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PROVINCIALISING MACDIARMID: DECOLONISATION AND SCOTTISH LITERARY HISTORY

Alex Thomson

Contemporary calls for 'decolonisation' invoke a political, historical, and epistemological task of critique. Reframing decolonisation as an unfinished project, they draw attention to the legacies of imperialism not only within postcolonial states but within former imperial metropoles.[1] This entails resituating the formal decolonisation of the post-1945 world within a *longue durée* of colonial and anti-colonial struggle characteristic of global modernity; acknowledgement that socioeconomic and political development have been inexorably tied to colonial histories; and recognition of ongoing economic, social, and cultural legacies of colonialism. Critics challenge the Eurocentric implications of the concepts and categories available to historiography, social theory, or political thought, and within which ongoing debates about the nation-state as a political form adequate to addressing contemporary social needs and existential planetary risks are framed. Decolonisation movements raise challenges for educational institutions in the global North, committed in principle to the mobilisation of historical and sociological understanding in service of sustainable development and reduction of inequality, and this leads to questions of intellectual and political responsibility that may conflict with local or national commitments.

Decolonisation has resonance for Scottish institutions and for scholars of Scottish history and culture. Modern Scotland is an imperial project through and through: disproportionately the beneficiary of British imperial trade, over-represented in the institutions and mechanisms of Empire, Scotland is the origin of significant outbound migration into imperial space for at least two hundred years. Yet since the 1960s, what historians and activists have characterised as 'cultural amnesia' about empire has attended Scottish political and social reinvention, and the rhetoric of colonisation has

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[1] On 'decolonisation' as an unfinished project, see Latin American work on decoloniality in particular: e.g., Nelson Maldonado-Torres, 'On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept'. *Cultural Studies*, 21.2-3 (2007), 240-70.

fostered potent myths about Scotland's historical status and the Scots diaspora. 'Decolonisation' has in other contexts been invoked by white nationalists, and, like other nations constructed as 'Celtic', Scotland contributes to the symbolic and social imaginary of white ethnicities in the context of transatlantic processes of racialisation and ethnogenesis. Efforts by historians and politicians to correct the record have contributed to a contemporary cultural climate in which institutional acknowledgement and gestures of reparation are highly politically charged.

This essay explores the value of decolonisation not as a new 'paradigm' or 'turn' within Scottish literary studies but as a project of revaluation and critique that might contribute to what Achille Mbembe describes as 'disenclosure': an 'opening, a surging up, the advent of something new, a blossoming' that takes the form, exemplarily in Frantz Fanon, of 'the struggle for life – which is the same thing as to open up a world'. The '"decolonial/decolonization project"', Mbembe writes, 'is premised on the idea that social worlds are multiple, fractured and contested'; it is oriented to 'expanding our conceptual, methodological, and theoretical imaginary'.[2] Here the central figure is Hugh MacDiarmid (C. M. Grieve), the modern Scottish writer whose work most consistently takes the project of revaluation as its own.[3] My proposal is that the ambivalence of MacDiarmid's cultural programme, alongside his putatively anti-Imperialist political agenda, has left a complex legacy in Scottish literary history: to surface and think through this legacy can be an act of decolonisation in the context of the entrenched methodological nationalism of the field.

The first section of the essay outlines an ambivalence inherited by contemporary literary studies from MacDiarmid's cultural programme, given political cover by his supposed credentials as a decolonial nationalist; the second sketches an alternative response in light of perspectives drawn from work on decolonisation and decoloniality. The account of MacDiarmid's work, and of the secondary material, is partial and focused on politics rather than poetics, but there is no scope within this short paper for a discussion of recent contributions to decolonisation within Scottish literary studies. Moreover, to approach decolonisation in the field through the figure of MacDiarmid risks reinforcing the centrality of an already dominant figure rather than enlarging its scope to include a wider range of voices. These are significant omissions, but my justification is that this

[2] Achille Mbembe, 'Disenclosure', in *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2021), pp. 42-89 (pp. 61, 62, 79).

[3] Throughout the essay I take 'Hugh MacDiarmid' as the dominant eponym organising the poetic and critical production of C. M. Grieve, distinguishing the names under which individual texts were published where possible.

approach offers a necessary critical displacement preliminary to opening further paths of enquiry.

MacDiarmid's Provincial Vision and Scottish Literary History

One of the ambiguities of the term 'decolonisation' is that it can refer both to nativist calls for a return to indigenous, pre-colonial or non-Western traditions, and to projects that seek to complicate the distinction between self and other which underpins such distinctions.[4] Given the paradigmatic non-alignment of nation-states with homogeneous group identities in the contemporary world, decolonisation can be the alibi for one ethnic or cultural group to deprive another of power and influence in the name of particular traditions. But equally, decolonisation can name the critique of the postcolonial and settler-colonial state and its ideological naturalisation via the nation form. This alternative aligns with the powerful but ambiguous and unresolved impetus that postcolonial thought has offered to Scottish literary studies since the renewal of the field in the 1980s.

