

A Meeting with Hugh MacDiarmid

Candymill, Biggar, Lanarkshire, 13 August 1974.

Candymill, made up of a few farms along the side of the road leading from Edinburgh to the South West, is a little village on the border dividing the counties of Lanarkshire and Peebles.

It was, in fact, the bus-driver who asked me if I was going to see «the Poet» having noticed my frequent, furtive glances at the map and my portable tape-recorder. When I said yes, with what must be typical Scottish gentility, the bus-driver got out of the bus and showed me the road I had to follow to get to «the Poet's Cottage». Certainly, I was, to say the least, surprised at the modesty of the poet's home, but was pleasantly received by his warm welcome which completely discredited the legend of his «cantankerousness».

I had no trouble whatsoever in recognising him because he was exactly like the portrait painted by R. H. Westwater for the cover of his Selected Poems published by Penguin. My plans of an interview as such were spontaneously absorbed into a fluent and comfortable conversation, in an atmosphere of ease and friendliness, undoubtedly helped along by the many «wee drams» of malt, of which he is a reputed connoisseur.

Hugh MacDiarmid (pseudonym of Christopher Murray Grieve) was born on 11th August 1892 in Langholm, Dumfriesshire, on the Scottish Border, a region well known for the fierceness and the fighting spirit of its inhabitants. His father was a postman and they lived in the Post buildings, in which the local library was also located. Grieve was educated at Langholm Academy, the Broughton Junior Students' Center and the University of Edinburgh. At the death of his father he left his teacher training and dedicated himself to journalism, expressing his left-wing ideas. During World War I he served in the Army in Greece, France and Italy. Grieve revived the old Scots vocabulary which had no equivalent in modern English, inventing a «synthetic or plastic Scots» capable of dealing with any matter of modern thought and life. His communism and his nationalism did not help his popularity but he is now fully recognized as the man who brought the Scottish literary tradition back on the map of European literature, struggling for the «complete independence» of Scotland and the right of his nation to

communicate with the world without the English mediation. C. M. Grieve published in 1923 the *Annals of the Five Senses*, first of a long list of poems and books of poetry. Other famous poems are: *Sangschaw* (1925), *Penny Wheep* (1926), *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), *To Circumjack Cencrastus or the Curly Snake* (1930), *First Hymn to Lenin and other poems* (1935), *Stony Limits and other poems* (1934), *Second Hymn to Lenin and other poems* (1935), *Lucky Poet. A Self-study in Literature and Political Ideas* (1943), *Speaking for Scotland. Selected Poems* (1946), *In Memoriam James Joyce. From a Vision of World Language* (1955), *Three Hymns to Lenin* (1957), *The Battle Continues* (1957), *Burns Today and Tomorrow* (1959), *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961), *Collected Poems* (1962), *Selected Poems* (1970).

Mr. MacDiarmid, which was the most crucial period of your artistic life?

I think there were two turning points in my writing. When I as a boy my parents spoke Scots, all the people in the town where I was born spoke Scots, but any lapse into Scots was forbidden in the classroom. We were obliged, encouraged to speak what they called 'Queen's English', which nobody in England speaks at all, and we weren't told anything at all at school about Scottish literature: one or two of the more important poems of Robert Burns, a ballad perhaps. It wasn't till I was demobbed from the Army in 1920 and came back to Scotland that I thought: «Well, we have been fighting for the rights of small nations, like poor little Belgium and we don't know anything about our own country». So I started to study it, intensively and it wasn't long before I found it, other young Scots coming out of the Army were in the same position. So we started a movement called the *Scottish Renaissance Movement* to revive the use of the Scots language as a literary medium. That was the first turning point. Up to then I hadn't thought of writing in Scots at all. Then I suddenly found that I could write better poetry in Scots than I could hope to do in English. This was the first turning point. The next turning point was about thirty years later. I became more and more concerned with the problems of the modern world, regarding it as a turning point in the whole history of mankind: the acceleration of changes, the new scientific discoveries and so on. So I felt impelled to write about these things in my poetry, but there was no language in which to do it, there were no words in English, it was an international scientific jargon. I was encouraged to persist in writing in this language, in whatever language I could find, by remembering Heine, the German poet, whose first two volumes of lyrics were enormously popular and still are. One day he said to himself: «I won't write anymore of this sort of stuff!» and he spent years in trying to find a way of breaking up the tonality of the lyric and introducing kinds of material, scientific, political, that had up to that time been considered non-poetical. I took exactly the same course and I have been pursuing that course ever since. My bibliographer, Dr.

