Hamish Henderson: The Desert War, Italy, and Scottish poetry

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Hamish Henderson
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An exhibit from the G. Ross Roy Collection
in the Graniteville Room, Thomas Cooper Library

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Hamish Henderson: 
the Desert War, Italy and Scotland

Preface

Thomas Cooper Library has been fortunate to acquire a small archive of poetic drafts, letters and other material by the Scottish poet, folklore scholar, and translator Hamish Henderson. Born in 1919, in Blairgowrie, Perthshire, Henderson is best-known as a poet for his long poem about the North African Desert War of 1942, Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica (1948), awarded the Somerset Maugham Prize in 1949. The exhibit includes the early drafts for four sections of this poem, together with correspondence about its publication and reception.

From North Africa, Henderson moved on to the invasion of Sicily, the Anzio beachhead, and liaison work with the Partisans in Italy. That experience became the basis both for his later commitment to Scottish folk culture and his translations from Italian poetry and the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci. The exhibit therefore also fittingly welcomes to Thomas Cooper Library this year’s W. Ormiston Roy Visiting Research Fellow in Scottish Poetry, Dr. Marco Fazzini of the University of Venice.

Initial cataloguing of the Henderson archive was done by Jamie S. Hansen, Head of Special Collections Processing. There appears currently to be no bibliography of Henderson’s writings, but preparation of the exhibit was greatly helped by information in two recent collections edited by Alec Finlay: Alias MacAlias, a selection of Henderson’s essays (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992), and The Armstrong Nose, a selection of his letters (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996). I wish also to acknowledge the help of Professor G. Ross Roy, both in facilitating the library’s acquisition of the Henderson archive, and in providing background on individual items for this exhibit.

Patrick Scott, 
Associate University Librarian 
for Special Collections
The Exhibit

Hamish Henderson in 1948
Photograph by C.F.S. Newman, from Alan Ross, Poetry 1945-50
(London: Longmans, Green, for the British Council, 1951).


Henderson moved in boyhood to London from the Scottish Highlands, returning only for long summer holidays. Poetry Scotland, to which Henderson also contributed translations, was the leading publication for Scottish writers in the 1940s, and this volume was guest-edited by Hugh MacDiarmid, the acknowledged founder of the modern Scottish Renaissance. The later essay recalls Henderson’s discovery as a teenager of modern Scottish poetry, in MacDiarmid’s early volume Sangschaw (1925). Though Henderson and MacDiarmid, the acknowledged leader of the Scottish Renaissance, shared commitments to Scottish nationalism and Marxism, later they would recurrently differ over Henderson’s commitment to popular culture.

“Poem. Written during the Air-raid of June 13-14 [1940],” holograph MS.
shown with


While an undergraduate reading modern languages at Cambridge just before World War II, Henderson twice went to Germany for a Quaker refugee group. This poem was written just before he joined the Army in 1940.

“Poem,” Citadel (Cairo: British Institute, 1943).

With his fluency in German and Italian, Henderson was posted as an Intelligence Officer to Cairo. While Rommel seized Tobruk (in June 1942), and advanced within a hundred miles of the Egyptian capital, Cairo became the centre for an extraordinary flowering of modern war poetry, the so-called Western Desert group, which included several young Scots. Other contributors to this issue of Citadel included Keith Douglas.

“Hospital afternoon,” Oasis: the Middle East Anthology of Poetry from the Forces (Cairo: Salamander Productions, 1943).

The most famous Western Desert publication was this widely-distributed anthology of original poetry, produced with official sanction as a morale booster. Other contributors included Erik de Mauny, G. S. Fraser and John Waller. Forty years on, its original editors produced a series of further World War II anthologies, to which Henderson also contributed.

shown with Ian Eadie’s painting “Staff Officers. . . . Plan El Alamein” from Roderick Grant, The 51st Highland Division at War (London: Ian Allan, 1977).