Despite the hesitations voiced by many of those critics who have explored the parallel in detail, the field remains indebted to a weak postcolonial paradigm which sees the conditions of Scottish literary production in the modern period as analogous to those within colonial and postcolonial societies, based on the historical dominance of standard English as a privileged mode of speech, and the lesser status of other languages in the British Isles. The characteristic modes of this approach have been differentiation between Scottish and English traditions in terms of dominant styles and themes, and aesthetic or political revaluation of Scottish texts and genres. Whereas contemporary nationalist political thought inherits some themes from the interwar period but represents a distinctive new configuration, review of literary and cultural criticism suggests that despite apparent differences, there is a much stronger underlying continuity.[5] In this section I will argue that these continuities reflect the influence of MacDiarmid, the loudest voice in interwar debates, remaining a vocal presence in Scottish cultural life until his death in 1978, and a key precursor to other influential writers such as Tom Nairn. My claim is that the reparative ambition of cultural and literary histories, of explaining and redeeming Scottish cultural history since the Union of 1707, conflates systems of

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[4] For a powerful critique of the former, see the argument in Olúfémi Táíwò, *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously* (London: Hurst, 2022), aligning, on this point at least, with Mbembe.

[5] See Ben Jackson, *The Case for Scottish Independence: A History of Nationalist Political Thought in Modern Scotland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 16-34.

cultural value with direct or indirect political and socioeconomic power relations.

'Provincialism', Susan Manning suggests, 'relates primarily not to a body of doctrine, a geographical location or a political affiliation, but to a state of mind, a predisposition to view the world in certain ways'.[6] MacDiarmid's distinctive and long-lasting contribution to Scottish cultural criticism is the intensity and exaggeration of his own provincial vision. The hallmark of his critical voice from the 1920s onwards is his repudiation of the existing standards and values of contemporary Scotland as inadequate, elevating the banal and neglecting the distinctive. The critique of provincialism, which means first and foremost its identification and rooting out, finding its workings everywhere, is to be the catalyst and stimulus of cultural change. For MacDiarmid, Scotland's failure of cultural independence becomes its most exceptional feature. In the unpublished typescript of *Aesthetics in Scotland*, dated by its editor to 1950, MacDiarmid argues not only that 'the Scottish people themselves were – and the vast majority of them still are – as ignorant as the English with regard to the Scottish tradition in literature and the arts' but that 'a higher proportion […] than can be found in any other Western European country' remain 'utterly insensitive to the arts'.[7] If the critique is over-reaching, violent and destructive, then that is only a measure of the scale of the task.

David Goldie has argued persuasively 'how problematic it is to constitute the cultural and political relations between England and Scotland in the early twentieth century as a dialogue between two distinct traditions'.[8] The productive and differentiated cultural interchange Goldie describes is grounded in the integration of a single British literary system commercially, institutionally, socially and ideologically: this is the context for the successful careers of writers as distinct as Margaret Oliphant, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, and J. M. Barrie. MacDiarmid's provincialising project takes shape as the repudiation of this system, as it has developed over the preceding two centuries, adopting and transvaluing the discourse of Anglicisation, a longstanding structure of feeling associated with the response of Scottish intellectuals to social and economic modernisation by elegiac reflection on its perceived cultural impacts.

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[6] Susan Manning, *The Puritan Provincial Vision: Scottish and American Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 71.

[7] Hugh MacDiarmid, *Aesthetics in Scotland*, ed. by Alan Bold (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1984), p. 26.

[8] David Goldie, 'Unspeakable Scots: Dialogues and Dialectics in Scottish-British Literary Culture before the First World War', in *Literature and Union: Scottish Texts, British Contexts*, ed. by Gerard Carruthers and Colin Kidd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 259-77 (p. 276).

Manning characterises the provincial in terms of 'the simultaneous desire to emulate and to be independent'.[9] To effect a radical differentiation between English and Scottish tradition, and repudiate the hegemony of the former over the latter, MacDiarmid 'minoritises' Scottish literature. This means he will understand the contemporary renewal of tradition primarily through its struggle to assert itself as autonomous; both against English styles and Scottish philistinism. The revolutionary gesture is that by transposing the centre to be emulated from the standards of the British imperial metropole to those set by European modernist movements, he forcefully asserts the existence of conflicting systems of valuation, one primarily aesthetic and the other primarily social. Or to put this in other terms, MacDiarmid's provincialism is self-consciousness of aesthetic 'belatedness' rather than distance from the centre of socioeconomic or political power.

Although fatefully attracted to grand systems, MacDiarmid is not a systematic thinker; given the miscellaneous and occasional nature of much of his critical writing, his desire to accommodate his rhetoric to different audiences, and the inconsistency of various attempts to give a definitive political embodiment to his aesthetic instincts, his project has many but only partial inheritors. His influence lies in two significant directions. The first is the inauguration of a critical stance which blends the vocabulary of artistic, political, and economic dependency and represents the situation of Scottish culture in terms of temporal lag and provincial distance. The second is the construction of Scottish cultural history as that of an eclipse to be reversed. If the former has proven attractive to political and social critics, the latter has been more persuasive to scholars and historians. However, the subsequent detachment of the socioeconomic from the cultural has consequences. For the former, adopting MacDiarmid's critique of bourgeois culture, the apparent 'lag' of Scottish behind the social modernisation of other countries is naturalised and taken as a given. Nairn is exemplary, writing in 1968: 'The SNP Nationalists are merely lumpen-provincials whose parochialism finds its adequate expression in the asinine idea that a bourgeois parliament and an army will rescue the country from provincialism; as if half of Europe did not testify to the contrary'.[10] For the latter, MacDiarmid's critical differentiation of Scottish from English tradition comes to be an assumed fact, leading to a focus within analysis of the former on the native, 'racy' elements within what is in fact a more complex, stratified and heterogeneous compound system.

Following the decline of what historians have characterised as the period of British 'nationalisation' in the post-war period, the emergence of contemporary nationalist discourses from the 1960s has been driven in part

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[9] Manning, *The Puritan Provincial Vision*, p. 71.

