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Duncan Glen

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Hugh MacDiarmid in Our Time

We can see patterns everywhere and not least with regard to numbers; in 1923 Christopher Murray Grieve, having in 1922 adopted the pseudonym "Hugh MacDiarmid," published his first book *Annals of the Five Senses*. In 1963 G. Ross Roy founded *Studies in Scottish Literature* and now he has decided, to the regret of many of us involved in Scottish studies, that this will be the last number of this very significant journal. From 1963 until his death in 1978 MacDiarmid was associated with *Studies in Scottish Literature* and he regarded its publication as an aspect of the makeover that had taken place in how Scottish literature was seen by academics, publishers and his fellow writers. Against such a helpful change has to be set the many cultural and political influences that still diminish the Scottish tradition in literature; the Anglicization of Scottish life continues, and that process undermines the work of those whose writing is aided by a knowledge of that tradition.

In any assessment of twentieth-century Scottish poetry it is less easy to challenge the significance of Hugh MacDiarmid's poetry than it is, for example, to ignore the importance of Sydney Goodsir Smith's *Under the Eildon Tree*, 1948.¹ Nevertheless, to sit in Edinburgh University, as I did in the 1990s, and hear a lecturer tell a seminar group that "obviously MacDiarmid went to Jamieson's Scottish dictionary for the word 'chitterin'" reveals an ig-

¹Sydney Goodsir Smith, *Under the Eildon Tree: A Poem in XXIV Elegies* (Edinburgh, 1948); second revised edn. (Edinburgh, 1954). See also Sydney Goodsir Smith, *Collected Poems, 1941-1975* (London, 1975), pp. 149-87. Henceforth Smith.

norance of not only the spoken Scots used by MacDiarmid as a boy in Langholm, where he was born in 1892 and buried on 13th September 1978, but also of today's spoken Scots. Behind this ignorance rests a cultural and social prejudice against Scots, rooted to some extent in the same personal ambitions that led David Hume to believe that his nephew should be educated in England as "it must always be of great Advantage to speak properly; especially, if it shou'd prove, as we have reason to hope, that his good Parts will open him the Road of Ambition."² In Lowland Scotland to this day, speaking "properly" means rejecting the spoken language that has its roots in the Scots of Dunbar, Henryson and Burns.

These are prejudices faced by Christopher Grieve in the early 1920s when he began to write poems in Scots that a very few discerning readers immediately recognized as something radically new and important to the Scottish literary tradition. Alongside these social prejudices, which could (and still can) stall a promising career, Grieve was well aware that no ambitious poet would wish to be linked to what then passed for poetry in Scots. To move from being C. M. Grieve, writer of safe verses in English and the not-over-experimental prose of *Annals of the Five Senses*, to being "Hugh MacDiarmid," involved not only courage but also the innocence which facilitates the confidence that only young poets can enjoy. Grieve was further strengthened by being a true-born radical who preferred to take cultural and political stances involving what Sydney Goodsir Smith was to term "perpetual opposition" (Smith, p. 99).

In a published interview with me, recorded at Brownsbank Cottage on 25th October 1968,³ MacDiarmid said that all the layers of misinterpretation that had accrued to his poems needed to be "wede awa." He was referring specifically to suggestions that his poem "The Watgaw" was based on either his memories of the death of his first wife, who did not die until thirty years after the poem was written, or his father's death. Such biographical intrusions are less destructive to an appreciation of his poetry than the ignorance of his language and the tradition he worked within, referred to above. In the long term of critical appreciation of a significant poet such as MacDiarmid, the responses of the half-educated or the prejudiced will count for naught, but currently they do undermine the reputation of the single Scottish writer of the twentieth century who is unquestionably a major poet.

If a word such as "chitterin'" contributes to the making of the much-admired poem, "The Watgaw," it does not matter how the poet came by the word. It is to be found, with other words that MacDiarmid used in this poem, in Sir James Wilson's *Lowland Scotch as Spoken in the Lower Strathearn Dis-*

²*The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1932), II, 154-5.

³Hugh MacDiarmid and Duncan Glen, *The MacDiarmids: A Conversation* (Preston, 1970).

tract of Perthshire, 1915,⁴ and no doubt he could also have found it in Jamieson's dictionary, just as he would have been able to remember his mother using it in everyday conversation—as mine did many decades later. To emphasize this aspect of MacDiarmid's technique in order to generally undermine what the poet achieved is not only critically substandard but part of a wider diminishment of not only his work but also the poems in Scots by other contemporary poets. Hugh MacDiarmid was a harsh critic of his contemporaries, but his life was devoted to both poetry and the need for a vigorous and confident Scottish culture that faced the political and financial, and so cultural, influence of London, without a trace of the cringe that has demeaned so many Scots since at least 1603 when King James VI flitted south to London.

