

‘The Man is a Menace’: MacDiarmid and Military Intelligence

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The government files held on Hugh MacDiarmid (pseudonym of C. M. Grieve, 1892–1978) in the National Archives, recently released under the Freedom of Information Act,¹ show that from 1931 to 1943, while he was in London, Shetland, and Glasgow, the British Security Services watched the modernist poet, keeping track of his private life and, more significantly, monitoring his public pronouncements and political activities. Grieve (reference Security/G/37b/63) ‘is a fanatic only too ready to give his allegiance to any extremist cause’, according to a Security Service report of April 1941;² two months later another MacDiarmid file asks, ‘What does “A” do here, please? The man is a menace’.³ The reports, which, unsurprisingly, markedly increased in number during the Second World War, focus principally on MacDiarmid’s Scottish nationalism and communism. But just what were the authorities so worried about with regard to his politics, particularly given that for much of this time MacDiarmid was in the relative isolation of Shetland, a place he lived throughout most of his surveillance by the state?

The Security Services were well aware of MacDiarmid’s political history and some reports document the course of his pre-observation political evolution. Grieve was politicised early. He joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in Edinburgh in 1908, shortly after leaving school; he covered the miners’ strike in 1911 while working for the *Monmouthshire Labour News* in South Wales; and the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin excited him with the possibility that a Scottish nationalist movement could also help contribute to the break-up of the imperial British state. Returning from

the First World War, Grieve needed a settled location if his political ambitions were to find their full compass and Montrose, in Angus, north-east Scotland, provided him with this prospect. He was intimately involved in politics while in Montrose, serving as a socialist Independent on Montrose Town Council from March 1922 to August 1924. He was also continuously involved in Scottish nationalist propaganda, and was crucial to the origination of the National Party of Scotland (NPS) in 1928. Although he didn't join the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) until 1934 when he was in Shetland, his interest in communism stretched back to the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, and he lectured on Lenin's political significance to the Montrose ILP in 1920.⁴ As I have argued elsewhere,⁵ MacDiarmid synthesised his Scottish nationalism and socialist internationalism to imagine a Scottish Republic, a politics nurtured by his actual and ideological interaction with his most favoured Scottish places: his Border's birthplace of Langholm, Montrose, and the Shetland island of Whalsay. Envisioning a radical new Scotland, in Montrose MacDiarmid worked towards a modern Scottish Renaissance in culture and politics that he hoped would undermine the very identity of monarchical Britain. What is highly symptomatic of the balance of British power that MacDiarmid wished to topple is the fact that, despite his vigorous political campaigning and cultural production in Montrose, it wasn't until he left Scotland to live in London that Westminster took vital notice of his potential political threat to the British state.

London

After leaving Montrose, where for most of the 1920s he worked as a local journalist with the *Montrose Review*, in September 1929 MacDiarmid arrived in what he would later describe as 'the enemy capital' to work for Compton Mackenzie's radio journal

Vox.⁶ It would be tempting to assume that MacDiarmid's communism was what brought him to the attention of the Security Services in 1931; after all, *First Hymn to Lenin* was published in December of that year when Grieve, after a short stint of employment for a business organisation in Liverpool, returned to London and his responsibilities as director of the Unicorn Press, which published this collection. Not only was it MacDiarmid's first overtly communist poem, 'First Hymn to Lenin', which opens the collection, also includes a brutal advocacy of revolutionary violence:

As necessary, and insignificant, as death
Wi' a' its agonies in the cosmos still
The Cheka's horrors are in their degree;
And'll end suner! What maitters 't wha we kill
To lessen that foulest murder that deprives
Maist men o' real lives?⁷

Whilst propounding such extremist doctrines in verse, MacDiarmid was reportedly in connection with the Fleet Street Communist Party Group, and willing to use the Unicorn Press to disseminate communist propaganda on their behalf. A Security report of 21 December 1931 alludes to Grieve: 'It appears that this man writes rather good revolutionary poetry, under the name Hugh M'DIAMID [*sic*]. He is a rabid Scottish Nationalist, but is in close touch with the [Communist] Party'.⁸

This is the first of several references in the Security Service files to MacDiarmid's 'rabid' nationalism, and it was, in fact, his Scottish nationalism that first prompted the British state to spy on him. Opening their file on Grieve, in a Special Branch report of 16 February 1931 he is found lecturing on 'The Essentials of