[10] Cited by Jackson, *The Case for Scottish Independence*, p. 69.

by a marked shift from the socio-economic to the cultural register.[11] This is the context for the adoption of 'postcolonial' paradigms into cultural criticism in the 1980s and 1990s, displacing the earlier deployment of more strongly economic narratives by Nairn and others. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, new cultural and literary studies became more comfortable discussing the distinctiveness rather than the failure of Scottish tradition, and in acknowledging the overlapping and reinforcement of diverse identities – national, British, and imperial – in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The perceived 'distortion' of Scottish cultural development challenged by MacDiarmid, a critical line taken up more widely by the twentieth-century Scottish Renaissance movement, itself came to be seen as deriving from the hegemony of English critical paradigms. Parallels with postcolonial literature helped to explain literary forms that seemed to embrace multiple, or conflicting, cultural inheritances. Following the tendency of nationalist political thought to see the period since Union as an unfortunate episode belying essential constitutional and social differences, and the end of Empire as the unannounced dissolution of the imperial partnership, the dominant tendency of cultural criticism became the identification and recovery of alternative formal and aesthetic traditions to 'English' literary norms. This allowed for cultural production in Scotland to be read as the site of a generative struggle between different linguistic registers, cultural forms, and social and intellectual traditions: although not, however, as more recent work has highlighted, on the basis of the English and Scots hegemony over Gaelic culture.[12] While there has been consideration of Scottish intellectual and literary contributions to Empire, the reverse perspective has received less attention. What MacDiarmid's criticism calls to attention – the decisive shaping of modern Scottish culture both by Union and Empire – has receded into the background.

As contemporary Scottish aesthetic and cultural politics emerged from under the shadow of its mistrusted postwar predecessors, criticised for essentialism and nativism, a later wave of scholarship also offered significant re-evaluations of MacDiarmid. In a sign of contemporary discomfort with the tendency of artistic modernism to ground critique in aesthetic categories, MacDiarmid's poetics have been read via his politics, rather than vice versa. What emerged from this revaluation was what is now a standard reading of MacDiarmid's political and aesthetic agenda as – broadly – that of a decolonial nationalist rather than either a reactionary modernist or a committed communist. This reading seems to resolve some

[11] See David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth Century History* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).
[12] See Silke Stroh, *Gaelic Scotland in the Colonial Imagination: Anglophone Writing from 1600–1900* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017).

of the contradictions in MacDiarmid's politics, while allowing for sympathetic engagements with the fault lines and pressures in MacDiarmid's poetics as reflecting broader concerns within postcolonial modernisms: poetics of collage or montage responding to linguistic encounters, unresolved ambivalence over the identity of the poetic persona as representative of a people, and complex oscillation between the embrace of modernisation and the lure of the ancestral past.

Recent more detailed accounts of MacDiarmid have repeatedly engaged these problems, often with tact. Ian Duncan recognises the circularity of reading MacDiarmid through Nairn and hesitates to endorse Stephen Maxwell's late-seventies left-nationalist reading of MacDiarmid: 'it seems over-optimistic to cast MacDiarmid as a prophet of the great phase of decolonization and Third World nationalism of the post-World War II "Bandung-era"'.[13] Focusing on *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, he foregrounds instead MacDiarmid's recasting of the Romantic 'dissociation of sensibility' as an internal psychological struggle between English and Scottish, in which one stands for reason and modernity, the other for feeling and the past. For Matthew Hart, MacDiarmid's 'synthetic vernacular' poetry is an intense response to the tension in the construction of the national state as 'simultaneously the *product* of sovereign power and an *answer* to its inherent crises': nationalism for MacDiarmid, as for John Maclean, can be the vector for resistance to capitalism but only when recast in dynamic relation to internationalism.[14] This captures MacDiarmid's *modernism* and his resistance to the merely archaic, but it fuses the late politics with the early poetics and relies on the assumption, as Cairns Craig argues, that 'in its own linguistic experience, [Scotland] shared the experience of the colonised'.[15] Hart echoes Laura O'Connor, who also believes that in the absence of formal policies of linguistic control the linguistic experience of Scots speakers 'often *felt* coercive' but compares the atavistic qualities of MacDiarmid's poetics to the longing of postcolonial Creole texts for an absent authenticity, which ought to ground the identification of language, literature and communal history in the normative model of a national literature.[16] Like Hart

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[13] Ian Duncan, '"Upon the thistle they're impaled": Hugh MacDiarmid's Modernist Nationalism', in *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899–1939*, ed. by Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 246-66 (p. 248).

[14] Matthew Hart, *Nations of Nothing But Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 76 (emphasis in original).

[15] Cairns Craig, cited in Hart, *Nations of Nothing But Poetry*, p. 56.

[16] Laura O'Connor, *Haunted English: The Celtic Fringe, the British Empire and De-Anglicization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 116 (emphasis in original).

she ends up drawing on MacDiarmid's account of Scottish cultural history to explain MacDiarmid's approach, in this case via Nairn rather than Craig.

