

1993

On Editing MacDiarmid's Complete Poems

W. R. Aitken

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Aitken, W. R. (1993) "On Editing MacDiarmid's Complete Poems," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 28: Iss. 1.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol28/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

W. R. Aitken

On Editing MacDiarmid's *Complete Poems*

In 1974 there was published a rather curious anthology entitled *The Booklover's Almanac*, selected and arranged by Robert Brittain. The compiler of this "literary anthology for all who love books and reading" believed that readers might welcome "an almanac that would identify each day in the year as the anniversary of some event in the history of literary activity." You may wonder what this bit of miscellaneous information has to do with Hugh MacDiarmid, and what in particular with the subject of editing MacDiarmid's *Complete Poems*. The connection with the poet is that Hugh MacDiarmid is assigned a day in Brittain's *Almanac*. Not as you might have thought his birthday, 11th August; MacDiarmid's day is the 13th of February, for on that day in 1926, as the compiler reminds us:

excerpts from *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* appeared in the *Glasgow Herald*, several months before the publication of the complete poem in book form, foreshadowing the advent of the Scottish Movement under the leadership of a poet to rank with Burns and Dunbar.

And the connection with the editing of MacDiarmid's *Complete Poems* is that the question of identifying and assigning titles to separable poems within what MacDiarmid called the "gallimaufry"¹ of *A Drunk Man* is just one of the many problems an editor of MacDiarmid must face.

¹*Gallimaufry*: Fr. (*galimafrée*), hash, ragout; O.Sc., a medley (1573-84); Sc., a hotch-potch, a dish of varied ingredients (1900).

The six short extracts published in the *Glasgow Herald* were separately titled and were described as "representative selections, which can be read as separate poems, although in their proper context they form essential parts of the development of the scheme of the book." When the book was published nine months later, in November 1926, there were no individually titled sections, although the poet marks a break or change of mood or direction in the structure of the poem through the typographic device of the ellipsis, inserting three points, three full stops, where the break occurs.

But in 1934 MacDiarmid's *Selected Poems*, chosen by the poet himself and published at the incredible price of one shilling—48 poems for one shilling!—included eight passages from *A Drunk Man* under individual titles, some of which have become well known as poems in their own right, such as "The Common-Riding," "Farewell to Dostoevski" and "Yet Hae I Silence Left." And again, in MacDiarmid's *Collected Poems*, published by the Macmillan Company in New York in 1962, and in a revised edition in 1967, the poem was printed as a sequence of 59 poems, each with its own title. It has since become known that this treatment of the poem was suggested by the publisher's editor, and that MacDiarmid accepted the suggestion, or at least acquiesced, and supplied the titles for the separate sections. But he later regretted this decision, and it is not surprising, then, that all later printings of *A Drunk Man* print the poem without titled divisions.

But the question of dividing or not dividing the text of *A Drunk Man*, and how to draw the reader's attention to those sections of the poem that have become known as separate poems, is not one of the more difficult problems facing MacDiarmid's editor; opinion—including the poet's own—is substantially on one side.

Perhaps I should digress for a moment to explain how I came to be involved in this work. I had first met Christopher Grieve in Edinburgh in 1933 and over the next five years I had met him frequently and had visited him—and Valda and the young Michael—in Whalsay on a number of occasions when in 1938 he asked me to be the manager of his new periodical, *The Voice of Scotland*. MacDiarmid was in Shetland and the quarterly was to be printed in Dunfermline, where I was working as a librarian. And so I became responsible, in various ways, for the periodical's first five issues. MacDiarmid sent me the copy for the issue; I prepared it for the printer, read and corrected the proofs, made up the paging of each issue, looked after the advertising, circularized potential subscribers, mailed each issue as it was published, and kept the accounts.

Thirty-five years later MacDiarmid told me that his *Complete Poems* were to be published by Timothy O'Keefe, and he asked if I would see the publication through the press, in association with his son, Michael. This would involve tracing the poems published in a wide range of periodicals

over more than fifty years. I understood that the work was to be undertaken anonymously; Michael and I were merely doing for the poet what he would have done for himself, had he felt able. Just as I had stood in for MacDiarmid anonymously in seeing *The Voice of Scotland* through the press, when distance prevented him from doing so himself, so now we would stand in for the poet when age constrained him. The condition of anonymity I accepted willingly, out of respect and admiration for the poet and affection for the man. No one was more surprised than I to find my name with Michael Grieve's on the title-page of the *Complete Poems*.

Thus, in editing the *Complete Poems* we were carrying out the expressed wishes of the poet: the arrangement of the volumes, their presentation from Author's Note to Glossary and Indexes, are as he wanted them to be. MacDiarmid's views were very definite: there should only be a glossary conflated from those he had supplied for the separate books drawn upon, and no additional explanatory annotations or elucidations at all, and he certainly did not want any scholarly notes anywhere. At another time he ruled out bibliographical information relating to the poems hitherto uncollected: such information he thought inappropriate in the *Complete Poems*; it should be reserved for a separate bibliography and published later.

One reviewer's headline described the *Complete Poems* exactly: "MacDiarmid as he wanted to be seen." In the review he wrote:

In time the scholars will get to work on a bigger, more cumbersome edition. Meanwhile this has the authority of the poet himself. . . . It does without editorial comment or extensive textual annotations, but then it was meant to be a book by a living poet and MacDiarmid certainly lives through these pages.²

Sadly Hugh MacDiarmid did not live to see his *Complete Poems* published—they appeared two months after his death—but he did see all the material, collected and ready for the printer, he wrote and signed his Author's Note, and he saw the proofs at different stages.

