

## *Hugh MacDiarmid in Context*

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Hugh MacDiarmid died in 1978. I met him three times during the last year of his life, here at Brownsbank, when he was in his mid-80s. He was one of the very great poets of the twentieth century and he brought about enormous and difficult changes in his native country.

He came out of the nineteenth century. He was born in the Scottish Borders in 1892. He served in the Royal Army Medical Corps in the First World War. He survived that and was relieved from service suffering from cerebral malaria. He survived that and became a full-time journalist in Scotland, but when his first marriage broke down he suffered extreme psychological alienation and physical breakdown. He survived these. With his second wife and a young son he went to live on the Shetland island of Whalsay, far north of mainland Scotland. Their staple food was mackerel and mushrooms. He survived that, returning to Glasgow during World War II. Surviving that, he and his wife settled in the Borders once again. Throughout his adult life, his voice was raised in protest at injustice and inadequacy everywhere, but especially in Scotland: and so he made a lot of enemies. He was a lyric poet, a satirical poet, a meditative and philosophical poet, and finally an epic poet. He lived in relative poverty for most of his long life.

He came out of the nineteenth century – literally. He came out of a world in which certain individual men had taken upon themselves a kind of comprehensive understanding of society, an attempt to understand the workings of the social world in all their complexity: the great Victorian sages, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold. In terms of his social vision, Hugh MacDiarmid was a descendant of theirs.

Ernest Hemingway once commented that all the big words – love, honour, glory, patriotism – were killed off in the First World War – but MacDiarmid knew them before they died.

MacDiarmid was a survivor, a man who came through a large part of the twentieth century and whose creative life stretched forward from before World War I

(1914-18), through the years between the wars, the years of the Modern Movement in literature and the arts, and who was familiar with the great writers of that time – W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound – and who recognised in 1922 the two greatest works of literature in the Modern Movement: Eliot's *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. But MacDiarmid then went on from there into the era after World War II (1939-45), writing an enormous quantity of material – poetry and prose – which is still working like yeast in the mixture of modern Scottish life and ticking like a time-bomb in the world of modern literature. He is still a living influence in the twenty-first century.

I'm interested in this man because I love his poetry; but I'm also interested in him because of his enormously influential creative effort, to revitalise and regenerate a nation. I'm interested in the pathos of the epic effort.

Let me be precise: there are three important moments in the history of modern Scotland. The first was in 1603, when James VI of Scotland became James I of an abruptly united kingdom, took the Scottish court to London and marked the transition in English literature between the late medieval and Elizabethan period and the early modern and Jacobean period. The second was in 1707, when the Scottish parliament voted itself and the nation's political statehood out of existence and dissolved themselves into Westminster and the larger economic project of the British Empire. The third was in 1922, when a thirty-year old man who had been christened Christopher Murray Grieve started publishing work under the name of Hugh MacDiarmid, and started a literary movement which he described as 'a propaganda of ideas'. This movement is known as the Scottish Literary Renaissance, whose effects are part of the fabric of Scotland's literary and cultural life today.

These are big claims. And perhaps it will be impossible for me to convince you that all of them are justified. But what I shall attempt to do, no doubt too briefly and inadequately, is to provide a very simple introduction to this great poet by showing you some of his poems and talking a little about his writing, and I'm going to do that in the simplest possible way, by reading it. But I also want to suggest in a little more depth the kind of cultural stagnation in Scotland from which his work arose. And if I have time I'd like to suggest something of the fertility of the literary world that has come about in his wake.

In 1976 I read MacDiarmid's work for the first time and I was immediately aware that I was in the presence of something quite astonishing. This feeling of exhilaration reading this poetry is quite common among readers who have come to his work often outside of the main academic institutions where one might have expected it would have been taught more widely and more frequently. Let me quote a description of MacDiarmid by Andrew Marr, from his book, *The Battle for Scotland* (1992):