While MacDiarmid has been read through the postcolonial, in turn postcolonial readings of contemporary Scottish literature and culture in the same period were nourished by renewed interest in the interwar Renaissance. Reviewing the development of postcolonial approaches in 2011, Michael Gardiner argues that 'the tension between British global modernity and local and national cultural formations […] was most volubly documented [by scholars within literary studies] not in the eighteenth century […] but in modernism'.[17] Writing in 2013 Carla Sassi and Theo van Heijnsbergen also 'identify the writers of the twentieth century 'Scottish Renaissance,' and Hugh MacDiarmid in particular, as the establishers or at least the initiators of such a national master narrative, focused on a re-evaluation of the local, the peripheral and the vernacular, as a last line of resistance against the metropolitan (and anglocentric) language and culture of Empire'.[18] Both the criticism of MacDiarmid, and its circular adoption within the same postcolonial frameworks it was devised to accommodate, offer us a 'postmodern' MacDiarmid. They downplay the totalising and synthetic qualities of his interest in epic as a mode in his late work, and foreground his interest in the local and particular at the expense of their political and philosophical grand narratives he sees as the necessary correlate. As with other forms of postmodern sensibility, it is a reading which replaces historical and critical self-reflexivity with intense self-consciousness, and tends to disavow rather than affirm political responsibility.

Although because of their evident ambiguities these parallels have tended to be advanced provisionally, this pattern of interpretation is salient enough to have struck a more detached observer – the historian of empire Stephen Howe – as curious:

> Scholars and critics have not only tracked down the scattered allusions to colonial politics and literatures in his work […] and emphasised how his extraordinarily wide-ranging […] intellectual curiosity and political engagement embraced many colonial themes. Some have also urged that 'the political evolution of MacDiarmid's poetry marks the shift from elitist modernism (indicative of the waning of British imperial control) to the ideal of a postcolonial society'. Yet it must surely be added that such colonial and anti-

[17] Michael Gardiner, 'Introduction', *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Michael Gardiner, Graeme MacDonald and Niall O'Gallagher (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), pp. 1-12 (p. 4).

[18] Carla Sassi and Theo van Heijnsbergen ,'Introduction', *Within and Without Empire: Scotland across the (Post)colonial Borderline*, ed. by Carla Sassi and Theo van Heijnsbergen (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2013), pp. 1-13 (p. 2).

> colonial themes feature in only a very small portfolio of the poet's writings, while although his interests may have been global his activities were rather less so. Indeed, it is striking how far the literary-political circles in which MacDiarmid moved included rather few non-Scots, still fewer non-Europeans and almost literally no non-whites.[19]

One might go further. This pattern of interpretation is circular because it relies on acceptance of the analogy, not just authorised but to a large extent originated by MacDiarmid himself, between the situation of Scottish culture and that of colonial societies. It fails to contextualise that analogy within a deliberate strategy of provincialisation, and in doing so leads to the conflation of quite different socioeconomic and political conditions. According to historians, 'The vision of Scotland as an English "colony" was dominant within the late twentieth-century SNP', and the recoding of nationalism as a political movement has seen the invention of new, counterfactual popular traditions.[20]

In this section I have argued that one outcome of the strength of MacDiarmid's idiosyncratic modernist vision is the persistence of provincialism within twentieth-century Scottish cultural criticism. Adopting the category of the provincial from Manning's study of early nineteenth-century Scottish and American literature to characterise this inheritance is a strategy of anachronism intended to expose the tendency of recent critics to think all asymmetric cultural relationships on the model of the colonial. In the following section I switch the emphasis in my use of the term, reframing MacDiarmid's work in order to outline a decolonial challenge to Scottish literary history.

Provincialising MacDiarmid: Decolonial Perspectives

Provincialisation is a longstanding slogan of decolonial thought associated with the critique of Eurocentrism. As articulated in the influential work of Dipesh Chakrabarty, provincialising Europe means displacement of its centrality within the theoretical framework for understanding non-European societies, and critique of the hold of European models over South Asian

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[19] Steven Howe, 'Anti-colonialism in Twentieth Century Scotland', in *Scotland, Empire and Decolonisation in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Bryan S. Glass and John MacKenzie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), pp. 114-27 (pp. 123-24), citing Scott Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place: Imagining a Republic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 188.

[20] Stephen Mullen and Ewan Gibbs, 'Scotland, Atlantic slavery and the Scottish National Party: From Colonised to Coloniser in the Political Imagination', *Nations and Nationalism*, pre-print (2023), doi:10.1111/nana.12925, (p. 1).

thought and culture.[21] To provincialise the metropole is to decentre social imaginaries, and to proliferate new histories of the interrelationship between locality and globality which no longer take European and North American models as exemplary of economic, social, and political development. While implying the challenge and sometimes the rejection of Eurocentric explanatory frameworks and epistemological assumptions, provincialisation need not be a rejection of the thought of the universal, as some of its critics have challenged; rather it may be a project which seeks to rethink the relationship between the local and the universal, once the idea of the universal is understood as embedded in particular traditions.

In this sense, as Mbembe argues, provincialisation need not be understood as an anti-European project, but rather as a project which 'calls on Europe to responsibly live what it says are its origins, future and promise': or, in other words, it may be consonant with European thought's reflexive self-critique.[22] Indeed Manning argues of her subjects that in their work 'Scottish and American writers searched for a point of view from which to overcome these polarising tendencies: by investigating the nature of provincialism they attempted to endow it with a status which is not dependent on opposition to, or defence against, a "centre"'.[23] What recent decolonial scholarship can offer to the rethinking of Scottish literary history are ways to avoid the collapse of the decolonial into a mode of the provincial, simply reversing the mistake of critics who have taken MacDiarmid's provincialism to be a mode of anti-colonialism.

