

LANGUAGE AND POLITICS
IN THE WORKS OF HUGH MACDIARMID

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By
ROBIN RUSSELL MACKENZIE, M.A.

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AUTHOR: Robin Russell Mackenzie, M.A. (Aberdeen University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. J.M. Gray

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: a study of the relationship between Hugh MacDiarmid's poetic language and his political beliefs between the wars. Some account is given of political conditions in Scotland between the wars and the part played by MacDiarmid in political movements -- Scottish Nationalism, Social Credit, Communism. The object of the thesis is to trace the influence of the poet's politics on his various experimental poetic languages -- "synthetic Scots" and "synthetic English".

PREFACE

The following study is really an attempt to connect a poet's language with his political beliefs. Most poets in the past have encountered no conflict between their language and their politics. In the 20th century, when ideology can operate in such a way as to change the philosophical basis of a nation's life, it is perhaps not surprising to find that it may also colour a poet's poetic language.

One of the best examples of the political poet is Hugh MacDiarmid, l'enfant terrible of the Scottish literary scene, who has spent a lifetime in ceaseless political skirmishing and linguistic study. While it is not unusual to find a poet's politics influencing his poetic content, it is more uncommon to find a poet who bases his language on political principle. But if we accept, with MacDiarmid, that while the mind destroys what it creates, language builds, we must accept the political commitment of the poet, not only in content but also in language.

Because of MacDiarmid's engagement in politics in what is, or should be, traditional Scottish style, neither giving nor expecting quarter, he has been subject to the most disturbing conspiracy of silence by Scottish educational authorities. My first acknowledgement must, therefore, be to those authorities who allowed me to pass through the educational machine, without hearing of Hugh MacDiarmid

except some dark hints about his friendship with Willie Gallacher and the Communist Party of Great Britain. I must regard it as a great benefit to be allowed to come upon MacDiarmid's work as an adult and without the refraction of the true light through some Scottish school-master's brain -- torn as it is between desire to impart knowledge and desire for good results in the examinations for the Scottish Certificate of Education.

More seriously, I must thank Dr. Martin Gray (a self-confessed habitue of the Rose Street "houffs" in Edinburgh during the reign of MacDiarmid), and Mr. Thomas Crawford, for their patient, willing and good-natured help. I must also thank Mr. Watson Thomson, Vancouver, former editor of the New Britain journals, for his help in clarifying the political scene in Britain in the 'thirties. Invaluable also was the help of my former teaching colleagues, Donald MacCormick of Glasgow and Douglas Young of Aberdeen. Lastly, acknowledgements are due to the staff of the Mills Memorial Library, McMaster University, for their unsung but invaluable assistance.

R.R.McK.

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ABBREVIATED TITLES OF WORKS CITED

<u>Alb.</u>	=	<u>Albyn, or Scotland and the Future.</u>
<u>A.S.T.</u>	=	<u>At the Sign of the Thistle.</u>
<u>C.G.</u>	=	<u>Cunninghame-Graham. A Centenary Study.</u>
<u>CP</u>	=	<u>Collected Poems.</u> (New York: MacMillan, 1962).
<u>C.S.S.</u>	=	<u>Contemporary Scottish Studies.</u>
<u>I.M.J.J.</u>	=	<u>In Memoriam James Joyce.</u>
<u>I.S.</u>	=	<u>The Islands of Scotland.</u>
<u>L.P.</u>	=	<u>Lucky Poet.</u>
<u>S.C.</u>	=	<u>The Scottish Chapbook.</u>
<u>S.S.</u>	=	<u>Scottish Scene.</u>
<u>T.B.C.</u>	=	<u>The Battle Continues.</u>
<u>U.B.W.W.</u>	=	<u>Ugly Birds Without Wings.</u>

I

NORTH OF THE TWEED

I believe that...men are beginning to see, not perhaps the golden age, but an age which, at any rate is brightening from decade to decade, and will lead us sometime to an elevation from which we can see the things for which the heart of mankind is longing. ¹

Woodrow Wilson almost certainly believed what he said and to a great extent echoed the sentiments of most people in the Western World. After all, the Great War had been the "war to end all wars", the war to make the "world safe for democracy", and, as an afterthought, the war to ensure "national self-determination". The nations of the West had rallied to the aid of "gallant little Belgium" and had soundly trounced the Prussian bully and his henchmen at the cost of a mere 9,000,000 dead.

Although Wilson saw the Great War as the beginning of a new age, many regarded it as the culmination of a tradition of national self-expression. Out of the chaos caused by the disintegration of the two great Continental Empires, Russia and Austro-Hungary, there arose a host of small nations -- many of them to be overwhelmed in the next war -- which demanded to be heard as individual states. From Tsarist Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and

¹C.L. Howat, Britain Between the Wars 1918-1940 (London, 1959), p.1.

Finland broke away, and from Austro-Hungary emerged Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary and Austria. Poland had seized its chance on the defeat of Germany and the break-up of the Russian Empire to claim independence and even the Ukraine claimed national sovereignty for a short time. The British Empire had not escaped this European resurgence of nationalism, latent, or at least not explosive, since 1848, and the Irish, beaten militarily in 1916, won a moral victory over the British authorities in Ireland which was in effect a victory for nationalism. In fact, the Easter Rebellion of 1916 must be kept in the forefront of the mind of anyone trying to understand the course of Scottish Nationalism in the inter-war years. The events following the Rebellion, such as the "Black and Tan" war, and the civil war between the Irish Free State and the Irish Republican Army, all helped to create the atmosphere in which decisions concerning regional devolution were made at Westminster.

The Great War had supposedly been fought to protect "gallant little Belgium", and to many returning from the conflict it must have seemed as though something might be done about the submerged and oppressed nationalities in the United Kingdom. As Hugh MacDiarmid wrote in 1926:

[the War] achieved what nothing else could have achieved, because it removed for a while large

numbers of Scots from the Caledonian scene, and permitted them a view of a larger world: this estrangement had the effect it ever has on the Scottish mind --- a marked quickening of the patriotic sense, mingled with the desire for new things. 2

The war had removed Hugh MacDiarmid from the Scottish scene as well and had taken him as Sergeant Grieve of the R.A.M.C. to Salonika, Italy, and France where he served in an Indian military hospital. Although he had been invalided home in 1918 with cerebral malaria, like so many other servicemen, he was not demobilised until 1920. While the war permitted MacDiarmid and many other Scots "a view of a larger world", it also showed them what smaller nations could do if they had their freedom. Among the more thoughtful who saw through the myth regarding "gallant little Belgium", it must have seemed clear that the great Imperial nations had started the war for their own purposes and had used the smaller nations as pawns. It was commonly rumoured that trade had continued between certain of the warring powers, that certain essential materials for the manufacture of gelignite had been shipped to Germany via supposedly neutral countries although Britain ruled the waves, and that many British grenades had German fuses. Whether all these rumours were true or false, a large number of disillusioned veterans returned from the war determined that such a bloodbath would not occur again and certainly not

²C.S.S., p.15

for the same reasons. To many it had been more of a trade war than a just war, and many intellectuals along with T.S. Eliot realized that the Great War could be better compared with the First Punic War than the First Crusade.

It is not surprising considering the general disenchantment with the war that many regarded the breaking down of the large super-states as a necessary step towards ensuring that wars of that magnitude did not occur again. MacDiarmid could well ask the question after the war:

Was it for little Belgium's sake
Sae mony thoosand Scotsmen dee'd?
And never ane for Scotland fegs
Wi' twenty thoosand times mair need! (CP, 231)

The Communists were not slow in pointing out that the war had been caused by capitalism. For the less revolutionary, devolution seemed to be the answer to the excessive power of the great financial and capitalist nations. Thus Scottish Nationalism for many returned soldiers was a step towards making wars more difficult to break out "inevitably".

It must not be thought, however, that the small national units and the national movements which arose in the wake of the war had no tradition. Although it seemed, in 1848, that nationalist revolutions were over and that the balance of power would remain in the hands of the great imperial powers, the nineteenth century, especially during the first thirty years, had really been a time for consol-

idation and scholarly research into the national literatures and languages in which they were written, and this work did not cease with the failure of 1848. Admittedly the nations that felt they should reassemble themselves from the divisions of the Middle Ages, like Germany and Italy, succeeded in their national resurgence, probably because their fragmentation hampered trade, but these may be taken as the exact opposite of, for instance, the Finnish people's national aspirations. As Wyndham Lewis puts it, most nationalism "derives among other things from a desire on the part of the interested parties to become a smaller unit; German nationalism from a desire to become a larger unit"³. During the latter part of the nineteenth century then, much scholarly work was done in connection with national literature and language. Elias Lönnrödt in Finland had already produced a long connected version of Kalevala, the Finnish folk epic and there had been a conscious effort on the part of intellectuals and poets like Alexis Kivi to make Finnish a real poetic language and not merely a language for peasants. In Norway, Ivar Aasen, following the lead of Henrik Wergeland had founded the New Norse Movement whose aim it was to destroy the Danish domination of Norwegian culture. In Lithuania the poetry of Antanas Strazdas owed much to the belief that the national language was the best poetic medium

³ "Nationalism", Bookman (September, 1934), p.277.

for the Lithuanian. In fact, in the wake of Romanticism the demand for national literature grew in nearly every language group in Europe (except Scotland), some early in the century and some later, but all founded on the desire for national independence and sovereignty. It is no surprise then to find that the Great War broke the old Continental Empires and allowed a mass of small, usually fiercely nationalistic states to arise.

In Scotland, it appears at first sight that the same forces are at work. In 1853 W.E. Aytoun formed the National Association for the Vindication of Scottish Rights, which, although it had no immediate political effect, showed that at least a few Scotsmen were not satisfied with the conditions of government in their native land. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there had been a feeling, especially among the Whigs, that Scotland was politically subservient to England and not the sister nation as the Union of 1707 had guaranteed. The Lord Advocate, Henry Melville, Lord Dundas, was a complete despot in Scotland and, as Henry Cockburn makes clear, allowed no political meetings of any kind during his dictatorship. Apparently a meeting about West Indian slavery, held in Edinburgh in July 1814 "was the first assembling of people for a public object that had occurred here for about twenty

years", and Cockburn adds laconically that, "if the termination of slavery in our West Indian colonies had been a purely political matter, it could not have been held in Edinburgh in 1814"⁴. Even after 1814 Scotland still continued to be "a lodge at a rich man's gate", as the Radical writers put it. Thus there was a current of dissatisfaction among many Scots about the state of their country early in the nineteenth century.

To compare this feeling with the nationalist forces building up on the Continent is to twist the facts of history too much. What Aytoun in 1853, the Scottish M.P.s. in 1869, and Lord Rosebery, wanted was merely that Scotland should guide its own affairs rather than the English Home Secretary in London. There was no attempt to posit the claims of Scots as a literary language anywhere in the background of these movements and certainly no attempt to operate outside the accepted English party system. As far as language was concerned, Gaelic was being stamped out as quickly as the Highland schoolmasters and dominies could manage this anglicisation and Broad Scots was consigned to post-Burnsian sentimental maunderings about Nature and the virtues of simple country life. Even Robert Louis Stevenson, in his volume of poetry called Underwoods (1887) apologises for writing some of his poems in "our dying language"⁵.

⁴Memorials of his Time (Edinburgh, 1910), p.271.

⁵Underwoods (London, 1887), p.xi.

All in all the picture in Scotland during the nineteenth century was not bright. When, however, nationalist feeling did start smouldering in Scotland it smouldered fairly consistently, although one could never say that it actually burst into flame. The Scottish Labour Party, which was founded in 1888 with Keir Hardie as secretary and the redoubtable R.B. Cunninghame-Graham (Don Roberto) as honorary president, had as one of the planks on its electoral platform Home Rule for Scotland. It is strange and a little disheartening that the Parliamentary Labour Party has nearly always paid mere lip-service to regional devolution or even sentiment, perhaps because the advantages felt to accrue to centralization always defeat the benefits supposed inherent in regionalism. With the return of the Liberals in 1906 the stage seemed set for some sort of Home Rule measure but, as usual, luck was against the nationalists. In 1913, Sir W.H. Cowan's Scottish Home Rule Bill passed its second reading by 204 votes to 159 but nothing was done before the war put an end to most domestic legislation. It would be wrong, however, to imagine that these bills and movements had really much effect on Parliament -- as can be seen from the voting figures almost half the House either did not bother to turn up or did not vote at the Scottish Home Rule debates.

Finally the war put a stop to debates of this sort in Parliament, although, in 1917, the Scottish Trades Union Congress asked Lloyd George for his support on the matter of Home Rule. But as Duncan Glen rather acidly comments;

After the war the parliamentary Motions and Bills began to be moved again but one Ireland proved enough for the English M.Ps., and after 1920 none of the Scottish Home Rule Bills was allowed to come to the vote. 6

It is ironic that both sides should use the Irish struggle for independence as a lever against the other. The Unionists pointed the moral that the consequences of allowing Scottish Home Rule would be some sort of civil war on the Irish pattern. The nationalists pointed out with a gravity that suggested that only with difficulty were the Scots restrained from throwing off the alien yoke, that unless the Government "concede the mild meagre measure for which we are now asking, forces at work that neither we nor anyone can stop, will soon demand not this measure but a bold and bigger measure"⁷. The result was an impasse.

The nearest the nationalists got to the dark movements hinted at, was when the Reverend James Barr, a socialist M.P., in 1927, introduced his Government of Scotland Bill which went further in its nationalist demands than

⁶ Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance (Edinburgh, 1964), p.43.

⁷ Sir Reginald Coupland, Welsh and Scottish Nationalism (London, 1954), p.399.

most of the previous measures; in fact, the Bill demanded dominion status, with the Crown and a Joint Defence Council remaining as the only links with Westminster. All was in vain. The English M.Ps. who completely outnumbered any opposition of a nationalist nature, either objected on principle to any threat to the unity of the Kingdom or were apathetic and a little surprized and hurt that the Scots should be making so much fuss when they seemed well enough off. But history, economic and industrial, shows what the fuss was about:

Certainly Scotland's economy had been at a low ebb since the war; for which England was given the blame. When steelworks, shipyards, railways, textile mills, banks were more and more controlled by English companies and directed from head offices in London, Scotland's interests came last. The Calico Printers' Association closed all its Scottish works in 1929; the workshops of the old Scottish railways were closed or much reduced in their operations; the naval dockyard at Rosyth was closed; steelworks were abandoned, shipyards left silent, rusting, grassgrown. The production of coal fell by 24 percent, and employment in coalmining by 36 percent, between 1913 and 1937; in Lanarkshire, previously the source of more than half Scotland's coal, production was almost cut in half. Scottish shipping declined by 25 percent while England's increased slightly. In Dundee the jute industry, on which half the industrial population depended, recovered in the 'thirties to half its pre-war production after drastic reorganization had restored some of the advantages it had lost to Indian competition. 8

Generally speaking Scottish production declined by about 12 percent between 1907 and 1930 at a time when England's rose by 20 percent.

