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Naomi Mitchison

A Self-Interview



I went with my father to Glasgow where, as one couldn't help being aware, most of the interesting life of Scotland was going on. He was either giving the Gifford Lectures or listening to them. If the latter, I would be sitting by him and digging him in the ribs when he went to sleep. I don't quite know why I found the place so exciting. It was extremely unpleasant at that time. I remember going with one of the medical officers of health to look at some of the old tenements on what I think are now parts of Strathclyde University but which were then single-ends up a common stair. I remember the medical officer saying to me, "Keep your hat on. They are apt to fall off the ceiling." And yet somehow I got a feeling that something was going on. It must have been about this time that I went to speak to the Glasgow Rationalist Association. I wonder if it still exists. I had an idea at that time of writing a sociological book about conditions in some of the cities and certainly Glasgow would have been one of them. But as it went on I found it was too big for me to handle.

That then, as far as I am concerned, dates the Scottish Renaissance back into the fifties. But why begin there or indeed any other place for it has been going on for long enough. In the nineties before I was born Rachel Annand Taylor was writing poems like "The Princess of Scotland." And Andrew Laing

had written "Lone Places of the Deer," and was happy that I as a child liked it so much and did not really care for the fairy tales which most people associated with him. Before that again there was Robert Louis Stevenson on whom I had been brought up. Indeed I had written one or two rather bad poems in Scots when I was hardly more than an adolescent in World War I. Many of the poets were women--Violet Jacob and later Marian Angus and Helen Cruikshank. But maybe their voices were too still to make it as representatives of the Scottish Renaissance.

I was certainly very clear about it by early 1930 when I wrote, "We have been warned." Here the imagery, the Campbell women, and the Gules Lion asleep are definitely out of Scotland. By that time my grandmother was dead and we were not going to Cloan for our holidays in the same way that we used to. We took houses several times in one place or another and I used to get to know the locals and to realize something of Scottish feeling. Again when the hunger marchers came to London during the terrible Depression of the early thirties, I asked for the Scottish contingent to come to supper at our house in Hammer-smith. We had a big room and as soon as they had eaten and drunk we started singing and dancing. Everyone lit up and I have seldom been in such good, well-danced lively eightsomes. So for me Scotland and its Renaissance is very much mixed up with left wing politics including the Labor Party. I stood for the Scottish universities (then a combined seat) in 1935. I quote one sentence from my election address which naturally I insisted on writing myself instead of having it written for me by a respectable agent. "I believe that the real and important aims of Scottish nationalism can only be attained and put into practice through socialism. Under the present system, Scotland could never hope for real freedom." Naturally I didn't get in. When they asked me to stand I put down a deposit of £100. I asked, "Is there any chance that I shall win?" The answer was "no." "But shall I lose my deposit?" Again the answer was "no." So I went ahead and had a very enjoyable time going round the universities, getting to know people, and talking mostly to audiences of nonvoters since the actual voters were probably much too respectable to come to a Labor Party meeting. It may be worth remembering that the first Home Rule Bill was tabled by the Socialists in March, 1928. It is a fairly mild bill but envisages a Scottish Parliament with considerable powers including the power of levying and collecting taxes, including income tax. Among those putting it forward were Tom Johnson, Kirkwood, Buchanan, and others. This was reprinted at the time of the Scottish Covenant but by that time everything was being overwhelmed by the preparations and finally the happening of World War II. It came in again to a later generation and in a later form.

