How I Came to Write a Poem about Hugh MacDiarmid’s Socks

By Magi Gibson

Washing Hugh MacDiarmid’s Socks, by Magi Gibson. Luath Press, 2017

Edinburgh. Blackwell’s bookshop. Summer 2007. The audience squeezed into the upstairs room faces a dilemma. Shut the windows and suffocate, or open them and drown out the readers with the roar of traffic and lashing rain. We opt for Slow Death wrapped in the Comfort Blanket of Literature. I’m slipping into a semi-comatose state when one of the readers mentions socks. Socks? Yes. Hugh MacDiarmid’s socks to be precise. His dirty socks, if you please. Parceled up with brown paper and string. Posted from Shetland to Cornwall. Nearly nine hundred miles. In the early 1930s. My brain screams WHY?!

So his wife, Valda can launder them. And post them back. It seems.

WHAT?! Did I hear that right?

Yes. I did. And not just socks. And shirts. And – I try not to think of … well, let's not go there.

But those socks have triggered something in my skull and now thoughts are rattling out like ticker tape:

You don't need a washing machine. Not even a single tub to wash socks.
(Remember the hand ringer?) Nor do you need the revolutionising
twin tubs from the 60s. Nor the automatics from the 70s. Ah!
Those basic Indesits and the much lusted-after Zanussis!
You don't need access to a Laundromat or a Dry Cleaners. Not for socks!
A block of soap. Check. Warm water. Check. Sink. Check. Scrubbing board?
Optional. They surely had scrubbing boards on Shetland?
If Hugh MacDiarmid could hold a pen he could scrub a sock.
So why? Why would he choose to send dirty linen nine hundred miles?
Why expect his wife to do what he would not?

My brain whirrs and whirrs on '*why*' as if the ticker tape has run out. Then a final cough and splutter – and even more importantly – *WHY DID VALDA COMPLY?*

Beth Junor, for it's her book launch I'm at, has mentioned the socks while telling us about collecting and editing the letters Hugh MacDiarmid's wife, Valda sent him during their long marriage (they were together from 1931 until 1976) in her new book, *Scarcely Ever Out of My Thoughts*.

Now, you'd be forgiven for thinking that a 1930's housewife who took in her husband's washing at nine hundred miles' distance, laundered and returned it by post, might be a downtrodden drudge. But it's common knowledge that Valda Trevlyn Grieve was a force to be reckoned with. Colourful stories about this fireball of a woman, second and fiercely loyal wife to MacDiarmid until his death, have never been in short supply.

In *A Clamjamfray of Poets*, Stanley Roger Green, a contemporary of MacDiarmid, describes Valda as:

> *small and compact with bright hennaed hair and possessed (of) a pugnacious*

> *spirit that may have come from her Cornish origins. She was forthright and outspoken, nor did she mince her words, which were often bluntly Anglo-Saxon.*

In the Dangerous Women Project blog her daughter-in-law, Deirdre Chapman, recounts how:

> *At an Edinburgh reception she emptied her wine glass over Ian Hamilton QC who simply continued his conversation. She heckled the painter Peter Westwater at the unveiling of his portrait of Christopher, and heckled again at the presentation to her husband of the Freedom of Cumbernauld.*

Ronald Stevenson, the composer, in his Memories of Valda Grieve, "O I Hae Silence Left" – published in *Chapman* after her death – wrote:

> *She made heckling an art. The ungentle art of making enemies. She dared to speak her mind, it was dazzlingly uncourteous.*

One of the reasons she'd left the Shetland island of Whalsay to return with their small child to her childhood home in Bude while MacDiarmid remained alone, was that she'd found herself unable to settle amongst the local women. Valda felt judged and out of place with her cigarettes and her scarlet finger and toenails. So why would this Queen of Bohemia, this wild spirit, this woman her daughter-in-law claims liked to target the "bourgeois and boring" choose to carry out an act of subservient domesticity, receiving her husband's dirty socks in the post – when the man in question seemed perfectly capable of carrying out the chore himself?

Before we had even left Blackwell's that wet Edinburgh evening I knew I was going to write a poem, *Washing Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks*. What I didn't know, is that it would take me another nine years to do it.