Scottish Nationalism’ to the London Branch of the NPS. At Eustace Miles Restaurant it was recorded that he argued, ‘It is time that we in Scotland put England in its proper place, and, instead of our leaning on England and taking inspiration from her, we should lean and turn to Europe, for it is there that our future prosperity lies.’ Grieve proposed a ‘Celtic Union between Scotland, Ireland and Wales, including the Isle of Man’, a pan-Celtic ideal drawn from Ruaraidh Erskine of Marr and the Scots National League (established in 1920, and which MacDiarmid was involved with whilst in Montrose). He went on to claim that ‘Scotland did not end at the Cheviots but that Lancashire was its rightful boundary and that given its proper boundaries Scotland would become the richest and biggest commercial centre in the British Isles and London would wither and die’.⁹

MacDiarmid’s irredentist aspiration to destabilise the balance of British power, and strip London, the state’s capital, of its influence and prestige, was alarming enough for the authorities to keep a check on his movements for the next twelve years; however improbable the political possibility that a union of the peripheral ‘Celtic’ nations could break the British union, from this point onwards MacDiarmid was labelled an extremist ideologue, his radical nationalism a menace to the state. Having infiltrated ‘a meeting of the secret section of the Scottish Nationalists’, a government spy (who must surely have been prominent in nationalist circles) writes that ‘all known extreme nationalists’ will subsequently be invited to meetings and that Grieve, ‘who, about 2 years ago was leader of “Clan na Nalba” a rebel organisation in Scotland’, was ‘the best man to get in touch with’ in this regard, despite reputedly being ‘dishonest and fond of drink’.¹⁰ In the next report, of 17 October 1932, it ‘is believed that the Scottish Nationalist Party [*sic*] is supplying the money to keep the “Inner Circle” (Croileagan na h Alba) operative’; Grieve, however, ‘will not be

admitted to the “Inner Circle”.¹¹ Was MacDiarmid too extreme for the extremists, not reliable enough or, as the novelist Fionn Mac Colla wrote in his autobiography,¹² simply unable to keep a secret? MacDiarmid’s promotion of a clandestine nationalist unit with militarist aims resulted in Special Branch investigating Compton Mackenzie, who the poet hinted was ‘Chief of Clann Albain’.¹³ Mackenzie was prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act in 1932 for information contained in his *Greek Memoirs* (1932). The Government file subsequently opened on Mackenzie reveals that in July 1934 he met Sir Oswald Mosley, the founder of the British Union of Fascists, at the January Club where they talked of Scottish nationalism, and that, at a cocktail party in 1939, Mackenzie was said to have voiced support for the IRA.¹⁴ If Mackenzie did lead the organisation (if it ever even existed beyond the planning stage), this would make sense of MacDiarmid’s contention in the *Daily Record* of 10 May 1930 that the militaristic Clann Albain ‘resembles the Fascist movement’.¹⁵ Margaret, Grieve’s first wife, had apparently ‘attended Irish Revolutionary Meetings’ and was described by Special Branch as having been a ‘secretary of “Clann Albainn”’, which was ‘an auxiliary of the National Party of Scotland’.¹⁶ All of this was too much for the leadership of the NPS. Whilst his communism was bad enough, for John MacCormick, National Party Convener, MacDiarmid’s endorsement of a nationalist paramilitary organisation hopelessly compromised the image the NPS was trying to sell to mainstream voters. Grieve was expelled from the NPS on 19 May 1933, seventeen days after he left mainland Britain for Shetland.

Whalsay

With his expulsion from the NPS, MacDiarmid joined the CPGB in the summer of 1934. Special Branch intercepted Grieve’s 11 August 1934 letter to the Party asking

that he and his second wife, Valda, be granted membership, and in which he regrets that the remoteness of his current island home prevented him from joining at least a year earlier. In spite of the island's peripheral location MacDiarmid was determined to be involved in international radical politics while based in Whalsay. As a member of the Provisional Committee of the British Union of Revolutionary Writers he signed a circular letter inviting left-wing writers to a conference that would lobby for the permanent establishment of a British section of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers, as well as looking at ways of assisting the unemployed hunger marchers of the Depression.¹⁷ MacDiarmid also added his signature to a circular of 1935 sent out by *Left Review* protesting against the Jubilee celebrations.¹⁸

Despite such revolutionary credentials, MacDiarmid's relationship with the CPGB was problematic. John Baglow writes of MacDiarmid's 'maverick association with communism',¹⁹ and argues that 'communism for MacDiarmid has an intense personal significance, but scarcely remains communism *per se* in his hands'.²⁰ For Baglow, MacDiarmid's politics are secondary to, and separable from, his poetry; it is a critical error in Baglow's eyes, therefore, to grant his political ideas the level of serious consideration that MacDiarmid himself accords to them. Baglow correctly identifies the atypical nature of MacDiarmid's communism, but in my view wrongly attributes this to the poet's individual eccentricities and creative multiplicity. Emphasising the almost existential self-making of the many-sided Grieve, and using this to undermine the notion of ideological consistency, Baglow neglects to attend to the collective national specificity structuring MacDiarmid's political thinking. Baglow's failure to understand the Scottish framework of MacDiarmid's communism, and his subsequent dismissal of it as a serious political position, is reminiscent of the reaction of the Communist Party of Great Britain when faced with the ungovernable

Comrade Grieve. However contentious the line he adopted was with the Party, Westminster continued to take his politics seriously; state informants watched Grieve through all of his twists and turns in relation to the CPGB.

