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DAVID CRAIG

A National Literature?
Recent Scottish Writing

Until very recently, Scottish writers went on clinging with a mad Japanese courage to the idea of their cultural separateness. A generation ago, Scottish literature was the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid and the fiction of Lewis Grassic Gibbon, and these two were nationalists almost more than they were socialists. That may be why they have contributed far, far less than they should to the common idea of what British literature has been in recent times. This invisible barrier between Scottish and English literature is a modern development, due perhaps to that London dominance of culture that has threatened to drown the north of England as well as Scotland. Burns, for example, was fully current in England. By 1813 there were at least eight editions of his works published in the north of England (e.g. in Newcastle), and pubs were being named after him. Matthew Arnold’s pages on him in The Study of Poetry are more perceptive, serious, and complete than anything by the Scottish critics of that time. Arnold did not fuss about the “language problems,” the need for glossaries, and the like. He felt Burns as immediately as he did Chaucer, Gray, or Shelley, and he could absorb him into his critical standard, as when he says:

For the votary misled by a personal estimate of Shelley... of that beautiful spirit building his many coloured haze of words and images “Pinnacled dim in the intense inane”—no contact can be wholesomer than the contact with Burns at his archest and soundest.

These are qualities which Scottish literature can still contribute to the British tradition. MacDiarmid especially could well stand for the “sound” as a corrective for votaries of the clever-clever Auden. Yet for British readers in general MacDiarmid has never got much beyond his extraordinary minority-esteem as a Great Poet whose great poems somehow aren’t common property. Many a snatch from his lyrics should surely have joined Auden’s “We must love one another or die” among the slogans of the intelligentsia, for example this from “Second Hymn to Lenin”—

Oh, it’s nonsense, nonsense, nonsense,
Nonsense at this time o’ day

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That breid-and-butter problems
'Sud be in ony man's way.

Yet MacDiarmid is totally ignored in Kenneth Allot's Penguin *Contem-
porary Verse* (1950), as in the Faber anthology compiled by Michael
Roberts just after MacDiarmid's heyday in the early Thirties; and En-
hlish intellectuals ask one for opinions on MacDiarmid as though they
were seeking otherwise unobtainable news from the North Pole.

Again, Grassic Gibbon has, like Robert Tressell, extremely high
standing among working-class readers; but outside what may be called
the labour-movement public—silence. In the Pelican *Modern Age* he isn’t
even given a mention (though Noel Coward, C. P. Snow, and Hugh
Walpole get detailed entries). When I was hitch-hiking from Edinburgh
to Aberdeen in the spring of 1958, I said to the lorry-driver as we came
onto the red soil of Angus, "Here’s the Mearns," and he replied, "Aye—
Grassic Gibbon’s country." He had heard the first part of Gibbon’s
trilogy *A Scots Quair*—surely the finest British fiction of the Slump age—
more than once during its many broadcasts on the Scottish radio. No
other Scottish literature of recent times has become proverbial in this
way, and here is another likeness to Tressell: Brendan Behan says in
*Borstal Boy* that Dublin house-painters who had never read *The Ragged
Trousers* ("nor any other book, either") would call the
foreman Nimrod.

It is a quarter of a century since Gibbon’s trilogy and since the
last work of MacDiarmid’s that I would call creative—the *Hymn to Lenin*
volunteers of 1931 and 1935. There are salient aspects of their work that
mark them as not of the age in which we now live. This older note can
be heard, for example, at the close of Gibbon’s first volume, *Sunset Song*
(1932), where a country minister’s sermon for the Great War dead turns
into a lament for the peasantry:

And then, with the night waiting out by on Blawerie brae, the
sun just verging on the coarse hills, the minister began to speak again, his
short hair blowing in the wind that had come, his voice not decent and a
kirk-like bumble, but ringing out over the loch:

"FOR I WILL GIVE YOU THE MORNING STAR
In the sunset of an age and an epoch we may write that for epitaph of the
men who were of it... It was the old Scotland that perished then, and we
may believe that never again will the old speech and the old songs, the old
curses and the old benedictions, rise but with alien effort to our lips.
"The last of the peasants, those four that you knew, took that with
them to the darkness and the quietness of the places where they sleep. And
the land changes, their parks and their steadings are a desolation where the
sheep are pastured, we are told that great machines come soon to till
the land, and the great herds come to feed on it, the crofter has gone, the
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man with the house and the steadings of his own and the land closer to his heart than the flesh of his body...

"...But need we doubt which side the battle they would range themselves did they live today, need we doubt the answer they cry, to us even now, the four of them, from the places of the sunset?"

And then, as folk stood dumbfounded this was just sheer politics, plain what he meant, the Highland man McIvor tuned up his pipes and began to step slow round the stone circle by Blaweatie Loch...

National feelings breathe and surge in such a passage, and the vocabulary that comes naturally to express them is the old Romantic language—sunsets and stars, "nothing abides," the darkness. The associations the Romantic poets had played on to express their melancholy at what seems now to have been their fundamental underlying subject—the spoliation of the old craftsmen's and yeomen's England—are equally apt for Gibbon. He invokes them shamelessly, with no inhibition, so overweening are his national fellow-feeling, grief, and nostalgia.