After a brief period with the South African Division, Henderson transferred to the Highland
Division, again as an Intelligence Officer, staying with them through the battle of El Alamein, the campaigns in Cyrenaica and Tunisia, and on into Italy. This reminiscence recalls the impact on morale of Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery’s arrival in August 1942, and the subsequent turn of the tide in the Western Desert.

Map of the Western Desert Campaign of 1942-43.
Many of the places on this map provide the markers for Henderson’s major war poem, Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica. Following the costly victory at El Alamein in early November 1942 (in 12 days the Highland Division alone had 12,500 men killed, missing or wounded), the Division fought up the coast through the Halfaya Pass to Fort Capuzzo, and El Adem.

The Elegies in Draft
Henderson’s Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica begin with El Alamein (“End of a Campaign’), and would eventually comprise a prologue, ten elegies divided into two groups by “Interlude: Opening of an Offensive,” and the concluding “Heroic Song for the Runners of Cyrene.” Henderson later wrote that, while they were written “between March 1943 and December 1947,” four sections “already existed in fragmentary form in the Autumn of 1942.” The Henderson archive at Thomas Cooper includes early drafts for four sections, as well as later material from Henderson’s preparation of the published text.

Two drafts of “Prologue.”
This section, beginning “Obliterating face and hands,” records Henderson’s “rash ambitious wish” to “write a true and valued testament” to the dead of the Desert War. In the published text it was dedicated to John Speirs, author of The Scots Literary Tradition (1940).

Two drafts from the Fourth Elegy.
Henderson’s Fourth Elegy, “El Adem,” depicting visitors and prisoners after El Alamein, exemplifies his comment that the Elegies are “poems of passive suffering ... poems of stoicism.” The second fragment, beginning “Son of man,” clearly shows the then-inescapable influence of T. S. Eliot; the verso has jotted notes of Italian vocabulary to aid Henderson’s work interrogating the prisoners his poem describes.

Most of the Henderson’s individual Elegies were first published during the war in periodicals or anthologies, before their revision into book form. Lehmann’s ongoing series Penguin New Writing, published on both sides of the Atlantic, was one of the most prestigious outlets for a young poet. Along with this first version of Henderson’s Second Elegy, this issue included contributions from Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis. Henderson had first met the dedicatee for this Elegy, Luigi Castigliano, on the beachhead after Anzio, when he crossed the lines to join the Allies. In a letter of 1946, Henderson cites Castigliano as evidence of the “great interest for Scotland in Italy.”

“Fort Capuzzo,” New Road: directions in European art and letters, 4, ed. Fred Marnau
The separate publication of Henderson’s Ninth Elegy, printed facing Hugh MacDiarmid’s elegy “Coronach.” Henderson also translated for the same issue an essay on modern Italian poetry, by Ruggero Orlando.


Shown with Henderson’s own description of visiting war graves is a contemporary photograph of a Seaforth Highlander visiting a makeshift cemetery near Wadi Akarit and the Gabes Gap, April 1943.

Draft of the Tenth Elegy.

While this is one of the clearest and fullest of the early drafts in Thomas Cooper Library’s Henderson archive, it shows significant variants in many lines.

The Draft for Henderson’s Foreword to the Elegies

Following the War, and his final year in Cambridge, Henderson set to work crafting the series of Elegies into a book, staying on the Scottish island of Canna with the folklore scholar John Lorne Campbell (to whom he dedicated the Fifth Elegy), and in the southwest on Kintyre, with the author Naomi Mitchison. To introduce the poem, Henderson wrote a short essay about the origin, structure and message of the work, which undoubtedly played a part in the book’s critical success. Shown here is Henderson’s fair-copy typescript version, which incorporates substantial additional holograph sections. Significant additions include the discussion of post-War historical progress, and the introduction of a “Roman friend” into the discussion of his own poetic objectivity about a war in which he had participated.


shown with

Marguerite Caetani Bassiano, autograph letter signed, to Henderson, Nov. 7 1947.