MacDiarmid's idiosyncratic attitude to the Communist Party line is certainly a characteristic facet of the mid-1930s when he was in Whalsay. He was expelled from the CPGB in November 1936, but in March of that year the Party still seemed willing to forestall such an outcome by making 'every endeavour to convince him that at present he has a wrong line'.²¹ MacDiarmid continued to adopt a 'wrong line' as far as the CPGB was concerned by proposing to run as a candidate for the Rectorial Elections at the University of Edinburgh in October without the Party's permission, doing so on a 'Communist proletarian separatist republican' ticket, and 'organising a conference for, or developing an "Inter-University United Front – Socialists; Communists and Scottish Nationalists"'.²² The Party's London Secretariat informed Grieve, when writing to him in Whalsay on 14 July 1936, that the 'control and direction of all electoral activities in which Party members are engaged' is the responsibility of the member's 'District', which is in turn accountable to 'the Party Centre'.²³ In other words, the Scottish Secretariat in Glasgow would ultimately answer to CPGB headquarters in London.

MacDiarmid promoted his 'Proletarian-Separatist Literary Line in Scotland' in the form of a written publicity statement that included an open letter of 8 July 1936 to *Outlook*, edited by James H. Whyte and David MacEwan. (That the Security Services intercepted this suggests that all of MacDiarmid's mail, even that which he intended for public consumption, was routinely opened.) Calling *Outlook* a 'fascist-nationalist quarterly', he rails against what he terms the "'White Mouse Faction" of the Anglo-Scottish Literati', which for MacDiarmid chiefly consisted of former allies Edwin

Muir – who had recently published *Scott and Scotland*, his refutation of the possibility of a distinctively Scottish literary tradition – and Whyte, dedicatee only two years previously of MacDiarmid's 'On a Raised Beach' and founder of the culturally nationalist journal *The Modern Scot*. His break with Whyte and Muir betrays the notorious personal implacableness of MacDiarmid, but it also hints at the ideological frustrations he was suffering with regard to the CPGB. His attempt to find a Scottish setting for his Marxism not only entailed a parting of the ways with such compeers of the Scottish Renaissance Movement as Muir and Whyte; it also drove him out of the Communist Party.

MacDiarmid was thrown out of the CPGB for pointing to what he understood to be the Party's 'betrayal of John Maclean's line', which had 'resulted in a loss to Scottish Socialism beyond all reckoning'.²⁴ Born in Pollockshaws, Glasgow, the Marxist agitator John Maclean attempted to establish a Scottish Communist Party from 1920, 'as a prelude to a Scottish Communist Republic'.²⁵ Maclean's Scottish Communist Party was intended to be independent of the centralised CPGB in London, founded in the same year. MacDiarmid's accusations of betrayal were primarily aimed at William Gallacher and Harry MacShane, Scottish members of the CPGB. Maclean was gaoled in 1918 for his seditious advocacy of pacifism, a second spell in prison that took a severe toll on his health and may well have contributed to his early death; MacDiarmid believed Gallacher to be especially guilty of undermining Maclean's plan for a self-determining revolutionary organisation in Scotland by questioning his mental health at this time.²⁶ In 'John Maclean (1879-1923)', a poem deleted from the first edition of *Stony Limits*, MacDiarmid compares Maclean's death to that of Christ's:

As Pilate and the Roman soldiers to Christ
Were Law and Order to the finest Scot of his day,
One of the few true men in our sordid breed,
A flash of sun in a country all prison-grey.
Speak to others of Christian charity; I cry again
For vengeance on the murderers of John Maclean.²⁷

In this poem Maclean is not only analogous to Jesus in being a martyr to a cause that could revolutionise humanity; he is also Christ-like in experiencing betrayal at the hands of his own people, by whom he was offered up to a centralising imperial power. For MacDiarmid the CPGB, through its most influential Scottish acolytes, colluded with the British state in weakening Maclean's potential to mount a serious political challenge to metropolitan control, whether of an established or a revolutionary variety.

