In the Midst of Our Human Civil War: Hamish Henderson’s War Poetry and Soldier’s Songs

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Cover Page Footnote
IN THE MIDST OF OUR HUMAN CIVIL WAR:
HAMISH HENDERSON, WAR POETRY,
AND SOLDIERS’ SONGS

Corey Gibson

Writing in 1968, in a brief passage explaining the “idea” behind a new poem series, Hamish Henderson (1919-2002) began with a quotation from Heinrich Heine: “Freedom, which has hitherto only become man here and there, must pass into the mass itself, into the lowest strata of society, and become people.” Henderson insisted that what Heine says of freedom applies also to poetry: that it has the potential to become everyone, and indeed, that it has, like freedom, a moral imperative to become everyone. The simple present form – “become” – invokes the sense in which both liberty and lyrical self-expression must be continually sought out and reaffirmed, and that this is a universal, timeless truth. To ensure that this democratisation of poetry is realised is, writes Henderson, “our most urgent task.”

By the late 1960s, when Henderson set out this poetic agenda, the Scottish folk revival was well established. Folk clubs and festivals were commonplace, and the commercialisation of traditional song was a familiar, though periodically controversial, phenomenon. For almost twenty years Henderson had worked at collecting and disseminating traditional Scottish folksongs and lore, and he had become, for many, an embodiment of the movement itself. Henderson was one of the most prominent public defenders of the revival: he sought to vindicate his cultural political programme against Hugh MacDiarmid’s accusations of

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worthless populism. Furthermore, he published articles tracing folk-song types, profiling “tradition bearers,” interrogating modes of cultural transmission, and imagining the political potential of the revivalist project.

The introductory note to this later poem-series, “Freedom Becomes People,” was, however, concerned with Henderson as a poet, rather than with these more familiar incarnations. The purpose of this article is to explore some of the early manifestations of Henderson’s search for a poetry that “becomes people.” His ideas about how the “isolation” of the artist in modernity might be overcome provide us with a distillation of his cultural politics and a blueprint for their suggested aesthetic forms. Henderson’s most productive period in terms of poetic output coincided with his military service and with the remaining post-war years of the 1940s.

Henderson’s two major publications from this period were *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* (1948), a volume of ostensibly high-Modernist verse, which won him the Somerset Maugham award in 1949; and the less well-known, *Ballads of World War II* (1947), a collection of soldiers’ songs transcribed, translated, compiled, edited, and, in part, written by Henderson. These works are poles apart in terms of form: one, esoteric art-poetry compared by reviewers to Eliot and Pound, replete with classical allusions and evocations of the work of Rilke and Konstantin Cavafy; the other, bawdy, sometimes scatological, predictable in rhyme and metre, and in parts, even cheerful and gleefully dismissive of the horrors of war. However, together these volumes expose the roots of the cultural-political position Henderson was to arrive at by 1968. His war

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poetry and soldiers’ songs can be understood as concerted efforts to reconcile theory with practice: to imagine a lyrical mode that neither patronises nor alienates the soldiers whose voices and experiences are represented. In this way, Henderson’s early works foreshadow his writings about the folk revival, which was to cure the isolation of the artist in modern society by dissolving him or her in the voices of that romantic construction, “the people.”

After a winter spent constructing anti-tank defences in East Sussex with the Pioneer Corps, Henderson joined the Intelligence Corps, and by late 1941 he was stationed in Egypt. Through the rest of the War, he was attached to various divisions, most famously with the 51st Highlanders. He was part of the North African Campaign, and witnessed the Battle of El Alamein, before joining the invasion of Sicily, and the subsequent advance north through mainland Italy. Henderson’s duties included the interrogation of POWs, which he took as an opportunity to master Italian, to collect folksongs, and to recite passages of Goethe or Dante from memory. While on the Italian mainland, Henderson organised Allied co-operation with the Communist Resistenza. It was there he discovered Gramsci (1891-1937), the political martyr whose name had already accumulated symbolic resonance, as un grande pensatore – a great thinker.

In his 1968 manifesto of sorts, Henderson proposed that we “go to school with the folksingers ... because in the past, and breenging into the present, it is their work which has ‘become people.’” The aim of the new poem series, writes Henderson, is to argue for the reconciliation of the artist and society: “it would no longer (like my desert war Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica) be a poem of endurance, of in the main passive suffering; it would rather represent the moment of resolve, of transformation, of insurrection.” Though Henderson does not elaborate in his description of this “moment” that this poetry – and poetry in general – should address, he does provide some clues. If “resolve” is read in its musical application to refer to the movement from discord to

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5 See Concise Scots Dictionary (2005), s.v. “breenge”: “rush forward recklessly or carelessly; plunge; make a violent effort.”

