

Brownsbank Cottage
Courtesy Biggar Museum

No ruined stones

The home of one of Scotland's greatest literary figures stands on the edge of ruin

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I remember lying on top of Valda's bed in my sleeping bag that first night, wondering if I had made a terrible mistake. In the roof space overhead, a large company of mice was practising eightsome reels. Outside, all was still and – in stark contrast to the southside of Glasgow I had left – the darkness was solid, ink-black. Whether it was colder outside than in, however, seemed debatable.

It was February 1993, and I had just taken up residence at Brownsbank, an old farmworker's cottage near the town of Biggar, which itself sits among the Lanarkshire hills 40 miles south-east of Glasgow and 30 miles south-west of Edinburgh. I was supposed to be there for the next two years, and it crossed my

mind that that was a long time to be deprived of sleep by the rowdiness of the already resident wildlife.

Brownsbank was the last home of the poet Hugh MacDiarmid and his Cornish wife, Valda Trevlyn. In spite of the fact that MacDiarmid (or Christopher Murray Grieve, by his real name) was the most important and influential literary figure produced by Scotland in the twentieth century, they lived in poverty for most of their lives. When, in 1950, they were about to become homeless, a publisher friend put them in touch with Thomas Tweedie, who farmed at Candymill, three miles from Biggar, and who had a vacant cottage on his land. In January 1951, Tweedie agreed to let them move in, perhaps thinking it would be a temporary arrangement. In fact, they never left. Brownsbank became their permanent home until MacDiarmid's death in 1978. Valda died in 1989. Thomas Tweedie never charged them rent in all that time, a remarkable act of generosity towards people with whose communist and nationalist politics he had little reason to empathize. Over time, a mutual liking and respect developed.

After Valda died, there was a risk that the cottage would fall into disrepair. Fortunately, Biggar Museum Trust, run by an energetic, magpie-like collector called Brian Lambie, stepped in to save it. Lambie had known MacDiarmid well and in 1968 had inveigled him, the nearest thing to a local celebrity, into officially opening the first of the town's several museums. The Museum Trust bought Brownsbank from the Tweedie family, its contents were catalogued and put into storage, essential structural work was carried out, and the contents were replaced exactly as they had been. With the cottage being up a farm track and open to visitors only by appointment, it was decided to put it to practical use by installing a writer-in-residence. I was the first occupant of this post which, apart from giving me shelter and vital writing time, came with a stipend and a remit to engage with schools, writing groups and others in the local community. It also meant I could leave my job in bookselling and make writing my full-time occupation, which I have been able to do ever since.

It seems to me that I was guided to Brownsbank by something like the hand of fate. I discovered MacDiarmid's work in 1978, the year of his death. I was a third-year History student at Edinburgh and at the start of September boarded an aeroplane

for my first trip beyond the British Isles – on an exchange scheme to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. The same week, as I was adjusting to the shock of the completely new, MacDiarmid died, and not long after that I read a review in the Guardian Weekly of his posthumously published Collected Poems. Although his name meant almost nothing, something attracted me to him. I located some of his books in the Penn library, found another in an esoteric downtown bookstore, and started reading. His poetry and prose set off a revolution in my head, overturning everything I had ever thought about literature, language, politics, culture and Scotland. It helped, no doubt, that I had leapt clean out of my familiarity zone just at that moment. When I returned home a year later, I realized that a gate had opened onto things of which, although they had been there all the time, I was entirely ignorant. I did not hesitate to go through it.

Four years passed. I submitted poems and short stories to magazines: some were accepted. I returned to university as a postgraduate and got a part-time job, later a full-time one, in a bookshop. In 1991, I had a collection of short stories published, which made me eligible for assistance from the then Scottish Arts Council. The Brownsbank residency, which it helped to fund, was advertised, but I assumed it

would go to some established name and didn't apply. A few months later, I learned that the position had not been filled, and that the Biggar Museum people were keen to appoint someone who really needed a break. I already owed Mac-Diarmid a great deal, but thought I would give it a try. Three months later I was in his old home, listening to the mice dancing.