8. Rowat, p.468.

It became increasingly obvious that Scottish Home Rule could not be achieved within the framework of the English three party system and so in 1928 the National Party of Scotland was formed by the merging of the Scottish National League, the Scottish National Movement, the Scottish Home Rule Association, and the Glasgow University Nationalist Association. As this merger had forced all shades of political opinion together, from the strongly monarchical and conservative to the "wild man" element on the far left, of which MacDiarmid was an unrepentant member, it was not long before a rival party was formed. The Scottish Party, under the aegis of the Duke of Montrose, Sir Alexander MacEwen, and Professor Dewar Gibb, was formed in 1932 and took up a consistently right wing stance. Although they stood for a sort of Home Rule movement, to MacDiarmid and a number of left wingers, they were just the sort of people, Anglo-Scots, who would destroy anything of value if Scotland did manage to win her independence. He made this clear on a number of occasions, and in no uncertain manner:

No form of devolution (and any form of devolution is an insult to Scotland -- it is not for England to give us back "control of our domestic affairs" but for us to assert our independence and take our own course regardless of England) which brings these precious legislators back from Westminster to Scotland is worth a damn. They will remain the same on this side of the Border as on the other. 9

Though the structure of the sentence may be a little clumsy

there is no mistaking the message. The Scottish Party, in fact, might have been described in true MacDiarmid fashion as a gang

of high mucky-mucks, famous fatheads, old wives of both sexes, stuffed shirts, hollow men with headpieces stuffed with straw, bird-wits, lookers-under-beds, trained seals, creeping Jesuses, Scots Wha Ha'evers, village idiots, policemen, leaders of white-mouse factions and noted connoisseurs of bread and butter, glorified gangsters, and what "Billy" Phelps calls Medlar Novelists (the Medlar being a fruit that becomes rotten before it is ripe), Commercial Calvinists, makers of "noises like a turnip", and all the touts and toadies and lickspittles of the English Ascendancy, and their infernal women-folk, and all their skunkcoil skulduggery. 10

In view of the opinion which MacDiarmid held of most of the Scottish Nationalists it is little wonder that the National Party in its purge of undesirable elements in 1933 should expel, among the rest of the extremists, the outspoken MacDiarmid. The next year, when the National Party joined the Scottish Party to form the Scottish National Party (S.N.P.), MacDiarmid launched an attack of the new party as deviationist and, worse still, bourgeois:

The Scottish Party, headed by the Duke of Montrose and Sir Alexander MacEwen, entirely consists of that sort /right wing moderate/ and has as its sole object the confining of the Scottish Movement within the narrowest possible limits and with the least possible discomfort to the existing order. The National Party of Scotland had attempted, on the other hand to stand pat on the few basic facts to a whole range of other considerations; but it

has now abandoned even that effort and is fused with the Scottish Party. 11

The history of the S.N.P. has indeed been as MacDiarmid predicted: right wing, moderate and therefore ineffectual. The only success the party had was in the Motherwell by-election of April 1945, and even that success was short-lived as the seat was lost in the Labour landslide of that same year. Perhaps we should sympathise with the party officials in view of the courage of their stand and yet, as Duncan Glen quotes from John MacCormick's The Flag in the Wind, there is something a little pathetic in placing so much blame on MacDiarmid for the failure of the S.N.P.:

Although I have no doubt that he (C.M.Grieve) has done invaluable work in the whole field of Scottish literature, I am certain C.M.Grieve has been politically one of the greatest handicaps with which any national movement could have been burdened. His love of bitter controversy, his extravagant and self-assertive criticism of the English, and his woolly thinking, which could encompass in one mind the doctrines both of Major Douglas and Karl Marx, were taken by many of the more sober-minded of the Scots as sufficient excuse to condemn the whole case for Home Rule out of hand. 12

It is ironic to think that the very words which MacCormick uses to describe the typical Scottish voter, "sober-minded", would condemn any political party dependent on voters of that quality out of hand for MacDiarmid.

¹¹ S.S., p.55.

¹² Quoted by Duncan Glen, p.124.

But nationalism sometimes grows slowly and at the strangest times. The propaganda work MacDiarmid, and his younger fellow poets, Douglas Young, Sydney Goodsir Smith and others, have done has borne fruit in the strangest sectors. In spite of the usual conservatism of Scottish academic authorities and their built-in inferiority complexes about Scottish matters, there was founded, in 1948, a full-time lectureship in Scottish Literature at Glasgow University, and in 1952 the School of Scottish Studies was established at Edinburgh. This movement has continued with the establishment of further chairs and lectureships at all four ancient universities. The Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue and the Scottish National Dictionary have been made the responsibility of all four universities although perhaps the most significant sign of a change in attitude to Scottish affairs was the great success of Sir David Lyndsay's morality play Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis at a number of Edinburgh Festivals commencing in 1948. In Scottish schools, so often the target of MacDiarmid's most vitriolic attacks, Scottish history is treated more sympathetically and in a more adult fashion, Scots literature is studied, and the official attitude to dialects has changed radically since the 'thirties. The official attitude might be summed up in the following extract from

the Scottish Education Department's pamphlet, English in Secondary Schools:

It is not suggested that attempts should be made to impose on pupil or teacher any one particular speech pattern or accent. Opinions will differ widely concerning the meaning or even admissibility of the term 'standard English' as applied to speech. But few will cavil at an exemplar of English generally acceptable to educated Scots. Although slovenly perversions of dialect will thereby be excluded, local forms of speech, words and phrases of genuine dialect, whether of the Borders or Buchan, should find a place in the classroom. The inclusion in the syllabus of Scots poetry and prose will ensure some opportunity for the speaking of 'Braid Scots'. 13

In spite of the change in the official attitude in education, which leaves many questions unanswered (such as what is meant by "slovenly perversions of dialect", "genuine dialect", and even "Braid Scots"), the Scottish public has remained apathetic to any prospect of Scottish Home Rule and was probably unimpressed by the theft of the Coronation Stone from London and the broadcasts of Radio Free Scotland on the television wave-band. There is, however, increased activity from the S.N.P. and this year (1966) the membership of the party has trebled.

The only real chance Scotland had, however, of gaining its independence was in the 'twenties and 'thirties when economic hardships attributable to English control of industry might have rallied the majority of the Scots people to the cause. In fact, MacDiarmid's consistently left wing

¹³ Scottish Education Department, English in Secondary Schools (H.E.S.O., 1952), p.6.

attitude was probably the most politically realistic that the S.N.P. could have adopted at that time. That the Scots did not achieve self-governing status was therefore, the fault, not only of the English M.Ps., but also of the Scots themselves. The inter-war period was neither stable economically nor settled politically. Some Scots regarded Scottish Nationalism as mere nostalgic feeling for the past that probably never was and many regarded it as an obstacle in the path of world revolution. Lewis Grassie Gibbon (James Leslie Mitchell), the author of the unjustly ignored trilogy A Scots Quair, was particularly bitter in his attacks on nationalism of any sort, epitomised as it was for him by "Communist-murdering Finland" and the middle-class mediocrity of the Irish Free State. MacDiarmid, however, claims that Gibbon came to espouse the nationalist cause before he died, although we have no evidence of this from Gibbon's own writings.¹⁴

Other Scots, in the majority perhaps, might have become nationalists had they not been so terrified of the Red Menace which they felt might easily devour the West unless a united front be maintained. Most English M.Ps. and many Scotsmen regarded, and to a certain extent still regard, Scotland and especially Clydeside as a hot-bed of Communism. The legend of "Red Clydeside" dies hard. In

¹⁴Letter to The Scotsman, 4th June, 1966.

retrospect, however, the situation is much clearer and it is almost laughable that so many people could believe revolution would come to Scotland in the Russian model ; at the time the picture must have looked very different. In 1919 there were riots in Glasgow and the red flag was hoisted on the municipal flag-pole and the authorities were convinced that the long-awaited revolution was about to take place. In point of fact, the issue was a demand for a 40-hour week to accommodate the soldiers about to be demobilised. Troops were concentrated with tanks and machine-guns to control the approaches to the city and, after a fierce battle between police and demonstrators, popularly known as "the battle of George Square", the troops marched in to occupy the city¹⁵. In 1921 there were again fears of a revolution when the "Triple Alliance" the Mineworkers' Union, the Transport Workers' Union, and the Railwaymen's Union threatened to go on strike. The election of 1922 did nothing to ease the fears of the bourgeoisie that the proletariat might rise and once again it was Glasgow which showed its true colour. Of the fifteen Glasgow seats, Labour won ten, and out of the twenty-eight Clydeside seats Labour and the I.L.P. won twenty-one. Most of the men elected had been agitators during the wartime Clydeside struggles, and although they had become respec-

¹⁵Howat, p.24.

table enough to be elected they were commonly supposed to be about to set the House of Commons afire. David Kirkwood, one of the leading figures in the group, left Glasgow for London with great acclaim and the words, "When we come back, this station, this railway will belong to the people"¹⁶. This must have struck fear in the hearts of many, and yet they need not have worried. The fine words of these men were lost in Westminster and never took the form of action.

But, for a second time since the war, during the General Strike of 1926, violence broke out in Glasgow where buses were overturned, police attacked and black-legs manhandled. Hugh MacDiarmid, in A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, shows his disappointment at the collapse of the strike which he describes as a rose:

A reid reid rose that in the lift
Like a ball o' fire burned. (CP, 104)

Although in most areas the strike was regarded as merely a way of ensuring a decent wage, in the North of England and in Scotland, it was regarded by many as the start of the revolution. In John Paton's Left Turn, an old I.L.P. man from the North probably echoes the sentiments of many:

Man, John, there's never been onything like it. If
the blighters o' leaders here... dinna let us down

¹⁶ A.J.P. Taylor, "Confusion on the Left", The Baldwin Age, ed. J. Raymond (London, 1960), p. 66.

we'll hae the Capitalists crawlin' on their bellies in a week. Oh, boy, it's the revolution at last. 17

It is small wonder that the cause of Scottish Nationalism should have been regarded rather coldly by moderates generally. Who could tell what danger an almost certainly socialist Scottish Parliament might be to England? On the other hand very many left wingers saw Scottish Nationalism as an anachronism in that day of international Communism; it had been promised by the theorists that Capitalism would collapse of its own accord in any case. If, however, the fear of Communist revolution was the dominant feature of the 'twenties militating against any political move towards Scottish Home Rule, fear of economic collapse must surely have been the dominant feature of the 'thirties. In 1931, the Bank of England seemed on its last legs and with widespread unemployment the health of the pound depended on loans from New York. The New York banks, however, were unwilling to make loans to Ramsay MacDonald's Labour Government unless some gesture was made towards economising. The gesture decided upon was a cut of 10 percent in the unemployment benefit. The Government split over this issue, allowing the National Government under the former Labour Prime Minister Ramsay

¹⁷ Quoted by Kowat, p.321.

MacDonald to come to power.

The events of the 'thirties must have brought very forcibly to people's minds the conviction that all was not well with the economic set-up of the country. The Baldwin era seems to us now to have been the time of the National Government and of political stagnation, but, as one writer has it, "exotic plants, hybrids, submerged growths or weeds, however they might be regarded, were continually struggling to establish themselves, sending up strange shoots amid the familiar vegetation"¹⁸. One of these exotica was Social Credit, which was founded on the writings of Major Douglas, a retired army engineer. His theories involved the destruction of the banking system which kept the people's purchasing power artificially lower than its productive power. It is small wonder, in view of its avowed intention to destroy the capitalist banking system, that Social Credit became the economic conviction of MacDiarmid, much to the chagrin of the Communist Party of Great Britain (C.P.G.B.). Although MacDiarmid was in London at the time, working as a journalist, there is no evidence that he had anything to do with Kibbo Kift, the active wing of the Social Credit movement, or that he ever wore the official green shirt.

¹⁸ E. Wharton, "A Few Lost Causes", The Baldwin Age, p. 80.

The Social Credit theory may seem ridiculous in retrospect, and L.S.F.-trained economists merely laugh at the mention of its name, but to many it was the only way out of what seemed to be an economic maze. [One should not of course make the mistake of regarding the Canadian Social Credit Movement as having anything to do with Douglasite economics or the original ideals of the party; the only connection is the name.] The main force of Social Credit in its original form lies in the fact that it is an individualistic creed and the solution of the economic problems of society is only the first step in a much more ambitious 'democratization'. In his book, Social Credit, Major Douglas writes:

not so

what
orig. of the
religious
element
of the SC?

It is significant that the arguments voiced from all these quarters are invariably appeals to mob psychology -- "Europe must be saved", "Workers of the World Unite", etc. The appeal is away from the conscious-reasoning individual, to the unconscious herd instinct. And the 'interests' to be saved, require mobs not individuals. 19

No wonder MacDiarmid was attracted to such an economic philosophy; not only did Social Credit promise that the individual would be the most important part of the system, but also that its secondary aim was an anti-philistine one:

But the second necessity under which men and women labour, after the primary necessity has been met,

²⁰ C.H. Douglas, Social Credit (London, 1935), p.29.

can broadly be described as the satisfaction of the artistic instinct; which can be further analysed and defined as the incorporation in material forms of ideals conceived in the mind. 20

The Social Credit theory in Britain, in spite of the efforts of Major Douglas, MacDiarmid, T.S.Eliot, Herbert Read, and such organs as New Britain, New Albion, and Eleventh Hour was held only by "a fairly small, rather cranky group",²¹ and failed to survive the bitter clashes of the Communists and Fascists of the later 'thirties, most of the Greenshirts literally changing their colours and joining the Communists. This step was taken by MacDiarmid as well, although even when actually a member of the Party he still hankered back *and still does* ✓ to the Douglasite theory of economics. The transition from Social Credit to Communism to many was imperceptible: it was sufficient to point out the iniquities of the banking system to be classed as a Communist, as Watson Thomson the editor of New Britain, New Albion, New Atlantis, and Eleventh Hour, found to his cost in Saskatchewan, on relinquishing his editorship²².

MacDiarmid, however, is and was no politician. He was expelled from the National Party of Scotland once and

²⁰ C.H.Douglas, p.108.

²¹ Private letter from Watson Thomson, Vancouver, 1966.

²² Private interview with Watson Thomson.

from the C.P.G.B. twice, and yet remains for most people the archetypal Scottish Nationalist and to many Scots a hated Communist. To understand his involvement in the various political parties he supported or was an active member of, during the 'twenties and 'thirties -- and these are the years we must study for political content -- it is imperative to bear in mind the statement he makes in Lucky Poet in 1943:

Apart from the working-class movement generally, and the question of Scottish Independence, what is the enemy I have been fighting in this life-long warfare-- the enemy is human stupidity in general, and in particular that cant of literature and illusion of knowledge... 23

2 Under this banner he could attack from any angle and avoid the charge of political inconsistency. In fact, nothing shows his essential lack of interest in the politicking of the 'thirties, in reaction against the political fatuity of Ramsay MacDonald and the inspired lethargy of Baldwin, better than his 1934 attack on politics:

Politics are a kind of abracadabra which demonstrably lacks the attributes which it arrogates to itself, and which, in the absence of these, to an overwhelming degree subserves not what the majority of the public even believe, but infinitely more sordid and unscrupulous and shameful ends. 24

The consistency of the stance the poet takes up lies in the basic charge that he makes: the offending creed or system

²³ L.P., p. xviii.