Aitken of the Strathclyde University in Glasgow tells me that I have written 135 books and pamphlets. I should stop but I don't intend to stop.

Is your language invented or derivative?

My language is partly invented. It is on a basis of the kind of Scots that was written by Dunbar and H. Henryson and other Scots poets of the xv and xvi centuries, but it is an invented language.

You said once: «Dunbar, not Burns!» Are you still of the same opinion?

No, I changed. That was a young man's feeling at that time. Dunbar was a great technician of verse but hadn't the solid poetic content that a great poet requires, and I decided since, that if I had been a little bit older and a little bit wiser I would have recommended not so much Dunbar hut Henryson

Did your parents speak Scots?

Yes, that was the language I learned on my mother's knees; in my childhood all my people spoke Scots, they don't today, there has been a considerable lapse of spoken Scots.

Were poetry and ballads in Scots popular during your childhood?

My father and mother weren't very much interested in poetry or anything but in the Borders there was a lot of that. My grandparents, for example, would tell me stories in Scots and some ballads occasionally.

Why did you write your marxist poetry, your 'Hymns to Lenin'?

I was always a socialist. I began as a socialist. I was a member of the *Independent Labour Party (Social Democratic Party)* and I found that they had moved away from the ideas of the early socialist pioneers in Scotland, all Scottish Nationalists before the time, whereas the new ones were so anxious to have Westminster as a platform that they had ceased to be of any use for Scotland. It didn't suit me and I thought of moving further left (that is an arguable point), and I joined the Communist Party and I am still a very active member of it. The Communist Party, incidentally not like the other parties, has declared absolutely for Scottish independence, what our enemies call 'separatism'. We can't have separatism in the modern world, we want complete independence. That is what I stand for in Scotland: cultural and economic independence. We are a wealthy country and England, with her difficulties, her balance of payments, is anxious to grab the Scottish oil.

Do people feel Scots today in Scotland?

Yes, it is pretty general now. The grand swell of public opinion in Scotland has moved in favour of Nationalism beyond the point reached by the Scottish Nazional Party. There has been a big change of public opinion in

Scotland and not only Scots but our other native language, Gaelic, is coming up with some very good poets, for the first time in two centuries or more.

Which are the links between Gaelic and Scottish poetry?

There are many links and also oppositions. Dunbar and others quarrelled with the Gaelic elements. Burns owed a great deal to Gaelic, not in language but in music, Highland music, pipe tunes. But I am very modernistic, my best friend, I think, in the modern poetic world, was Ezra Pound. My wife and I visited him in Venice and went with Ezra to the Florian Café in St. Marc Square. That wasn't long before he died. This was the second time I was in Italy. The first was in the first World War, coming back from Salonicco where I spent two years.

When did you decide to write about the world and not only about Scotland?

There are millions and millions of people all over the world doing exactly the same thing. They feel ruthless and they are seeking an indigenous basis again for their lives and literatures, and finding it. That's happening all over, Australia, Canada and other minor countries. In the bigger literatures, English for example, most of it is rubbish. They talk about English poetry, there is no such a thing.

Do you usually live here, at the «Cottage»?

No, I am a great deal away. Now I am trying to stop being away so much. I have been all over the world in the last ten years. I have been in China, four or five times in Russia, all the Earstern European Countries, Sweden, East Germany, America, Canada. I want to stop. I'm getting too old, you see!

