

I’VE been writing over the last fortnight about the motion put forward in the Scottish Parliament by Clare Adamson, to the effect that Hugh MacDiarmid is recognised internationally as a major poet, and Brownsbank Cottage near Biggar, Lanarkshire, in which he and his wife Valda lived from 1951 till their deaths in 1978 and 1989 respectively, 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. Clare, the SNP MSP for Motherwell and Wishaw, made her opening speech. Brian Whittle (Conservative, South Scotland) gave his strong support, declaring that MacDiarmid’s cottage should have the same status and be preserved and kept as securely in the public domain as Robert Burns’s birthplace cottage in Alloway. Emma Harper (SNP, South Scotland) backed the motion in a speech in fluent, confident Scots.

Deputy Presiding Officer Liam McArthur continued by inviting a response to the motion from Richard Leonard (Labour, Central Scotland) and formerly leader of the Labour Party in Scotland. There’s some history here. The Labour Party developed from the Labour Movement, which arose through industrialisation and resistance to capitalist exploitation of working people in the 19th century.

As an organisation, the party’s foundations were laid in Scotland, with the Scottish Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party and then the Labour Party, whose co-founders were two Scots, one working class and one a land-owning aristocrat – Keir Hardie and RB Cunningham Graham.

If Keir Hardie, despite his first name being all too familiar these days, has been pretty much sidelined, then Cunningham Graham’s role in the Labour Party has been almost completely erased. Both supported home rule for Scotland and Cunningham Graham was also at the foundation of the National Party of Scotland.

His opinion was that neither the best socialist ideals of Labour nor the best ideals for independence of the SNP could work at all unless the parties were progressively working together. So what was our Scottish Labour representative going to say about MacDiarmid?

Leonard began: “I, too, thank Clare Adamson for leading this debate. MacDiarmid remains politically controversial, but artistically revered. His very identity was provocative – the striking imagery of Norman MacCaig captures it best: ‘CM Grieve dived in at one end, and Hugh MacDiarmid swam ashore at the other.’”

That’s a reference to MacDiarmid’s – or rather, Grieve’s – discovery of the Scots Dictionary, and describes how the poet, who began writing in neo-Georgian English, encountered the Scots language and shocked all of literary Scotland by writing his early lyrics – those little sticks of dynamite that would explode the

THE KIND OF POETRY WE WANT

‘A poetry that stands for production, use, and life /As opposed to property, profits and death.’

Alan Riach concludes his account of the MacDiarmid’s Brownsbank motion debated in the Scottish Parliament on March 18

old establishment edifice and show you the shining structures beneath it, still strong and ready for new build. Leonard continued: “By the age of 16, he was a member of the Independent Labour Party. He left, and then, when he fell within the orbit of James Keir Hardie in South Wales, he rejoined.

“In 1922, he was first co-opted, then elected, as an Independent Socialist to Montrose Town Council. He joined the Communist Party in the 1930s and then the National Party of Scotland. Expelled from the Communist Party for being a nationalist, expelled from the National Party of Scotland for being a communist, he stood as the SNP candidate in the Kelvingrove division of Glasgow in the 1945 General Election and again, in the 1950 General Election, but this time as an independent Scottish nationalist.

“In 1956 – at the very point when many others left it for good, as the Soviets suppressed the Hungarian uprising, and the revelations about Stalinism emerged – he rejoined the Communist Party, standing as the CPGB candidate against the then prime minister, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, in the Kinross and West Perthshire constituency in the 1964 General Election. His poetry included Hymns to Lenin, who he said marked ‘the greatest turnin’ point’ since Christ. Of John Maclean’s ‘unbreakable spirit’, he declared:

*“Like a lightning-bolt at last the workers’ wrath falls
On all such castles of cowards
whether they be
Uniformed in ermine, or blue,
or khaki.”*

Pause there for a moment. This

was full disclosure, I thought. Here’s MacDiarmid exposed, the extremist, the liability, the dangerous, wayward political poet, writing himself on to the edges of credibility and sometimes right over the cliff and taking us into deep waters, uncharted territories.