There is no nostalgia in MacDiarmid—his intellect is too ruthless. But in his poetry, too, one feels the swell of nationalist ardour, as in this lyric from a long sequence, "Ode to all Rebels," which was kept out of Scots Unbound when the godly Victor Gollancz published the book in 1934:

Scotland, when it is given to me
As it will be
To sing the immortal song
The crown of all my long
Travail with thee
I know in that high hour
I'll have, and use, the power
Sublime contempt to blend
With its ecstatic end,
As who, in love's embrace,
Forgetfully may frame
Above the poor slut's face
Another woman's name.

The remarkable unbeautiful metaphor at the close, the power of the one intellectual conviction to sustain a single tense sentence from the first line of the poem to the last—these qualities mark the poem as belonging to MacDiarmid's strongest vein; and the subject is Scotland.

Scotland—this was the richest single idea in our best writers of that inter-war period. What caused this? The Scottish National Party was being founded. But that is itself another symptom, rather than a deep social cause. For MacDiarmid's generation, the Great War had shattered

1 A Scott Quate (London, 1930), 192-3.
2 Stony Limits and Scots Unbound (Edinburgh, 1916), 93.
irretrievably the old Whig and imperialist ideology which England (rather than Britain) had embodied for so many. As the Twenties wore into the Thirties and the Slump deepened, many forces gathered strength on the Left: two Labour governments, organisation of the unemployed, the anti-Fascist front. But in an autonomous culture like Scotland’s there was also a precipitation of nationalism—the wounded morale of a Distressed Area that happened to have a national past. (Compare the Agrarian movement that the Slump produced in the American South.) Scotland was exceptionally hard hit. The industrial lop-sidedness and obsolescence that are still so crippling made Clydeside and the central Scottish coalfields one of Britain’s black spots in the Thirties. Our unemployment rate averaged twice England’s (as it has done ever since the Second War too), and an average of 25,000 people emigrated every year—this has recently gone up sharply. So a heightened, and painful, sense of separate entity was reborn. In literature, the effects of the nationalist Thirties lasted after the economic basis had changed again. During the War and after, a second generation of poets were writing in a special literary Scots, and they constantly canvassed the idea of cultural nationhood. But cultural values cannot exist for long in mid-air, without roots in practical social life. Now that nationalism is spent, what is there to feed sap to the literature?

It might be argued that nationalism is not spent. MacDiarmid often prides himself that Scotland has its own literature once again. His poems are on school syllabuses; there is a School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh and a Lectureship in Scottish Literature at Glasgow; one of the Edinburgh little magazines, Limes Review, has even published criticism written in Scots. In politics, waves of national feeling continue to rise from time to time. The Covenant in favour of Home Rule was signed by a majority of our adults; a Nationalist candidate did well in the 1962 West Lothian by-election; and now this latest and deepest of the postwar slumps has added fuel to the movement for a plebiscite on self-government. Yet no mass party backs Home Rule (a majority of Labour M. P.’s did in the Twenties); and in literature the ‘national’ features are mostly secondary or institutional—lectureships and research projects are set up, but the literature itself is hard to find. There are good talents at work in Scotland but, unlike Gibbon and MacDiarmid, what they write isn’t overtly national, and has therefore less to offer the

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5 As always, Scotland becomes “interesting” when things are worst for her—this latest crisis has produced a host of searching commentaries, e.g. Andrew Hargrave, “Scotland and the Common Market,” New Saltire, No. 6 (December 1962); Lawrence Daly, “Scotland on the Dole,” New Left Review, No. 17 (Winter 1962); James Milne, “Shall Scotland be murdered?” Labour Monthly, (November 1962); Gordon McLennan, Demand a Future for Scotland (C.P.G.B., 1962).
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journals, dictionaries, and study-projects that are set up on the assumption that there is in the north a distinct, separate culture. Of course these things should all be done. But often the mill seems pretty short of grist.

If one thinks of who is writing poetry in Scotland today, there is Norman MacCaig, whom I consider largely fake, a blatantly synthetic "Metaphysical"—yet as Scotland's most talked-about versifier he cannot be ignored, and his work is wholly in English, as is the published work of the most consistent younger poet, Iain Crichton Smith. Among the novelists, Robin Jenkins is outstanding, David Lambert should also be read, and these men go no further in the national direction than to use some Scottish settings and some Scots speech. It is rather that they happen to be Scottish citizens than that they write to any received idea of our history or separate nationhood—as had been the approach of all our significant novelists from Scott and Galt through Stevenson to George Douglas Brown and Gibbon.

This strikes me as a liberation. For generations (as I tried to show in my Scottish Literature and the Scottish People) our culture was neurotic with over-consciousness of nationality. Our writers dithered among stereotypes, theories, poses; and the faculty of perceiving life for itself was all but lost. Today, with the fading of the nationalist mirage, we can see ahead more clearly and in particular can appreciate better how our literature plays its part in struggles and developments much broader and more real than the private nationalist obsession.

