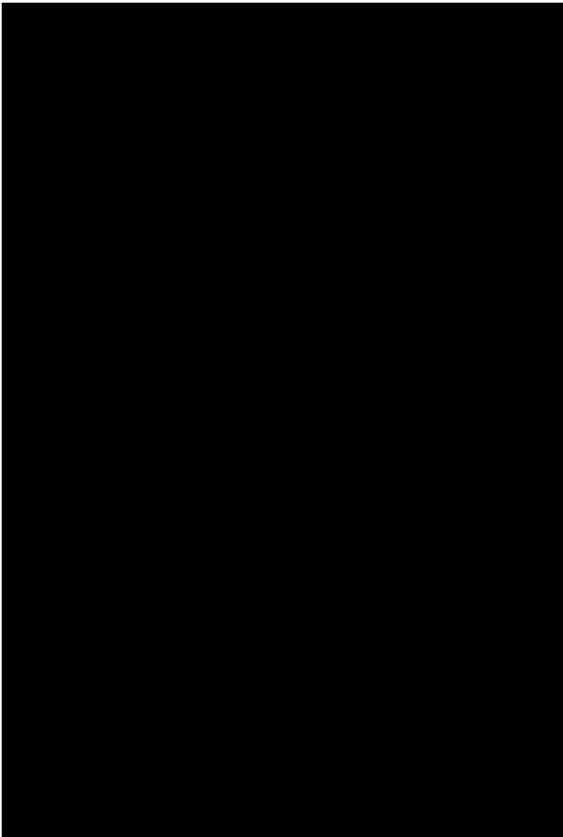


Helen Cruickshank: 'Bide the storm ye canna hinder'

By Jenni Calder



It may seem unlikely that a female civil servant brought up in rural Angus should have become a key figure in what she herself did not like to call 'the Scottish Renaissance'. But Helen Burness Cruickshank was a poet of distinctive voice who for several decades supported and nurtured many of Scotland's most noted

writers. Her role at the heart of Scotland's literary community was acknowledged by Hugh MacDiarmid and many others.

She was born in 1886 in the village of Hillside just north of Montrose. Her parents both worked at Sunnyside Mental Hospital in the village, but this was a farming community and it was the rural environment and the cycle of the farming year that shaped her language and her imagination. Her (1976) provides an evocative account of her childhood years, full of detail on her natural and material surroundings. It's a wonderful source of information relating to a particular place at a particular time, conveying the rhythms of life as well as recording the clothes people wore, the food they ate, the work they did and the recreations they enjoyed. A striking theme is the importance of music making and traditional song, which remained deeply felt interests throughout her life and clearly influenced her poetry. 'We knew all the songs in the Scottish Students' Song Book,' she wrote. (, p.30). Music making was important for the songs themselves and their roots in tradition but equally for the social exchange and cohesion these occasions generated.

Helen, Nell to family and friends, went to the village school and then to Montrose Academy. The family spent holidays in Glenesk, where Nell and her two older brothers roamed the countryside and she learnt to observe and respond to the natural environment. She was undeterred by any conventional view of female activity - 'I always wanted to do what the boys did' is a line in her poem 'Beech Leaves', although the poem also conveys an ambivalence about some of the boys' activities - specifically here the destruction of a wasps' nest. She became a keen hill walker and mountain climber and the pull of Glenesk and adjacent hills and glens - Glen Isla, Glen Clova, Glen Shee - never subsided.

Although a bright student who could have gone on to university (as her brothers did) the family were not able to afford this. Instead she sat the Civil Service examinations and at the age of 17 went to London to take up her first job at the West Kensington branch of the Post Office. London offered her not only independence but cultural opportunities that she eagerly embraced. She went to concerts and plays and galleries, and walked around London in a spirit of curiosity and appreciation. These early years of the twentieth century saw the growth of the women's suffrage movement and she soon joined the Hammersmith Branch of the WSPU and was spending her days off chalking pavements and selling the organisation's weekly paper. Her Aunt Betsy commented, 'Eh, lassie ...

ye'll come tae an ill end yet' (, p.43).