²⁴ S.S., p. 253

is the enemy of real knowledge. Formal economics is no different:

The interest of money-lenders is to set up a system which enables them to exact their usury as frequently as possible; hence all the talk about economic interdependence, the impossibility of national economic autonomy, the further 'undesirability' (from their point of view) of individual economic security and all the guff about the delicacy and intricacy of the financial system, its insusceptibility of democratic control, the secret movements and confabulations of Mr. Montagu Norman and his confreres, and all the rest of the 'mumbo-jumbo'... 25

For much the same reasons he castigates the ignorance of most of the men involved in the Scottish Nationalist Movement:

✓ ...the vast majority of those who now call themselves Scottish Nationalists have not undertaken the arduous task of repairing this tremendous defect in their education [lack of knowledge of Scottish history, literature, and current affairs] They are in this respect exactly in the same boat as their opponents. Their organizations, promoting Parliamentary contests and seeking electoral support, limit their appeal to those who are similarly ignorant and are above all things anxious to avoid the nuisance of getting down to fundamentals. 26

At any other level than this ultimate one, MacDiarmid is inconsistent, attacking persons and institutions at one point and praising them at the next, but he is not blind to the fact that he is any normal political figure. He is the unrepentant "cat-fish that revitalizes the other torpid

²⁵ A.S.T., p.63.

²⁶ New Britain, November 1st, 1933, p.747.

denizens of the aquarium"²⁷. Basically MacDiarmid is not interested in politics as some sort of social panacea; his interest lies in politics as "an artist's organized approach to the interdependencies of life"²⁸.

At first MacDiarmid was a socialist and belonged to the I.L.P., later becoming a Labour town councillor in Montrose, but it is not surprising, considering the debacles of the Labour Party in the 'twenties and 'thirties, under the singularly spineless leadership of Ramsay MacDonald (whose sin was trebled in MacDiarmid's eyes because ✓ he was a Scotsman), that he lost interest in the movement and in 1934 points out that the socialist movement has produced no good poetry which is sufficient condemnation to MacDiarmid²⁹. In 1952, MacDiarmid, writing of the great Scottish Socialist and Nationalist Cunninghame-Graham, claimed that, although the Socialist Movement commanded an overall majority for some time, this was "unaccompanied by any counterpart of the slightest consequence in literature and the arts and failed even to yield any book that influenced the general development of British, let alone European

²⁷L.P., p.241.

²⁸Ibid. p.241.

²⁹A.S.T., p.114.

Socialism, while the majority of the L.Ps. it returned to Westminster were mentally negligible"³⁰. Grassie Gibbon

in his Grey Granite, certainly agreed. Essentially

✓ MacDiarmid is an anarchist and so it is not surprising that all the official political groups found his help often less than welcome. Eric Linklater paints an amusing, and not inaccurate portrait of the poet as Hugh Skene, Scottish Nationalist poet and Communist, who supports Magnus Merriman in his Scottish Nationalist election campaign:

Then Skene spoke, and in an instant had his audience afire. A lamp behind him lit his flaming bush of hair, his thin and lovely hands beat the air. He was more than a little drunk, and he spoke of revolution as though man were made only to break through barricades and run with torches down a ruined street. Whether the revolution he advocated was Communist or Nationalist was not very clear, but it was exciting, and the miners cheered him loudly. 31

But at a serious level, MacDiarmid has been accused of inconsistency too often by those who are either judging him by inapplicable standards, or who have not the range of vision of the poet. His life-long battle has been for Scottish Nationalism, the working classes, and the right of every individual to develop his consciousness as far as possible. The fact that he manages with apparent ease to combine Nationalism with Communism is seen less as an incon-

³⁰ C.G., p.10.

³¹ Magnus Merriman(London, 1959), p.188.

shot 22.05
 his
 11.00

 sistency when we consider how communism today has fallen away from its high pre-war Internationalist standards and has tacitly admitted the existence of nationality. In order to combine Communism with Scottish Nationalism as well as to include his newly discovered concept of Gaelic Scotland, MacDiarmid, in Lucky Poet, mentions that he is working for the establishment of "Workers' Republics in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Cornwall", " a sort of Celtic Union of Socialist Soviet Republics in the British Isles"³². This plan includes all the poet's tenets, as, at the same time, each part would be allowed to govern its own future. This sounds very like the regional devolution of the Douglasite New Britain Movement, in which MacDiarmid was involved when he was working in London in the 'thirties, although at other times he makes quite clear that Nationalism must be revolutionary, radical and republican.³³

Although MacDiarmid was ejected from the National Party of Scotland in 1933 for Communism, he did not take long to make up his mind that the Communist Party offered him the nearest thing to his political ideal and even in 1966, he claims that " the two best Scottish Nationalists I have known were both Communists, I refer to Willie

³²L.P., p.26.

³³Alb., p.8.

Gallacher and (though he never joined the British Communist Party) John MacLean"³⁴. Four years after he joined, the C.P.G.B. expelled him for his nationalist activities but reinstated him, to expel him once again for "nationalist deviation" in 1938. He remained outside the Party until 1957, when, while many were leaving it because of the Russian action during the Hungarian uprising, he rejoined it. At that time he stated in a letter to the Daily Worker (28th March, 1957) why he rejoined at such a juncture and how he combined Nationalism with Communism:

I am a Nationalist because life as we know it is always specific -- specific in time and place. It is where and when it is, and of no other where and when.
I am a Communist because life is always , and has always been, individual. There is no question of a universal because any attempt at definition of life must start out with the concept 'individual', otherwise it would not be life. 35

He claimed thereafter that Communism is the only political creed which guarantees man his individuality. He is, however, altogether critical of the humanly controlled system as opposed to the ideal. He attacks "the blatant Philistinism of the vast majority of [his] Communist comrades"³⁶ in the same way as he attacked the Socialists and the National Party of Scotland. In In Memoriam James Joyce he again

³⁴Letter to The Scotsman, 4th June, 1966.

³⁵Quoted by Duncan Glen, p.126.

³⁶L.P., p.337.

shows his clear-sighted appraisal of the proletariat, free from the "pinko-grey", guilt-ridden view of the Auden-Spender-Day Lewis group:

And I am haunted by the masses
In our great industrial centres
Greedy for productivity and neglecting fertility.
The fertility and potential abundance of life
Is a gift so strange to their minds that they feel
in themselves
The responsibility towards it -- they hold it something
That rises of itself, not an achievement
Which nothing but adequate effort can keep alive. 37

Coupled with his concern over the Philistinism of the proletariat and their dislike of mental effort is an absolute hatred of the puritanism "that goes with most so-called Communism or Socialism"³⁸, and in 1962, he states that he never sought to address himself "to the uneducated or undereducated, to juvenile delinquents, to beatniks and the like"³⁹.

He would, he states in The Battle Continues:

Wipe out the false word "humanism"; our art is not
to be
Misericordious, toothless, pacifistic but the art
of full-blooded men
Each in command of a full arsenal of feeling, including
the feeling of social hatred.
No inertia, cowardice, quietism, weariness, apathy then.4C

37 I.H.J.J., p.43.

38 L.P., p. 239.

39 U.B.W.W., p.3.

⁴⁰T.B.C., p.33.

In spite of his repeated cries that he has "no love for humanity but only for the higher brain-centres"⁴¹, he really has too much love of humanity; he believes in individuality, in Communism, in Nationalism, all idealisms, which point to a humanitarianism unconnected with dewy-eyed romanticising about the common man, the proletariat and the rural worker. His humanitarianism is a goad which will force common men -- "sailors, fishermen, agricultural workers, rural labourers, of all kinds, buck navvies, and other non-bogus people"⁴² -- to realize their potential, regardless of whether they have been conditioned to bondage or not; it is by no means a panacea.

The "non-bogus" people whom he met while on war-service in a Clydeside engineering works (he was then fifty-three years old and weakened by ill health) and among the "entirely unlettered crews of the little sailing-boats on which I go to the herring-fishing, thirty miles beyond the Ramna Stacks on the edge of the Main Deep"⁴³, are his main concern and he will make sure that they do not accept the easy way, but that they will always live life to the full.

I do not care a rap what the educated classes think, believe, like etc. But if the great masses are bogged in ignorance and shocking bad tastes, that is precisely

⁴¹L.P., p.78.

⁴²Ibid., p.412.

⁴³Ibid., p.48.

what I am vitally concerned about, and I cannot lie back, aloof among my intellectual peers, and in that way acquiesce in the degraded standards of the generality. I must get in amongst them -- I must seek to interest them in better work, to give them better standards by every means in my power, and next to face-to-face talking to them I find the best means to my hand just these endless controversies in newspapers and particularly local papers... 44

He even mentions at one point --this is in his earlier days -- that he intends to save poetry by going to the people and making "a pilgrimage through the length and breadth of the country, declaiming and explaining my poetry at street corners and market squares and wherever 'two or three are gathered together' and prepared to listen"⁴⁵. He did not, in fact, make this pilgrimage; he did not need to. By using the local papers and avoiding the Anglo-Scottish Glasgow Herald and The Scotsman ⁴⁶ which were virtually united against him after his espousment of Communism, he did, indeed, succeed in stirring the torpid denizens of the aquarium. It is unfortunate but probably not surprising that they resented his attacks and came to know him more as a polemical prose-writer than a lyric poet. Professor Buthlay describes one such journalistic feat when as self-

⁴⁴L.P., p.97.

⁴⁵A.S.T., p.121.

⁴⁶Since the war, however, both newspapers, staffed very often by disciples and friends of the poet, have printed large numbers of letters from him on a wide variety of topics.

propaganda for To Circumjack Cencrastus, MacDiarmid wrote a number of advance reviews under pseudonyms to different journals alternately attacking and defending his name⁴⁷. Undoubtedly something was proven when Edinburgh University conferred the honorary degree of LL.D. on him in 1957, although, perhaps more in keeping with the man, this newly acquired respectability did not prevent him contesting the Kinross and West Perthshire seat as a Communist against the then premier Sir Alec Douglas-Home who was backed by all the might of the Conservative Central Office. Even more in keeping with MacDiarmid was his instituting proceedings against the Prime Minister for the unfair advantage afforded him by his appearances on the national television network as the leader of the Conservative Party.

Let the only consistency
 In the course of my poetry
 Be like that of the hawthorn tree
 Which in the early Spring breaks
 Fresh emerald, then by nature's law
 Darkens and deepens and takes
 Tints of purple-maroon, rose-madder and straw.

Sometimes these hues are found
 Together in pleasing harmony bound.
 Sometimes they succeed each other. But through
 All the changes in which the hawthorn is dight,
 No matter in what order, one thing is sure
 --The haws shine ever the more ruddily bright. 48

⁴⁷K. Buthlay, Hugh MacDiarmid (Edinburgh, 1964), p. 112.

⁴⁸I.M.J.J., p. 35.

II

FAITH IN SCOTLAND'S HIDDEN POO'ERS

The language element, the Scottish national character, of my poetry, is not the most important thing about it. ¹

When MacDiarmid wrote these words, in the late 'thirties, he was living in self-imposed exile on one of the more remote of the Shetland Islands, and was a fully convinced communist, though not in the Party. He had not only taken the step of cutting himself off from the rest of the literary world but he had been expelled from the National Party of Scotland for communism and from the C.P.G.B. for "nationalist deviation", had forsaken his earlier experiments with 'synthetic Scots' and had adopted English, of a very special order, as his poetic language though he still wrote Scots poetry in a very thin canon of that language. Perhaps it is not fair then to judge his earlier work by this statement but it is impossible not to agree with him that even in his earlier poetic phase in the 'twenties and 'thirties, the time of Sangschaw, Penny Wheep, A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, and To Circumjack Cencrastus, his principal concern was not 'the language element' but the spiritual element of his poetry. The most important thing for him is the belief in

¹L.P., p.160.

human potentialities, the belief that all men must share the creative agony of the artist and those who do not are less than human.

Scottish Nationalism and the language element are really only part of this belief. He, as a Scotsman, had first of all to find a suitable medium for his poetry -- otherwise the full potential of his creative power would not be realized. His object was to "split the Caledonian atom, and to liberate the Scot that is to be"². That object did not depend for its success upon Scottish Nationalism of the orthodox variety or the language element.

Whichever came first, his Scottish Nationalist politics or his advocacy of Scots as a poetic language, it is not directly relevant to his aim as a prophet of individualism and the potential greatness of the human spirit. Probably, in fact, his interest in Scots came before his interest in Scottish Nationalist politics. Strange as it may seem in view of the attacks MacDiarmid made later on the Burns Cult, he probably first became interested in Scots as a language through the activities of the Vernacular Circle of the London Burns Club.³ Suddenly realizing that Scotland had other poets apart from Burns, poets who were

²W.Power, Literature and Oatmeal (London, 1935), p.181.

³Buthlay, p.8.

perhaps more powerful artists, writing, not in a dying dialect, but in a fully armed independent language, MacDiarmid, with typical verve and omnivorous appetite, devoured every book he could lay his hands on regarding Scotland and its literature, history, sociology and language. It is obvious when we read such works as his Contemporary Scottish Studies (1926) and Albyn or Scotland and the Future (1927), that MacDiarmid's knowledge of the facts concerning Scotland is encyclopaedic. Probably no one else in Scotland in this century has known so much about the country (which may account for his lack of success as a Scottish Nationalist politician) and certainly no one else has combined this vast corpus of knowledge with genius.

As early as 1922, MacDiarmid, still writing under his real name C.M.Grieve, edited his first periodical, The Scottish Chapbook, and it was immediately clear to those who had not already found the message of Northern Numbers clear enough, that this was the start of what has later been called a "Kulturkampf". He claimed that Scottish Vernacular was "the only language in Western Europe instinct with those uncanny spiritual and pathological perceptions alike which constitute the uniqueness of Dostoeveski's work"⁴ -- a fact which indicates that MacDiarmid's later

⁴S.C., p.210.

who were *very* *had* *Communists*

Communism may have its roots in admiration for the great Russian artists. Not only, however, did he press Dostoeveski into service, but also Oswald Spengler, whose The Decline of the West had just been published in Germany. Using Spenglerian terminology, he divided Western Man into the Appollonian type and the Faustian:

The Appollonian type is dogmatic, unquestioning, instinctive, having no conception of infinity -- in short your average Englishman or German -- and the Faustian mind, on the contrary, is dominated by the concept of infinity, of the unattainable, and hence is ever questioning, never satisfied rationalistic in religion and politics, romantic in art and literature -- a perfect expression of the Scottish race. 5

With the support of Spengler, MacDiarmid was convinced that English was not good enough for the Faustian Scot and so he posited the claim of Scots Vernacular, that "vast unutilised mass of lapsed observation made by minds whose attitudes to experience and whose speculative and imaginative tendencies were quite different from any possible to Englishmen and Anglicised Scots today"⁶.

Having had his eyes opened to the great past of Scottish literature, Dunbar, Douglas, Henryson, and Lyndsay, and having decided that to back up any political Scottish Nationalism a cultural language was needed, *he*

⁵S.C., p.214.

⁶Ibid., p. 210.

MacDiarmid, in the 'twenties, began to graft on to his already consistent and fairly uncorrupted dialect as many new words (or rather old words made new) from dialect dictionaries and Middle Scots poets as he needed. In answer to a question asked in a B.B.C. broadcast, he replied, "I went to where the language was kept, to the dictionary. It seemed the most logical thing to do"⁷. Apart from being an invitation to the critics of "synthetic Scots" to attack, this statement is, in many respects, correct, as MacDiarmid did go to the dictionary -- Jamieson's Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language -- to obtain many of his "trouvailles".

So followed the period of "synthetic Scots" -- a most unfortunate term, the word synthetic suggesting to us something false and artificial, whereas in fact what MacDiarmid wanted was a synthesis or amalgam of Scots, old and new, a very different thing... ⁸

MacDiarmid's work in synthesising a language has a number of antecedents, although to use them as justification is a very doubtful proposition. One of the first to advocate some sort of amalgam of dialects was Dante who declared that "the illustrious, cardinal, courtly, and curial

⁷ Quoted by W.A.S. Keir, "Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance", Festschrift, ed. K.D. Duval and S.G. Smith (Edinburgh, 1962), p.14.