If Anglicized and ill-informed Scottish critics have attempted to chip away at the authenticity of the linguistic foundations of MacDiarmid's poems, so also have politicians and members of the business and professional classes dismissed him as a woolly-minded poet who would not last two weeks in their work-a-day world. Almost inevitably, following his years of unemployment, poverty and general rejection in the 1930s and 1940s, in his years at Brownsbank Cottage, from 1951 to his death in 1978, MacDiarmid tended to portray himself somewhat as caricatured by such supposedly worldly-wise men and women. For example, he said to me that he had never been any good as a businessman and thus as a publisher. It is true that, both as a writer and a publisher, he was not interested in making money—and therefore did not do so. If Grieve had been given the position enjoyed by T. S. Eliot in London at Faber & Faber he could, on the evidence of his career in Montrose in the 1920s, have been a success both in literary publishing and as an editor of a highly-subsidized quality literary journal—he could have given Scotland the equivalent of Eliot's *The Criterion* where, incidentally, Eliot printed MacDiarmid's "Second Hymn to Lenin" (July 1932) and "Cornish Heroic Song for Valda Trevlyn" (January 1939).

In Montrose, where he lived in 1919 and again from 1921 to 1929, Grieve was, in the context of the very limited finances available to him, a very efficient and creative literary publisher and editor.⁵ He took over the publication of his first anthologies, *Northern Numbers*, when T. N. Foulis backed out of the project, and his own first book, *Annals of the Five Senses*, 1923, was first published under his own imprint. His now widely-hailed monthly magazine, *The Scottish Chapbook*, may have lost money, but it gave those who bought it

⁴See especially the section on weather, although "chitterin'" does not appear in that section. Sir James Wilson, *Lowland Scotch as Spoken in the Lower Strathearn District of Perthshire* (London, 1915), pp. 168-9.

⁵See Duncan Glen, "MacDiarmid: Montrose Publisher," in *Selected Scottish & Other Essays* (Kirkcaldy, 1999), pp. 84-7.

a first reading of not only major lyrics by MacDiarmid but his now much-quoted *Causeries* which helped to change the course of Scottish poetry.

For Grieve to have launched the weekly *The Scottish Nation* in May 1923 may, with hindsight, look like the act of a very unrealistic publisher, but the product was the work of a professional journalist who knew the business of publishing, printing and distribution. In failing to attract readers for a literate and politically radical paper he is in good company. As a publisher Grieve may have lost money, and as a result incurred debts with local shopkeepers, but he also created, almost unaided, the literary revival of Scottish literature that became known, to the annoyance of lesser achievers, as the Scottish Renaissance movement.

The fourteen numbers of Grieve's *Scottish Chapbook* caught the attention of other younger poets and offered them the encouragement of publication—I think in particular of the young William Soutar, but others who contributed included not only older traditional lyric poets (Violet Jacob, Marion Angus, and Pittendrigh Macgillivray) but Alexander Gray, Helen B. Cruickshank, Edwin Muir and Neil M. Gunn. Such writers could sense that something was afoot; that new ideas were in the post-war air. They sensed that, after the long years of parochial versifying by localized rhymesters, perhaps Scottish writing could, in the words of Grieve (*Scottish Chapbook*, vol. 1., no. 1, October 1922) “embrace the whole range of modern culture” and bring Scottish literature “into closer touch with current European tendencies in technique and ideation.” It is difficult now to appreciate how novel such a view was in the early 1920s and how, for a very few poets, it stirred them into a more optimistic view of the future of Scottish literature. MacDiarmid's influence on other poets could be seen even more clearly in the late 1930s and 1940s when Sorley MacLean, Robert Garioch, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Douglas Young, Maurice Lindsay, and others began to publish significant poems in Gaelic and Scots. Also, politicians who sit in this twenty-first century in Edinburgh in a restored Scottish Parliament are long-distance beneficiaries of the influence of the prose and poetry that he wrote in the 1920s in a small house in the provincial town of Montrose.