concord; if “transformation” is thought of in terms of linguistics, as the conversion of an element of the underlying, logical, deep structure of a sentence, into an element of the surface structure; and if “insurrection” is taken explicitly, as a committed uprising against authority, the character of this “moment,” and its relevance to a poetry that “becomes people,” becomes a little clearer. Extending the metaphorical reach of Henderson’s description we can see that his poetic project aims for a kind of harmony; a consensus or unity that can emerge from previously obscured places to present its true character openly and honestly. It is also a revolutionary act that pushes against the domineering discourses of officialdom. Henderson’s “poetry” seeks to address the world from among the “people,” redefining their relationship with art and promoting a sincere, direct form of collective self-expression. Folk art offers a visceral, unpretentious form sustained by the anonymous agents of oral transmission. It is this notion of folk culture that Henderson seeks to find a setting and a subject for, in his “idea of the poem,” and it is this search that he works towards in his two major publications on the War: the *Elegies* and the *Ballads*.

**ELEGIES FOR THE DEAD AND THE LIVING**
Commentators have often noted the documentary force of the *Elegies* — as an immersive recording of the soldiers’ experiences in the desert, and of the warfare it hosted.\(^7\) The setting inhabited by individual soldiers, embedded in the vast desert landscape; the intimated movement of jeeps across its surface; the dulled impact of shells in the distance; and the community of soldierly life—all these images recur. In his essay “Germany in Defeat” (1948), Henderson explained that in the North African desert it had occurred to him that the Surrealist painters of the 1930s were “merely prophetic”:

> The debris of a desert battle-field, every conceivable object in creation thrown out of the world's lumber room on to a “nostalgic

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\(^7\) See comments by two fellow-veterans of El Alamein, the poet Sorley MacLean and Brigadier Lorne Maclaine Campbell V.C., included in *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica*, second edition (Edinburgh: EUSPB, 1977; repr. Polygon, 2008), 12, 68. In a private letter to Henderson, Douglas Young criticised the *Elegies* for this tendency toward the documentary. In his analysis, they are not poems at all: “they are in fact a sequence of dramatic short stories in a poetical prose akin to much contemporary journalism, e.g. the better *Daily Express* war reporters” (from a letter dated 30 Jan. 1949: NLS archives, Acc. 10788).
landscape” of Paul Nash; the skeletal silhouette of a crashed Stuka leading the eye away into an infinity of sterile desolation; the earliest littoral life, and wrecked upon it some grotesque memento of human mortality – all these one had seen before.\(^8\) The theatre of desert war, then, already belonged to the artistic imagination before the soldiers arrived. It was a site for the collision and detritus of symbols and histories, and Henderson would transpose several landscapes over it, imbuing all with a kind of collective and transcendent memento mori. Henderson concludes his 1948 foreword to the collection by recalling the comments of a friend, who had remarked that “surely, having been so much in the midst of things, you must find it very difficult to be impartial.”\(^9\) With hindsight, Henderson surmises that, as he gradually understands how people form their opinions, it seems “next to impossible” to achieve this impartiality, unless one has been “in the midst of things” (ibid.). This feeling, of a poetic voice that has been fully submerged in the experiences it depicts, being “in the midst of things,” is one that endures even through the more abstracted and less situational passages of the *Elegies*.

The *Elegies* were written between 1942 and 1947 in North Africa, Italy and Scotland. Describing the genesis of the poem-series in his foreword, Henderson wrote:

> It was the remark of a captured German officer which first suggested to me the theme of these poems. He had said: “Africa changes everything. In reality we are allies, and the desert is our common enemy.”

> The troops confronting each other in Libya were relatively small in number. In the early stages of the desert war they were to a large extent forced to live off each other. Motor transport, equipment of all kinds and even armoured fighting vehicles changed hands frequently. The result was a curious ‘doppelgänger’ effect, and it is this, enhanced by the deceptive distances and uncertain directions of the North African wasteland, which I have tried to capture in some of the poems (*Elegies*, p. 11).

This “doppelgänger effect,” an “odd effect of mirage and looking-glass illusion” as Henderson also described it, was, in the years following the

\(^9\) Henderson, *Elegies* (1948), as in n. 3 above, p. 16. Parenthetical references to *Elegies* in the text are to this edition.
events the poems describe, to expand its significance and gain a
metaphorical reach that would be central to the poem-cycle:
…the memory of this odd effect … persisted, and gradually
became for me a symbol of our human civil war, in which the
roles seem constantly to change and the objectives to shift and
vary. It suggested too a complete reversal of the alignments and
alliances which we had come to accept as inevitable. The conflict
seemed rather to be between ‘the dead, the innocent’ – that
eternally wronged proletariat of levelling death in which all the
fallen are comrades – and ourselves, the living, who cannot hope
to expiate our survival but by ‘spanning history’s apollyon
chasm’ (Elegies, p. 11-12).