After the War, Henderson kept up the intellectual and literary links with his Italian friends, as shown by this letter from the editor of a respected Italian literary magazine, concerning publication of his Fourth Elegy. Other contributors included W. H. Auden, Walter de la Mare, Marianne Moore, Theodore Roethke, and E.E. Cummings.


Lehmann, who had published Henderson in his Penguin New Writing, encouraged Henderson in his reworking of the Elegies. Interestingly, in light of Henderson’s aim of memorializing the dead from both sides, Lehmann tells of a positive German reaction to the PNW selection. The domestic letterhead shows that Lehmann was not yet writing formally as publisher for the Elegies.

Two fan letters about the Elegies from 1949.

In March 1949, the Elegies were awarded the Somerset Maugham Prize, administered by the Society of Authors. At the top is an enthusiastic letter of congratulation to Henderson, from a pre-War Scottish friend with whom he had been reunited on the Italian beachhead of Anzio in 1943. Below is a formal acknowledgement of a complimentary copy Lehmann had sent to the
former British commander in Libya, who praised Henderson’s evocation of the desert, even if he didn’t like modern poetry.

Hamish Henderson,
First edition, first issue, boards in illustrated dustjacket, signed. Henderson’s book came out at the end of 1948. The Times Literary Supplement praised its compassion and sincerity, the left-wing New Statesman commented that it has “the desert’s unmistakeable signature” and “physical vividness, Poetry Ireland praised its Celtic consciousness, while the U.S.-based Partisan Review judged it “one of the best war poems I have seen.” Interesting in light of Henderson’s later career as a folklorist is the review by the Marxist historian (and ex-tank captain) E. P. Thompson, in Our Time, who praised Henderson for his “self-effacement before the dignity of ordinary people,” adjured him to reject the literary coteries for “the people who make their own history.”

Hamish Henderson,
“Flower and Iron of the Truth, A Survey of Contemporary Scottish Writing,” in Our Time, incorporating ‘Poetry and the People’, 7: 12 (September 1948), 304-306. While waiting for the publication of the Elegies, Henderson made several contributions to the literary monthly Our Time. With MacDiarmid’s encouragement, he persuaded the editorial commission to let him edit this special Scottish issue, and the contents page shows how widespread his connections had become; contributors included MacDiarmid, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Sorley Maclean, and George Campbell Hay. The title of Henderson’s important introductory essay was drawn from MacDiarmid’s First Hymn to Lenin.

John Lehmann, autograph letter signed, to Henderson, February 8 1949.
shown with
Hamish Henderson,
First edition, remainder issue (1955), wrappers with printed dustjacket, signed. Though Henderson’s publisher John Lehmann had good literary connections from his work for Penguin, he was not able to turn positive critical reaction into substantial sales, even after the Maugham Prize was announced. Eventually, he sold Henderson the remaining sheets, and Henderson had them made up in wrappers as shown, by the Edinburgh publisher Callum MacDonald (information from manuscript note by Henderson in G. Ross Roy’s personal copy of second issue, also displayed).

The later publishing history of the Elegies: the second edition, together with the draft of Sorley Maclean’s preface and Henderson’s final corrections.
The eventual second edition was published in 1977 by the Edinburgh University Student Publications Board (on its way to becoming the respected publishing imprint Polygon). Shown here (top) are the two forms in which the book was issued, in paper boards with dustjacket (1977), and in wrappers with the same dustjacket (date unknown, possibly a 1991 reprinting). The EUSPB edition added a new preface, by the Gaelic poet Sorley Maclean (1911-1997), who had
himself (like Henderson, Robert Garioch and Norman MacCaig) served with the Highland Division in North Africa; shown here is Maclean’s fair manuscript. Also shown (centre) is a copy of the 1977 edition, with several small final corrections by Henderson.

