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Alec Finlay

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*Alec Finlay*

## Hamish Henderson and the Modern Folksong Revival

The modern Scottish folk-song revival, which began in 1950, forms a bridge between the Scottish Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, conceived and inspired by Hugh MacDiarmid, and contemporary Scottish culture. It widens the scope of its predecessor: together the two movements contributed to one of the periodic upswells in the confidence of Scotland's national, cultural and political consciousness.

The folk-song revival also, I would argue, had a decisive influence on the concept of "literary nationalism" which emerged during the earlier literary campaign—and in this respect these movements bear out the long running intertwined relationship between the Scottish folk and literary traditions. This has been a central argument of Hamish Henderson, the poet, singer, folk-song collector and political activist, who was the major architect of the Revival movement, and it is his achievement which I will concentrate on here.

Thanks to Eckermann we know that Goethe explained Robert Burns's greatness as the result of his being born into the carrying stream of the folk tradition:

...the old songs of his ancestors lived in the voice of the common people; they were, so to speak, sung to him at the cradle; as a youth he grew up among them, and the high excellence of these examples became so much a part of him that they formed a living foundation upon which he could build his writings.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>J. P. Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, ed. Hans Kohn, trans. Gisela C. O'Brien (New York, 1964), pp. 113-14.

Like Burns, Hamish Henderson was born into the carrying stream. His mother was a beautiful singer; his grandmother had a prodigious folk repertoire and memory. She was also an indigenous Perthshire Gaelic speaker, and Henderson grew up in a trilingual culture, at the meeting point between Gaelic, English and Scots, Highlands and Lowlands.

Henderson shares Burns's ability to bridge the gap between the "heich" and "laich" arts: he crosses boundaries between high and low art and boundaries between social classes, art forms and geographically and socially isolated cultures—for instance, traveling physically and culturally from his Perthshire childhood, to the left-wing intelligentsia of Cambridge University in the 1930s, fighting alongside Partisans in the Apennines in the War, and tramping the roads with tinker-gypsies on this folk-song collecting forays, in Sutherland in the high Summers of the 1950s. As a poet and a folk collector he has acted as a bridge between the high Modernism of MacDiarmid, and the post-war renewal of popular and traditional Scottish culture.

I will begin by outlining the development of Henderson's life and work in the immediate post-war years; the period in which MacDiarmid was very much his mentor. The two first met in 1946, when Henderson was twenty-seven and MacDiarmid fifty-four. He was a tireless supporter of MacDiarmid's poetry, and shared, to an extent at least, his nationalist and Communist beliefs. And, returning from the crucible of war, much as MacDiarmid had done after World War I, Henderson brought with him a renewal of the campaigning zeal to rebuild Scotland. In his essay "Scotland's Alamein" he asks: "How are we going to reconcile the survivors with the dead except by facing up with the problems they would have faced had they been alive."<sup>2</sup>

Henderson's *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*, his only published collection of poetry, received the Somerset Maugham award. The *Elegies* remain one of the great poetic responses to the Second World War. As an attempt to write a philosophical collection of poems, to discern a wider significance in the conflict, they clearly follow MacDiarmid's lead, sharing his concern with the enduring political, cultural and historical problems of Scotland. The enemy the poet confronts in this poem is Fascism; but he identifies this as a tyranny which is not only a political entity—the wartime enemy army and Nazi State—but also something which extends to include the imposition of any barriers of race and creed, any attempt to curb or confine love. For instance, the imaginative fusion of Cyrenaica and Scotland, which is suggested in landscapes which merge "the wilderness of your white corries, Kythairon"<sup>3</sup> and memories of the "treeless machair" and "circled kirkyard" (Fifth elegy, p. 27), implicates the

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<sup>2</sup>"Scotland's Alamein," *Voice of Scotland*, III.4 (June 1947), 3.

<sup>3</sup>*Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* (London, 1948), Fifth Elegy, p. 29. Further references will appear in the text.

spiritual and artistic desolation of Calvinism, a tyranny in the poet's own homeland. Thus the *Elegies* represent a spiritual quest; but, as a poetry of the battlefield, this introspective inquiry only intensifies the poet's yearning for the shared human values of love and solidarity—so much so that, confronted by the barren desert, an uneasy alliance is forged between the opposing armies, disrupting preconceptions about nationalism and patriotism.

