One Hundred Years of Hugh MacDiarmid

By Alan Riach

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> *of the Scottish people don't know any more than they've ever known what they want. In any case, they couldn't want what I stand for because until quite recently, Scottish schools, colleges and universities had no courses in Scottish literature or the Scottish languages. They were entirely conditioned by English standards. I want to break away from all that. I want complete disjunction from England…*

In other words, poetry, the work of all the arts, is a major fact of any society, but no less important politically is education, the work of all people, but particularly educational institutions, all of them, and the politicians charged with helping make such education happen. MacDiarmid said, 'until quite recently…'. Let's remind ourselves of the establishment of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies in 1970 and of the Department of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow in 1971. He knew what he was talking about.

My personal story of encountering MacDiarmid and his work overlaps with the last years of his life and the rise of neoliberal economics internationally and emphatically within the UK, and the political structures that have continued to hold Scotland in a judicial trap. We're still trying to free ourselves. The work of the poetry and all the arts, as MacDiarmid demonstrated, and as the poems quoted above show, is no use as a panacea, nor compensation, nor therapy, and it's certainly no guarantee of economic growth. That it should be seen as such is a very silly notion. Above all, it's no good if it doesn't touch what humanity is at its best, what human potential is at its fullest. And for over one hundred years that's what MacDiarmid has been teaching us to understand.

The last time I met him, near the end of his life, I asked with the fury of youth, 'When?' MacDiarmid raised his eyebrows. Chris, he said I should call him. That wasn't quite right. And 'Dr Grieve' was too formal. I think I remember that I called him Christopher. 'You've called for all these things, and argued, written so much, so passionately, Scotland's independence, socialism, a better place to live in, the well-being of people, all these things, *when* do you think it might happen?'

He smiled and nursed his pipe, puffed, and said, 'Alan, when you get to my age, the urgency is less important.' As in these lines, from 'On a Raised Beach':

Nothing has stirred
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But one bird. The widest open door is the least liable to intrusion,
Ubiquitous as the sunlight, unfrequented as the sun.
The inward gates of a bird are always open.
It does not know how to shut them.
That is the secret of its song,
But whether any man's are ajar is doubtful.
I look at these stones and know little about them,
But I know their gates are open too,
Always open, far longer open, than any bird's can be,
That every one of them has had its gates wide open far longer
Than all birds put together, let alone humanity,
Though through them no man can see,
No man nor anything more recently born than themselves
And that is everything else on the Earth.
I too lying here have dismissed all else.
Bread from stones is my sole and desperate dearth,
From stones, which are to the Earth as to the sunlight
Is the naked sun which is for no man's sight.
I would scorn to cry to any easier audience
Or, having cried, to lack patience to await the response.
I am no more indifferent or ill-disposed to life than death is;
I would fain accept it all completely as the soil does;
Already I feel all that can perish perishing in me
As so much has perished and all will yet perish in these stones.
I must begin with these stones as the world began.

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We must be humble. We are so easily baffled by appearances
And do not realise that these stones are one with the stars.
It makes no difference to them whether they are high or low,
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