What was the attitude of the Russian critics?

There was a lot of opposition, of course to the Marxist Poems. A lot of people say: «Oh, well, his early lyrics, but anything he has written since then, of course, is just, a palling off, but I don't agree with them and I don't care what they say! I gave you Heine's example and Pasternak was another; he said: «We are living in such a complicated world now, that it cannot be told in a short poem, we must have more elbow room». I have been very lucky. I knew Yeats, Dylan Thomas, Pound, some of the Russians, Pablo Neruda and so on. I have been very lucky.

Certainly yes. You wrote even a poem, 'The Lucky Poet'?

Oh, yes! The critics, the more academic and more official critics, said it was a bad, unintelligible book, but I don't care what they say. The book is just gone into a second edition. I begun publishing and writing verse when I was twelve, I began writing in English. I wrote almost always verse. I have written a lot of prose since, but when I was young I never thought of

prose. It was never possible for me to write drama, or fiction, or a novel because they require a knowledge of character and I am not interested in human character. I am only interested in the higher brain centres, in ideas, not opinions. I have been considerably influenced by Gramsci, the Italian communist writer who also reverted to the native dialect.

I have noticed that Gramsci is very popular in Scotland?

Henderson, of the School of Scottish Studies, has just published, in an Edinburgh magazine, translations of Gramsci's letters. He was over in Italy, during the war, with the partisans. He speaks Italian like a native and has done a very good job. I know the Italian poets, I took Montale around Glasgow, I know Ungaretti, I had a radio broadcast with him in London and I knew Quasimodo.

What do you think of modern Italian poetry?

I like their ideas but I need a bigger canvas for my poems.

Is the actual wish for independence of Scottish people derived from their cultural background or is it a revival caused by the English politics?

Scottish people have always been international in a way that the English have never been. They are now in the European Community but they have never been spiritually in Europe at all. In ancient times the Celtic Commonwealth extended right to the middle of Russia, all over Northern Europe and they were never imperialistic. The separate tribes had their own autonomy, but the Celts were accustomed to be cosmopolitan in that sense, still retaining their native root and language. The main difference between the Celts and the English is an ethnic difference. We are Gaels, they are Anglo-Saxons. The Celtic minorities can get together on a cultural basis. I have recently been in the Welsh Academy, in Ireland, in our Universities, and I think there is a good basis in our literature. I think that the Celtic minorities can unite on a cultural level. The political problem is represented by our common enemy: English imperialism. But I think we will all get autonomy. I am getting too old but I think that in five years (I might still be alive then) we will get our autonomy.

Don't you think that many Scots became conscious of their cultural individuality because of the economic situation, because of the economic oppression, and after moved towards a cultural consciousness?

Yes that is perfectly true. The importance of the upsurge of the Scottish Nationalist Party is represented by the increased proportion of young people who were members of it. I would say 60%. When we started it, back in 1928 (I was one of the founders) they were all older people. Now there is a very healthy climate.

Which kind of poetry have you been reading?

I like difficult poetry, poetry which concerns itself with intellectual values. The great Scottish philosopher, David Hume said that «Prayed daily for the reenthronement of the great god Difficulty». I don't believe in pop art at all, or in giving the people what they want.

I have read most of the European and American poets but I have been influenced, in so far I have been influenced at all, by the French poet Paul Valery. I like that kind of work. Most of what is written today is rubbish. Trying to express what I feel about most of this stuff I would say: – Emotion without intellect, fancy without imagination and a particular attempt to bring things down to the level of mere entertainment –. I am against all this.

I think that since the publication of your first book, 'The Annals of the Five Senses', your attitude towards poetry is quite changed?

