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Robert Hay Carnie

Hugh MacDiarmid, Robert Burns and the Burns Federation

Alan Bold characterized Hugh MacDiarmid in the Introduction to his edition of the poet's letters as "a great poet, an indefatigable propagandist, and a prodigious and remarkable man of letters."¹ I am not concerned here with either the first or last of these judgments, both of which I happen to agree with. I am chiefly concerned here about the quality of MacDiarmid's pronouncements about Burns and about the Burns movement—pronouncements made partially in verse, but mostly in prose, and made throughout the whole of MacDiarmid's life as a writer. These dicta are very much the product of MacDiarmid's pugnacious and irascible temperament, and of his extreme sensitivity to perceived critical neglect in Scotland of his *own* extraordinary poetical genius. They are not, in my opinion, carefully considered literary, historical and critical judgments of Robert Burns and the Burns cult. Much of what MacDiarmid says on this topic is writing of the kind I would characterize as propaganda, lacking the objectivity and neutrality generally associated in this century with serious literary and historical writing. By propaganda I mean writing that propagates a particular viewpoint or creed, to the exclusion and outright rejection of the validity of opposing viewpoints or creeds. Propaganda, as opposed to history or criticism, usually tells the reader as much about the propagandist and *his* literary, political, philosophical and social perceptions, as it does about those of the subject the propagandist is writing about. MacDiarmid made the interesting

¹*The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. with Introd. Alan Bold (London, 1984), p. vii. Henceforth *Letters*.

claim in one of his letters to R. E. Muirhead (of Nov. 5, 1928. *Letters*, pp. 296-8) that his poetry and his propaganda on behalf of Scottish nationalism are "part of each other."

In his relentless pursuit of Scottish nationalism, MacDiarmid frequently attacks Scottish cultural institutions of which one might have expected him to approve. These included the Saltire Society, the Scottish Text Society, the National Gallery, the Scottish universities, BBC Scotland, and, of course, the Burns Federation. He attacks these institutions for not being Scottish enough, or for not living up to his perception of what they should be or what they might have been. In his attacks on the Burns movement, attacks which began in 1920 when he was 28 years old and went on to 1959 when he was 67, MacDiarmid adopted a propagandist posture, and made little or no effort to be objective about, or fair to, a movement of which he was for so many years a part, choosing to ignore most of the established and accepted conventions concerning literary and cultural discourse in the twentieth century. I think it is true to say that these conventions, while not discouraging the use of satire and irony, deplore the use of personal lampoon, travesty and the misrepresentation of publicly available fact. There has been a widespread belief amongst literary men of our century that excessive use of the rhetoric of polemic is counter-productive; and that prejudicial misstatements of fact are too easily exposed to encourage a serious literary historian or literary critic to base his analyses upon such misrepresentations. Common as the lampooning approach had been in the eighteenth century, particularly in the satiric wars involving Dryden, Pope and Grub Street, twentieth century criticism, especially that conducted in academia and in literary journals, avoids excessive emotionalism, prefers to appeal to reason, and "middle of the road" positions, and has aspirations towards "fairness," to both the individuals and the institutions being discussed. I certainly believe personally that this is the most effective mode of literary and cultural debate. I am also aware that the tone of critical debate is often as much determined by the medium in which it is conducted as by the personality of the writer. Much of the debate about Burns in particular, and Scottish poetry in general, in the period 1920 to 1960, was carried on *not* in the pages of academic journals, but in the pages of a wide variety of general journals and newspapers. MacDiarmid was expert in the propaganda techniques of this kind of literary journalism. He was a newspaperman for most of his early working life.² Both MacDiarmid and his opponents, in their long-lived debates about the utility of the Burns movement, or about related literary topics such as the

²Among the newspapers that MacDiarmid worked for were the *Clydebank and Renfrew Press* (1912), *The Forfar Review* (1913) and *The Montrose Review* (1921-29). In the same period he founded and edited his own journals *The Scottish Chapbook* (1922-23) and *The Northern Review* (1926). He also contributed to and was later literary editor of *The New Age* (1923).

widely canvassed arguments on the relative merits of synthetic and enriched Scots as opposed to "pure" regional dialects, attacked individuals by name, stressing personal attributes and "class" or "regional" characteristics as part of the polemical technique. Dismissive phrases such as "London Scotties,"³ or the drunk man's: "(Or less than human to my een / The people are in Aiberdeen)" (ll. 1994-5) reflect not only Grieve's anger at the attacks on his Lallans verse in an Aberdeen newspaper, but also his enjoyment of flyting. MacDiarmid's personal attack on his former friends Edwin and Willa Muir, published in *The Voice of Scotland*,⁴ using Barbara Niven's savage cartoon of a large muscular female zealously protecting a Larry the Lamb pet with Edwin Muir's features, and captioning the cartoon "Willa and Edwin," is a further example of such excesses, so often found in the heated arguments about the future of Scottish culture in editorial leaders, letters to the editor, commissioned special articles and so on. MacDiarmid and his friend and collaborator, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, enjoyed more than most the pleasures of flyting.

