

Hugh MacDiarmid and the British State

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This modernist poet was born in the late-nineteenth century in a small European nation that was once an imperial power but has been somewhat dominated by its closest and larger neighbour. A ‘mystical nationalist’, he used multiple pseudonyms, in part to help spark a literary renaissance in his home nation in the early twentieth century.¹ Celebrated as his country’s national poet, certainly in the modern era, arguably of all time, this writer is the subject of numerous portraits in the most prestigious galleries of the nation’s capital city, as well as having his image and quotations from his works used on mugs, fridge magnets, street benches and café chains. Who is he? The poet I have in mind is not Hugh MacDiarmid, the subject of this article, but rather the Portuguese Fernando Pessoa, born in Lisbon in 1888, only four years before Christopher Murray Grieve, otherwise known as MacDiarmid, and a writer whose heteronymous identities launched a Portuguese literary revival and who has become central to our understanding of modernism and the fragmented and agonised nature of the modern personality. In Lisbon, the city he walked in the fashion of the Baudelairian flâneur and which forms the backdrop to many of his major poems and a prose work such as *The Book of Disquiet*, Pessoa’s presence is perhaps greater even than that of Camões, the sixteenth-century poet of Portugal imperialism, most famous for *The Lusiads*. Pessoa’s high seriousness has been ironised in postmodern style, the image of the trench-coated, bespectacled poet striding out in the Lisbon streets utilised, surprisingly and affectionately, in tourist memorabilia. This may be a good or bad thing or both, but, however so we may view the commercialisation of culture, it illustrates a recognition that, despite their distinct

¹ Richard Zenith deploys Fernando Pessoa’s description for himself in *The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa*, ed. and trans. by Richard Zenith (New York: Grove Press, 2001), p. 158.

similarities – there are of course marked differences too – Hugh MacDiarmid simply does not muster, even in post-devolutionary Scotland. This may be in part because, far from being celebrated by the state, and commercialised and perhaps therefore neutralised in some manner, MacDiarmid remains an enemy of the state, specifically the British state. While an independent Portugal lauds Pessoa, a devolved-but-still-British Scotland largely derides when not ignoring MacDiarmid.

The sheer oddness of MacDiarmid’s position in contemporary political debates in Scotland and Britain is illustrated by the mainstream and social media furore that is generated whenever SNP MPs and MSPs wear white roses for the state opening of the Scottish and UK Parliaments. At the reconvening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, then-leader of the party Alex Salmond told the BBC journalist Brian Taylor that SNP members of parliament were sporting ‘the MacDiarmid rose’, ‘not quite the Jacobite rose’.² Salmond is of course alluding to MacDiarmid’s ‘The Little White Rose’:

The rose of all the world is not for me.

I want for my part

Only the little white rose of Scotland

That smells sharp and sweet – and breaks the heart.³

The poem, dedicated to the poet and writer John Gawsorth (1912–70) who in 1934 put MacDiarmid up in his house in London’s Great James Street, has a complex history. It was first published by MacDiarmid anonymously in 1931 in *The Modern Scot* and *Living Scottish Poets* but with acknowledgement to Compton Mackenzie, who in a 1929 radio broadcast, part

² Alex Salmond, ‘The Scottish Parliament – The First Day’, 12 May 1999, cited in Alan Riach, *Representing Scotland in Literature, Popular Culture and Iconography: The Masks of the Modern Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 29.

³ Hugh MacDiarmid, ‘The Little White Rose’, Hugh MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems: Volume I*, ed. by Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), p. 461.

of which appeared in the *Scots Independent* later that year, said: ‘You know our wild Scots rose? It is white, and small, and prickly, and possesses a sharp sweet scent which makes the heart ache’. The lyric then appeared in *Stony Limits and Other Poems*, in the 1934 first edition of which collection it, and ‘Cattle Show, replaced the suppressed ‘John Maclean (1879–1923)’. When Maurice Lindsay included the poem in his 1976 anthology *Modern Scottish Poetry* he mistakenly published it under Compton Mackenzie’s name, a confusion which continues to this day, in part perhaps because Mackenzie had much more explicit Jacobite sympathies than the communist and republican MacDiarmid.⁴

Many commentators and some on social media have made links between the SNP’s homage to MacDiarmid in wearing the white rose, MacDiarmid’s role in the early days of the National Party of Scotland which led to the founding of the SNP in 1934, and MacDiarmid’s interest in fascism, in order to cast the SNP as an ethnic rather than civic nationalist party.⁵ Within this debate, it is worth remembering that, while seeking Scottish independence, the SNP, unlike Sinn Féin, sends MPs to sit at Westminster, the home of the British state, and that MacDiarmid was expelled from the SNP in the 1930s for his communist beliefs. MacDiarmid wrote two articles in 1923 calling for a ‘Scottish Fascism’.⁶ However, Bob Purdie’s contention that ‘[i]f these two articles had never been published it is unlikely that anyone would have thought of MacDiarmid as a fascist’ ignores MacDiarmid’s later

⁴ Alan Bold, *MacDiarmid, Christopher Murray Grieve: A Critical Biography* (London: John Murray, 1988), pp. 429-30. See for instance *Private Eye*, No. 1400, 4–17 September 2015, p. 19, for a reader’s letter insisting on Mackenzie’s authorship of the poem, and an ongoing debate over MacDiarmid’s politics.