In a later interview Henderson explained his reference to ‘‘Apollyon,’’ the
beast with flames in his belly, who faces Christian in The Pilgrim’s
Progress, as symbol of that which must be overcome in reconciling the
survivors with the dead, “facing up to the problems they would have faced had they been alive.” As Henderson’s explanation suggests, the poetry came out of the landscape itself: the sensory experience of warfare was recalled and mulled over, intellectualised and imbued with an expansive metaphorical significance. While opposing armies faced one another across the desert, the human on either side was a reflection of itself, united in its struggle with an inhuman landscape. Giles Romilly reviewing *Elegies* for the *New Statesman* recognised this marriage of setting and symbol: “the desert was like the stain of dye with which a scientist colours a piece of matter before looking at it under a microscope. It allowed detail to stand out and take on symbolic value.”

The *Elegies* inhabit the desert from multiple perspectives. Henderson, or at least the constructed voice of the “poet,” is apparent throughout, making comment on the task of the poem-series itself, both as a record of the events and an attempt to explain their significance. Henderson’s verse-prologue initiates this self-reflexive stance, referring to the objectives of the poet:

…this, my rash
Ambitious wish in verse to write
A true and valued testament (*Elegies*, p. 9).

The first elegy of the series, “End of a Campaign” then introduces the reader to the “brutish desert” (a “landscape of half-wit / stunted ill-will”), and after musing on the bodies of the dead, on their lives and their deaths, it finishes by reflecting on the task of the elegist:

…and seeing that all
have gone down like curs into anonymous silence,
I will bear witness for I knew the others.
Seeing that littoral and interior are alike indifferent
and the birds are drawn again to our welcoming north
why should I not sing them, the dead, the innocent? (*Elegies*, p. 20)

This allegiance with the dead, and the compulsion of the survivor to “sing them” in the face of indifference, is critical to the poet’s attempt to circumvent the popular reflex: to herald the sacrifice of the dead. Henderson rejects the implied premise of this “sacrifice,” refusing to accept that these deaths are in any way inevitable and therefore justifiable, even in the fight against fascism.

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Part One of Henderson’s elegy series is prefaced with these lines from Goethe:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{Alles geben die Götter, die unendlichen,} \\
&\text{Ihren Lieblingen ganz,} \\
&\text{Alle Freuden, die unendlichen,} \\
&\text{Alle Schmerzen, die unendlichen, ganz (Elegies, p. 17).} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Part Two opens with these lines from Sorley Maclean’s poem “Glac a’ Bhàis” (Death Valley):

\[
\begin{align*}
&'\text{Na shulde marbh an “Glac a’ Bhàis”} \\
&\text{Fo Dhruim Ruidhiseit,} \\
&\text{gille \text{g}’s a logan m’a ghruidh} \\
&\text{’s a thuar grisionn.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Smaoinich mi air a’ ch\text{c}ir ’s an àgh,} \\
&\text{a fluair e bho Fhurair,} \\
&\text{bhith tuiteam ann an raon an àir} \\
&\text{gun éirigh tuilleadh –} \\
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Ge b’e a dhe\text{c}in-san no a chàs,} \\
&\text{a neo-chiontas no mhìorun,} \\
&\text{cha do nochd e toileachadh ’na bhàs} \\
&\text{fo Dhruim Ruidhiseit (p. 33).} \\
\end{align*}
\]

The passage from Goethe pre-empts the distressing but nevertheless humane account of the desert war that is to follow. The enduring and abstracted condition of humankind – as the object of the gods’ love, and, consequently, subject to “all” pleasures and pains – functions as a qualifier for the desert war. Indeed, this premise gets dangerously close to excusing mass death and suffering; proposing that the concentration of

12 The original quatrain was never published by Goethe, but comes from a letter dated 1777, addressed to Countess Stolberg: “The gods, the unending, give all things without stint to their beloved: all pleasures, the unending, and all pains, the unending, without stint.”

13 Henderson’s note (Elegies, p. 57) provides Maclean’s own prose translation: “Sitting dead in ‘Death Valley’ below the Ruweisat Ridge, a boy with his forelock down about his cheek and his face slate-grey. I thought of the right and joy he had from his Fuhrer, of falling in the field of slaughter to rise no more.… [ellipses in original] Whatever his desire or mishap, his innocence or malignance, he showed no pleasure in his death below the Ruweisat Ridge.” Cf. Sorley Maclean, From Wood to Ridge: Collected Poems (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), 211-3.
“pain” has its counterpart “pleasure” elsewhere, out of sight. This is not to say that Goethe’s lines bear no relation to the minutiae of life detailed in some of the poems; he repeats: all things – pleasures and pains – are proffered. The lines from MacLean, however, offer an elaboration of this state of being, giving an unflinching account of the real implications of war, and the vast inhuman space between the language of the structures that orchestrate conflict (“the joy and the right”), and the human tragedy of dead soldiers. MacLean addresses a singular consequence of Goethe’s truth. The relationship between these two passages becomes more striking when Henderson’s explanatory note is taken into account: “Goethe’s quatrain was frequently included in small anthologies ‘for the Front’ carried by German soldiers in the field – and indeed its thought lies very near the mood of many of them” (Elegies, p. 57). In this sense Goethe’s words were an interpretative framework for the soldiers, one that contextualised their wartime hardships with a transcendental premise, and encouraged acceptance and stoicism, or at least a recognition of the limits of individual agency. Henderson sets this alongside the “sceptical ironic spirit” of MacLean (ibid.). Together these excerpts offer a fragment of dialogue between two economies of scale that can be brought to bear on conflict and sacrifice. He reminds us that any grand vision of our human condition must accommodate the most extreme pleasures and pains, whilst insisting that we ought not to lift war out of its own reality when we seek to understand it. Neither the actuality of “the dead” in Cyrenaica, nor the seeming inevitability of war and of death, is allowed to take precedence in these poems: both realities must be reconciled.