It is interesting to compare the *Elegies* with the poetry of MacDiarmid written on Whalsay (the tiny rocky island in the Shetlands which was his home for most of the 1930s). Some of these poems anticipate Henderson's imaginative synaesthesia of Scotland and the desert. MacDiarmid confesses:

I was better with the sounds of the sea  
Than with the voices of men  
And in desolate and desert places  
I found myself again.<sup>4</sup>

The two poets' different representations of the desert underline their respective tendencies to communality and isolation—which in turn calls to mind Burns' apposite lines in his beautiful "Song, composed in August":

Thus ev'ry kind their pleasure find,  
The savage and the tender;  
Some social join, and leagues combine;  
Some solitary wander.<sup>5</sup>

Henderson's wartime experiences spurred his search for an art which could successfully surmount tyranny on every level. This would have to be an art of direct and shared communication. In the Prologue to the *Elegies* he describes the effort required to harness his creativity to art poetry: "...a bit / That sets on song a discipline, / A sensuous austerity" (p. 9). It was this austerity the folk-song revival would eventually free him from, returning him to the art of his childhood as, just as Burns had before him, he set aside poetry in favor of song, the art that was truest to his own creative personality.

In Henderson's case song also seems to have recaptured the emotional tenor of wartime, the solidarity of the battlefield. In 1947 the first published example of his collecting appeared in his *Ballads of World War II* (Glasgow, 1947), a collection of soldier songs, songs of humor and protest, including some of his own best songs, for instance, "The D-Day Dodgers" and "Banks O' Sicily." He recently remarked:

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<sup>4</sup>Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems, 1920-1976*, ed. Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken. 2 vols. (London, 1978), I, 454. Henceforth MacDiarmid.

<sup>5</sup>*The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, ed. James Kinsley. 3 vols. (Oxford, 1968), I, 5.

[my songs are] a sort of fusion of my two greatest loves: the anonymous song poetry of Scotland...and the comradesly solidarity of the anti-fascist struggle which dominated my early manhood.<sup>6</sup>

The various political and aesthetic arguments Henderson constructed around the folk-song revival are secondary to these more immediate personal experiences. When in his most important essays of the immediate post-war period, "Flower of Iron and Truth" and "Lallans and All That," which discuss MacDiarmid and his younger poet allies, Henderson demands that poetry should be in direct living contact with the people, he is also anticipating the song collecting tours he would embark on a few years later. Perhaps it should be no surprise that following the success of his *Elegies* Henderson published very few poems of substance. The great expectations of him as a poet were not realized. In their flytings, MacDiarmid implied that Henderson had failed in this respect. Replying in his own defense, Henderson described the attitude he now held toward his art:

...the final shape of a new long poem I have been working on still eludes me.

In any case I have come to set greater store by my songs 'in the idiom of the people' than by other kinds of poetry that I have tried to write.<sup>7</sup>

The quotation is from Burns. In the years to come, Burns would increasingly become a crucial battleground in their disagreements and flytings. When MacDiarmid accused Henderson of underachieving he did have evidence to justify this: he is indicting the hesitancy Henderson admits to in his letter. Although poetry had served for his remembrance of the desert campaign, it was not the most natural vehicle for the emotions Henderson wished to express, for all the reasons of temperament and background I have already described.

Committing himself to folk-song, Henderson went against literary fashion; against the whole Modernist sensibility which had been such a strong influence on him since Cambridge. Even worse, he brought himself into direct conflict with MacDiarmid and the new Scots poetic vanguard who followed him. Henderson had already pledged allegiance to this progressive nationalist, socialist, cultural and political campaign, for instance, in the two early essays already mentioned. There was, it seems, good reason for MacDiarmid to condemn his defection: after all, what was he expected to make of this new folk-

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<sup>6</sup>Hamish Henderson, sleeve notes, *Pipes, Goatskin & Bones*, Grampian Television: Aberdeen, 1992.

<sup>7</sup>Hamish Henderson, letter to *The Scotsman*, 28 Nov. 1959. Reprinted in *The Armstrong Nose: Selected Letters of Hamish Henderson*, ed. Alec Finlay (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 88. Henceforth *The Armstrong Nose*.

song project? Years before, MacDiarmid had campaigned against the genteel interpretations of traditional song, the remnants of Victorianism, which still held sway in the concert hall and on the B.B.C.—with gusto he had attacked Hugh Robertson's Glasgow Orpheus choir and the popularity of Marjorie Kennedy-Fraser's settings of Gaelic songs, as well, of course, as the Burns cult, and the bowdlerizing of Burns songs—and there seemed little reason why he should change his views on folk song now. MacDiarmid's own emphasis was firmly on nurturing the Modernist aesthetic in Scottish music as well as its poetry.

