

LAST week, I quoted the motion put forward in the Scottish Parliament on March 18 by Clare Adamson, 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 from 1951 till their deaths in 1978 and 1989 respectively, must be repaired, preserved and developed to a secure state for future generations to comprehend their literary and cultural history, for the wellbeing of the nation.

The motion received cross-party support, Clare made her opening speech, and the Presiding Officer then invited further response from neighbouring parliamentarians. I was waiting for some critical opposition to MacDiarmid’s politics, his extremism, his volatility. After all, this was the man who concluded his “autobiography” Lucky Poet (1943) with the words: “And my last word here is that, if I had to choose a motto to be engraved under my name and the dates of my birth and death on my tombstone, it would be: ‘A disgrace to the community,’ – Mr Justice Mugge.”

Actually, you can see engraved on MacDiarmid’s tombstone these lines from his poem A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle (1926):

*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.*

Imagine my welcome surprise, then, when Brian Whittle (South Scotland, Conservative) delivered his speech: “I am really pleased to speak in support of the motion and I thank Clare Adamson for bringing the debate to the chamber. We do not get enough opportunity to talk about Scotland’s long and proud cultural history.

“Scotland is the homeland of many nationally and internationally recognised artists, writers, musicians and dramatists, and no more so than in the world of poetry, in which the national Bard, Robert Burns, has introduced people around the globe to Scottish culture and drawn many of them to Scotland to see what else it has to offer.”

Pause. Go back beyond the trigger word “Burns”. What did he say? Read it again: “We do not get enough opportunity to talk about Scotland’s long and proud cultural history.”

Now there’s a good conservative sentence, a reprimand to the Scottish Parliament, to all governments, to all media. It’s a notice of protest with which MacDiarmid would concur, bringing all the verbal rockets and missiles he had at command.

Why not, dear parliamentarians? Why not? Why not make sure in the future that you DO have time to talk about “Scotland’s long and proud cultural history”?

Whittle continued: “Poetry,

Culture: How much is it worth?

Alan Riach continues his report on the Holyrood motion and debate on Hugh MacDiarmid’s Brownsbank Cottage

perhaps more than any other form of writing, is often shaped by the writer’s direct experiences and the places where they live.

“If we want to truly understand these writers and the minds that crafted their immortal works, therefore, we need to look beyond the words and to the world in which they were crafted. That is why initiatives such as MacDiarmid’s Brownsbank are so important in preserving the wider works of poets such as Hugh MacDiarmid.

“As a proud son of Ayrshire, I could not allow the debate to pass without drawing parallels between Brownsbank and Robert Burns’s Cottage in Alloway. As members will know, Burns Cottage offers visitors an insight into the world in which Robert Burns was born, with the surrounding area providing the inspiration for many of his later works.

“In contrast, Brownsbank Cottage was a feature of MacDiarmid’s later years. However, both buildings have become synonymous with their occupants, and both bring their own insights into the minds of those two gifted writers.

“While Burns Cottage has been preserved by the National Trust for Scotland, however, Brownsbank is reliant on the hard work of members of the Scottish charitable incorporated organisation that was created to preserve both the cottage and Hugh MacDiarmid’s legacy.

“The organisation is funded – as Clare Adamson’s motion points out – principally through the generosity of grant funding from the likes of the SSE Clyde wind farm development fund, the Architectural Heritage Fund and the William Grant Foundation, as well as through the generosity of individual members of the public who are committed to preserving Hugh MacDiarmid’s cultural legacy.

“It is to the credit of everybody who is involved in those groups that they do not see the objective purely as preserving Hugh MacDiarmid’s past; they are also looking to the future, using his works to inspire and encourage the next generation of writers.

“I am delighted that, from the reinvestment in a writers in residence programme to the creation of a poetry board scheme for pupils in South Lanarkshire to showcase their efforts, aspiring writers will have the opportunity to build their talents on such strong foundations.”

It’s to Whittle’s credit that he should draw the parallels so emphatically between Burns and MacDiarmid. So often Burns is seen



In one of the last photographs taken of Hugh MacDiarmid before his death, he and his wife Valda stand at the gate of Brownsbank Cottage in 1978

Photograph: Gordon Wright

Above right: A painting of Brownsbank by Ruth Nicol



Hoping against hope to hear the authentic call ... And know the explanation I must pass is this – You cannot light a match on a crumbling wall.

There are 12 lines between those two couplets, a long quotation from Aristophanes’s play The Acharnians, in which the speaker is waiting in the open theatre hoping to hear the greatest of all the ancient Greek tragedians, Aeschylus, called forward, but instead the Herald calls for Dexitheus and Chaeris “with his music truly / That turned me sick” and the whole Assembly remains empty, when it should be full.

MACDIARMID’S equivalence is the poets he names, posers, empty rhetoricians, fame-gatherers who never take the risk of writing anything truly challenging. He once commented that he had chosen the word “Leftish” to use in his title because it was just that bit more pejorative than “Leftist”!

But Whittle’s point was eminently clear without reference to the full text and his revision of the last word was terribly appropriate. The building he was referring to was Brownsbank Cottage and if its walls crumble, we will all have lost immeasurably.