MacDiarmid's poetry remains a vast and little colonised continent of wonders, glittering views and strange formations, which everyone with the requisite supply of synapses and a little common courage should visit. A founder member of the National Party, MacDiarmid managed to get thrown out of it in 1934 for his communism, and then thrown out of the Communist Party in 1938 for his "nationalist deviation". Four years later, when the Nationalists had split and swung under left-wing pacifist leadership, he rejoined them. Then he resigned again. In 1956, when droves of British communists were leaving the Party because of the Soviet repression in Hungary, MacDiarmid rejoined that, snarling about the need to put down revisionists (a somewhat strange position for a self-professed Nationalist). When the world was crowding through the exit, MacDiarmid was fighting to get in. Any would-be practical politician looking for a guru (Scots especially) should run a mile from his gigantic presence. John MacCormick said of Grieve/MacDiarmid: "Although I have no doubt that he has done invaluable work in the whole field of Scottish literature I am certain that C.M. Grieve has been politically one of the greatest handicaps with which any national movement could have been burdened. His love of bitter controversy, his extravagant and self-assertive criticism of the English, and his woolly thinking... were taken by many of the more sober-minded Scots as sufficient excuse to condemn the whole case for Home Rule out of hand." Absolutely true: yet today tens of thousands of unsober-minded Scots, who have never even heard of the ever-respectable MacCormick, read MacDiarmid for inspiration.

Well, with a handful of synapses and a little common courage, I went on and read him.

But why bother? Who was this man and what makes me think he deserves this kind of recognition?

Let's start with the world he came from.

Up until the union of the crowns of Scotland and England in 1603, Scotland was internationally recognised as a nation state and an important player on the field

of international European politics. The musical and cultural life of the country did not depend upon the court entirely, but patronage was important for the survival of certain aspects of it. Although the arts will always find ways of surviving, they have less chance of international recognition (and national self-esteem is thereby diminished) when there is neither money to sustain them, nor political authority to recognise them.

When the Treaty of Union in 1707 folded what was left of the Scottish parliament into Westminster, the dissolution of autonomous political authority flushed the population of Scotland into a colonial situation. In terms of financial, political and courtly authority, the United Kingdom was and has remained Anglocentric.

With the rise of the British Empire, two things happened to Scotland at the same time: it became invisible, and it became internationally recognisable in stereotypes and caricatures.

It became invisible in the sense that many of its major artists, composers and writers were exiled from their own national identity and became bulwarks of the British establishment. Scots were both the victims and the perpetrators of the British Empire. They and their country became dissolved in the great imperial project. Thomas Carlyle, in his lectures *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841), refers to Samuel Johnson as his countryman – an Englishman. Further down the line, when Field Marshall Montgomery spoke in the Royal Albert Hall on 23 October 1946 to an enormous reunion of El Alamein veterans, he subsumed Irish, Welsh and Scots in his patriotic declaration: ‘We are all Englishmen here!’

Perhaps the best example is one of the most famous photographs ever taken: of John Brown, standing just to the left of Queen Victoria (who is on horseback), with the gamekeeper, John Grant, standing to her right. After the photograph was taken, the gamekeeper was cut out of the picture and it was made into a postcard. In 1863, its first year of issue, alone, it sold 13,000 copies and was sent all over the world.

The image of John Brown presents the features that were to hold sway (and in some respects, still do): a dour, serious expression suggests the conscience and determination of the set of his character, staring straight at the camera: a direct



Just cost the soul of any of these ones –  
The female things, I mean. Two pence? Ah, yes,  
That woman's body sells each night for less.

The sentimental, nostalgic school of Scottish writing was being rejected by MacDiarmid in favour of a new kind of poetry, and a new, urgent, European and international sense of the political world in which Scottish literature would have to find its place, if it was to be worth anything in the modern world.

Then something happened. To quote the words of Norman MacCaig, Christopher Murray Grieve got hold of Jamieson's *Etymological Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* – Chris Grieve dived in at one end and Hugh MacDiarmid clambered ashore at the other.

He began to write a series of short, intense and incredibly powerful lyric poems in Scots.

The language we call Scots had been developing and evolving as a language quasi-independently from English for centuries, as the weight of political, economic, cultural and linguistic authority moved to the South. MacDiarmid was to make use of it not merely as a comic medium or a register of eccentric absurdity but as a medium for serious, adult, intensely thoughtful poetic expression. Consider 'The Innumerable Christ' with its epigraph from Professor J.Y. Simpson, 'Other stars may have their Bethlehem, and their Calvary too.'

Wha kens on whatna Bethlehems  
Earth twinkles like a star the nicht,  
An' whatna shepherds lift their heids  
In its unearthly licht?

'Yont a' the stars oor een can see  
An' farther than their lichts can fly,  
I' mony an unco warl' the nicht  
The fatefu' bairnies cry.