Two anthologies of poetry bring out the change between pre- and post-war generations. The first, Maurice Lindsay's Modern Scottish Poetry: An Anthology of the Scots Renaissance, 1920-1945 (1946), is a book I have been through many times, and lately I have been finding which poems stay with me on their merits, according to the sharpness of the line they leave in the imagination. Of the poems written since MacDiarmid, or since the Spanish War, the outstanding piece is certainly the Gaelic poet George Campbell Hay's "Grund na mara" ("There they lie") translated into Scots by Douglas Young. It is imagined as the reverie of an old island woman, stunned and half-disbelieving at the loss of her son at sea during the War:

'Thonder they lig on the grund o the sea,
nae the hyne whaur they wald be.'
Siccan a thing has happenit me
sin my son's been gane. When he was wee
I dainlit the bairn like a whelpikie
and he leuch in ma airm sicht castyllie.
It's the auld weird nou I maun dree.

lie
haven
cheerily

After a section presenting her village with its daily round carrying on,
the poem reaches the kind of starkness that Scots (like all vernaculars) is so suited to evoking:

I see your jacket on the heuk,  
but the hous is lown in ilka neuk,  
never a sound or a word i the room,  
nae schaffan o baits on the threeshart-stane,  
the bed cauld and the chillin room.

Expression is stripped down to the plainest facts—yet even these can imply acute experience; and the language then intensifies to a rare pitch of unadorned tragic utterance, expressing grief that has passed through the immediate pang of loss to face death as part of normality:

Gin it's the sych that traivels far  
ye'll hear my sychan whaur ye are,  
sleepan i the wrack, jundied aye,  
wi usome ferries soonman by .

The young man’s reply expresses a very Scottish theme—the son struggling to shake off the clingings of mother-love:

Wheesht, woman, wheesht, and deavens me.  
My wa’s the mid to see ye greet.  
The ship brak doun under our feet,  
life gaed aff, and memorie wi ’t.  
London slew me, weary faa ‘t,  
commacht the een that never saw it.  
Aiblins I was acquent wi you,  
the saut has renigie my memorie nou.

Finally Hay puts in a simple moral in the way of Henryson, Langland, or Shakespeare:

Sair the price maun be downpitten  
by the island-fowk for the greatness o Britain.

This attitude to the metropolitan country is in touch with the nationalist Thirties, yet it fits naturally into the almost timeless mode of the whole poem. It is one of those pieces whose style is untouched by recent literary developments. Subject-matter and presentment recall the ballad, yet there is not a trace of the fake antique. The fact is that the island community behind such a poem has changed so little in essentials from the pre-capitalist epoch that in this case the old songs do rise without effort to the lips. The individual death is given with poignant immediacy; yet every touch—the collective “they” of the first line, the acceptance of “the auld weird,” the oddly distanced communication between mother and son—evokes general death in the individual one. This seems to me the most successful poem by any Scotsman since MacDiarmid; and I can think of few writers anywhere in the British Isles who could give so
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rich a value, through so unerringly simple a presentation, to one of the fundamental life-experiences.

Other of Young's versions from the Gaelic share these qualities, especially some short pieces by Soley Maclean. He no longer publishes; he is supposed to be writing a Gaelic "epic"; and a friend reports him "disgusted" by his work of the late Thirties and the War. Yet at the time socialism led him to bitterly concentrated images of poverty that recall Brecht, e.g. these lines from "Hielant Woman":

This spring o the year is by and gane
and twenty springs afore it spent,
sin she's hikeit creels o could wrack
for her bairn's meat and the laird's rent.

Twenty hairsts hae dwineit awa,
she's tiet her simmer's goodwill grace,
while the sair treuchle o the black wark
pleed its rigg on her clear face.

. . . Her time gaed by like black sleek
through an auld strikkit houze-tig seepan;
the bruikit aye sair black wark,
and gray the nicht is her lang sleepen.

The abrupt, unfluent movement, that never relaxes throughout the poem, conveys as palpably as the imagery the kind of desperately hard life that Robert Fisherty filmed in Man of Aran.

Nearly on a level with these for the distinctness of the mark it leaves in the imagination there is Adam Drinan's satire on an émigré come back rich from America—"Successful Scot":

By adding figure to figure
you have developed never,
you have just grown bigger and bigger
like this wee wort from the heather;
and size is all you have got.

Your mind set towards London,
your belly pushing to success,
from the very day that you won
the bursary of the West,
have flagged and faltered not.

Not much has your face altered!
The man has the mouth of the child.
The Position you planted and watered
expands from the lad's desires
as if bound in a pot...

Here spite against success finds a complete style. We are reminded of many a Burns satire on paunchy businessmen—"Behind a kist to lie an'

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sklent,/ Or purse-proud, big wi' cent. per cent.,/ An' muckle wame...”

