survey*, ed. by Duncan Glen (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1972), 166.

⁷⁸ Edwin Morgan, ‘MacDiarmid Embattled’, in *Lines Review*, 15, ed. by J. K. Annand (Edinburgh: M. MacDonald, 1959), 24.

⁷⁹ MacDiarmid, ‘Westminster Abbey’ in *The Revolutionary Art*, 70.

Imperialism' and not the English people.⁸⁰ Yet, this distinction between ideology and people is in itself an inherently opportunistic authoritarian line. If we look at Valda Grieve's wartime letters to her husband, we find her extolling the virtues of Stalin: 'Stalin gave a fine speech to the Red Army & incidentally let our people know that he was only concerned with driving out the Nazi Germans from Russian territory – & that he had no intention of destroying the German people – how different from Churchill's Billingsgate display'.⁸¹ Roderick Watson reminds us that while MacDiarmid could be witheringly critical of the 'complacency of Christianity' as in the poem above, while at the same time 'praising Stalin and seeking a connection between the Celtic spirit and Stalin's homeland in Georgia'.⁸² For every utterance of humanity that MacDiarmid's poetry offers, there is an equal and counter attraction to that which is in- or super-human. This allows him to make such claims as 'no one in his senses wants warfare, but if we are determined to be absolutely independent, it may be, and almost certainly will be forced upon us.'⁸³ This meticulously worded statement is not the act of, in Douglas Dunn's words, an intemperately hot-headed 'armchair fuehrer', but it does show that often MacDiarmid's 'cultural reality was at odds with the reality of Scotland as a whole'.⁸⁴ It also reminds the reader of Sartre's rallying cry of a justifiable and oppositional violence to tyranny: 'By any means necessary' which was adopted by many generations of freedom fighters, such as the Black Panthers and supporters of the Palestinian cause. The phrase was in turn echoed by Frantz

⁸⁰ MacDiarmid, *A Political Speech*, 9.

⁸¹ Trevlyn Grieve, 'My dearest Christopher' in *Scarcely Ever Out of My Thoughts*, 107.

⁸² Lockerbie, 'Poet who saw through the lie [...]', 3.

⁸³ MacDiarmid, *A Political Speech*, 9.

⁸⁴ Dunn, 'Inhuman Splendours', 21.

Fanon in an anti-colonial context and has entered into the discourse of post-colonialism. It could be argued that MacDiarmid's attitude during World War Two was also a type of proto-post-colonialism where independence was to be gained 'by any means necessary'. His aggression stems from idealism and his anger is reserved for anyone who stood between him and his comprehensive vision of people and society and the arts, a cause of 'Scottish national awakening' he saw younger writers taking up after the 'forcing bed' of war and military experience.⁸⁵

'The German Bombers' comes from MacDiarmid's own civilian, home-front experience and takes place after a day in which Nazi bomber planes have flown over Edinburgh and not dropped a single bomb. The speaker reads into this the English government's contempt for its neighbours:

Scotland might have been shattered to smithereens
For all the English cared, or the Scots themselves dared;
We owe our thanks to German inadvertence,
Not English protection, that Edinburgh was spared.⁸⁶

When readers look beyond the blunt anti-English message, they may see that both fascism and imperialism are treated here as grave threats and disaster is averted due to human failure. The gratitude expressed is mordant. Edinburgh seems to have survived despite the neglect by England and due to the incompetence of Germany. There is no suggestion here that Germany is sparing Scotland because of the fallacious belief in the potential of some illicit peace deal to be made with

⁸⁵ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Scottish Arts and Letters: The Present Position and Post-War Prospects', in *The New Scotland* (Glasgow: Civic Press, 1943), 151.

⁸⁶ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'The German Bombers' in *The Revolutionary Art*, 45.

prominent Scottish Nationalists and Nazi Germany. Instead, MacDiarmid is writing from almost first-hand knowledge of the devastation of an aerial attack. He moved to Glasgow in early 1942, less than a year after the 'Clydebank Blitz', which claimed the lives of over 500 people. Riach points out that these poems are not merely acts of ignorant racism or Anglophobia, but are carefully considered attacks on specific aspects of political and cultural life from a Scottish nationalist standpoint.⁸⁷ Like in 'On the Imminent Destruction of London, 1940', MacDiarmid seems to be trying to shock us into caring. Note how MacDiarmid is referring to a few, not all, of London's inhabitants:

The leprous swine in London town
And their Anglo-Scots accomplices
Are, as they always have been,
Scotland's only enemies.