Whilst undertaking all this publishing work, Grieve was also an astoundingly productive and reliable free-lance journalist who unfailingly met his deadlines. He was also working “full-time” as a salaried and very competent Editor/Reporter for the local newspaper, *The Montrose Review*, which, in contrast to the Tory *Montrose Standard*, was a Liberal/Radical paper. As if that was not enough work for one man, in March 1922 Grieve was co-opted to Montrose Town Council to fill a vacancy caused by the resignation of Baillie Davidson, and he successfully stood at elections in November 1922 and November 1923. During these elections he performed well at what were known as “heckling meetings.” At one such meeting he explained that although he was a Socialist he was not standing as an official Socialist candidate but as an Independent—a position that, throughout his life, suited him better than con-

forming to the policies of any political party. Grieve attended Council meetings with great regularity, seemingly missing only one when he was out of town giving one of many talks on matters literary and political. Initially, Councillor Grieve was appointed to the Water Committee, the management of Dorward's House of Refuge, the School Management Committee and the Library Committee. In November 1923 he was appointed Hospitalmaster and early in 1924 he became Convener, or Chairman, of Parks and Gardens and was a member of the Water Board. This enabled MacDiarmid to write in his autobiography *Lucky Poet*:

My mother's people lie in the queer old churchyard of Crowdieknowe in the parish of Middlebie, which is the subject of one of my best-known lyrics—'Crowdieknowe'—a wonderful name for a cemetery, even better, perhaps, than the more sentimental one of Sleepy-hillock at Montrose, for which for some time, years later in my life, I shared administrative responsibility as a member of the local town council and of the parks and gardens committee thereof.⁶

In the 1960s I listened to those who dismissed this as one of MacDiarmid's tall stories—as not something that a poet of his erratic and unworldly temperament could possibly have been involved in.

Following his move to London in 1929, to edit the innovative but short-lived radio magazine *Vox*, disasters came multi-handed to Grieve. His marriage ended and soon so also did his career as a journalist. There followed years of poverty, illnesses and, perhaps hardest of all to bear, isolation from fellow writers, in the Shetland Isle of Whalsay. Compulsory recruitment in the early 1940s into manual war-time work in a munitions factory near Glasgow was almost a welcome release from the isolation of that northern isle. The core of the later long and non-lyrical poems that became *In Memoriam James Joyce* and *The Kind of Poetry I Want* were written in Whalsay, as was the very individualistic autobiography *Lucky Poet*. Following these hard years, it is not surprising that the editorial and journalistic talents shown by Grieve in Montrose were never again properly utilized; we cannot be surprised that Grieve was not averse to portraying himself as more unworldly than he once had been.

In *Lucky Poet* MacDiarmid wrote:

I was very early determined that I would not 'work for money', and that whatever I might have to do to earn my living, I would never devote more of my time and my energies to remunerative work than I did to voluntary and gainless activities, and *actes gratuits*, in Gide's phrase. The notion of self-advancement—of so-called success—was utterly foreign to my nature from the very beginning (*Lucky Poet*, p. 40).

⁶Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas* (London, 1943), p. 4. Henceforth *Lucky Poet*.

In the 1920s most of the freelance literary and political journalism syndicated by Grieve to local newspapers throughout Scotland was unpaid. We now live in a world in which Idealism, as personified by MacDiarmid and others of the Modernist years, is cynically submerged in a scorning careerism, but between 1923 and 1929, when he left Montrose to go to London, MacDiarmid changed Scottish literature in a manner that has benefited even those writers—the acclaimed writers of award-winning *belle-lettres*—who today confine their work to safe and fashionably mainstream verses.

Today over-many Scottish writers undermine Hugh MacDiarmid's achievement by asking of him responses that cannot be expected of a man who wrote his best work in the 1920s. He was, in the terms of today's post-feminist world, a male chauvinist and he did express authoritarian political ideas. There is, however, the unjust and far-fetched accusation that he was an aggressive and powerful bully who used his position as a great established poet to do down less fortunate and more gentle writers. MacDiarmid could be a harsh critic, but it was he who suffered isolation, poverty and vilification in the 1930s in the Shetlands, and throughout the 1940s and 1950s, whilst lesser conforming poets were given jobs by the British Council and wrote regularly for established magazines. This is also the welcoming host who was always polite and considerate to all who visited him at his home; the man of whom Norman MacCaig wrote, "He's mild as milk, he'd charm old ladies up / On to the mantelpiece—and leave them there." But that tribute ends with this verse,