Decolonisation has tended to be viewed as an inexorable stage of historical development, which, beginning in Europe, spreads across the globe after the Second World War. The term itself arises within the international world system as part of the management (or bureaucratisation) of these struggles, integrating the disruptive phenomena within a recalibration of the semantics and norms of global political discourse. Treating the rise and fall of European empires as an inevitable historical process establishes an equivalence between the emergence of smaller European states from the dynastic empires of the nineteenth century and more properly postcolonial struggles. Decolonial political theorists charge

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[21] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). Chakrabarty's work has been productively taken up in Scottish literary studies by Antony Jarrells, '"Associations Respect[ing] the Past": Enlightenment and Romantic Historicism', in *A Concise Companion to the Romantic Age*, ed. by Jon Klancher (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009) pp. 57-77; 'Provincializing Enlightenment: Edinburgh Historicism and the Blackwoodian Regional Tale', *Studies in Romanticism*, 48.2 (Summer 2009), 257-77.

[22] Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, p. 76.

[23] Manning, *The Puritan Provincial Vision*, p. 148.

that this model obscures the changing semantics of empire in the period before and after 1945, and the racialised limitation of the right to self-determination in the period after 1918, restricted to European and white settler states. Revision of the dominant narrative has been driven both by attention to anti-colonial movements and thinkers and by recognition of the violence with which their imperial possessions were defended by colonial powers. Far from the benign management of an inevitable process of the flourishing of independent states, the historical event of decolonisation depended on the intellectual, cultural, and political activism of subjugated peoples and was met with violent resistance and contestation by European powers. The historical reframing aligns with theoretical challenge to the teleological nature of this narrative, the ideological ends it serves, and the framework of assumptions about social and political development it presumes.

There are two critical lessons for Scottish literary studies: firstly, that there needs to be greater recognition of significant differences between anti-colonial and other nationalist and/or anti-imperial struggles; and secondly, that changing 'norms' within the international political system have contributed to the problematic historical assumption that all modern 'nationalist' movements before 1945 are also decolonial. Those changing norms make it all too easy to conflate contemporary nationalist claims for self-determination with anti-colonial struggle, but they also cover over tensions within decolonisation over the form of the nation-state. In theoretical terms, as Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh argue, 'perhaps the most pernicious colonial legacy since and after the eighteenth century was the idea that to one state corresponds only one nation'; and from a more historical perspective the political theorist Adom Getachew has argued that anti-colonial nationalisms should be understood as a mode of internationalist worldmaking.[24] This suggests a third observation: the same changing 'norms' in which nationalism is equated with anti-colonialism may contribute to the reverse assumption that decolonial movements are primarily nationalist.

Combined, these propositions drawn from critique of 'decolonisation' and its institutional inheritance give us powerful reasons for suspicion of the equation of European 'nationalist' movements in the interwar period with postwar or contemporary 'decolonial' movements. Returning to MacDiarmid's work, this in turn suggests three broad lines of argument: that his nationalism is never decolonial but rather imperialist and Eurocentric;

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[24] Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 238; Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

that his anti-imperialist phase, from the promulgation of the 'Red Scotland' thesis in 1936 onwards, may not represent a markedly decolonial turn but is better understood as a new political expression of his underlying anti-materialism; and that not only does the purportedly 'worldly' late poetics remain vulnerable to the charge of Eurocentrism but MacDiarmid's continuing identification of culture and nation itself represents a persistent colonial legacy.

Caution against the equation of European independence movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with the postcolonial moment is critical to challenging the assumption that MacDiarmid's nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s is straightforwardly decolonial. The strength of the Imperial framing of British political culture in the period is such that British radicalism, even of such influential figures as J. A. Hobson, treats imperialism as a decadent or degenerate form of Empire. Except for a handful of intellectuals and activists, there is no significant British anti-imperialist movement in the interwar years, although London proves a central node in global networks of anti-colonial struggle. Historians of Scottish nationalism in the period have highlighted that the Empire was effectively a non-negotiable horizon for any credible political movement, and that the dominant conception of an independent Scotland within the nationalist movement was predicated on maintaining status within the Empire.[25] MacDiarmid himself, in these extraordinarily productive years, is preoccupied with establishing Scottish writing within 'world literature', but the terms within which he sees this run back directly to Goethe and recognise only European forms and models.

Re-examination of MacDiarmid's political rhetoric of the 1920s and 1930s confirms this line of argument, although it requires some effort to distinguish between the reality of MacDiarmid's public statements and his later reputation. The early debates within the nationalist movement have tended to produce a caricature. In the 1930s it suited both the National Party of Scotland, exemplified by John MacCormick's influential portrait of MacDiarmid in his memoir *The Flag in the Wind*, and critics of the party such as Alexander MacEwen (the SNP's first leader from 1934–36), to attack him as an extremist. However, while it is true that MacDiarmid's rhetoric can be deliberately provocative, his public attitude towards empire is broadly consistent, and largely conventional, reflecting the nationalist aspiration for Scottish self-government within an imperial framework.

