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Reviews


This book is not an autobiography but a series of essays, nominally dealing with Mr. MacDiarmid's friends—K. S. Sorabji, F. G. Scott, Major C. H. Douglas, William Gallacher and others—but actually expounding his own ideas and opinions in a prose so thick with quotations that the unwaried reader may get tangled in the undergrowth.

To take an example of his method, one chapter is headed Ezra Pound. It contains 473 lines, 243 of which are quotation. 78 of the lines quoted are from MacDiarmid's own writings, but 17 of these 78 seem, if I interpret the quotation marks correctly, to be a passage of someone else's prose embedded in MacDiarmid's verse. Not one of the 243 lines quoted is from Ezra Pound himself.

The chapter begins with the statement that Mr. MacDiarmid is frequently asked to pay commemorative tributes and did so on the occasion of Pound's 80th birthday. He cites G. S. Fraser's defence of the Cantos and of Pound's scholarship in his book on Pound, and follows with 46 lines quoted from an article of MacDiarmid's own on the epic qualities of Charles Doughty's work, containing among other things passages about libroch and the classless society. We suspect that a case is to be made out for modern epic, with Pound's cantos as an example, but then follows a paragraph about Laura Hofrichter's book on Heine, and Heine's effort to introduce variety of material into his lyrics.

The next passage lists the criticisms that Mr. MacDiarmid says are most frequently made of the Cantos. One of these is the accusation that Pound is a materialist. MacDiarmid immediately seeks to prove that "in actual aesthetic products materialist and sceptical writers have considerably surpassed religious ones. . . . There has been, and remains, an unbroken enmity between religion and art." His argument consists mainly of lists of non-religious poets with some effort made to explain away inconvenient religious poets like Calderón. It seems to me that the relationship of religion and religious feeling to art is too complex to be dealt with by making lists.

Then we have a long quotation from D. G. James' book Scepticism and Poetry and a consideration of Denis Saurat's *Literature and the*
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Occult Tradition, which claims that a whole line of European writers share a mental heritage in occult doctrines of non-Christian origin.

At this point I begin to wonder whether we are meant to be talking about religion in general or Christianity in particular? And how does Saurat’s thesis relate to scepticism or to the idea of modern epic or to Pound? Is Saurat there simply because he is another friend of MacDiarmid’s? At the end of all this the author complements Pound because “he has nothing to do with any of this pre-scientific material.”

Another quotation from D. G. James follows, dealing with the poet’s efforts to make an imaginative unity of the world, and then one from Edwin Morgan on modern epic is pursued by a passage from a poem of MacDiarmid’s own which seems to contain in turn a quotation from someone else unnamed.

Then there is a list of modern attempts at epic including those of Mayakovsky and Pablo Neruda.

MacDiarmid goes on to state that “the Christian religion can never recover from the appalling betrayal it perpetrated when it ceased to regard usury as a deadly sin,” and runs on with a reference to Major C. H. Douglas’ Social Credit proposals and a lively and pointed piece by Gilbert Cannan on the contemporary worship of money and sex.

Finally the author quotes approvingly a remark by Baroness Fiona von Thyssen that she can’t manage to like Englishmen, who are about as charming as rattlesnakes, and closes with a quotation from an organ called Revue du Tanka International dealing with MacDiarmid’s own poem In Memoriam James Joyce from the standpoint that the reviewers prefer tanka.

It’s like a hunt with a quarry that changes with each shift of light. Obviously the article contains much that is stimulating, but apart from the view that the Cantos are an epic poem and epic poems are a good idea, what does it tell us about Ezra Pound? Mr. MacDiarmid illuminates neither Pound’s poetry nor the poet himself, and we don’t even know from the article what Pound’s own views are or whether the author knew him personally.

On the whole MacDiarmid seems more interested in ideas than in people, and he is not very good at expounding ideas which he does not share. Some of his insights into Scottish history and literature are sharp and revealing, but many of his opinions are perverse. (This wouldn’t bother us if we believed that everything is a matter of opinion, but Mr. MacDiarmid doesn’t, and I don’t.)

For example, MacDiarmid mentions with pride that he joined the [ 199 ]
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Communist Party at the time of the Hungarian uprising when other people were leaving it. How can a man so concerned with the national identity of Scotland approve the Russian suppression of a spontaneous revolt for national and individual freedom?

Again, he says "Against the strong vigour of Scottish life, almost all novels of this century are flimsy constructions of cardboard." This after stating that he reads few novels, mainly detective stories! On any serious consideration detective stories are an insult to the paper they are printed on. Is David Lindsay's A Voyage to Arcturus, the greatest Scottish metaphysical novel since Confessions of a Justified Sinner, a flimsy construction of cardboard? Or Neil Gunn's Green Isle of the Great Deep or the rich, warm Morning Tide?

The brief account that MacDiarmid gives of his life in one chapter is moving despite its almost impersonal baldness. He has experienced and suffered a great deal, and has struggled through the rigours of Scottish intellectual life with incredible energy and determination. It's only a pity that he finds it necessary to despise so many people. He writes "I do not share any of the interests of the mass. Their unexamined lives do not seem to me worth having... Indeed, my best friends are all part of an intellectual elite whose members are nearly all known in some degree to each other... I'm all for GIANTISM in the arts. Everything that means the expansion of creative genius to a point where all the little people simply can't comprehend it and are excluded automatically." He admires in himself and his friend Sorabji an inability to suffer fools gladly, and the last words in the book are a quotation from Norman Douglas of whom he warmly approves (why? Are his novels so far from cardboard?) "Therefore the sage will go his way, prepared to find himself ever more and more out of sympathy with vulgar trends of opinion... He scorns to make proselytes among his fellows: they are not worth it. He has better things to do... He endeavours to find himself at no matter what cost, and to be true to that self when found, a worthy occupation for a lifetime." But the so-called sage who scorns his fellows and all their occupations is not a sage. George Fox says "There is but one light. The nearer all come to it, the nearer they come to one another." Another wise man tells us "I draw water, I chop wood: miraculous deeds, acts of wonder." But the vagaries of this book don't really matter: in his life Hugh MacDiarmid has drawn water and chopped wood, and in some of his Scots poems he performed miraculous deeds and acts of wonder.

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