By the late thirties, the Renaissance had probably got going. I must have read Hugh MacDiarmid's early poems about then, so much better than the late ones when he felt himself impelled by a rather curious muse to put the doctrines of Marx into lengthy verse statements. His small boy and my youngest girl were both at school in Killquhanity whose headmaster, such a nice man, always wore a rather bedraggled kilt, and where the children were very much in touch with the local farming community. Yet, I was not in the full swing of the thing until the days of Scottish convention starting, I suppose, in the early forties. I find old copies of the *Scots Independent* in which I talk about Scotland and Revolution and so on. This was a very muddling time for the Left with the Communist Party apparently split and the Labor Party not being very sure of itself. Then came the days of "King John," John MacCormick, who was the moving spirit in the Scottish Covenant movement. He got together on a non-party basis all sorts of people who were unhappy about Scottish affairs and wanted more or less self-government and this included many of the people whom one thinks of in connection with the Scottish Literary Renaissance. For instance, the declaration on Scottish affairs had people like Edna Muir MacKenzie, then busy on her big history, Compton Mackenzie, James Barke, myself and above all Neil Gunn. There were also various people who were certainly not of the left including Lady Glencoats and the Duke of Montrose. I used to see Compton Mackenzie from time to time and he was always being tremendously hospitable and informative about the younger writers. Nobody has quite taken his place. We had a byelection in Argyle in the early years of the war. At that time there was supposed to be a Party truce, but this did not include the Nationalists and we got William Power to stand as the Nationalist candidate. Here in Carradale we had a splendid campaign backed by a very diverse people including my eldest son who at that time was a devoted Communist, whether or not that was a good thing for Power! My own feeling is that if Power had really wanted to get in or if John MacCormick, a much more forcible and intelligent person, had stood himself instead of acting as agent, we would have had a Nationalist representative instead of waiting a whole generation for MacCormick's nice small boy whom I remember coming in to tea, rather shy, but who afterwards, as is the way with small boys, grew up!

I think the Covenant Movement must have come into full swing just after the War, with people like James Bridie and Boyd Orr very firmly behind it. Boyd Orr was a very impressive character and I got to know him fairly well, especially in his UNESCO days. His great white eyebrows could waggle with great effect from the platform of any meeting.

I got to know James Bridie well when Denis MacIntosh, who was

and is a Carradale fisherman, collaborated with me on a play about the fishing which was produced at the Citizens Theater in Glasgow in the days when the Citizens was still a people theater and gallery tickets cost only a shilling. Bridie was then one of the directors and his own brilliant plays and pantomime were produced there. I remember going to see him about *Spindrift*, the play which had been accepted. It was not working out completely right. Bridie drew a curve in the air and then another curve, saying, "Now it is like this, but it ought to be like that." I saw at once exactly what he meant and re-wrote so that it all came right. We had some marvelous actors, including Duncan Macrae and Roddie Macmillan who made big names for themselves later on. The Citizens was not exactly a luxury theater. Not only was it cold, drafty and dirty, but the dressing room accommodation was quite awful. I used to be there, sometimes with Denis and sometimes without, for the rehearsals and from time to time I had to walk back to the underground station across the Gorbals which had then not been pulled down and so-called rehabilitated. I was staying with Dr. Wattie as usual; we had been fellow members of the Royal Commission on Deprived Children and had been two signatories of the Minority Report, something which brings people together rather a lot. I would usually lose my way somewhere in the Gorbals and ask how to get to the station from the nearest character who was sitting on the pavement sharpening his razor on his broken bottle, and he would say, "Ach, come wi' me, hen," and off we would trot, discussing politics and perhaps the theater. The play was a tremendous success, but soon afterwards the fashion changed and none of our later plays were accepted by the Citizens. We did, however, do a joint book called *Men and Herring*, a documentary about the Loch Fyne herring fishing. For me, Carradale and the herring fishing was very much tangled with the whole thing--the blue eyes and the blue jerseys. I wrote a long poem about the fishing which I still think is one of the best things I wrote.

But by that time I had read Neil Gunn's *Silver Darlings* and that was a beginning of long friendship with him, partly carried out in a series of letters and partly through our meetings, usually in Inverness after I became a member of the Highland Panel in 1947. We talked widely about people and writing but most of all about Scotland and what being Scots really amounted to. I don't think writers ever talk about books which are in progress because they don't really know what is happening to them and once a book has been published it ceases to be deeply interesting and yet in a way one perhaps always writes for some special audience. I know, for instance, that Neil wrote *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*, one of his best books, specially

for me. He told me so afterwards and I felt it as soon as I actually began to read the book. Once we had a Highland Panel meeting on 31 October--meetings were almost always on the last Friday in the month. Now, I wasn't going to miss Halloween for any government department, so I managed to acquire suitable male clothing and then went off to tease the secretariat. I remember being finally thrown out of the hotel by the porter who said they didn't want any more boys coming in. I then took refuge in the car park at the back since whom should I find in a parked car but Neil, perhaps calming down and even having a spot of shut-eye after a session in the bar, but very welcoming to a stray female even in man's clothing which did not really seem to worry him! I think he always felt that however much we might disagree, we were always secure that we loved one another. After Daisy died he was very lost and I think it made a difference having some woman to whom he could turn with some of his troubles. I think he felt with some of his books that the heights were all right and what he had intended, but that sometimes some of the characters took it into their heads to talk too much. I sympathized with this as it often happened to me.