In his first book-length critical publication, *Albyn: or Scotland and the Future*, published under Grieve's name in 1927, the only extended discussion of constitutional rather than cultural themes revolves specifically

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[25] See Richard J. Finlay, *Independent and Free: Scottish Politics and the Origins of the Scottish National Party, 1918–1945* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1994).

around the question of Empire. Here Grieve reflects the enthusiasm of the Scottish Home Rule Association (SHRA) for the Labour Member of Parliament The Reverend James Barr's private member's bill 'The Better Government of Scotland', debated in the House of Commons in May 1927 – about which Richard Finlay notes that its Labour Party supporters were considerably more dubious than the activists of the SHRA.[26] Countering the longstanding claim by its opponents that Home Rule must represent a diminution of the Scottish contribution to the Empire, Grieve argues that this is not a 'reversal' so much as a 'fresh and salutary manifestation' of constitutional development which will contribute to ensuring that 'the Empire can be maintained and prevented from sharing the fate of all the other great centralized empires of the Past'.[27] Not only would Home Rule give Scotland a greater say in imperial governance, but the good of the Empire can only be secured by ensuring the flourishing of all of its component parts: 'Will it not serve the Empire best in the future […] if Scotland can once again become the home of a vigorous and multiplying people from which the Colonies can continue to draw robust settlers'.[28] Although for Grieve the Bill has a larger significance, irrespective of its likely success, as one symptom of 'profounder stirrings of the national consciousness, […] a means to steadily emerging ends which cannot yet be clearly defined', his account broadly reflects the established position of the SHRA.[29]

This is not an isolated example. In an important series of inter-linked essays published in 1931–32, each of which shares phrases, sentences and sections with the others, MacDiarmid's personae equivocally link the struggle against 'English Ascendancy' within British cultural expression to the struggle against 'imperialism' within the context of the Empire. Writing as James Maclaren in *The Scottish Educational Journal* (3 July 1931), in one of a series of articles reviewing the success and prospects of the Scottish Renaissance movement, MacDiarmid links 'the vital question of "Europe or Empire"' to the '"Defence of the West", the conservation and furtherance of European civilization, and the continuance of white supremacy'.[30] For Maclaren, the active internationalism of the national movement has re-established meaningful contacts between Scotland and Europe, for example in arguing for the distinctive rights of minority literatures (regional, dialect)

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[26] Finlay, *Independent and Free*, p. 19.
[27] C. M. Grieve, *Albyn: or Scotland and the Future*, in *Albyn: Shorter Books and Monographs*, ed. by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996) pp. 1-39 (p. 24).
[28] Grieve, *Albyn*, p. 25.
[29] Grieve, *Albyn*, p. 22.
[30] Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Raucle Tongue*, volume II, ed. by Angus Calder, Glen Murray and Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. 262.

to representation within PEN International. However Scottish identification with a wider principle of decentralisation within Europe is not cast as a reconfiguration of its geopolitical alignment, but as a vindication of its possible role within the British Empire. In the same piece Maclaren attributes to William Power phrases which occur elsewhere under Grieve's name in his *Modern Scot* essay (July 1931), 'The Caledonian Antisyzygy and the Gaelic Idea'. English Ascendancy, it is argued there, has been the 'ruination' of the British Isles and a 'betray[al of] European civilization by pandering to colonials and Yankees and coming down to their level'.[31]

Duncan Bell has argued that within British political thought of the period the distinction between pro- and anti-imperialist positions can often be misleading, given the frequency with which the critique of 'imperialism' has formed part of the argument for the reform or improvement of Empire.[32] So it is here with MacDiarmid's rhetoric: the equation of 'Anglicisation' with 'imperialism' is put in the service of a call for renewal of the Empire through a rebalancing of the relationships between its parts, consonant with the civilisational mission of European nations. As Grieve writes in 'The English Ascendancy in British Literature' (1931), 'the cultural significance of the anti-English and other tendencies in most of the [Dominions]' is that they will lead to 'those changes in the Imperial organization which will deprive England of the hegemony it has maintained to long'.[33] Even allowing for the mercurial quality of MacDiarmid's political thinking, the inevitable inconsistencies in argument arising from his bricolage compositional techniques, and his recognition of the rhetorical value of accommodating his message to the prejudices of different audiences, the presence of this theme in this cluster of essays, one published in the leading literary journal of the day, and another chosen for reprinting in *The Uncanny Scot* (1934), remains significant. It strongly suggests that MacDiarmid's position in the early 1930s remain consistent with the arguments of *Albyn*, and indeed variants of the arguments, including material to be reused, can also be found in the *Scots Independent* essays of 1927.[34] Although it is now framed through the Irish nationalist Daniel Corkery rather than Charles Maurras or Oswald Spengler, the theme of national cultural revival remains directly linked to that of the decline and renewal of European civilisation.

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[31] Hugh MacDiarmid, *Selected Essays of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. by Duncan Glen (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), pp. 56-74 (p. 62).

[32] Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[33] Hugh MacDiarmid, *Selected Prose*, ed. by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992) pp. 61-80 (p. 67).

[34] For example, 'Wider Aspects of Scottish Nationalism', *The Raucle Tongue*, II, pp. 60-63.

Nourished by the integral nationalism of Maurras and the example of small European nations, critical examination of MacDiarmid's thought cannot ignore the profound Eurocentrism of his aesthetic and cultural frames of reference in the period, including his construction of the global and of 'world' literature. In the extraordinarily productive years of the 1920s and 1930s MacDiarmid is preoccupied with establishing the place of Scottish writing within the chorus of 'world literature'. The terms within which he sees this run back directly to Goethe – it is to see both major and minor nations as offering distinctive literary and cultural heritages. Like other work of the Romantic period, the first modern age of decolonial revolutionary struggle, it tends to repeat the assumptions of the eighteenth century that the nation is a characteristic feature only of European peoples.

