
Hugh MacDiarmid continues to be a problem to Scottish literary criticism. In terms both of his modernist poetics and his efforts to regenerate the national culture, he is Scotland’s equivalent of W. B. Yeats, but unlike Yeats he has had almost no impact on international accounts of modernist poetry and had, in his lifetime, equally little success in transforming Scottish culture or politics. The ‘Scottish Renaissance’ which he proclaimed in the 1920s he ended by renouncing in the 1930s because none of those who had participated in it had followed his leadership in issues of language or politics. Those sympathetic to MacDiarmid have seen in his almost single-handed attempt as poet, critic, publisher, journalist and politician to move Scotland towards self-determination in literature and politics, a heroic endeavour defeated by a nation trapped in a stupefyingly conservative culture. Others have seen in his shrill anglophobia, in his contempt for his own nation’s actual culture and in his apparent political reversals – most famously in rejoining the Communist party after the Hungarian uprising – a self-indulgent politics of pointless gestures, as unsteady and undisciplined as the poetry that accompanied it. If the first were true, its implications for Scottish culture as a whole in the twentieth century would be deeply pessimistic; if the second were true, then Scotland’s greatest twentieth-century poet would be great only by comparison with the littleness of the rest of Scotland’s poetic achievement in the first half of the twentieth century. Rather than the ‘Scottish Renaissance’ prophesying the upsurge in Scottish literary
and political activity in the years since 1979, it would shrink into the dead-end from which modern Scottish culture had to escape in order that self-determination could be achieved.

For Scott Lyall the importance of coming to terms with MacDiarmid’s politics lies in the fact that his ‘ideological influence still powerfully – if subliminally – resounds in Scottish cultural politics’ (p.14). If MacDiarmid is as flawed as his detractors would suggest, then so is the Scotland which he continues to shape. Lyall, however, wants to resituate MacDiarmid’s politics and poetics both historically and geographically. Since Tom Nairn’s analysis of Scottish culture in the 1970s, it has been commonplace to read the Scottish Renaissance as a belated nineteenth-century nationalism emerging uncertainly into the artistic world of modernism: Lyall, however, presents MacDiarmid as emerging ‘from the Great War to sniff the first fresh breeze of postcolonialism’ (p.5), and his poetic career as a development towards the ‘ideal of a postcolonial society’ (p.188). From that postcolonial perspective, nationalism is a means of resistance to capitalism – and there is therefore no contradiction in being both a nationalist and a socialist – but, more importantly, it is also resistance to the metropolitan culture that capitalism both sustains and is sustained by. As a consequence, MacDiarmid’s politics, according to Lyall, is determinedly a politics of the local, and his choice of places to live – Montrose on the east coast of Scotland in the 1920s and Whalsay on Shetland in the 1930s – is the symbolic enactment of his refusal to live within the value-system of the metropolitan centre. To write at the cutting edge of modernity but from the distance of the periphery is to prove that ‘there is nothing more universal than the local’ (p.17). Living in a small community, deeply engaged in its politics as councillor and journalist, is not, then, an accidental element in MacDiarmid’s development: the local is, for Lyall, the very ground of MacDiarmid’s poetry, and that localism the foundation of his politics.

Lyall, however, presents Grieve as one in the long line of pseudonymous Scottish authors – from Ossian
Macpherson to Fiona MacLeod — who have had to invent an alternative personality in order to compensate for ‘a diminished modern Scottish identity . . . so circumventing an inherited national inferiority complex’ (p. 31). The ‘immoderately expressive’ Hugh MacDiarmid is the antitype of the Scot produced by Union and Empire, and his ‘writing career was a committed act of engagement and identification with the land of his birth, a poetics of place striving to reveal the essential totality of the nation’ (p. 23). The problem lurking in this sentence, for both MacDiarmid and for Lyall, is that identification with the land meant the very opposite of identification with the history of the nation: for MacDiarmid, the historical nation and the essential nation had been sundered from each other by the Reformation, which ‘subverted the whole national psychology’ (p. 39).