As further examples of propaganda in MacDiarmid's journalism, consider the following two examples. *The Montrose Review*, whose reporter was C. M. Grieve, gave prominent space to MacDiarmid's address at a Burns Supper held by the Glasgow Branch of the Scottish National Movement, in January 1928. R. E. Muirhead was in the chair.⁵ The speaker reported and the reporter were of course the same person. The address was called "Burns from the National Standpoint"; the theme was the difficulties involved in reviving the Scottish vernacular; the villain was the predominantly English legislature which "ever since Union of Parliaments, had spent enormous sums annually on the teaching of English language and literature, but would not devote a penny piece to the teaching of Scots language and literature" (*Review* [Jan. 27, 1928], p. 2). Now this is pure anglophobic propaganda. MacDiarmid knew very well that the

³The phrase "crouse London Scotties" is used by MacDiarmid in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, ed. Kenneth Buthlay (Edinburgh, 1987), l. 45. All readers of MacDiarmid are indebted to Buthlay's annotated edition. Further references to this poem will be to this edition.

⁴In the issue of the *Voice of Scotland* for September-November, 1938. (Vol. I, No.2). See also *Letters*, p. 124, where MacDiarmid tells of Helen Cruickshank's "clip on the lug re the Muir cartoon." Although he reported that "it had affected quite a number of people the same way," MacDiarmid remained impenitent about its viciousness.

⁵*The Montrose Review* (Jan. 27, 1928), p. 2. Henceforth *Review*. I am grateful to Mr. John Doherty, Librarian, Montrose Public Library, for his kindness in sending me a photocopy of this review. The number also contained an editorial commentary on the stir created by MacDiarmid's remarks, and makes the comment: "While the general consensus of opinion is on the whole unfavourable to Mr. Grieve's criticisms of the National Bard, a large proportion of those who have expressed their opinions share his view that the Burns Movement ought to have done a great deal more to promote the interests of Scottish literature."

connection between Parliamentary budgets and the specific budgeting in individual schools for literature and language teaching was very remote indeed, and that whole battalions of *Scottish* educational officials employed by local authorities would in fact make such specific decisions. It was propaganda of the “let’s blame the English for everything that is wrong with Scottish education” variety. The notice ends with the passage: “With regard to Burns, the best thing Scotland could do—to give it a chance of realising the aims for which Burns had wrought—was to deliberately set themselves to forget, for the next quarter of a century at least, that he (Burns) ever existed” (*Review* [Jan. 27, 1928], p. 2). This was the sentiment which, according to MacDiarmid himself, led to his expulsion from the local Burns Club, and he adds “for years after I was treated as a leper in Burnsian circles.”⁶

My second example involves J. M. Bulloch, the Aberdeen-born London journalist, president of the Vernacular Circle of the Burns Club of London, and one of MacDiarmid’s opponents and one of his favorite targets in journalistic literary debate in the 1920s.⁷ Bulloch (1868-1937) learned his trade as a journalist with the *Aberdeen Free Press*. In 1889 he went to London as assistant editor of *The Sketch*. He moved to *The Graphic* in 1909, and in 1924 he was principal literary critic of the Allied Newspapers group, reviewing 500 to 600 books a year. It was in this latter capacity that he reviewed *Scottish Scene, or the Intelligent Man’s Guide to Albyn* (London, 1934) written by MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, under the wonderful headline “Two Playboys of the Northern World”! Bulloch, a prominent London Scot, had been in the chair when MacDiarmid had addressed the Vernacular Circle of the Burns Club of London on “Unexpressed Elements in Scottish Life.” The content of the talk was summarized in the *Burns Chronicle*.⁸ Almost as interesting as the summary itself, is the conclusion of the report: “Dr. Bulloch in moving the thanks of the meeting to Mr. Grieve, combatted certain statements made by the lec-

⁶MacDiarmid provides this commentary on the effect of his 1928 speech in his essay *Burns Today and Tomorrow* (Edinburgh, 1959), p. 39.

⁷Almost all my information on Bulloch, an influential and neglected minor Scottish journalistic writer, is derived from contemporary obituaries, photocopies of which were kindly sent to me by Mr. Iain Beavan of the University Library, Aberdeen. In view of the nature of his relationship with Bulloch and William Will in the 1920s, MacDiarmid’s reference in *Lucky Poet* (London, 1943) p. 32 to “my friends Mr William Will and the late Dr. J. M. Bulloch” and his praise of their work on behalf of the Scottish vernacular movement within the Burns Federation seems curiously benign, and perhaps ironic.