The Highland Division Marches through Tripoli
Following the rout of Rommel’s army in the Cyrenaica campaign, the Highland Division reached Tripoli, and there staged the victory march past shown here, for the Prime Minister Winston Churchill, on February 4 1943. There, “standing in the last city of Mussolini’s empire,” Churchill, moved to tears as he took the salute, asserted that “when history is written . . . your feats will gleam and glow and will be a source of song and story long after we who have gathered here have passed away.” The official recording of this historic event had to be scrapped, as (to the Prime Minister’s initial bewilderment and subsequent delight) the troops marched passed singing an old Scottish bothie-ballad, “The Ball o’ Kirriemuir,” the bawdiness of which had been joyously elaborated through two World Wars (shown here from “Count Palmiro Vicarion’s” Book of Bawdy Ballads, Paris (of course): Olympia Press, 1956; on Churchill’s reaction, see James Barke, in The Merry Muses of Caledonia, London: Allen, 1965, pp. 32-33; photo from Grant, The 51st Highland Division).

Hamish Henderson in Sicily, 1943
The Highland Division went on from North Africa to the landing in Sicily. This photo shows Lt. Henderson questioning a German paratroop officer, Lt. Guenther, who he had personally captured, in civilian clothes, trying to cross Allied lines near Buccheri; Guenther later escaped, and led a suicidal frontal attack on Henderson’s unit at Monte Cerere in December 1944 (photo from Grant, The 51st Highland Division).

In his late essay “Puir bluidy swaddies” (in Cencrastus, 1995/96, and in Addidon and Calder, Time to Kill, 1997), Henderson recalls beginning this poem during the night of July 8-9 1943, as The Highland Division rolled about in landing crafts on the way from Tunisia to the Sicily landings. He finished it in the hills of Italy a year later. His editor, Nicholas Moore, had known Henderson in Cambridge Socialist circles before the War. Fellow-contributors in New Poetry included Wallace Stevens, Conrad Aiken, Elizabeth Bishop and Allen Tate. Henderson later retitled the poem “Ballad of the Simeto,” to avoid confusion with his better-known “Highland Division’s Farewell.”

The Highland Division’s Farewell to Sicily
Henderson has recounted how the Highland Division HQ celebrated victory in Sicily by a retreat parade of massed pipe bands in the small Sicilian town of Linguaglossa, where, amid crowds shouting “Via la Scozia,” a familiar pipe tune echoed in his head with the words “Puir bluidy swaddies are weary.” “I had the beginning of a song.” It gathered its own momentum as a military folk-song, with accretions and variations, till in the early 1950s, Henderson, by then a folk-song collector, could be offered it for recording as a genuine product of the oral tradition. Slyly, he
included it as “anonymous,” not only in his Ballads of World War II (1947), but even in this later Oasis anthology Poems of the Second World War (1985).

Seumas Mor MacEanruig [Hamish Henderson]
Ballads of World War II
shown with
Postcard of Lili Marlene’s home
Henderson’s experience of war-time soldiers’ songs, and of the role of folk-song among the Italian partisans with whom he fought after Anzio, led to this “first collection” of oral wartime ballads (there was no second collection). During World War II, the film star Marlene Dietrich made famous as her signature ballad, the plaintive “Lili Marlene,” about a soldier remembering his lost girl-friend, through cabaret shows for the troops in North Africa and Italy; the American OSS had her record it also in German as a morale-breaking propaganda exercise. Along with British songs, Henderson included variants on “Lili Marlene” and other songs in German and Italian. Given the then-law in Britain on obscenity, most soldiers’ songs were unprintable; Henderson’s inscription attributes to Hugh MacDiarmid the strategy he adopted, of setting up a special Lili Marleen Club and selling the book to members only, thus technically avoiding obscene publication.

A Scottish sergeant-major in Sicily
Cf Henderson’s “Highland Division’s Farewell.” This 1943 photo, according to the wartime caption, “shows the complete accord with which British soldiers have been received by the people” (photo from Grant, The 51st Highland Division).

