An Interview with Hugh MacDiarmid

Alexander Scott
Alexander SCOTT: You were born and brought up in Langholm, in the Borders, Chris. Did you start writing poetry when you were still a boy in Langholm?

Christopher Murray GRIEVE: Yes. I think I had my first attempts at verse published when I was about twelve, in the local paper, you know. I was always interested in poetry.

S: And, were they in English at that time?

G: They were in English, yes.

S: As a result of our educational system?

G: Well, at school—I think we all spoke Scots in Langholm, at home my parents spoke Scots—at school we were punished if we lapsed into Scots. We were supposed to speak what they would call "standard English," which is peculiar to Scotland, of course; you don't find it in England itself at all.

S: But you still spoke Scots, of course, the minute you escaped from it.
G: Well, I didn't come back to Scots until after the First World War when I was demobbed.

S: In writing?

G: In writing. I always spoke Scots and still do.

S: In fact, you're a native speaker.

G: Yes.

S: And from Langholm you went off down into "foreign parts," to London, to England and Wales as a journalist, didn't you?

G: Yes. Well, they were both rather brief. I went to Wales to act as a reporter and editor on a paper that was promoted by the South Wales Miners Federation, a Socialist paper—it didn't last long, and I came back to Scotland, but the experience in London was even briefer. I went down to act as London editor for a radio critical journal promoted by Compton Mackenzie—that didn't last long either.

S: That was later, in the thirties.

G: In the thirties, yes.

S: But of course you had been abroad in the Army between these two.

G: I was five years abroad. In Salonica, in Italy, in France for a time; the South of France.

S: And did your experience during the war have any effect on awakening or re-awakening an interest in Scotland?

G: Well, I think it did because I didn't like the Army particularly, that made one nostalgic, want to get home and so on and I came in contact with all kinds of people. There were five different armies in Salonica alone. I was there a couple of years and they were very nationalistic—the Venizelist Army in Greece and so on—and I began to think about Scotland itself, naturally. But I hadn't thought of it in language terms up to then at all. I hadn't thought of Scots, writing in Scots.

S: In fact, when you first came back, after the war, and settled in Scotland, in Montrose, you began to issue the
anthology called *Northern Numbers* and at that time you yourself would be still writing in English.

G: Yes, still in English, yes, yes.

S: And what turned your mind particularly towards writing in Scots, because I remember at that time you were actively hostile to the vernacular circle of the Burns Club in English and their attempts to revive the Doric, as they call it.

G: I have always hated the Harry Lauder type of thing Scots had degenerated into and I knew that the formation of vernacular circles under the auspices of the London Burns Club simply concerned to prolong that sort of thing and I wanted something entirely different. I had become interested in various European language movements by that time and I began to realize that something similar could be done in Scotland itself, you see.

S: And how did you start experimenting in Scots?

G: Well, by going to where the words were, you know. The dictionary, Jamieson's *Dictionary*. That's what triggered me off—the words themselves actually triggered me off.

S: But of course some of the words weren't just in the dictionary, they were already in your own head and experience.

G: Oh yes. There had been a lot of lapsed vocabulary, you know, and it was necessary to reinforce the language with extended vocabulary very extensively.

S: But you began really with playing with the words.

G: Oh yes, oh yes.

S: So there was an element of the game, an element of fun.

G: Oh yes.

S: An element of deliberate... 

G: No one took it seriously at first at all.

S: Until you discovered that this was the way that you wanted to go.
G: I discovered that I could write better poetry in Scots than I could in English.

S: And the first poems in Scots were on the whole short lyrics, weren't they?

G: Very short lyrics, yes. That was quite natural, of course, because nearly all English poetry is short lyrics, you see, and I hadn't begun to think in terms of anything else and realize that the lyric was no longer an adequate medium in the modern world with its big scientific developments and so on.

S: So very quickly your *Sangschaw* came out, the first book of lyrics, in 1925, and the second book *Penny Wheep*, in 1926, already has extended poems in it.

G: Yes, yes. They were leading to *A Drunk Man*.