The remit was to present as far as possible all the published poems of Hugh MacDiarmid—there was never any thought of printing poetry still in manuscript—with typographic and other errors corrected. By his own admission MacDiarmid was one of the world's worst proof-readers and a bibliographer's nightmare. Throughout the long process of correcting these typographic and other errors and eliminating the defects of earlier proof-reading I was in constant touch with the poet to ascertain his wishes and record his decisions.

²Alan Bold, *The Scotsman*, 2 December 1978.

The poems were to be arranged book by book chronologically by date of publication, and within a book in the order in which the poems had been first presented in that book, with the addition of a final section to include, in their own chronological order by date of first publication, poems hitherto uncollected. This may at first sight seem to be a complicated and difficult arrangement—but it has its own logic, and it was the poet's choice. It presents the published poems of Hugh MacDiarmid in the order in which a systematic reader of his published books would have found them in his successive books of poetry and prose, and it presents, in that final section, his uncollected poems as they were published, year by year.

The correction of typographic and other errors involved, for example, the restoration of a line inexplicably omitted from one of the *Dìreadh* poems, the checking of quotations from Euripides and Mistral and Wicksteed's translation of Dante, the insertion of the keyword missing from the passage the poet quotes in *In Memoriam James Joyce* from C. M. Doughty's *The Dawn in Britain*. A number of words had been misspelled; others had been "corrected" erroneously by helpful editors or printers, and these errors had sometimes been perpetuated in later printings. And so on.

Perhaps I might discuss two examples in some detail. In *A Drunk Man*, in all editions prior to the *Complete Poems*, there occurs the phrase "Branksome's deidly barrow." The reference is to Flodden and the phrase is borrowed from a poem by J. B. Selkirk (pseud. of James Brown, of Selkirk), "Selkirk After Flodden," which MacDiarmid knew and had quoted approvingly (in 1925) in one of his *Contemporary Scottish Studies*. The passage in Selkirk's poem runs:

A' the lads they used to meet
 By Ettrick braes or Yarrow
 Lyin' thrammelt head and feet
 In Brankstone's deadly barrow!
 O Flodden Field!

But in echoing this passage in *A Drunk Man* (in 1926) MacDiarmid wrote Branksome instead of Brankstone. (The normal spelling now is Branxton.)

MacDiarmid's slip is readily explained. To a boy from Langholm Branksome (or Branxholm) must have been very familiar—a Border castle, twenty miles north of the Muckle Toon on the Hawick road, the keep of Upper Teviotdale and the key of the pass between the Tweed and Cumberland, and every reader of Scott knows the opening of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*: "The feast was over in Branksome tower."

Over the years various friends drew MacDiarmid's attention to this slip, which he regarded with the greatest equanimity—and let the word stand uncorrected through successive editions. For the printing of the poem in the

Complete Poems I asked him, "Branksome? or Brankstone?" With a smile he replied, "I suppose I should correct that line at last"—so in the *Complete Poems* you will find Brankstone is printed.

My other example is of a fortuitous misprint, a printer's error that the poet accepted and decided to retain. A short poem about his contemporaries Auden, MacNeice and Day Lewis—with its memorable last line, "You cannot light a match on a crumbling wall"—was first published in the *Nation* (N.Y.) on 5 January 1957. In the contents list on the front cover of that issue the title of the poem is given as "British Leftist Poetry, 1930-40," and this is the title I have since found over the draft and a fair copy of the poem among MacDiarmid's papers, but over the poem as printed in the *Nation* (and as reprinted in the *Collected Poems* of 1962 and 1967) the title is given as "British Leftish Poetry, 1930-40." When I put the matter to MacDiarmid he confirmed that Leftish was a printer's error, a misprint he had not intended, but when I asked if he wanted his original title restored in the *Complete Poems*, he said with an amused twinkle in his eye, "No. Leave the misprint. Don't you think 'Leftish' is just a bit more pejorative?"

It is not any part of my brief to offer literary comment or criticism, but as this talk is given under the heading "MacDiarmid and World Literature," I should like to say that at the end of my work on the *Complete Poems* I ventured to tell MacDiarmid how much I had been impressed by the *Direadh* poems, the first of which I had seen through the press in *The Voice of Scotland* almost forty years before. This prompted an interesting reply:

In aesthetic matters judgment becomes just a question of personal taste. I too think the *Direadh* sequence good, but I am quite sure "On a Raised Beach" is one of the very best things I've written and recently for the first time in several years I re-read the *In Memoriam James Joyce* and am more than ever convinced that it is a poem running right through from start to finish.³

When Hugh MacDiarmid in his eighty-first year asked me to edit his *Complete Poems* I saw the daunting task as both a challenge and a duty, but also as a privilege. Later the poet was, in his own words, "remorseful . . . at all the work I've involved you in."⁴ But when he had seen all the work done and the book was at last being printed, after what had seemed to him interminable delays, he wrote in a letter, just four months before his death, a paragraph I may be allowed to quote:

³Letter of Hugh MacDiarmid to WRA, 28/4/78. *The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Alan Bold (London, 1984), p. 591.

⁴Letter of Hugh MacDiarmid to WRA, 30/3/75. *Letters*, p. 590.

The one really satisfactory thing about the whole business is my incredible good luck in having you seeing to the collection and ordering and proofing of the contents. I could not have been better served, and there does not seem any way in which I can repay you.⁵

The *Complete Poems* as it stands is sufficient reward. It is enough for me to know that I seem to have discharged to his satisfaction the responsibility that Hugh MacDiarmid laid on me. The two volumes provide, as one reviewer put it, "a tempting clean slate for the literary historians and the critics to begin the process of evaluation."⁶

This paper was read at the Hugh MacDiarmid Conference in the Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh, on 23 August 1988.

Dunblane

⁵Letter of Hugh MacDiarmid to WRA, 28/4/78. *Letters*, p. 591.

⁶*The Economist*, 30 December 1978.