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AFTER MACDIARMID: CREATIVE WRITERS, THE CANON, AND THE ACADEMY

Alan Riach

When Hugh MacDiarmid sloganised in the 1920s, “Not Burns – Dunbar!” and “Not traditions – precedents!”, his project was twofold. As a writer, he wanted to make it new (no constrictions); as a literary Scot, he wanted to reclaim the full inherited file of his cultural history. One project establishes a canon, the other elides its imposition and takes from it, and from anything else, what useful examples it might. One led directly to the idea of the multi-faceted, multi-lingual “tradition” of Scottish literature, the other to creative writing that, as the cliché runs, “knows no bounds.”

Remember the context. Scottish literature in the 1920s was far from a defined subject in any curriculum. MacDiarmid, in both projects, was a demolition man sent in to bring down the establishment. Generally, at the time, the reading of Scottish literature was either by way of the idolatry of Burns or the Shakespeareanising of Scott: the comfortably approved radical, or the complacently engaging humanity-encompasser. Neither were very exciting to modernists. But leave the dynamics of original writing aside for a moment and consider the demands of scholarship.

The critical development and descriptions of Scottish literature as a canonical subject in the twentieth century, pointedly encouraged by MacDiarmid, were delivered pre-eminently by David Daiches, in the first, contextualising chapter of his *Robert Burns* (1950), in the 40-page booklet, *A Short Introduction to Scottish Literature* (1951) by Sydney Goodsir Smith, and in *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (1958) by Kurt Wittig. These were interventions in the tradition of the histories of Gaelic and vernacular Scottish literature (by J.S. Blackie, J.M. Ross, Nigel MacNeill, Hugh Walker, J.H. Millar and T.F. Henderson, for example) that had been growing in number since the nineteenth century.

Since the 1980s, the number has increased significantly. For example,

there are books by, edited or co-edited by, Roderick Watson, Cairns Craig, Marshall Walker, Douglas Gifford, Dorothy McMillan, Duncan Glen, Alasdair Gray, Sarah Dunnigan, Alan MacGillivray, Carla Sassi, Marco Fazzini, Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning, Murray Pitttock, Robert Crawford, Gerard Carruthers, and Aniela Korzeniowska.

But remember the context. These histories are published alongside histories of English literature and the established canon of – and by now, equally established interrogations of – English literature, as well as literally innumerable studies of specific aspects or periods within it. That canon comfortably accommodates T.S. Eliot, Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and Les Murray, and from this side of the border, Edwin Muir and Douglas Dunn. But almost always it determinedly excludes MacDiarmid.

In the 1970s, when MacDiarmid and Norman MacCaig visited schools and universities, they were often introduced as living specimens of the strange genus, poet. Their weirdness gave them a significant cachet. Surprising as it may seem these days, they were, so to speak, “cool.” A friend of mine recalls a visit to his school by MacDiarmid, who was introduced by the rather prim English teacher as “A poet – a real, living poet!” The story is that he opened his talk with the fine salvo, “English literature is nothing but merely an adjunct of British imperialism, and has no literary value whatsoever!” This shocked the teacher and delighted the students. I remember myself being introduced to a kirk elder by an aunt and uncle in the early 1980s, who proudly described me as studying for a PhD at Glasgow University. “And what are you working on?” asked the churchman. “Hugh MacDiarmid,” I replied. He literally stamped the floor. You could almost see the steam coming out of his ears. “What do you want to read that horrible man for?” he demanded. We were rather shocked.

It was not only MacDiarmid’s extremism, or the radical challenges of his poetry, or the slap in the face to establishment conventions of his polemical essays and critical revaluations, but the sense that he was delivering information from somewhere beyond the boundaries, that made his presence so important, and difficult to quantify in any long-term assessment of the history of Scotland and Scottish literature. Edwin Morgan, working alongside Alexander Scott at the University of Glasgow, Morgan in the English Department infiltrating Scottish literature by Robert Henryson and William Dunbar and the new American Beats, most memorably Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” and Scott the first head

of the newly-established Department of Scottish Literature in the 1970s – these men too were on the crest of a wave that broke between the weighty continuities of English literature (in Glasgow's very conservative ethos) and the break-up brought in via America (particularly through the teaching of Marshall Walker and Jack Rillie). Both men were also poets. The conventions of academic life at that time did not prize this especially. So the introduction of Scottish literature in this context was indeed, “making it new.” It was an enactment of both imperatives MacDiarmid had made banners of in the 1920s. Morgan and Scott were poets taking what they wanted to use in their poems (“Not traditions – precedents!”) but they were also introducing Scottish literature into the curriculum (“Not Burns – Dunbar!”). The native literature was an upstart, unknown mongrel, with all the appeal of novelty and sometimes, the force of the shock of the new.