Yet I don't think I knew many of the writers really well. Though I had read most of his books, I didn't know Eric Linklater at all but when I heard he was going to be at the first international PEN conference after the war I wrote to him and said I was thinking of going and could we go together. I hadn't, of course, been outside the British Isles for some five years and felt quite dizzy at the prospect of going to Switzerland. Eric was then living in Orkney and I still have his letter of reply which says, "I don't speak any of those foreign languages except a little old fashioned American and a few very rough words in Hindustani. I certainly have no intention of trying to speak French or German--because it just encourages them. And after all we did win the war." He then discusses methods of getting there, saying, "I've told Cooks in Edinburgh to get a passage on the second. I suppose one has to go from Norfolk or Croydon or one of those other ridiculous suburban stations." He goes on to talk about arrangements. Clearly I had been rather bothered and thinking that the conference would be held in French. He ends, "If you will insist on addressing the conference in one of the native languages I think you should choose Romansch which is, I believe a sort of Swiss." In fact we had a marvelous journey together and with him as a companion I ceased to be nervous about flying or even about dealing with the conference when I got there. I still think his war book, *Private Angelo*, is one of the very best. If one could induce him to talk about the war he was fascinating. He told us once about how he came to a castle in Northern Italy during the break-

through at the end of the Italian phase of the war. Some caretaker seized on him and said there were pictures there, "multo antico" and that he must now be prepared to look after them. He went to the room where they all were, all stacked against the walls, prepared to find something worthless and there when he looked were the pictures from Florence. He said he couldn't really believe that they were the genuine ones until he stooped and kissed the Primavera on the lips. And then he said, "When she kissed me back I knew it was the real thing." Probably he is the person who was really responsible for rescuing them though I doubt he was ever given the full credit for it. It wasn't until later that I got to know his wife Marjorie. We were fellow members of the Highland and Island Consultative Council and were both thrown off at the same time, presumably because we asked too many awkward questions and so had become an administrative nuisance.

In 1946 Scottish Convention started a small monthly magazine price 3d called *Forum*. I seem to have written in it quite a lot and so did various people who were deep in educational matters. Jimmy Maxton had just died and this was a considerable blow. Whether he could have made a good Scots leader is something else again but he was at least a great figurehead. When I look at the membership of the National Committee I don't see much in the way of writers but I do see one name which matters and that is Miss L. R. Annand--granddaughter of Rachel Annand Taylor. She was then a young painter and it was mainly through her that I got to know the work of some of the younger Scottish painters who were certainly part of the Renaissance. Ferguson was living in Glasgow and, of course, Margaret with him running the Scottish Ballet and various classes. She taught me the exercises which I have been doing ever since! They were both very conscious of being Scots and I think this is clear in Ferguson's later pictures. But there were also younger ones, especially Crosbie whose work I much liked. Others were Fleming and Crawford and the young Moroco. But the Glasgow painters were beginning to be quite well known and it seemed fairly clear that Glasgow rather than Edinburgh was the main center at that time. The East Coast painters and especially Joan Eardley had begun to work but were still at the beginning. Morrison was painting in Glasgow and had not yet moved to his East Coast landscapes. Some of the others whom one knows well, especially perhaps the ones who are more often seen in Edinburgh, were still at art school. An earlier generation, for instance Cahoon, had moved to London. Though I think one still notes a certain Scottishness about them. Certainly Wyndham Lewis noted it and spoke to me about it. Things were always printed, for instance a threepenny "Blueprint for Scotland." Most of this was done by