I' mony an unco warl' the nicht  
The lift gaes black as pitch at noon.  
An' sideways on their chests the heids

O' endless Christs roll doon.

An' when the earth's as cauld's the mune  
An' a' its folk are lang syne deid,  
On coontless stars the Babe maun cry  
An' the Crucified maun bleed.

But of course MacDiarmid was quite capable of keeping a vital sense of humour alive and kicking in his poems – but this sense of humour would often aid and abet serious thought. It wasn't mere frivolity. Think of the vision of the Day of Judgement in the cemetery of 'Crowdieknowe':

Oh to be at Crowdieknowe  
When the last trumpet blows,  
An' see the deid come loupin' owre  
The auld grey wa's.

Muckle men wi' tousled beards,  
I grat at as a bairn  
'll scramble frae the croodit clay  
Wi' feck o' swearin'.

An' glower at God an' a' his gang  
O' angels i' the lift –  
Thae trashy bleezin' French-like folk  
Wha gar'd them shift!

Fain the weemun-folk'll seek  
To mak' them haud their row –  
Fegs, God's no blate gin he stirs up  
The men o' Crowdieknowe!

Just a personal anecdote to illustrate that poem. I wrote a poem myself once about my grandfather, an affectionate portrait-poem. I showed it to one of my uncles, who said he thought it was a pretty good picture but that there was another side to him too. He said that when he was a wee boy, he and some of his pals had been playing, running along a wall by the side of my grandfather's shed, and they'd jumped onto the roof of the shed, and my grandfather had heard them and come out, livid, angry and saw them, leapt back into the shed and re-emerged with his

cheeks bulbed out – he'd just swigged a huge mouthful of paraffin – and he took out some matches, lit one, and sprayed the paraffin out and up at them in a flamethrow-fountain of fire! They scarpered, fast, yelping in fright.

Now, I wouldn't recommend that sort of behaviour to anyone but I think it's a shame that these days you're unlikely even to imagine it. My grandfather was about the same age as MacDiarmid, so when we're thinking of those 'Muckle men wi' tousled beards, / I grat as a bairn' we can imagine behaviour as outrageous and as shocking as that – or even more so – from older generations.

To contrast the tones of voice MacDiarmid was capable of, though, consider this beautiful love poem from 1932, 'Milk-Wort and Bog-Cotton':

Cwa' een like milk-wort and bog-cotton hair!  
I love you, earth, in this mood best o' a'  
When the shy spirit like a laich wind moves  
And frae the lift nae shadow can fa'  
Since there's nocht left to thraw a shadow there  
Owre een like milk-wort and milk-white cotton hair.

Wad that nae leaf upon anither wheeled  
A shadow either and nae root need dern  
In sacrifice to let sic beauty be!  
But deep surroondin' darkness I discern  
Is aye the price o' licht. Wad licht revealed  
Naething but you, and nicht nocht else concealed.

Scots was the oral language of rural and agricultural workers and MacDiarmid's boyhood and not the polite and genteel language of literary London – so MacDiarmid was uniquely placed to bring together a modern sensibility and a farmer's sense of human creaturality and consequently a liberating attitude to sexuality and morality plus a sense of humour. Even when he is writing in English, you can see those qualities all working together, for example in 'One of the Principal Causes of War':

O she was full of loving fuss  
When I cut my hand and the blood gushed out  
And cleverly she dressed the wound

And wrapt it in a clout.

O tenderly she tended me  
Though deep in her eyes I could tell  
The secret joy that men are whiles  
Obliged to bleed as well.

I thanked her kindly and never let on,  
Seeing she could not understand,  
That she wished me a wound far worse to staunch –  
And not in the hand!

At the same time as he was writing these poems, he was producing hundreds of essays for scores of newspapers, journals, literary, political and cultural magazines, and stirring up controversies at every opportunity. Norman MacCaig used to say that he would start an argument in a graveyard. But it was more than just love of argument. He was also doing the job of Samson on the pillars of the literary and cultural establishment. Let me give you an example from his ‘autobiography’, *Lucky Poet* (1943):

The poetry I want turns its back contemptuously on all the cowardly and brainless staples of Anglo-Scottish literature – the whole base business of people who do not act but are merely acted upon – people whose ‘unexamined lives’ are indeed ‘not worth having’, though they include every irresponsible who occupies a ‘responsible position’ in Scotland today, practically all our Professors, all our M.P.s, and certainly all our ‘Divines’, all our peers and great landlords and big business men, the teaching profession almost without exception, almost all our writers – ‘half glow-worms and half newts’.

