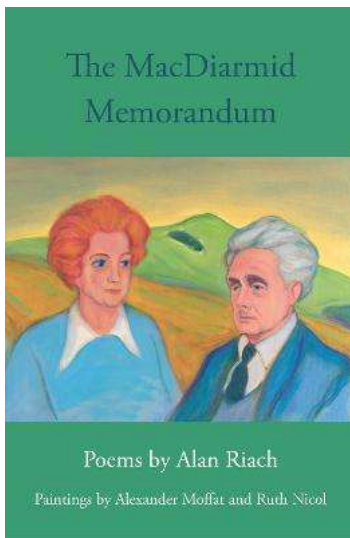


‘The MacDiarmid Memorandum’, by Alan Riach

Review by Giacomo Bianchino



At the National Library of Scotland there is a draft of Hugh MacDiarmid’s unpublished masterwork, sometimes called *Cornish Heroic Song* and sometimes called *Mature Art*. In the margins of his ‘author’s note’, the poet has scrawled a correction in his cropped, runic handwriting. This addition tells us that the poem, which he defined and redefined many times over the last forty years of his life, is an ‘epic intime’. An intimate epic. But the letters are close-kerned: it could as easily be an ‘epic in time’.

What makes MacDiarmid a poet of universal value is the way that both these readings could describe his work. Even his most ‘intime’ lyrics in Scots billow out to a cosmic viewpoint, traipsing space and billowing their perspective ‘in time’. And it’s this double MacDiarmid that Alan Riach, along with the painters Sandy Moffat and Ruth Nicol, memorandises in his latest book.

On the one hand, *The MacDiarmid Memorandum* is a welling of deep personal sympathy for the poet. In the (rather long, for a poetry volume) introduction, Riach opens the door to the old man’s Brownsbank cottage. Here, in his later years, Chris Grieve – MacDiarmid’s sometimes companion – welcomed guests from across the world, and particularly those of the younger Scottish generation. It is this Grieve, voluble and warm, that Riach wants to introduce: to extend a

welcome to his little *aonach* in the lowlands.

The meat of the book is comprised by poems, written with Riach's characteristic stridency and attention to the environment, which chart the different periods in MacDiarmid's life. Woven between the poems are Moffat's brooding portraits and Nicol's wonderfully expansive landscapes. Not unlike MacDiarmid's pioneering *Poems to Paintings by William Johnstone*, the visuals work as little eddying-points for the words. The relationship isn't direct or naive, but nimble and, dareonesay, dialectical in that they invite a second, third or nth reading of the poems with fresh eyes.

There is, indeed, plenty to find in the re-reading. Riach's is a warmly wise voice, and there is a weight to his line that rolls it to its end like a ball toed gently down a little hill. The sense of movement is buttressed by the suddenness (an important temporality for MacDiarmid) of the poems' beginnings. The tendency to start *in media res*, by a kind of thematic catalexis, gives us the sense of a letter from a friend, the details of whose life are kept in our back pocket.

But it's not only Alan Riach who is writing in these poems. The re-reading finds among them all the traces of MacDiarmid's craft. His fondness for lists, attention to the site of writing and fluent inversion of imagery are all on show in the *Memorandum*. What's more, their placement in the story of the poet's life gives them a new volume- not by 'explaining' their context, but opening a question of the role of form in the poet's shifting sense of self.

The focus of the poetry skews to Grieve's childhood and MacDiarmid's advanced age. The tone here is intimate, and even bucolic. It seems as if the MacDiarmid we are destined to get is the hearty lallans balladist, or the dear old man nursing a dram in his easy chair. The landscapes of Ruth Nicol, which grow in number as the book goes on, also enjoy a calm serenity that recalls the celebrations by certain very Georgian critics of MacDiarmid's 'golden lyric'.

This rustic charm, however, is a trick. The tone of the 'intime' gives way, at many points and in the most salient poems, to a broader view: an aspiration to the total vision. A book that follows someone like MacDiarmid can't hold back the tide of ideas for long; and the chapters following Grieve's boyhood carry titles like 'World War One: Big Empires and Small Countries' and 'World War Two: Fascism and Populism'. In these middle chapters, we realise that the domesticity of the earlier

poems was only ever the shading of a background for these great flights of thought. In the *Memorandum* every gesture to the ideal begins in and is anchored in the mundane reality of a scene: family life, working life, even the act of writing.

Riach's gift to the memory of MacDiarmid is this sense of the universal inhering in the local. It's not a gift made openly, but left behind for diligent friends to find. In certain axial poems, Riach talks about an 'opening out' – from life to poetry, from finitude to the infinite. And this is the mantra of the volume. What Riach is an expert in is the alchemy of the lived detail; finding in it the trace of the universal movement. In this, he is properly MacDiarmidian.

The painters, too, seem conscious of this happy tension between the small and the large in the work of the poet. Moffat's hagiographical portraits sit the great figures of the last 100 years in Scottish culture in the towering, elemental landscapes of the lowlands. Even the bluster of his noisier tableaux (say, *Milne's Bar*) has something of the Raphaelite *School of Athens*, as against the parlour scenes of a Vermeer or an Ingres. The activity in Moffat's paintings is the play of big ideas over, through and against the people in the picture.

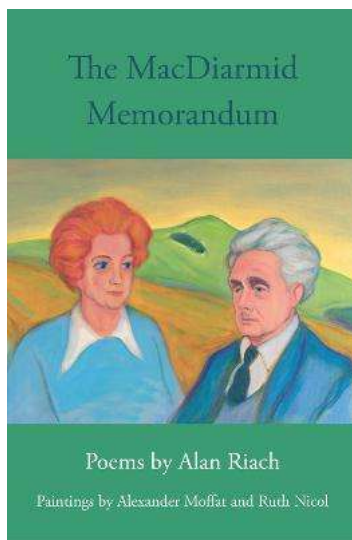
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The writing on our invitation to the poet's world is in a strange language; a futhorc legible only to those that are 'in the know'. I wonder, for the novice of Scottish letters, if this work is an act of hospitality, or a polite smile as the door is gently closed in their faces. With the right knowledge, the poems are subtle,

dexterous things; and the paintings lovely troublings of the calm. But if Riach's great discovery is MacDiarmid's talent for 'opening out', it must be an investigation into what this means for poetry as a whole. I'd like to duck behind the veil of ignorance and read the *Memorandum* again, to see if it enchanted me the way MacDiarmid can the most naive of readers.

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