A second challenge to disambiguating MacDiarmid's writing and clarifying his political stances is that following his own political reinvention in 1936 it suited him to recast his early interventions as less discontinuous with his later views than they in fact were. The proclamation of the Red Scotland thesis itself is reiterated (often by partial or complete reprinting) in the autobiography by MacDiarmid (Grieve), *Lucky Poet* (1943), the pseudonymous essay 'The Politics and Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid' (written under the name Arthur Leslie, 1952), and the second volume of MacDiarmid (Grieve)'s autobiographical writings, *The Company I've Kept* (1966). In these texts, invoking John Maclean to link his position to an earlier radical precedent, MacDiarmid does specifically interpret Scottish independence as 'part of the process of England's Imperial disintegration and a help towards the ultimate triumph of the workers of the world'; not following this 'separatist and anti-Imperialist line', he claims, has been a 'disastrous blindspot in the entire development of the working class movement in Scotland'.[35] This latter is a variation of the Leninist argument propounded by Ralph Fox in *The Colonial Policy of British Imperialism*, cited approvingly elsewhere in *Lucky Poet*, that it is imperialism which has diverted the Labour movement in Europe, the latter securing the support of 'a labour aristocracy' for the status quo.[36] Reconstructing the mythic persona of MacDiarmid, these texts systematically obfuscate any differences from the positions actually taken by Grieve: when he writes 'I have always thoroughly agreed with' Ralph Fox, it is unclear whether he means since he read the book; since the publication of the book in 1933; or that Fox's arguments in the book embody stances he has always taken – either on doctrinal grounds, or because his biographical and political upbringing has

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[35] Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas*, ed. by Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994) p. 144.

[36] Ralph Fox, *The Colonial Policy of British Imperialism* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1933), p. 108.

predisposed him to this position.[37] There is a similar temporal slippage when, writing as Leslie, Grieve argues MacDiarmid has been committed to international socialism 'Ever since his boyhood'.[38]

For MacDiarmid in the late 1920s and early 1930s the epochal world struggle is not between colonial powers and subjugated nations, but between 'world culture' (tacitly understood as European) and materialist civilisation. This is an idiosyncratic and primarily spiritual interpretation of 'anti-imperialism' as a totalising critique of modernisation. When from the late 1930s onwards MacDiarmid's rhetoric is more stridently anti-imperialist in tone, its reference remains equally unfocused. The dominant notes are opposition to capitalism, militarism, and war domestically, in the name of internationalism, meaning Soviet communist doctrine. MacDiarmid's sustained interest in Major Douglas and the Social Credit movement leads to a further compounding of anti-imperialism with the attack on finance capital, a rhetoric with strong anti-Semitic overtones. In this context it remains systematically unclear the extent to which the demand for proletarian revolution, the principle of national self-determination, and the repudiation of the influence of specific 'imperialist' powers representative of capitalist forces can be distinguished, and in turn separated from, the more intuitive call for spiritual renewal.

Rather than the expression of one distinctive ideology, or a series of considered positions, MacDiarmid's thought is better understood as belonging to a family of discourses of *Kulturkritik*, rooted in the *fin de siècle*, which proliferate in the interwar years across the political spectrum and share common themes. As Zeev Sternhell puts it,

> It was in the name of 'anti-materialism' that men who had issued from different political streams condemned Marxism and liberalism and the political, social and cultural characteristics of the traditional left and right. All of them shared a common hatred of money, speculation and bourgeois values in general, and all of them condemned the exclusion of the working class from intellectual and cultural life.[39]

In other words, MacDiarmid's ambiguous 'modernism' needs to be understood as the background against which his various political stances, vocabularies, and affiliations should be understood as tactical developments.

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[37] MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet*, p. 86.

[38] Arthur Leslie, 'The Politics and Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid', in *Selected Prose*, pp. 201-19 (p. 201).

[39] Zeev Sternhell, 'The "Anti-Materialist" Revision of Marxism as an Aspect of the Rise of Fascist Ideology', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 22.3 (1987), 379-400 (p. 379).

In the context of his vocal turn against the nationalist movement in the later 1930s, there are scattered elements within MacDiarmid's later poetics in which his 'modernism' seems to point more directly not only to forms of decolonial struggle but to a more global or worldly perspective. Conflicting tendencies in the late work *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955) bear this out. It is striking that in a passage which derives from the work of Leonard Woolf, one of the handful of overtly anti-imperial British intellectuals of the 1920s, updated by MacDiarmid to refer to contemporary anti-colonial struggles in Africa (ll. 31-34), the emphatic point is the critique of 'Mechanical authoritarianism (l. 20).[40] From the perspective of MacDiarmid's internationalism, the struggle against imperial rule is merely an aspect of the struggle against mechanical civilisation. Similarly, the question of world language remains underpinned not just by the European category of world literature, but by the historical philology of the Indo-European tradition which shapes the numerous references to Sanskrit not as an alternative 'transnational' language, comparable in some ways to a 'global English' that some critics have seen as itself 'provincialised' through cross-cultural encounter, but as a return to the linguistic source.[41] Similarly a passage in which MacDiarmid refers to the Tarim valley as the centre of the world is doubled by his geopolitical construction of central Asia in light of Soviet linguistic policies:

> Have we not travelled all over
> What the Arab geographer Al-Aziz
> Called Daghestan's 'Mountain of Languages,'
> Kumyk, Avar, Lezghin, Lak,
> Darghin and Tabasaran?
> – All powerfully developed now
> Under the Soviet regime,
> All used in the schools
> And in newspapers, magazines, and radio broadcasts,
> Where thirty years ago ninety per cent.
> Of the population were illiterate,
> Poverty-ridden, hungry, ravaged by disease,
> And to-day all radiant with new life
> And great creative developments
> In every aspect of art and affairs (ll. 19-33).[42]

The risk of a poetry of prose is that it will be vitiated by the material it absorbs, and the rapid transition from the lyrical to the propagandistic

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[40] Hugh MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam James Joyce*, *Complete Poems,* volume II (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 841.
[41] E.g., Simon Gikandi, 'Provincialising English', *PMLA*, 129.1 (2014), 7-17.
[42] MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems II*, p. 795.

highlights the degree to which MacDiarmid's anti-materialism has been recast as a flat and static opposition between two forms of worldmaking: true internationalism (within which national cultural and linguistic units will flourish) and false universalisation (the product of 'kinless cosmopolitans').[43] MacDiarmid's anti-imperialism leads him to identify the Soviet Union with the political force of modernisation that he called for in the aesthetic and spiritual realm, and came to believe could be identified with scientific progress.

