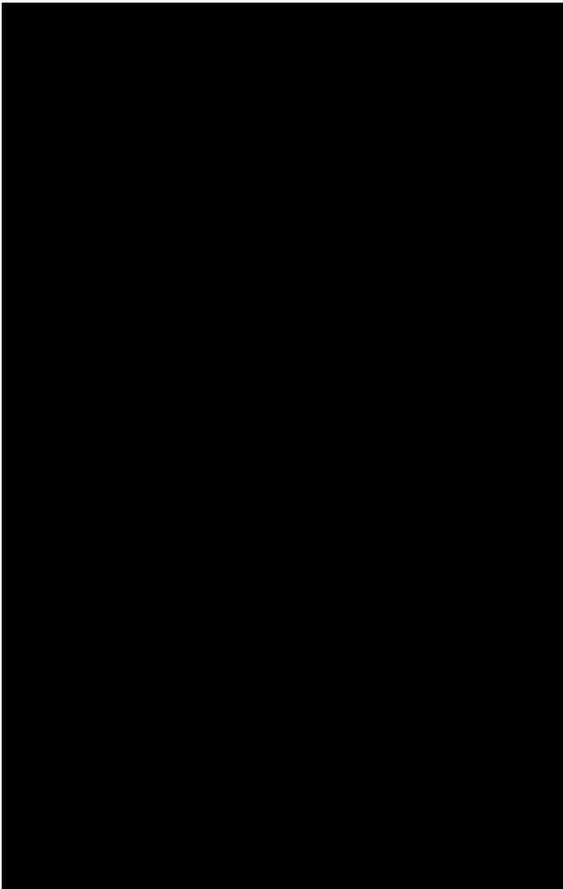


How I Came to Write a Poem about Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks

By Magi Gibson



Was I g Hug MacD ar d'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?!

she returned to her home from her Corsica. She was fortunate to find a good friend, and she received her words, which were often lovely. A glo-Saxo.

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

At a Edinburgh reception she seated her wine glass over the table. She looked at the artist Peter Westwater at the unveiling of his portrait of her, and looked again at the restoration of her as a doctress of the Freedoms of the Guild.

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

She made a great art. The gentle art of making a great art. She dared to speak her mind, it was dazzlingly courteous.

One of the reasons she 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 found herself unable to settle amongst the local women. Valda felt

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 L ke 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 L ke 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 *Scott's I t e r a t o a l R e v e w* in 1968:

*I told [Leo ard], co f d e c e a d a s g e t l y a s I c o u l d o s s l y d o t, t a t f
V r g a a d e v e r e e v t e d t o a E d u r g l t e r a r y s a l o - o t t a t t w a s
l k e l y - t e y ' d a v e s e t e r t o u t t e r t e a o c k s w l e t e R e a l P o e t s g o t o
w t t e c a t.*

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 socially egalitarian society the deal is that once (socially speaking) someone writes the "wrong" groups are free to engage literature (or equally significant activities) and yet do not do so, thus robbing it of its value. But alas, given the least freedom and they will do it. The trick to us ecoes is to take the freedom as a social freedom as possible and the - as some of the so-called socialists will do it anyway - develop various strategies for organizing, coding, or eliminating the artistic works that result. If properly done, these strategies result in a social situation where women are (supposedly) free to contribute literature, art or whatever, but very few do, and those who do (the sees) do it badly, so we can all go on to live.

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 may 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 Soddan 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 also 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?

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

*The If d t e letter, t e o e w ere s e structs
It s easy to uy row a era d a all of str g.
Se d e your d rtyl e . I k ow you forget suc t gs.*

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

for a all- g t d scuss o a out us c, a ded y a ottle of alt a d d verted y Valda's freque t terru t o s. If a yt g s acked of ca t, s e let you k ow. T e sess o was ta e-recorded. Later a ste ogra er ade a ty escr t of t a d t was u l s ed (sl g tly a r dged) t e seco d volu e of MacD ar d's auto ogra y, T e Co a y I've Ke t. (Hutc so , 1966). I w s Valda's co e ts ad ee cluded. T ey would ave e lve ed t e text.

His autobiography. *T e Co a y I've Ke t*. 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 Forr t*, written in honour of her husband, was published in *T e Scots a* 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 lfe Valda u l s ed oetry of er ow . S e ad also la ed to wr te a Cor s cook ook - De rdre Gr eve (er daug ter- -law) a d Nor a MacCa g's w fe Isa el were el g er w t t e ty g of t s. T ere are also otes for er auto ogra y a o gst er a ers.

