

We must save this unique treasure

An event of some cultural significance will take place in the Scottish Parliament on March 18 – and we all should be aware of it. By **Alan Riach**

AN event of some cultural significance will take place in the Scottish Parliament on March 18 – and we all should be aware of it. Readers of The National know how important Brownsbank Cottage is for the legacy of Hugh MacDiarmid, Scottish literature and culture more generally and, seen in a larger and longer perspective, for the lasting value of cultural life in Europe and the world. A motion (reference: S6M-16290) is being brought forward in the Scottish Parliament entitled “MacDiarmid’s Brownsbank Cottage, a Scottish Cultural Treasure”. It was lodged by Clare Adamson, the SNP MSP for Motherwell and Wishaw, and has achieved cross-party support. It is due to be debated on March 18. Here it is in full:

“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; 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; 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; 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.”

Following the tabling of the motion, the significance of MacDiarmid and his work today and into the future will be discussed at a presentation in the Scottish Parliament’s Burns Room, Hugh MacDiarmid and Scotland Now, hosted by Adamson and the Brownsbank trustees. A very limited number of places are still available if you’d like to attend, but your name must be on the guest list to gain admittance – if you’re not registered, you won’t be allowed in. If you are interested in attending please contact macdiarmidsbrownsbank@gmail.com as soon as possible. Why is this motion, and this event, important? I can put it succinctly. There’s a tale of two buildings, the Scottish Parliament and Brownsbank Cottage. The former is one of the most splendid and spectacular architectural achievements in



Scotland, designed by the Catalan architect Enric Miralles.

The latter is a two-room farm worker’s cottage, with an add-on kitchen, bathroom and toilet. Without the people who lived in that cottage, the Parliament would not exist. In a nutshell, that’s it. Here’s how the Brownsbank website describes the cottage: “Perched amid the Peebles-shire hills near

Biggar, Brownsbank cottage is the former abode of the poet Hugh MacDiarmid. In 1951, Hugh MacDiarmid’s publisher, William MacLellan, introduced the poet to Thomas Tweedie, the owner of Brownsbank Farm. “Owing to the graciousness of the Tweedie family, the Grieves [that is, MacDiarmid, or Christopher Grieve, and his wife Valda Trevelyn Grieve] resided rent-free at Brownsbank for the rest of their lives.”

When they moved in, the cottage lacked both water and electricity. Later, actor Alex McCrindle led the work to install essential utilities, the construction of the kitchen and bathroom, digging the ditches for the pipes for running water.

MacDiarmid’s great late works, *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955), *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961) and the *Direadh* poems (1974), were published during the couple’s time in the cottage, as well as the first

SNP MP Clare Adamson (below left) brought forward the motion recognising how important it is to preserve Brownsbank Cottage, which currently stands empty and is in urgent need of repair

editions of his *Collected Poems* (1962 and 1967), and the *Complete Poems* (1978), of which he approved the proofs just before his death. From Brownsbank, MacDiarmid embarked on numerous worldwide journeys, to the USSR, China and other communist countries in the East, and to Canada and the United States in the West. Visitors from all corners of the globe came to visit him there.

THEY included Seamus Heaney, Allen Ginsberg, Edwin Morgan and Yevgeny Yevtushenko; the composers Alan Bush and Ronald Stevenson; the concert pianist John Ogdon; the film-maker Margaret Tait; the poets Norman MacCaig, Sorley MacLean, Duncan Glen, and his immediate family, their son Michael and his wife Deirdre and the grandchildren; and many others.

Chris and Valda were a self-sustaining couple in many ways, in a partnership built upon independence and irreverent respect. Brownsbank is an A-listed building, the only one in Britain that has that grade not because of its architectural distinction but because of its former resident.

After their deaths, the interior of the building was carefully maintained to keep the ethos of the two main rooms, MacDiarmid’s and Valda’s, housing numerous portraits and photographs of both, and a unique collection of books and memorabilia.

The shelves in MacDiarmid’s room were packed with the green-spined Penguin crime novels, as well as



copies of his own work, poems, prose, limited editions. In Valda’s room, they were filled with books relating to her native Cornwall, by AL Rowse, DH Lawrence and others.

But in recent years, the cottage has come through the storms of Scotland’s weather poorly and is now in urgent need of repair, waterproofing the roof and maintaining the integrity of the exterior, The books, beds and furniture, the memorabilia and treasures of the interior are all currently in storage.

Despite the best efforts of the trustees, no single grant has been awarded to cover the total costs of this repair. Indeed, from certain quarters disdain for the desire to keep this national resource in good repair has been registered.

When the cottage was home to writers-in-residence, distinguished occupants included award-winning author and publisher Matthew Fitt, an unflagging champion of the Scots language and author of the first Scots-language SciFi cyberpunk novel, *But n’ Ben A-Go-Go* (2005); James Robertson, the inaugural Scottish Parliament writer in residence and the author of the Booker Prize-nominated novel *The Testament of Gideon Mack*, currently adapted for the stage by

Matthew Zajac and touring Scotland in a sold-out stage production by the Dogstar Theatre Company; author and travel-writer Linda Cracknell; and Gaelic poet and cultural ambassador Aonghas MacNeacail, among other distinguished young writers.

As an investment for future writing of quality and distinction, and, it should be emphasised, as a location from which writers went out to local schools and libraries, encouraging the work of younger generations as well as knowledge of MacDiarmid and Scottish writing of the past, Brownsbank has been of both local and national value.