It is easy to dismiss such poetry as bilious and rhetorical, but that would overlook the fact that MacDiarmid's life, as is well documented, was not only that of a poet and intellectual, but also that of a political worker, reformer and agitator. He had practical work to do in Scotland, from defending cottars against unreasonable hikes in their rents on Whalsay to running as a political candidate on a number of occasions.⁸⁸ In this sense, these poems are an immediate, if jaundiced, type of journalism, coming out of the danger and exhilaration that MacDiarmid lived with on a daily basis. In an interview with George Bruce he acknowledged that people may consider him fatally cynical, but that he was thinking in terms of improvement and

⁸⁷ Moffat, & Riach, *Arts of Resistance*, 49.

⁸⁸ Brian Smith, 'Stony Limits: The Grieves on Whalsay 1933-1942', in Laurence Graham & Brian Smith eds., *MacDiarmid in Shetland* (Lerwick: Shetland Library, 1992), 42-72, 61.

regeneration. He urged people to take the ‘long term perspective’ and even these little, seemingly impetuous war poems do this. If they are described as callous or brutal, they are misread.⁸⁹

The long-term view, a view of commitment to regeneration, is perhaps not immediately apparent. Such a view is further obscured by the fact that other poems take place in a much more mundane or domestic setting, such as memories of MacDiarmid’s time on Whalsay. These quieter island poems, while still demonstrating MacDiarmid’s radicalism, act in symbolic ways, bringing to mind Edwin Muir’s techniques of myth and fable. For instance, in ‘A Shetland Cottage’, MacDiarmid uses his ascetic existence on Whalsay as a means of trying to strike at the heart of the matter. The poem is not only about the search for shelter and stability on the island – something MacDiarmid would bring down to ideological and imaginative bedrock in ‘On a Raised Beach’ in the 1930s – but an attempt to locate the source of the global chaos surrounding the poem. MacDiarmid diagnoses the source of the problem not as a racist or prejudiced attack on groups of people, but as the corrupting power of capital; it is the ‘money age’ where ‘money has become supreme’, which is a vestigial trace again of his Douglasite utopianism:

That is going to make the world hell – for none of the
realities
Are capable of a rational justification.
Every other week the papers are full of details
Concerning the most appalling catastrophes
- Earthquakes, massacres, and God knows what.
But no one ever mentions them. They’re forgotten

⁸⁹ Hugh MacDiarmid, ‘Hugh MacDiarmid & George Bruce: An Interview’, in *Akros: Special Hugh MacDiarmid Issue (Part 1)*, Vol. 5, No.13 (1970), 76-77.

instantly.
 The only things that are taken seriously are
 sweepstakes.
 But *they* relate to money. Money is the only reality left.
 There's no need to even pay lip-service to anything
 else.⁹⁰

This poem challenges us to agree with such a fatalistic and cynical assessment of the world. Yet its closing lines ring out as prescient when considering the fiscal exigencies of our own age. Such poems read like warnings from a different era, urging us to value above all human potential, to restore in a broken and fragmented era a 'bracing and zestful appetite for life' and a sense of solidarity across the ages, as in this untitled fragment from the same archives that yielded the poems in *The Revolutionary Art of the Future*:

How glorious to live! Even in one thought
 The wisdom of past times to fit together
 And from the luminous minds of many men
 Catch a reflected truth: as, in one eye,
 Light, from unnumbered worlds and farthest planets
 Of the star-crowded universe, is gathered
 Into one ray.⁹¹

MacDiarmid's war poems maintain their power to disquiet to this day. They seek out 'the extreme in order to extend human consciousness.'⁹² For him, the world and its traditions are not to be accepted unquestioningly. As readers, we must apply the same approach, even if it means we find his work wanting and

⁹⁰ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'A Shetland Cottage' in *The Revolutionary Art*, 34-35.

⁹¹ Grieve; Manson, & Riach, 'Introduction', xxvi.