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Valda Trevlyn Grieve intrigued me. Some years before that Blackwell's reading, I was interviewed for the Brownsbank Creative Writing Fellowship. Brownsbank Cottage in the rural south of Scotland, near Biggar, is where Valda and Hugh set up home in 1952. When Hugh died in 1978, Valda lived on there alone until her death in 1989.

The interview for the Fellowship took place inside the cottage. Imagine a wee Scottish but-and-ben, rough and ready, hunkered on the edge of green rolling fields. What a strange mix of being both observer and observed as I perched on the edge of MacDiarmid's brown leather high-backed armchair, his eyes drilling down on me from various portraits, while I waited my turn to be summoned ben the room for my interrogation.

If anything, I was as curious about Valda as MacDiarmid himself. I was already nursing a fascination, which I went on to develop in poems in my forthcoming collection, *I Like Your Hat* (Luath Press, November 2020), with women who support and/or become muses of male artists, often stunting or even ruining their own artistic development in the process. History seems littered with the muses and helpmates of famous men. Some began promising careers that were then abandoned, subsumed or destroyed. Or their own creative impulses, talents and ambitions were never developed while they nurtured and promoted their male partner's career.

In *I Like Your Hat* there are poems for Scotland's Stella Cartwright, a young woman who mixed socially – and against the mores of the time – with many poets who would have known MacDiarmid in the mid-twentieth century. Stella, described by one poet as "a lassie frae the mune" became lover to several, muse to many. Like Valda, she too wrote some poetry and had it published, but it is as The Muse of Rose Street that she's remembered. It would appear she did not receive artistic encouragement from those she so inspired. Indeed, it could be argued that at that time, mid-twentieth century Scotland was something of a hostile environment for women poets. Jean Ure wrote in a sharp satirical piece published in the *Scottish International Review* in 1968:

> *I told [Leonard], in confidence and as gently as I could possibly do it, that if Virginia had ever been invited to an Edinburgh literary salon – not that it was likely – they'd have set her to butter the bannocks while the Real Poets got on with the chat.*

Jean had good reason to feel alienated and othered as a woman poet in that era. In 1959 Norman MacCaig edited an anthology of Scottish poetry where he included no women. Not one. When a Scotsman reviewer raised concerns, Hugh MacDiarmid dismissed the women poets of the time as "the bevy of Scottish

songstresses" and their poetry as "superannuated kinds of verse".

In 1983 Joanna Russ explained this phenomenon in her ground-breaking analytical book, *How To Suppress Women's Writing*:

> *In a nominally egalitarian society the ideal situation (socially speaking) is one in which the members of the "wrong" groups are free to engage in literature (or equally significant activities) and yet do not do so, thus proving that they can't. But alas, give them the least freedom and they will do it. The trick thus becomes to make the freedom as nominal a freedom as possible and then – as some of the so-and-sos will do it anyway – develop various strategies for ignoring, condemning, or belittling the artistic works that result. If properly done, these strategies result in a social situation in which the "wrong" people are (supposedly) free to commit literature, art or whatever, but very few do, and those who do (it seems) do it badly, so we can all go home to lunch.*

But Valda! My interview for the Brownsbank Fellowship was conducted not in Hugh MacDiarmid's room, but in the other half of the cottage, the room in which Valda lived and slept. A space with bright woolen throws and hand-made cushions and home-made colourful curtains. A small space full of art and creativity. And while a striking painting of the woman herself gazed down, I explained that if granted the residency I'd like to spend time finding out more about her life with MacDiarmid. Who was this woman who was mother to the poet's child, who had been publisher, companion, cook, debt-collector, wood-chopper, poet, onion-pickler, berry-picker, hostess to his often famous visitors?

In the event I was not selected. Perhaps for the best. I doubt life in a harsh Scottish winter in a draughty wee but and ben would have been great for my asthma.

But that warm, wet summer's night as I left the reading at Blackwell's in Edinburgh with my copy of Valda's collected letters, my twenty-first-century feminist self was pretty certain she was going to write a poem about socks, a poem that challenged the patriarchal norms which have for so long seen women confined to domestic spheres, while men – nay The Great Men – got on with The Great Thinking. Because if the wee wives did any thinking at all as they toiled over their steaming boilers and broke their backs at their sudding sinks, it was that Life was Sodden Unfair, and Oh, What Wonders I Might Achieve If Only I Too

Had A Wee Wife!