S: That's it. So you moved very quickly, in fact remarkably quickly. You extended the range and the form.

G: It had been germinating in me for a long time, you know, but it took actual form, and a way to do it.

S: So in fact the rediscovery of Scots more or less opened the flood-gates and let everything that had been in you for years come out.

G: That's right.

S: Now, of course, there are all kinds of stories around about the composition of *A Drunk Man*, or maybe I shouldn't say the composition as there's no doubt that you composed it but about the organization of the material. There's this story about yourself and F. G. Scott putting it into its present order, shall we say. Is this story reasonably accurate or is it largely mythical?

G: It depends exactly what the story is, you know. Scott was invaluable to me, there's no question about that at all. He had a [greater] knowledge of Scottish literature, poetry in particular, than I had at that time; but it was simply the organization of the poem that he was mainly concerned with and I had written a great deal more than appeared in the final text, and a lot of it was below par, below the level of certain other things, and he helped me by suggesting that this and that and the other should be left out and the whole thing strength-
enewed on the basis of the best, what he regarded and what I came to regard as the best things in the text.

S: Well, I believe he is also claimed to have provided the last two lines of the poem.

G: He claims that but I don't remember that as a matter of fact. I am quite willing to allow him the credit for that.

S: Well, I wish I had provided these last two lines. I have often wondered about the next long poem *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, if it might not have benefitted by something of the same treatment—it's a very long poem with some marvelous things in it, but rather more unequal, shall we say, than *A Drunk Man*.

G: That was written at a very bad time of my life when I was coping with what finished up as a divorce from my first wife, you know, and that was one of the reasons why I failed to concentrate as I should have done on the idea of the fundamental snake in the way that I concentrated on the idea of the thistle as a symbol. If I had been more realistic in the handling of the snake and so on, I could have brought the whole thing together in a better way, I think.

S: I think that's the difference between the two poems, that the thistle becomes protean, it becomes dozens of different things whereas the snake just lies there as a snake and never really develops into the various aspects that you want it to. However you went away from Scotland around that time. Do you think there is any connection between your departure from Scotland about 1930 and the fact that in the early 1930's you wrote so many poems investigating your own Scottishness and your own ancestry in particular.

G: Oh, probably. I was away from Scotland and that gave me a chance of seeing it better, you know and thinking about things. I wasn't very happy either in London or Liverpool and I wanted to get back to Scotland and I had to consider the pros and cons of whether it was worthwhile or not.

S: At the same time, or almost at the same time, as you were investigating your Scottishness, ironically your language was perhaps becoming less Scots and tending more towards an English kind of Scots.

G: That's quite true. That's quite true. In dealing with types of subject matter that hadn't been used in previous Scots
poetry I had no precedents to pattern myself on, you see, so I had to fall back on a relatively unfamiliar field of English poetry which I never liked in any case, it never rang a bell with me, any modern English poetry at all. I was always very conscious of the psychological difference between myself as a Scot and anything English at all.

S: So you would say that your English is a very Scottish kind of English.

G: The English people—they refuse to recognize that I am speaking proper English at all, you see.

S: I think they have also, to their eternal disgrace, may I say, on the whole not recognized you as a poet in English, either to anything like the same extent, as for example, the Americans have recognized you.

G: It's much easier in America. I remember Professor David Daiches telling me that in various American universities, when he was acting as a professor he found his students had less difficulty in coping with Medieval Scots writing—Dunbar, Henryson, and so on—than they had in coping with the Augustan English poets—Pope and so on, because he said then that there were large dialectical differences in the United States themselves, and they were used to that kind of thing in a way that we had ceased to be in this country.

S: But in turning from Scots to English, was it a matter of Scots not any longer having the vocabulary to be able to cope with the subjects you were becoming more and more interested in?

G: That was the great difficulty, of course. It needed a considerable revival of obsolete language and you are always under a certain amount of pressure from friends to write in a Scots that would be intelligible to the ordinary person and I didn't think that was necessary at all; even now in certain quarters there is a desire to get back to spoken Scots. I'm not in favor of that at all. No. I don't see any advantage to be gained by it.