Bill MacLellan, as charming a rogue as ever went bankrupt and lost his authors' manuscripts. One of the great Glasgow meeting places was the Saltire Society Club. During the later forties and into the fifties, the Saltire Society was a very potent bit of Scots awakening and perhaps the general Renaissance Movement owes more to it than to any other body. This club house in Glasgow was a great meeting place for all of us and provided a decent cup of coffee and scones. For some reason it came to an end--probably it didn't meet planning requirements, there wasn't sufficient fire precaution or something like that. After it moved to Edinburgh it gradually became more respectable and less influential or so at least it seems to me, though it still does a certain amount and its awards for architecture and so on are quite important. Louise Annand and I used to go to the Glasgow club a great deal and meet people, including no doubt some of the young poets, but I don't really remember very much about them. Probably coffee was less in their line than stronger drinks. All sorts of literary magazines came and went, and more or less the same set of people wrote for all of them and were paid little or nothing. But that perhaps matters less if one feels that one is part of a main movement which may be going further than the written word. However one of the most important perhaps was the old *Forward* when it was edited by Emrys Hughes. I used to write for that very often and once got into terrible trouble because I had in trying to tease Douglas Young over his spell in prison inadvertently offended MacIntyre the then chairman (I think) of the Nationalist Party who sued for libel. I wanted to fight it but my Edinburgh cousins who were cautious writers to the Signet advised me to settle out of court. I had made real friends with Douglas Young at this point. I find no letters from him but this doesn't mean that we didn't correspond probably at great length. I have many of his books and he used occasionally to come to our flat in London and talk classics with Dick who very much appreciated his translations into and out of ancient Greek. We saw a great deal of one another during the preparations for the visit by the delegation from the Authors World Peace Association to the Soviet Union. This was a curious body partly of slightly batty elderly people and only too rosy view of what it necessarily must be like in the Soviet Union and a lot of younger people, including Doris Lessing, many of whom were devoted Communists. I was on the Executive Committee and sometimes a bit worried, but the visit to the Soviet Union, though not I think as much of a success as we supposed it was, did produce some interesting reports, including Douglas Young's paper headed "A Scots Socialist's Impression of Russia." Compton Mackenzie and Neil Gunn had both signed the Authors World Peace Appeal. We went to Moscow and

Leningrad and Douglas looked so exactly like everybody's idea of a distinguished Russian professor that he was often taken for one, especially by other Russians. He spoke a little Russian, and indeed he was the only one of the delegation who did so. By the end it was clear that we in the delegation had spent so much time quarreling with one another that we had hardly any time to discuss controversial matters with our Russian opposite numbers who were in effect the Russian respectable government-sponsored writers, not necessarily the best, but those who were thought to be most "responsible." We all went to see Marshak who had done delightful translations of Burns into Russian and who was definitely a grand old man and not being bullied for what may have been some hot out-of-line remarks from time to time. I think we were all rather dead observers of the Russian scene and had not taken in the impact of Stalinism. But when one goes anywhere one tends to see what one wants to see and we didn't want to see any of that. Later on I talked it over with Douglas but it was the kind of thing that happened and he always said one shouldn't worry too much. I have a gorgeous photograph of him riding a wooden horse on a Russian merry-go-round with myself on another! I went once to stay with him at Tayport and to see the pottery which Heather, his wife, was making and very beautiful it was though she used to get rather annoyed with people who said they would like a bit more of the same glaze as the one they had had already. That would have been dull. The thing I remember most clearly is that they had a most unusual bathroom, a really large room with the bath in the very middle which for some reason is very disconcerting.

At that time poems were occasionally printed even in the ordinary Glasgow papers. *The Scottish Art and Letters*, *Modern Reading*, *The New Alliance*, and so on. The BBC was at that time rather doubtful about things Scottish and unwilling to take risks. There were other people who for various reasons did not want to take risks and who wrote on the whole under pseudonyms. This includes "Adam Drinan" [Joseph Macleod] but I think the secret must be fairly well known by now. I always felt that he was one of the best and most forceful of the poets. Again we corresponded. I met Maurice Lindsay, as of course we all did. He was always chugging round discovering people and seeing that the right ones got into the Scottish Renaissance category. I am sure he did a useful work but I can't say that I always agreed with him. Of the actual war poets far the best to mind was Hamish Henderson who was much more of a real soldier than most of them. Some of his best things are pure army and therefore not very publishable but his "Farewell to Sicily" is as good as they come. I have heard it sung often now and it always comes through superbly. So, I think, does his "John MacLean

March" for it is essentially a ballad with a tune at the back of it. My own feeling is that such people are as important, or more important than the "art" poets. This reminds me of Louis MacNeice's bagpipe music which is also a gorgeous bit of ballad-writing. It was taken up for a short time by the Carradale choir and made a wonderful song, but I am afraid that some of them found it a little bit shocking and so it was dropped in favor of more respectable Gaelic.