Henderson’s Elegies test the limits of Goethe’s quatrain. These lines on the gifts of the gods can be approached as an exordium for the experience of warfare, as well as for these particular elegies for the dead, and as such they refer to an incontrovertible condition of human life. Though Goethe’s statement might not satisfy our need for an explanation for death, pain and suffering, it does describe the relentlessness of our capacity for “all things.” In Henderson’s hands, both Goethe and MacLean address humanity’s unceasing propensity for wretchedness, though from different vantage points: one, in terms of the celestial “gift” of human life, and the other, from the only certainty that can be read on the face of a dead serviceman.

In the sixth elegy, “Acroma,” Henderson writes of the various, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives of the War:

On one point however there is unanimity: their sacrifice though hard and heroic was on the whole “necessary.”
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I too have acquiesced
in this evasion: that the unlucky
or the destined must inevitably fall
and be impaled on the basalt pinnacles of darkness.

Yet how can I shame them, saying that they
have died for us: that it was expedient
a generation should die for the people? (Elegies, p. 35-36)

Henderson’s ironic bracketing-off of the “necessary” sacrifice echoes Auden’s phrase about war-deaths in “Spain” (1937): “To-day the deliberate increase in the chances of death, / The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder.”14 Orwell famously dismissed Auden’s phrase as evidence of the poet’s “amoralism” and “warmongering.” assuring his readers it was indicative of the position of many poets in the 1930s: “so much of left-wing thought is a kind of playing with fire by people who don’t even know that fire is hot.”15 The fraught relationship between the living and the dead resurfaces, and Henderson’s poetic voice goes on to wonder how he might acknowledge the dead: “what requiem can I sing in the ears of the living? / No blah about their sacrifice….” The final stanza reads:

So the words that I have looked for, and must go on looking for,
are words of whole love, which can slowly gain the power
to reconcile and heal. Other words would be pointless. (p. 36)

The search for these words is the task of the Elegies. The commonality of the living troops on both sides is not only based on the landscape they inhabit – the desert, their common enemy – but also on the ultimate unifier of the living: “the proletariat of levelling death,” which faces them all, and demands atonement (Elegies, p. 23).16 The collective dead are repeatedly described in these terms, as Henderson reminds us that it is not only nationality that dissolves in death, but also class. Through his subscription to a broadly Marxian worldview, the collective dead become the revolutionary force of human history. Our mortality makes us equals, and only in death can this truth be consummated.

The relationship between the living and the dead is, therefore, the basis of the relationship between humanity and history. It is to the dead that we, the living, are held accountable. In the final elegy, Henderson’s poetic voice considers his “duty,” in that “deadland,” as “Remembrancer,” to sing for those (the dead) who “amnestied / escaped from the tumult”:

We fly from their scorn, but they close all the passes:
their sleep’s our unrest, we lie bound in their inferno –
this alliance must be vaunted and affirmed, lest they condemn us!

... Either build for the living
love, patience and power to absolve these tormented,
or else choke in the folds of their black-edged vendetta! (p. 49)

These lines lead to the final proposition: that we

carry to the living,
blood, fire and red flambeaux of death’s proletariat.

... At last, spanning this history’s
apollyon chasm, proclaim them reconciled (ibid.).