S: I agree with you there. That's like saying that a poet in England should give up the literary language and confine himself, say, to the patois of Liverpool. One says that one realizes what a ludicrous position that is. And in fact you would say I suppose that Denis Saurat is quite right in describing the Scots that you wrote in the twenties as synthetic Scots.
G: Oh yes. Undoubtedly. Saurat did a good deal to help the movement in the beginning putting in it proper content, delineating the potentialities of the movement in terms of European literature. I was never anxious to domesticate the issue at all and make it another slight development of local dialect or anything like that. I wanted to re-establish it as a language and work back to a complete cannon of the language. English was in a worse position than Scots. There are more dialect differences in England than ever were in Scotland, you know. They treat their dialects shamefully, the English.

S: Well, this is the reverse side of the coin, of course, of having a standard literary language which we did not have.

G: We didn't have, but they imposed a false standard that didn't arise out of the native circumstances except in a portion of the 17th Century.

S: Yes, that's right, and if it was foreign to most of England it was even more foreign to us up here because whether we knew it or not we did inherit a literary language.

G: It had to be adopted; Northern English should have been adopted not the South Anglo-Norman English that was adopted as the basis of the common English language.

S: Well, certainly every time I read Barbour who is contempor­ary with Chaucer it is remarkable how much easier he is to read than Chaucer is. I'm not saying anything against Chaucer because I think he is a superb narrative poet but his language is difficult in a way that Barbour's is not, but of course the development of Scots as a literary language ceased abruptly in 1600 and you presumably were trying to start off again where the Medieval makars had left off.

G: Yes. Oh, quite. And I had realized also that it was impossible to achieve what I was aiming at without corresponding political developments. It was largely a political matter— even now in Yorkshire and Northumbria and Cumberland the dia­lect, and there are dialect societies, is very closely linked to Scots. Burns, the type of Scots that Burns uses in most of his work, doesn't fall strangely upon a Cumbrian or a Northumbrian ear or a Yorkshire ear.

S: Yes, I've noticed that there was a whole school of Cumbrian poets.

G: There were the dialect societies, and so on. As a matter
of fact that was the basis of my argument that Scotland ought to extend to the Humber-Mersey line.

S: Well, they'll probably be glad to join us once we get that oil flowing.

G: We don't give a damn now, you see.

S: This, of course, explains your celebrated slogan "Back to Dunbar not Burns."

G: Yes, yes.

S: Because he [Burns] was dealing with or writing in a tradition which had really broken down and got very limited.

G: Exactly. He [Dunbar] had a European purview, European affiliations, all these great Medieval makars had access to a European readership that the subsequent writers in Scots and Scots dialect lacked completely. They became completely provincialized.

S: At the same time though you presumably have some admiration for Burns as a literary artist.

G: Oh yes, not only as a literary artist. I deprecate what I thought was the mistake of his life, his concentrating on these infernal songs.

S: You say that, of course, because you are tone-deaf.

G: No, that's not the reason. I am thinking of the content of the songs rather than the sound of them, the sentimentality and the concentration on romantic love and so on, and the similarity of all the damned songs. He had great potentialities as a poet as he showed in "Holy Willie's Prayer" and elsewhere; if he had concentrated on that, on the best work from the point of view of poetry rather than songs which is an appeal to [a] practically illiterate peasant public he could have realized himself I think as a much greater poet than he was, but he would not have had the universal réclame that he has had.

S: Well, I would agree with you that the satires are the finest things he ever accomplished.

G: He could have been a great satirical poet. He was in fact, but he didn't develop that side of it.
S: And you think that the state of a language and the state of society in Scotland in the late 18th Century had something to do with this failure to go on as he had begun with these superb satires?

G: No, I think it was the over-influence of English literature. Edinburgh after all, the Edinburgh period, was fatal to Burns. The English influence is very strong there and I think any English influence on a Scottish writer is bound to be bad. I don't know any instances to the contrary. It ruined R. L. Stevenson, it ruined Barrie, for example. Sir Walter Scott wrote his best stuff in dialect, not in the English of his novels. I don't regard him as a poet incidentally, unlike Dr. Tom Crawford I've got no use for Scott's [poetry].