⁸*Burns Chronicle*, 33 (1924). This volume contains a full report of the work of the Vernacular Circle of the Burns Club of London, pp. 118-124, reviewing lectures by Lord Aberdeen, J. M. Bulloch, and W. A. Craigie, as well as the critical account of MacDiarmid’s paper.

turer, and discussed contradictory views advanced. The lecture provoked greater criticism than any other lecture delivered to the Circle" (p. 123).

MacDiarmid found it hard to forgive Bulloch, or his fellow journalist William Will, another Aberdeen Scot and London Burnsian, for their public opposition to his views on the future of the Scots vernacular. William Will edited the volume called *The Scottish Tongue* (London, 1924) which contained four lectures given to the Vernacular Circle of the London Burns Club, including those by John Buchan and J. M. Bulloch. Grieve's lecture is conspicuous by its absence from the volume. He is also noticeably absent from Bulloch's enthusiastic account of the lecture series printed in the *Burns Chronicle*.⁹ I believe that it was MacDiarmid's highly personal sense of rejection by the Burns movement in general, and by the members of the London Burns Club in particular, that heightened the severity of both the general satiric attack on the immortal memory tradition in *Penny Wheep*, and the specific attack on the London Burns Club in the opening section of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. The poem entitled "Your Immortal Memory, Burns!" was first published under the pseudonym A. K. L. (A. K. Laidlaw) in MacDiarmid's *Scottish Chapbook* in 1923, and was re-published in *Penny Wheep* in 1926. It sticks out like a sore thumb in *Penny Wheep*, where it is the last poem in a volume containing some of MacDiarmid's most brilliant lyrics in Lallans, being one of only three poems in the volume written in English, and is palpably of poorer literary quality than the other lyrics.

The passage on the Burns Club movement at the beginning of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* also stands out in that remarkable poem because of its prominent position. The passage was apparently written in the period 1925 to early 1926, when MacDiarmid's anger with the Burns Federation and at his non-appearance in *The Scottish Tongue* was at its height. Parts of *A Drunk Man* were seen at the proof stage by the sculptor-poet, Pittendrigh Macgillivray,¹⁰ who objected to the tone of the passage, and particularly to the racist line "Some wizen'd scrunt o' a knock-knee Chinee" (ll. 38-9). Although MacDiarmid accepted a few of Macgillivray's other criticisms of *A Drunk Man*, he did not change this passage at all, and it remained intact, redolent of his anglophobia, xenophobia and class antagonism, in the published version. These two poetic attacks on the immortal memory tradition and on the Burns movement are different in scope and range. The complete poem "Your Immortal Memory, Burns!" adopts the technique of "lashing the vice and sparing

⁹*Burns Chronicle*, 2nd Series, 1 (1926), 25-30.

¹⁰There is a good account of Macgillivray's work as a reader of the proofs of *A Drunk Man* in Alan Bold's *MacDiarmid: Christopher Murray Grieve: A Critical Biography* (London, 1988), pp. 186-7.

the name.”¹¹ MacDiarmid uses his knowledge of hundreds of Burns suppers and immortal memories to highlight two obvious satiric targets: the Scottish common man’s rejection of all poetry save that of Robert Burns, and the “haggis and whisky” emphasis he finds at such events—“a boozy haze/ Enchants your lays.”¹² Less acceptable is his scorn of the “bourgeois” limitations of the average participant at Burns Suppers, shopkeepers, solicitors being particularly scorned for their “once a year” enjoyment of Burns’s poetry. Immortal memory speakers are accused of spilling out:

These vivid clots
Of idiot thoughts
Wherewith our Scottish life
Is once a year incomparably rife. (*ll.* 57-60, *Complete Poems*, I, 78)

The reference to Burns as “O Poet Intestinal” (presumably a transferred epithet, *l.* 12, *Complete Poems*, I, 77) blames Burns for the alleged intellectual limitations of his immortal memory admirers.

The *Drunk Man* passage shares with the earlier poem MacDiarmid’s anglophobia, and his distaste for “London Scotties,” particularly those who came from Aberdeen. The contrast of the physical bulk of the English critic G. K. Chesterton to the tiny frame of the Chinese Burns enthusiast, is presumably meant to underline MacDiarmid’s contempt for non-Scottish commentators on Burns at Burns Suppers, despite Chesterton’s skill as a critic of Burns displayed elsewhere in his writings. And lines like “and ten to wan the piper is a Cockney” (*l.* 40) display anglophobia once more. However much one may share MacDiarmid’s disapproval of the over-sentimentalism of “The Star o’ Rabbie Burns” approach in immortal memories, or feel that there may be some merit in his oft-repeated charges of comprehensive ignorance of the text of Robert Burns in Burns Supper audiences, the virulence of the satirist seems to me to be out of proportion to the venial nature of the literary sins of the Burns Club devotees. Panegyric is not my favorite art form, even when, as in immortal memory speeches, the subject is a great poet. However the immortal memory tradition seems to me to satisfy the need of ordinary people to praise and cheer a writer whose poetic work they genuinely admire. MacDiarmid’s rejection of this tradition in these two passages, and in numerous prose flytings in the same vein, seems to me to contain large elements of frustration and envy at Burns’s popularity, and a modicum of intellectual snobbery about the common man’s ability to praise his favorite poet.