In 1912 Cruickshank was transferred to a job in Edinburgh, her first opportunity to get to know the city that became her home for the rest of her life. She worked initially in the accounts office in the main GPO building at the bottom of North Bridge (which now houses the offices of Creative Scotland among other organisations). Edinburgh, she wrote, was 'a case of love at first sight' (, p.45) and she was enchanted as she explored the city by its 'unexpected loveliness' (p.46). Walks in the Pentlands, sometimes camping overnight, became a regular activity.

By the time war broke out in 1914 she was writing poetry. In 1920 she responded to an appeal by Hugh MacDiarmid for contributions to his newly launched . He encouraged her, although she did not meet him until 1924. This was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. Cruickshank wrote in Scots and English, as she would continue to do for the whole of her career. Scots was the linguistic environment she grew up in, and neither London nor Edinburgh diminished her intimacy with the language and her sense of its appropriateness for the landscape, physical and emotional, of her poetry. The Scots she used was the real, lived language of her growing-up and it retained the pulse and vigour of its origins. It enabled her to convey the texture of Angus life. Her poem 'In Glenskenno Woods', published in her first collection (1934), captures a lyrical and reflective moment of humanity's conjunction with the natural world.

An everyday countryside occurrence, a little girl's hair caught by bramble thorns, becomes a metaphor for life's future entanglements and the speed with which they approach - 'The autumn/O' life draws near'. The poem's gentle and reflective realism is characteristic of Cruickshank's voice, although she also developed veins of humour and irony. She clearly saw herself in that 'little lass', the child waiting and listening and not aware of what life has in store.

For seven years Cruickshank lived in a bedsit in Marchmont, then in a flat at Meadowbank before taking up residence in what was in effect an artists' colony off Shandwick Place where friends gathered for musical and literary evenings. By this time she was beginning to get published, encouraged by MacDiarmid. It was a mutually supportive relationship, as MacDiarmid was often the beneficiary of her hospitality when he spent time in Edinburgh. The year 1924 was a turning point for Cruickshank. Just as she was becoming a part of the literary community and was increasingly engaged in Scotland's 'position in the world of arts and letters' (, p. 58) the death of her father meant that care of her mother fell to her as the only daughter. She bought a semi-detached villa in Cors

seven-year relationship with an artist, already terminated, clearly not without distress. (Several poems reflect this, including 'Heresy', with the lines 'Lock the door/And hide the key., Keep your heart/In secrecy.) The Civil Service did not employ married women, but now she had her mother to support and a house to maintain and could not afford to give up her job. But if that door closed, others remained open and inviting. She clearly resented the adjustments she had to make but did not allow them to obstruct her commitment to a literary life.

In 1927, MacDiarmid and others initiated the Scottish Centre of PEN, the organisation representing poets, essayists, editors and novelists founded six years earlier in London in the aftermath of the First World War's devastation. Its aim was to support writers and promote the international exchange of ideas in an effort to rebuild an international literary community. Cruickshank quickly became involved, as did Edwin and Willa Muir, Lewis Spence, Catherine Carswell, Neil Gunn and many of Scotland's most prominent writers. In 1929 she became honorary secretary of Scottish PEN and Dinnieduff was a frequent location of meetings, formal and informal. In 1934 Scottish PEN hosted the annual PEN Congress in Edinburgh which was an opportunity, energetically seized, to present Scotland's literary past and present to an international audience.

Cruickshank welcomed many writers to Dinnieduff, offering hospitality and support. MacDiarmid, the Muirs, Catherine and Donald Carswell, Nan Shepherd, Louis Grassie Gibbon, Douglas Young, Marion Lochhead were among those who often visited. The house was the scene of many impromptu literary and musical gatherings. In the 1950s and 60s there were visits from Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, from Ewan MacColl, and from Hamish Henderson who provided 'a feast of folk song' (, p.127).