But Drinan is typically modern, in the disenchanted dryness with which one damaging detail after another is put in, and in the hard punch of the final rhymes. Such spite (as Burns, too, showed) is apt to be a shaky basis for an integrated poetry, and Drinan does crumble at the end: Scotland is too easily and sentimentally merged with the man's disowned youth—"you would trample your youth in this flower/ that you have forgotten." So many of the Scottish themes lead off into a position that the writer cannot face without accepting those very defects in his own country that he would like to wish away. For the fact is that most Scots who have left their country behind them have emigrated, not out of pushfulness or common greed, but for sheer survival.

Those, then, are the poems that stay with me from this representative book (the MacDiarmid poems in the anthology have not been considered, for the reasons given above), that continue to release into the imagination. Each of them makes its own perfectly distinct impression, they are not echoes or echoes of echoes. They stand out from among poems like this:

I go north to cold, to home, to Kinnaird,
Fit monument for our time.

This is the outermost edge of Buchan.
Inland the sea birds range,
The tree's leaf has salt upon it,
The tree turns to the low stone wall... 
The water plugs in the cliff sides,
The gull cries from the clouds
This is the consummation of the plain.

O impregnable and very ancient rock,
Rejecting the violence of water,
Ignoring its accumulations and strategy,
You yield to history nothing.

This is laughably solemn. Each word, whenever the poem goes beyond the simplest Imagist image, has such an air of saying so much, like an old owl that fancies itself wise. But the abstractions—"consummation," "rejecting," "strategy"—are there only because T. S. Eliot had meditated on history in "Gerontion." This way with the stark and simple—contrasted with Hay's or Maclean's—seems to me "traditional" in a wholly weak sense. "Home" is supposed to stand for a timeless, basic pietas; but it remains just a word.

That poem, however, (George Bruce's "Kinnaird Head") is one of the accepted gems of the Scottish Renaissance. This lack of discrimination between the genuine and the paste has been confusing enough in England
but still more baneful in Scotland, anxious as we are to make the most of our scanty personnel. If we do wish to discriminate honestly between the genuine and the paste—and thus save our little magazines from turning into mere showcases for gewgaws, unable to interest a broad-based public—we must, I think, put in the former class Sorley Maclean, Douglas Young in his translations, some of Adam Drinan, and in the latter class Norman MacCaig, George Bruce, Tom Scott, Maurice Lindsay, and most of Sydney Smith. This is very summary. But it is based on more than ten years’ constant reading in the Scottish literary media, past and contemporary and it is borne out by the post-War generation’s anthology, Honour'd Shade. Before discussing that book we should note the facts that the cream of the minor poets I have mentioned were all progressive. In their poems they spoke out against exploitation and poverty, the neglect of the Distressed Areas, imperialism and war. Sorley Maclean was far on the Left at that time, Douglas Young a stalwart of the Labour Party (and a Nationalist too), and Adam Drinan (Joseph Macleod) one of the most open-minded champions of Soviet art during the War.

Honour'd Shade contains almost nothing in the old high nationalistic style and little overtly progressive work—indeed little considerable poetry of any kind. What I called the nationalist obsession is gone and with it, evidently, any powerful incentive to imagine and express. National over-consciousness is still there in the form of synthetic Scots—the diction MacDiarmid pioneered in the Twenties and hardly anyone but Young in his translations has used to fresh effect since. Is this, for example, creative Scots?

My world in nether winter is the sun
Barred in a cell, and dinst dull in yeryth
The cache is tinate, the road unseam
And dumb wi babban-quaa its dule and rime—
Sol is dowsit dimm, deid not but hapt
And hainit, close, or Cocorico bells rebirth
In the clean white clout o’ the Lamb.

Each phrase, each noun with its adjective or participle, seems to have to heave itself laboriously into place. This might be to evoke the numb low-chb of the year. But the movement is too wooden for such effects: compare the truly nerveless lapsings and slowings of the words in Eliot’s “A Song for Simeon”:

Lord, the Roman hyacinths are blooming in bowls and
The winter sun creeps by the snow hills;

4 Chosen by Norman MacCaig to mark the bicentenary of Burns's birth (Edinburgh, 1959).

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The stubborn season has made stand.
My life is light, waiting for the death wind.
Like a feather on the back of my hand.
Dust in sunlight and memory in corners
Wait for the wind that chills towards the dead land.

Beside this the Scots reads like a stilted translation from another language. Maybe the poet (Sydney Goodsir Smith) was thinking in English yet forcing himself—for the very best cultural reasons of course—to write in Scots.

Evidently the genuine rhythms and idioms are unlikely to crop up in that vein. Long ago MacDiarmid gave the slogan "Back to Dunbar". But the "aureate" or ornamental Scots that this implied is the least successful of the Scottish veins today. Again and again we seem to find our true voice in a style of extreme plainness, e.g. Young's translation in Honour'd Shade from a 19th-century German poet, Paul Heyse, "Eftir the Daith o a Bairn":

I thocht I heard ye chap up the door,
and rase til apon, as gin yince again
ye stuid their speiran, like ye uild afore,
sae couthlie, "Daddie, can I come ben?"

asking
pretty

Ay, and yestreen straavaig on the sand
I felt your wee bit hand hit i my hand,
and what the chad was rowan i the swaw
I spak out loud, "Tak tent an dinna fas."

wandering
shingle, rolling, wave

This is so economical and so right that we want not a word more or less. Extraordinarily keen feeling arises from language that never (except perhaps in "sae couthlie") asks for our tears. The same "unanswerable" plainness shows through in English also, as in Iain Crichton Smith's fine "Old Woman":

And she, being old, fed from a mashed plate
as an old mare might droop across a fence
to the dull pastures of its ignorance.
Her husband held her upright while he prayed...

