

I WROTE a fortnight ago about the motion lodged at the Scottish Parliament entitled: “MacDiarmid’s Brownsbank Cottage, a Scottish Cultural Treasure”. I attended when it came before MSPs last Tuesday and what I witnessed was not exactly what I’d been expecting.

I knew the proposal had gained cross-party support but I wasn’t prepared for the eloquence, conviction and indeed passion that came from both the Conservative and Labour representatives.

More than that, the evening was full of good humour, strong sympathies, long and deep feelings of commitment and enjoyment, expressed with a fluency and collegiality, a sense of mutual respect and real insight.

These were all coming from different directions, for sure, but in a series of complementarities. There was not a trace of the shout-the-other-one down petty-mindedness that spoils the reputation of politicians and numbs and tires or depresses all witnesses. No. It’s worth recording. Unlikely as this must seem, my conclusion is that there are such occasions when Hugh MacDiarmid really does bring out the best in people.

I’d like to present what was said that evening here in the pages of this newspaper even though the transcripts are in the public domain and freely available on the Scottish Parliament website. This is because, like so much else online, you’ll only find them if you know what you’re looking for. Serendipity – the marvellous accidentalism of chance discovery – applies here. Pick up the paper and see what you get. Maybe not what you expected.

We trooped into the public gallery in the debating chamber and lined up in our seats. As we arrived, a number of MSPs were leaving following the previous debate. Ours was the last motion of the day. They had important matters elsewhere, no doubt. But they missed it. And the importance of this debate as a matter of primary cultural significance in Scotland’s public political world should not be underestimated.

Deputy Presiding Officer Liam McArthur opened proceedings, saying: “The final item of business is a members’ business debate on motion S6M-16290, in the name of Clare Adamson, on MacDiarmid’s Brownsbank cottage: a Scottish cultural treasure. The debate will be concluded without any question being put. I invite members who wish

Trustees and friends of the charity MacDiarmid’s Brownsbank, in the public gallery. Left to right: Matthew Fitt, Fiona Paterson, Scott Barron, James Robertson, Susan MacDougall, Gerda Stevenson, Alan Riach, Bashabi Fraser, Neil Fraser. Front row: Kirsten MacQuarrie and Gerry Cambridge

MacDiarmid’s living legacy

Alan Riach at Holyrood for the proposing of a motion to recognise the poet’s Brownsbank Cottage as a Scottish cultural treasure

to participate in the debate to press their request-to-speak buttons.”

I was surprised by that – no questions were to be put forward. The motion had already been given cross-party support. There were no dissenters. This wasn’t a contest. But I wondered, could there still be conflicts of opinion?

The speeches were made by representatives of the three main political parties. What I felt most deeply was that the power coming through in the speeches was generated by MacDiarmid himself and carried by the speakers. Let me remind you of the motion itself:

“That the Parliament commends the work of MacDiarmid’s Brownsbank; notes that it is a charitable organisation, which was founded in 2015 to preserve and promote the legacy of Brownsbank Cottage in the Peebleshire Hills near Biggar, South Lanarkshire; understands that Brownsbank Cottage is an A-listed building, most notably remembered as the former home of the renowned poet, Christopher Murray Grieve, who was better known by his pen-name, Hugh MacDiarmid; further understands that the charity works to restore and upgrade the cottage, to conserve its contents, to promote the works of Hugh MacDiarmid nationally and internationally, to re-establish the Brownsbank Writing Fellowship for writers in residence to work from the cottage and to generate educational and community creative involvement, as well as promote literary tourism” ...

That first part of the motion relates

specifically to the small two-room cottage MacDiarmid and his wife Valda lived in from 1951 until his death in 1978 and hers in 1989. I’ll come back later to the state of disrepair the cottage is currently in, and what needs to be done, both urgently and in the longer term.

But the fact the building is A-listed not for its architecture but for the poet’s residency, is surely unique in the whole history of A-listed buildings in the UK. That’s worth emphasising. And celebrating!

“[Parliament] recognises that Hugh MacDiarmid stood as a significant Scottish poet, journalist, essayist and political figure, and believes that he is widely regarded as one of the most influential Scottish writers of the 20th century, making a profound and lasting impact on Scottish culture and politics” ...