¹¹From “On the Death of Dr. Swift.”

¹²“Your Immortal Memory, Burns!” *ll.* 41-2. *The Complete Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken (London, 1978), I, 78. Henceforth *Complete Poems*.

In “The Modern Scene” section of *Scottish Scene* MacDiarmid returned once more to smiting and slighting the Burns Federation. I quote:

The Burns Federation, and the Burns Clubs generally...have consistently dissociated themselves from the new creative tendencies in Braid Scots and continue to adscript themselves to a kailyaird level which is beneath intelligent consideration.¹³

The same passage also vigorously attacks the Scottish Text Society and the Scottish universities which supported it. This unnecessary and silly attack on useful Scottish literary scholarship had been stimulated by a speech by George Gordon, at that time President of Magdalen College. Gordon’s speech was made at the Jubilee celebration of the STS. Gordon, a prominent Burnsian, had suggested that the availability of well-edited texts of the earlier Scottish writers might be a source of inspiration to the new writers of the Scottish Renaissance, and had shown his familiarity with Scottish Renaissance poetry and the work of MacDiarmid. MacDiarmid found the tone of Gordon’s remarks patronizing, and comments in a surly way that he had never even seen a volume produced by the Scottish Text Society, and that he and his fellow writers could not afford to be members of such societies. It soon becomes clear that MacDiarmid’s real concern is not the availability of the STS editions, but that he detects both in Gordon’s remarks and those of Lord MacMillan, the President of STS, an effort to distinguish between cultural and political nationalism. As MacDiarmid puts it, “we are not to be fobbed off on genteel hobbies in that way; our nationalism involves every aspect of Scottish art and affairs” (p. 52). MacDiarmid will have nothing to do with the moderate approach to literary debate; he usually prefers to be where extremes meet; as editor, public contributor and sometimes pseudonymous contributor to the multitude of journals for which he wrote, he had a journalist’s keen awareness of how much a sprinkling of abusive publicity of private individuals and public institutions could help to keep a literary controversy alive. The best known example of this technique is his Montrose based journal *Scottish Chapbook* published in the early 1920s, where he appeared in its columns in three different roles—C. M. Grieve, the judicious editor writing editorial chats; Hugh MacDiarmid, the highly original poetic contributor writing in an enriched, synthetic Lowland Scots, and A. K. Laidlaw, the totally fictitious business and circulation manager of the journal writing satirical poetry about the horrors of the Immortal Memory tradition in his spare time. MacDiarmid was to do the same thing again in his short-lived illustrated paper *The Scottish Journal* in the early 1950s. There was a debate in its pages about the quality of the membership of the Saltire Society where

¹³Lewis Grassic Gibbon [James Leslie Mitchell] and Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene, or The Intelligent Man’s Guide to Albyn* (London, 1934), p. 51. The whole section (pp. 37-57) demonstrates MacDiarmid’s tendency to overstate the weaknesses of Scottish cultural organizations, when he detects in them “the imperial tide of Englishism over the Border” (p. 50).

words like “nonentities” and “mediocrities” were being thrown about. MacDiarmid denied being the author of the anonymous contribution which started the debate, although the views of this contributor strongly resembled his own. He was certainly editorial arranger of the subsequent debate in which John Oliver, the Edinburgh lecturer and editor took part, and defended the role played in that society by “nonentities” like himself.¹⁴

In much of this public literary debate, conducted mostly in pamphlets and in the columns of Scottish newspapers in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee, MacDiarmid often uses what he himself called a “berserker” approach in passionately attacking both individuals and institutions who disagreed with any of his strongly held convictions about literature and society. Under the influence of George Gregory Smith, who wrote in 1919 *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*, MacDiarmid had convinced himself that there was something particularly Caledonian or Scottish in arriving at truth through the exploration of contradictions and of extremes. This is especially true of his writings on the Burns movement, where he presented his views in an intensely personal, and often disturbingly unfair way. When I re-read this material in the 1990s, I see now what I did not see when I read much of it on its first appearance: MacDiarmid’s ego was insecure and he became angry at any public rejection of his passionately held opinions, and this insecurity had much to do with his aggressive style of presentation. Any reprinting of his collected dicta on the topic under discussion would be far more accurately adorned with a title such as “*MacDiarmid on Burns and the Burns movement*” rather than “Burns and the Burns movement—an examination.” In 1959, the bicentenary year of the birth of Burns, MacDiarmid published the long essay I have already referred to with the promising title *Burns Today and Tomorrow*. I suspect MacDiarmid meant this to be his final word on the subject. The tone of the whole piece is set in its opening paragraph:

I choose the title “Burns Today and Tomorrow” for this bicentenary essay because, having proposed the chief toast at several Burns Suppers annually for the past thirty to forty years, I have always made a point of proposing not “The Immortal Memory” but “The Future of Robert Burns,” since immortality is something outwith our com-

¹⁴*Scottish Journal*, 11 (Nov.-Dec. 1953), 5-6. This short-lived journal was printed and published by MacLellan of Glasgow. It ran for 12 numbers in 1952 and 1953. The controversy described above was only one of the provocative articles and editorial letters to be found in its columns. In No. 5 (January 1953), for example, are to be found a leader on the poor standard of Scottish journalism, a description of the menu at a Burns Night by F. Marian McNeill, and one of the usual attacks by MacDiarmid on the “Future of the Immortal Memory.” In this piece he deprecates “a deplorable concentration on Burns’ quite undistinguished love affairs and alcoholic habits for a genuine and informed concern with his poetry” (p. 3).

prehension, whereas the future esteem and influence of Burns's work is at least to some extent within our own control.¹⁵

I know who the "I" of this passage is. The sudden switch to "our" comprehension and "our" control puzzles me. Is this MacDiarmid and the individual reader? Or is it perhaps a Royal "we"? It certainly cannot refer to the Burnians as a group for much of the essay lashes out at the alleged inadequacy of the Burns movement's response not only to Burns, but to Scottish literature in general, and the Scottish Renaissance poets in particular. Let me give you from the same source a short sample before I attempt to summarize what MacDiarmid said in a whole series of such attacks in 1928, 1934, 1952 and 1959:

Burns cult, forsooth! It has denied his spirit to honour his name. It has denied his poetry to laud his amours. It has preserved his furniture and repelled his message. It has built itself up on the progressive refusal of his lead in regard to Scottish politics, Scottish literature, and the Scottish tongue. It knows nothing about him or his work—or the work that should be done in continuance of his—except the stupid and stereotyped sentiments it belches out annually. It is an organisation designed to prevent any further renaissance of the Scottish spirit such as he himself encompassed, and in his name it treats all who would attempt to renew his spirit and carry on his work on the magnificent basis he provided as he himself was treated in his own day—with obloquy and financial hardship, and all the dastardly wiles of suave Anglicized time-servers and trimmers. [Bulloch, Will & Co.?] It has produced mountains of rubbish about him, but not a single good critical study, not a single appreciation above the literary level for which a first-year Higher Grade schoolboy would be thrashed if he had so dealt with some petty English novelist or poetaster. It has failed (because it never tried—it has been numerically ample to succeed if it ever had) to get Burns or Scottish literature or Scottish history or the Scots language, to which Burns courageously and rightly and triumphantly reverted from English taught in Scottish schools.¹⁶

There is a great deal in that one passage alone, that startles any serious student of Burns, whether inside or outside the Burns movement.

The organization called "it" so roundly attacked in this passage was of course the Burns Federation, which was founded in 1885, and had published in its journal, the *Burns Chronicle*, started in 1892, a full (sometimes too full) record of all it had done to meet its established aims and objectives. Let me remind you what these aims and objectives were then and now:

¹⁵Hugh MacDiarmid, *Burns Today and Tomorrow* (Edinburgh, 1959), p. 1.

¹⁶*Burns Today and Tomorrow*, pp. 1-2. The passage is lifted almost verbatim from MacDiarmid's *At the Sign of the Thistle* (London, 1934), p. 169, under the title "The Burns Cult."

- a) to strengthen the bond of fellowship amongst the members of Burns Clubs and kindred societies.
- b) to purchase and preserve manuscripts and other relics associated with Robert Burns.
- c) to mark, repair and renew buildings, statues, tombstones etc. associated with Robert Burns.
- d) to encourage institutions and movements in honor of Robert Burns.
- e) to encourage and arrange competitions in schools to stimulate the teaching and study of Scottish history, literature, art and music
- f) to encourage the development of Scottish literature, art and music.

As the direction of the attacks in *Burns Today and Tomorrow* shows, MacDiarmid was fully aware of these aims and objectives, and if he ever read a volume of the *Burns Chronicle* other than those which contained his own contributions to its pages, he would have seen, however incomplete and imperfect the results, how hard and long the members of the Burns Federation worked to attain all of them. That MacDiarmid had little taste for the first four objectives is clear from what follows, and he constantly asserts that the Burns Federation failed miserably in their efforts to advance the last two.

