

# What's to be done about MacDiarmid's Brownsbank?

Alan Riach turns his attention to the future

OVER the last few weeks, I've been writing about the motion put forward in the Scottish Parliament by Clare Adamson, the SNP MSP for Motherwell and Wishaw, to the effect that Hugh MacDiarmid is recognised internationally as a major poet, and that Brownsbank Cottage near Biggar, Lanarkshire, in which he and his wife Valda lived, must be repaired, preserved and developed to a secure state for future generations to help comprehend our literary and cultural history, for the wellbeing of the nation.

The motion received cross-party support with passionate commitment expressed by Brian Whittle, Conservative MSP for South Scotland; Emma Harper, SNP MSP for South Scotland; Richard Leonard, Labour MSP for Central Scotland; and Culture Secretary Angus Robertson.

Cross-party support means that the SNP are not alone in giving their approval, and MacDiarmid's Brownsbank has drawn the British and Unionist parties to voice their colossal commitment. And not just "voice" it but declare it publicly, and it's now on the record.

I take it that signifies something realistically important – should all our efforts fail, should that small cottage go to rack and ruin, should the walls crumble and all its former contents rot away, it will be a radical national failure across all the mainstream political parties. Perhaps a more radical failure than many more obvious ones.

So, the trustees of the cottage must ask, and now answer, the great and simple question put by the man to whom MacDiarmid dedicated three unlikely but wonderfully memorable "Hymns": Vladimir Ilyich Lenin – "WHAT IS TO BE DONE?" Sober,

dull and tiresome as it must sound, the first answer is that the trustees will develop a strategic business plan for the future of the cottage in both the immediate and longer terms.

As previously noted, we've been given support from the Clyde Wind Farm Community and Development Fund, Architectural Heritage Fund, SSE Renewables Community Investment Programme, and the William Grant Foundation and there have been generous donations from the public. These have helped us to keep the worst of the disrepair at bay. But we cannot let another winter come without more active intervention. To summarise, the plan is threefold:

**1 REPAIR COSTS** for building and restoration work of the kind urgently required increased massively after the Covid pandemic and are still uncertain. They have been made even more so by the latest turmoil unleashed from the White House.

However, as the trustees gather the necessary information in preparation for new funding applications, it is not unreasonable to assign a ballpark figure of £500,000 to the costs of

a) establishing the refurbishment, security and stability of the cottage; b) the re-installation of all its contents and memorabilia, beds, books and blankets, taking them out of storage and returning them to the cottage as they had been in the Grieves' lifetimes; c) the reconstruction of the outhouse in the back garden, established as MacDiarmid's work and storage space and destroyed beyond repair by the storms of winter 2024, to be newly rebuilt and fitted as an educational and writers' teaching and writing space, fully waterproof and secure with a small foundational

library; and d) reopening the completely restored cottage to the public as a living museum for all visitors by appointment with the Brownsbank custodian.

This is a priority of national and international significance and, when completed, Brownsbank should be on the map with Biggar Museum, all Lanarkshire museums, great writers' houses in the Borders, the Scottish Poetry Library, VisitScotland and Scottish and international universities.

## 2 REINSTATEMENT OF WRITERS' FELLOWSHIPS

THE ambitions for Brownsbank go far beyond restoring the fabric and functionality of the building. Once made safe and secure, a writing fellowship associated with Brownsbank, similar to the writer-in-residence posts that existed there from 1993-2012, will be re-established.

Discussions are now under way to specify the details of this scheme. A six-month or year-long residency would be an attractive opportunity for many young and aspiring writers, and a retreat for many senior and well-tried and trusted writers of recognised achievement.

Both James Robertson and Matthew Fitt have testified that their residencies in the 1990s were forcing grounds for their own writing careers, when they were living under the roof of the cottage, with the sounds of the scurrying mice in the loft and MacDiarmid's ghostly portraits looking at them from the walls, and his green-covered paperback crime fiction tempting them from his bookshelves; while Valda's room next door held her portraits and her collection of books about her native Cornwall.

What they went on to accomplish has already been truly remarkable:



Paintings by Ruth Nicol of Valda and Hugh MacDiarmid's respective rooms at Brownsbank Cottage

James's extraordinarily powerful and varied series of novels and stories, as well as his poems, and Matthew's poems and science-fiction novel written entirely in the Scots language, But n' Ben A Go-Go, are their major writerly achievements.

However, together they have worked tirelessly on the Itchy Coo publishing imprint, with children's books, both original and in translation, in Scots, while Matthew is also taking forward brilliant initiatives in educational resources with Scots Hoose.

THE list of writers who followed them is too strong to summarise easily. Every one of their names might prompt a reading list for anyone who'd like to be well informed about modern and contemporary Scottish literature.

Gerry Cambridge, Aonghas MacNeacail, Linda Cracknell, Tom Bryan and Carl MacDougall were in turn followed by a number of writers who were given shorter fellowships associated with the cottage, rather than being resident in it.

All these "new generation" writers worked on their own writing and at the same time threw themselves with contagious enthusiasm into innumerable local engagements with schools, libraries, reading groups, bookshop events throughout South Lanarkshire and helped maintain the poetry notice board in Biggar's main street. In other words, their

work was of immediate local value, as well as national and increasingly international significance.