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 T oug ts*:

I Valda Trevly , MacD ar d's ot er alf, C r sto er Gr eve fou d a wo a w ll g to e dure co sta t overty, cold, worry, d sa roval a d solat o

*order to nurture, even to ensure the survival, of her us a d's ge us. Not g
s clearer t ese letters t a t at s e d d so at great erso al cost, ut also
w t o e, u our a d s eer loody- ded ess.*

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, *Was g Hug MacD ar d'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 So g*, from *W ld Wo e of a Certa Age* (Chapman 2000) say, Is it our fault, Sir/ that you are deaf/ to the beauty of our songs?

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 *Fres Ocea s* from Stramullion, with Chapman magazine s commitment under editor Joy Hendry, and Polygon s various initiatives, including the *Or g al Pr ts* 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.

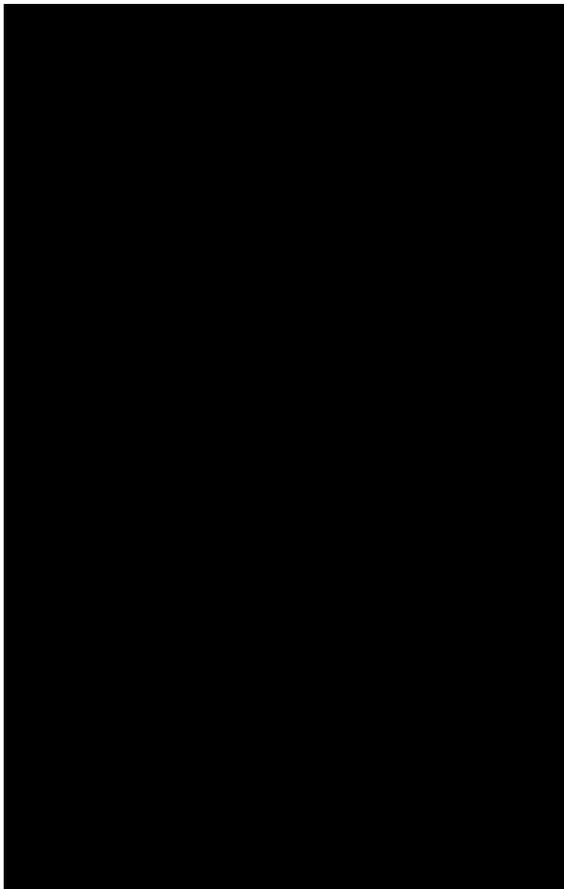
And my intention as a woman who has chosen to be a poet, is that this poem,

Was g Hug MacD ar d's Socks, respects and honours the woman Valda was, the choices she made, and the life she lived.

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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 do 't need a washing machine. Not even a single tub was socks.
(Remember the adriatic?) Nor do you need the revolution's
twentieths from the 60s. Nor the auto attacks from the 70s. A!
Those as I desire and the un-lusted-after Zauss!
You do 't need access to a Launderer or a Dry Cleaners. Not for socks!
A lack of soap. Check. War water. Check. Socks. Check. Scrubbing board?
Optional. They surely had scrubbing boards on Setland?
If Hugh MacDiarmid could hold a piece could scrub a sock.
So why? Why would he choose to send dirty laundry to be laundered?
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 1930s 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 Clash of Poets*, Stanley Roger Green, a contemporary of MacDiarmid, describes Valda as:

She all a d'co' act w' t' r' g' t' e' a' e' d' a' r' a' d' o' s' s' e' s' s' e' d' (o' f) a' u' g' a' c' o' u' s' s' r' t' t' a' t' a' y' a' v' e' c' o' e' f' r' o' e' r' C' o' r' s' o' r' g' s' . S' e' w' a' s' f' o' r' t' r' g' t' a' d' o' u' t' s' o' k' e' , o' r' d' d' s' e' c' e' e' r' w' o' r' d' s' , w' c' w' e' r' e' o' f' t' e' n' l' u' t' l' y' A' g' l' o' - S' a' x' o' .