Henderson with the Italian partisans
Following Anzio early in 1944, Henderson fought in North Italy with the partisan forces. Photos of Henderson in 1944 (on left in jeep, marked with the Garibaldian slogan “Bandiera Rossa”), and addressing a post-war reunion of the 52nd Garibaldini Brigade in 1950; Henderson was expelled from Italy by the CDU government shortly afterwards (Both photos from The Armstrong Nose: selected letters of Hamish Henderson, Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996).

Typescript translation, with corrections, of Gramsci’s Prison Letters
Henderson records that he began this translation in Belfast in 1948, and finished it in Milan and Cambridge in 1950. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) has been described as “the most important European Communist thinker since Lenin.” One of the founders of the Italian Communist Party, he was arrested by the Fascists in 1926, condemned by special tribunal to twenty years’ imprisonment, and died without ever being released. An Italian friend gave Henderson a copy of the 1947 Einaudi edition of the prison letters, and he immediately recognized in Gramsci’s Sardinian background a parallel to the political and cultural struggles of Scottish nationalism. Moreover, unlike Lenin, and very importantly for Henderson, Gramsci gave popular culture and language, not just economic determinism, a significant role in national development.

John Lehmann, letter to Hamish Henderson, March 31, 1949
As this letter makes clear, Henderson had told his publisher about going to Italy to work on the
Gramsci translation; Lehmann’s cautious response presages the difficulty Henderson would have in finding a publisher.

**New Edinburgh Review, numbers 24-25, 26.**

“Gramsci Special Double Issue,” and “Gramsci II.”

For many years, Henderson was unable to find a publisher for his completed translation; in a TLS letter (July 23 1974), he reviewed Lehmann’s return of the typescript, and the repeated efforts he and others made to get it placed during the 1950s. E. P. Thompson’s journal The New Reasoner in 1959 printed a few extracts in 1959, but these numbers of a student-run magazine were the first publication in English of all 218 letters from the 1947 edition, which, though superseded textually by subsequent scholarship on Gramsci, remains of considerable historical importance for modern Italian political history. This magazine issue contains background essays by others and two otherwise-unknown Mussolini letters that partisans had given to Henderson. The NER numbers, with the papers from a Gramsci conference, were also sold gathered between hard covers (recently acquired for the collection, but not displayed).

Antonio Gramsci, 1891-1937.
**Gramsci’s Prison Letters; Lettere dal Carcere.**
Translated and introduced by Hamish Henderson.

First edition, in dust-jacket. *Inscribed by the translator “To Lucie and Ross.”*

Henderson’s important introductory essay on Gramsci explores the parallels between Sardinia and Scotland, to bring out the relevance of Gramsci for radical Scottish nationalism.

Hamish Henderson
**The Cell: holograph manuscript**

*shown with*


Italy and Gramsci’s imprisonment provided Henderson’s projected second long poem, to be titled *Freedom becomes people*, begun in the 1940s, much revised, and partially published in this special Henderson number of the Scottish literary magazine *Chapman*. In his introduction, Henderson set out the poem’s aim: to “go to school” with traditional folk-singers, to “abjure self-congratulatory elitism” (instancing MacDiarmid), and move beyond the passive endurance of his *Elegies* to “the moment of resolve, of transformation,” leaving the desert behind to “celebrate the ‘vulgar’ Italy.” Henderson gives important background to this segment in a 1991 letter to the magazine *ZED*, Vol. 3 (Summer 1980)...

Hamish Henderson,
“‘Infirm of purpose! Give me the daggers!’: Some thoughts on Highland history,” *Cencrastus*, no. 3 (Summer 1980).

*Shown with*

*Tocher: Tales, Songs, Tradition, selected from the Archives of the School of Scottish*
Studies, no 34 (Edinburgh: School of Scottish Studies, 1979).