⁸ Ibid., p.14.

vernacular language in Italy is that which belongs to all the towns in Italy but does not appear to belong to any one of them". Of English writers, Spenser was probably the first to make it his avowed intention to pluck the best and most useful words for his purpose from the past, although Ben Jonson later complained that Spenser "writ no language". Milton introduced deliberate archaisms and latinate terms into his Paradise Lost, to make, as Addison put it, "his poem the more venerable, and give it a greater air of antiquity".

By using archaic and obsolete terms in Scots poetry, MacDiarmid was also operating within a well-defined tradition. All three of the 18th century Scottish (as opposed to Gaelic) poets of standing, Allan Ramsay (1684/5-1785), Robert Fergusson (1750-'74), and Robert Burns (1759-'96), used a poetic language, peculiar to them as individuals and not strictly a pure spoken dialect. Their reasons for making up such a "synthetic" language were, of course, varied but perhaps the most important reason common to all was a desire to show just what Scots was capable of. All wrote poems in English, but, to a great extent, they wrote their best work in Scots, not only because they thought and felt most naturally in it, but also because it seemed one way, perhaps the only way, of redeeming the "treason" of the Union of the Parliaments in 1707. That Allan Ramsay felt obliged to

*according to whom
Remembers it was a Union.*

explain why he used Scots in The Gentle Shepherd, indicates that even in 1738 there was a feeling that the Scots language was threatened and that the next thing to be threatened might be the Scottish nation:

That I have expressed my thoughts in my native dialect was not only my inclination, but the desire of my best and wisest friends; and most reasonable, since good imagery, just similes, and all manner of ingenious thoughts in a well-laid design, disposed into numbers, is poetry --Then good poetry may be in any language. 9

Although Burns was more of an 18th century figure and more in tune with the Age of Sensibility as it is now called, he still found it difficult to express himself poetically in English and complained of this in a letter to Thomson, his song editor:

These English songs gravel me to death.--I have not that command of the language that I have of my native tongue.--In fact, I think my ideas are more barren in English than in Scottish. [sic] 10

The sentimental Jacobitism of all three is, in fact , a further sign that nationalism was not far below the surface, although the only political expression allowed to them was the writing of Scots poetry. As Professor Renwick writes of the post-Union years:

...the Golden Age of Scotland was an age of political degradation. In 1745 Scotsmen were still capable of political action, in that some fought for the Stuart

⁹The Gentle Shepherd, (Perth, 1738), preface.

¹⁰Letters of Robert Burns, ed. J. De L. Ferguson (Oxford, 1931), Vol. II, p. 268.

dynasty and some against -- crude action but positive. Thereafter the government in Westminster arranged that neither body should be allowed the possibility of action. Scotland was managed through the Lord Advocate by the exercise of patronage, bribery, and repression as required, with just enough show of politics as to admit Scottish Members of Parliament to be merged into English parties. 11

MacDiarmid, writing in an age when even sentimental Jacobitism is no longer allowed the poet, has often pointed out the greatest sin that Burns committed was to give in to the pressures of his publishers and to write his "serious" work in English, thus tacitly relegating the Scots language to homely scenes, comic stories and sparetime poetry. While admiring the successful poetry of Burns, he deplored the influence Burns had, "producing little save puerile and platitudinous doggerel"¹², and reducing "the whole field of Scots letters to a 'kailyaird'"¹³.

The one even faintly hopeful spark in Scottish poetry during the literary Dark Ages of the 19th century is Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-'94), although even he had to apologise for writing in Scots, which he regarded as fast becoming an antiquity:

The day draws near when this illustrious and malleable tongue shall be quite forgotten; and Burns's Ayrshire and Dr. MacDonald's Aberdeen-awa', and Scott's brave metropolitan utterance will be all equally

¹¹English Literature, 1789-1815 (London, 1946), pp. 194-5.

¹²Alb., p. 12.

¹³Ibid., p. 19.

the ghosts of speech. Till then I would love to have my hour as a native Makar, and be read by my own country folk in our own dying language. 14

In spite of the fact that MacDiarmid would disagree with the sentiments expressed, and the sentimental feeling of nostalgia as well as the thinly disguised inferiority complex about the quality of Scots, Stevenson was not being at all controversial; he was merely echoing what most people were saying in the 19th century. And, indeed, Scots was dying, accelerated by the schools, the universities and churches. The 19th century, however, was a great age for dialecticians and other antiquarians and so it is not surprizing perhaps to hear Stevenson apologize to the dialect purist for doing exactly the same thing as MacDiarmid forty years later, namely, language-making:

...for I simply wrote my Scots as well as I was able not caring if it hailed from Lauderdale or Angus, from the Hearn or Galloway; if I had ever heard a good word, I used it without shame; and when Scots was lacking, or the rhyme jibbed, I was glad (like mybetters) to fall back on English. 15

This is by no means the sentiment admitted by MacDiarmid in spite of the similarity in respect of language-making, and it took that poet to make the conscious effort not only to make a language but to make a language which was

¹⁴R.L. Stevenson, Underwoods (London, 1887), p.xi.

¹⁵Ibid., p.xi.

more than a nostalgic indulgence. It remained to MacDiarmid to restore the Scots language to its rightful place as an adult tongue, precise and forceful like Middle Scots had been.

During MacDiarmid's formative years, when he was at school at Langholm Academy, Scottish poetry was probably at its lowest ebb. John Davidson (1857-1909), it is true, had been writing and had achieved a fair level of fame, but he wrote in English and "was unable to realize the far greater suitability of Scots for the expression of his ideas than English could ever afford"¹⁶. His ideas, however, concerning language, and his poetry of ideas had a very profound influence on MacDiarmid later in life. But there was nothing ^{to} distinguish Davidson at a language level from any English writer and Scots remained, during most of MacDiarmid's school years, the language of M.As. masquerading as shepherds of the Ochils, as Duncan Glen puts it, or post-Burnsian claptrap for the Poets' Corner of local papers. The view of Scots as a language fit only for the most trivial subjects, Burns Nights, and the lowest classes of humanity

¹⁶Hugh MacDiarmid, "John Davidson: Influences and Influence", an introductory essay to John Davidson: A Selection of his Poems, ed. Maurice Lindsay (London, 1961), p.51.

was, and still is, maintained by a vocal middle-class. In 1919, Professor Gregory Smith, echoing the sentiments of the Anglo-Scottish literary establishment, while at the same time appearing to be controversial, had written a chapter entitled "The Problem of Dialect":

Should it be the destiny of Scottish literature to lose its individual place and at last forget the full Doric and the traditional themes, there need be no wringing of hands, as if nationality were lost and the generous spring of Scotticism had run dry. The passing will not be as the last flicker of a spent force, but the completion of an Act of Union which has been long in the making, and which northern genius, trained in a school too narrow for its power, may, in the fuller enjoyment of an old comradeship, find play for these powers and indulge a growing confidence. 17

In point of fact Smith was writing just too late, as in a very few years MacDiarmid was to explode on the Scottish scene and destroy all the best-laid plans of the Anglo-Scottish bourgeoisie on more than the language level.

MacDiarmid came late to both the Scottish language and Scottish Nationalism. Before the war he had trained to be a teacher -- a species of Scot he later castigated mercilessly and probably not without cause -- at Broughton Junior Student Centre in Edinburgh, but had left when his father died. After journalistic work in various parts of Scotland and England, and involvement in the Independent

¹⁷ Scottish Literature (London, 1919), pp. 153-4.

Labour Party, he joined the Royal Army Medical Corps. Then followed illness in 1918 and demobilisation in 1920. Montrose became his base for the next nine years and he lived there with his wife and two children, worked for the Montrose Review, became a Labour Town Councillor, and, as Professor Buthlay laconically has it, "the greatest literary force in Scotland"¹⁸. Twenty-eight may seem a rather advanced age for a poet to become interested in his true poetic medium but that is not to say that MacDiarmid had been idle in the previous years. He had already started to write in English in a vaguely Georgian style and in First Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems (1931), we come across the poem "Beyond Exile", which he wrote while on war service in Salonika in 1916 (although in Northern Numbers (1920) it is incorrectly dated 1919). The mood of the poem is that of a slightly nostalgic soldier on foreign service looking forward to the time when he will be among his hills and meeting his own people, and the language is typically Georgian in a colourless sort of way with consciously "poetic" words such as "albeit", "sundering", "leagues", and "bourne". It is not until we read his "Sonnets of the Highland Hills" which he states are from "a privately circulated sequence of

¹⁸Buthlay, p.4.

fifty"¹⁹ that we find out the poet is no Georgian of the usual calibre, but something far more powerful and modern in outlook. Five of the sonnets he printed in his second series of Northern Numbers (1921), and one of them entitled "The Wind-Bags", dated Gildermorie November 1920, is worth looking at.

The evocation of, and obvious interest in, the wild moorland scene is typically MacDiarmid. His interest has always centred on the bleak, the rough, and above all the unsentimental; poems about rough, inhospitable land are not infrequent in his works, as, for example, "The Sauchs in the Reuch Heuch Hauch", "Milk-Wort and Bog-Cotton", "Tarras", "Why I became a Scottish Nationalist", "Island Funeral", and others.

Rain-beaten stones; great tussocks of dead grass
And stagnant waters throwing leaden lights
To leaden skies: a rough-maned wind that bites
With aimless violence at the clouds that pass,
Roaring, blackjowled, and bull-like in the void,
And I, in wild and boundless consciousness,
A brooding chaos, feel within me press
The corpse of Time, aborted, cold, negroid.

Aimless lightnings play intermittently
Diffuse, vacant, dully, athwart the stones,
Involuntary thunders slip from me
And growl, inconsequently, hither, thither
--And now observe, see-saws of sighs and groans
Oblivion and Eternity together.

This is not the poetry of Georgian England, even though the

¹⁹N.N., p.26.

studied use of the sonnet form and some of the words and constructions like 'athwart the stones' may suggest it. Already we have a number of typically MacDiarmid themes and sentiments: the interest in bleakness and the wild violence of the wind, the man alone "in wild and boundless consciousness", and most of all the erotic symbolism of violent coupling between Oblivion and Eternity which is a reflection of the "bull-like" wind which bites "with aimless violence". All these themes the poet was to use both in his Scottish poetry and his later "world-view" work. But as yet there is no interest in Scots as a language. The thoughts of the later poems are there but not the medium. In fact, MacDiarmid seems at this time to have been a normal, young, poetically-inclined journalist, a member of the I.L.P., a writer of Georgian verse with an interest in European poetry, and an omnivorous reader. Although MacDiarmid's early attempts at English poetry in Northern Numbers and Annals of the Five Senses, may suggest a kind of schizophrenia, we must regard these poems as experiments, not wasted but without the great motive power of Scottish Nationalism and politics generally behind them.

*when did
he join the
organisation?*

What caused the outburst of Nationalistic feeling in Scotland in the 'twenties after so many years of

and why did it fade so rapidly!!!
47

complacency is not easily definable. It seems to have had at least something to do with the experience of the Great War, the slogans of that war concerning the rights of small nations, the final flare-up of Romantic Nationalism of the previous century and the fact that there arose in Scotland at that time a number of not inconsiderable writers. First of these was Sir Alexander Gray (1882) who published, in 1920, a number of Scots translations of German and Danish songs and ballads. As Kurt Wittig points out, this was "more than another Horace in homespun: it was a deliberate attempt to use Scots for the expression of European meanings -- if only those of the past --and Sir Alexander was mining a vein that suited the Scottish genius." ²⁰ This widening of Scots poetry to include Continental work was just the sort of impetus that MacDiarmid's nationalism needed, as above all else he hated and still hates parochialism and certainly, until the middle thirties strove to make Scotland part of Europe rather than a province of England.

Lewis Spence (1874-1955) was another pioneer of the Scots poetic language, although he favoured a much more scholarly approach to the business, looking back

²⁰ The Scottish Tradition in Literature (Edinburgh, 1958), p.280.

constantly to the Makars, and attempting, neither very seriously nor successfully, to write in Middle Scots. After MacDiarmid had written his views on "synthetic Scots" in "The New Movement in Vernacular Poetry", one of a series of articles for The Scottish Educational Journal and also in the Scottish Chapbook, Spence wrote:

If in some sort this "new" vernacular, gathered from all the Scottish dialects, culled from the ancient Makars, and abounding in words of somewhat far-fetched aspect, is not wholly satisfactory, it still foreshadows the advent of a tongue which even an intelligent member of the Scottish Vernacular Circle will admit is bound to arise as a medium for the necessities of the growing number of those Scottish writers in prose and verse whose destinies are linked for good or evil with the Doric. 21

Later he withdrew his support for "synthetic Scots" and ~~x~~ attacked MacDiarmid's A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle as being trawled up from a Scots dictionary and redolent with "words and expressions of fantastic, droll and whimsical sound and appearance"²². According to Spence much more care and scholarship must be employed before "a very happy admixture" would result which would "not only be absolutely familiar to the writer, but capable of being set down instantly as inspiration so clamantly requires"²³.

This is the usual criticism of "synthetic Scots"

²¹"The Scots Literary Renaissance", Nineteenth Century and After, (July 1926), p.127.

²²"Scots Poetry Today", Nineteenth Century and After, (August 1929), p.256.

²³Ibid., p.256.

repeated by John Speirs, Edwin Muir, David Craig and others, and yet, while there may be some truth in the criticism when applied to lesser figures and to the weaker of MacDiarmid's poems, there is no truth in the statement when applied to MacDiarmid at his "synthetic Scots" best. In 1925 Sangschaw was published and Scotland had a poet of British calibre. *what does this mean?* This was followed by Penny Wheep in 1926 and A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, the same year, and Scotland had a lyric poet of European standard. *is that all?*

We may investigate MacDiarmid's reasons for choosing to make up his own language and may accept Scottish Nationalism as the main one, but from his prose works we learn that there was more to his "synthetic Scots" than the invention of a language to be used by Scottish poets. In Contemporary Scottish Studies (1926) MacDiarmid gives as another reason for adopting Scots as his poetic language the fact that so many events in Scotland seemed to add up to a great Scottish revival in the arts and in public life:

...I have been driven to see a potentially creative interrelationship between such ostensibly unrelated phenomena as the emergence of the "Glasgow Group" of Socialist M.P.s.; intensification of the Scottish Home Rule Movement; the growth of Scottish Catholicism; the movement for the revival of Braid Scots. As soon as I began to interest myself in the possibilities of a Scottish Renaissance I found that I was by no means alone in doing so. The matter was definitely 'in the air'. 24

²⁴C.S.S., p.111.

Not only was MacDiarmid's effort not a solo experiment but he was not operating against the widely held philosophical belief of the time. In the same book, he admits his debt to Spengler, the German philosopher, for the basis behind his move -- that is, that English, the only language available to a Southern Scot apart from Scots, was dying:

That is the choice -- either go back to Scots; or be content to be indefinitely no more than third-rate in an English tradition which is declining, and to the declinature of which no bottom can apparently be set -- one of Spengler's "exhausted civilizations" giving way to "the stones the builders rejected". 25

The feeling that English was dying, was not a belief exclusive to MacDiarmid : many English and American poets felt the same way and tried to remedy this by experiments with technical words, quotations and phrases from foreign languages, and the destruction of accepted printing conventions.