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

At a Edinburgh reception she entertained her w' e' g' l' a' s' s' o' v' e' r' I' a' H' a' l' t' o' Q' C' w' o' s' l' y' c' o' t' u' e' d' s' c' o' v' e' r' s' a' t' o' . S' e' e' c' k' l' e' d' t' e' a' t' e' r' P' e' t' e' r' W' e' s' t' w' a' t' e' r' a' t' t' e' u' v' e' l' g' o' f' s' o' r' t' r' a' t' o' f' C' r' i' s' t' o' p' h' e' r' , a' d' e' c' k' l' e' d' a' g' a' i' n' a' t' t' e' r' e' s' e' t' a' t' o' t' o' e' r' u' s' a' d' o' f' t' e' F' r' e' e' d' o' m' o' f' C' u' r' i' e' r' a' u' l' d' .

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

She ade eckl' g' a' art. T' e' u' g' e' t' l' e' a' r' t' o' f' a' k' g' e' e' s' . S' e' d' a' r' e' d' t' o' s' e' a' k' e' r' e' d' , t' w' a' s' d' a' z' z' l' i' n' g' l' y' u' c' o' u' r' t' e' o' u' s' .

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, *Was Hugh MacDiarmid's Socks*. What I didn't know, is that it would take me another nine years to do it.

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 *...*

hostile environment for women poets. Jean Ure wrote in a sharp satirical piece published in the *Scottish Literary Journal* in 1968:

I told [Leonard], confidencely as gently as I could possibly do it, that for Virginia and ever she invited to a Edinburgh literary salon - not that it was likely - they'd have set her to utter the accolade 'let the Real Poets go on with their work'.

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 so-called egalitarian society the deal struck (socially speaking) so the women writers of the "writing" groups are free to engage 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 to us economists to take the freedom as a total freedom as possible - as so the of the so-called-sos will do it anyway - develop various strategies for organizing, coding, or enlightening the artistic work that result. If properly done, these strategies result in a social situation where women writers are (supposedly) free to contribute literature, art or whatever, but very few do, and those who do (it seems) do it badly, so we can all go on to live.

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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 may 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 Soddan 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,

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 herself
led to the little school she'll see his daddy soon, she
scribbles letters with a borrowed pen, a rook she calls it.*

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

*The children need news too. Another red-killed ascoo.
It's sunny. It's raining. Is there ever going to eat?*

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

*From the tot she makes the cake, arcs,
posts, captures the delight we expect to see,
ales the glad scent of the bread fruit and the a.*

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.

*So et es se feels so ad s et ks of wad g out to sea,
sw g out a d out - su s g - ca go o fart er -
ar s u - a few gurgles - & all s over - t sou ds so easy - ut -*

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, *a d* 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.

*T e I f d t e letter, t e o e w ere s e structs
It s easy to uy row a era d a all of str g.
Se d e your d rty l e . I k ow you forget suc t gs.*

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 *T e Scott s Rev ew of Books* he describes how once:

*Valda o ed us after a cou le of ours, terru t g t e flow of words a d
Gle f dd c w t , "I ca 't talk to you a out V ctor a e c oetry, ut would you
l ke a fr ed egg or a aco roll?" Before s e could f s t e se te ce, C r s
(MacD ar d) ad terru ted er: "Well, you've ot g ut laz ess a d
g ora ce to co quer!"*

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:

C r s could also e u k d to Valda. If s e ke t co g a d out of s roo w e I v s t e t e t e r Brow s a k cottage (y B ggar) e would ex lode, "Wo a , kee oot!" O ce t s was a wee t too uc for Valda to ear. I ot ced s e ad tears er eyes a d s e we t to er roo .

Stevenson further recounts:

I t e early S xt es, MacD ar d, t e a st Jo Ogdo a d I et y o e for a all- g t d scuss o a out us c, a ded y a otte of alt a d d verted y Valda's freque t terru t o s. If a yt g s acked of ca t, s e let you k ow. T e sess o was ta e-recorded. Later a ste ogra er ade a ty escr t of t a d t was u l s ed (sl g tly a r dged) t e seco d volu e of MacD ar d's auto ogra y, T e Co a y I've Ke t. (Hutc so , 1966). I w s Valda's co e ts ad ee cluded. T ey would ave e lve ed t e text.

His autobiography, *T e Co a y I've Ke t*. 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 Forr t*, written in honour of her husband, was published in *T e Scots a* 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 l fe Valda u l s ed oetry of er ow . S e ad also la ed to wr te a

Cor s cook ook - De rdre Gr eve (er daug ter- -law) a d Nor a

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, *Was Hugh MacDermid's Socks*, respects and honours the woman Valda was, the choices she made, and the life she lived.

(c) The Bottle I