There were three crucial reasons why Henderson felt his attention to folk-song was justified. The first and most obvious was his own love of song. The second derived from his analysis of Scottish culture; from his awareness of a vast underground of genuine traditional music and song, which formed a living connection with the great ballad tradition of the past. His aim was to record this, and then reintegrate it within the wider Scottish Renaissance movement. Thirdly, and following on from this, was his understanding of the intertwined relationship between the folk and literary traditions. After all, hadn't many of our greatest poets and novelists been involved in the revivals of the past, poets such as Ramsay, Fergusson, Burns, Scott, and Hogg. These song revivals of the past had, he argued, played their part in encouraging and sustaining the literary revivals they accompanied. This mixture of faith and intellectual conviction guided his commitment to the folk-song revival campaign—a revival which, as the new decade of the 1950s dawned, was about to be born.

If the revival was, to an extent, consciously planned, its beginnings can still best be traced to a chance encounter—one signaled in a letter Henderson received from his friend and supporter, Ewan MacColl on 16 February 1951, warning him of an imminent arrival:

...there is a character wandering around this sceptred isle at the moment yclept Alan Lomax. He is a Texan and the none the worse [*sic*] for that, he is also just about the most important name in American folksong circles. He is over here with a super recording unit.... The idea is that he will record the folk-singers of a group of countries.... He is not interested in trained singers or refined versions of the folksongs.... This is important, Hamish. It is vital that Scotland is well represented in this collection (*The Armstrong Nose*, pp. 46-7).

Lomax and Henderson traveled the Highlands that summer. With the synchronicity of this meeting all of the elements that would gel into the modern folk revival fell into place.

Henderson was a born collector. He was already going on collecting forays as a teenager, cycling as far as Aberdeen, where he gained access to the University to see the Greig/Duncan folk-song collection for the first time. Over the course of a lifetime he amassed a collection which Ewan MacColl praised as "one of the great Scots collections, worthy of being ranked with

those of Gavin Greig and David Herd.”<sup>8</sup> After the success of Henderson’s first collecting trips to the North-East, apprenticed to Alan Lomax, the newly formed School of Scottish Studies financed a number of further collecting trips—“God’s own job,”<sup>9</sup> as he described it in a letter of the time. It was on these tours that Henderson discovered and recorded from singers such as Willie Mathieson, John MacDonald, John Strachan, and then, in 1953, Jeannie Robertson.

The importance of the meeting with Jeannie was immediately clear to him; he had predicted that there would be someone with just such a rich repertoire of traditional material, probably a woman, possibly a traveler, the only surprise was that he had expected to find her living in the countryside. The short walk from the University Library in Kings College, Old Aberdeen, where he studied Grieg’s collection, to Jeannie’s house in nearby Causwayend, where he would often walk into an impromptu ceilidh or story-telling session, became symbolic of the gulf between academicism and the living tradition. It was this cultural apartheid that he set about to remove once and for all.

With each collecting tour he carried more songs and stories back to the archives of the School of Scottish Studies; then, through the ceilidhs he organized, and his appearances at folk clubs, recordings and radio programs, these were passed on to the young apprentice singers in the cities. He collected from farm workers, shepherds, and, especially, from amongst the tinker-gypsies.

It is impossible to imagine a social group more isolated from contemporary Scottish society, nor one with closer ties amongst themselves, than these tinker-gypsies, or travelers, and this partly explains why many of the finest of the source-singers upon whose repertoire the new revival was founded, came from this community. Henderson accorded them respect, and held their art in high esteem:

In the long run it seemed to us that it was the singers themselves who could elucidate best some of the still resistant problems of ballad-scholarship... The language, the music, the atmosphere, the personality of Scots folk song can best be got straight from them.<sup>10</sup>

Norman Buchan, another comrade in this new project, comments on his unusually catholic attitude:

[Henderson] recognised it wasn’t an archaic, an antiquarian ploy that he was on. It was something that was living... Curiously enough for someone who was a poet, and

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<sup>8</sup>Ewan MacColl, “Hamish Henderson,” *Tocher*, 43 (1991), 2.

<sup>9</sup>Hamish Henderson, Letter to Marian Sugden, 29 Nov. 1951. *The Armstrong Nose*, p. 59.

<sup>10</sup>Hamish Henderson, sleeve notes, *The Muckle Sangs* (TGNM 119/D), 2.

a very good poet, he fortunately did not wish to discriminate in his folk collecting... He had both the quality approach, as it were, understanding the importance of a big ballad, understanding the importance of a living tradition, but also knowing that the squibs were part of the process. He understood the process as well.<sup>11</sup>

In his program notes for the 1952 People's Festival, Henderson made his own wider aims clear:

If the Ceilidh succeeds in its purpose, it will perform something of tremendous cultural significance for Scotland. In our cities the folk tradition has never completely disappeared, in spite of all the inroads made upon it, and it is still possible to graft these flowering branches from the North and West upon a living tree. We are convinced that it is possible to restore Scottish folk-song to the ordinary people in Scotland, not merely as a bobby-soxer vogue, but deeply and integrally.