It is worth stressing that the Burns Federation so strongly attacked in the passage I quoted is the same umbrella organization which included the Montrose Burns Club, of which MacDiarmid was a member during his ten years or so in that town. The Montrose Burns Club had joined the Federation in 1915. If the Burns Federation was the miserable failure that MacDiarmid so frequently proclaimed it to be in print, he had had apparently ample opportunity to reform it from the inside. MacDiarmid had attended the 1922 meeting of the Burns Federation as the delegate from Montrose; and had been invited to speak at the closing dinner, replying to the toast "Scottish literature." He had then a public platform for his views on the future of that literature. He also served for a number of years on the Federation's Literature Committee giving him yet another avenue to make his views and priorities known—this was a committee from which he withdrew in 1933.¹⁷ The Federation's long-time secretary,

¹⁷I am grateful to Mr. John Inglis, Past President of the Irvine Burns Club, and current Secretary of the Burns Federation, for the material he sent to me on MacDiarmid's relationship with the Federation and about his appearances in the pages of the *Burns Chronicle*. I am also grateful for the photocopy of MacDiarmid's letter of acceptance of honorary membership of the Irvine Burns Club in December 1962. The contrast between MacDiarmid's words: "I look forward to having an opportunity to visit Irvine some time and see the important Burns manuscripts and other treasures belonging to the Club" and a passage in both *At the Sign of the Thistle* (1934, p. 168) and *Burns Today and Tomorrow* (1959, p. 1), urging the making of "a

Thomas Amos, had praised, in his annual reports in the early 1920s, MacDiarmid's pioneer work in *Northern Numbers* and *Scottish Chapbook*; the Federation had employed its member from Crieff Burns Club, one Robert Bain, to write reviews of contemporary Scottish poetry—reviews which included enthusiastic accounts of both *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep*.¹⁸ Despite obvious provocation, the Burns Federation continued to speak kindly of MacDiarmid's published work in their official journal, the *Burns Chronicle*, even though there was a bad patch in the relationship from 1934 to the 1950s. Robert Bain, writing in 1933, said of him: "When pure poet, he seems to me incontrovertibly right in all he says; while as a critic he appears to me to be as a mass of prejudices and personal antipathies."¹⁹

MacDiarmid's best known attack on the Burns Movement is the essay published under the title "The Burns Cult" in the volume called *At the Sign of the Thistle*, already noted. It was written shortly after MacDiarmid withdrew from the Scottish Literature Committee of the Burns Federation. It starts with a mildly amusing fable in which an imaginary Burns Federation expert called "Charlie Crichton" confides a great secret to the author of the essay. MacDiarmid attempts to legitimize this fictional Burnsian by associating him in the first paragraph with actual Burnsians like Duncan McNaught, long-time President of the Burns Federation, Thomas Amos, equally longtime Secretary of the organization, and John Muir, a well-known student of Burns antiquities. MacDiarmid mocks the Federation's third objective—their concern with Burnsian monuments and buildings—by announcing that Crichton had told him long before anyone else, about "The Last Great Burns Discovery." The key satiric passage is that in which MacDiarmid says:

The Burns Movement had fallen on lean years; and there was a ridiculous attempt in certain would-be-clever quarters to switch it off its traditional lines and concentrate attention on highbrow stuff and nonsense like the "intellectual content" of the poems, the verbal texture, the rhythms, stanzaic forms, and the like. Crichton put an end to that.²⁰

bonfire of all the worthless, mouldy pitiable relics that antiquarian Burnsians have accumulated at Mauchline, Dumfries and elsewhere" is truly striking.

¹⁸*Burns Chronicle*, 2nd Series, 1 (1926), 53-5; and 2nd Series, 2 (1927), 63-5.

¹⁹*Burns Chronicle*, 2nd Series, 8 (1933), 84. Bain briefly reviews *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, *To Circumjack Cencrastus* and *First Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems*, along with the work of other Scottish Renaissance poets. Despite the anti-Burns passage analyzed earlier in this paper, Bain clearly thinks very highly of *A Drunk Man*.

²⁰*At The Sign of the Thistle: A Collection of Essays* (London, 1934), p. 165. Henceforth *Thistle*.

Charlie Crichton's last great Burns discovery was the supposed finding of a little ruined old dry closet close to Burns's cottage. MacDiarmid scorns Burnsian antiquarianism by mock-heroically treating the alleged discovery of the convenience that Burns himself had used, as a moment of supreme mystical communion between the Burns movement and the poet that the movement existed to celebrate.

In the second part of this well-known essay MacDiarmid repeats his assertion that the Burns Movement must be killed stone dead. He contrasts what he thought a world-wide Federation of Burns Clubs *might* have been, with what he saw as the pitifully ineffective reality. The objects of his attacks are extremely familiar. I have already quoted his scorn for "Burnsiana"—what he calls "the worthless, mouldy, pitiable relics that antiquarian Burnsians have accumulated at Mauchline, Dumfries, and elsewhere," already noted; secondly he deplores the faulty emphasis on "the mere man and his uninteresting love affairs" (*Thistle*, p. 168); thirdly, and he had done this first in 1923, he thunders about the intellectual poverty of the Immortal Memory tradition, and what he calls the

witless lucubrations of the horde, of bourgeois "orators" who annually befoul his memory by the expression of sentiments utterly anti-pathetic to that stupendous element in him which ensures his immortality (*Thistle*, p. 168).