My work represents a complete break with all these people – with all they have and are and believe and desire. My aim all along has been (in Ezra Pound’s terms) the most drastic *desuetization* of Scottish life and letters, and, in particular, the de-Tibetanization of the Highlands and Islands, and getting rid of the whole gang of high mucky-mucks, famous fatheads, old wives of both sexes, stuffed shirts, hollow men with headpieces stuffed with straw, bird-wits, lookers-under-beds, trained seals, creeping Jesuses, Scots Wha Ha’ers, village idiots, policemen, leaders of white-mouse factions and noted connoisseurs of bread and butter, glorified gangsters, and what ‘Billy’ Phelps calls Medlar Novelists (the medlar being a fruit that becomes rotten before it is ripe), Commercial Calvinists, makers of ‘noises like a turnip’, and all the touts and toadies and lickspittles of the English Ascendancy, and their infernal women-folk, and all their skunkoil skulduggery.

He made a lot of enemies. And the enemies were in positions of power at home in Scotland. Here he is in his periodical *The Scottish Chapbook* (1922), telling us what he's up against:

Scottish literature, like all other literatures, has been written almost exclusively by blasphemers, immoralists, dipsomaniacs, and madmen, but, unlike most other literatures, has been written about almost exclusively by ministers, with, on the whole, an effect similar to that produced by the statement (of the worthy Dr John MacIntosh) that 'as a novelist, Robert Louis Stevenson had the art of rendering his writings interesting' and 'his faculty of description was fairly good.'

And here he is, reviewing D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in the influential journal *The New Age*, in 1928:

I am at one then, with Lawrence as to the essence of the matter: that does not alter the fact that his preoccupation with this theme has not in this instance led to literature. He has not even beaten the Censor. He has not even stuck to his own case; he gives the woman a private income and so dodges the whole issue. Making her ladyship's lover a gamekeeper, and making him talk mainly in dialect, are also mere evasions. If I had the money and the power I would circulate this book amongst all English-speaking adolescents, but that in no way blinds one to its valuelessness as literature. I do not think its author is under any illusion either; the trouble is that he has become more interested in these problems of life than in literature. Mr Lawrence has become like one of his own characters, a buck of the King Edward school, who thought life was life, and the scribbling fellows were something else. The number of people who can copulate properly may be few; the number who can write well are infinitely fewer.

And here, more polemics, written nearly thirty years later, in 1957:

The 175th birthday of the *Glasgow Herald* may have evoked the congratulations of the Queen. We have a different view of the matter and regard that newspaper as the dullest and most pig-headedly reactionary in Britain and certainly the most anti-Scottish. We believe it is on the way out, however, and certainly hope it will not exist to celebrate its 200th birthday. It is a national disgrace that so blatantly Quisling a paper should be published in our midst. *The Scotsman* is a little better, but not much. Both are hopelessly anti-cultural. Mr Douglas Percy Bliss, Principal of the Glasgow School of Art, recently stated that Glasgow had never had any use for art at all. The criticisms, of music, painting and other arts in both these newspapers are beneath contempt, but not so far beneath as their book reviews.

The *Glasgow Herald* book reviews were symptomatic of what MacDiarmid considered to be Scotland's cultural rottenness. He believed that his task was to

destroy the mediocrity with which that culture was saturated and to act, as he said, like a catfish in an aquarium, stirring up the other denizens to more fruitful and fertile activity.

What of his poetic career?

In 1926, he published a long, book-length poem with the heavily ironic title, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. The first line of the poem tells you that the speaker isn't drunk at all, but exhausted at the dispirited state of the nation and at the heart of the whole work is a despairing sense of the waste of human potential. It's in Scots and it needs to be read at speed and at length for it to have its full effect. Let me give you a couple of examples from it. This is how it begins:

I amna fou' sae muckle as tired – deid dune.  
It's gey and hard wark coupin' gless for gless  
Wi' Cruivie and Gilsanquhar and the like,  
And I'm no' juist as bauld as aince I wes.

The elbuck fankles in the coorse o' time,  
The sheckle's no' sae souple, and the thrapple  
Grows deaf and dour: nae langer up and doun  
Gleg as a squirrel speils the Adam's apple.