I did not meet the Muirs until some time later when I went down to stay for an evening at Newbattle Abbey College. I think he and Willa were having quite a happy late time there, feeling both a sense of security and a pleasing relationship with the students who, I thought, felt very warmly towards them, realizing that Edwin was one of the great people of their own Scotland. He was always very anxious to help anyone who showed any sort of poetic or aesthetic talent and would tell people just where to send their poems and how to deal with the world of publishers and editors. He was also, of course, very much in touch with poets in other countries. Like so many of the Scottish poets he was perhaps more appreciated in Europe than in Edinburgh or certainly in England. There was, and I suppose is, a London-Oxford-Cambridge triangle of literature in England which can be rather over-narrow though by now no doubt the red-brick universities are in on this and these have broadened the triangle without ever coming as far north as Scotland. Meanwhile, of course, I was writing myself and much of it was very Scottish indeed. Some of it was quite local like the play "A Matter Between Macdonald" which we acted in the village hall and the long poem "The Knife" which I wrote gradually over the years starting, I suppose, in 1940 when I first got to know Duncan Monroe, the forester, and still being re-written years and years later. I also wrote a book, *The Bull Calves* which never got much publicity nor sold very well, but it came out at a period of great publishing difficulty and rather disappeared. Perhaps it wasn't quite in the line for anything, but the historical notes which I put in were, I believe, of considerable value and represented a great deal of work. I read a lot at that time and in fact had a bigish library of the 18th century Scottish texts. Later I tried to write another Scottish book about my Trotter and Stuart ancestors, Tories all, at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. But this somehow has never met with any approval, though I think it is historically of some interest. Perhaps I should re-write it.

However that is, I think enough about myself and maybe I allowed myself to be deflected too much into other politics. As far as I remember, the Scottish Convention as a movement dropped out round about the fifties, at least I cannot find any

of its papers after that, and *Forward* was taken over in 1960 and joined up with *Socialist Commentary*. This meant that it was no longer a Clydeside paper and all the liveliness and rebelliousness of people like Emrys Hughes ceased to be part of it. It had certainly become too respectable for people like me to write in it, but maybe the main difficulty was money. It had struggled on for so long on hand-outs. We did a lot of things for free in those days. There was a pamphlet called *Re-educating Scotland* written by Kilgour, Robert Britton, and myself, which I believe had some effect on the new proposals for Scottish education and which in fact was widely circulated. I also wrote a pamphlet just called *Highlands and Islands* and published by the Unity Publishing Company in Glasgow. This was a first attempt at producing any kind of plan for the Highlands and was, I think, sold at one of the Labor Party conferences. However all this was practical dog's body work and has, I suppose, little to do with the higher flights of the Scottish Renaissance.

I got to know Neil Gunn in 1941. This was because I had been much upset by a rather horrid review of *The Silver Darlings* in *The New Statesman*. I thought the best thing to do was to write a review myself in the *Campbeltown Courier* not that this perhaps did much good to him in a literary sense but it may have sold a few copies. I had sent him also a copy of my story "Five Men and a Swan" which had been turned down by *New Writing*. I shall quote from these letters, all of 1941, in the order in which he wrote them. We were clearly feeling towards one another, trying to find out what sort of person the other one was, and what their views would be on politics, writing and so on. I quote from the first letter written on 6th March 1941: "You raise such thought in your letter by suggesting that some of us in Scotland interested in such matters should keep in touch. I do agree. For many years now I have given most of my spare time to politics behind the nationalist scenes mostly and indeed over this broad northland there is no one with whom I talk literary or kindred affairs." He then says a lot of nice things about my story and adds: "I think that just this kind of work is creative work in contradistinction to the very brilliant work of many writers who tell us so factually with such sensitive insight and sympathy all about the intricacies and relationships of ourselves and our societies. High talent with a good eye too and a gift for reporting can put it over us any time. But here we are sort of getting into another dimension and without talking highfalutin about symbols and psycho stuff I got a sort of notion that the surrealists are up to something somewhere. If I was in the hunt it's this swan rather than Proust's one that I'd like to keep