The revival, which I have only briefly outlined here, was as radical and far-reaching as the project of cultural renewal MacDiarmid began in the 1920s, and like its forerunner, it was a synthetic means to reassert a living tradition. Although MacDiarmid came to oppose the revival as the natural enemy of his own aims, a natural rapprochement between the two movements emerged, and this argues much for Henderson's vision of their inter-connectedness.

What of the relationship with MacDiarmid? Throughout the early 1950s, as the folk revival slowly made headway, the two remained on good terms. MacDiarmid attended some of the early ceilidhs in Edinburgh. At one, where he was the guest of honor, he rose to propose a vote of thanks to the performers, saying:

Our tremendous treasury of folk-song in Scotland, whether in Lallans or Gaelic ... has been occluded, very largely for political reasons, from the majority of our people. This Edinburgh People's Festival, and the movements in which my friends on the platform and other in the audience are concerned, is a reassertion of that tradition.<sup>12</sup>

Henderson felt he had achieved much in allying the folk revival with the best of modern Scottish poetry, a strategic move reuniting the "heich" and "laich" arts. However, as the movement progressed he was, undeniably, moving away from the urban proletarian sympathies of MacDiarmid, which were still largely defined in Stalinist terms. He was journeying back towards the country and the folk he had grown up with in Perthshire, and the Highlands beyond. This symbolic journey, in many ways recalls Burns's crucial visits to

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<sup>11</sup>"Norman Buchan on Hamish," *Tocher*, 43 (1991), 21.

<sup>12</sup>MacDiarmid, quoted in Henderson's "Tangling with the Langholm Byspale," *Cencrastus*, 48 (Summer 1994), 9.



the Highlands, which were such a rich source of new songs and tunes, and an inspiration to his art and his nationalism.

Although Henderson never reneged on his political allegiance to working-class culture, his move away from an urban poetry of commitment was, inevitably, deplored by MacDiarmid, who held that the proletariat was the only legitimate vehicle for political and cultural progress. Henderson's attitude was more pragmatic. He held that the urban and the rural working class are equally part of Scotland's political and cultural past and future. He dedicated himself to reconciling the growing antagonisms between town and country, antagonisms which industrial society had brought about (evident in a song like Burns's "The Collier Laddie"), antagonisms which MacDiarmid's political analysis in a sense depended upon and perpetuated. These ideological differences soon became tied up in their arguments over Burns and his influence.

MacDiarmid's criticisms of the Burns cult are well known; of particular relevance here though is a crucial essay "Robert Fergusson: Direct poetry and the Scottish Genius" (published in 1952—the very same year that he made his speech of praise at the folk-song ceilidh, a typical MacDiarmidian contradiction). This essay is largely an attack on the fledgling folk-song revival, clothed as a comparison of Robert Burns and Robert Fergusson. Burns is described by MacDiarmid as having "betrayed the movement Ramsay and Fergusson began." The language question is "the crux of the whole matter."<sup>13</sup> Fergusson represents the possibilities of direct Scots speech, allied to a firm political resolve, one which is resistant to all Anglification, and committed to the urban proletariat, while Burns, at his worst, represents Scottish sentimentality, anti-intellectualism, political wavering, and a romanticized attachment to the rural poor. (All accusations which would later be directed, in their turn, at Henderson).

MacDiarmid summarized his quarrel with Burns in a short piece written for *The Guardian*:

I think [Burns] sacrificed the possibilities he had of becoming a great poet very largely to his work of renovating and redefining Scottish folk-songs. That wasn't his proper business at all, and I deplore that he spent so much time on it.<sup>14</sup>

His attacks on the revival derive from his belief that folk-song was inextricably connected with the social conditions and the attitudes of the Scottish peasantry and rural laborers of the 18th and 19th centuries. In a letter from their first flying, in 1960, he accuses Henderson of wanting "to stabilise people at a low

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<sup>13</sup>"Robert Fergusson: Direct Poetry and the Scottish Genius," *Selected Essays of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Duncan Glen (London, 1969), p. 136.