Forbye, the stuffie's no' the real Mackay.  
The sun's sel' aince, as soon as ye began it,  
Riz in your vera saul: but what keeks in  
Noo is in truth the vilest 'saxpenny planet'.

And as the worth's gane down the cost has risen...

Whisky and Burns are the two most famous tokens of Scottishness MacDiarmid begins with, and he turns his scorn onto the vacuous pontificators of the 'Burns Supper' circuits:

A' *they've* to say was aften said afore  
A lad was born in Kyle to blaw about.  
What unco fate mak's *him* the dumpin'-grun'  
For a' the sloppy rubbish they jaw oot?

Mair nonsense has been uttered in his name  
Than in ony's barrin' liberty and Christ.  
If this keeps spreedin' as the drink declines,  
Syne turns to tea, wae's me for the *Zeitgeist*!

'Wae's me for the *Zeitgeist*!' indeed. But the comedy of these early pages gives way to a much more mysterious, serious and sinister vein, shot through with resonances from the Scottish ballads.

In wi' your gruntle then, puir wheengin' saul,  
Lap up the ugsome aidle wi' the lave,  
What gin it's your ain vomit that you swill  
And frae Life's gantin' and unfaddomed grave?

I doot I'm geylies mixed, like Life itsel',  
But I was never ane that thocht to pit  
An ocean in a mutchkin. As the haill's  
Mair than the pairt sae I than reason yet.

I dinna haud the warld's end in my heid  
As maist folk think they dae; nor filter truth  
In fishy gills through which its tides may poor  
For ony *animalculae* forsooth.

I lauch to see my crazy little brain  
– And ither folks' – tak'n' itsel' seriously,  
And in a sudden lowe o' fun my saul  
Blinks dozent as the owl I ken't to be.

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.

I'll bury nae heid like an ostrich's,  
Nor yet believe my een and naething else.  
My senses may advise me, but I'll be  
Mysel' nae maitter what they tell's...

I ha'e nae doot some foreign philosopher  
Has wrocht a system oot to justify  
A' this: but I'm a Scot wha blin'ly follows  
Auld Scottish instincts, and I winna try.

For I've nae faith in ocht I can explain,  
And stert whaur the philosophers leave aff...

Or consider this lyrical interlude when a man confronts a woman and asks her these bitter, strange questions, and is answered:

O wha's been here afore me, lass,  
And hoo did he get in?

*– A man that deed or I was born  
This evil thing has din.*

And left, as it were on a corpse,  
Your maidenhead to me?

*– Nae lass, gudeman, sin' Time began,  
'S hed ony mair to gi'e.*

*But I can gi'e ye kindness, lad,  
And a pair o' willin' hands,  
And you sall ha'e my breists like stars,  
My limbs like willow wands,*

*And on my lips ye'll heed nae mair,  
And in my hair forget,  
The seed o' a' the men that in  
My virgin womb ha'e met...*

W.B. Yeats memorised that, he said it was so lovely, so beautiful and mysterious that he wanted to carry it in his memory. Of course, MacDiarmid was writing self-consciously and explicitly as a man, deliberately exploring aspects of his own sexual identity, for example, in the poem 'Conception', where he talks of making the 'terrible blinding discovery / Of Scotland in me, and I in Scotland':

Even as a man, loyal to a man's code and outlook,  
Discovers within himself woman alive and eloquent,  
Pulsing with her own emotion,  
Looking out on the world with her own vision.

In the 1930s, MacDiarmid was suffering terribly from personal poverty, social estrangement – his enemies were powerful – and the disastrous break-up of his first marriage. With his second wife and young son he went into exile in the Shetland Islands away up in the North Sea. There he suffered a severe physical and psychological crisis and collapse but he survived that too, and came through

with one of the most sustained and deeply philosophical poems of the twentieth century, 'On a Raised Beach'. Here is a short extract:

Deep conviction or preference can seldom  
Find direct terms in which to express itself.  
Today on this shingle shelf  
I understand this pensive reluctance so well,  
This not discommendable obstinacy,  
These contrivances of an inexpressive critical feeling,  
These stones with their resolve that Creation shall not be  
Injured by iconoclasts and quacks. Nothing has stirred  
Since I lay down this morning an eternity ago  
But one bird. The widest open door is the least liable to intrusion,  
Ubiquitous as the sunlight, unfrequented as the sun.  
The inward gates of a bird are always open.  
It does not know how to shut them.  
That is the secret of its song,  
But whether any man's are ajar is doubtful.  
I look at these stones and know little about them,  
But I know their gates are open too,  
Always open, far longer open, than any bird's can be,  
That every one of them has had its gates wide open far longer  
Than all birds put together, let alone humanity,  
Though through them no man can see,  
No man nor anything more recently born than themselves  
And that is everything else on the Earth.  
And only the unshakable be left.