The terms of this reconciliation between the living and the dead are not clear. The living are implicated in the fact of the dead, and we must “build for the living” if we are to sustain “our human house,” which incorporates the dead, the living, and the not yet born. These closing lines of the final elegy gather metrical momentum and leave a carefully prepared space for that reconciliation, though it is never expressly achieved. It seems that it is only possible to describe a movement towards this final syncretism between the living and the dead. Henderson is sensitive to the limits of poetry, and we are left with only an inexpressible human resolve to continue, to persevere. ¹⁷

This construction is lifted out of the modern desert war and given a transhistorical setting in the final poem of the series, “Heroic Song for the Runners of Cyrene.” It is based on the legend, recorded by Sallust, of the Philæni brothers of Carthage and their counterparts from Cyrene running out into the desert to collide with one another. ¹⁸ At the point of meeting, the competitors were to be buried alive, thereby marking the boundary

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¹⁷ With this attitude, cf. Romain Rolland’s aphorism “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will,” a favourite of Antonio Gramsci’s, repeated in both his Prison Letters and Prison Notebooks, and acknowledged by Henderson in his work on Gramsci (Neat, Making of the Poet, 244).

between their respective cities. In Henderson’s telling, the runners have “history the doppelgaenger / running to meet them” (*Elegies*, 54-5). The song for the runners gathers pace towards the end of the poem and the poem-series: “the goal is in sight. Simultaneous the onrush, / the clash close at hand, o incarnate dialectic!” On impact, the runners and their counterparts finally fall, “locking like lovers / … / down the thunderous cataract of day” (*Elegies*, 56-7). This “dialectic” is the history of humanity: human civilisation must grapple with the common structures of its past, with its origins, if it is to be preserved. The grand narrative of civilisation cannot be extricated from its human cost; the bodies of the contemporary war-dead are, like the runners, physical incarnations of the dialectic.

Henderson’s manifesto, “Freedom Becomes People,” designates the *Elegies* as poetry of “endurance” and “passive suffering,” as opposed to the “resolve,” “transformation” and “insurrection,” which are the aims of his later work. However, the abstracted narrative movement of the elegies; setting out the dialectic of the dead and the living; that between humanity and history, and the compulsion to traverse these “apollyon chasms,” are better understood as an exploratory gesture toward this forward-looking “resolve.” Henderson’s new poetic project is to build from this point, toward a reconciliation of the artist with society, of poetry with people. The elegist seeks to overcome a similar dilemma, to “build our cairn,” and find the words which might gradually accumulate the symbolic power to “reconcile and heal” (*Elegies*, p. 36).

**THE ARMY BALLADEER & HIS “REBELLIOUS HOUSE”**

In his foreword to *Ballads of World War II* Henderson explains that this material:

… grew up under the shadow of – and often in virtual conflict with – the official or commercial radio of the combatant nations.

The state radio in time of war does not encourage dissidence from the straight patriotic line. It regards most expressions of the human reaction to soldiering as a drag on the national war effort…

For the Army balladeer comes of a rebellious house. His characteristic tone is one of cynicism.19

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19 *Ballads of World War II*, collected by Seumas Mor MacEanruig (Hamish Henderson), First Collection (Glasgow: issued by the Lili Marleen Club of Glasgow to Members only, 1947): p. iii. In the Roy Collection, Henderson has
Henderson published the ballads under the auspices of the fictitious “Lili Marleen Club of Glasgow.” This publication strategy was principally because many of the songs were bawdy, and Henderson refused to “insult [the] ballads by bowdlerising them.” The transaction involved in buying a copy was technically recast as the paying of a subscription to join the club, followed by the receipt of a complimentary collection of wartime ballads. But Henderson’s recognition that the publication risked police intervention also suggests that their subversive power was not just down to ribaldry. The Ballads challenged popular, officially sanctioned conceptions of the war-effort and the soldier’s place within it, offering instead the unexpurgated song-voice of those “in the midst of things.” If approached individually, the songs might not display a radical point of view, or demonstrate an active political agenda, but when collected and published under the emphatic and seemingly comprehensive title Ballads of World War II, they assume a more subversive and authoritative voice.

The precise settings of the ballads, and their relationships with the environments in which they were conceived and sung, helps to explain the appeal that they held for the soldiers. Henderson’s notes provide these contexts: the regiments and divisions that carried the songs and were thought to be their sources, the events they depict and the tunes to which they were sung. Though portrayed entirely differently, the manoeuvres and movements of the soldiers at war are as central to the Ballads as they are to the Elegies. “Canaglia Pezzente” (“The Penniless Canaille”), a Tuscan partisan song with the refrain “Long live the Soviets! Long live Lenin and Stalin!” is, for example, preceded by a note which associates the song with “the famous Garibaldini Division of the Arno, whose already legendary General ‘Potente’ was killed in action against the 4th German Paratroop Division in Florence (August, 1944)” (Ballads, 37-38). “The Ballad of Wadi Maktilla” is characterised as a description of the “somewhat abortive raid by the 2nd Camerons on an Iti outpost about 12 miles East of Sidi Barrani – 1940” (Ballads, 7-8). In this instance altered by hand line 3 of the passage quoted to substitute “divergence” for “dissidence.” References to Ballads in parentheses in the text are to this edition.

20 As Henderson later noted, this method of publication, inspired by Sydney Goodsir Smith’s Auk Society, was suggested by Hugh MacDiarmid (Alias MacAlias, 390, and cf. inscription in the Roy Collection copy).