This is followed by the passage I have already quoted, and which he repeated (unmodified) in 1959. His fourth charge in this section is that the Burns Federation had failed to give adequate financial support to the great new Scottish dictionaries. This is not true. John McVie, Secretary to the Burns Federation for many years, was the chief fund-raiser for the *Scottish National Dictionary* and helped to keep the scholarly project alive. In the final section of this essay, MacDiarmid examines the state of Burns scholarship in 1934. He rightly applauds the appearance of De Lancey Ferguson's edition of Burns's *Letters*. He regrets, as most people would, that D. H. Lawrence had not written his proposed book on Burns. He talks about the most recent biography by Catherine Carswell, a writer who had originally upset him by an attack she had made on a *Radio Times* broadcast he had given about Burns, and who had later become his friend. He stigmatizes what he calls the Burns Federation's incredible "dog in the manger" policy in regard to important documents in their possession. I do not think that MacDiarmid's highly qualified approval of Carswell's biography of Burns would go down terribly well in the 1990s amongst female critics:

...we have had...Mrs. Catherine Carswell's life of Burns—unfortunately, despite its manifold excellencies (it is far and away the best book yet devoted to Burns) a life of the man, not a study of the poet, and withal only by a Scotswoman and not by the Scotsman with whom the long-overdue task will finally lie (*Thistle*, p. 171).

The essay ends with more hits at the Anglo-Scots; more assertions that the Burns movement had become a middle-class organization that working class Scots had ceased to have much to do with. The most unsatisfactory part of this essay comes where MacDiarmid's scorn for the Burns movement spills over into a lamentably bad analysis of the literary quality of Burns's poetical writing. For serious students of Burns, it requires no further comment than the exposure of quotation:

It has been said that repetition of the same lines or phrases accounts for seventy-five per cent of Burns's work; certainly his great work is a small portion of the remaining twenty-five per cent—and not the portion most generally known. Most of his work has dated very badly; it is full of eighteenth-century conventionalism and the minutiae of dead and even at the time very local controversies. It marked the end of a phase—not a fresh start in Scots letters. It contains surprisingly little description of Scottish scenery, little concern with Scottish history, little sense of Scotland's destiny, and as to his love-songs they might all have been written to the same lay figure, for any particularity they contain. He has the typical voluptuary's aversion from realism in this respect (*Thistle*, p. 175).

It is critical rubbish of this kind that may well have sparked Edwin Muir's comments in his 1947 essay "The Burns Myth," an essay which celebrates Burns's accessibility as a poet to all readers: "a poet who has such an insight into ordinary thoughts and feelings that he can catch them and give them poetic shape, as those who merely think or feel them cannot. This was Burns's supreme art." MacDiarmid would have done well to consider Muir's warning: "When we consider Burns we must therefore include the Burns Nights with him, and the Burns cult in all its forms; if we sneer at them we sneer at Burns."²¹ MacDiarmid's passionate excess in *At The Sign of the Thistle* in attacking the Burns Movement requires some further analysis and explanation. A careful reading of the pages of the *Burns Chronicle* suggests that MacDiarmid's account of the Federation's activities and achievements is hopelessly misleading. In the volume for 1922, there is a paper on "Burns Clubs and Burns's Songs," written by a Vice-President from Glasgow which contains the following passage:

The old taunt of "Haggis and Whisky" thrown at Burns Clubs was in days gone by frequently justified, but for years past it has been a pointless and baseless jeer. The number of Clubs which have merely an annual dinner, or supper, is steadily diminishing. A large number of Scottish Clubs (also many Clubs in England, notably London) are doing splendid work of varied quality, essaying tasks at once patriotic, philanthropic, antiquarian, literary, and artistic. And I am not sorry to see

²¹*New Judgments: Robert Burns. Essays by Six Contemporary Writers*, ed. William Montgomerie (Glasgow, 1947), p. 7 (both passages). The quotation is from Muir's essay "The Burns Myth."

from the numerous syllabuses published in the *Burns Chronicle*, that Burnsians are everywhere alive to the propriety of extending their literary horizon. They include not only most Scots authors, but English and foreign ones as well. Among the subjects discussed last session are John Galt, Shakespearian Tragedy, Miss Ferrier's Novels, The Kailyarders, J. M. Barrie, Lord Byron, John Keats, Beranger, and Heine. And in addition we have numerous papers on social, political (non-party), and even religious subjects...²²

My own survey of published club syllabi for the period 1922 to 1933 confirms what Hunter says, with the important qualification that not all the federated clubs had such regular monthly programs—e.g. The Montrose Club restricted itself in this period to the annual supper, an AGM, and support of a song and reciting competition in the local schools.