Outside, the grass was raging. There I sat
imprisoned in my pity and my shame
that men and women having suffered time
should sit in such a place in such a state...

Elsewhere (and especially in a sequence which has had a succès d'estime, "Deer on the High Hills,") Smith is prone to a Yeatsian swell and flow of poetic diction along with a "Metaphysical" jargon and disruption of conventional syntax that recall the tiresome tricks of MacCaig and W. S.

\footnote{New Saltire, No. 2 (Nov. 1961) or separate ed. (Edinburgh, 1962).}
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Graham. Yet he never quite loses touch with that salutary starkness or trenchancy which is so strong in the Scottish tradition—in the ballads and folksongs, in Burns, in MacDiarmid.

Such a style probably has its basis in the culture of a small semi-nation whose Establishment and genteel tradition are not so all-embracing, not so formidably sleek, armour-plated, and sure of themselves, that other sections of the culture have difficulty in making headway. In the small country no one is far from the people or from oral language not much filtered through print and therefore unlikely to be elaborate or indirect. Consider, for example, a bilingual sequence, “Poems of an Undefined Love,” by a poet from Caithness, in the extreme north, where the language (as in Orkney and Shetland) is a dialect of Scots. The sequence is about an affair in which the poet hasn’t seen his girl for months—their relationship has become abstract, void of real emotions. For seven stanzas this is analysed, in precise intellectual English:

When we are apart
We are other persons.
We always see them
In perspective, defined,
But we cannot act on that.
We obliterate the lines again
In the cross-section
And make grounds
To forget the warning.

In the eighth stanza analysis stops, direct address occurs for the first time, and for this the poet needs Scots. It is as though pent-up bitterness absolutely demands release into real speech in which evasion will be impossible:

I'm no playin the game o' love.
Ye may say
We were no engaged
And only going out
Afore the public
But in the hert
Neither were we disengaged
And ye let him pit his mooth there.³

Every accent, stop, and switch feels perfectly timed, moving unswervingly to the implacable pinning-down effect of the close; and again the medium is almost unadorned speech.

In the last few years we have seen this strength of popular speech coming into its own as a medium in which Scottish writers can join in that triumphant renewal of the folk and vernacular forms that has dis-

³ John Manson, We Must Alter the Words (Aberdeen, 1954), 10-11.
tungished the present period in British cultural life—the mushrooming of the folksong clubs, the superb, pioneering creative work of Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger (their individual songs and, above all, their radio-ballads), and the rebirth of a drama close to folksong in the hands of John Osborne, Brendan Behan, Arnold Wesker, John Arden, Shelagh Delanay. In November 1939, Hamish Henderson (an outstanding folksong collector for the School of Scottish Studies and known already for his Poundian English _Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica, 1948_) wrote to the _Scotsman_ to disclaim any resentment at having been left out of _Honour'd Shade_: 

...I have come to set greater store by my songs 'in the idiom of the people' than by other kinds of poetry that I have tried to write. By working in the folksong revival, therefore, I am paying what is probably congenial tribute to the "honour'd shade" of the most famous Crochallan Fencible [i.e. Burns].

Here the difficulty arises, as with all discussion of the New Wave, that one cannot really do without live oral illustration. One of Henderson's best songs "Farewell to Sicily," can be heard on the MacColl record, _Barrack Room Ballads_ (Topic 10T26), but most of them would have to be searched out from the memories of the men who sang them in Italy in 1944 or from old issues of the Workers' Music Association paper, _Sing_. As a song-writer he works close to the people's own movements, and one song that is easily available was published as a leaflet (with music) by the Associated Blacksmiths' Forge and Smithy Workers' Society, to commemorate an exchange of good wishes between workers from Leith and Kiev during a Scottish-Soviet Friendship Week. Here Henderson captures the very pulse of muscular exertion in a way that was second nature to the Scottish people's poets of the 18th century—Ramsay, Fergusson, Burns:

O horo the Gillie More  
Noo's the time, the hammer's ready,  
Haud the tongs—ay, haud them steady  
O horo the Gillie More

Gar the iron ring, avallich!  
Gar it ring frae shore tae shore.  
Leith tae Kiev—Don tae Gairloch  
O horo the Gillie More.

O horo the Gillie More  
Here's a weld'll wear for ever.  
Oor gup they canna sever  
O horo the Gillie More...  