21 Neat, Making of the Poet, 203.

22 See “Puir Bluidy Swaddies are Weary,” Alias MacAlias, 327-38.
Henderson even reproduces the language of the squaddies with the pejorative “I’i” for the Italians.

Hamish Henderson’s Ballads of World War II (Glasgow, 1947), inscribed by Henderson reproduced by permission of the Estate of Hamish Henderson image courtesy of University of South Carolina Libraries

Henderson’s Ballads present the “rebellious house” of the Army balladeer as shared by both Allied and Axis forces. The result is similar to that of the “proletariat of levelling death” in the Elegies, that is, a recognition of the validity of the voices and experiences of soldiers on both sides of the conflict, through their ultimate unity as living, mobilised troops. In the Ballads, however, they are united by their cynicism, their common frustrations with the absurdities of the War and their roles in it, and by their tender thoughts of home and their imagined return. In his introduction, Henderson notes that “Shakespeare, who ran God close in the matter of creation, knew him [the Army balladeer] well and called him Thersites” (Ballads, p. iii). In Troilus and Cressida, Thersites, who first appeared in Homer’s Iliad, is worked up into a major character; though he plays the fool, he speaks truth to power, and for Henderson, he
represents an apparent archetype for the soldier’s sardonic sense of humour.

A German song included in the *Ballads*, “Kennst de den Avanti Schritt?” (“Do you know the Avanti Step?”), is a good example of the kind of material Henderson associates with his Army balladeer. He notes that “from the desert days onwards the Italian word *Avanti* (Forwards) became for the Germans a synonym for retreat. To ‘do an Avanti’ meant to beat it good and proper” (*Ballads*, 39). In Henderson’s translation, the song reads: “Do you know what the Avanti step is? / One step forward and ten back….” This sardonic tone has its equivalents among the songs of the British regiments. For instance, in Henderson’s own “Ballad of the Big Nobs” (unattributed in the *Ballads*), various political and military leaders are evaluated according to their use to the “Eighth Ar-mee”:

There’s Ritchie, there’s Ritchie
And his arse is feeling itchie
For he wasn’t much fuckin’ use
to the Eighth Ar-mee (*Ballads*, 11-12).

The military failures of the Allies are also mocked in Henderson’s “The Fall of Tobruk”:

Tommy thinks he holds Tobruk.
Along the road comes Rommel.
Inside two shakes Tobruk is took
And Tommy’s on the bummel (*Ballads*, 28).

At the heart of Henderson’s project lie multiple, variant versions of the song “Lili Marlene,” the most enduring symbol of the common folk voices of soldiers on both sides in the Second World War. As Henderson notes in his introduction to the *Ballads*, this song “sprouted variants and parodies galore in the authentic ballad manner.” Originally a World War I poem, written in 1915 by Hans Leip of Hamburg, the song was popularised among German, British, Italian and French troops alike after its frequent broadcasts, first on the German Belgrade Radio Station, and

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23 Major-General Neil Ritchie was promoted to head the Allied North African Command in 1941, but failed to halt Rommel’s advances. In other verses Henderson celebrates the usefulness of other Generals, as also of Stalin and Churchill. Henderson (p. 12) annotates it as “Sung September 1942.”

24 “Bummel,” a German-derived word for journey, trek or hike, is not in English dictionaries but had been used by Jerome K. Jerome for his comic novel about the cycling craze, *Three Men on the Bummel* (1900); what the squaddies made of Henderson’s rather-desperate rhyme is not recorded.
later, further afield. Derek Jewell comments that “it became a song for marching to, a song for sitting down to – the property of virtually every nation engaged in the war.” In his collection, Henderson includes Leip’s original version, which presents the voice of a homesick soldier, doomed to die, pining for his lover, and hoping to meet her again by the lamppost outside the barracks (Ballads, 31-32). He also reproduces a fairly faithful Italian version of the original (Ballads, 33-34), before moving on to fragments from two German parodies. Henderson translates lines from one of these: “To the West of Moscow, before the great gates there stands the German Army and it can’t advance a yard. So everyone can see how Adolf Hitler comes to grief, as Napoleon did before him [repeat; ‘as Napoleon did before him’]” (Ballads, 35).

According to Henderson, “the best-known English words to the ‘Lili Marleen’ tune” are “The D-Day Dodgers” (Ballads, 9-10), a song which has become closely associated with Henderson himself. Neat explains Henderson’s role as master-balladeer shaping popularly-originating material: “it is a genuine soldier’s ballad – a collective creation – given form and artistic force by the hand of a master.” The song addresses the rumour current in the Eighth Army at the time that Lady Astor had referred to those fighting in Italy as “D-Day Dodgers.” The lyrics of the first six verses ironically detail the glamorous lifestyle enjoyed by the soldiers serving in Italy:

We didn’t go to fight there – we went there for the ride.
Anzio and Sangro were just names,
We only went to look for dames (Ballads, p. 9).