S: I would tend to agree with you about many of his later, longer poems—I still think there are some very fine shorter pieces, but I certainly agree with you that the English influence on Burns was often bad, but I think in a way that his turning to song was a kind of retreat from Edinburgh back into Scotland.

G: Well it may have had that personal psychological cause but I think it was unfortunate.

S: However many of your own lyrics, which of course you didn't compose for music, have a singing quality because so many of them have in fact subsequently been set to music by Francis George Scott.

G: I did write most of them with the idea that F. G. Scott would set them and he did set most of them, you know.

S: Oh, you had this idea in your mind at the time?

G: Oh yes, oh yes, right, almost from the beginning, after I got in touch again with Scott. He was always pressing me for new lyrics and so on and that meant, you see, that I was slower than I otherwise would have been in breaking away from the lyric form because I wanted to give them to him, otherwise I think I would have developed much more rapidly into different larger forms of poetry in Scots.

S: Now, in the 30's, as you turned from Scots towards English the poetry becomes more philosophical, it becomes much more concerned with scientific fields, and it becomes a good deal more discursive. I recall from Kenneth Buthlay's book that you
had a breakdown about 1934 and it has always seemed to me that there is a marked difference in style between the poetry before that period and the poetry after that period.

G: I think that was due to the difference of content, of course, difference of subject matter; I had become more and more political and I had become more and more influenced by certain developments in contemporary foreign literatures. I didn't want to do anything to encourage the continuance of Scottish local literature; I wanted Scottish literature to take its place in the development of literature generally with other comparable European countries.

S: And you wished to deal with themes that were of more than just Scottish relevance.

G: Oh yes.

S: And so this necessitated a change of style.

G: It was a necessity, because after all Scotland had practically ceased to have any peasantry. It had ceased to be primarily an agrarian country. It was one of the most advanced industrialized countries in Western Europe, and that difference, that development in Scotland required to be reflected in the literature of Scotland. We couldn't go back to the old peasant folk poetry. I think that's what's wrong with the present, in recent years, revival of Scottish folk poetry. They are simply molding themselves on forms that arose out of a different environment altogether. There is something spurious about it and it's not relevant to the requirements of the present day.

S: And yet it seems to be extremely popular at the moment.

G: It is very popular.

S: Do you think this is the old example of bad money driving out good?

G: I never knew a time, I don't think there has been a time, in literary history when poetry was otherwise than unpopular. It has always only appealed to a very limited section and it had popularity in inverse proportion to its poetic worth.

S: So in fact it takes a long time for a poet to make it.
G: Oh yes. Unless there are advantageous circumstances: Burns made it relatively quickly, but then he wasn't a solitary example; a man who made it much more quickly and still comes out in more editions than Burns, McGonagall, did appeal to a very broad mass of the people in a way that Burns, even Burns didn't.

S: Yes, they don't call him the great Burns, they call him the great McGonagall. I think in a way that the kind of ironic adulation of McGonagall is a reflection of the Scottish people's hatred of real poetry.

G: Of course it is.

S: I've always thought it very peculiar that there's *A Drunk Man Looks At The Thistle* which seems to me to be the greatest extended poem in the whole of Scottish literature (and I've said this in print) published in 1926 and yet it doesn't go into a second edition until the 1950's, if I remember.

G: [There are] about eleven editions now, I think.

S: That's right, but in the first place it took about a quarter of a century before it really got itself established, was recognized widely in literary circles, let alone anywhere else.

G: That's true. That was largely owing to the influence I think of the two main Scottish daily papers, *The Scotsman* and *The Glasgow Herald*. *The Glasgow Herald* reviewed it very unfavorably on its first appearance.

S: I thought they had published extracts...

G: Oh they did.

S: Before it appeared?

G: Yes. The review was very unfavorable and *The Scotsman* didn't review it at all.