Kick him—that's nothing. Kick his ideas, then
The poor rise up, the dead slide from their stones.
Then he's himself and he's Anonymous.
It's not his hand that strikes, but everyone's.⁷

Writing in the *New Yorker*, and collected in *Nobody's Perfect*,⁸ Anthony Lane suggested that in the 1990s T. S. Eliot was being "Larkinized," by which he meant that Eliot's reputation was being destroyed by comparing him to what, ridiculously, some regard as not only a major English poet but a paragon of civilized values. Lane continued:

Once we begin to chastise poets for what they believed, what they cried in public declarations or murmured in idle moments, who should 'scape whipping? Having surveyed the sins of the leading poets in the language, I have come to the unlikely

⁷"Hugh MacDiarmid (1)" in *Poems Addressed to Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. Duncan Glen (Preston, 1967), p. 31. MacDiarmid turned 75 on August 11, 1967. MacCaig's poem is not collected in either Norman MacCaig, *Collected Poems* (London, 1985), or *The Poems of Norman MacCaig*, ed. Ewan MacCaig (Edinburgh, 2005).

⁸Anthony Lane, *Nobody's Perfect: Writings from the New Yorker* (New York, 2002).

conclusion that the only one who can be honored with impunity is George Herbert. (Lane, p. 447).

We can more easily class MacDiarmid with Ezra Pound as a propagandist for unholy political views than with the almost canonized Anglican Herbert, but at the core of MacDiarmid's thinking there is, although he did not like the term, a mysticism that may have been the only resolution to the seeming contradictions and complexities of his life, politics and poetry. This can be seen in this passage from *The Kind of Poetry I Want*, which I have chosen to illustrate my suggestions because it involves the poetry of both Herbert and Vaughan,

Bacon's *Of Gardens* is as much a formal plan
As a Loggan print of a Jacobean Great House;
Conceived as a whole, the garden is thought of
As a generalised form of beauty.
It is the whole that matters, not the parts.
And where they were considered separately
The parts still tended to be
Such lesser exercises in design
As a topiary. But the flower regarded as a symbol
Rescued our forefathers from these horticultural patterns
And brought man and flower
Into a new relation. By poets like Herbert and Vaughan
Tree and plant were recognised as having a place
In the same economy of which man was a part.
They obey the inner law of their being
And it is for man to emulate them.
'In the beauty of poems,' as Whitman said,
'Are henceforth the tuft and final applause of science
...Facts showered over with light.
The daylight is lit with more volatile light.⁹

In recent years, whilst Seamus Heaney has been writing knowledgeably and appreciatively of MacDiarmid's poetry, and in 2002 visited Langholm to give a talk to a most enthusiastic audience, MacDiarmid is being "Larkinized" by cringing Scottish critics and smart London-centric writers. The latter group has recently included the late Ian Hamilton, who once excellently edited *New Review*, who diminished his critical standing by asking in his *Against Oblivion: Some Lives of the Twentieth-Century Poets*¹⁰ whether a man out of the

⁹Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems 1920-1976*, ed. Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken, 2 vols. (London, 1978), II, 1027-8. The ellipsis is in MacDiarmid's text. Henceforth *Poems*.

¹⁰Ian Hamilton, *Against Oblivion: Some Lives of the Twentieth-Century Poets* (London, 2002).

Gorbals could be expected to understand MacDiarmid's Lallans. Today, when a writer, whether Edinburgh- or London-based, uses the term "Lallans" we can expect an adverse response to MacDiarmid's language; we are back with his supposedly esoteric use of words such as "chitterin'"—or in Hamilton's case "fochin'" from the last line of the second verse of "Country Life,"

Inside!... Inside!
There's golochs on the wa',
A cradle on the ca',
A muckle bleeze o' cones
An' mither fochin' scones (*Poems*, I, 31).

This is a poem which, in reviewing *Sangschaw* in 1926, Edwin Muir described as having

an almost fantastic economy, a crazy economy which has the effect of humour and yet conveys a kind of horror, which makes this poem so original and so truly Scottish. It is a pure inspiration; nothing could be better of its kind, and the kind is rare. This vision is profoundly alien to the spirit of English poetry; the thing which resembles it most, outside other Scottish poetry, is, perhaps, the poetry of Villon.¹¹

The two verses of this poem were instantly understood by me when I first read them in my teens, but perhaps my having had a Scots-speaking grandfather who farmed in rural Lanarkshire gave me advantages denied to both Ian Hamilton and his imagined hard man out of Glasgow's long-gone Gorbals.