NOW, that’s quite a statement in itself, and worth pausing on. Let me emphasise – our Parliament has now publicly endorsed MacDiarmid’s status and value, nationally and internationally. That doesn’t happen often. Almost, never. And further:

“[Parliament] acknowledges that MacDiarmid’s Brownsbank has, to date, been supported by the Clyde Wind Farm Community and Development Fund, Architectural Heritage Fund, SSE Renewables Community Investment Programme, the William Grant Foundation and generous donations from the public,

but that further support is urgently required; notes that distinguished past occupants of Brownsbank include the award-winning author and publisher, Matthew Fitt, and James Robertson, the inaugural Scottish Parliament Writer in Residence and author of the Booker Prize-nominated, The Testament of Gideon Mack; believes that Brownsbank Cottage has made an indelible imprint on Scottish cultural heritage and that its preservation, with immediate works required, is a cultural priority”...

This part of the motion was saying something more – the writers-in-residence programme that ran for years was a major investment in the future of Scottish writing. The brilliance of MacDiarmid’s poetry, his political and cultural activism, are historic, but the effect of the residencies was to generate new Scottish writing for the future.

For example, James Robertson and Matthew Fitt went on to develop Itchy Coo publishing (www.itchy-coo.com), with translations into Scots of Aesop’s Fables, Hans Christian Andersen’s Fairy Tales, Julia Donaldson’s The Gruffalo (and The Gruffalo’s Wean), and ScotsHoose: Learning and Creativity in the Scots language (www.scotshooseyaldi.com).

These are wonderful Scots resources for schools, primary and secondary, educational investment of the deepest kind. And as James and Matthew have both told me, their work came directly out of their experience of literally living under the roof of that cottage. Their



A portrait of Hugh MacDiarmid by Alexander Moffat. Alan Riach says: ‘In this portrait, MacDiarmid is looking out directly at us. It’s as if he’s saying, “I’m dead. I died in 1978. But you, reading this newspaper, you’re alive. Right now. You have to ask yourself, what do you want of the future? What will you make of it now? What are you prepared to do?”’

commitment was deepened and strengthened, their conviction and dedication grew charged.

“[Parliament] commends the board of trustees and volunteers of MacDiarmid’s Brownsbank on what it sees as their tireless efforts to protect and promote this historical Scottish landmark; notes the view that the protection and development of Scotland’s literary heritage is vital to the nation’s cultural health, identity and confidence, and further notes the calls for the Scottish and UK governments to assist with the restoration of Brownsbank Cottage, to preserve this historic and national treasure.”

And there’s the rub. What’s needed, what we have to do, is not only to “preserve” but to make that “national treasure” something purposive, living and open for all, activating, catalysing, vitalising – that’s what comes next. I’ll come back to it.

But also, there’s the recognition that “Scotland’s literary heritage” – its “protection and development” – is “vital to the nation’s cultural health”. I’d say that to deny this is a form of self-suppression, as bad for national wellbeing as smoking, alcoholism, misogyny, racism, or even worse things, because it’s only through “cultural health” – which includes the most scathing satire and, yes, sometimes, extremism – that those aspects of humanity at its worst can be countered, corrected and kept in check.

Clare Adamson, the SNP MSP for Motherwell and Wishaw, spoke in

support of the motion. She said: “I thank my colleagues for supporting the motion for debate and I welcome to the public gallery the trustees and friends of the charity MacDiarmid’s Brownsbank, including members of the Grieve family, who have joined us this evening.

“They are the custodians of MacDiarmid’s legacy and their ambitions for his former cottage at Brownsbank in Biggar deserve our collective attention. I also pay tribute to my friend and colleague Mairi McAllan MSP. Brownsbank Cottage sits in her Clydesdale constituency and she has been an avid supporter of the work of the trust and the restoration efforts.

“Today, we reflect on a figure of international significance. I am reminded of listening, a long time ago, to Bookclub on Radio 4. James Naughtie was interviewing Maya Angelou and introduced her as one of the greatest black writers of the 20th century. She immediately picked him up and said, ‘I’m considered one of the best writers of the 20th century – I just happen to be black’.

“I think the same could be said of MacDiarmid. He writes mainly in Scots but he is more than just a Scots writer and Scots writers should be recognised for their international efforts and talents. I am reminded that some of the greatest experts on MacDiarmid, and some of Scotland’s greatest writers and professors of literature and Scots language, are in the gallery this evening, so there is no pressure at all on anyone who is speaking in the debate to get things right. A few weeks ago, I attended the

Association for Scottish Literature international lecture by Petra Johana Poncarová of the University of Glasgow and Charles University in Prague, who is currently a Marie Curie fellow at the University of Glasgow. She spoke about Gaelic and Scots in the 20th and 21st centuries.