my eye on." Then he begins to talk about Gaelic. "Only if you remembered words and phrases for my father had it but then I happen to be of a generation for whom Gaelic was supposed to be a drawback in life. We laughed at it as outlandish. Over-propaganda was very subtle. God what crimes have been committed in the name of propaganda! Yet it is not just so easy as all that as I could show. These particular stories I sort of know in my blood and their rhythm and their kind of wonder. The life was communal, or rather that anarchism where the common social good was heightened by the intensifying of the individual. The disentangled values here would be interesting and then to translate those values into our age." He then talks more about my swan story and about a poem which I sent him, probably an early version of "The Knife." He adds, "Many thanks for letting me see these manuscripts. They hearten me for it's not much I've seen springing after a lot of digging one way or another." He also sent me a one-act play on sea fishing. It was acted by a team from Fort William and carried through to the all Scotland final of the Scottish Community Festival where it was last knocked out. The next letter of 30th March--I had sent him clearly some other poems and complained about my own treatment by the English highbrows.--He says, "I'm not sure that I follow you in your references to highbrows and the jumps on you for your writing. I wish I could but my ignorance here is very great as indeed it is of all learned literary matters. To me your poem is very highbrow I am afraid full of the bare bones for example that T. S. Eliot seems to think we should hunt these days. Full too of quite a remarkable subtlety in rhyme and rhythm. I can hardly imagine--this is the bare bone that interests me--that one of your fishermen would really think it poetry. You're Left or Marxist highbrow--wherein lies his quarrel with the poem? Not with the content. So with what? Any other particular specimen of highbrow? You see I'm bogged." In another letter he gets back on to the problem of the British Marxist highbrow. "It does really begin to look as if their street working class story is wanted as a thrill to the non-working class intelligentsia. Not new at all but rather horrible version of eternal snobbism. And I cannot see how they can found their view on the allegedly new literary needs of Leftism for when we go right bang left into the surrealist camp that founds explicitly on the Marxian dialectic we find the leaders of the camp deploring these working class stories and demanding in prose poesy in the myth--in short your swan. If they had said they appreciated your swan but that in their opinion you hadn't brought it off I could at least acknowledge their criticism however I might disagree. It's really pretty terrible. And in addition as you say it's run by Londoners with all that

implies for us."

I must then have sent him my long poem about the fishing because he writes: "The way your fishing poem was made is very interesting and the personal elements involved must have made it good fun besides. The whole affair must have been a grand experiment. My use of the word highbrow (which I am not dropping!) needs some explaining. Poetry to get over to them needs in itself some of the emotional value of an old Gaelic song. Direct rhythm and a sort of unconditional power. When you say that 'most of my stuff is fairly emotional' (as the reason for the highbrows sitting on you)--well I wonder. (I don't mean I wonder about the highbrows.) Your poetry may deal with emotional state or condition but its restraint as it were is held in a strong intellectual pattern. This sometimes gives to your lines almost a staccato effect, the effect of powerful statement and the reader has to let himself get caught by the tremendous reserves of feeling between the lines. I exaggerate there perhaps in order to make my point--a purely personal one of course so I won't ask your forgiveness. I am merely trying to get to the difficulties of men who as you say read Annie S. Swan with eagerness. Now Annie S. Swan as literature may be pretty poor stuff but she does supply form for romantic movement--the same as the surrealist highbrows are after! They fill in her stuff with their own stark emotions. If you could provide the vehicles surely as Annie then we'd be back once more to the old ballad splendor. And then by the Lord we'd be going places. All this is just talk with maybe something floating about somewhere."

He writes also specifically about the review in *The New Statesman* by Anthony West. "What a scope it offers cleverish, liverish superior lads of the new intellectual world pandit pink complexions and all. I'm sorry I never tumbled to the real meaning of your highbrows until now! Cheers. I have read the novel reviews in the *N.S.* always with an irritated feeling of their vindictive waspishness. The only writer who knew his type well was D. H. Lawrence but he showed how they live in their heads--and he knew their heads. Their reaction to a book like mine--and inevitably to much of your work--is pretty much like the reaction of a certain kind of homosexual to straight sex. Dealing at such length with such crude humans I particularly sinned in not making them brutal--and so satisfying the subtle sadism of the stickit intellectual. And if I say it as much it is not because they have attacked me--they haven't deigned to notice me so far--but because they have attacked good men with so utter lack of magnanimity of the warmth in praise or denunciation out of which light comes that in some sensitive really creative mind there must occasionally be

induced despair. I may be unfair to Anthony in this for I am really referring to a type I know. But oh Lord that's not what I meant by highbrow when I mentioned folk like yourself or T. S. Eliot.