But my anger settled. And I thought again. There were real people involved in this Strange Tale of the Travelling Socks, sailing on the ferry from Shetland to the Mainland, then barrelling on the midnight train all the long length of Britain from Thurso to Penzance. (Oh, and all the way back.) (And back again.) Could I really judge so quickly why another woman made the decisions she did? The least I owed Valda was to explore the letters she'd written, to hear her voice. So I did. And found much of what she wrote moving.

I also sought out Hugh MacDiarmid's letters. A hefty tome! I won't pretend I read them all. My interest was explicitly in his exchanges with Valda. Though truth be told, I gained huge insights from her responses during their period of separation, those despairing times when she was waiting and waiting for news, or for money, or instructions as to what he wanted done about this or that piece of business, and his responses were painfully slow in coming.

Often you hear people say, Oh you must judge people by the mores of the times they lived in. Many might think this sending-socks-through-the-post-to-be washed palaver would be normal in early 1930s. Forget it! I'm old enough to have known a fair number of men of MacDiarmid's generation. Many would have washed their own socks as a matter of personal responsibility. In the early 1930s men like my father were living in digs, labouring all day in hard outdoor jobs, and washing their socks in sinks all over the country.

So, the poem itself. Writing any poem, unless it's a poem where it starts with a phrase or an image, where a strong line comes in with a sweep like a wave then you surf or ride on its rhythm, and it carries you joyously along – my biggest fear is it kicks off on the wrong line, I come in at the wrong angle. If that happens the poem will be hobbled from the start. With Washing Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks, I had no particularly strong starting image or line – just a title, and a sense of unease that I was writing about the intimate relationship of a couple I didn't know.

When we talk about writing stories, we often say, whose story is this? This helps the writer keep a tight focus. Not something I usually do with a poem! But there were three of us in this poem. Valda, Hugh and me. Was this really a poem about my reaction, my perspective? Or was it about Hugh MacDiarmid, and his socks?

In the event, I was so moved by reading Valda's letters, I wanted to make this as much as possible Valda's poem. And at last I got those first few lines that the poem would flow from.

> *Late at night, long after she has tucked his child in bed,*
> *lied to the 'little scone' he'll see his daddy soon, she*
> *scribbles letters with a borrowed pen, a broken pencil stub.*

Valda's letters were very much the source material. Themes repeated in them, such as:

> *The child needs new shoes. Another red-ink bill has come.*
> *It's sunny. It's raining. Is he remembering to eat?*

And her love and desire to nurture and care came through strongly.

> *From time to time she bakes him simnel cake, parcels,*
> *posts it, pictures his delight when he unpicks the twine,*
> *inhales the mingled scent of spice and fruit and marzipan.*

Life was very tough for her at times, back living with her elderly aunts who clearly disapproved of the choice of husband she'd made. Life sometimes closed in on her. Some phrases and lines in her letters were so honest, so moving, I included them, unchanged, in italics. It seemed the most fitting way.

> *Sometimes she feels so bad she thinks of wading out to sea,*
> *swimming out and out – sun shining – can go no farther –*
> *arms up – a few gurgles – & all is over – it sounds so easy – but –*

Of course, it's me, the poet, sitting in the twenty-first century, who reaches my own conclusion, who settles the damned rattling ticker-tape questions in my head, who realises that my first knee jerk reaction when sitting upstairs in the oxygen-deprived bookshop in Edinburgh was both right and wrong. It can both be outrageous that a man sends his dirty washing through the post all that distance for a downtrodden woman with a small child to wash, *and* it can be an act of love on her part. Her act can still be noble and generous, even while his is not. The reader might read the poem differently from this, and this is fine too. Once I have

released the poem into the wild, like the socks and the geese flying north – or south – I have no control over it.

> *Then I find the letter, the one where she instructs*
> *It is easy to buy brown paper and a ball of string.*
> *Send me your dirty linen. I know you forget such things.*

I've had praise for this poem and its expression of love, and I've had complaints for what some see as a failure of feminism. The poem now is what it is.