S: Well, that's the kind of thing which shows that history repeats itself very frequently, because they certainly seem to be rather slow about reviewing Scottish books even now, and one sometimes wonders who the reviewers are that they choose to review Scottish books. Have you seen in general any improvement in your lifetime in the way Scottish books have been covered in Scotland?
G: Well, there's more space given to them, I think, in the leading papers, you know, but I should say the level of judgment on the part of the reviewers hasn't improved any.

S: But when you began, there really weren't any literary quarterlies in Scotland, you had to start them yourself.

G: There had been one or two abortive ones before I started, but I started them, yes.

S: And in those days, of course, there was no Scottish Arts Council to subsidize them.

G: No, there wasn't....Is there now?!

S: I believe that there are some subsidies going for various quarterlies, good, bad, and indifferent, shall we say, no names, no pack drill. But how many magazines, how many reviews, did you in fact begin?

G: The Scottish Chapbook, and The Scottish Nation, The Northern Review and there was another one.

S: Well, The Modern Scot was later but you were just associated with that.

G: I didn't begin it--it was Jim Hawick and John Thom that did it, you see.

S: Now, all of the reviews which you personally edited, apart from Northern Numbers which really comes before your rediscovery of Scots, as it were, all of them advanced the idea and sought to promulgate the results of the Scottish Renaissance.

G: Yes, yes.

S: Now, is there such a thing as the Scottish Renaissance apart from the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid?

G: I think there has been. It has manifested itself in a lot of ways. There has been some very good Scottish poetry by a number of poets which I don't think would have come into being if it hadn't been for that general agitation, you know, and there's been a very considerable extension of the knowledge of Scots poetry and so on and teaching of it in schools and universities, and so on within recent years, and I think that was a direct product of the sort of ferment that we set going. I think not
these periodicals that I started were mainly influential but I did a tremendous amount of syndicated work to all kinds of local papers, five or six columns a week appearing in an average of about 30 local papers for several years, plugging this idea of the possibility, of the desirability, of the Scottish Renaissance and I think they had a very considerable effect.

S: Who were the earliest disciples who came along?

G: There was Willie Soutar in Perth, for example, and Willie Jeffrey in Glasgow, and Power who was on the Glasgow Herald, he wasn't a poet himself, and Helen Cruikshank who died recently—oh, there was quite a number, and then there were several women, two in Stirling. I didn't know them personally, only knew them by correspondence. I published poems by them and then I got gradually in touch with a group round about Aberdeen. At that time, in Aberdeen, before the unification of the Press and the Journal, several columns used to be devoted to writing in Aberdeen dialect by people like Mary Symon and John White and others and another friend of mine, R. L. Cassie started Swatches o' Hamespun which was a very useful collection, mainly in prose, but...

S: But his tradition still goes on in Aberdeen. We've just had Flora Garioch's...

G: She's very good. She's a bit above the level of what we call "Kailyaird" writing, you know.

S: Some of them are real poems, not just verses.

G: I think they are. Yes.

S: So that all of this was happening in the twenties and the early thirties and the movement was given a sort of intellectual backbone by the ideas which you provided.

G: Yes, I think so. And I wanted something wider than that. I never believed in a real gulf between Scots and Gaelic. I thought that had been accentuated for reasons of divide and conquer, you know—British imperialism. After all, Scottish Gaelic literature is very largely a song literature and the actual lyric curve of Gaelic songs is almost identical with the best of Scots songs so there was no fundamental difference between the two and I wanted to see a unification and an understanding and very early when I started some of these periodicals promulgating the idea of the Scottish Renaissance amongst the first
people who came to me were Gaelic writers—Sorley MacLean, George Campbell Hay, and so on. And of course that has gone on ever since.

S: But of course you yourself had to come to the Gaelic from outside, whereas you were able to come to Scots from inside.

G: Oh yes, they had it quite different. But there was no reason why we should be at each other's throat. The two things could be simultaneously encouraged and so on.

S: Well of course the poets in Scots and the poets in Gaelic do speak to one another nowadays.