Epic form in MacDiarmid's late work aspires to conjure the as-yet-unachieved progressive realisation of the modernisation process embodied in his fantasy Soviet Union over the standardisation and homogeneity he identifies with the capitalist world system. This purportedly post-national position justifies forms of cultural and political domination which can be stigmatised as imperial. If MacDiarmid shares anti-capitalism with some theories of decoloniality, and shares an anti-imperialist rhetoric with a strand of counter-systemic (but pro-Soviet) discourse that still runs through the Western left, then there are both positive and negative reasons to explore a partial affinity. However, the Eurocentrism of MacDiarmid's assumptions, which lack the framework of either a social theory or a philosophical approach which would rescue them from Romantic metaphysics, would require significant scrutiny.

Re-reading MacDiarmid in relation to the scholarship of decolonisation offers some significant clarification. Examination of his political rhetoric confirms that his historical and political frame and construction of culture in the 1920s and 1930s remains profoundly Eurocentric; despite the retrospective light cast by his own political writings, his stated stances are those of Imperialist nationalism. Moreover, the terms of 'anti-imperialism' in his later writing are not given cohesive political determination, but rather form part of a fluid and interconnected set of political vocabularies to be drawn on in the service of wider critique of the modern age. This means they can only partially be mapped to anti-colonial thought, and then only indirectly, through shared inheritance from Marxist or other political and theoretical discourses. Despite the turn in his political discourse, and in his poetics, *In Memoriam James Joyce* remains dominated by the same static opposition of 'good' and 'bad' universalisms, overdetermined by his Eurocentrism, now with more pronounced Orientalist strains, and shot through with the prosaic political rhetoric reflecting his pro-Soviet stance at the time of publication.

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[43] Andrei Zhadnov, quoted by MacDiarmid in support of the claim that 'cosmopolitanism is the antithesis of internationalism', in 'The Freedom of the Writer' (1950), in *The Raucle Tongue*, volume III, ed. by Angus Calder, Glen Murray and Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), p. 253.

Conclusion

If MacDiarmid has indeed been one of the most central figures to the construction of a postcolonial Scottish literary history, then there are good reasons to unsettle this framing, which offers a template for a complacently weak 'postcolonial' reading of devolutionary Scottish literature – and which a decolonial approach might challenge. Rewriting Anglo-Scottish relations in terms of cultural centre and periphery not only impacts our understanding of the productive agency of modern Scottish culture in its own right, but also reduces its agency and contribution to the British Empire and to Britain as a political project. Moreover, it tends to direct attention away from empire as a historical phenomenon and from its legacies, not only within the British Isles but across the global Scots diaspora, as having ongoing social and political significance. What is by now a well-established critique argues that the perception of having been only a junior partner in English colonialism, or even its victim, contributes to the construction of Scotland as a post-imperial nation, freed from historical anxiety. It should be clear that such narratives are deeply implicated in contemporary identity construction and political discourse, contributing to Scottish exceptionalism and related phenomena such as the denial that racism is an issue in contemporary Scotland.[44]

A decolonial response to MacDiarmid might highlight aspects of his political views and the epistemological framework for his cultural criticism which are in need of reconsideration and that problematise the reading of his work as a decolonial modernism. Provincialising MacDiarmid in this respect would mean emphasising the fundamental Eurocentrism of his conception of world literature, as well as the unexamined metaphysical content of his conception of the category of 'world' as a finite but unreachable totality, characterised in his late work by the tension between the utopian vision of a harmonious interplay of national languages and the false standardisation arising from the enforced adoption of a false universalism. Although the project sketched here might seem largely negative, or critical, it can be understood in terms of Mbembe's 'disenclosure' in two senses. Challenging the legacy of MacDiarmid to contemporary criticism exposes the operations of methodological nationalism in the literary field; while displacing MacDiarmid's own thought and poetics within a global history of decolonisation offers a disclosive critique, preparatory to recontextualisation of his distinctive modernism of inner vision, pursued through a crisis of authenticity and authority.

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[44] For example, Minna Liinpää, 'Nationalism and Scotland's Imperial Past', in *No Problem Here: Understanding Racism in Scotland*, ed. by Neil Davidson et. al. (Edinburgh: Luath, 2018), pp. 14-31.

The significant insight of MacDiarmid's aesthetic and political project for contemporary Scottish studies is the pervasive connection of the national to the imperial in the modern period, or of the inexorable and exigent doubling of Scotland with Empire. The opportunity afforded to the field by the current resurgence of decolonial theory and criticism is the amplification and endorsement of that principle, understood as an implication of the knotting together of political modernity (the nation state), sociological modernity, and European imperialism, rather than on grounds of exceptionalism. The double bind is that renewal of this analysis must pass beyond the political romanticism associated with the aesthetic construction of the national, endorsed by MacDiarmid and continued by recent cultural and literary histories: less reconstruction, more deconstruction and critique.

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