In another letter opened by state operatives, written to the District Secretariat in Glasgow on 4 December 1936 to protest against his expulsion from the Communist Party, MacDiarmid returns to the idea that Maclean had been betrayed:

I am in possession of the full facts and intend to thresh the whole question of John Maclean out against William Gallacher and show that 'betrayal' is by no means too strong a word for the way in which the latter acted to the former. The whole CP line in regard to Scotland was based on that diabolical bit of trickery, and must be – and will be – altered in the direction I suggest.²⁸

The direction MacDiarmid suggested is developed in ‘The Red Scotland Thesis: Forward to the John Maclean Line’, his editorial to the first edition of *The Voice of Scotland*, summer 1938:

Just as [James] Connolly said that in Ireland the social revolution would be incomplete without a national revolution too, so in Scotland here it is clear that the objectives of the social revolution can only be fully realised if it is accompanied by autonomy on a Communist basis.²⁹

MacDiarmid affirms his political conviction that socialism can only be established in Scotland through a national revolution by citing the significance of the republican James Connolly (1868-1916), the Edinburgh-born leader of the Irish Easter Rising of 1916, each (individual and event) a strong influence on Maclean’s political evolution towards the establishment of the Scottish Workers Republican Party. Security Service reports and intercepted letters by and relating to MacDiarmid show that, after he was readmitted to the Party in May 1937 on appeal, the CPGB, still troubled by his insistently *Scottish* internationalism, wanted him to submit his work to them for approval before it was published.³⁰ The Communist Party of Great Britain and the British state would appear to make curious bedfellows in their respective wish to censor MacDiarmid; however, as events in Whalsay unfolded during the War, they were both equally concerned by the development of his Scottish republicanism.

War on the Home Front

MacDiarmid was expelled for a second time from the CPGB in February 1939, mainly for his continued advocacy of the John Maclean-line in *The Voice of Scotland*,

which he refused to submit to the Party prior to the journal's publication.³¹ The beginning of the Second World War in September 1939 also marked a shift in the nature of the observation of MacDiarmid by the Security Services: the number of reports became more frequent, and Special Branch now sent many of these reports to MI5 and the German specialists MI12.

He may no longer have held official membership of the CPGB but MacDiarmid was still propagandising for communism. Along with David Orr, the local doctor, and Henry Grant Taylor, the poet's amanuensis, in May 1940 Grieve invited the young men of Whalsay to a social at Orr's house in an attempt to convince them to become communists. According to an intercepted letter from one Johnson of Shetland, with the drink flowing 'Greives [*sic*] began to sprout about politics – from that to the great advantage Communism is to the working man, it meant more work – better pay – and every man to share alike – down with all MASTERS'.³² A subsequent meeting brought only two islanders back to Orr's and at the final gathering only Grieve, Orr and Taylor were present. It was reported that most of the men turned up for the original meeting mainly through the doctor's promise of free beer...³³

His lack of success in converting the people of Whalsay to the revolutionary cause might seem to confirm the communist Mary Litchfield's caustic view, expressed two years earlier in a letter to the Party's Scottish Secretariat, that, 'with no contact with the masses', MacDiarmid 'is known only to a particularly barren precious and pseudo-intellectual clique'.³⁴ However, the meetings did attract the attention of the master of Whalsay, W. A. Bruce, with whom Grieve and Valda occasionally socialised at Symbister House. Stuart Bruce, the laird's brother, acting on information that he received from the laird regarding MacDiarmid, wrote to the Home Office on 27 April 1940 to say that he was 'sure that this man and his wife are

dangerous to the state, and should be prevented from tampering with the loyalty of young men called to the colours'.³⁵ The laird himself thought (in the words of Corporal A. C. Robertson, one of two soldiers who came to Whalsay after the Home Office received Stuart Bruce's letter) that Grieve 'was in no way dangerous' as 'he kept himself very much to himself and had very little contact with the ordinary people'. However, Robertson's report states that Mrs Croskey – in whose house the soldiers stayed the night and where the poet had lodged when he first arrived on the island – had heard MacDiarmid call 'for the expropriation of landlords', as well as 'Scotland for the Scots'. According to Robertson, Valda was apparently even 'more outspoken' than her husband and angered the laird's wife by allegedly wishing 'to cut the Queen's throat'. Communist and Scottish nationalist, the Grieves 'are very conspicuous in an orthodox and very loyal community and their views have much shocked the local people', writes Robertson; so much so, it was thought that the purpose of the reconnaissance trip to Whalsay was to arrest 'the local "bad man"'.³⁶

MacDiarmid responded to this incident by writing to Captain Jock Hay of Lerwick, wrongly accusing him of authorising the operation. Addressing his letter to 'Captain Joke Hay', MacDiarmid proceeds to abuse Hay on grounds that to help illustrate why, at this time of the war against Nazism, the poet was being watched by the British Security Services:

Not only am I quite entitled to hold Communist meetings if I want to, but the present War is being fought on behalf of Civilisation, Freedom and Democracy – of which not even the Germans but skunks like you are the deadliest enemies.³⁷

MacDiarmid informed Hay that he had already written to the Senior Military Officer in Lerwick indicating his intention to take legal advice from the Civil Liberties Association in relation to the investigating soldiers. It is ironic, given that he was being watched by the state as a potential security risk, that he also threatened to have questions asked in the House of Commons over the matter.³⁸

By the spring of 1941 Security reports were discussing MacDiarmid as a candidate for inclusion on the invasion list, a register of those people who could be interned as possible traitors to the state if the Germans invaded Britain.³⁹ He was spared this fate by the remoteness of Whalsay, a place impossible to leave quickly or without being detected, as well as through the indifference of the islanders to his efforts to agitate on behalf of communism. With the departure of Dr Orr, who had been traced to Hope Street in Leith,⁴⁰ and Henry Grant Taylor, who had been arrested as a conscientious objector (CO),⁴¹ Grieve's lone companion and political comrade on Whalsay was Valda – described by John Mair, the Scottish Regional Security Officer, as his 'virago wife'.⁴² Mair thought that Grieve failed to understand 'the ramifications of the Censorship' during wartime,⁴³ however, his personal and geographical isolation sufficiently contained his political threat to keep him off the invasion list.

Anxious over the fate of Grant Taylor, who was imprisoned for ten days for failing to turn up for a National Service medical, MacDiarmid wrote to Miller Wheeler, editor of the *Scots Socialist*, asking for details of Taylor's plight and seeking legal assistance for his ex-secretary from 'the Prisoners' Committee'.⁴⁴ Grieve referred to 'the formation of a Committee to aid Scottish Nationalist prisoners (under R. E. Muirhead's chairmanship)' in another intercepted letter.⁴⁵ The Security Services watched Grant Taylor, but a report of 28 March 1941 concluded that he 'is not thought to be associating with Scottish Nationalist extremists'.⁴⁶ A follow-up report

three days later uses a slightly different, more highly charged, description: ‘Taylor is, so far, not thought to be associating with Scottish National Socialists’.⁴⁷ The resonance of this closing phrase, employed as it is by officials in relation to the British state’s concerns over the rise of Scottish nationalism, is deeply significant in the context of the War and the Allied fight against the National Socialism of Nazi Germany. Grant Taylor’s refusal to serve in the military does not, as Security reports establish, seem to have been related to a specific political belief such as Scottish nationalism; but other notable Scottish conscientious objectors were not simply pacifists, as Taylor would appear to have been.

The poet and classicist Douglas Cuthbert Colquhoun Young (1913-73), graduate of the Universities of St Andrews and Oxford, stood trial in 1942 as a CO. A prominent Scottish nationalist, Young demonstrated his position in *The Free-Minded Scot*, his account of his trial and defence:

He protested that the proceedings were fundamentally null, and that the pretended Statute was unknown to the Laws of Scotland. He submitted that the so-called United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland was a legal non-entity, arguing that its fundamental charter, the Treaty of Union, had been voided, and that it had no status in International Law ...

Alternatively he showed that the pretended UK was simply the old kingdom of England, and its statutes alien to this jurisdiction.⁴⁸

Despite his rigorously contended case that the conscription of Scots to serve in the War was in legal contravention of the 1707 Treaty of Union, and that Scots should only be conscripted by an independent Scottish government into a Scottish army,

Young spent eight months of a twelve month sentence in prison for breaching the National Services (Armed Forces) Act, 1939.⁴⁹ In his Foreword to Douglas Young's 1943 collection of poems *Auntran Blads*, MacDiarmid writes of Young:

His attitude to the Second World War is so deeply at variance with that of the Westminster Government and the so-called 'national unity' of our war-effort generally, that his political opponents in the Anglo-Scottish capitalist Press have (falsely) denounced him as a Pacifist and attempted to prejudice on this ground the new Scottish Nationalist developments with which he is so prominently associated.⁵⁰