But there was no condemnation. Leonard brought the point home: “Hugh MacDiarmid’s poetry has an enduring, timeless quality, and so speaks to our times as well as his own. My own party’s current leaders should take heed.

‘Physical power’, he wrote, ‘Is a rough substitute for patience and intelligence, and co-operative effort in the governance of man’, and ‘killing is the ultimate simplification of life’.”

Wasn’t that a courageous thing to say, an assertion of some independent thought, beyond the party line, especially in a world where the only real profiteers are the military-industrial complex, the arms trade and corporate businesses?

Patience, intelligence, and co-operative effort in the governance of man: that’s what we need more than anything. Killing is the ultimate simplification of life. That’s hard wisdom. “My own party’s current leaders should take heed.”

And for me, that was perhaps the one sentence of the whole evening that has resonated most strongly, most echoingly. It continues to do so.

Leonard went on: “‘The Kind of Poetry I Want’, MacDiarmid proclaimed, is ‘a poetry that stands for production, use, and life / As opposed to property, profits and death’. He was at once an idealist and a realist, famously combining the two in the poem Glasgow 1960, published in 1935, in which he imagines crowds packed tight on buses and trams travelling to Ibrox



stadium not for football but to watch a debate between intellectuals.

‘THERE are anti-imperialist writings that bleed dangerously into an intolerable Anglophobia but, as the late Stephen Maxwell put it – members of the SNP and Alba should heed this – MacDiarmid’s was a nationalism ‘to transcend nationality and to present Scotland not as the possessor of distinctive national qualities, but as an exemplar of universal intellect and aesthetic qualities, which rendered trivial all lesser distinctions’.

“I am pleased to support the motion and the Brownsbank Cottage project, because we need to keep that flame of intellect and culture burning. Whether we consider MacDiarmid to be a communist at heart, a nationalist in his soul

or simply one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, we need to remember him and celebrate him and the values he stood for. That leads me to my final point.

“Before MacDiarmid moved to Brownsbank Cottage, he and Valda lived in the laundry cottage on the Duke of Hamilton’s estate at Dungavel. Dungavel, to our shame, continues today to be a detention centre for asylum seekers – a so-called immigration removal centre.

“I hope that, tonight, in this debate, we can resolve that, as well as keeping open Brownsbank, we also pledge to do everything we can in the name of our common humanity to close down Dungavel and regain, in the words of Hugh MacDiarmid, ‘the grounds of our being’.”

The final speaker was Angus Robertson, the SNP’s Constitution, External Affairs and Culture Secretary. He said: “I am grateful

to Clare Adamson for lodging the motion and securing the debate. It is right we celebrate the life and legacy of Hugh MacDiarmid and mark the work of the Brownsbank trustees, whom I have met in the past.

“I commend their efforts in promoting the preservation of this legendary poet’s work and home for future generations to enjoy. I thank the various speakers in the debate for their valuable and interesting contributions. I begin by reflecting on Hugh MacDiarmid’s life, as others have remembered him, offering a few personal reflections.

“As we have heard, Christopher Murray Grieve was born in 1892 in Langholm, in what is now Dumfries and Galloway. He died in 1978, aged 86. He was a voracious reader as a boy, which set him up well for his future careers, in which he celebrated words and languages.

“He was a pupil at Broughton

High School, the school that I would attend – many decades later, I hasten to add. Indeed, there was a house named after him – Grieve House.

“As a young journalist, MacDiarmid reported on the challenges facing those living in the mining communities of Wales for a socialist newspaper run by Keir Hardie, the Scottish founder and leader of the Labour Party.

“By the early 1920s, his political consciousness was growing, shaped, no doubt, by the seismic events around him – the First World War of 1914-18; the Easter rising in Ireland in 1916; the Russian Revolution in 1917; and his own experiences during time spent in the military.

“As we have heard, MacDiarmid’s political views changed over time. They reportedly encompassed socialism, communism, Labour values and Scottish nationalism. Notably, from my perspective, he was a founding member of the National Party of Scotland in 1928.