This lavish satire leads to the penultimate stanza, in which Lady Astor’s mouth is described as “too bleeding wide,” before the pathos of the final lines:

25 See Jacob Hieble, “Lili Marlene – A Study of a Modern Song,” Modern Language Journal 31.1 (1947): 30-4; and Liel Leibovitz and Matthew Miller, Lili Marlene: The Soldiers’ Song of World War II (New York: Norton, 2009). Henderson normally uses the original German spelling “Marleen,” not only in the imprint to Ballads, but also in the 1947 text (e.g. pp. iii, 10, 31, etc.); the later spelling “Marlene” followed its U.S. recording in 1944 by the exiled German singer Marlene Dietrich.


27 Perhaps because “The D-Day Dodgers” is less a parody than a burlesque re-use of the “Lili Marleen” verse-form, Henderson placed it separately in Ballads (1948), near the beginning of the volume, not with the other versions.

28 Making of the Poet, 152.
Look around the mountains, in the mud and rain –
You’ll find the scattered crosses – (there’s some which have no name).
Heartbreak and toil and suffering gone,
The boys beneath them slumber on.
Those are the D-Day Dodgers who’ll stay in Italy. 29

“Lili Marleen” supplied Henderson with the name for his imagined club, under whose aegis the collection would be published. It is a title that embraces the soldier’s song as a form of collective self-expression transcending the distorted dividing lines of war and travelling freely across nations and languages – like a folksong. In this context, it is no surprise that the song also punctuates the closing lines of Henderson’s seventh elegy: “seven poor bastards / dead in African deadland … wie einst Lili / dead in African deadland / einst Lili Marlene” (Elegies, p. 40).

Although Henderson packaged the Ballads as a collection of the work of “the anonymous Army balladeer,” on closer inspection it is clear that he was the principal balladeer he had in mind. Of the twenty-three songs included in the volume, eleven are Henderson’s own. His official role as the collector of these ballads, and his undisclosed role as the author, can perhaps be understood with recourse to his later thoughts on the “folk process”:

When one speaks of anonyms, of course, one must bear in mind that at many stages of the folk process individual minds – and sometimes, quite clearly, powerful ingenious minds – have set their seal on new variants. Sometimes a craftsman-poet, endowed with ‘a nice judicious ear’ (to quote Burns) and immersed in the musical and linguistic traditions handed down to him, must have composed song-poems in the time-honoured prescriptive idiom which were already halfway towards becoming folk-songs. 30

Henderson “set his seal” on the ballads of the War, forming “song-poems” from those that were already becoming “folk-songs” out among the soldiers. The degree of original composition is therefore unknowable, and to some degree, irrelevant. It should be noted that Henderson chose not to attribute authorship to any of the materials in the Ballads; this omission let him include much of his own work, and the songs as a whole are only attributed to a military regiment, a battle, and a date; the notion of an individual author is eschewed. The Elegies seek to “sing them, the dead, the innocent,” by inhabiting the environment of the living soldier and exploring his relationship with death and history, those forces that

29 Neat (Making of the Poet, 153) credits this final verse to Henderson himself.
30 Alias MacAlias, 73.
surround him. The *Ballads* inhabit the collective song voice of those at war, the “rebellious house” of the Army balladeer that can be built on any battlefield, in any language.

**BECOMING PEOPLE**

In his efforts to map Henderson’s cultural politics and its implementation in the popular folk revival, John Mitchell constructs an opposition between the art-poetry of his *Elegies* and his modern folk poetry. He celebrates Henderson’s approach as one that “[combines] a closeness to and fruitful exploitation of folk, traditional and popular material with a rich development of ideas and emotional implications.” The greatest examples of Henderson’s revivalist art are, for Mitchell, “The 51st Highland Division’s Farewell to Sicily” and “The Freedom Come-All-Ye,” because of their folk-based forms, and their delicate “balance of intellect and emotion.”

31 In contrast, though he recognises the progressive “forward movement” of the *Elegies* in their urge toward “wholeness,” Mitchell criticises the dialectics of the poem-series as having become too abstract, thereby leading to a “false objectivity which is unnatural to [Henderson] and the opposite of what we find in his songs”:

> There is a certain fatalism, a separation of history and agent. In freeing himself from all petty antagonisms and cant in the face of levelling death the poet retires to such rarefied philosophical heights that the historical struggle is too often gutted of its flesh and blood – the concrete moral, class issues of the epoch: barbarism versus humanism, fascism versus the people.

32

In searching for a “concrete moral,” Mitchell overlooks the complexities of Henderson’s treatment of death and history. He does not, for example, recognise that the poems encourage us to appreciate that repulsion towards fascism as an ideology, and the refusal to see the enemy as unambiguous manifestations of this ideology, can easily coexist. To see the two positions as forming a disabling contradiction is to miss the fact that among many early twentieth-century poets, contradiction and paradox are often liberating rather than constraining phenomena.