<sup>14</sup>"MacDiarmid on MacDiarmid," reprinted in *The Uncanny Scot: A Selection of Prose by Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Kenneth Buthlay (London, 1968), pp. 169-70.

level corresponding to a state of society that has virtually ceased to exist.” And, in *Aesthetics in Scotland* he repeats the accusation: “The folk-song movement is hopelessly bogged down in senseless repetition and a hopelessly sentimental attitude to an irrecoverable past.”<sup>15</sup> For MacDiarmid, folk-song was incapable of forming an avant-garde culturally or politically, precisely because its popularity involved in inevitable compromise.

For Henderson the achievements of any Scottish avant-garde depended on its respecting the integral balance within Scottish culture: the progressive phalanx of art poetry must keep in touch with the people, a contact best achieved through the more democratic folk-song revival. For a time he tried to maintain the alliance with MacDiarmid, despite their aesthetic differences. There was good reason for this, as MacDiarmid was the closest modern equivalent to the poet, song-composing and folk-song collecting predecessors that Henderson so much admired—Ramsay, Burns, Scott or Hogg. Despite MacDiarmid’s own cavil, Henderson would go on insisting that MacDiarmid’s poetry had one foot in the Folk tradition. For instance, in a letter written shortly before the poet’s death, he firmly ties him to this role within the carrying stream, describing him as the greatest poet since Burns—one who has devoted his life to the cultural resurgence of his country, and as someone whose “work exemplifies many of the best features of the marriage between folk-song and art song.” What the features of this marriage were I will come to shortly.

Although Henderson would always maintain that MacDiarmid’s poetry had its roots firmly planted in popular folk tradition, his own allegiance with MacDiarmid was eventually broken by the poet’s increasingly virulent attacks. A careful reading of their writings reveals that in fact, quite a long time before their public flytings (which began at the end of the 1950s), their positions had begun to draw apart. In an essay titled “Enemies of Folk-song” Henderson attacked the idea of a literary or political elite, and discussed the antagonisms between folk-song and art poetry:

Folk-song is a challenge to the culture of the elite, [because] it expresses with power and élan the communal creativeness of the people against a book-song and art poetry increasingly contracted and withdrawn from the life of the common people.<sup>16</sup>

Published in the same year as MacDiarmid’s epic intellectual poem *In Memoriam James Joyce*, this statement is clearly a warning against the dangers of such elitism. The precise nature of MacDiarmid’s elitism is brilliantly summarized by George Davie in his book *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect*:

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<sup>15</sup>Hugh MacDiarmid, *Aesthetics in Scotland*, ed. Alan Bold (Edinburgh, 1984), p. 98.

<sup>16</sup>Hamish Henderson, *New Saltire Review*, 2 (Autumn 1955), 46.

The starting point of [MacDiarmid's] argument...is the historic rivalry between national groups as well as within national groups, over the question of excellence in culture, knowledge, thought, etc....some groups will always be superior to others...there is...a corresponding struggle between the elite, the intellectual few who do the discovering, and make possible the progress, and the anti-elitist many, who are not equal to participating in the general argument, and who seek, often successfully, to bring to an end "The insatiable thocht, the beautiful violent will, / The restless spirit of man" by imposing egalitarianism, of which the Burns International is the great example.<sup>17</sup>

These sentiments echo those in his long poem *To Circumjack Cencrastus*:

The mob'll never ken  
 For this in the last resort  
 Mak's them less apes, mair men (MacDiarmid, I, 266)

MacDiarmid's concept of the literary avant-garde was very closely modeled on the political or revolutionary elite—for instance, on Lenin and the Bolshevik revolution, or the Irish Rebellion of Easter 1916, or in his involvement with fascism in the 1920s, and with the 1320 Club in the 1960s. In his later poetry MacDiarmid also allied his poetry with the technological and scientific elite, the "intellectual few" Davie refers to. Thus Henderson found himself confronting, in the Scottish poet he most admired, an image of the tyranny he had sworn to oppose. In retrospect MacDiarmid's life and work seem to have inevitably drawn complex psychological responses for those he influenced, inspiring a mixture of devotion and rebellion (in American terms one thinks of the similar relation between Charles Olson and Ezra Pound).

Henderson's response to this relationship goes beyond their increasing personal antipathy, to encompass a commentary on poetry and authorship. He describes MacDiarmid as a craggy symbol of remoteness, a solipsistic genius. This image of solitary tyranny is also a penetrating reflection on Henderson's own creativity, remind us of his own hesitancy concerning art poetry. The art poet is here predominantly a paternal figure, while the folk-song tradition is associated with the maternal; one thinks here of his own family home, of Jeanie Robertson, and of the importance of women in the whole oral tradition.