On 13th December 1929 Grieve's old paper, *The Montrose Review*, printed this report: "Mr C. M. Grieve, Montrose,... met with a serious accident in London on Thursday last week. Mr Grieve fell off a bus on which he was traveling and sustained serious head injuries. He was removed to a London hospital in a serious condition." The injury proved to be less serious than this suggested, but Norman MacCaig, who probably admired MacDiarmid more than any other living human being, was fond of saying that MacDiarmid lost his ability to write lyrics when he fell off that London bus. Even a cursory look at the date of that incident, and poems unquestionably written after it, shows this to be nonsense. MacDiarmid claimed to have written much poetry whilst living at Thakeham, in Sussex, in 1932 and, whilst this included longer poems, there also belongs to that year what MacDiarmid at one time regarded as his best short lyric, "Milk-Wort and Bog-Cotton," which was printed in the *Dublin Magazine* in 1932 and collected in *Scots Unbound and Other Poems*, 1932, and begins:

¹¹Quoted in Duncan Glen, *Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance* (Edinburgh & London, 1964), pp. 87-8.

Cwa' een like milk-wort and bog-cotton hair!
 I love you, earth, in this mood best o' a'
 When the shy spirit like a laich wind moves
 And frae the lift nae shadow can fa' (*Poems*, I, 331).

Although wrong by a few years, as well as in linking a loss of the lyric cry to a bump on the head, MacCaig was correct in that, like most poets, MacDiarmid had only a decade or so as a poet of "song." Within that term I include not only the unique and masterly short lyrics of *Sangschaw*, 1925, and *Penny Wheep*, 1926, but also the book-length *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, again 1926. These works alone make MacDiarmid a major poet. To many, his most important poems are the best of the short lyrics that were first collected in *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep*, and these are indeed poems that are not only very innovative but of the order of lyric work that, whilst it cannot be influential in its forms, can inspire other poets. I am thinking especially of "The Eemis Stane," "Empty Vessel" and the four-poem sequence entitled "Au Clair de la Lune," but most poets would be proud to have written almost any of the short poems of *Sangschaw* and *Penny Wheep*.

I first read MacDiarmid's poetry in the late 1940s, the first being *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. That experience remade my teenage view of not only Scottish but world literature; it took me into complex worlds that I had glimpsed in novels by Dostoevski but not in the standard Eng Lit poems that I then knew from classroom teachings, and certainly not in any Scottish poetry. To me Burns was the poet of "The Cotter's Saturday Night" and it took me many years to appreciate the true Burns that had eluded my teachers. Many readers find MacDiarmid's long masterpiece difficult; my first youthful and innocent reading of it has perhaps served my more mature readings well, as I have found it to be more accessible than have many seemingly-sophisticated readers and critics.

The long, extended *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, 1930, disappointed after *A Drunk Man*, but the section entitled "North of the Tweed" delights through pure song, and the adaptation from Rilke's "Requiem for a Woman" which begins "I have been frequently astonished, letting go" is masterly. I am personally pleased to have rediscovered for MacDiarmid the poems that were collected in *A Lap of Honour*, 1967, and, whilst my personal involvement may distort my view of these poems, I do think that "By Wauchopside" should be in every MacDiarmid *Selected Poems*. The opening line shows the classic MacDiarmid humor: "Thrawn water? Aye, owre thrawn to be aye thrawn!" (*Poems*, II, 1083).

The later, very long poems, *The Kind of Poetry I Want*, 1961, and *In Memoriam James Joyce*, 1955, can be appreciated as we may appreciate Whitman's *Song of Myself*, or Pound's *Cantos*, but when put beside the early lyrics and *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, they do show that during his years in Whalsay MacDiarmid was a poet who constructed his works almost as

scissors-and-paste work out of his encyclopædic reading, rather than having been able to allow language to sing from these accumulated ideas and the emotions that surrounded and enriched them.