What MacDiarmid meant by a declining language was that " English is suffering from a kind of Imperial elephantiasis"²⁶; it no longer had the precision that is required of a poetic language. Later, when MacDiarmid had looked deeper into Scottish history and decided that the Celtic influence was the important spark in the Scottish soul

²⁵C.S.S., p.119.

²⁶A.S.T., p.181.

he compared Scottish with Welsh literature and remarked on "the extreme sensibility to the whole of their conscious existence, but especially with what has to do with the physical world from star to leaf"²⁷. Always the emphasis is on exactitude, on precision, on the ability to pin down meaning exactly. It would be easy to say that MacDiarmid obtained this accuracy by inventing his own language, but this is not quite true.

Anyone with even a slight acquaintance with Scots dialects and the poetry of Burns, will realize, if he reads Sangschaw, and Penny Wheep, and even A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle, that MacDiarmid's much lamented "difficulty" lies not so much in the fact that he is using a new language "abounding in words of somewhat far-fetched aspect", but in the fact that he is using Scots at all to deal with themes difficult in any language and which have not been the province of Scots poetry since the time of Dunbar. As Burns Singer remarks in his article "Scarlet Eminence", "its notorious difficulty reflects the stupidity of its critics rather than the intentions of its creator"²⁸. By a simple arithmetical system it is possible to show that the average, but necessarily unbiassed, reader will find

²⁷ L.P., p.85.

²⁸ "Scarlet Eminence", Encounter, (March, 1957), p.55.

very few words in any of the volumes of obscure or ancient derivation.²⁹ In the oft-anthologised "The Bonnie Broukit Bairn" there occur but three words which require a glossary, "broukit", "crammasy", and "clanjamfrie", and although knowledge of the exact Jamieson meaning gives an added pleasure to the lyric the onomatopoetic qualities of the words themselves is sufficient to anyone with half an ear for sound. Critics have pointed out with glee that the "trouvailles" are noticeably from the beginning of Jamieson's dictionary, forgetting no doubt that even though they are the alliterative qualities of MacDiarmid's verse suit this sort of approach³⁰. While it is absurd to count up lists of words like some sort of mathematical problem, this approach certainly meets many critics of MacDiarmid on their ground and forces them on to their own caltrops.

This should not detract from the fact that MacDiarmid (idd, in another sense, create^d a new language, like Shalom Jacob (————), whom he mentions in In Memoriam James James Joyce:

He practically created a new language
Reinvigorated another,
Portrayed a whole civilization

²⁹ From the twenty-eight poems of the Sangschaw, I found approximately forty difficult or obscure words which were without my knowledge, giving an average of less than two per poem.

³⁰ As per Jamieson's, "broukit"; having spots or streaks of dirt on it, "crammasy"; cloth of crimson, a grain colour, "clanjamfrie"; low, worthless people (expressive of abundance).

In all its minuteest detail,
 Became the grandfather, the source of inspiration,
 Of a whole galaxy of writers
 Gave dignity to the humble
 And hope to the unfortunate
 Of a whole people. 31

The difficulty of MacDiarmid's poetry, if many of his English critics would admit it, is not the barbed wire fence of dialect, but the thought and subject of the poetry. The poet's striving after precision of utterance meant that he regarded all language, whether from dictionaries or dialects, as necessary material, and even so, if we look closely enough and with sufficient detachment, we find his archaisms and obscurities are fairly rare and certainly not the insuperable barrier of Speirs's imagination. As late as the 'thirties, when his interest in Scots as his own medium was waning, he still sought the elusive exactitude he desired, and in both In Memoriam James Joyce³² and The Islands of Scotland³³, he exults over the ancient, but fast declining, Shetland language "Norn" and catalogues the words it has for winds in various degrees and states of the sea. This is for MacDiarmid, "the old precision of discrimination which is so rarely encountered today and seems indeed, to have been almost wholly blurred and swallow-

³¹I.M.J.J., p.63.

³²Ibid., p.44.

³³I.S., p.89

owed up in that general omnitude of today which is indeed 'without form and void'.³⁴

Not only did MacDiarmid hope to achieve "the old precision of discrimination" and thereby revitalize Scots, he also saw how other languages had been revitalized from the "disjecta membra" of a language, "Provençal in France, Catalan in Spain, the Landsmaal in Norway and so on"³⁵, and had noted that these language movements had been accompanied, it seemed inevitably, by national liberation movements. Only in Scots, he claimed, could a Scotsman express himself:

... English is incapable of affording means of expression for certain of the chief elements of Scottish psychology -- just as English has no equivalents for many of the distinctive words in the Scots vocabulary. ³⁶

Undoubtedly MacDiarmid was the ideal person to revitalize Scots, as it was obviously a labour of love for him to use new words and to incorporate them totally into his vocabulary. As David Daiches says, "the poet's imagination works linguistically; for him, proper naming of things is the revelation of their real meaning in experience"³⁷. Thus Spence's strictures, and those of a number of others, regarding MacDiarmid's unscholarly approach to making up

³⁴I.S., p.91.

³⁵Alb., p.35.

³⁶Ibid., p.35.

³⁷"The Early Poems", Festschrift, p.47.

his language, are irrelevant and pedantic. An artist is almost certainly not the best person to set down a new language as a dictionary item. MacDiarmid, for his part, just used the language he knew, half knew and discovered from dictionaries and books, as he admits. He certainly made mistakes and used the wrong word occasionally, as Professor Buthlay points out not unsympathetically³⁸, but who, in the last analysis, cares? The words were dead and have come alive again. -- it is small wonder that they have been metamorphosed in the resurrection process. Not only was MacDiarmid consistent, but he was also quite within his rights as a poet, as the only important thing is whether he is successful or not:

Any language real or artificial, serves if a creative artist finds his medium in it. ³⁹

MacDiarmid seems to have been drawn inevitably to revitalizing Scots, and with Scots, revitalizing his own poetry, which, before Sangschaw, had shown signs of promise but no greatness. Scottish Nationalism was undoubtedly the greatest factor in his initial attempts at Scots poetry, although it may be argued that MacDiarmid's poetry is and was always political either implicitly or explicitly. His use of Scots in the first place, was a political act

³⁸ Buthlay, p.25.

³⁹ A.S.T., p.189.

NB. which he obviously associated with other developments of a political nature in Scotland, and with the Irish literary movement which had gone hand in hand with the Irish Nationalist movement, most obviously in the person of Padriac Pearse, the Irish poet-soldier, executed for his part in the Easter Rising of 1916. As MacDiarmid became more accustomed to Scots, it is interesting to notice how his surety of touch increases until in A Drunk Man he attains to an almost complete mastery of the language and a much deeper type of poetry than the lyric outbursts of Sangschaw and Penny Wheep. On the other hand it is worth noting how successful the densest lyrics are in these latter collections, the most commonly anthologised being those with the greatest density of "synthetic Scots": "The Bonnie Broukit Bairn", "The Watergaw", "The Eemis Stane".

Perhaps the success of the dense poems of Sangschaw and Penny Wheep had the effect of confirming in MacDiarmid what he knew already: that the reason for the low status of Scots was largely English domination of British literature. The Burnsian Bardolators were responsible to a great extent but much more serious was the threat of the English Ascendancy. As late as 1934 he could write that,

Anglo-Scottish friendship need not suffer, as Anglo-Irish relationships have done, but if that is to be avoided there must be a speedy abandonment of the top-lofty, intolerant attitude of a certain

type of Englishman and of any aggravating insistence Governmental or otherwise, on an unreal and undesirable uniformity. 40

But obviously he had made up his mind by that time, as his "Causerie" in The Scottish Chapbook shows that, barring divine intervention, he believed that there was no chance of an English change of heart. Even in Penny Wheep, we get a preview of what was to come in his attitude to the English from his poem "Gairmscoile". Not only is the Scots denser than in any of his other poems, but his poetic claims for the Scots language are even less ambiguous than usual: the Scottish tongue "rings/ Wi' datchie sesames, and names for nameless things" (CP, 58). In Makar-like style he flytes some poor poetasters in the English tongue comparing himself to Wergeland attacking the Danish domination of Norwegian literature:

...Natheless like thee I stalk on mile by mile,
Howkin' up deid stumps o' thocht, and sawin' my eident
gift.

Ablachs and scrats, and dorbels o' a' kinds
Aye'd drob me wi' their puir eel-droconin' minds,
Wee drochlin' craturs drutlin' their hit thochts
The dorty bodies! Feech! Nae Sassunuch drings
'll daunt me! Tak' ye sic things for poets? (CP, 58)

In A Drunk Man, the poet, confident of the role he is to play in nurturing Scottish literature, and realizing that the English rose will attempt to overshadow the Scottish

⁴⁰"The Celtic Literary Revival", New Britain (March 14, 1934), p.514.

thistle, attacks England, though not as savagely as later during the 'thirties.

Upon their King and system I
Glower as on things that whiles in pairt
I may admire (at least for them),
But wi' nae claim upon my hert,
While a' their pleasures and their pride
Ootside me lies -- and there maun bide.

Ootside me lies -- and mair than that,
For I stand still for forces which
Were subjugated to mak' way
For England's poo'er, and to enrich
The kinds o' English, and o' Scots
The least congenial to my thoughts. (CP, 140)

For a Scottish Nationalist anti-English sentiments are
✓almost essential, like a kind of intellectual terrorism
without which the English Ascendancy will not deign to fight
but will only refuse maddeningly to take any notice of the
forces raised against it; Coupled with Scottish Nationalism
in an anti-English form, MacDiarmid first, in A Drunk Man
mentions a topic which was to become an increasingly important
part of his life and poetry: left wing politics.

The collapse of the General Strike in 1926 had been
a grave blow to most left wingers, especially when it
became clear that the union leaders, unused to the handling
of such a large undertaking, had failed to make use of the
solidarity and determination of the average British working
man and had been stampeded by the Government's dire warnings
of class warfare and anarchy and Churchill's antics with
armed food convoys and displays of military force, into

an early and ignominious settlement. MacDiarmid echoes the disappointment of many socialists in A Drunk Man :

A rose loup't out and grew, until
It was ten times the size
O' ony rose the thistle afore
Hed heistit to the skies

And still it grew till a' the buss
Was hidden in its flame.
I never saw sae braw a floo'er
As yon thrawn stock became.

And still it grew until it seemed
The haill braid earth had turned
A reid reid rose that in the lift
Like a ball o' fire burned. (CP, 104)

In spite of the grand beginning the strike peters out pathetically:

--The thistle like a rocket soared
And cam' doon like the stick. (CP, 105)

Although MacDiarmid had been a strong I.L.P. man in his earlier days, the breakdown of the General Strike seemed to him to mark the end of hopes that social justice could be secured by parliamentary means or through the pusillanimous right wing leadership of the trade unions. As his ability to write Scots poetry improved, he became more confident in his role as prophet, and more revolutionary 2 in his politics.

At the same time there had been creeping into his poetry a hint of bitterness at the dough-like quality of the Scots themselves, a feeling w^e may assume all prophets have when faced with an audience sunk in smug

lethargy. In A Drunk Man, he echoed T.S.Eliot in lamenting the living death of the people:

Helplessly the folk continue
To lead their livin' death. (CP,68)

And later:

To save your souls fu' mony o' ye are fain
But de'il a dizzen to mak' it worth the daein'.
I widna gi'e five meenits wi' Dunbar
For a' the millions o' ye as ye are). (CP,89)

*Spoken and
the Scots - UK
Hitting with
the SNP. 1969*

All the same the feeling is still that the Scots are helpless and need a leader -- or a catfish in their aquarium -- and are not irretrievably lost. It is not their fault but that of the all-enveloping English Ascendancy. For a time, towards the end of the poem, the poet dramatizes his despair: the Scots will never learn to live.

They canna learn, sae canna move
But stick for aye to their auld groove
--The only race in History who've

Bidden in the same category
Frae stert to present o' their story,
And deem their ignorance their glory. ✓

The mair they differ, mair the same.
The wheel can whummle a' but them,
--They ca' their obstinacy "Hame". (CP,149)

Even so, MacDiarmid, with characteristic optimism, decides that, in spite of all the evidence, he still chooses to "tak' it to avizandum", or to defer his decision.

His decision we might have hoped to find in To Circumjack Cencrastus, which was advertised in the 1926 version of A Drunk Man, as being "in preparation". Four

years , however, were to pass before the poem finally came off the press. In those years a number of things had happened -- not the least of them being growing dissatisfaction with his Montrose job, which he complained about in that part of To Circumjack Cencrastus, entitled in the Collected Poems (1962), "MacDiarmid's Curses". He moved to London in 1929 at the behest of Compton Mackenzie, but work was elusive and so he ultimately took the post of "Publicity Officer to the Liverpool Organization", which he soon lost. He fell off a bus and suffered severe concussion necessitating the replacement of a part of his skull by a metal plate. As though all these things were not enough, his wife refused to leave London and so his marriage was dissolved in 1932. All these events, following so closely one each other's heels, must have made the writing of poetry very difficult. The result was To Circumjack Cencrastus, probably the most uneven of his "gallimaufries".

In this volume there is an increase in pettiness and despair so unlike the eloquent, even grandiloquent, optimism of the earlier volumes. He attacks the boss for his "new hoose, his business, his cigar", complains about the difficulty of his domestic lot, how, if he prostituted his talents, he could live comfortably like Neil Munro, how truly ignorant the Scottish Universities

are, and how difficult it is to concentrate on writing. It is impossible not to feel that this malaise is the result of non-poetic difficulties and that given the right sort of environment the poet would recover his failing powers. How MacDiarmid was to survive and be changed by these events of the late 'twenties and early 'thirties was almost certainly not clear to the poet himself, but changes were to take place and a new poet, still following the same basic path, was to emerge from the twilight of despair, metamorphosed in language and politics, and yet unmistakably and uncorruptibly Hugh MacDiarmid.

III
LOURD ON MY HERT

My dreams for you, Scotland, as soon as I heard
Ithers cry I was right and repeat what I'd said
I kent I was hopelessly wrang and was glad
O' the light sic fools inadvertently shed. (CP, 233)

The fragment quoted is from the poem, "To a New Scotland", from Stony Limits and Other Poems, although the poet might have entitled it, in all truth, "To a New MacDiarmid". By 1934, when it first appeared, it must have already become clear to MacDiarmid that his political aims, and as a result, his linguistic position, had to change.

At the end of the previous chapter, I pointed out that MacDiarmid, in the early 'thirties, was under so many pressures and tensions, domestic, political, physical, and spiritual, that it was no wonder that he came out of the process very much changed, at least outwardly. Too much of his time in London in those years was taken up by journalism and it must have come as an unpleasant surprise to find that his London work was no more interesting or rewarding than his Montrose's boss's advice to "get on/ wi' advts. and puffs, and eident con/ The proofs" (CP, 184), and that he was living in a much more unsettled atmosphere. He was obviously suffering from what Claud Cockburn calls the most fatal disease of the propagandist "of which the

principal symptom is an awareness of having said or written all this over and over again, without, so far as can be seen, having had the slightest effect upon anything"¹.