Though what would MacDiarmid make of it, I wonder? He who dismissed the Scottish women poets as "the bevy of Scottish songstresses" and their poetry as "superannuated kinds of verse". MacDiarmid scholar, Alan Riach, often visited Hugh and Valda at Brownsbank. In an essay for *The Scottish Review of Books* he describes how once:

> *Valda joined us after a couple of hours, interrupting the flow of words and Glenfiddich with, "I can't talk to you about Victorian epic poetry, but would you like a fried egg or a bacon roll?" Before she could finish the sentence, Chris (MacDiarmid) had interrupted her: "Well, you've nothing but laziness and ignorance to conquer!"*

It would be invidious to try to understand the dynamics of any couple's relationship, but those words, "Well, you've nothing but laziness and ignorance to conquer". The very rebuke some women might make to a man who failed to wash his own socks.

Ronald Stevenson gives further insight into the dynamic of the Grieves' relationship in his Chapman essay, "O I Hae Silence Left" when he writes:

> *Chris could also be unkind to Valda. If she kept coming in and out of his room when I visited them in their Brownsbank cottage (by Biggar) he would explode, "Woman, keep oot!" Once this was a wee bit too much for Valda to bear. I noticed she had tears in her eyes and she went into her room.*

Stevenson further recounts:

> *In the early Sixties, MacDiarmid, the pianist John Ogdon and I met in my home*

> *for an all-night discussion about music, aided by a bottle of malt and diverted by Valda's frequent interruptions. If anything smacked of cant, she let you know. The session was tape-recorded. Later a stenographer made a typescript of it and it was published (slightly abridged) in the second volume of MacDiarmid's autobiography, The Company I've Kept. (Hutchinson, 1966). I wish Valda's comments had been included. They would have enlivened the text.*

His autobiography. *The Company I've Kept*. And in it a conversation recorded for posterity. Minus the voice of the one woman present. This is how women disappear from history. How women's voices are erased. Literally.

Valda Grieve was a well-read woman according to her daughter-in-law, and we do know that she did write some poetry. Her best-known poem, *Haud Forrit*, written in honour of her husband, was published in *The Scotsman* for MacDiarmid's eightieth birthday.

During thirty-five years of leading writing workshops I've been constantly and consistently shocked at how much more encouragement and confidence-building women, especially older women, need to take even tentative steps towards a writing career in contrast with the many men I've also worked with. Joanna Russ has written of the subtle – not to mention blatant – ways that women writers have been discouraged, denied or rendered invisible. Beth Junor in her introduction to her book says:

> *Later in life Valda published poetry of her own. She had also planned to write a Cornish cookbook – Deirdre Grieve (her daughter-in-law) and Norman MacCaig's wife Isabel were helping her with the typing of this. There are also notes for her autobiography amongst her papers.*

The fact that Valda did, in later life, write poems, does make me wonder if this complex woman who put so much energy into the ambitions of her husband perhaps might have – in a different time – aspired to being a writer? Certainly she could have been no greater champion of her husband, and as novelist James Robertson says on the cover notes to *Scarcely Ever Out of My Thoughts*:

> *In Valda Trevlyn, MacDiarmid's other half, Christopher Grieve found a woman willing to endure constant poverty, cold, worry, disapproval and isolation in*

> *order to nurture, even to ensure the survival, of her husband's genius. Nothing is clearer in these letters than that she did so at great personal cost, but also with hope, humour and sheer bloody-mindedness.*

And might MacDiarmid on reading my poem about his socks have sent me off with harsh words to the kitchen to butter the bannocks? Or denounced my poem as superannuated verse? Who knows. The man was gey thrawn and never to be second-guessed.

In any case, as the gifted Scottish poet, Helen Lamb, wisely advised me just before the publication of the poetry collection, *Washing Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks*, an event which sadly coincided with her early and sudden death, "Why care what men who are not your readership think?" As the bats in of one of my own poems, *Bat Song,* from *Wild Women of a Certain Age* (Chapman 2000) say, "Is it our fault, Sir/ that you are deaf/ to the beauty of our songs?"

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Scottish poetry was as stuffy and in need of fresh air in the mid- to late-twentieth century as that overheated book launch in Blackwell's. Women had to heave at the door for entry. A few inroads were made earlier, but the serious big push was marked in 1989 by the all-women anthology *Fresh Oceans* from Stramullion, with Chapman magazine's commitment under editor Joy Hendry, and Polygon's various initiatives, including the *Original Prints* series also adding serious weight and muscle.