G: At least most of them in my lifetime anyway.

S: In fact there has been quite a cross-fertilization because very evidently your poetry in Scots has had a strong influence on Sorley MacLean in Gaelic and then there's been a feedback into Scots because so many of his poems have been translated by Douglas Young and others into Scots from Gaelic.

G: Well, it digs both ways, and should do with the development of Scottish-Gaelic studies, this new Gaelic college in Skye and so on, I think the possibility of fruitful interaction will be developed.

S: Well this is unique, isn't it, in the history of Scottish literature; there seems to be very little feedback between...

G: Oh, there was antagonism, and that was fomented from outside, I think. The English discriminated in the punitive action they took against Gaelic; they didn't against Scots, you see.

S: But I think the punitive measures against Gaelic had started even before the English got into the act; I think James VI had begun it even before he became James I, if I remember correctly.

G: Ay, well there was that element, of course. Political power and particularly the development of the capitalist system ensured that that would happen because centralization is essential to the capitalist system.

S: Yes, I think it started in the sixteenth century, it has always seemed to me, with religion; with the Protestant revolu-
tion in 1560 which really didn't get to the Highlands in the same way it got to the Lowlands, so that as well as the language difference there was the religious difference, and probably...

G: Of course, you had the Roman Catholic element even then in the Highlands and Islands but not in the Lowlands to anything like the same extent.

S: That's right. And then of course Sorley MacLean and George Campbell Hay, who were both marvelous boys and not late developers as so many Scotch poets are, they were producing poetry in Gaelic in the thirties but Campbell Hay was also writing in English and in Scots.

G: He had half a dozen languages, he was a great linguist.

S: That's right, and then of course in the forties we got what has been called the second wave of the Renaissance as far as writing in Scots is concerned.

G: Yes; that's going on, of course. But they are not following me--I make that clear--are you? A lot of these younger ones have written what I really call gutter Scots, sort of hazy, weak Scots founded on inadequate knowledge of Burns and so on, but they're not following my example in trying to revive the language at its very roots and develop it.

S: But you're talking about now, of course, but what about this second wave that began in the forties, what about the so-called "Lallans makars?"

G: A lot of them suffered from the disadvantage, of course, of not having Lallans or Scots natively, they only had a book knowledge of it, and that's not adequate. That's where I had an advantage over most of them. Not over Soutar; it was Soutar's physical handicap that restricted his development I think, because he had the language natively, his father and mother both spoke Scots.

S: Yes, I remember him saying in one of his diaries that English wasn't natural to him, that he floundered while he was using it; you can see this in the poetry.

G: Yes, exactly.

S: And of course he was a native speaker and still spoke Scots with his parents all his days.
G: Simple Scottish dialect, yes.

S: And the same is true, I suppose, of Robert Garioch.

G: Oh yes.

S: And there are one or two others who are native speakers as well, but on the whole there is this terrible flaw.

G: There was a number of them who were not native speakers.

S: And on the whole they have tended not to last, but of course there is always an exception to the rule—we have Sydney Goodsir Smith, now, who was a New Zealander and brought up in English schools and yet he was a complete convert to Scots.

G: There was a predecessor of his, you know, whose upbringing and education and so on shouldn't have given him, and didn't give him, any knowledge of Scots and yet who wrote his best work in Scots—Sir Walter Scott.

S: Oh but surely the fact that he was brought up on the Borders...

G: A lot of contemporaries of Scott's wondered where he got his Scots; it was foreign to his family, foreign to his professional development as a lawyer, and so on, and yet he had a wonderful knowledge of Scots—he was a parallel to Sydney Smith in fact.

S: But I think he must have been like yourself and had a memory that went right back to his childhood, because he was brought up on his grandfather's farm for a number of years, he must have...

G: Still it was quite surprising, you see, that he'd a marvelous grip of Scots. If he'd written more in Scots he'd have been a better writer.

