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Studies in Scottish Literature

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Kurt Wittig

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ADDRESS EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE TO:

Editor, *Studies in Scottish Literature*
Department of English
University of South Carolina
Columbia SC 29208 (USA)

ADDRESS ORDERS FOR CURRENT AND BACK ISSUES TO:

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THE HUGH MACDIARMID MEMORIAL TRUST

Hugh MacDiarmid died last year, and a number of people in Scotland, anxious to provide a fitting memorial to the founder of the Modern Scottish Literary Renaissance, have formed the Hugh MacDiarmid Memorial Trust, one of whose principal objectives is to raise money to establish a Hugh MacDiarmid Chair of Scottish Literature at a Scottish University. The amount required will be at least \$400,000.

Those already associated with the Trust include many prominent literary, academic and political figures, the Scottish Arts Council, the Saltire Society and the Scottish Trades Union Congress. The Trustees are: Professor Sir Kenneth Alexander, N. Buchan, M.P., Alex Clark, Professor David Daiches, Sir Alexander Gibson, Michael Grieve, Lord Kilbrandon, Michael McGahey, James Milne and Alex Scott.

Hugh MacDiarmid was a poet whose stature was international, and in North America his contribution to literary developments was widely recognized. The trustees of the appeal are most anxious that those in the United States who wish to be associated with the provision of a fitting memorial should have that opportunity. To this end a group to be called American Friends of the Hugh MacDiarmid Memorial Trust has been formed under the chairmanship of G. Ross Roy. The University of South Carolina is the sponsoring institution of this group. Its function is to collect and forward contributions to the Trust. Members of the Trust are confident that Hugh MacDiarmid's contribution to world letters will elicit a generous response.

Application has been made to register the American Friends of the Hugh MacDiarmid Memorial Trust as a non-profit tax-exempt body, thus making contributions tax-exempt. These should be sent to

Professor G. Ross Roy
English Department
University of South Carolina
Columbia SC 29208.

Studies in Scottish Literature



Hugh MacDiarmid (1892–1978)



"Back to Dunbar, not Burns" was the rallying call of Hugh MacDiarmid and as usual with this complex genius it was a statement which needs to be considered from several points of view. Unfortunately the statement has been misinterpreted by some as a denigration of Burns, but this is not the case at all. MacDiarmid has written and lectured on Burns many times, stressing the fact that he represents the end of a great poetic tradition, not the beginning of one. He particularly appreciated Burns's songs and wrote in the introduction to a collection of them which he edited, "these songs are immortal ...through them Burns has an international acceptance no other poet equals."

Dunbar represents a beginning, not an end, and MacDiarmid no doubt felt that if Scottish poetry was to have a revival it must make a clean break with the post-Burns poetic and Kailyard traditions which lingered well into the twentieth century. Dunbar was of a heroic age in Scottish history, a time when Scotland was an independent nation, and this surely appealed to a founder of the Scottish Nationalist Party. So the call went out for a new poetry no longer shackled to what was a dead tradition by the 1920s and the Scottish Renaissance was born. *Northern Numbers*, *The Scottish Chapbook*, *The Voice of Scotland* and other periodicals under MacDiarmid's editorship became the proving ground of the newly vitalized litera-

ture while at the same time with his own books, *Sangschaw*, *Penny Wheep* and *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* he burst upon the front rank of poets of the English-speaking world, and for some years before his death he was undoubtedly the greatest living "English" poet.

In later years he would have smiled wryly at the use of the word, for his whole endeavor had been to make of the literature of Scotland something unmistakably Scottish, a goal which he felt was not inconsistent with its being international. He thus saw no contradiction in supporting both the Scottish Nationalist Party and the Communist Party. His use of the Scots language even was not tied to the dialect of any single region--he has said that his interest in the use of Scots came about through his reading of Jamieson's *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Tongue* which reinforced what he called his own "lapsed vocabulary."

Fame and even recognition were slow in coming to MacDiarmid. Edinburgh University conferred an LL.D. on him in 1957, Dublin not long before his death; no collected edition of his poetry appeared until 1962. He was not given the Nobel Prize he richly deserved, but here he is in good company. He has become part of a great triumvirate: Dunbar-Burns-MacDiarmid.

GRR