That is pure milk of industrial folksong, expressing downright straightforward emotions. A more complex style, still drawing on the
folk source, appears in the anti-Polaris song, "The Freedom Come-all-ye"—printed in Ding Dong Dollar (Glasgow, 1961) as anonymous but in fact by Henderson. This is struggle literature, literature of the march, platform, and loudspeaker, and this does not preclude poetic virtues. I admire particularly the imagery that is scaled large enough to make us think of the whole world yet never dissolves into Shelleyan fantasy. The superabundant freshness of the opening colours all that follows:

Roch the wind in the clear day’s dawin
Blaws the clouds heeler-gowdie ow’n the bay,
But there’s mair nor a roch wind blawin
Through the great glen o’ the world the day...
Nae mair will the bonnie callants
March tae war, when oor braggarts crowly caw,
Nor wee weans frae pit-heid an clachan
Mourn the ships sailin doon the Broomielaw;
Broken familys in the land we herriet
Will curse Scotland the Brave nae mair, nae mair;
Black an white, ane til ither mairriet,
Mak the vile barracks o’ their maisters bare.

Henderson is "old fashioned," both in the thickness of his Scots and in the whole-hearted drive and swing of his militancy. But a recent poetry booklet called Underwater Wedding, by Alan Jackson (a member of the Scottish Committee of 100), shows how folk styles can fertilise verse distinctly of the younger generation in its clipped, off-hand deflation of the old hallowed symbols and values:

I hate circles,
Haloes, hats, the lot.
I’m going to smash ‘em
With all I’ve got.

I’m coming out.
I’ve got a right to birth;
To air and sun
As well as earth.

I’m gorged with the ancient
Goody foods.
Time now for fighting
And the seven-league boots.

Time for the Mother
To get a big kick;
To scatter the dark
With a swipe of my stick.

This is the very voice of the brownd-off intellectual, both the background of Freud and Jung and the hard-bitten Sixties slang—"the lot."
It is the voice of Jimmy Porter (or Osborne himself) and of Jo in A Taste of Honey. What is unusual is Jackson’s trick of grafting a Beat manner onto the fairy-tale, nursery jingle, and nonsense rhyme:

Goodly godly kindly men,  
If you pour I won’t say when.

Wash me in the holy lather,  
Ancient as my ancient father.

Scrub my toes eight nine ten,  
Goodly godly kindly men.

When Jackson tries to suggest positively the kind of freed, impulsive experience he is pitting against the prohibitions of the old Presbyterian code, he falls back on the sheerest poetic diction, jush and hackneyed. But the adolescent revolt—I say that quite straight with no intention to patronise—that mainly motivates his poems is expressed with astonishing bite by that quirky, jingling style.

English or American literature could not have been discussed adequately at such length without a mention of fiction. In Scotland very few pieces of lasting value in the prose forms have appeared, perhaps (as I have suggested elsewhere\(^1\)) because the modern novel is a town form and by the time the industrial town was being absorbed into the British imagination, Scotland had lost by emigration the bulk of her literary talent—hence our long fixation on the past, the village and the countryside. What can hardly be doubted is that the characteristic life of the millions who have spent their days in the densely built-over industrial Lowlands that stretch from Glasgow to Dundee has scarcely figured in a single piece of writing that would bear pondering and re-reading. In the Thirties there was Grassic Gibbon’s Grey Granite. Since then we have had to content ourselves with the counterfeit coinage of a George Blake. By reputation he is a sort of Glasgow Zola; yet in his famous (and reprinted) The Shipbuilders (1944; 1954) he can lapse into presenting for our serious attention a vision of the lure England has for Scots folk that has no more actuality than a tweed Christmas card, no more relevance to the present than a print of pink-coated gentry riding after a fox. Scottish novelists have behind them too little tradition of writers tackling the town with full confidence that it is wholly available and wholly fitted for authentic re-creation. David Lambert’s He Must So Live (1956) tries to render Red Clydeside—the Clydeside of Davie Kirkwood, Willie Gallacher, and the Battle of George Square. In dialogue at least he is adept—he can catch to perfection the hard-hitting back-

\(^1\) See Craig, Scottish Literature and the Scottish People (London, 1961), 145-6, 222-4, 309; and letter to Glasgow Herald, 27.10.61.
chat of tenement dwellers. Yet in his presentation of violent experiences—battles between workers and police, physical collapse—he is, like Blake, too contaminated by the pulp novel, by sensationalistic over-writing, at once hectic and vague. As a result his own long trade-union experience (he is now General Secretary of the Foundry Workers) goes for nothing, and the natural drama of fluctuating labour struggles fails to be strongly established. It is not that the subject is intractable in itself, whatever the bourgeois-minded critics say: think of the searing vividness with which it was handled by Dos Passos, Farrell, Steinbeck, or Gibbon in the Thirties, or for that matter the more-than-documentary competence and interest with which Len Doherty and Margot Heinemann have handled it recently.