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32 Mitchell goes on to claim the “Interlude” as the point at which Henderson’s “actual sympathies” are exposed, in contradistinction to the abstract sympathies portrayed in the *Elegies* (pp. 202-3).
Nevertheless, it is the opposition between this perceived “false objectivity” and the values of Henderson’s songs that gives a misleading impression of his creative responses to the War. The assumption that Henderson’s songs are a more accurate embodiment of his “moral standpoint” than the poems is problematic. It detaches the dilemmas and grand dialectics of the *Elegies* from the common song of the soldiers on the basis of a different level of philosophical engagement. The other assumption at work is that there is in fact less philosophy in popular poetry or song. The comparison falls down when Mitchell asks that Henderson’s songs and poems present a consistent cultural-political vision whilst also claiming that the two forms are unequal in their capacity for philosophical thought. By exploring those elements that are shared and developed in and between Henderson’s *Elegies* and his *Ballads*, I argue that the difference between these materials is principally one of form and technique, rather than of morality or of political philosophy.

One of the central images of the *Elegies* is the “apollyon chasm.” In this context it can be understood as that disjuncture between the living and the dead, and between humanity and history, that is explored throughout the poem-series. However, the image recurs in Henderson’s later writings with a different function. During the “Folksong Flytings” of 1964, between Henderson and MacDiarmid, Henderson drew attention to the lines of MacDiarmid’s “Second Hymn to Lenin,” which had asked: “Are my poems spoken in the factories and fields, / In the streets o’ the toon?”[^33] For Henderson, the passage is “an eloquent, and even poignant statement of the artist’s awareness of his isolation in modern society, and of his duty to look outwards, and to attempt to communicate across the apollyon chasms.”[^34] The image is thus extended to incorporate that rift between art and the people, a separation that the committed poet must endeavour to overcome. This provides another connection between the early war-related poems and Henderson’s cultural politics as formulated throughout the period of the folk revival. Naomi Mitchison made an inadvertent prediction about the role of the *Elegies* in the formulation of

Henderson’s cultural politics when she titled her review, “A Bard Who Picks Up the Song of the Future.”

Henderson was born exactly a year after the armistice of the First World War, and he was nineteen when the second war was declared. His early adult years were therefore indelibly marked by this period of global conflict. Henderson frequently acknowledged the breadth and depth of this influence in his later years. In the sleeve notes for a recorded collection of his songs and poems, *Pipes, Goatskins & Bones* (1992), he wrote:

… the songs and poems … represent a sort of fusion of two of my greatest loves: the anonymous song poetry of Scotland, which I was lucky enough to hear quite a lot of from my mother when I was a child, and the comradely solidarity of the anti-Fascist struggle which dominated much of my early manhood. I soon found the music of the one love merging with the music of the other.

In describing his work as a fusion of these loves, Henderson implies an essential confluence between the communally experienced, ideological and physical conflict with fascism, and the power of expression of the anonymous voice of folk culture. The *Elegies* and the *Ballads* constitute early experiments with these ideas, the former exploring the implications of this violent struggle, and the latter setting down an “anonymous song poetry” sprung from the experiences of War.

E. P. Thompson was one of the most perceptive reviewers of the *Elegies*, and he recognised Henderson’s desire “to speak directly, out of his experiences, to his fellow men,” but Thompson qualified this remark with a warning against donning an “impersonal dialectic” in the interests of appealing to the literary elites, or “culture boys,” those “circumscribed by the coteries and sophisticated reviews.” In a personal letter to Henderson, Thompson writes:

…[the ‘culture boys’] would kill your writing, because you, more than any other poet I know, are an instrument through which thousands of others can become articulate. And you must not forget that your songs and ballads are not trivialities – they are quite as important as the Elegies.

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36 *Alias MacAlias*, 452.
The idea of a poet being an “instrument through which thousands of others can become articulate,” is closely related the proposal for a poetry that becomes people, and it necessitates something of the lessons of the folksinger, who, unlike a literary poet, offers up a framework for self-expression that can be easily absorbed and reproduced.

In the years following his demobilisation, Henderson translated Antonio Gramsci’s *Lettere dal Carcere* (*Prison Letters*), began song collecting in earnest back in Scotland, and found employment as a folklorist in the University of Edinburgh’s School of Scottish Studies. He contributed intermittently to many cultural, political and literary debates through various articles and opinion column letters, and he tirelessly promoted Scottish folk culture, negotiating with, and defending against, the revival’s critics along the way. Throughout all of this, Henderson developed his ideas of folk culture and literature and of the cultural politics that were their foundation. Nevertheless, his original creative responses to the War signal Henderson’s first sustained efforts to create culturally and politically engaged art, and these lyrical experiments were to reverberate, on some level, in all of his subsequent artistic and critical work. He sought out a popular culture that could mediate between the universal – “our human civil war” – and the particular – our living “in the midst of things.”