“She had undertaken a wealth of research on MacDiarmid and showed not only that he loved the Scots language and was committed to bringing it back into common usage and parlance in Scotland, but that he had a great influence on the Gaelic revival in Scotland, translating many of our Gaelic poets into Scots and sharing that work in a number of publications and magazines. We are perhaps not as familiar with that as we are with some of MacDiarmid’s other work.

‘MACDIARMID was never afraid to question conventional ideas. He believed that reviving the Scots language in poetry was about not just literature but reclaiming Scotland’s artistic character and culture to assert its independence and revitalise a literature that he saw as weighed down by sentimentality.

“His vision was to move away from the overly sentimental writing of the past and create something bold – something uniquely Scottish.

“His commitment to those ideals, and his radical advocacy, are the reasons why we now recognise the Scottish renaissance in the Scots language. MacDiarmid himself described that movement as ‘a new insistence on the Scots Lallans language in the first place and, beyond that, on the need to restore Gaelic as the national language of Scotland and to resume in the fullest way the great traditions of our lost heritage of Gaelic culture, and to apply these to new creative purposes’.

“He saw language as the foundation of cultural revival, and his work embodied that belief. He was ever controversial – in fact, many of my colleagues knew him personally and will speak to that. He was often a cantankerous character, shall we say, and his writings were often polemic, frequently contradictory and enduringly influential.

“His passion was not just linguistic, it was political, too. He was a founding member of the National Party of Scotland, which became the Scottish National Party. At the same time, he was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and in 1964 he stood as a Communist Party candidate against the then prime minister Sir Alec Douglas-Home.

“MacDiarmid believed that Scottish identity and the lives of the people who lived here were ill served by the political establishment. His belief in the cultural and political significance of language was unshakeable, and that conviction is embodied in Brownsbank Cottage.

“It is an A-listed building and the interior has been carefully preserved to reflect the character. The two main rooms – those of MacDiarmid

and his wife, Valda Trevlyn Grieve – are there to be seen. The shelves in MacDiarmid’s rooms are filled with green-spined Penguin crime novels alongside copies of his own work. Today, the cottage is a cherished site of heritage, loved and respected not just by the people of Scotland but by many beyond our borders.

“The cottage has been a writers’ residence for some of our greatest living writers, some of whom are in the gallery this evening, such as Matthew Fitt and James Robertson, and Professor Alan Riach. Writers’ fellowships nurture creativity, providing space for writers to explore new styles and perspectives while shaping Scotland’s ever-evolving cultural identity. We need to secure Brownsbank Cottage for the future of Scotland.

“I am sure some members may talk about the “little white rose of Scotland”, which, although I do not think that that was quite MacDiarmid’s view, has nonetheless been adopted by the SNP as a symbol of our national party in this Parliament. Some may mention A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle.

“However, I spent some time with Matthew Fitt in Cleland Primary school in my constituency. I saw the young people working with him in the Scots language, and learning about it. The joy and the confidence it gave them to know that the language they used with their families every day was good made me think of a MacDiarmid children’s poem, which I will quote. It is called The Bubblyjock, which is a male turkey.

*“It’s hauf like a bird and hauf like a bogle
And juist stands in the sun there and bouks
Its a wunder its heid disna burst
The way it’s aye raxin its chousks
Syne it twists its neck like a serpent
But canna get oot a richt note
For the bubblyjock swallowed the bagpipes
And the blether stuck in its throat.”*

Clare ended her speech right there and that was another surprise to me. I could not have predicted that the first speech of the evening would conclude with MacDiarmid as a comic writer for children. But he was and the simple delight of the poem (and its representation of the bubblyjock’s self-determined resistance to the conventional rules of harmony, producing its own sounds, like the bagpipes, music that does not conform) was registered by everyone present.

There was considerable applause for the speech and the reading of the poem, from all the MSPs in the Chamber and, sitting up in the public gallery, we happily joined in.

The Deputy Presiding Officer picked up: “Thank you, Ms Adamson. Indeed, I can also confirm Matthew Fitt was a somewhat tenacious midfield player for the Myles Court Warriors – a passion at the University of Edinburgh in the late 1980s. With that, we move to the open debate.”

And we’ll come back to what happened next, next week.