Thankfully, more and more windows and doors for diversity are opening in the Scottish poetry world, fresh air is gusting in, and female voices are singing out, though not, I hasten to add, as songstresses. We are poets. And no longer easily deleted from the conversation when it is transcribed for posterity.

But what would have happened, I wonder, if instead of washing his socks and constantly bolstering her husband's talents, Valda had siphoned off some cash from his whisky allowance while lonely and sad in Bude, purchased a fistful of decent pens and pursued her own writing career?

We shall never know. That's not the choice she made.

And my intention as a woman who has chosen to be a poet, is that this poem,

Washing Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks, respects and honours the woman Valda was, the choices she made, and the life she lived.

References & Further Information

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So his wife, Valda can launder them. And post them back. It seems.

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Why expect his wife to do what he would not?

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When we talk about writing stories, we often say, whose story is this? This helps the writer keep a tight focus. Not something I usually do with a poem! But there were three of us in this poem. Valda, Hugh and me. Was this really a poem about my reaction, my perspective? Or was it about Hugh MacDiarmid, and his socks? In the event, I was so moved by reading Valda's letters, I wanted to make this as much as possible Valda's poem. And at last I got those first few lines that the poem would flow from.

> *Late at night, long after she has tucked his child in bed,*
> *lied to the 'little scone' he'll see his daddy soon, she*
> *scribbles letters with a borrowed pen, a broken pencil stub.*

Valda's letters were very much the source material. Themes repeated in them, such as:

> *The child needs new shoes. Another red-ink bill has come.*
> *It's sunny. It's raining. Is he remembering to eat?*

And her love and desire to nurture and care came through strongly.

> *From time to time she bakes him simnel cake, parcels,*
> *posts it, pictures his delight when he unpicks the twine,*
> *inhales the mingled scent of spice and fruit and marzipan.*

Life was very tough for her at times, back living with her elderly aunts who clearly disapproved of the choice of husband she'd made. Life sometimes closed in on her. Some phrases and lines in her letters were so honest, so moving, I included them, unchanged, in italics. It seemed the most fitting way.

Sometimes she feels so bad she thinks of wading out to sea,
swimming out and out – sun shining – can go no farther –
arms up – a few gurgles – & all is over – it sounds so easy – but –

Of course, it's me, the poet, sitting in the twenty-first century, who reaches my own conclusion, who settles the damned rattling ticker-tape questions in my head, who realises that my first knee jerk reaction when sitting upstairs in the oxygen-deprived bookshop in Edinburgh was both right and wrong. It can both be outrageous that a man sends his dirty washing through the post all that distance for a downtrodden woman with a small child to wash, *and* it can be an act of love on her part. Her act can still be noble and generous, even while his is not. The reader might read the poem differently from this, and this is fine too. Once I have released the poem into the wild, like the socks and the geese flying north – or south – I have no control over it.

Then I find the letter, the one where she instructs
It is easy to buy brown paper and a ball of string.
Send me your dirty linen. I know you forget such things.

I've had praise for this poem and its expression of love, and I've had complaints for what some see as a failure of feminism. The poem now is what it is.

Though what would MacDiarmid make of it, I wonder? He who dismissed the Scottish women poets as "the bevy of Scottish songstresses" and their poetry as "superannuated kinds of verse". MacDiarmid scholar, Alan Riach, often visited Hugh and Valda at Brownsbank. In an essay for *The Scottish Review of Books* he describes how once:

Valda joined us after a couple of hours, interrupting the flow of words and Glenfiddich with, "I can't talk to you about Victorian epic poetry, but would you like a fried egg or a bacon roll?" Before she could finish the sentence, Chris (MacDiarmid) had interrupted her: "Well, you've nothing but laziness and ignorance to conquer!"

It would be invidious to try to understand the dynamics of any couple's relationship, but those words, "Well, you've nothing but laziness and ignorance to conquer". The very rebuke some women might make to a man who failed to wash

his own socks.