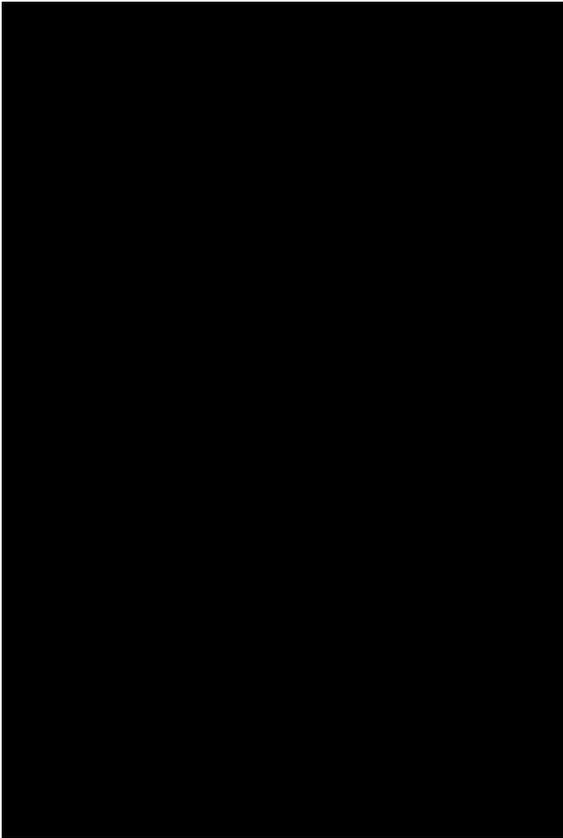
Cruickshank was also a founder member of the Saltire Society, initiated in 1936, and increasingly committed to encouraging awareness of Scotland's cultural heritage, which she felt was neglected. Her commitment to the Scots language was part of her effort to reawaken an understanding of its rich potential - an effort shared by Hugh MacDiarmid, of course. 'Our Scots language is so colourful, graphic, economical, pungent or poignant that I am constantly surprised it is not oftener used by poets,' she wrote. (, p.77), and she quotes George Mackay Brown's comment from : 'Decay of language is always the symptom of a more serious sickness.'

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Helen Cruickshank died in 1975. Her health deteriorated in her latter years and she was less mobile, but she continued to return to Glenesk whenever she could and maintain contact with the community where she grew up. There is no doubt that she will be remembered and acknowledged for her generosity in supporting and nurturing writers, for her key role in the early years of Scottish PEN and for her championship of Scottish culture generally. Her own writing probably suffered from the multiple responsibilities she undertook and the personal sacrifices she made in order to support others - her output was not great - but she wrote a number of memorable, evocative and incisive poems which continue to resonate in the twenty-first century. The following lines, from 'Song of Pity for Refugees', retain a particular relevance.

The Scots language, robust, rooted, unequivocal, anchors these lines in Cruickshank's life and background as well as giving powerful expression to an empathy that was characteristic of her poetic output. She still speaks to us.

Note



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For Cruickshank the move brought an abrupt end to her bohemian existence at Shandwick Place. 'The year of adjustment,' she wrote in (p.62), 'was, I think, the unhappiest of my life. I had regained a mother but lost my freedom.' It also brought an end to the possibility of marriage. She had had a seven-year relationship with an artist, already terminated, clearly not without distress. (Several poems reflect this, including 'Heresy', with the lines 'Lock the door/And hide the key., Keep your heart/In secrecy.) The Civil Service did not employ married women, but now she had her mother to support and a house to maintain and could

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Cruickshank's interests were increasingly dominated by the belief in the need to explore and promote Scotland's 'position in the world of arts and letters' (, p.58). Although she was dismissive of the idea of a 'Scottish Renaissance' she sensed a renewed vigour in Scotland's cultural environment and a spirit of creative challenge. Her own role in this was considerable, both through her contribution as a poet and in her support for so many of the leading writers of the time.

Throughout this period Cruickshank had a demanding job as well as her many cultural involvements and domestic responsibilities. But she also found time to escape into the hills, to her beloved Glenesk and further afield in the Highlands and Islands and in the Lake District, sometimes with a companion but often alone. She relished the solitude and clearly the regular reconnection with landscape was restorative as well as nourishing her poetry. Her second collection,

, was published in 1954 and in 1968. Editions of her appeared in 1971 and 1978. In the 1950s she became sought after as an authority on Scottish literature, with invitations to speak live and on the radio.

Her poetry never lost its intimacy with the natural world but she also, especially in later poems, addressed the social and political consequences of human activity. In 'In Any Glen' she suggests that a return to the land could be the answer for those rotting in 'stinkin' tenements': 'will ye tak' the spade/An' no the dole/ Save Scotland wi' endeavour?' In 'Shooting Guest, Nonconformist' she puts herself in the shoes of a reluctant sportsman whose awareness of the sport's effect on the landscape and the life it once sustained distracts him from the business of slaughtering grouse.