In the year of his trial Young took over the Chair of the Scottish National Party (SNP) from William Power, thus heralding a split in the SNP and the reintroduction of a more militant line against conscription. SNP policy since 1937 had been to oppose Scottish conscription whilst Westminster denied Scotland self-government. This was overturned in 1940, when members who were pacifist or engaged in anti-conscription activities were expelled from the Party.⁵¹ One such was Arthur Donaldson, leader of the United Scotland Movement, which campaigned for Scottish neutrality.⁵² Donaldson was imprisoned in 1941, but received a note of support from MacDiarmid on his release from Barlinnie. In this intercepted letter, submitted to MI5, MacDiarmid says that he is aware that his correspondence is being tampered with and so is never sure just how much of it reaches its intended destination. He tells Donaldson that, in his capacity as a Scottish magistrate (he became a Justice of the Peace while in Montrose), he has written to the Lord Chancellor, Sir John Allsebrook Simon, protesting against the incarceration of Donaldson and the law student Matthew

Hamilton.⁵³ He has also, he says, sent letters to *The Times Literary Supplement* and the *New Statesman* drawing attention to police raids on the homes and offices of anti-conscription activists and Scottish republicans in which certain manuscripts were seized, including an MS belonging to MacDiarmid. He ends his letter to Donaldson by deploring ‘these damnable spy rumours which if possible at all to trace to any particular transmitter should be so traced and legal action taken’.⁵⁴

The Security Services were worried that Scottish nationalist COs like Donaldson may have been spying for the Germans, perhaps basing this supposition on the premise that my enemy’s enemy is my (ideological) friend. Military Intelligence would also surely have been reminded of the links between Irish republicanism and Germany at the time of the Easter Rising during World War One, not to mention Irish neutrality in the current conflict. Grieve wrote to Tom Johnston MP, Secretary of State for Scotland, complaining of the confiscation of the manuscripts and vehemently denying any relationship whatsoever between Scottish republicanism and Nazism – although he hardly helped his cause by calling those who carried out the raids ‘the English Gestapo’.⁵⁵

MacDiarmid’s stance, and the provocative language used to give it expression, was not unusual among Scottish nationalist fundamentalists. Oliver Brown, for instance, in his pamphlet *Hitlerism in the Highlands*, writes of ‘the evil consequences of the Anschluss of 1707 whereby the former nation of Scotland was incorporated into the English Reich’.⁵⁶ Brown’s belief was that ‘Scotland, under the domination of a permanent English majority in the House of Commons, has no more freedom of action than Norway under Nazi occupation’, and he cites the imprisonment of Donaldson and Hamilton by ‘the English Government’ as giving credence to his claim.⁵⁷ Grieve wrote to Brown from Whalsay on 12 July 1941 thanking him for

sending *Hitlerism in the Highlands*, and condemning the ‘cynical murderous attitude to Scottish soldiers traditional of English militarism’.⁵⁸

Scottish nationalists such as MacDiarmid and Brown may have compared English Ascendancy in the United Kingdom, particularly with regard to the united front of the War effort, as being akin to the fascism Britain was fighting, but MacDiarmid had himself expressed some admiration for Hitler in the early 1930s, viewing him as a Nietzschean Overman with the ideas and charismatic power to potentially transcend what the Scot thought of as the mediocrity of capitalist democracy. In an article Grieve wrote for the *Free Man* in July 1932 Hitler keeps company with Ireland’s Éamon de Valera and (bizarrely, in light of his pacifism) India’s Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, indicating that what the poet believes his own country needs most in the quest for independence is a strong leader of a radical nationalist movement.⁵⁹ He craves the appearance in Scotland of a Carlylean Great Man to take the nation forward, seemingly unconcerned as to the ideology of this individual. One can but hope that his approving references to Hitler signify that he was in fact ignorant at this stage as to the true nature of National Socialism. As late as 1941, while still in Whalsay, he did admit to being uninformed in general about the War in a letter to Orr that was intercepted and passed on to MI5: ‘I’m saying nothing about the War. I don’t know enough to make any expression of opinion on my part possible. I get little or no news.’ He did, however, articulate his continued faith in the ultimate triumph of communism:

I think in Russia and elsewhere there is a solid core which will prevent any betrayal à la Munich or any other sort; and give Churchill and all his gang the shock of their lives ere long. The coming of World Socialism is not

going to be side-tracked. No doubt we'll have to go through Hell first, but all the machinations of the bankers and other monopolists will fail; the forces of democratic progress and justice and peace have got the measure of their enemies this time all right ...⁶⁰

His lack of confidence in the available information owing to censorship, coupled with the lack of information available in out-of-the-way Whalsay, may partly explain why MacDiarmid did not self-publish (if a publisher could not be found for such work in the circumstances) some of the more controversial poetry he produced about the War during the conflict. In one untitled poem, unpublished until recently, MacDiarmid writes of what he believes to be 'the real state of affairs between England and Scotland today:'

The German bombers came up the Forth
And unchallenged all day o'er Edinburgh flew
While not in Edinburgh but only in London
The air-raid warning siren blew.