The awareness that came upon him in England was not that Scottish Nationalism was a hopeless cause to support but that in the form he had envisioned it, it was bound to be an utter failure, and so some new angle had to be taken. His writing at the time, in fact reflects the confusion of a man whose basic tenets remain the same but who realizes that his approach is wrong. Much more than his writings from exile in Shetland, his English works show a confusion of thought and principle which marks a man who has come to a turning point in his life. Even in To Circumjack Cencrastus, which we may assume was commenced not long after the publication of A Drunk Man in 1926, we find contradictions in language, with poems written in English juxtaposed to poems regarding Scots as "the true language o' my thochts"; contradictions in principles, with poems like "A'e Gowden Lyric" which MacDiarmid claims is better than "a social problem solved" and "Lourd on My Hert", where he laments the spiritual and political bankruptcy of Scotland. In the collection of essays

¹Crossing the Line (New York, 1960), p.135.

entitled At the Sign of the Thistle (1934?), we are again given an insight into a mind full of different political, artistic, and linguistic concepts, some of which are left-overs from his ideas of the 'twenties and some harbingers of the 'thirties. Most had been printed in magazines in 1931 and 1932, and among the themes are the English ascendancy in British Literature, a defence of Scots Vernacular as having "a higher percentage of words (most of which have no, or no exact, equivalents in English) of the sharpest psycho-physical significance or the subtlest shades of mental discrimination, all of can be adapted directly or metaphorically, to the most modern uses"², an introduction to Gaelic poetry, an attack on money-lenders though not on Jews, the extension of vocabulary to allow poetry to "join issue at every point with modern intellection"³, a case for some sort of nationalism based on Social Credit, using as its model the situation of the Faroe Islands, and a promise of greater experimentation in Scottish Vernacular. The whole collection is an astonishing hodge-podge of ideas and represents in some way the confusion in MacDiarmid's mind as well as its fertility.

²A.S.T., p.28.

³Ibid., p.92.

All in all, however much we may agree in some respects with William Soutar, MacDiarmid's poetic contemporary, that,

Grieve -- even allowing for his egocentricity-- has not been helped by isolation; a number of men nearer his own calibre would have made it easier for him to keep balanced in his self-judgement and would probably have toned up his work -- forcing upon him a more rigorous technique; but there must always be plenty of lava and brimstone at the creation of the world, 4

-- however much we may agree, it is important to remember that exile for MacDiarmid was almost a poetic necessity. Exile to the most remote part of Scotland was absolutely essential to the poet when we consider the amount of poor and downright bad poetry he produced in England under the pressure of his life there. It allowed him time to think of the larger, and broader themes which his muse demanded and which had been forgotten among the bread-and-butter problems of his stay in England. Although the New Britain Movement, which he had been interested in, was probably a highly commendable organization, its effect on the poet was almost certainly bad. Through being forced to think in terms of economics, and practical politics and politicking, his poetic style had suffered to the extent of his producing such poor efforts as "The Belly Grip"⁵

⁴Diaries of a Dying Man, ed. A. Scott, (Edinburgh, 1954), p. 57.

⁵New Albion, (April, 1934), p. 45.

and "Songs of the New Economics"⁶, Also working against his ability to produce good poetry was domestic difficulty which culminated in divorce from his first wife in 1932, although he married again, this time more happily.

The principle reason for the breakdown in his poetic technique was, however, failure of his original concept of Scottish Nationalism. He came to agree more and more with writers like Lewis Grassie Gibbon (James Leslie Mitchell) that Scottish Home Rule would merely lead to a middle class ☒mediocrity like the Irish Free State -- moderate, anglicized, and totally philistine. The purge of the National Party of Scotland of 1933 by the moderate members seems to have finally justified MacDiarmid's fears about the chance of Scottish Nationalism of any revolutionary nature. It was crystal clear that Scottish Nationalism, in the form it then took, was no better than the rule of Westminster.

In the General Election of 1931, the I.L.P., which was regarded by most as a particularly Scottish party, although Scottish Home Rule had never been one of its election planks, had been cut down to a stump of five, most of whom came from Clydeside. Worse still the Parliamentary Labour Party, although resoundingly defeated in that election, had shown itself to be totally English

*But it would be
a high
society thing
the point*

⁶ New Atlantis, (October, 1933), p. 31.

in outlook and considerably more dangerous under the leadership of Ramsay MacDonald than the Conservative Party which at least was recognizably the enemy of the working classes. ✓
MacDiarmid, at this time, realized that, although he would have preferred simultaneous national and social revolution in Scotland, social revolution must come first. The party most likely to effect this was the Communist Party, and certainly not the Scottish National Party, formed by the amalgamation of the Duke of Montrose's Scottish Party and the National Party of Scotland which had already expelled MacDiarmid and other left wingers. It is, in a way, unfortunate that the Labour Party and the I.L.P. were so strong in Scotland, as it forced Scottish Nationalism into a moderate (i.e. right wing) position which could never have been revolutionary enough to effect what it purported to be attempting. Scottish Home Rule seems now, with the advantage of hindsight, never to have been a feasible proposition, except as the result of some sort of violent revolution as in Ireland, where Nationalists and Socialists could combine with an easy conscience against the British oppressors, political and industrial. Unfortunately for extreme Scottish Nationalism, the English have only been innocently, amiably, maddeningly, woundingly tactless and insensitive in their dealings with Scotland, seldom deliberately oppressive.

This disillusionment which MacDiarmid suffered in his political aims for Scotland was echoed in his aims for the Scottish language. Apart from any thing else, he had come to the conclusion, in the early 'thirties, that he had taken his "synthetic Scots" language about as far as he could. To Circumjack Cencrastus marks the change from the exclusive use of "synthetic Scots" to a much greater variety in language. This is not to say that having created this linguistic "golem" he abandoned it. Anyone who has read Scottish newspapers since 1945 will know that MacDiarmid's correspondence advising young Scottish poets to use the "Lallans", as it came to be known as, was a legendary institution. Even in the 'thirties he did not abandon his creation. Once he regained his mental, and domestic, equilibrium in the Shetlands with his second wife, he could write such excellent and densely Scots poems as "Water Music" and "Tarras", as well as many poems, like "Harry Semen", "Milk-Wort and Bog-Cotten", "The Seamless Garment", "First Hymn to Lenin" and "Why I became a Scottish Nationalist", in a thinner, but nonetheless effective canon of Scots.

The first sign, however, that MacDiarmid was not completely satisfied with his "synthetic Scots" for his own purposes, was his use of English for the translation of Rilke's "Requiem -- Für eine Freundin", which appeared as part of To Circumjack Cencrastus. He claimed later in

the same gallimaufry that the change was only temporary:

A' this is juist provisional and'll hae
 A tea-change into something rich and Scots
 When I wha needs use English a' the day
 Win back to the true language o' my thochts. (CP, 188)

It is obvious that the change was going to require something stronger than tea to return to "synthetic Scots". However much MacDiarmid protests that this change is only temporary, it is impossible not to notice that some deep change had taken place in the poet himself, perhaps a change occasioned by his awareness of the impossibility of his struggles with the monstrous deadness of the Scottish public and the attacks of his enemies in the literary world, who regarded him as a dangerous rebel and at best a ridiculously nostalgic Nationalist of the lunatic fringe. Something of the same feeling was echoed by Edwin Muir, MacDiarmid's old friend and enemy over the "synthetic Scots" question, who, while not agreeing over the retention of Scots as a literary language, was still a keen nationalist:

Now smoke and dearth and money everywhere,
 Grim heirlooms of each fainter generation,
 And mummied housegods in their musty niches,
 Burns and Scott, sham bards of a sham nation,
 And spiritual defeat wrapped warm in riches,
 No pride but pride of pelf. 7

Like Ireland, Scotland seems to have the power of both

⁷"Scotland, 1941", Modern Scottish Poetry, ed. Maurice Lindsay (London, 1948), p.49.

bewitching and disgusting its writers.✓

To Circumjack Cencrastus , like First Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems (1931) and Scots Unbound and Other Poems (1932), is a product of the frenetic political and journalistic activity of MacDiarmid's London days. The tone is often strained and the language wordy and inefficient. Perhaps the very title, Scots Unbound, gives us some clue to the change in MacDiarmid's mind. He regrets, in "Iolair", that the poems he has written have not sparked off any great poetic movement or even regard:

As an eagle stirs up her nest,
Flutters over her young,
Urges them into the void, swoops underneath
And rests a struggler on her back for a space
Would the songs I sung
Might be to my race. (CP, 204)

He sees himself as prophet, leader of his chosen people, whether they want it or not, but in the next verse he pleads for support from the mother eagle, Scotland or Alba, as though he had not enough strength in poetic language or sympathy with the cause, to carry on:

Alba, mother eagle, support me.
He who sings
Struggles and cannot yet float upwards
From the high valleys among the Cairngorms like these
Of your true brood; on the wings
Whose movement is repose. (CP, 204)

In view of the title of the collection and this cry for help, we may conjecture whether it was the language, "Scots", which required to be freed from its impediments, or whether

it was the people, the Scots, who required to be unbound from their provincialism.

Even in To Circumjack Cencrastus, there had appeared the poem -- one of the most successful of the gallimaufry -- "Lourd on my Hert", which has shown (using but one word "lourd" which might give trouble to the English critic not conversant with French) how MacDiarmid's attitude to Scotland was changing from optimistic belief in national and nationalistic resurgence in Scotland to a wry melancholy in which the state of the nation is compared to

...the weary days
When it is scarce grey licht at noon. (CP,165)

The reason for the greyness is primarily, as he diagnoses,

...a' the stupid folk
Diffusin' their dullness roon and roon
Like soot
That keeps the sunlight oot. (CP,165)

Scotland has, in fact, let herself down and has let the poet down as well. Perhaps the stupidity of the folk is the result of English machinations but no mention is made of these in this poem. With ironic laughter he remarks in one of those typically sardonic MacDiarmid parting shots:

I'm fain to cry: "The dawn, the dawn!
I see it brakin' in the East".
But ah
--It's juist mair snaw! (CP,165)

While we may claim that MacDiarmid is adopting the persona of the disillusioned nationalist for poetic effect in this

poem, the note of disillusionment is too strong and wryly stoical to be the work of a poetic dramatist putting on a mask.

Combined with this note there is a frequent questioning of his own ability as a poet. He wonders whether he has not failed to crystallize experience in his poetry, whether he has not missed the whole point of that art:

Nay, the last issue I have all but joined
But my muse still lacks -- and so has missed all --
The right temper, like yours, which goes to the point
Of the terrible; the terrible crystal.

Some day I cry -- and may cry my life through --
Serene and modest in self-confidence like you
I will capture the world-free illusion two
Of naught, and they one, like me and the sun's rays.
(CP, 208)

MacDiarmid, as he so often does, is thinking out his attitude to, and relationship with, poetry in the poem itself but he is aware that the final breakthrough into the poetry he wants is all but impossible to effect:

Found I shall know it like a turned lock's click
But I fumble and juggle again and again
Your every least move does the trick
But I watch your quick tumblers in vain. (CP, 208)

But later, in Stony Limits and Other Poems (1934), we find MacDiarmid revealing his optimistic belief, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, that his action in championing Scotland and the Scottish language, has not been the worse

for being a failure:

And sae my failure suddenly reveals itsel'
A pairt -- a strengthenin' -- o' your reserved intent;
Hard the task, greater the triumph; I'm prood to be
Failin' the latter wi' the former blent. (CP,232)

In 1932, however, it must have appeared to the poet that all he had worked for was fruitless and likely to remain so; Scottish Nationalism was becoming moderate, his work in London was turning out to be no better than his work in Montrose, his marital life was extremely difficult and he also felt that his advocacy of "synthetic Scots" was at a dead end. Added to these worries, as though they were not enough, was a Wordsworthian feeling that the "shades of the prison-house" were beginning to close in upon him and that he was perhaps past his creative best at the age of forty without anything accomplished: ??

...so life leaves us. Already gleam
In the eyes of the young the flicker, the change,
The free enthusiasm that carries the stream
Suddenly out of my range. (CP,209)

For a man of MacDiarmid's incredible vitality such disappointments and depressions did not last. Being an optimist if nothing else, his energy soon found an outlet in Communism and his love of Scotland in its forgotten Gaelic background. This background he came to regard as being far more likely to provide the tinder for the blaze he still hoped to produce in Scotland, both

politically and spiritually, than the dour Lowland tradition. Not only had he been influenced by the activities of the Irish literary movement but he had also been recognized by it and invited to Dublin as a guest of the Irish nation in 1928 and there he had met many of the leading literary figures of that nation. At the same time, from his readings in Scottish history, he had come to regard the pre-Reformation Catholic Scotland as the time when, not only was the country independent, but it also supported a thriving artistic community. Knox and his Presbyterianism had been the death of Scottish culture, and, indeed, when we consider the effect that the imposition of an English as opposed to Scottish Bible is bound to have on a nation of religious extremists, the death of the Scottish language. Catholicism was naturally linked with Ireland and the Gaelic parts of Scotland, although without much foundation upon fact.

As early as 1922 MacDiarmid had quoted Gregory Smith's Scottish Literature in his article for the Scottish Chapbook, entitled "A Theory of Scots Letters", but perhaps missed the point Smith was making as, indeed, did Smith himself.

Perhaps the very combination of opposites -- what either of the two Sir Thomases, of Norwich and Cromarty, might be willing to call "the Caledonian antisyzygy" -- we have a reflection of

the contrasts which the Scot shows at every turn, in his political and ecclesiastical history, in his polemical restlessness, in his adaptability... 8

Neither Smith nor the poet seemed particularly aware at the time that one scale of the antithesis could be the Gaelic one and the other the Lowland Scot. It is debatable whether the zig|sare Gaelic or the zags, but MacDiarmid realized by the late 'twenties that the Gaelic side of the Scotsman was the side most interesting to him as a poet.

The effect of discovering that the Gaihbhealtach covered most of Scotland, if not in language then in spirit, was to revivify MacDiarmid's Scottish Nationalism. The only trouble was that Gaelic, as a spoken language, was not available even to MacDiarmid himself, let alone the bulk of the population from whose ranks it is to be supposed that the great Gaelic poets of the 20th century were to rise. Admittedly with the help of Sorley Maclean, MacDiarmid had translated "Birlinn Chlann-Raghnaill" by Alexander MacDonald, and "The Praise of Ben Dorain" by Duncan Ban MacIntyre, for the Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry (1940) which he edited. But still there was always the obvious feeling of disappointment that he could not

⁸ Scottish Literature, p.4.

become fully conversant with this eminently poetical language which had so many of the qualities he had hoped to inject into his "synthetic Scots": qualities of exact discrimination of colour, sound and other natural phenomena.