Ronald Stevenson gives further insight into the dynamic of the Grieves' relationship in his Chapman essay, "O I Hae Silence Left" when he writes:

> *Chris could also be unkind to Valda. If she kept coming in and out of his room when I visited them in their Brownsbank cottage (by Biggar) he would explode, "Woman, keep oot!" Once this was a wee bit too much for Valda to bear. I noticed she had tears in her eyes and she went into her room.*

Stevenson further recounts:

> *In the early Sixties, MacDiarmid, the pianist John Ogdon and I met in my home for an all-night discussion about music, aided by a bottle of malt and diverted by Valda's frequent interruptions. If anything smacked of cant, she let you know. The session was tape-recorded. Later a stenographer made a typescript of it and it was published (slightly abridged) in the second volume of MacDiarmid's autobiography, The Company I've Kept. (Hutchinson, 1966). I wish Valda's comments had been included. They would have enlivened the text.*

His autobiography. *The Company I've Kept*. And in it a conversation recorded for posterity. Minus the voice of the one woman present. This is how women disappear from history. How women's voices are erased. Literally.

Valda Grieve was a well-read woman according to her daughter-in-law, and we do know that she did write some poetry. Her best-known poem, *Haud Forrit*, written in honour of her husband, was published in *The Scotsman* for MacDiarmid's eightieth birthday.

During thirty-five years of leading writing workshops I've been constantly and consistently shocked at how much more encouragement and confidence-building women, especially older women, need to take even tentative steps towards a writing career in contrast with the many men I've also worked with. Joanna Russ has written of the subtle – not to mention blatant – ways that women writers have been discouraged, denied or rendered invisible. Beth Junor in her introduction to her book says:

> *Later in life Valda published poetry of her own. She had also planned to write a*

> *Cornish cookbook – Deirdre Grieve (her daughter-in-law) and Norman MacCaig's wife Isabel were helping her with the typing of this. There are also notes for her autobiography amongst her papers.*

The fact that Valda did, in later life, write poems, does make me wonder if this complex woman who put so much energy into the ambitions of her husband perhaps might have – in a different time – aspired to being a writer? Certainly she could have been no greater champion of her husband, and as novelist James Robertson says on the cover notes to *Scarcely Ever Out of My Thoughts*:

> *In Valda Trevlyn, MacDiarmid's other half, Christopher Grieve found a woman willing to endure constant poverty, cold, worry, disapproval and isolation in order to nurture, even to ensure the survival, of her husband's genius. Nothing is clearer in these letters than that she did so at great personal cost, but also with hope, humour and sheer bloody-mindedness.*

And might MacDiarmid on reading my poem about his socks have sent me off with harsh words to the kitchen to butter the bannocks? Or denounced my poem as superannuated verse? Who knows. The man was gey thrawn and never to be second-guessed.

In any case, as the gifted Scottish poet, Helen Lamb, wisely advised me just before the publication of the poetry collection, *Washing Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks*, an event which sadly coincided with her early and sudden death, "Why care what men who are not your readership think?" As the bats in of one of my own poems, *Bat Song,* from *Wild Women of a Certain Age* (Chapman 2000) say, "Is it our fault, Sir/ that you are deaf/ to the beauty of our songs?"

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Scottish poetry was as stuffy and in need of fresh air in the mid- to late-twentieth century as that overheated book launch in Blackwell's. Women had to heave at the door for entry. A few inroads were made earlier, but the serious big push was marked in 1989 by the all-women anthology *Fresh Oceans* from Stramullion, with Chapman magazine's commitment under editor Joy Hendry, and Polygon's various initiatives, including the *Original Prints* series also adding serious weight and muscle.

Thankfully, more and more windows and doors for diversity are opening in the Scottish poetry world, fresh air is gusting in, and female voices are singing out, though not, I hasten to add, as songstresses. We are poets. And no longer easily deleted from the conversation when it is transcribed for posterity.

But what would have happened, I wonder, if instead of washing his socks and constantly bolstering her husband's talents, Valda had siphoned off some cash from his whisky allowance while lonely and sad in Bude, purchased a fistful of decent pens and pursued her own writing career?

We shall never know. That's not the choice she made.

And my intention as a woman who has chosen to be a poet, is that this poem, *Washing Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks,* respects and honours the woman Valda was, the choices she made, and the life she lived.

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