Then Creative Writing arrived.

Conventional academic literature courses are predicated on period, genre or national traditions. We give contexts, theoretical approaches, and we do close reading. By contrast, most Creative Writing classes I've worked in involve reading material as far as possible without extensive reference to the historical period or the national traditions or even the biography of the writer. Instead, the priority is to see how the writing itself works directly on our imaginations, what techniques we can spot and learn from, what are its effects, how does its narrative develop, how are its characters created, how does its dialogue work, how is its humour conveyed, and, most especially, how is its tension initiated, sustained and resolved, in the language. These are, generally, courses built on the premise “Not traditions – precedents!”

Sometimes the same critical engagement is prioritised. We might always advise discrimination, asking first for an honest answer to: Do we like that? And then the more difficult one: Is it good?

Whether the answer is yes or no, there are a number of things we can describe about what it is we like or don't like and how we respond to these things. To what extent is our liking generated by associations we bring to the material? Are storytelling techniques in film and television so familiar now that we are impatient with writing and pages and books? Or turn that around: Are there things that writing can do that cannot be done in screen media?

How do we identify the difference between what we like and what is good? Sometimes there are things we don't like but we know they are technically exemplary, in some way. When for the New York Edition of

The American Henry James substitutes “He spoke as to cheek and chin of the joy of the matutinal steel,” in place of his original wording, “He was clean-shaved,” we know something impressive is going on, but some of us will like it more than others.

All this is valuable, but where does it leave Scottish literature?

In 1922, MacDiarmid wrote: “Scottish literature, like all other literatures, has been *written* almost exclusively by blasphemers, immoralists, dipsomaniacs, and madmen, but, unlike most other literatures, has been *written about* almost exclusively by ministers” and he gave the example of one so-called critic writing, “as a novelist, Robert Louis Stevenson had the art of rendering his writings interesting”.

Now this latter judgement is no longer true: a great body of perceptive, re-evaluating, contextualising critical writing on Scottish literature, especially since the 1980s, has brought about an enormous development in the potential for expanding the pleasures, insights and difficult kinds of worth in good critical reading of Scottish literature. It was not inappropriate in the 1920s, though. Yet whether literature is written “almost exclusively” by outlaws is dubious, unless you reverse the proposition to signify that literature can only be written by the wayward. It would not have applied accurately at any time, though. It is a lovely polemical assertion, but wrong when you think of Henryson, Scott, Buchan, Gunn, Grassie Gibbon, merely to state the obvious. The myth at the heart of this is that of the Romantic sinner, from Milton’s Satan to Melville’s Ahab, or Blake, reminding us, “All poets are of the Devil’s party”, or as MacDiarmid puts it, “The poet a Tarzan among apes, all / Suddenly, murderously, inimical.” That certainly applies to MacDiarmid at some stages of his long life, but it’s not a general truth for all writers, and certainly not for many, perhaps most, students on Creative Writing courses, or their teachers.

Working in institutions of tertiary education imposes constrictions of convention and professional practice. Some can be usefully challenged and broken, some demand respect. Knowing the difference is crucial, and being sensitive to when to break, when to observe, the rules, is equally crucial, because they change. In the early twenty-first century, creative writing is part of most university curricula, but the relation between what many people prioritise as an enhancement of the capabilities of self-expression, and what many others would prioritise as the critical understanding of the expression of others, is always in negotiation. In my submissions for assessment for Research Funding, I was encouraged to include a book of poems as well as scholarly essays. So far, so

ecumenical. But the key that unlocks both creative energy and scholarly application is the same: the intrinsic optimism of curiosity.

It is still true that the canon of Scottish literature – however we present that – will be much less familiar to non-Scottish readers or students than that of English or American literature. So the invitation stands, to address the proposition of the canonical as a matter of empowerment. Which is to say, it is also a matter of disempowering something else. If you understand the risk involved in that, what is at stake, and what it might cost, the yield might be all the greater – either in scholarship or in new writing. So much understanding will help, but as with all things, too much might drown or debilitate anyone. Yet to leave your selection of precedents entirely to arbitrary browsing, personal preference, or ego-driven choice, rather than respect for something beyond the self, will never be enough.