Beyond the personal, political, and contemporary aesthetic differences between them, was a recognition that their positions paralleled a long-running tension in Scottish culture; a tension which can be traced back to the Enlightenment, or earlier, and which is discussed by David Hume and by Robert Burns, the tension between an intellectual elite and the common people. George Davie summarizes Hume's argument, which is against:

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<sup>17</sup>George Davie, *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 111-2.

The...real danger of an intellectual atomisation in which the learned and conversable...get out of contact with one another, losing in the process the sobering sense of the common origin of their respective modes of culture in what Hume refers to as the animality of the vulgar...<sup>18</sup>

It often seems as if, over the course of his life, Henderson has made a series of strategic interventions in "MacDiarmidism" (as Angus Calder has called this period); interventions which seem in hindsight to be guided by Hume's warning. For instance, he suggests that "If the Renaissance in Scottish arts and letters is to be carried a stage further, our poets and writers could do no worse than go to school once again with the folk-singers."<sup>19</sup> Folk-song embodied the "animality of the vulgar"—just as Burns had before him, Henderson delighted in celebrating the sexual comedy, for instance, in his long poem "Auld Reekie's Roses," as well as collecting bawdy songs. It is true that there are examples of such Rabelaisian sentiments in MacDiarmid's poetry; nevertheless, there is a warmth and range of emotion—for instance the love and comradeship expressed between brother men, as well as between the sexes—in Henderson's work which resonates in Burns's songs and poetry, and which is not found in MacDiarmid's work to the same degree.

Folk-song offered new models of the Scottish voice and new models of authorship, and, in doing so, the revival offered a new concept of "literary nationalism." It is these models which I will examine in my conclusion.

Having acknowledged the antipathy between folk-song and art poetry, Henderson quite deliberately exploited the role of folk song as the bastard cousin of its more respected literary relative. As he puts it: "The best of our literature is impregnated through and through with the despised folk tradition."<sup>20</sup>

Throughout Scottish history there has been a constant interplay between the folk-tradition and the learned literary tradition... Burns is the preeminent example of this—a poet who understood and recreated his own work in the folk tradition of his people. (Ceilidh, p. 27).

The songs of Robert Burns are certainly the most famous example of this interplay; and Burns and Henderson are examples of how this process tends to di-

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<sup>18</sup>George Davie, "The Social Significance of the Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense," *The Scottish Enlightenment and Other Essays* (Edinburgh, 1991), p. 58.

<sup>19</sup>Hamish Henderson, "Programme Notes for the People's Festival Ceilidh," reprinted in *Chapbook*, III.6 (1967), 27. Henceforth Ceilidh.

<sup>20</sup>Hamish Henderson, "The Underground of Song," *Scots Magazine*, 1963, reprinted in *Alias MacAlias: Writings on Songs, Folk and Literature*, ed. Alec Finlay (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 35. Henceforth *Alias MacAlias*.

minish authorial identity, in its literary form, in favor of the communal identity of folksong, “the idiom of the people.” It was not unknown for Henderson to record his own wartime songs on the early collecting tours, from singers who had no idea the song even had an author, let alone that he was sitting at the same table.

Up to this point, the arguments between art poetry and folk-song have largely been based on differing socio-political analyses. Henderson attempted to challenge the literary model of authorship with one drawn from the very different models of the folk tradition, and this seems likely, at first glance, to increase the disagreement between himself and MacDiarmid, who, as we have seen, held resolutely to the sovereign power of the poet, a figure at the forefront of a cultural and political avant-garde. However, on closer examination of Henderson’s argument, a surprising parallel between the folk and literary idioms is revealed, and here we move beyond the limited socio-political argument that had taken precedence up until now. The first clue to this connection is found in Henderson’s essay on MacDiarmid, “Alias MacAlias,” in which he points to the frequency of the alias in modern Scottish literature, a lingering trace of the old folk attitude to authorship—MacDiarmid is the most famous example that springs to mind, but, as we have seen, modern Scottish literature is full of them. Henderson is keen to remind us that:

Burns set up a folk song-workshop of his own, and transformed, without seeming effort, our whole conception of the meaning of traditional art for society...[his]creative methods included: ‘appropriating opening lines or even whole stanzas from earlier or contemporary authors—or from popular tradition—and using them as a basis for this own productions.’<sup>21</sup>

Henderson realized that this attitude to authorship connected directly with MacDiarmid’s poetic methods:

[MacDiarmid’s] acquisitive attitude to material from all sorts of sources is strongly reminiscent of the folk poet, who frequently appropriates lines or even whole stanzas from other poems or songs.<sup>22</sup>

The various controversies in MacDiarmid’s lifetime over his use of unattributed quotations, most famously in poems like “Perfect” and “The Little White Rose,” are well known. In this new light, these poems are examples of the continuing currency between the folk and literary traditions. This use, or re-use, of existing materials is common to much modernist poetry and art—as, for instance, in the “objet trouvé” or “found poem”—and the parallels Hender-

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<sup>21</sup>Hamish Henderson, “Freedom Becomes People,” *Chapman*, 42 (Winter 1985), 1.