The Scottish Renaissance, therefore, is not simply ‘a cultural Counter-Reformation’ but a refusal to accept Scotland’s actual historical development as any part of the essential Scotland. The poetics of place and of the local — ‘Langholm is the “secret reservoir” (Lucky Poet, p. 20) that MacDiarmid draws upon when writing his poetry’ (p. 69) — allows MacDiarmid to displace Scotland’s actual history and thereby open up an alternative future grounded in its localism and peripheralism. As a result, critiques of MacDiarmid, like Harvey Oxenholm’s, which charges it with being provincial is, according to Lyall, inappropriate, because it:

implies that the working environment of those in small places like Langholm is less important than that of the great centres of ‘mass industrial and political conflict’ such as ‘Lenin’s Petersburg, Rosa Luxembourg’s Berlin — or the Glasgow of John MacLean’. It is just such insular metropolitanism that MacDiarmid’s Maclean-inspired Scottish Republicanism seeks to radically counter. From a local milieu, his internationalist politics supplant in faith the Christian vision. (p. 76)
To do so, however, Grieve not only has to deny Glasgow any place in ‘essential’ Scotland but has to turn MacDiarmid into a national saviour figure who will ‘sacrifice himself for the nation’ and be ‘willingly crucified by the Thistle’ (p. 78), in order that the nation can be resurrected.

Lyall wants to argue that ‘effectively and ingeniously, MacDiarmid managed to interrelate his political and cultural activities in Montrose through his jobs as journalist and councillor’ (p. 84) and that the ‘metaphysical nationalism of A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle is the ‘poetic manifestation of the cultural and political ideas that MacDiarmid propagandised’ in the period. But the disjunction between the small-town politics of Councillor Grieve and the national ambitions of MacDiarmid are elided in that sentence by making MacDiarmid rather than Grieve the ‘journalist and councillor’. It was a disjunction from which Grieve suffered increasingly in the years leading up to the break-up of his marriage in the late 1920s and a disjunction which Lyall does not sufficiently acknowledge when he allows the poetic pseudonym to become the agent in Grieve’s political activities. MacDiarmid may aspire to be ‘the poet-Christ’, ‘an unforgiving, Calvinistic Übermensch’ (p. 91) but Councillor Grieve is more concerned with his council’s efforts at a ‘reduction in the wages of officials and workmen’ in Montrose (p. 86).

The wealth of detail about Grieve’s activities in Montrose makes this the most valuable section of the book. The fact, however, that ‘the work produced in Montrose offers no obvious poetics of place’ (p. 92) because ‘the intensely local colouring that flows through MacDiarmid’s work’ (p. 94) in this period is derived from ‘the folk-memory of his earliest childhood in Langholm’ (p. 93), points to two difficulties in Lyall’s analysis. First, there is no real account of what a poetics of place – rather than a politics of place – might be. Indeed, the poetry that seems most clearly set in a particular place – ‘On a Raised Beach’, say – is a poetry effectively negating all places as they relate to human beings: ‘Frequently a Shetland vista gives one the
illusion of not being on part of the habitable earth, but of
some burnt-out star. The end of the world; well, it will come
to that some time, won’t it? As well, perhaps, to reckon with
a foretaste of it now’ (p. 122).

Second, Lyall’s effort to recombine Grieve the politician
and MacDiarmid the poet as complementary modes of one
activity, creating a new national self and therefore the possi-
bility of a new nation, runs up against what we might call
the ‘impossibilism’ of MacDiarmid’s poetic stance. Lyall
acknowledges that in the case of *A Drunk Man Looks at the
Thistle*, ‘it is not the so-called fractures of the nation’s
history or the philistine nullity of Calvinism that create a
cultural vacuum, but an absolutist MacDiarmid in pursuit
of a metaphysical Scotland . . . This vision, synchronous, as
it can only be, with the failure of Scotland to fulfil such an
impossible ideal in reality, accordingly empowers the poet
to redeem the nation through his saviour-like presence’ (pp.
161–2). He goes on to suggest, however, that MacDiarmid
later recognised the irrationalism of this position and devel-
oped an art and a politics based on a recognition, similar to
Adorno’s, that the revolutionary artist must accept ‘high art
as a bulwark against the homogenising forces of consumer
capitalism’. But the poetry that this produces in *In Memo-
rian James Joyce*, consists of facts ‘so abstruse as to render
their liberatory possibilities negligible to all but the educated
few’ (p. 184). It may be a poetry fulfilling a ‘true interna-
tionalism’ but it is not a poetry that can generate the nation-
alism from which such internationalism must derive. Rather
than a poetics of place, it is a utopian poetry of ‘no place’.

MacDiarmid is indeed a problem. Lyall’s detailed
analysis of the contexts in which Grieve was working
provide us with excellent material for a better understanding
of how MacDiarmid dramatised Grieve’s problems: whether
we have yet adequately come to terms with the problem of
MacDiarmid is more doubtful.

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