What we must do now is make certain that the walls of that building do not crumble, that Brownsbank is secured and preserved for the future, and kept in as serious a state of good repair as Burns’s birthplace cottage in Alloway, for in many respects, in terms of Scottish literature and culture in its entirety, Brownsbank has far greater significance.

Is that a contentious judgement? Well, figure it like this – Burns

was born in Alloway, and Whittle was spot-on accurate to say that the cottage there “offers visitors an insight into the world in which Robert Burns was born”.

That means it’s actually a more palpable reminder of the world of his parents than that in which he was a young man or adult, so if you want to imagine his presence you really need to go to Tarbolton or Dumfries.

Go to Walter Scott’s Abbotsford and you’re in the building where he wrote many of his novels. The library still holds the presence of his mind. Brownsbank’s distinction in this triumvirate of great writers’ houses is that this is where the poet and Valda lived for the greater part of their lives continuously, and were living when MacDiarmid’s later, epic works were published. In Memoriam James Joyce (1955), The Kind of Poetry I Want (1961) and Diredh (1974). I could not have predicted that the Conservative MSP for South Scotland would have been so clear and emphatic in his appraisal of the importance of MacDiarmid and Brownsbank as being of cognate significance with Burns and the Alloway cottage. But there it was, backed up by that emphatic endorsement of Adamson’s motion and the political authority of the Scottish Parliament.

Deputy Presiding Officer Liam McArthur came in again now: “I call Emma Harper – you have around four minutes, Ms Harper.” Harper (South Scotland, SNP MSP) began: “Thank you, Deputy Presiding Officer, for allowing me to finagle wi ma keyboard to make sure that it will actually stand up to the debate. I thank Clare Adamson for securing the debate.

“She has articulated very well in her motion and in her speech the importance of Brownsbank Cottage and the work that is being done by the trustees and volunteers on what is, though it may be an under-appreciated corner of Scotland’s literary tradition, a shining star in 20th century history. “I am proud to be an MSP for the area. Clare Adamson has welcomed everybody to chamber, and I masel will welcome everyyin tae the chamber the nicht, tae.” Harper, in flowing, confident, cadenced, vigorous Scots, spoke of the various locations in which MacDiarmid had made his home, that Scots he had left and those he had created anew, and then came back to Brownsbank: “MacDiarmid was born and schooled in Langholm, also known as the Muckle Toon and pairt o my South Scotland region. For the first 60 years of his life, however, his home is hard to pin down, although his formative years appear again and again in his work, with large sections of A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle referring back to his youth in Langholm.

“He demonstrated that through his own body of work – always lyrical and frequently ludicrous, surreal and moving. His publishing in Scots gave credence to the language at a time when received wisdom and the dominant establishment view was that Scots was the language of the gutter or of the under-educated.

“Reading again through A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle for today’s debate, I think that his love and admiration for another Scots poet, Robert Burns, shines through, although perhaps not his admiration for some who hing their pegs on his poetry while missing the human meaning behind it.

“Both poets shared a Lowland Scots upbringing and a sense that Scotland and its people needed recorded and shared with others, but in a multiplicity of ways, with the diversity of our land at the heart of what they wrote – or, as MacDiarmid himself said: ‘Scotland small? Our multiform, our infinite Scotland small?’. No doubt Burns would have smiled as MacDiarmid scrieved that oot.

“Next year, MacDiarmid’s The Bonnie Broukit Bairn will be added to the higher English set text list. It is a tribute to his body of work and to the impact that he has had on our nation’s sense of its literary self and the language that we use day after day, that tens o thoosans o weans an bairns will hae the chance tae study his verse in the same context as Burns, Stevenson and John Byrne.

“In the same way, the work of Brownsbank is keeping alive MacDiarmid’s legacy and life fur oor generation and future generations, celebrating a body o work that has stood, and will stand, the test o time as the work o one o oor great poets and writers.”

Once again, the applause was general and filled the chamber. Joining in from the public gallery, we weren’t aware of the exclusive protocol, until the Deputy Presiding Officer offered us a pleasantly mild rebuke: “I gently discourage those in the public gallery from participating, including through applause.”

So far, so good. Strong endorsements. Rule-breaking applause. But I was wondering what the Scottish Labour representative would say. You’ll find out next week.

So often Burns is seen as a singular, solitary genius and not in relation to others

but how the initiative speaks to Scotland’s cultural confidence and identity and to our commitment as a nation to valuing and protecting that heritage.

“As Clare Adamson’s motion highlights, we cannot afford to see buildings such as Brownsbank fall into disrepair. The cottage and other buildings like it have offered a spark of inspiration to many of Scotland’s most successful and influential literary figures.

“There are many arguments for their preservation, but Hugh MacDiarmid himself put it quite succinctly when he said, ‘You cannot light a match on a crumbling building’.”

That last line was particularly well chosen. It comes from a poem entitled British Leftish Poetry, 1930-40, in which MacDiarmid rejects the pretentious socialist politics of poets such as C Day Lewis, Stephen Spender and WH Auden, and concludes more precisely, “You cannot strike a match on a crumbling wall.”

It’s worth quoting a little more of the poem to see the line in context:

*Auden, MacNeice, Day Lewis,
I have read them all,*