S: Well I agree with you that his Scots dialogues are the finest things in the novels. But I remember in the introduction to one of the cantos of Marmion he does say that the influence of the stories and the songs that he heard sung and told by the shepherds and the farm workers on his grandfather's farm have remained with him all his days in a way that, to a lesser extent I suppose, the influence of the people that Burns grew up with really stayed with him all his days, which brings
us back, of course, to the "lang toon," to Lallans.

G: Well it's a double thing in Scott—the fact that he had this knowledge of Scots, the fact that he had a particular social position, was what led him to harm the Ettrick Shepherd so badly, he had a snobbish attitude to [blank] and Hogg had a lot of potentialities and had a very good grip of Scots you know.

S: Well isn't it very difficult because of our educational system, and probably was even more difficult at the beginning of the twentieth century, for a Scotsman really to discover his own Scottishness because he gets overlaid so quickly with other...

G: There was everything to dissuade you from attempting to discover anything of the kind because you got thrashed if you lapsed into Scots in the school, and so on.

S: And presumably in your days at school very little Scottish literature would be taught at all.

G: Oh no, none. We didn't know anything about Scottish literature; it was all English literature.

S: Not even Burns?

G: Eh, you got an occasional thing of Burns I think by the time you got to about the sixth standard, but just one or two songs, that was all. And "Tam O'Shanter."

S: But the Scottishness was there nevertheless all round the school.

G: Yes. We learned nothing whatever about Dunbar, Henryson or any of the others.

S: So really your Scottishness came into you from the environment rather than from formal education.

G: It did; there was an antagonism to the English in the Borders at that time. To speak English was held to be aping the gentry, "speaking fine" you see.

S: "Pan loaf" as we say up in Aberdeen.

G: And of course the bulk of the population spoke Scots.

S: Well Scotch voices were not designed to speak English.
G: No.

S: I mean here we are speaking to one another in English but I think our voices go more naturally into the rhythms and cadences of Scots.

G: Well Burns didn't write any good English poems, did he?

S: Well I find it difficult to discover one.

G: I think I have, you see.

S: Yes, well would this not be because Burns never spoke anything else, I suppose, but Scots.

G: His reading was very largely English though.

S: That's true. Maybe it was because the models in English...

G: Yes, Shenstone and that sort of thing, you know, that was bound to be fatal to any potential Scotch poet.

S: And yet one could argue that contemporary English poetry is pretty thin gruel.

G: Yes, well it was a bad period, of course, the Augustan English poets...

[a break here]

S: I think we were talking about the difficulties of a Scotchman finding himself in Scots and his equal difficulties in finding himself in English, and we were saying that Burns was writing English in a period when the kind of English poetry that was being written wasn't really suited to Scotsmen, and perhaps this is true today also that the kind of poetry being written in England isn't suited to Scots.

G: Oh, it's even truer today; there's no English poetry of any quality being produced at all. The English literary scene is sufficiently well organized that they keep on pretending that they have a whole range of poets, and I think all of them are extremely poor. When they want anybody who as a poet exemplifies the English language, potentialities for poetic expression of the English language, they get a Welshman and an Irishman and two Americans, not a single Englishman. Of course Hume, the Scottish philosopher, said long ago that English as a cre-
ative medium was on the way out; he foresaw the complete extinction of the long line of English literature. I think his prophecy has been realized in our time.

S: And yet you have written more and more poetry in English.

G: But it's not a kind of English that's recognized as proper English. The syntax and so on doesn't correspond.

S: Is it recognized as improper English?

G: It's improper, a good deal of it, but not in that sense.

S: Now In Memoriam James Joyce, your longest published poem in English, is part of a much larger work called "Mature Art"; does this work in fact exist as such?

G: No, and not likely ever to exist either. As you know not only in regard to my English poems but in regard to my Scots poems at various times I promulgated ideas for a very large poem. In "Glen Albyn" I gave a complete scheme of what I was going to do there, and abandoned it, you see. [blank]... the same thing and it's certainly the same thing in "Mature Art." It's an impossible thing to realize; I've changed completely and am in the process of continual change. I want to write another long poem; six, seven thousand lines.

S: On what subject, on what theme?