All through his adult life, MacDiarmid was intensely aware of the poetry of Robert Burns, and despite his over-emotional rejection of the Burns movement, was, most of the time, a strong admirer of a poet he considered to be very different from himself. The name Burns, the impact of Burns on the cultural traditions of Scotland permeates both MacDiarmid's poetry and his correspondence. MacDiarmid is an extremely well-informed Burnsian. He is fully aware of Burns's quite extraordinary popularity over a period of more than two hundred years. This popularity persisted both with other poets and with all classes of readers, first in Burns's native Scotland, then in the English-speaking world at large, and finally, through the medium of translation, to other cultures and tongues. The translation process is one that Burns's poetry seems to survive much more successfully than the poetry of most other poets. MacDiarmid, who successfully translated or rendered into Scots a number of poets writing in European languages, is clearly fascinated by Burns translatability, and wrote an article on the theme for the *Burns Chronicle*.²³ MacDiarmid is acutely aware that this accessibility, this appeal of Burns's poems to all humanity, is in striking contrast to a common charge in his native Scotland, particularly in the literary columns of Scottish newspapers, that his own verse was difficult, and inaccessible both in respect to its themes and its choice of language. MacDiarmid gives a typical example of this level of newspaper criticism in a letter to George Ogilvie of 29 Dec. 1921, when he quotes *The Weekly Scotsman's* view of his early English poetry: "some of Mr. Grieve's sonnets are as difficult of access as the mountains which inspired them" (*Letters*, p. 69). One can see in some passages of MacDiarmid's personal correspondence how keenly he felt about the differences between Burns as the poet of all humanity, and a writer like himself, whose work was initially not generally

²²*Burns Chronicle*, 31 (Jan. 1922), 57.

²³"A Note on Some Foreign Translations of Burns," *Burns Chronicle*, 3rd Series, 8 (1959), 70-75.

popular in his own country. In a letter to R. E. Muirhead, about his activities as a Scottish Nationalist, MacDiarmid says:

In this connection it must be remembered that all my work hangs together—my poetry and my general propaganda are parts of each other: and I am unquestionably doing far more for Scotland when my activity issues in poetry rather than in any other form. Only that cannot be controlled; the spirit blows where it listeth. I have no silly personal pride; I do not write poetry—I am merely the vehicle for something far greater than myself. Without egoism therefore I know that Yeats, Mackenzie and others are right when they tell me that I am by far the greatest Scottish poet since Burns. After all what does that amount to: I may be that and still relatively negligible to Burns. In any case I know that all the best poetry I have in me is still to write. And it will take some writing—and this, too, makes me more defenceless in many ways than people not burdened with such a mission. Nor can I blame people for not recognising my quality as a poet. I stand at the very opposite pole of Scottish poetical genius from Burns: he was a great popular poet—I am essentially, and must be, an unpopular one; a poet's poet. Burns was so great in the one direction that Scotland needs a great poet now of precisely the opposite cast, and, if I am not that one (time alone can tell: my work will take another quarter of a century to estimate fairly) I shall at least have done a great deal towards preparing the way for him.

My task is to be unpopular—a fighter—an enemy of accepted things; not in any captious fashion but out of profound conviction, and while I may often mistake the promptings of my heart and be merely factitious, I have reason to know that the best of my work at all events is proving a powerful influence because it springs from the deeps of the destined (*Letters*, pp. 297-8).

This is a MacDiarmid, modest, insightful, listening to the promptings of his heart, enthused by the importance of his mission, the task of writing great national Scottish poetry that this particular Burnsian responds to. I am less at ease with the far more pugnacious, self assertive public MacDiarmid. I like to remind people that MacDiarmid published a poem in 1923 honoring Duncan McNaught, a long-time President of the Burns Federation:

Honour to him who hath established
A means to realise Burns' noblest dream
And haste the time whereof he caught the gleam
—He of the grey indomitable head
Whose service followed where the great song sped!

* * *

M'Naught, who follows you must surely try
To take his stand where, living, Burns had stood
Nor save on this foundation can he build.

(*Complete Poems*, II, 1224)

MacDiarmid also acknowledged in the dedication to the poem "Ballad of the Five Senses," first published in *Sangschaw* (1925) his appreciation of the efforts of Sir Robert Bruce, President of the Burns Federation, "to foster a

Scottish Literary Revival" (*Complete Poems*, I, 36). One could wish that this positive note in MacDiarmid's writing about Burns and the Burns movement had been more sustained, and that his later ambivalence and negativism about the poet and the movement much less prominent.

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