'What happens to us / Is irrelevant to the world's geology' MacDiarmid tells us: 'But what happens to the world's geology / Is not irrelevant to us.' In the poetry of his Shetland years, MacDiarmid invites us to confront 'elemental things'. One of the poems from the Shetland period encapsulates what MacDiarmid experienced there: '*from The War with England*'.

I was better with the sounds of the sea  
    Than with the voices of men  
And in desolate and desert places  
    I found myself again.  
For the whole of the world came from these  
And he who returns to the source  
May gauge the worth of the outcome  
And approve and perhaps reinforce  
Or disapprove and perhaps change its course.

Now I deal with the hills at their roots

And the streams at their springs  
And am to the land that I love  
As he who brings  
His bride home, and they know each other  
Not as erst, like their friends, they have done,  
But carnally, causally, knowing that only  
By life nigh undone can life be begun,  
And accept and are one.

By insisting upon the material existence of the stones on the raised beach and by measuring all human culture and all human life in a geological scale, MacDiarmid – miraculously – found a way to survive the crushing situation of his personal life. For contrast, look at these two poems. The first a Shetland poem of a very different sort, ‘With the Herring Fishers’:

‘I see herrin’.’ – I hear the glad cry  
And ’gainst the moon see ilka blue jowl  
In turn as the fishermen haul on the nets  
And sing: ‘Come, shove in your heids and growl.’

‘Soom on, bonnie herrin’, soom on,’ they shout,  
Or ‘Come in, O come in, and see me,’  
‘Come gie the auld man something to dae,  
It’ll be a braw change frae the sea.’

O it’s ane o’ the bonniest sights in the warld  
To watch the herrin’ come walkin’ on board  
In the wee sma’ ’oors o’ a simmer’s mornin,  
As if o’ their ain accord.

For this is the way that God sees life,  
The haill jing-bang o’s appearin,  
Up owre frae the edge o’ naethingness  
– It’s his happy cries I’m hearin’.

‘Left, right – O come in and see me,’  
Reid and yellow and black and white  
Toddlin’ up into Heaven thegither  
At peep o’ day frae the endless night.

‘I see herrin’,’ I hear his glad cry,

And 'gainst the moon see his muckle blue jowl,  
As he handles buoy-tow and bush-raip  
Singin': 'Come, shove in your heids and growl!'

And in 'Crystals like Blood', in simple, straightforward English, MacDiarmid makes use of scientific and technological vocabulary to effect a very personal, emotional charge. This is a poem which starts in one world and ends up in a very different one. It is an elegy for someone beloved who has died, a person the poet held 'dear' and it begins in a tone of sad recognition, as the poet turns 'a chunk of bedrock' in his hand, looking at the 'veins and beads' of bright magenta, intense colour sharply defined in the stone. Then the poem evokes the process of the extraction of mercury from cinnabar, as an iron pile-driver rises and falls and turns like a huge, symmetrical spider. Finally, the poem compares the poet's own 'treadmill memory' drawing its sources of 'felicity, naturalness and faith' as the beloved's body lies 'rotting here in the clay'. Utterly materialist and unpersuaded by religious consolation, the poem nonetheless reinforces a human strength of feeling, reaching across the worlds of the living and the dead.

MacDiarmid's later poetry became longer, predominantly in English, and epic in scale. Poems such as *In Memoriam James Joyce*, 1955, or *The Kind of Poetry I Want*, 1961, had to wait for publication to catch up with them, but he had been writing them since the 1930s and some sources even date back to the 1920s. But they point forward to a world of unembarrassed plenitude and encyclopedic knowledge presented with incomparable flair, appetite and zest.