⁵ There are far too many examples to cite, but see, for example, *Ah Dinnae Ken*, ‘SNP MPs wear the little white rose of fascist gesture politics’, 28 May 2015 <<https://ahdinnaeken.wordpress.com/2015/05/28/snp-mps-wear-the-little-white-rose-of-fascist-gesture-politics/>> [accessed 17 September, 2015] and the much-shared Torcuil Crichton’s ‘Hugh MacDiarmid’s Shady Fascist Politics’, *Whitehall 1212*, 7 May 2012 <<http://whitehall1212.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/hugh-macdiarmids-shady-fascist-politics.html>> [accessed 17 September 2012].

⁶ C. M. Grieve, ‘At the Sign of the Thistle: Plea for a Scottish Fascism’, *The Scottish Nation*, No. 6, 5 June 1923, and ‘At the Sign of the Thistle: Programme for a Scottish Fascism’, *The Scottish Nation*, No. 7, 19 June 1923.

comments in relation to National Socialism in the 1930s, just as Gavin Bowd overstates any ostensible connections between war-time Scottish Nationalism and Nazism.⁷

Given the controversy he continues to ignite, it is unsurprising that the British state should have been interested in MacDiarmid in his lifetime, and it deployed operatives to spy on him from 1931 until the 1940s.⁸ Special Branch and MI5 were well aware of the nature of the poet's politics. In 1931, the same year he published the collection *First Hymn to Lenin*, a report said of MacDiarmid: 'It appears that this man writes rather good revolutionary poetry [...]. He is a rabid Scottish Nationalist, but is in close touch with the [Communist] Party'.⁹ This was filed when MacDiarmid was living in London, where he first came to the attention of the state while lecturing on 'The Essentials of Scottish Nationalism' at the London branch of the National Party of Scotland as he advocated 'a Celtic Union between Scotland, Ireland and Wales, including the Isle of Man'.¹⁰ Spies had infiltrated an extremist grouping of Scottish nationalists, and found that while the inner circle, referred to as 'Croileagan na h Alba', was being provided with money to keep it alive, MacDiarmid would not be admitted because he was believed to be 'dishonest and fond of drink'.¹¹

Things would become more serious for MacDiarmid when he moved to Whalsay in 1933. Despite the island's remoteness in the Shetland archipelago, the state spied on MacDiarmid for his almost decade-long stay there, regularly intercepting his mail, and sending operatives to Shetland to get a closer look at the poet. The opening of MacDiarmid's mail revealed aspects of the poet's private life as well as the nature of his political interests. Throughout the 1930s the poet's major political focus was communism. In August 1934 for

⁷ Bob Purdie, *Hugh MacDiarmid: Black, Green, Red and Tartan* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2012), p. 1. See Scott Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place: Imagining a Scottish Republic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 128-36, for more on MacDiarmid and National Socialism. Gavin Bowd, *Fascist Scotland: Caledonia and the Far Right* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2013), chapters 4 and 5.

⁸ See Scott Lyall, "'The Man is a Menace': MacDiarmid and Military Intelligence", *Scottish Studies Review*, 8.1 (2007), 37-52, for a more detailed analysis of this.

⁹ The National Archives (subsequently TNA), KV2/2010 2S1020, report date: 22 March 1932, date of origin: 21 December 1931.

¹⁰ TNA KV2/2010 2S1020, 16 February 1931.

¹¹ TNA KV2/2010 2S1020, 17 October 1932.

instance, the state opened a letter sent from MacDiarmid to the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) asking that he and his wife Valda join the Party in which he also says that they would have done so before now but for the remoteness of their location. In spite of Whalsay's distance from the mainland, MacDiarmid was keen to participate in radical politics, signing a letter in support of the Hunger Marchers, and wishing to see the inception of a British Section of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers.¹² The republican poet would also sign a circular sent to *Left Review* objecting to the 1935 silver jubilee celebrations for King George V.¹³ While such facts are interesting in their own right, they are hardly surprising given MacDiarmid's radical political leanings. More pernicious perhaps is the state's prying into MacDiarmid's private life, such as his divorce from his first wife, who was still 'being kept in view' in 1940, and his relations with Valda, the 'woman who poses as Mrs Grieve', who would later be described as the poet's 'virago wife' and was 'apparently more outspoken than her husband'.¹⁴

State surveillance of MacDiarmid increased during the Second World War.