Scotland might have been shattered to smithereens
For all the English cared, or the Scots themselves dared;
We owe our thanks to German inadvertence,
Not English protection, that Edinburgh was spared.⁶¹

Conscripted into the National Service as a munitions worker, MacDiarmid left Whalsay for Glasgow on 13 January 1942.⁶²

Glasgow

On moving to Glasgow MacDiarmid was reconsidered for the invasion list (also referred to as the suspect list). However, it was decided by Security operative R. Retallack that he was 'genuinely anti-Nazi' and that, in any case, from the vantage point of February 1942, the 'Scottish extremists have turned out to be much less formidable than they were considered to be last year'.⁶³ The follow-up report of March 1942, compiled by T. M. Shelford, is important in that it essentially summarises the attitude of Military Intelligence to MacDiarmid's politics:

I observe from her letter of the 24th February 1942 that Miss Retallack took the view that GRIEVE should not go on the Suspect List. I think that there is some force in her supposition that GRIEVE's Communist convictions go pretty deep, and that the entry of Russia into the war may have altered his outlook. It would be as well, however, to keep an eye on him, for I think that if he shows any indication that he is opposed to the war effort, it would prove that his Nationalism, which also goes pretty deep, is the dominant side of his political outlook. In such event, he would appear to me to be a suitable candidate for the Suspect List.⁶⁴

Grieve was to meet with Oliver Brown and Arthur Donaldson for a social evening in Glasgow on 28 March 1942 to celebrate the Declaration of Arbroath,⁶⁵ before speaking at an open-air event in the city on 5 April, also to commemorate the 1320 Declaration. In the words of a Special Branch officer,

GRIEVE said he hated Fascism wherever he found it, were it in Germany, Italy, Spain or England. We are told we are fighting against Fascism but all the time English Fascism is shackling itself on us. The treatment of the *Daily Mirror*, the sacking of the Special Commissioner, the Conscription Acts, Regulation 18b, the dragging of Scots girls to England to work, were all incidents in the progress of English Fascism. The Scots people, he declared, had better be careful lest, while they were being beguiled into taking a leading part in fighting for imperialism, with the thought that they were fighting against Fascism, they found themselves in the grip of Fascism at home. German Fascism, he said, was bad but it was nothing to English Fascism.⁶⁶

Addressing a Scottish Socialist Party meeting in Glasgow on 29 March 1942, MacDiarmid said that he disagreed politically with T. S. Eliot as the Anglo-American poet was ‘very near to being a Black Fascist’. None the less, Eliot was right to see civilisation and freedom as being ‘maintained by small groups of people who worked together voluntarily for a great ideal’; such, for MacDiarmid, was represented by the Scottish Socialist Party and the *Scots Socialist*. The gathering attracted around thirty people, one of whom was an officer from Special Branch.⁶⁷ In spite of this minority appeal, the Security Service reports on MacDiarmid illustrate that the authorities took the threat of the poet’s politics with the utmost seriousness, viewing what they regarded as his extremism as a menace to the British state. The files of Military Intelligence are also a vivid demonstration of the extremes to which the state will go in order to defend the idea of Britishness.

Notes

1. Passed in November 2000, the Freedom of Information Act came into effect from 1 January 2005.
2. Report of 21 April 1941, from R. Brooman-White, to Peter Perfect, in The National Archives, KV2/2010 2S1020; subsequently TNA.
3. Report of 6 June 1941, from P. Perfect, Scottish Regional Security Officer, to R. Brooman-White, Oxford, TNA.
4. See *Montrose Review*, 13 February 1920, p. 5, and Scott Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place: Imagining a Scottish Republic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), Chapter 3.
5. Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place*.
6. Christopher Grieve, letter to Edward Lucie-Smith, 29 November 1965, in Dorian Grieve, Owen Dudley Edwards and Alan Riach (eds), *Hugh MacDiarmid: New Selected Letters* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001), p. 414.
7. Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken (eds), *Hugh MacDiarmid: Complete Poems, Volume I* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), p. 298.
8. Report S.F. 464/12, 22 March 1932, TNA.
9. Special Branch report no. 307/INL/2045, TNA. Regarding *Scotia Irredenta*, MacDiarmid's idea is hardly unheard of, even among English poets; as Peter Davidson writes, 'Simon Armitage's definition of the English north assumes simply that the Lake District *is* Scotland.' *The Idea of North* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), p. 224.
10. Special Branch report (Informant) no number given, TNA.
11. Special Branch report (Informant), 17 October 1932, TNA.