<sup>22</sup>Hamish Henderson, “Hugh MacDiarmid: The Langholm Byspale,” *Edinburgh City Lynx*, No. 35 (21 September 1978).

son reveals here make sense of his determination to keep the literary avant-garde in connection with the idiom of the people.

What confirms these parallels, in my view, is a similar parallel between the modernist avant-garde and the folk, oral and literary traditions, discussed by MacDiarmid—with different ends in mind—in his essay on “Ossian: James MacPherson,” published in *Scottish Eccentrics* (1936). MacDiarmid uses Ossian as a model of authorship; he deliberately blurs the borders of the individual creative intelligence, challenging the literary bourgeois figure of the author.

MacDiarmid’s subject matter gives him the opportunity to explore this in the context of translation and its relationship with poetry. It is now commonly acknowledged that MacDiarmid’s own translations are reworkings of cribs done for him by friends, or are modeled on other existing translations; so it is no surprise to find him challenging the conventions of the art of translating, and taking such an interest in Ossian. The success of a translation is, in his view, not to be measured by how much of the original has passed intact from one culture and language into another. In MacPherson’s case, the supposed fraud—the distance between his Ossian poems and the original oral lays—is, he argues, beside the point. The poems must be evaluated in their own right, as poems in English.

MacDiarmid goes on to speculate about the true nature of the Scottish genius: a gift for “transition” rather than “translation,” based on “the play of personality,”<sup>23</sup> as the poet absorbs the mask of another creative personality (which again helps to explain the tendency to adopt an alias). Conventional translation is a pale shadow of these greater gestures. This new model of authorship justifies the poet’s using any raw materials—whether these are existing folk poems or songs, translations, or prose or poetry—as his genius will affect a transition, or recomposition, fusing these elements together into a dynamic new work of art.

The essay on Ossian presents a vision of the poet as a kind of literary superman, a figure free from any confining rationale or logic; a sublime figure, whose daring breaks through conventions through willpower and overriding genius. In comparison, Henderson’s ideal author figure escapes convention by identifying with the common people, by—as in Burns’s case—entering into the carrying stream. Of course, as I have already indicated, these models of authorship relate directly to their political points of view.

MacDiarmid’s attitude to translation, in the context of these models of authorship, is motivated by the primary task he had set himself; that of renewing the Scots language, and single-handedly recomposing a national literature—and what could be more natural than that, in their attempts to model a new or renewed language, poets should look to other languages. All of the major Scottish Renaissance poets were translators, Henderson included. The

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<sup>23</sup>Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Eccentrics* (London, 1936), p. 239.

Lallans or Renaissance poets were also, to varying degrees, writing in a language which they did not speak, day to day; they were, in MacDiarmid's case in particular, composing with dictionary in hand—even writing their own poetry, they could find themselves involved in a kind of translation.

In his poetic experiments MacDiarmid was motivated by the attempt to create a language which was, in his own words, “resistant to Anglification.” Debates in Scotland over language and voice have always gone hand-in-hand with the debate over political identity. There is no doubt that, when the renaissance was in its infancy, it seemed necessary to insist on Scots as “both a language and a literary tradition entirely separate from English.”<sup>24</sup> Henderson saw the revival could have a major role in this process, offering real and practical examples of a living speech or song, from which poetry could learn. These examples of speech were very varied. The revival broadened the Renaissance's exploration of the old tongues, and highlighted the spoken Scottish voice in all its distinctive variations and languages, including the modern demotic language of the new urban singers. By stressing speaking over writing he continued his campaign to reunite “Govan or Hamilton...with Comrie or Lochboisdale,”<sup>25</sup> the rural and urban voice—not creating a single homogeneous nation but a melting-pot of voices—one with, as he said, “deviations to Highland and Lowland.”<sup>26</sup>

In one sense, folk-song has consistently been identified with a distant golden age in Scottish culture, because it seems to reach back beyond the linguistic dichotomy imposed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the dichotomy which forced literate Scots to carry two languages in their heads, English for writing, Scots for speaking. Edwin Muir famously summarizes this as the dilemma for the Scotsmen of *feeling* in Scots and *thinking* in English.<sup>27</sup> MacDiarmid's Renaissance confronted the psychological effects of this head on. First of all, in the campaign for Scots, and later, when he envisaged a campaign whose eventual conclusion would be the renewal of Gaelic as the national language—an argument paralleled by some of his most controversial comments about the true racial life. Henderson's attitude was, once again, more pragmatic: to him Scotland's linguistic diversity was a strength, not a

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<sup>24</sup>Roderick Watson, “Alien Voices in the Street: Demotic Modernism in Modern Scots Writing,” *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 25 (1995), 147.