⁹² Boutelle, *Thistle and Rose*, 229.

irresponsible. The intention of these poems is to shock readers out of complacency and uncritical thinking that leads into believing the myths of the 'Keep Calm and Carry On' Blitz, where ordinary people were expected to stoically put-up and shut-up. At their core the poems are about trying to project the cause of Scottish nationalism and independence, improving the lives of the working classes and about MacDiarmid's ambitions for humanity, for great intellectual achievement. These priorities are not shared by everyone, but MacDiarmid felt they were the most important issues for his time. Unfortunately they are also tainted by MacDiarmid's firm belief in the positive influence of Stalinism. Besides, his extreme egotism as an artist led him to assume that his ideals were without question the right ideals for everyone of his time. The outspokenness and vociferousness of these poems are the result of an impassioned mind, and an attempt to be heard and taken seriously in matters pertaining to life, nation and society, from someone on the periphery of the action. As Tom Scott says:

To scientists and philosophers we look for facts, information, truths, principles, ideas, wisdom: but in matters of value and priority the poet is, or ought to be, consulted. That he isn't is one of the main reasons why the present mess is the present mess.⁹³

In addition, Scott's points extend, and make more directly applicable to MacDiarmid's work, Ezra Pound's belief, expounded in the 1913 essay 'The Serious Artist' that 'the arts provide data for ethics.'⁹⁴ To Pound's mind, 'ethics are based on the nature of man' and we 'must know what sort of animal

⁹³ Tom Scott, 'Vive MacDiarmid', *Chapman*, 22 (1978), 12.

⁹⁴ Ezra Pound, 'The Serious Artist', in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 46.

man is before we can contrive his maximum happiness.’ The arts, including literature and poetry, are as much a scientific discipline as chemistry, and in this context they ‘give us our best data for determining what sort of creature man is’. The important role of poetry in this light, of the war, becomes a matter of necessity. MacDiarmid was working under the sincere illusion that he was pointing the way towards a better post-War Scotland. But as we have seen, he was ‘bad at politics’ and ‘lacked patience and awareness of how other people thought’.⁹⁵ His apodictic belief in the truth of his work as a poet was both his strength and his downfall as it meant his work, rather resembling a dictatorship, had no time for dialogue, equivocation or discussion.

In writing about MacDiarmid’s poetry Douglas Dunn bemoaned the fact that his work engendered two types of response, either ‘permanent evangelism or permanent explication’. Dunn’s third, preferred, type of response, outright repudiation, is not the way forward either. It is not easy to be an apologist for MacDiarmid’s poems of World War Two, as for every instance of compassion or anti-fascism, there are also examples of cruelty and a blindness to the threat of Stalinism. But it is also not right to allow these poems to either pass unremarked-upon or be patently misrepresented. MacDiarmid’s work was coloured by his Modernist commitment to seeing life as potential that has been denied by hegemonies and war-generating imperialisms. The problem is that at the height of his egoism as an artist he was convinced his path was the right one which led him to see the war in an extremely binary way of good and evil. When he did not see much ‘good’ represented by the Allied Forces of the UK and USA, he impetuously advocated Stalinism as the solution, which flawed his work. What emerges from the poems

⁹⁵ Purdie, *Hugh MacDiarmid*, ix.

explored in this article is a drive to transcend the general sense of 'helplessness' that Angus Calder has diagnosed as the prevailing mood of the arts during the war.⁹⁶ That said, MacDiarmid was working beyond his means in that he never brought about lasting change. His conscience and ego however would not allow him to remain silent. According to Calder the main literary wartime dilemma was how 'could the writer, made intensely political by the events of the era, hope to influence events, if not by propaganda'.⁹⁷ Calder's remark shows an awareness of active poets in society, such as MacDiarmid, who desire change and try to enact it through work that persuades its readers by shocking or provoking them with dystopian futures or extreme viewpoints. Far from glorying in the death of innocent civilians and turning a blind eye to the threat of fascism, these poems show MacDiarmid at his most topically engaged and attuned to the challenges and troubles of his time. He was without doubt a man in constant revolt against the prevailing order of his times, and his work shows his ability to entertain political ideas and then violently abjure them for the sake of something else that might well serve people better. Behind most acts of revolt there is an anger, and behind that anger there is, more often than not, a frustrated form of idealism. Certainly, the fate of Scotland is at the forefront of his mind, but he is also deeply concerned about the potential of humankind and the anti-life forces that prevent a greater society from being envisaged and achieved. With this in mind, and considering these poems were some of MacDiarmid's last sustained creative efforts, for all of their glaring faults, they can be fairly described as 'the revolutionary art of the future.

⁹⁶ Angus Calder, *The People's War*, 514.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*