In "North of the Tweed" from To Circumjack Cencrastus MacDiarmid wonders at the fact that such a beautiful country should yet not produce a poet, and in the end of that poem gets rid of the bairn begot by him on the Scottish Muse and plays a pibroch of farewell on the Gaelic pipes instead in symbolic fashion:

Here tak' your bairn; I've cairried it lang eneuch,
Langer than maist men wad, as weel you ken.
Noo I'll pipe insteed --- what tune'll you hae?
On Rudha nam Marbh. (CP, 201)

It is even more symbolic that the tune should be "The Point of the Dead", signifying that the Scotland he had courted, is now dead and to be lamented. Later in his career he came to regard Gaelic as the Ur-language of Scotland and the other Celtic parts of Britain, like Ireland, Wales and Cornwall, but in To Circumjack Cencrastus, he wishes that his "yokel words/ Some Gaelic strain had kept"(CP, 177); he boasts "sall Jewry breed a Christ/ Gaeldom canna equal"(CP, 197); he wants "Scots steel tempered/ Wi' Irish fire"(CP, 191). Not only was he filled with enthusiasm for the spirit of the Gael and the exactitude of the Gaelic language, he also saw how he fitted into a Celtic context as the politically powerful bard:

While I want all this highly complicated poetry

and regard myself in this way as in others (although not in language) as a purely Celtic poet, carrying on (newly applied in vastly changed circumstances) the ancient bardic powers of savage satire and invective as well as the bardic concern for the Celtic countries -- Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Cornwall -- and for Celtic history and the continuity of Celtic civilization. 9

The first statement in parenthesis gives the game away, of course, in view of the oft-reiterated statement by MacDiarmid: "No language, no nation". The second ^{stage} parenthetical statement shows us just what MacDiarmid meant and the "changed circumstances" are from those of tribal primitive life to those of the 20th century, industrialized Scotland, still primitive in all the ways that matter to the poet although not tribal. In other words Celtic civilization is to ^{be} a 'dynamic myth'¹⁰ rather than an attempt to write street names and political manifestoes in Gaelic. The Gaelic language itself, apart from providing a yardstick for exactitude, unfortunately provided MacDiarmid all too often with a number of tags and phrases which most readers, Scots being among them, saw only as unpronounceable and incomprehensible chunks of alien language.

But it was not long before the Gaelic idea was employed in the much greater idea of Leninist Communism

⁹ L.P., p.166.

¹⁰ Quoted by Buthlay, p.10.

not as an opposition force but as the "complement and corrective to the Russian, making an effective quadrilateral of forces"¹¹. What MacDiarmid needed was a more effective medium and so he created another "Golem", this time "synthetic English".

¹¹I.S., p.49.

IV

THE IMPOSSIBLE SONG

In fact, I personally have always been rather baffled by people who see a complete break between MacDiarmid's early and later work. Grant his premises, and his development throughout is logical, direct and inevitable, and indeed he is the one person who has tried, and who continues to try, to fulfil the original aims of the [Scottish] Renaissance. ¹

W.A.S. Keir is right when he declares that MacDiarmid's poetic development is "logical, direct and inevitable", but it is still of value to ascertain what this development was and what prompted it, to what extent the change in his political thinking affected and influenced his dropping "synthetic Scots" in favour of English. We may agree that the change was inevitable but we must measure, if possible, the type and extent of it. As the poet himself points out in In Memoriam James Joyce (1955), he has necessarily had to extend the frontiers of human consciousness and no sentimentality can be allowed to stand in the way (after all, the language element is not the most important thing about his poetry):

Poetry is human existence came to life,
The glorious energy that once employed
Turns all else in creation null and void,

¹Festschrift, p.14.

The flower, and fruit, the meaning and goal,
 Which won all else is needs removed by the knife
 Even as a man who rises high
 Kicks away the ladder he has come up by. (CP,401)

To Circumjack Cencrastus had seen the first extensive use of English, in that case for the translation from the German of Rainer Maria Rilke's Requiem -- Für eine Freundin. This translation MacDiarmid admitted later was one of several "extremely poor approximations to the originals", and yet it is difficult to imagine that the translator could have done a better job in Scots considering the theme and Rilke's "untranslatable usage of German"². First Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems followed in 1921, but Scots of a rather thin variety still predominated. Scots Unbound and Other Poems (1932) marked the beginning of a greater use of English, to be followed the next year by Stony Limits and Other Poems and Second Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems. Nonetheless, it is important to realize that Stony Limits also contains some very fine Scots poems among the "Shetland Lyrics" and some exceptionally successful dense Scots poems such as "Water Music" and "Tarras". As I have suggested before, as soon as MacDiarmid cleared his feet politically and domestically, so to speak, he could once again give his undivided attention to poetry and the problems of language.

²"Rainer Maria Rilke", New Britain, (February 28, 1934), p.450.

In "Lament for the Great Music", from Stony Limits, MacDiarmid gives a further reason for his exile and the necessity for it, although with a touch of sadness:

I have had to get rid of all my friends.
All those to whom I had to accommodate myself.
If one's capital consists in a calling
And a mission in life one cannot afford to keep friends.
I could not stand undivided and true among them.
Only in the solitude of my thought can I be myself
Or remember you clearly. (CP, 261)

Perhaps the poet is over-dramatizing here the ruthlessness of his severance of relations with his friends and yet he could not have exiled himself to a more remote and alien part of the British Isles than Whalsay, in the Shetland Islands. Regardless of this he was nonetheless following a distinct 20th century pattern in writing in exile -- like D.H.Lawrence, Ezra Pound, T.S.Eliot, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, and above all James Joyce himself.

Part of the reason, however, for his failure to write satisfactory poetry in the early 'thirties, lay, I feel, in his espousment of the Social Credit, or Douglasite theory of economics. This theory must have had a strong appeal to the poet, who had not only experienced poor living conditions for years, but who had also, as a journalist, seen the effects of capitalism on humanity. He was not prepared like the Fabians and the Parliamentary Labour Party, to wait until the capitalist system destroyed

itself. He wanted the change to take place there and then and it seemed the easiest thing in the world to effect. Not all his interest lay, however, with the economic theory itself; the individualistic note to the writings of Major Douglas certainly appealed to the poet in him. Like so many thinkers in the 'thirties, MacDiarmid was convinced that science and technology had overcome want forever, and that it was only cruelty and avarice on the part of bankers and financiers that kept the people in slavery;

For the problem of Quantity is solved
There is abundance for all. 3

MacDiarmid also shared the opinion of many others that at least part of the unemployment of the 'thirties was "the inevitable and highly desirable result of scientific labour-saving and production-increasing devices"⁴.

The supposed simplicity of the Douglasite theory impressed MacDiarmid, who had always hated mumbo-jumbo and "the illusion of knowledge". This perhaps drew the poet into the centre of the controversy over economic policies and it is small wonder that his poetry suffered. As he himself realized in a moment of insight into his

³"Songs of the New Economics", New Atlantis, (October, 1933), p.31.

⁴"What the Unemployed Could Do", New Britain, (November, 1933), p.12.

own predicament:

I am a poet; our fools ask me for logic not life. (CP, 125)
 All in all MacDiarmid was not really interested in, or conversant with, economics as a discipline; in a way he regarded it as a pseudo-science. That did not prevent his making some shrewd criticisms of pre-Keynsian economics in his prose works, although his poetry seemed to suffer from his over-enthusiastic slogan-shouting.

The policy of orthodox finance is puritanical. It is founded on distrust of men and the assumption of scarcity. It has been crystallized into the severe injunction: Work More -- Consume Less, Work and Save. ⁵

It is testimony to MacDiarmid's essential humanity that his Social Creditism did not take the form, as with Pound, of anti-Semitism. He retained his belief in Douglasite economic theory even when he joined the Communist Party, and, indeed, is still reputed to have a hankering for the theory.

Economics, for MacDiarmid, however, was not a fruitful field to till as too much depended on generalizations and too little on exactitude and discrimination. In any case, problems concerning distribution and the like were merely administrative details and should be treated that

⁵S.S., p.154.

way:

Oh it's nonsense, nonsense, nonsense,
Nonsense at this time o' the day
That breid-and-butter problems
S'ud be in ony man's way.

Sport, love, and parentage,
Trade, politics, and law
S'ud be nae mair to us than braith
We hardly ken we draw

Freein' oor poo'ers for greater things...(CP, pp. 300-1)

Part of the reason for his being drawn into Social Credit circles in the first place was that he had been involved in the New Britain movement which not only supported Douglasite economic theory but also supported regional devolution⁶. His discovery of the Gaelic basis of Scottish character, his enthusiasm for Communism, and his more settled, though still hard, life in Shetland, all contributed far more to the amazing revitalization of his poetry, however, than economic theories.

In 1934, in collaboration with his friend, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, MacDiarmid produced the collection of essays and poems called the Scottish Scene or The Intelligent Man's Guide to Albion, and among the diatribes and political journalism, there appear a number of experiments both in Scots and in English. Although some of the experimental Scots drama is interesting in an academic way, though

⁶Private Interview with Editor of the official organ of the movement, Watson Thomson.

fortunately not followed up, the most interesting fragment is called "In the Caledonian Forest":

The geoselenic gimbal that moving makes
A gerbe now of this tree now of that
Or glomerates the whole earth in a galanty-show
Against the full moon caught
Suddenly threw a fuscous halation round a druxy dryad
Lying among the fumet in this dwale wood
As brooding on Scotland's indecrassifiable race
I wandered again in hemicranic mood.

She did not change her epirhizous posture
But looked at me steadily with Hammochrysos eyes
While I wondered what dulia might be her due
And from what her curious enanthesis might arise,
And then I knew against that frampold background
This streaked and forlorn creature was indeed
With her great shadowed gastrocnemius and desipient face
The symbol of the flawed genius of our exeredated breed. 7

This is dictionary-dredging with a vengeance and yet the important point is that Jamieson's Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language has given place to a collection of technical dictionaries, medical, geological, zoological, heraldic. While it may be suggested that the poem was written in a spirit of fun (it is dedicated to the poet's two children), there seems to me no doubt that it is obviously intended as a serious experiment. That is, we come to this conclusion after consulting our varicus dictionaries, and finding out that once again MacDiarmid is evoking the Scottish Muse. Even if we do not know that "druxy" means "riddled with rot" and that the "dryad" so afflicted is

⁷ S.S., p.67.

and obscure words alliteratively pounding his brain. But the reader may still agree with William Soutar when he writes in his diary:

... why must Grieve so often use his verse as a shopwindow for displaying curiosities of erudition. ⁸

It is interesting to note, as Professor Buthlay points out,⁹ that MacDiarmid includes a couple of Scots words in the mixture, which suggests that the poet is not so much regressing to English after the failure of his Scots as advancing into stranger and more demanding linguistic fields.

The reader may be forgiven for asking "What English?" -- and yet MacDiarmid has always made no bones about being "an unrepentant and militant highbrow"¹⁰. If the reader is not prepared to make an effort then it is the reader's fault, not the poet's. What the poet is doing, in fact, is creating his own English -- "synthetic English" -- which must draw its strength, not from "the real language of men", but from the English used by scientists, administrators, and scholars, as Burns Singer suggests¹¹. MacDiarmid stated in an essay, "The Problems of Poetry Today", just what he

⁸ Diaries of a Dying Man, p.174.

⁹ Buthlay, p.85.

¹⁰ A.S.T., p.122.

¹¹ "Scarlet Eminence", Encounter (March, 1957), p.53.

thought had to be done to rejuvenate English:

It is time to have the full courage of our intellectual interests and to deplore that slovenliness and laziness and lack of concern which condemns all but a moiety of our language to the limbo of incomprehensibility for all but a moiety of our people. A concerted effort to extend the general vocabulary and make it more adequate to the enormous range and multitudinous intensive specializations of contemporary knowledge is long overdue; and the problem of poetry and power which should be the prime concern of every poet (and the stature of a poet cannot be better tested than just by his concern with this) to a very large extent centres round this question of whether poetry is to be confined to obsolescent material and relatively unimportant side-issues -- thus playing into the hands of those who regard it as an infantilist or as a mere "polite accomplishment" or "luxury art" -- or join issue at every point with modern intellection. ¹²

For MacDiarmid the choice was obvious -- to join issue with modern intellection and his exile in the Shetland Islands allowed him to increase his knowledge, not only of languages, but of all sorts of sciences. Professor Buthlay may regret that MacDiarmid remembers so much,¹³ but, without a capacious memory the poet could not have filled the position of the traditional Celtic bard. As he states in Lucky Poet:

I am a modern Druid, and my conception of poetry is one that allows at once for the functions of education, historical guardianship, discussion of all manner of people at all levels, reportage of all sorts, exercises in the art of conversation,

¹² A.S.T., p.92.

¹³ Buthlay, p.3.

sheer entertainment, the fitting commemoration of great occasions, due summoning to high tasks, and in short, all the forms of appeal and commentary compatible with intercourse with people who are, in Apsa's sense, "fully developed personalities possessing high-grade critical intelligences". 14

The hold Communism had over MacDiarmid was, in fact, an intellectual one as he admits himself by his praise of Lenin as a ruthless intellect, able to see where the greatest good of humanity lies although humanity itself may not see it:

Here lies your secret, O Lenin, -- yours and oors,
No' in the majority will that accepts the result
But in the real will that bides its time and kens
The benmaist resolve is the poo'er in which we exult
Since naeboddy's willingly deprived o' the good;
(CP, 287)

This admiration of cold intellect, if we can call it cold when the stakes are so high, allows MacDiarmid to accept the Cheka's horrors as "necessary and insignificant": Rec

What maitters't wha we kill
To lessen that foulest murder that deprives
Maist men o' real lives? (CP, 286)

This sticks in the throats of many critics, especially Americans, who fail to see the consistency of MacDiarmid's stand as a Communist who is also an individualist. Charles Glicksberg exclaims over the fact that "MacDiarmid an intransigent individualist, fails to perceive that

¹⁴L.P., pp. 141-2.

Communism endangers the freedom and integrity of the individual"¹⁵, and yet himself fails to see that at that time, in the 'thirties even Russian Communism seemed the only hope of suffering humanity. As Sidney Goodsir Smith, one of MacDiarmid's close poetic friends, points out, "the first years of the Revolution -- the period that initially inspired such idealists as MacDiarmid -- produced in Russia a great renaissance of poetry, music and film"¹⁶. MacDiarmid's Communism was inspired by a vision similar to that which inspired Woodrow Wilson's democracy; both had seen the clouds part for an instant and had glimpsed their respective promised lands. What most critics fail to realize about MacDiarmid's Communism is that it is the ideal he upholds and just because men, using the name of communism, turn out to be oppressive does not necessarily mean that the theory itself is faulty. He writes later in The Battle Continues (1957) that he believes thoroughly in "the philosophy of opportunity, and knows of nothing/ That is more radical":

Democracy must always be on the attack,
 Always on the side of social change
 Against the forces of 'law and order'.
 The Socratic search for truth is the principle
 Which seeks to undermine the dogmatism of inertia.
 To break down the rational defences of prejudice
 And so allow human personality to grow

¹⁵"Hugh MacDiarmid: The Marxist Messiah", Prairie Schooner, XXVI (1952), p.330.

¹⁶Festschrift, p.75.

And to adapt itself to new conditions. 17

Democracy, Communism, what you will, has no value for MacDiarmid if it is not continually moving and attacking, and it is illuminating to see how "humanism" is made the scapegoat for many of the faults of political systems:

Wipe out the false word "humanism"; our art is not
to be
Misericordious, toothless, pacifistic, but the art
of full-blooded men,
Each in command of a full arsenal of feeling, including
the feeling of social hatred.
No inertia, cowardice, quietism, weariness, apathy then. 18

But MacDiarmid realizes that even if Communism did triumph his duty would be to criticize it lest it become sentimental or tradition-bound and so he does not envision himself as some sort of communist Poet Laureate:

I am like Zamyatin. I must be a Bolshevik
Before the Revolution, but I'll cease to be one quick
When Communism comes to rule the roost. 19

MacDiarmid is the Communist idealist who sees Communism

as only a step on the road to Anarchism, where everyone will be free to concentrate on what is important to the poet: the extension of human consciousness.

As MacDiarmid sees it, it is only the poet who can do this at present, and because he views himself as the omniscient Druidic bard, he feels that his poetry must be

¹⁷T.B.C., p.86.