That's inevitable. I think that many great poets do change about middle life. They can write different kinds of things all together, they come to a final conclusion about life and themselves and they feel the necessity to change their poetic expression. The early poetry is largely derivative, what your predecessors have done and you hear and read as a boy. Then as you get older, of course, you have to find yourself and get away from it because the gap between the generations is nothing to the gap between centuries. We are living in an absolutely unprecedented period in the world.

In 1935 you translated the Gaelic poetry of Alexander McDonald; was this your first approach to Gaelic poetry?

No, I was friendly with some of the younger Gaelic poets, one in particular, Sorley Mclean, who is a very good poet and if he had been writing in a language with a larger reading public he would have been recognised as a great international poet. He is very good indeed. He followed my example, unfortunately, for a while. He became a marxist too and was wounded in North Africa and then fell back from Marxism. The problem, with Gaelic, is that now in Scotland we have only 30.000 people who can read it and they do not all read or buy poetry. There is a very good book, I think the only good book up to now on the whole Scottish-Gaelic literature, by the professor of Celtic in Glasgow University, Derick Thompson. The earlier ones were written by ministers and were full of moral precepts, with a complete absence of literary criticism. There is now a surprising revival of Scottish-Gaelic language and, of course, it is much easier now. For long time the education authorities made it very difficult. They taught Gaelic even to children who were Gaelic speaking. They taught it through the medium of English, an absolutely antipathetic medium. But now there are far better facilities and Sorley Maclean is now the principal of the Gaelic College in the isle of Skye. A new thing just started, but it will

make a big difference. I think that the next generation, in the next quarter of the century, will see a big development of Gaelic.

Abroad (i. e. Italy) it is rather difficult, studying English literature at the University, to realize the importance of Scottish literature because the information are given through the medium of histories of English literature?

Yes, and they do not know that English poetry owes a great deal to Scotland because one of the important elements in it is the poetry of nature, landscape. They have got that from Scotland, from Thompson of the Seasons, from the Gaelic poets. They hadn't any nature poetry themselves at all. A mountain to them was Richmond Hill in the outskirts of London. They have got a lot from Scotland but there was no reciprocity. Scotland got nothing in return from English poetry. Chaucer wrote in what we now call Northern English, which is virtually the same as Scots, and that would have been the language of the United Kingdom if it hadn't been for the Norman conquest; then Southern English became the standard of English and this was wrong. They cut out their own dialect in England, Northumbria and elsewhere. They cut out Scots. Now there are far more dialects disregarded by official English. They shouldn't, because their potential creative development is in all these dialects. A very good poet, great linguist and scholar, Barnes, the Dorset poet, wrote in Dorset dialect. Official English brushed his poetry aside but he was a better poet than most of those who are included in the *Oxford Book of English Poetry*. The official languages often reflect official lack of civilization. This is one of the reasons why over half a century in *Who is Who* I have described my hobby as 'anglophobia'. Generally interviewers ask me: «Do you still hate England so much?». No, I hate English imperialism, I don't hate the English people, but their imperialistic culture. They have done it deliberately, it has been a constant policy of the English, involving Scottish education. Scottish law has been forced to assimilate itself more and more to the English and our is a finer law, much more humane.

What was the attitude of the readers when you began writing in Scots?

When I started to write in Scottish this was the objection that was raised: – Who is going to read it, the people haven't got Scots any longer –. They don't know they have got it but I found that to a very large proportion of Scottish people, if they see it on the page it is incomprehensible to them, but if they hear it spoken they suddenly find that they know most of the words. They didn't know they knew them before but they know them, the older people especially, of course, but now there is a great revival. The real danger now is because of the overpopulation of England and underpopulation of Scotland, they are flooding Scotland, buying up properties (we call them white settlers). There are more English in Scotland than Scots in England. The English population is growing and there has been a net fall

in Scottish births over deaths, a net fall in population, which is a bad thing. We still have got a tremendous emigration problem. We are losing 30 or 40 thousands of Scots every year. The younger, more virile and better educated Scots are going abroad.