In the 1960s his work began to be widely recognised with the publication in 1962 of his *Collected Poems* – in America first. He never lost his ability to challenge convention and authority and in two late comments on Edinburgh, one a poem, the other an article, you can see him enjoying living dangerously even in his old age. Here is the poem, from Edinburgh University Library, Gen 1957/5/4:

#### The Miracle of Edinburgh

I could hardly believe my eyes. I'd been away  
From the city for years – not long enough surely  
To allow for such a volte-face on the part  
Of our city Fathers, who for ages so dourly

Remained incapable of any such change of heart.  
But there it was – lifted high in the skies  
A magical symbol of man's true bent towards the heights,  
Abjuring the gloomy chaos below.  
A sun-bright complex of honey-coloured stone,  
Steel angles and glass, poised eagle-like above us,  
And crowning the city with glory there!

Theatre, opera house, art gallery, all  
Where the grim old Castle sat toad-like so long.  
Who could regret the disappearance now  
Of that dark memorial of the murderous past,  
As if all the blood squandered in Scotland had  
Clotted into a vast ineradicable stain,  
Where now, aurally, floats this golden proof  
That life has prevailed over death again,  
Hope over memory, the future at last  
Set free from the bondage of darkness,  
The spirit released from matter's fell clutch,  
Edinburgh – even Edinburgh – risen from the dead  
And laughing with delight as Lazarus never did.

When he was in his eighties, from 1976 to 1978, the *Radio Times* commissioned him to write a series of columns 'previewing' BBC radio and television programmes. His flair was undiminished and he took the opportunity to offer wicked comments on programmes he had no wish to see foisted on the viewing public. Here is an example:

Embarked on my eighty-seventh year, I should not be surprised that the months flip over like weeks and the years like seasons. But I find it very hard to believe that a whole year has passed since I last allowed my blood to boil over on the subject of the Edinburgh Military Tattoo. Yet here it is again, 'The Edinburgh Military Tattoo of 1978' (Monday 11.10 BBC1), as relentless as Christmas and twice as garish. The year has done nothing to soften my feelings. I consider the event an annual atrocity perpetrated by an army of occupation on a city of sheep. Tasteless sheep.

MacDiarmid was the most revitalising force in modern Scottish literature and anyone who is concerned with the literature and culture of this country has to take him into account.

I want to end by mentioning a few examples of what might be described as post-MacDiarmid Scottish writing, because I think they are especially revealing of three aspects of modern Scottish literature, three characteristics of modern Scottish culture which are, I think, quite singular, and very much a part of MacDiarmid's legacy.

These are (1) a concern with language; (2) a particular sense and use of humour, to aid and abet serious arguments and serious points; and (3) the rise to prominence of writing – especially poetry – by women, especially since the 1970s. The poems I would like to note here are a far cry from the sentimental post-Burnsian doggerel of the generations of versifiers from the late nineteenth century whose work amounted to little more than the literary leafmould from which MacDiarmid arose. There is an independence of spirit, a self-confidence and refreshing self-determination about these poets and their work and no special pleading of the 'It might be wee, but at least it's Scottish!' variety. These are distinctive voices speaking in their own right.

So if I name these authors and a handful of their poems, you might like to search them out and read them for yourself and see what you think of them in this 'post-MacDiarmid' context. Consider Alistair Reid's poem, 'Scotland' or Edwin Morgan's 'Trio' and 'The Loch Ness Monster's Song' or Tom Leonard's 'Unrelated Incidents' (especially number 3 in the sequence); consider Liz Lochhead's 'Mirror's Song' and 'Kidspoem / Bairnsang' or Jackie Kay's 'My Other Tongue' or Kathleen Jamie's 'Crossing the Loch'. Browse the website of the Scottish Poetry Library and ask how the poetry written before and after MacDiarmid might be described, in terms of the changes brought about not only by time passing and historical events but by MacDiarmid's determined and multi-faceted interventions, direct and indirect, his 'Scottish Literary Renaissance' of the 1920s and 1930s, his work of demolition and regeneration.

But I want to leave the last word with MacDiarmid himself. This is a short poem in English which says much more than it seems to be saying. It's a funny poem, but again, it's also making a serious point about how poetry works and how the artist works.

The Hills of Ross-shire

What are the hills of Ross-shire like?  
Listen. I'll tell you. Over the snow one day  
I went out with my gun. A hare popped up  
On a hill-top not very far away.

I shot it at once. It came rolling down  
And round it as it came a snowball grew  
Which, when I kicked it open, held not one  
But seventeen hares. Believe me or not. It's true.

The poet, the artist, always sets out to do something but always ends up doing a lot more than he or she imagined they were doing and sometimes this can make a difference beyond all imagining. In the twenty-first century, we are still catching up with Hugh MacDiarmid.