It needs full repair, renewed resilience, practical forward purpose to encourage the best of new writing and increase deepening knowledge of Scotland’s past cultural achievements. That’s one reason why the parliamentary motion is of intrinsic significance. But it’s more than that.

My opening point is the real challenge, and this is what readers of this paper and all the parliamentarians who must be engaged by this motion should be reminded of – if it had not been for MacDiarmid, and for Valda, who, you might say, saved his life and steadied him in his years of deepest despair and loneliness, from the 1930s, through to their lives in the cottage from the 1950s to his death in 1978 and hers in 1989 – there would be no Scottish Parliament and no parliamentarians to fill it.

Some might say, no loss. Abolish the thing, sack them all and go back to the happy ignorance of Unionism. You can be patriotic and not have a parliament at all.

But this won’t wash any more. As chairperson of the Brownsbank Trustees Committee, Denham MacDougall puts it, “It has been suggested that the three most important moments in the history of modern Scotland are the Union of the Crowns in 1603, the dissolution of the nation’s political statehood in 1707 and the moment when Christopher Murray Grieve started publishing work as Hugh MacDiarmid in 1922.”

And yet: “We still seem to be in an era when a bold social vision for Scotland is still wanting. How can our richly diverse culture be distilled into political objectives?”

“MacDiarmid offers two fortifying resolutions here. First, there is the perpetual example of his courage and capacity to demonstrate the potential of what all aspects of life could be like

in an independent Scotland. Then there is his insistence that freedom is FOR something, perhaps simply to realise the wasted opportunities of the last three hundred years.”

THERE is, of course, the opposition: “How often have we been told that the Union has brought so much goodness to the backward-looking country that Scotland once was before it, that the benefits of the Union are many and manifest everywhere, and that everything good in Scotland has been brought about as a result of the Union, and that therefore there are those good people who are both British and Scottish and have no problem with saying that ...?”

MacDiarmid has the answer to that in a poem entitled *The Parrot Cry*:

*Tell me the auld, auld story
O’ hoo the Union brocht
Puir Scotland into being
As a country worth a thocht.
England, frae whom a’ blessings
flow
What could we dae without ye?
Then dinna threip it doon oor
throats
As gin we e’er could doot ye!
My feelings lang wi’ gratitude
Ha’e been sae sairly harrowed
That dod! I think it’s time
The claith was owre the parrot!*

*A parrot’s weel eneuch at times
But whiles we’d liefer hear
A blackbird or a mavis
Singin’ fu’ blythe and clear.
Fetch ony native Scottish bird
Frae the eagle to the wren,
And faith! you’d hear a different sang
Frae this painted foreigner’s then.
The marine that brocht it owre
Believed its every word
– But we’re a’ deevied to daith
Wi’ his infernal bird.*

*And gin that disna dae, lads,
We e’en maun draw its neck
And heist its body on a stick
A’ ither pests to check.
I’d rather keep’t alive, and whiles
Let bairns keek in and hear
What the Balliol accent used to be
Frae the Predominant Pairtner here!
– But save to please the bairns
I’d absolutely bar it
For fegs, it’s aye high time
The claith was owre the parrot!*

But that’s polemic, of course, both serious and fun. It’s a test of your sense of humour and how far you’re willing to go with it. What makes MacDiarmid a great poet isn’t only his flair for such confrontational flying. It’s also his vision, on an epic scale. And it’s also his intimacy of sympathy, his understanding of people, of how language works, especially the Scots language, and in

the closest terms, as if he has already found a way to get right under your skin and into your thinking, and into your mind before language and before thinking even begins. Try this, *The Secret Voice*:

*My voice is like a bairn
– O wad that it could tell
The hauf that’s in my brain
And body – to mysel!
For Language is a young thing
But flesh is auld – and mind;
And words for what we are,
Or ken, are ill to find.
And fegs! For Life and Lear
It’s hard to thole to hear
The silly havers Thocht
At best can mak’ o’ ocht.
Yet whiles though words can brak’
A music that can gliff
Body and brain as if
Their benmaist secrets spak’.*

That is, sometimes, rarely, occasionally, a kind of music can be heard coming through words that can give you a glimpse of the secrets, the deepest understandings of what your body and brain really mean. MacDiarmid is one of the few poets in world literature whose words can supply those secrets.

And yet, also, in the public sphere, we have to acknowledge his lasting significance in another way – his presence as a catalyst and provocation, a challenger, a David with a slingshot going up against Goliath, his inexhaustible efforts to help bring about the Scottish cultural Renaissance that has been happening throughout the last century, wave upon wave, since 1922.

Without that cultural and political commitment and investment, which came in the 1930s, almost at the cost of his life, there would be no National Party of Scotland, no Scottish National Party, no public vision developing from such beginnings into what I think more than half the people of our country would wish for today. And there would be no Scottish Parliament.

In The National on March 3, George Kerevan wrote that he feared that in his emphasising “economic revolution” for Scotland, he had, in his decades of writing, “missed something vital in the argument”, “the freedom to value our unique Scottish culture”. On February 20, 2013, I began an article in The Herald, “Pivotal role of culture in talking up independence”) with these words: “There is only one argument for Scottish independence: the cultural argument.”

This parliamentary motion and the event that will follow it perhaps marks a recognition, finally, at least by some, that that argument is indeed the most essential one, that MacDiarmid is its progenitor, and that this is the “something vital” in it.

Had it not been for MacDiarmid and Valda, there would be no Scottish Parliament and no parliamentarians to fill it