MacDiarmid and Valda socialised with Whalsay's laird, who believed MacDiarmid 'was in no way dangerous', but the laird's brother, Stuart Bruce, was less enamoured of the poet, and wrote to the Home Office on 27 April 1940 to complain that 'this man and his wife are dangerous to the state'. According to Bruce, MacDiarmid, 'an author of sorts', should be 'prevented from tampering with the loyalty of young men called to the colours' during wartime. If Bruce is to be believed, MacDiarmid had called a meeting of the island's conscripted men and 'gave an address', the political tenor of which – communist? Scots nationalist? pacifist? – remains unclear from Bruce's letter. Bruce goes on to say that

¹² TNA KV2/2010 2S1020, 17 February 1934.

¹³ TNA KV2/2010 2S1020, 13 May 1935.

¹⁴ TNA KV2/2010 2S1020, 19 September 1934, 15 June 1940, 12 March 1941, 25 May 1940.

MacDiarmid ‘has already done a certain amount of harm amongst the female teachers at the two schools in Whalsay’, but fails once again to provide more details.¹⁵

Bruce’s suspicions of MacDiarmid remain one of the standard Unionist objections to both MacDiarmid’s politics and to Scottish nationalism per se: that in a time of crisis, when the British state, and Europe more broadly, was threatened by fascism, the Scot Nats were political equivocal, with some, such as the poet Douglas Young, Arthur Donaldson and Matthew Hamilton, being imprisoned as conscientious objectors who refused to fight in a war under *British* auspices, arguing that this was a violation under Scots law of the Treaty of Union. Major Buckley wrote to Scottish Command in Edinburgh on 12 June 1940 that he believed MacDiarmid to be ‘a rabid Scottish Nationalist’ who should ‘be counted as an irresponsible fanatic’, while only two days later a Major Spens replied that he concurred with the assessment of MacDiarmid as being ‘fanatical’, but in the ‘expression of Communist principles’, before signing off by asking if he and Buckley had attended Rugby together.¹⁶ Soldiers were sent to Shetland to check on MacDiarmid, and the people of Whalsay assumed they had come to arrest the local ‘bad man’, although this was not the case.¹⁷

MacDiarmid was well aware that he was being investigated, and proposed to take legal action through the Civil Liberties Association and have questions asked in the House of Commons over his own case and the raiding of the Glasgow office of the *Scots Socialist* journal, from which manuscripts of his were seized.¹⁸ MacDiarmid was not alone in being watched by the state: traces were put on MacDiarmid’s friend, the Whalsay doctor, David Orr, who went to Alberta in quest of Major Douglas’s Social Credit scheme in action, but returned disillusioned; Grant Taylor, MacDiarmid’s secretary and a conscientious objector; the author Mary Ramsay; Miller-Wheeler, editor of the *Scots Socialist*; the folklorist F.

¹⁵ TNA KV2/2010 2S1020, 25 May 1940, 27 April 1940.

¹⁶ TNA KV2/2010 2S1020, 12 June 1940, 14 June 1940.

¹⁷ TNA KV2/2010 2S1020, 25 May 1940.

¹⁸ TNA KV2/2010 2S1020, 29 May 1940.

Marian McNeill, author of *The Silver Bough*; the Gaelic communist poet Sorley MacLean; and the composer and MacDiarmid's former Langholm teacher, F. G. Scott. While the British state spied on MacDiarmid, its agents were in turn concerned that he and other Scottish nationalists were actually German spies; MacDiarmid, alert to the fact that his correspondence was being opened, wrote to Arthur Donaldson in June 1941 lamenting these 'damnable spy rumours'.¹⁹ MI5 considered MacDiarmid for the Invasion List, those who would be interned as a threat to the state if the Germans ever invaded, and they were continually concerned that the poet was breaching censorship laws during wartime, but they hopelessly misconstrued the politics of those described in one report as 'Scottish Nationalist Socialists', i.e. left-wing and republican supporters of Scottish independence, as being in league with Nazism.²⁰ Only in 1942, after over a decade of surveillance, and half way through the war, did state operatives decide that MacDiarmid was 'genuinely anti-Nazi', and that his 'Communist convictions go pretty deep'.²¹ However, even at this point, spies recommended that the state 'keep an eye on him' and that 'if he shows any inclination that he is opposed to the war effort, it would prove that his Nationalism [...] is the dominant side of his political outlook'.²²

The story of MacDiarmid's observation by the British state is fascinating in its own right as an aspect of British cultural and political history, but it is a story with continued reverberations in the present day. MacDiarmid's status as an extremist Scottish nationalist pariah for some, mainly Unionist, commentators, merely replays much of the wartime debates over the nature of Scottish nationalism. That MacDiarmid was spied on by the British state does indeed tell us something about the radical nature of his sometimes extreme political

¹⁹ TNA KV2/2010 2S1020, 18 June 1941.

²⁰ TNA KV2/2010 2S1020, 31 March 1941.

²¹ TNA KV2/2010 2S1020, 24 February 1942, 10 March 1942.

²² TNA KV2/2010 2S1020, 10 March 1942.

convictions. However, it also tells us something much more revealing about the British state's attitude to Scotland and the prospect of an independent Scottish state.

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