Brownsbank was weather-beaten, primitive, poorly insulated and subject to power cuts and an intermittent water supply, but I had it easy compared with how it had been in the 1950s. Then, the traditional, two-roomed "but and ben" had an outdoor water closet and no kitchen, bathroom, electricity or internal plumbing. Valda cooked soups and curries on the open fire; light came from oil lamps. In 1962, friends and supporters built a porch at the front, a kitchen and bathroom extension at the back, and installed electricity and hot and cold running water. MacDiarmid was seventy, Valda in her mid-fifties: they had had to wait a long time for basic comforts.

For me, Brownsbank's advantages far outweighed its drawbacks. With a good fire

going, it was cosy, inspiring and liberating. Waking each morning to multiple images of MacDiarmid staring at me from the walls as if urging me to get up and work, I got up and worked. I fitted my own few possessions in among those of the previous occupants – MacDiarmid’s collection of pipes, rows of green Penguin crime novels, in the bathroom the henna sachets Valda used to keep her hair startlingly orange – and lived for two years as a kind of tangible ghost haunting the past. The decor was almost entirely Valda’s: curtains sewn from odd scraps of material, bookcases hammered together from crates, wally dug, Cornish fishing floats hanging from the ceiling, bric-a-brac occupying every horizontal surface; outside, there were flower beds she had patiently created by collecting earth from molehills. Valda was the powerhouse who kept things going. The poet did the washing up, but recognized how much she had sacrificed to his art. In one anthology of twentieth-century verse, still on a shelf, his handwritten dedication reads, “To Valda with all my love. Where would I – or Scots poetry – have been without her?”

Throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s, friends, poets, critics, students and politicians came to visit MacDiarmid in what he wryly called “a growing shrine to my

vanity”. When I was there in the 1990s the tiny cottage fairly pulsed with atmosphere, as if its walls had stored up as much energy as it could from those decades and was slowly releasing it. A succession of six writers followed me, but in 2010 South Lanarkshire Council cut its support for the post, a move which led Creative Scotland, the Scottish Arts Council’s successor, to withdraw its matched funding. Since then the cottage, despite being A-listed because of the MacDiarmid association, has been unoccupied and only occasionally opened for visitors. Inevitably, a building that is not being used begins to deteriorate, and it is fair to say that Brownsbank today is in a sorry condition.

All is not lost, however. “MacDiarmid’s Brownsbank”, a new charitable trust, has been established, and Biggar Museum has graciously passed the cottage into its care. The necessary immediate steps to prevent further damage to the fabric of the building have been taken. The intention is to restore Brownsbank as a focus for learning and literature, locally, nationally and internationally.

MacDiarmid’s life work was to regenerate Scottish language, literature and culture

and reconnect them with Continental Europe and farther afield, but you don't have to be Scottish to appreciate his lyricism, his fearless intellect, and his unshakeable belief in the potential of every human being. As Andrew Marr has written, "Mac-Diarmid's poetry remains a vast and little colonized continent of wonders, glittering views and strange formations, which everyone with the requisite supply of synapses and a little common courage should visit". In the great debate over Scotland's political future that came to a head in 2014 and still continues, MacDiarmid's legacy has been curiously absent. Possibly this is because the pro-independence movement finds him too controversial an ally, as indeed was the case during his life, when he was as likely to set upon "Scots Wha Ha'ers, village idiots, leaders of white-mouse factions and Commercial Calvinists", as he was to articulate his self-styled hobby of "Anglophobia". Nevertheless, MacDiarmid has too much of interest and importance to say for us to ignore or quietly forget him, and Brownsbank is too special a place to be left to crumble. In his magnificent long poem "On A Raised Beach", composed in Shetland in 1933, he wrote: "There are plenty of ruined buildings in the world but no ruined stones". It would be to Scotland's shame if the home of one of its greatest literary figures were permitted to fall into ruin.