I do not think that MacDiarmid would have approved of a developed Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh that left the major policy decisions with the Westminster Parliament in London. Neither do I believe that he would have been content with a true federal system involving the English regions as well as Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, which recognized that the Westminster Parliament—which the English like to term the Mother of Parliaments—is not a continuation of the English Parliament but a new body that dates from 1707 and incorporated both the Scottish and English Parliaments. What would have delighted MacDiarmid was that the Opening Ceremony of the new Scottish Parliament on 1st July 1999 included, to the astonishment of many who heard it, a superb singing by Sheena Wellington of Robert Burns's song, "Is There For Honest Poverty," or "A Man's a Man for a' that." In his opening address, the first First Minister, the late Donald Dewar, spoke words that would have been welcomed by Hugh MacDiarmid, "At that heart of the song is a very Scottish conviction: that honesty and simple dignity are priceless virtues, not imparted by rank or birth or privilege but part of the soul. Burns believed that sense and worth ultimately prevail. He believed that was the core of politics; that without it, ours would be an impoverished profession." Mr. Dewar added to creative Scottish writing that sunny day when he spoke emotive words which he surely wrote himself, "In the quiet moment today, we might hear some echoes from the past: the shout of the welder in the din of the great Clyde shipyards; the speak of the Mearns, with its soul in the land; the discourse of the Enlightenment, when Edinburgh and Glasgow were a light held to the intellectual life of Europe; the wild cry of the great pipes; and back to the distant noise of the battles of Bruce and Wallace."

One of the strengths of MacDiarmid as a poet is that he not only heard those echoes and many others of the past, and not only merged what is specific to Scottish history with our modern understandings, but added to these the understandings of a great poet. In *Lucky Poet* (p. 3), MacDiarmid wrote immodestly but truthfully:

as a boy, from the steadings and cottages of my mother's folk and their neighbours in Wauchope and Eskdalemuir and Middlebie and Dalbeattie and Tundergarth, I drew an assurance that I felt and understood the spirit of Scotland and the Scottish country folk in no common measure, and that that made it at any rate possible that I would in due course become a great national poet of Scotland.

From reading his Scots poems we know that, like that of Burns, MacDiarmid's work can unify not only Scots but those, worldwide, who learn his language and know something of the tradition within which he wrote. At his best his poetry, confined by neither parochialism nor nationalism, belongs

alongside Joyce's *Ulysses*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and with William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*; his *Drunk Man* will, with the passing years, be seen to sit very comfortably not only with Burns's "Love and Liberty—A Cantata" and "The Holy Fair," but also the *Fabillis* of Robert Henryson and William Dunbar's "The Tretis of the Twa Mariit Wemen and the Wedo."

MacDiarmid's poetry is diverse beyond classification, yet running through that diversity there is a line, elusive and twisting, but yet discernible. It is a line that links what can appear to be an expression of a cold, unjust and cruel impersonal world to the potential that is in our common humanity. On remote Whalsay in the early 1930s MacDiarmid wrote the longer poem "On a Raised Beach," which is a magnificent continuation, in an English extended by geological and other technical languages, of his delight in the Scots language. Despite the austerity of the poet's vision, this is an optimistic "song" that offers a human response to these cold and seemingly inanimate stones,

We must be humble. We are so easily baffled by appearances
 And do not realise that these stones are one with the stars.
 It makes no difference to them whether they are high or low,
 Mountain peak or ocean floor, palace, or pigsty.
 There are plenty of ruined buildings in the world but no ruined stones.
 No visitor comes from the stars
 But is the same as they are.
 —Nay, it is easy to find a spontaneity here,
 An adjustment to life, an ability
 To ride it easily, akin to 'the buoyant
 Prelapsarian naturalness of a country girl
 Laughing in the sun, not passion-rent,
 But sensing in the bound of her breasts vigours to come
 Powered to make her one with the stream of earthlife round her,'
 But not yet as my Muse is, with this ampler scope,
 This more divine rhythm, wholly at one
 With the earth, riding the Heavens with it, as the stones do
 And all soon must (*Poems*, I, 425).

For the first two lines of "Empty Vessel" MacDiarmid was indebted to a folk song in which a woman is singing to a dead child. The second stanza movingly links that lass to cosmic space and Einstein's impersonal-seeming mathematics,

Wunds wi' warlds to swing
 Dinna sing sae sweet,
 The licht that bends owre a' thing
 Is less ta'en up wi't (*Poems*, I, 66).

Kirkcaldy, Fife

Why did they christen you, Duncan Glen.
You were never a glen but always a peak,
And you've hoisted Scotland in many ways
That show that Everest is not unique.
How have you done it? Because, be it confest,
Simply the fact that you never rest.

Why did they christen you Duncan Glen?
You were never a glen but always a peak.
And you've hoisted Scotland in many ways
That show that Everest is not unique.
How have you done it? Because, be it confest,
Simply the fact that you never rest.

[Hugh MacDiarmid]