In 1951, Henderson joined the newly-founded School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh, as a research fellow, collecting folk-song throughout Scotland, and playing an important role in the growing Scottish folk movement of the 1950s and 1960s. The two items displayed here represent a large number of regular contributions to folklore studies, spanning more than thirty years, especially to the School’s two periodicals, the more formal journal Scottish Studies and the practitioner-oriented magazine Tocher. The Cencrastus essay, on the role of women in resistance to the 19th century Highland Clearances both represents the links Henderson asserted between popular culture and popular politics, and also shows his openness (atypical among Scottish Renaissance writers) to gender issues in Scottish culture.

Hamish Henderson,

Song of the Gillie More.
Original padded tartan cloth. Author's signed presentation copy to G. Ross and Lucie Roy.
shown with Holograph manuscript for additional stanza.

Henderson recounts writing this ballad about a superhuman forgeworker (the Gillie More, or big fellow), when, during the height of the Cold War, the Blacksmiths of Leith, near Edinburgh, sent fraternal greetings to the Blacksmiths of Kiev. It was first published by the union as a song sheet in 1953, and republished in this form in 1962, for a visit of the Kiev Trades Council to the Edinburgh Trades Council.

Three examples of Henderson as political folk-singer
From the early 1950s onwards, when he was involved with the Edinburgh People’s Festival, a folk-political counterweight to the well-known Arts Festival, Henderson’s own performances and compositions were an important part of the evolving Scottish folk movement. The first and fullest is his John Maclean March, on the notepaper of the Workers’ Educational Association for which Henderson worked in Ireland in the late 1940s; Maclean (1879-1923) founded the Scottish Workers’ Republican Party. Also shown are briefer notes of the kind Henderson prepared for folk-performances; these notes mention the South African leader Nelson Mandela, for whom Henderson sang during his visit to Glasgow in 1993. The many recordings of Henderson’s songs are represented by this tape of a fundraiser for Ethiopian famine relief.

Hamish Henderson,

Holograph manuscript poem: “Gueed luck, this seely day o’ Yule,”
This brief Christmas poem is unusual in Henderson’s work, as being a more personal lyric rather than communal or political song. Also shown: photograph of Henderson at a Scottish poetry conference in Caithness in the early 1970s, from the David Morrison (Scotia Review) archive, also in Special Collections.

Hamish Henderson,

“Auld Reekie’s Roses,” from his Auld Reekie’s Roses,
shown here from The best of Scottish poetry, ed. Robin Bell (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1989).
Influenced by his wartime experience of soldiers’ ballads, Henderson’s poems often draw on popular slang as well as local dialect. This poem about springtime in the city of Edinburgh (‘Auld
Reekie’) uses slang from the tinkers or traveling folk whom Henderson encountered in his work as a folklore researcher and whose independence of respectability he admired.

Hamish Henderson,
“The Flying o’ Life and Daith,”
This medieval-style debate poem, celebrating the victory of life over death, is perhaps the only instance of a previously-unpublished work being selected for inclusion in one of the standard Oxford books.

Henderson, Downing Street Honours, and Popular Accolades
In 1983, Henderson received an envelope marked Personal and Urgent from the Prime Minister, telling him he was being recommended for the Order of the British Empire in the next New Year’s Honours List. Strongly opposed to the policies of the-then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, on defense and other issues, Henderson refused the honour, as this letter from a Downing Street private secretary shows, but soon after was chosen as Scot of the Year by Radio Scotland.

Hamish Henderson,
The obscure voice: translations from Italian poetry.
Limited edition of 300 copies. Author’s signed presentation copy to G. Ross Roy.
shown with
Carla Sassi and Marco Fazzini, eds.,
Poeti della Scozia Contemporanea.
Henderson’s early links with Italy have been continued in his own translations of Italian poetry into Scots, and more recently also in the appearance of Italian translations of his poetry. Carla Sassi’s English note on Henderson, for The obscure voice, brings out well the impact of his poetry on Italian readers of a later generation. Her co-author, Dr. Fazzini, is this year’s Roy Fellow.