¹⁸Ibid., p.33.

¹⁹Quoted by Buthlay, p.5.

all-embracing and educative:

I seek a ground....,
 The point where science and art can meet,
 For there are two kinds of knowledge,
 Knowing about things and knowing things,
 Scientific data and aesthetic realization,
 And I seek their perfect fusion in my work. 20

The language he chose for this poetry was English, but, in the same way as we call the language of James Joyce's Ulysses and Finnegan's Wake "English" for want of a better term, we must realize that English is merely the basis of what MacDiarmid hoped would be a world language for the "Welt-literatur" of world communism, not of course, a universal language like Esperanto and Basic English which are cut-down, simplified languages but a language which will have the necessary discrimination and exactitude and ability to deal with both matters of the spirit and scientific facts. English, as he had said before, was a dead language, a language which had been worked to death and could no longer be used for poetic purposes without a cutting off of all linguistic sentimentality and laziness and an injection of new blood. MacDiarmid was not the only poet of the 20th century who had imagined English to be worn out. One of the earliest who had expressed this sentiment was John Davidson, the Scottish poet of the late 19th and

²⁰ I.M.J.J., p.55.

early 20th century, who was such a great influence, both in attitude to language and material, on MacDiarmid at this stage. In deed, MacDiarmid quotes the older poet on this subject in In Memoriam James Joyce:

Our language is too worn, too much abused,
Jaded and overspurred, wind-broken, lame,--
The hackneyed roadster every bagman mounts. 21

To MacDiarmid, the deadness of the English was only an extension of the living death of the English nation, which shackled Scotland in "chains of lead" (CP,364), and covered her in "the perilous night of English stupidity" (CP,349). The "indiscriminate English" (CP,377) are, to the poet, the most dangerous enemies of Celtic (i.e. alive, intelligent, red-blooded) exactitude and intellect and do not deserve to have their language. Like the Scots they are losing it, but unlike the Scots, they are allowing it to pass away, ~~not as a result of linguistic imperialism~~ by another language, but through sheer laziness and stupidity. He finds it a lamentable state of affairs that English should have no words to describe sensations of smell and takes the opportunity in both verse (CP,214) and prose²² to drum in the fact that other languages, including Scots, have a sufficient vocabulary. The ideal language, for those

²¹ I.M.J.J., p.23.

²² "The Sense of Smell", The Eleventh Hour (December 19, 1934), p.87.

who had the gift of it, was Gaelic, although as time went on MacDiarmid came to regard it merely as another quarry for his "synthetic English".

MacDiarmid, after the early 'thirties, may seem to have forgotten his Scottish Nationalism but this is far from the truth. As he points out in "Direadh III", "Love of country, in me, is love of a new order" (CP, 350), and the new order was communism. In spite of the fact that, at times, he sank into the state of depression concerning Scotland, so common in his London and early Shetland days, as in "Glasgow" (CP, 357), from Lucky Poet, the general tone of his later poems is optimistic:

Never say die; tho' auld Scotland seems bare
Oot wi' your line; there's prodigies there. (CP, 231)

But always the concentration is upon the Celtic side of the Scottish soul. Gone is the delight in the Makars and in Scots dialect as a language by which he is emotionally attached to Scotland, and instead is the delight in any strange language which may have the qualities its more powerful neighbours may lack, and Scots is only one of many. As he stated in In Memoriam James Joyce, he is,

Concerned one moment with the whole of Welt-literatur
And equally concerned the next with Vogul,
The smallest of the Baltic-Finnish language group,
Spoken only by 5000 people. 23

²³ I.R.J.J., p.29.

His interest lay, however, in the essence of a language; the minute variation by which one language differs from another and expresses the spirit of that group which uses it. By no means was he a dilettante, having his fancy taken by quaint turns of speech:

... so
 With every language, dialect, usage of words,
 Even any sort of gobbledygook,
 The mode despised, neglected or rejected
 May become the corner stone of a miracle of expression.
 But whatever language we use
 We must command its Wesen* at its deepest,
 That element that cannot express itself
 More than dimly in man's every day life,
 For in the aesthetic experience
 Instead of language meaning the material of experience
 --Things, ideas, emotions, feelings--
 This material means language. 24

*salt or 'Tzimus.

MacDiarmid's love of Scotland had also to be based, after his realization of the futility of Scottish Nationalism as envisaged by the official party, on something more than language and history, and the title of his 1934 volume of poems Stony Limits and Other Poems, is indicative of the fact that the poet was seeking the bed-rock of Scotland and from that the Scottish character through the study of geology. Professional geologists may laugh at the naive use of the technical terms of the science, most of which can be picked up from any introductory text-book on the subject,

²⁴I.M.J.J., p.32.

and yet experiments of this sort are a necessity if poetry is, in MacDiarmid's words, to be regarded as something more than a "polite accomplishment". The only danger, however, that faces the poet who experiments in this way is that perhaps poetry will become merely an "academic accomplishment". But we can study how MacDiarmid avoids the danger by taking a sample from "On a Raised Beach":

Diallage of the world's debate, end of the long auxesis,
Although no ebrillade of Pegasus can here avail,
I prefer your enchorial characters -- the futhore
of the future --
To the hieroglyphics of all the other forms of
Nature.

Song, you apprentice encrinite, seems to sweep
The Heavens with a last entrochal movement;
And, with the same word that began it, closes
Earth's vast epanadiplosis. (CP,221)

Although we may debate MacDiarmid's premise that all language is the province of the poet, however specialized it may be, provided we accept the premise, then it is impossible not to agree that the words are meaningful in this particular context and are also poetically acceptable as far as sound qualities go. In fact, MacDiarmid went as far as to say that far from his using language not suited for poetic purposes, the truth of the matter was that people disregarding these specialist terms were deliberately blinding themselves:

Stupid people distrust and fail to learn technical terminologies of all kinds; thus disabling themselves from thinking about -- even from seeing --- everything

that is not expressible in the poor little stock vocabulary. 25

As it is, in the fragment alone, he makes use of words, not only from geology ("diallage", "encrinite", "entrochal"), but from chemistry ("auxesis"), rhetoric ("epanadiplosis"), equestrianism ("ebrillade") and hieroglyphics ("enchorial", "futhore"). The interest these words have for MacDiarmid is that they are exact and unsoiled, having all the qualities that he could hope for. As he states in Lucky Poet:

I am constantly on the qui vive for every trace of that peculiar individuality which Duns Scotus called haecceitas and the distintiv formalis a perte rei, agreeable to his love of objects between which minute distinctions can be made -- and, further, the concrete individuality of each object known in at least a confused way intuitively; everybody having not merely a material form but also a vital form; a special element of its being in its activity and movement. 26

It is then not surprising that MacDiarmid should interest himself in geology as an "exact" science, but it should not be forgotten that part of his interest lay in the fact that through the study of its rocks and geological formation he hoped to understand Scotland more clearly.

It is curious, however, to find in one man an almost fanatic devotion to scientific terms and what is commonly called "modern" knowledge, coupled with an equally strong belief in the power of the poet, the word-maker and

²⁵ "The Shetland Islands", New Britain (October 18, 1933), p. 700.

²⁶ L.P., p. 310.

bard of Celtic history. When we consider the matter more deeply, we find that the custom of regarding the poet as somewhat divorced from the affairs of men is of comparatively recent vintage. When, therefore, MacDiarmid states that he is interested in the "realen Machtfaktoren " -- the real elements of power²⁷, he is not expressing the fond hope that he would become some sort of Machiavelli if he went into politics; he is expressing his belief in the power of poetry and the role of the poet. He does not believe in the impossibility of changing the status quo, and certainly can find no evidence for the existence of the blind uncontrollable political and financial forces so beloved of the Naturalist School and those in power:

The first thing to remember is that none of these things happen of their own accord, or by the act of God; they are all caused by other individual men and women, and all of them -- all the big over-riding tendencies in human affairs -- by a mere handful of men and women in relation to the population as a whole. 28

One almost feels as if MacDiarmid regards the politicians and financiers as false prophets, controlling the people by language, and forcing them to worship the golden calf which has been foisted on them by the rich, and that the poet, if he is a true poet, must not retreat from the

²⁷ A.S.T., p.58.

²⁸ A.S.T., p.60.

public arena with the excuse that politics do not matter or are sordid, but must battle as the true prophet against the false. In Lucky Poet, he quotes Thomas Mann's comment on the Spanish Civil War in support of his belief:

The poet who has failed in the face of human problems posed in the form of political problems becomes not only a traitor to reason for the sake of mercenary interests, but is lost also as a person. His ruin is inevitable. He loses his creative powers, his talent, and will never again create anything of lasting value. 29

In the same volume, in one of the poems included therein, MacDiarmid further amplifies his view of the role of the poet and his reason for believing the poet to be the real expert on human, and therefore political, affairs:

"The true use of the imaginative faculty of modern times
Is to give ultimate vivification
To facts, to science, and to common lives".
A poetry, therefore, that like William Morris
In his News from Nowhere will constantly show
"How the Change Came" -- how far more clearly
The poet may see into the nature of political reality
Than can the practical men of his day. (CP, 342)

Even when faced with the great success of his hero, Lenin, who was MacDiarmid's political saint, he still reckons poetry to be "the greatest poo'er amang men", as, in fact, politics is contained within poetry. He can therefore conclude his "Second Hymn to Lenin" with one of the most optimistic views of poetry ever expressed:

²⁹L.P., p.137.

Unremittin', relentless,
 Organised to the last degree,
 Ah, Lenin, politics is bairns' play
 To what this maun be. (CP, 303)

Although we may baulk a little at the apparently extravagant claims MacDiarmid makes for poetry, if we accept his philosophy of language, that,

The mind creates only to destroy;
 Amid the desolation language rises, and towers
 Above the ruins; and with language, music; (CP, 259)

and recognize, at least some of the validity of his argument that the oppressors of humanity manage to remain in control through the clever use of language, then we can understand the connection between his politics and his use of language. We can understand fully the reason for his quest for unusual words, words which are not tainted with the "dogmatism of inertia"³⁰, nor with the touch of the "bourgeoisie, and especially teachers, ministers, lawyers, bankers, and journalists"³¹, who constitute the classes in control of all the media of communication.

³⁰ T.B.C., p.86.

³¹ L.P., p.xxiii.

CONCLUSION

It would be extremely handy were MacDiarmid divisible into Grieve the bard and MacDiarmid the political animal. The truth, as usual, is somewhere in between, and so we are left, fortunately, with a human being and not a schizoid phenomenon more suited to the analyst's couch than the literary dissertation.

As I have pointed out, it is impossible to separate the politico from the bard, as within the terms of reference MacDiarmid uses to define the poet, political commitment is one of the main requirements. What is unusual about MacDiarmid is that throughout his career his politics have dictated, to a great extent, the language he uses.

In the 'twenties, the decision to use Scots dialect was a Scottish Nationalist move, at a conscious level, although, deeper down, forces beyond the reach of logical and certainly political ones must have been operating as well. The making up of "synthetic Scots" was not merely an attempt to form a language which was exact, discriminating and suitable for the inhabitants of what Norman MacCaig, MacDiarmid's closest friend and fishing companion, calls "the knuckle-end of Europe"; it was an attempt, at some level, to develop a language likely to provide a national

poetic medium. MacDiarmid's work has not been in vain and "Lallans", as "synthetic Scots" is now^w dubbed, is one of the languages naturally open to the Scottish poet of today.

When we turn to MacDiarmid's creation of "synthetic English", we find, rather surprisingly, that once again there is, at the back of the whole edifice, a strong belief in nationalism, though not in any sort of aggressive jingoistic way. As he says in one of his countless little pamphlets, "not only do nationalities exist, as a matter of perhaps regrettable and actual fact, but... it is desirable, even on abstract grounds that they should"¹.

But his "synthetic English" was not to be a national language so much as an international language. Admittedly he had castigated Ramsay MacDonald in Scottish Scene for his ill-judged and badly thought-out "internationalism", but MacDiarmid had demanded that internationalism should be the complement of nationalism not its opposite. The internationalist must first be a good nationalist, and after finding out about his country, its history, culture, geology, biology, he can become an internationalist. Rootless cosmopolitanism was anathema to him. So it was that MacDiarmid first made his peace with Scotland before setting out to create language for Welt-literatur.

¹U.B.W.W., p. 6.

It is wrong, however, to imagine that MacDiarmid changed to "synthetic English" in an attempt to reach a wider audience. Of all British writers he has probably sold out least to commercial interests and indeed would not sell out even to Communism. His life has always been hard and he has lost his perfervidum ingenium Scotorum for no Establishment post. Until recently he and his wife have never had piped water in the house. Yet, apart from his depressed years in the early 'thirties, he has never complained about his financial position and still less sought regard through martyrdom. It is symptomatic of his relations with the literary Establishment that he has never had a British Council booklet written on his work, surely the only British poet of his standing to be so treated. In mooting "synthetic English", MacDiarmid was not seeking a greater audience so much as a greater range of subject matter.

To be a great political poet -- that is, to MacDiarmid, a Communist poet -- one has to be omniscient. His poetry had to be prepared to tackle any problem in any science, just as any man should attempt to increase his knowledge and understanding of his environment and therefore himself. Without this essential spark, the people are pawns

to the selfish and the powerful. MacDiarmid is under no illusions about the working class as a whole, however. He is not interested in obtaining larger pay packets and an extra T.V. set. In fact, there is, in his distaste for ease and excessive comfort, an almost Calvinist streak, which marks him as essentially Scottish. But this moral toughness must not be confused with Puritanism: all MacDiarmid asks is that ease does not degenerate into lethargy, reaction, and bourgeois conservatism. Poetry being the work of "word-magicians" (the concept is Celtic but also universal), any progress, which depends on convincing the people of where their true good lies, must depend on the poet. Thus to banish politics from poetry is as absurd, to MacDiarmid, as to banish words from books.

If we wish to compare MacDiarmid with any other British poet in his attitude to language, we must go back to Wordsworth and his attempts to revivify English by jettisoning decadent Augustan poetic diction. All he succeeded in doing was to substitute one poetic diction for another. MacDiarmid believes that no language -- neither "the language really used by men" nor the language used by any particular station or rank of men -- should be the proper material of the poet and especially the Communist poet.

Indeed, his life's battle has been for freedom for

the individual, freedom from material want but more than that, freedom for the spirit. The first battle he fought was against the English and Anglo -Scottish tyranny but this logically and inevitably widened into a general conflict with the bourgeoisie, the controllers of language and thus wielders of political power. Thus it was that the first stage in his campaign was a sort of guerrilla war in "synthetic Scots", which, to use Pentagonese, he "escalated" to a world revolution in "synthetic English". Perhaps the first Scottish makar, John Barbour, may have the last word on MacDiarmid's aim, the aim of the latest makar:

A! Fredome is a noble thing!
 Fredome maiss man to have liking:
 Fredome all solace to man givis:
 He livis at ease that freely livis!
 A noble heart may have nane ease,
 Na ellis nocht that may him please,
 If fredome failye; for free liking
 Is yearnit owre all other thing.
 He he, that ay has livit free,
 May nocht knaw weill the propertie,
 The anger, na the wrechit doom,
 That is couplit to foul thralldom.
 Bot gif he had assayit it;
 Than all perquer he suld it wit;
 And suld think fredome mair to prize
 Than all the gold in warld that is.
 --The Brus i. 225-240.

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