The esteemed Scottish novelists, the "quality" artists, are rooted in the countryside—Neil Gunn and Fionn MacColla. Yet there is little in Gunn beyond the simplest "nature notes" larded with the kind of laborious naïvetés and solemnities that are so often (as in the case of Edwin Muir) taken for real, even spiritually exalted creation. MacColla, a man who moved from Montrose, on the east coast, to the Outer Isles, also labours to express deep experiences, and he draws on the hallowed national subjects—the Clearances, the Troubles that harrowed Scotland from the Wars of Independence until the Reformation. Yet the evident sincerity and nationalist credentials cannot conceal the truth that these works are, as fiction, stillborn—wordy, strained, gauchely melodramatic.

Gunn did write one novel that I recall reading with bated breath, it so promised to get a serious theme into an effective form of fiction. This was The Drinking Well (1946). It deals with the efforts of a lad from a Highland croft to find his feet in Edinburgh, as a lawyer's junior. Here, in the theme of a young man who has moved from manual work to a profession, we have a likeness to a whole cluster of recent books, notably Raymond Williams's Border Country, Margot Heinemann's The Adventurers, and (in an oblique way) Arnold Wesker's Roots. The peculiar interest of The Drinking Well is that Ian's new companions are restless metropolitan intellectuals, a set of drinkers, who are not flitting (as might be the case in London) with socialism, Zen Buddhism, or drug-taking but with Scottish nationalism. The atmosphere of this section is authentic (I remember it myself from student days in Aberdeen)—the "brilliant talk," fired with enthusiasm as long as the drink lasts, the plans for books that would plumb the deeps of Scottish

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[See And the Cock Crew (Glasgow, 1945; 1962); Scottish Noëi (Barra, 1958); An Tryall of Heretiks (Collieston, 1962).]
experience. The theme, in fact, demands the steadiest treatment—treatment steadied by a perfectly clear realisation, on the author's part, of actual social possibilities. Gunn is too sentimental to manage this. He dissolves into evocations of the Scottish Past, the Highland Soul, etc., that are no better than the purple patches in a highclass tourist brochure. The appeal of the traditional fiddle music is described thus:

But the slow notes—they were too profound, too terrible in their potency.

There is a level at which the emotion of naked life can no more be borne, life lifting its face from the emotion of ten thousand years, its girl's singing face, pale with the generations of the dead, and the singing throat of an innocence that, at long last, is pure.¹

Such flounderings, such weak generalizations about Scottish culture are no substitute for the embodiment of it in achieved drama of storytelling. Gunn's novel should be compared with a story in a recent New Saltire (No. 7, March 1963)—Black and Red by the poet Iain Smith—the best short work we have had for years. It tells in extraordinarily keen-edged impressionistic prose, supposedly in letters home, the story of a Highland lad coming to university; and the basic attitude (at the other pole to Gunn's) is one of urgent desire to grow beyond a dying civilisation with its ageing people and ingrown puritanism. One memorable passage describes his deep thrill at a music utterly new to him—a Negro jazz hymn which his friend, a medical student, puts on the gramophone.

That is a glimpse of how our writers are becoming alive to our own time. The man who has done far and away the most towards this is the novelist Robin Jenkins. He is a popular library-novelist, and he does tend to skate along the surface with a facility that sometimes disguises a failure to more than sketch the outlines of the very complex characters, especially women, that he sets out to present. Yet at his best, which means not infrequently since The Changeling (1958), his lightness can, as in the early E. M. Forster, serve as the attitude of an unpartisan intelligence, not too heavily invested in any one of the characters or milieus he creates and thus able to bring out the value of each. Like Forster, and like T. F. Powys, Jenkins is forever concerned with the need for tenderness and humility—that we should be ready for and open to one another, not so afraid of being thought fools by the worldly-wise that we harden ourselves off into some role of self-importance or self-righteousness that stultifies the living impulse. Jenkins is acutely aware of how people can be hurt—he evidently feels deeply the wound of the Second War and the sheer knowledge that the Glasgow slums are there. He is moved to atone by warm love, and the feelings involved

¹ The Drinking Well (London, 1946), 133.
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are indeed hard to dramatise without sentimentality. In Jenkins this comes out sometimes as a quite swamping tendency to the arch and whimsical: the likeness to Forster and Powys is too often to their weakest work, the quasi-supernatural whimsies of Forster's short stories or Powys' poorest novel, Kindness in a Corner. In The Missionaries (1957), for example, about the eviction of a community of religious devotees from an old holy island in the west, there is little respite from the flow of heavily gnomic conversations, crankily oracular characters, and moments of "miracle" that are left much too nearly endorsed by the author himself.\footnote{10}

Nevertheless, the startling likeness of the style at many points to Forster and Powys is something Jenkins has a right to. Many a touch in his novels shows his Powys-like ability to note in a symbolic way the smallest symptoms of cruelty or malice, e.g. this image of a bland, treacherous shopkeeper looking at the corpse of a boy, from a novel about evacuees from Glasgow, Guests of War: "Michaelson dabbed now at one side of his moustache and now at the other, with his knuckle: he was imitating the swing of the gravedigger's spade."\footnote{11} The most obvious likeness to Forster is Jenkins's ability to generalise, often paradoxically, on the dramatic moments he has created, as in this passage from a novel about a Scottish girl in love with a high-born Indian—The Tiger of Gold:

Remembering Chandra, with my eyes, my lips, my breasts even rather than with my intellectual memory, I was convinced he had been sincere in Ilban; but even sincerity in love was not, I realised with a spontaneous gush of thankfulness, as unchangeable as those stars. If Chandra no longer wished to marry me, it did not mean he never had; and the change was insulting to neither of us.\footnote{12}

I think Jenkins's problem has been to find his way to subjects good not only for entertaining story-telling but also for the treatment of his deepest preoccupations at a level more deep-reaching than an easy opposition of the priggish and the warm-hearted, the self-righteous and the tolerant, and so forth. The Changeling shows him at his best—and strikes me as one of the finest things in British fiction since the War—because in it the meaning isn’t issued to us in little wise mottoes and the drama stands up by itself. The theme is, characteristically, that of a man trying to do good and finding that good, as the world receives it, can turn painfully into its opposite. Forbes, a rather pompous good-

\footnote{10}{For a quite different opinion of The Missionaries, see Alastair R. Thompson’s essay on Jenkins—"Faith and Love," New Saltire, No. 3 (Spring 1962), 62-3.}

\footnote{11}{Guests of War (London, 1956), 260.}

\footnote{12}{The Tiger of Gold (London, 1962), 211.}
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hearted Glasgow schoolteacher, decides to take a slum lad on holiday with his own family, to "give the boy a chance." For though the lad is clever, well-behaved, and mature, he is reputed a rogue because none can believe anything else could come from so squalid a home and because authority is constantly being nettled by the impenetrable suffisance the lad has developed simply to survive. On the holiday everything goes wrong—Mrs. Forbes is on edge waiting for signs of criminal slumminess, the other children are jealous, Forbes can't help wanting some sign of warmth or oncomingness from the imperturbably civil lad. Jenkins's Forster-like ability to cut very fast, yet without any forcing or sensationalism, from the laughable to the painful—in a way that reflects the disruptive shifts of life itself—comes out in an excellent scene in which the souring and jarring of the whole group has reached a climax:

Tom looked at Mrs. Forbes. He was astonished by the loathing in her eyes; but she nodded, and he immediately left the room.

As he went through the hall to the front door he caught sight of Forbes's old raincoat hanging on a peg. It was soiled, with green paint on its seat. He had a longing to touch it, but that shy gesture could not satisfy the sudden surge of love in him, so that he crushed his face into the coat, smelling not only paint but the sea.

... Then Tom found himself not hurrying through the garden to the hut, but knocking at the dining-room door. He would confess not only to the thefts in Woolworth's but also to the others at school; and he would tell them he was going away that afternoon for good.

Mr. Forbes opened the door, just enough to show his face; tear-stained, bewildered, and woebegone, it might have struck a stranger as comical. Inside the room was the sound of Mrs. Forbes weeping.

"What is it?" muttered Mr. Forbes. "What d'you want?"

What Tom had come to say, he found he could not; that weeping within the room demoralized him; or rather it drove him back to his old resources.

"I was wondering, sir," he said politely, "if I could have a loan of the bike to go to Dunroth."

"The bike?" repeated Forbes.

"Yes, sir. It would save the bus fare."

There was a rush inside the room. Forbes was pushed aside and his wife's face was seen, tearful, enraged, ugly.

"No, you can't have the bicycle," she screamed. "You knew Gillian was going to use it; that's why you want it."

Not only had he not known that, but he thought Mrs. Forbes hadn't known it either.

"I didn't know, Mrs. Forbes," he murmured.

"Yes, you did. You can't have it. Do you hear, you can't have it!"

Then she rushed back into the room.
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Forbes was left glaring miserably at him.
"Changeling," he muttered. "Changeling."
It was a word Tom did not know. Then the door was closed.13

Nothing could be finer than the sure way in which the novel then moves to what we feel to be its only possible end—a tragic end, which implicitly recognises the hopeless difficulties of thinking to solve dilemmas of class and inequality by single acts of kindness. The final pages are unerring, and show how Jenkins’s gift as a narrator springs from his keen, loving knowledge of how people feel and behave.14 This open-hearted interest in people, the humane radicalism which gives an edge to his writing whenever it deals with privilege and inequality, the marked distrust of fanaticism—these are qualities which put him with the "liberal" tradition in modern British writing. From the Scottish point of view what is so heartening is the breadth of his interest in not particularly “national” subjects (like many an English liberal, especially Joyce Cary, he is interested in children and in the backward countries). In him we have a talent that richly typifies what I meant when I said at the end of Scottish Literature and the Scottish People that "a freer spirit, facing up more openly to experience at large whatever its origins, might better enable the Scottish writer to cope with the problems of living in this place at this time."15

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14 Lose is a Fervent Fire (London, 1959) would have been equally worth discussing at length. I was deterred only by the difficulty of doing justice, briefly and with little quotation, to both the power of the book and the question of whether the sharp contradictions in the make-up of the heroine are done in sufficient depth.
15 p. 293.