<sup>25</sup>Hamish Henderson, “Flower of Iron and Truth,” *Our Time* (10th September 1948), p. 305.

<sup>26</sup>Hamish Henderson, Letter to the Scotsman, 17th February, 1953; rptd. *The Armstrong Nose*, p. 63.

<sup>27</sup>See the discussion of this in David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London, 1972), p. 68.

weakness. It was the best guarantee against MacDiarmid's overbearing anglophobia, and a challenge to the ascendancy of any single tongue, something Scotland has never had; here again, we might recall the importance of his Perthshire childhood, hearing Gaelic, Scots and English spoken. In his attitude to voice and its political implications Henderson echoes Antonio Gramsci's vision of folk culture as something which can never be entirely subsumed within any one political or national identity.

The ballads remain at the heart of Henderson's ideas on the question of voice. Many of the best interpretations came from travelers and embodied their distinctive way of life. In an important retrospective essay, "'At the Foot o' yon Excellin' Brae': The Language of Scots Folk-song" (1983), he favorably compares the folk-song tradition with Scots art poetry, and seeks to break open the bastion of MacDiarmid's cultural separatism: "the anonymous ballad-makers...were...operating in a zone which ignored national and political boundaries. The themes of the great tragic ballads...cross national language boundaries" (*Alias MacAlias*, p. 53). Having seemed to abandon MacDiarmid's literary nationalism completely, Henderson then reasserts the uniqueness of the Scottish singing voice within this new perspective:

...the unchallenged excellence of many of our ballad versions resides in the actual nature of the language in which they are couched—in what we may term 'ballad-Scots'.

This...idiom...is a flexible formulaic language which grazes ballad-English along the whole of its length, and yet remains clearly identifiable as a distinct folk-literary lingo.... In the folk field, as well as in the less agile literary Lallans, Scots may be said to include English and go beyond it (*Alias MacAlias*, p. 53).

Here the Scottish voice, or voices, becomes the new defining medium for political identity; a more loosely defined nationalism, to be defined by speech and song rather than the standardized conventions established by texts, or by dictionaries.

The folk-song revival was clearly a forerunner of the demotic vitality of the new poetry which flourished in the 1960s. These young poets shared Henderson's pragmatic attitude to the issue of voice and the realities of political nationalism. For instance, to quote briefly, Edwin Morgan agrees with Henderson that: "Scottish speech itself is still very fluid in the range from broad Scots to standard English." And, like Henderson, he favors "an unguished flexibility in this matter of language."<sup>28</sup> Ian Hamilton Finlay's poems in Glaswegian dialect, *Glasgow Beasts and a Burd*,<sup>29</sup> which MacDiarmid described as deplorable, and "written in the language of the gutter," are a perfect

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<sup>28</sup>Morgan, "The Beatnik in the Kailyaird," *New Saltire Review*, No. 3 (Spring 1962), 71.

<sup>29</sup>Edinburgh, 1961.



realization of Henderson's folk aesthetic in poetry, combining a gentle rural feyness with contemporary urban speech and the humor of the music hall comedian.

In conclusion, in many ways the sum of the task Henderson set himself amounted to a kind of healing process applied to Scottish culture, reintegrating the folk and literary traditions. This was born of his own need constantly to discover and rediscover the moment of direct and open communication between people. In terms of the influence this had on literary nationalism, his argument is in favor of the plethora of spoken and sung voices, for a sovereignty which rests with the people, or peoples, rather than the nation, state or political party.

Multiplicity is one of the most recognizable aspects of Henderson's credo. His rejection of the excesses of nationalism is finally confirmed by and extended through his close identification with that most dispossessed group of all, the travelers—a people who cannot be placed within conventional national boundaries. Their nomadic traditions carried back to a time before Scotland was a fixed political entity. Their way of life is pre-capitalist, and, in his words, “profoundly alien to most industrialised Western society”<sup>30</sup>; they are an ancient counter-culture, perfectly expressive of his own wish to exceed categorization and convention.

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<sup>30</sup>Hamish Henderson, sleeve notes, “Folksongs and Music from the Berryfields of Blair” (Prestige International 25016, 1962), reprinted in *Alias MacAlias*, p. 103.