So beyond the immediate urgency of repair and the longer-term reinstatement of the writers' fellowships, there's more. Much more.

## 3 ESTABLISH BROWNSBANK AS AN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE

THE most ambitious long-term plan is to develop the site around Brownsbank so that it can be used as an educational hub, bringing further benefit to the local community as well as celebrating one of Scotland's greatest writers, extending MacDiarmid's provenance nationally and internationally.

This should be planned for over the next two to four years. How much money would be needed is still being worked out but the ambition is palpable.

Using the cottage as a central resource, a living museum, the site could develop as an educational hub of learning for summer classes, day trips from universities (national and international), and students' group residencies.

This too is envisioned as bringing growth to the local economy, and also extending the provenance of MacDiarmid's Brownsbank nationally and internationally. Imagine summer school residencies in Biggar and neighbouring



towns and villages with visiting students and teachers of international renown.

The model here might be the annual WB Yeats summer school in Sligo ([www.yeatsociety.com/yeats-summer-school/](http://www.yeatsociety.com/yeats-summer-school/)). This goes a long way further than the International MacDiarmid Conference I helped organise at the University of Brittany in Brest in 2023.

Everything I've written here is of course provisional, the beginnings of a plan to be worked out thoroughly with greater expertise than I could bring to the project. But the vision is shared. The ongoing costs are in the process of being calculated and will form part of further funding applications and fundraising activities.

These costs will not be insignificant but they will be small in relation to the cultural and economic benefits they will bring both locally and nationally and this could even be the start of a much more active and positive way of connecting physical cultural assets to a greater appreciation by both Scottish citizens and international visitors of our literary and cultural riches.

I'd imagine the need to appoint a professional museum custodian, at least part-time, a person who would be available to take visitors to the cottage and keep it open to the public by arrangement. Such a person might also take on the future



The model here might be the annual WB Yeats summer school in Sligo

role of researcher and developer. Individual donations – however small! – are always very welcome through the donate facility on the MacDiarmid's Brownsbank website – [macdiarmidsbrownsbank.org.uk/donations/](http://macdiarmidsbrownsbank.org.uk/donations/)

Incidentally, there's a lovely blog post on the Scottish Poetry Library website about a visit to Brownsbank earlier this year, at this address: [www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/2025/01/gowden-feathers/](http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/2025/01/gowden-feathers/)

THIS year marks the centenary of the publication of MacDiarmid's first book, Sangschaw, and we're planning an event at the Biggar Little Festival, scheduled for Tuesday, October 21, to celebrate that. It will involve a reading of the entire 29-poem, 58-page book delivered by the best readers in the business. Mark the day.

The book opens with a preface by none other than John Buchan, 10 years after the publication of his still best-selling "shocker", The Thirty-Nine Steps.

The John Buchan Society maintains its museum in Peebles, and the association with MacDiarmid, while perhaps surprising to some, is worth remembering ([johnbuchansociety.co.uk/the-john-buchan-story/](http://johnbuchansociety.co.uk/the-john-buchan-story/))

Buchan's preface is only two short paragraphs and it's worth quoting in full. For anyone who hasn't had the good fortune to

read MacDiarmid yet, it's a perfect introduction:

*"Once upon a time the Scots vernacular was a national speech, and men like Henryson and Dunbar used it for the highest matters of poetry. But at the Reformation it was rusticated from court and college, and by the eighteenth century it had become a tongue only for familiar conversation, and in literature it was confined strictly to the homelier humours and affections. It was still capable, as Burns showed, of heights and profundities but its lateral range was narrow.*

*"As a consequence vernacular literature suffered from the fault of provincialism, a contentment too often with the second-rate in thought and style. In our own day we have seen the speech in its idiomatic form slowly dropping out of use, and Scots poetry becoming more and more of an antiquarian exercise. The inspiration may be from the heart, but the words are an effort of memory and scholarship."*

That's a valuable summary of Buchan's appreciation of the Scots language and what it had evolved into by 1925, but the next paragraph assesses MacDiarmid's activities with it and shows you what a revolution he performed:

*"My friend, the author of this book, has set himself a task which is at once reactionary and revolutionary. A preface is not the place for criticism, but I may be allowed to emphasise the boldness of his purpose. He would treat Scots as a living language and apply it to matters which have been foreign to it since the sixteenth century.*

*"Since there is no canon of the vernacular, he makes his own, as Burns did, and borrows words and idioms from the old masters. He confines himself to no one dialect, but selects where he pleases between Aberdeen and the Cheviots.*

*"This audacity may make some of the pieces difficult for the reader, and it may be that he does not always succeed, for a man with a new weapon rarely hits the mark at the first shot. But I welcome the honest hope and faith which inspire the experiment.*

*"It is a proof that a new spirit is today abroad in the North, which, as I have said, is both conservative and radical – a determination to keep Scotland in the main march of the world's interests, and at the same time to forgo no part of her ancient heritage."*

That's a salutation for which MacDiarmid may have been lastingly grateful. Buchan seems to recognise his own location on the clock of history and is gracious in his appreciation, acknowledgement and careful appraisal of the virtues and liabilities, the strengths and incipient weaknesses of his younger contemporary. That Buchan delivered such support, with such openness, generosity and insight, is salutary for us all. It is now "one hundred years since". You know what must be done.