G: That's the problem; I want a counterpart to A Drunk Man in Scots and I haven't got a key idea yet, but I think I will.

S: The thistle looks at the drunk man.

G: Well, we'll see. But I've got back again in my own thinking, in my own ideas, to Scots, you see. Scots is an impossible medium for any poems on scientific and modern subjects that I have been writing; you couldn't write "On a Raised Beach" in Scots at all, but you couldn't write it in English either, of course.

S: Well the kind of English you have written it in makes it a superb poem. I think myself that this is your finest poem in English.

G: I think it is one of my best poems, and certainly it evoked from an unexpected quarter the best critical essay on any of my
work. Professor D. M. Mackinnon, Chair of Divinity, gave the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh and then he published a small book summarizing the main points in his Gifford Lectures that he called The Problem of Metaphysics, and he devotes a whole chapter in that book to "On a Raised Beach," and a very good one too. He is pointing out that there are a lot of people, and I know the late Helen Cruikshank was one of them, and her literary executor the Rev. J. B. Logan of Crieff say, "Oh well, Grieve writes—he says he's not a Christian—but his work is [blank] with Christian references and so on, he has written a Christian poem, he's a Christian without knowing it." However, Mackinnon puts that kind of thing in its place and justifies my atheism, you see. It's a very good essay.

S: I must read it.

G: I've lent it out to somebody, I haven't got it at the moment here.

S: Now I would say that that poem in particular combines localism, being there in a particular place in Shetland, with a very wide outlook. Is this what you have been trying to do in your work throughout your career?

G: Yes. It's the most definitely atheistic poem that I've ever written. Materialistic if you care to use that term, which I don't. I think it's one of my best poems.

S: Yes, there are no ruined stones, I remember. And the fact that I remember something from it means that it has got no ruined stones. I am also fascinated by two things you said—in the first place you say that you haven't written these long poems because you have developed onwards so that you have got past the point of writing that particular long poem which I think is an ironic comment on Ezra Pound's The Cantos because he tried to stick with it, so you have got a poem which changes course about ten times en route so that there is no poem.

G: Ah yes, he lost the architectonic control of himself.

S: Absolutely.

G: I think it's a great poem nevertheless.

S: Well, there are certainly great things in it. Did Pound have any influence upon your writing of long poems?
G: Oh I think he had, because I corresponded with him and I finally went to Venice and saw him, and so on. I think Kulgin Duval and I are going to produce a little book of my various writings on Pound. I took part in a commemoration of Pound at Queen's University in Belfast and Olga Rudge with whom Pound was living thought that my tribute to Pound there was one of the best things that had ever been written about Pound by anybody and it was reproduced in that American Pound magazine *Tyuma*. But I've got to write another essay, that's the problem, I'm getting old and lazy you see, and to make a sufficient bulk of a little book I need to write another one now--I haven't done that yet.

S: Well are you going to write that before or after you write the seven-thousand-line poem in Scots?

G: I don't know what I'll do first—if I do anything.

S: Well I think one of the most striking things you've done recently, since you were talking about the long poem in Scots, is the short poem in Scots that appeared originally in *Akros* and which your son Michael and I put in our anthology of your work—"A Change of Weather."

G: Oh yes.

S: That is one of your few poems in Scots in the last twenty years.

G: Oh I haven't written much in Scots, no.

S: Can you remember what started that one off?

G: There's another unpublished effort was in Scots; some of it has been revived recently in *Agenda* and in that little magazine that Manson brings out in Edinburgh *Waybock*. There's a whole lot of that stuff and I don't think most of it is good, but one or two of them are, and should be incorporated in some subsequent book. I'll certainly write a lot more of this if I...

S: God willing as they say; if I may say that to an atheist.

G: Unless I get lazier and lazier and don't do anything.

S: Well you've done such an immense...

G: It's all right a young man like you, you know, but at my
age I want to rest on my oars a little.

S: Well you've certainly done enough in your time to entitle you to rest on your laurels.

G: Yes I think so, and then too much in some ways and too little in others.