"All the same the book has had some extremely generous reviews--in the *Times Lit. Sup.* by Wilford Gibson of the *Manchester Guardian* (he went all out for it) by Richard Church in *John O'London's* (enthusiasm for it) so I'm not complaining. However we have here in the *N.S.* instance something I have often felt in the *N.S.* generally and in many leftish advanced movements not a generous constructive or destructive spirit but an arid nagging. And after a time one does get bored by it; it tickles the intellect into a spurious superficial interest or excitement. It is clever cunningly analytical apparently omniscient but it is essentially sterile. After an overdose one wants to go to sea to haul an honest net!"

And he again goes on to talk some more about his book and about the difference between the bothy system of the big farms in Scotland and the crofting system with its young fellows and girls gathered together to summer sheathings was very marked in social ways. He was always deeply interested in the functioning of society and especially, of course, the functioning of Highland society which he managed himself to put across better than anybody else. He talks, too, about the old Highland dancing and all sorts of other things. Clearly I wrote to him in great detail about Carradale, about my friendships there, about the fishermen and the boats everything else. In fact after a few months without ever meeting one another we had become very close friends. In another letter written in the middle of July that year [1941] he writes: "I was interested envious indeed to read of all your practical affairs harvest, river and sea. Here where we are the sea is some little distance away and not a fishing sea at that. We live in the middle of a farm but not our farm. When I threw up my job pension and all and bought a little cruising boat and set off to explore the west from the water we found when we came back that we had no house because we had sold it before we left. The ideal (horrid word) was a small house something a little bigger than a croft near the sea with a bit of a boat in the offing. But though we scoured the country devil a place like that was to be had so we had to rent this place where I can't get doing things. But I'm afraid I'm not much of a natural writer though I've taken to it a bit. It would for example be quite impossible for me to sit down and write what I thought of some modern poets if I wrote in reachable distance of anyone's private river mouth and it dry weather! So I quite understand how it comes that you are not writing much. It is sort of difficult

to live and write unless as I say you are a born writer. Which is very vague for folk have different ideas how to live thank God. The city nearly came into my mind there. But I don't seem to be getting at this modern poetry which is what your poem prompted me to do. In short I don't know of anything I can have to say that can have much value. But I always know when I like a thing and generally why. And I like your poem because it's direct and living it has emotion and not intellect only. Since I last wrote you I visited a man who gave me quite a batch of poetry books by modern fellows-- Day Lewis, Auden, MacNeice, Ezra Pound. I've read 'em all but find in me no particular desire to read 'em again. Day Lewis produces an interesting effect thought and intellect are so busy compressing what he has to say to a richness that the total effect is just wordy. An awful nemesis of added dryness can overtake the too agile intellect. MacNeice uses his words like a poet and has a poet's vision of the thing but he seems to have nothing positive to say. I know that that no doubt properly interprets the age. But does it really? And in any case does it justify the poet?" He then goes on to discuss the Gaelic grammatical structure which I tried to use in some of my poems. He is critical about particular uses but adds, "The fact is that your theme and rhythm are right the rhythm that comes out of the land you are in. It is this sort of rhythm that forever cuts Yeats out of the true English tradition."

However he did get something out of one poet; he says, "I had a curious experience that I'd like to tell you about. The last of the poetic batch was poems by Rainer Maria Rilke translated by Leishman. As I had heard he was 'obscure' I merely thought that he was the other fellow's plus. And then I began stoically to read and oh sweet Heaven never have I known the exhilaration of poetry like it these twenty years. How lovely how supreme! I couldn't get over it for days. And when I thought that this was only a translation of that! When I knew as it were by instinct that the inner poetic essence was untranslatable I yet could almost swear I got some of that essence as you hear an overtone you can't catch. In each poem was the presence of the man himself. This was great good luck and if I could poach one of your salmon first I might some day even think of writing another novel! So powerful is the real thing in literature when you meet it! You haven't to fill your rifts with ore. But you may have to do a bit of private distilling yet before you'll make us drunk. But faith you're in the right way of it. And I salute you. And may you forgive me."

You see perhaps that I was telling him a lot about my own private troubles both in writing and in life. He does add one other thing, "As for nationalism being like a worm in front of

a steamroller I disagree entirely. Not about the steamroller. But men will get fed to the teeth with the steamroller. After all it's the light in our own surroundings and variety and local fun and games we're after--every normal sane man."

So this perhaps gives you a taste of Neil Gunn, of the beginnings of my friendship with him that went on so sweetly over the years.

Carradale House, Carradale