‘I WONDER what he would have made of our debate in the Scottish Parliament this evening and of the event that follows it, organised by the Brownsbank Trust, to celebrate his life, his work and his home.

“By 1922, Grieve had begun to use the pseudonym Hugh MacDiarmid when he published verse in Scots, and his early writing heralded a new literary movement in Scotland. Hugh MacDiarmid is rightly associated with the Scots language, and he was also a strong supporter of the promotion and use of Gaelic, as were others who, with him, formed the Scottish literary renaissance.

“Today, the Scottish Government has a number of interventions and projects in place to support Gaelic and Scots, with new funding to be provided in 2025-26. The Scottish Government supports bodies such as the Association of Scottish Literary Studies, the Scottish Book Trust, Scots Hoose and the Scots Language Centre. Those organisations built on Hugh MacDiarmid’s legacy by further enriching Scots language literature and raising the status of Scots in our public and cultural life.

“Hugh MacDiarmid experienced years of exile, collapse and recovery in the 1930s, and he continued to dominate the Scottish literary world, even as he aged. His work in the 1950s and 1960s continued his fascination with languages and art forms as he sought to celebrate human creativity in all its aspects.

“MacDiarmid’s legacy continues to help build Scotland’s reputation and inspires academic and international links. In 2023, the Université de Bretagne Occidentale, which is based in Brest, held the first international Hugh MacDiarmid conference.

“The Scottish Government is keen to take advantage of such opportunities in future to celebrate the legacy of poets such as Hugh MacDiarmid domestically and internationally, particularly as we continue to expand our links with Scotland’s diaspora.

“It is a testimony to the vision and tenacity of the Brownsbank trustees,

the support provided by MSPs from across the Parliament and the advice provided to the trustees by our national bodies that we are discussing Hugh MacDiarmid’s huge and lasting legacy in Scotland today.

“The debate is a reflection of the importance of protecting the place where he lived for the last 27 years of his life. The story of the cottage forms part of our heritage, which defines who we are as a nation and is hugely inspirational, helping to create a powerful sense of place and providing a backdrop against which we live, work and have fun.

“The Scottish Government delivers support for the historic environment through sponsorship of Historic Environment Scotland. Through its grant schemes, HES delivers benefits for communities by helping to regenerate and promote the active use, care and maintenance of the historic environment. I understand HES provided feedback to the Brownsbank Trust on a previous proposal, and I encourage the trust to continue engaging with our public bodies.

“Hugh MacDiarmid’s commitment to Scotland and to literature has left a remarkable legacy for us. I congratulate everyone who took part in the debate and commend Hugh MacDiarmid’s work to everyone with an interest in the complexities of our history, which continue to shape us today. I commend, too, the work of the Brownsbank trustees in securing Hugh MacDiarmid’s former home for future generations to enjoy.”

That had its round of applause too, and the Deputy Presiding Officer stated: “That concludes the debate.”

It’s worth drawing attention to Robertson’s reference to the first international MacDiarmid conference at the University of Brest, in Brittany, which I helped organise with a brilliant team of scholars led by Professor Camille Manfredi.

And Robertson’s comment bears repeating: “The Scottish Government is keen to take advantage of such opportunities in future to celebrate the legacy of poets such as Hugh MacDiarmid domestically and internationally”.

With such clear and fulsome support from the Conservative and Labour speakers as well as the SNP, how can we, in Leonard’s words, “keep that flame of intellect and culture burning”?

The evening was far from over. We trooped out of the Chamber and into the Burns Room to deliver a reading of a selection of MacDiarmid’s poems to an audience of around 60-70 people from many social strata and spheres of life, including some of the parliamentarians.

I’ll draw this account to an end next week with what we do next – future plans and prospects. We’re asking the vital question now, as Lenin puts it: “What is to be done?”

●**Donations to help preserve Brownsbank Cottage are welcome at: macdiarmids.brownsbank.org.uk/donations/**

Ruth Nicol's painting The Roman Road & Brownsbank Cottage in Winter Snow