Two precedents to end with. Alan Sharp came from the port of Greenock on the Clyde estuary, a point of departure, a port to the wider world, the kind of place that might activate the imagination and help make possibilities real. He started from Greenock and wrote about it in two novels, but his last work was the screenplay for the film, *Dean Spanley* (2008). Set in Edwardian England, this is about a Dean of the Church who in a previous life was a spaniel. It is hard to believe imagination could travel so far as Sharp's does in this film. The acting by Peter O'Toole, Sam Neill, Brian Brown and Jeremy Northam is unimpeachable. There is no reference to where Sharp came from literally, but it's about what the imagination can do to help you in this life. As Peter O'Toole, as Fisk Senior, says at the end of the film: "Mustn't get too set in our ways."

To the extent that a knowledge and understanding, a sympathy and creative appetite with and for Scottish literature might activate that imagination, the value of the subject in its provision of precedents as well as traditions remains. Deeper understanding of distinctively Scottish cultural identity – or identities – remains vitally, widely, needed, and is always of decided political value. The confidence with which it might be used in new writing and the enthusiasm that might be brought to it, or that it might generate, remains largely untapped. The value of the relation between the demands of rigorous scholarship and the unpredicted dynamics of creativity, however, also remains, an unanswered, maybe unanswerable question. (Is it the thing? Or is it about the thing?)

This question was behind my own efforts as general editor of MacDiarmid's *Collected Works*, which began in 1992 and is still ongoing.

The first priority was to re-introduce MacDiarmid as a major modern poet to a readership that had not encountered or been only marginally aware of him. This job was done. The *Selected Poems* became a Penguin Modern Classic in 1994.

Then I wanted to ensure that out-of-print works were available once again, especially the autobiography, *Lucky Poet* (still one of the most underrated classics of twentieth-century literature). Even more importantly, I wanted to make available a vast amount of hitherto uncollected prose, essays on all sorts of topics, which were collected in three, increasingly massive, volumes entitled *The Raucle Tongue*. All these books were edited to make the work more accessible to a readership not exclusively of scholars, but potentially of other writers, historians, cultural analysts, essentially anyone interested in MacDiarmid, Scotland and the history of modernity. The variorum online edition of the “complete” collected edition still awaits the steel-bowelled scholar, but enough is now out there to demonstrate its value, if people care to read it. That depends partly on appetite, but partly, also, on fashion and politics.

MacDiarmid is easy to bash. Misleading superficial readings and caricatures are frequent, the historian-TV presenter Neil Oliver emphasising in his *History of Scotland* that MacDiarmid advocated “fascism,” as if that were the most important, and damnable, thing about him. The liabilities with MacDiarmid are unlikely to go away, and the give-and-take of making his work available to a broad readership, and offering scholarly contextualisation for its virtues as well as its excesses, is no less important in the twenty-first century than it was in the twentieth.

Another precedent might be noted here, though: the American poet Charles Olson. Even more than MacDiarmid, his writings – the major work, *The Maximus Poems*, his collected shorter poems, his essays and most of his critical writings – are all terrifically inchoate. Poems transcribed from manuscripts circle round the page like catherine wheel fireworks, single phrases, clusters of thoughts, scatter themselves over oceans of clear paper, flake-racks, wreaths or bouquets floating out on the ocean, perorations extend themselves beyond logic, by turns lyrical, light, but freighted, and sometimes, impenetrable, dense. Occasionally the left-hand margin is returned to, then the lines break away like the gulls in the first of the *Maximus* series, from:

the roofs, the old ones, the gentle steep ones
on whose ridge-poles the gulls sit, from which they depart,

And the flake-racks

of my city!

His writing is chaos, with the astonishing exception of his critical study of Melville, *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), the best single work ever written on Melville, a fantastically tight rhetorical construction from first word to last.

And yet, for all the massive irreducibility of this thoughtful, irrepressible man's wild poetry, and the sharpness of his provocations, what his work teaches, more, I think, than any of his rather staid and steady, scholarly poet contemporaries, is a profound respect for scholarship. He knew and his writings show, exactly what its value is. Robert von Halberg's critical study of Olson is aptly subtitled *The Scholar's Art*. That's a contradiction worth keeping in mind.

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