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12. See Fionn Mac Colla, *Too Long in this Condition* (Thurso: Caithness Books, 1975), p. 93.
 13. Cited in Alan Bold, *MacDiarmid: Christopher Murray Grieve: A Critical Biography* (London: John Murray, 1988), p. 245.
 14. See TNA, KV2/1271-1272.
 15. Bold, *MacDiarmid*, p. 245.
 16. Special Branch report no. 301/MP/3192, 21 October 1933, TNA.
 17. Intercepted circular from British Union of Revolutionary Writers to George Gray, 17 February 1934, TNA.
 18. Report S.F. 464/25, vol. 3, 182a, 13 May 1935, TNA; among many who signed was Sylvia Townsend Warner, whereas Rebecca West declined to add her name.
 19. John Baglow, *Hugh MacDiarmid: The Poetry of Self* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), p. ix.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
 21. Intercepted letter of 10 March 1936, from the Secretariat of CPGB, Central Committee, 16 King Street, London, to the Scottish Secretariat, TNA.
 22. Grieve came bottom of the poll for the Edinburgh University Rectorship with 88 votes, the winner, Viscount Allenby, gaining 825; see Bold, *MacDiarmid*, p. 338.
 23. Intercepted letter of 14 July 1936, from the Secretariat of CPGB, Central Committee, 16 King Street, London, to C. M. Grieve, Whalsay, TNA.
 24. Hugh MacDiarmid, 'Scotland; and the Question of a Popular Front against Fascism and War' (1936), cited in John Manson, 'The Poet and the Party', *Cencrastus: The Curly Snake*, Issue 68, p. 36.

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25. John Maclean, 'The Irish tragedy: up Scottish revolutionists!' in *The Vanguard*, November 1920, rpt. in *In the Rapids of Revolution: Essays, Articles and Letters 1902-23*, ed. Nan Milton (London: Allison & Busby, 1978), p. 220
 26. See Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Company I've Kept: Essays in Autobiography* (London: Hutchison, 1966), p. 139.
 27. *Hugh MacDiarmid: Complete Poems, Volume I*, p. 486.
 28. Intercepted letter of 4 December 1936, from C. M. Grieve, Whalsay, to the Secretariat, Scottish District Committee, CPGB, 83 Ingram Street, Glasgow, TNA.
 29. Angus Calder, Glen Murray and Alan Riach (eds), *Hugh MacDiarmid, The Raucle Tongue: Hitherto Uncollected Prose, Volume III: 1937-1978* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), p. 9.
 30. See, for instance, the letter of 29 January 1938 from Mary H. Litchfield, Kirriemuir, Angus, to the Scottish District, CPGB, Glasgow, in which she asks if it is true that 'the Party decided that McDiarmid [*sic*] must in future submit everything he writes to the Party, and have his work passed by the Party before publication'; TNA. Report S.F. 464/51 3a, of June 1938, cites an intercepted letter of Grieve's to the CPGB (Glasgow) regarding the Party's criticism of him for seeking to publish 'Red Scotland' without their prior ratification; TNA.
 31. See Manson, 'The Poet and the Party', pp. 37-8; according to Manson, the CPGB, in particular Peter Kerrigan, with whom MacDiarmid had a ongoing dispute, were also concerned that, in issue three of *The Voice of Scotland*, MacDiarmid had noted what he believed to be national divisions amongst the British Battalion of the International Brigade, with the Scots, Welsh, and Irish

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- refusing to fight alongside the English during the Spanish Civil War – an argument strenuously denied by Kerrigan.
32. Report S.F. 460/Lerwick/1 16b, intercepted letter from Johnson of Shetland to Angus of Edinburgh, 25 May 1940, TNA.
 33. See report of A. C. Robertson, Security Officer, No. 2 Protected Area, ref: Security /G/37b/63, 25 May 1940, TNA.
 34. Intercepted letter of 29 January 1938 from Mary H. Litchfield, Kirriemuir, Angus, to the Scottish District, CPGB, Glasgow, TNA.
 35. Letter from R. Stuart Bruce, 10 India Street, Edinburgh, to the Home Office, 27 April 1940, TNA.
 36. Report of A. C. Robertson, Security Officer, No. 2 Protected Area, ref: Security /G/37b/63, 25 May 1940, TNA.
 37. Intercepted letter of 5 June 1940 from C. M. Grieve, Sudheim, Whalsay, to Captain Jock Hay, Hayfield, Lerwick, TNA.
 38. Intercepted letter of 29 May 1940 from Christopher M. Grieve, Sudheim, Whalsay, to the Senior Military Officer, Lerwick, TNA.
 39. Report P.F. 43271/B.21 of 16 March 1941, TNA.
 40. Report P.F. 50121/B.25 of 19 October 1940, TNA.
 41. See report of 12 March 1941, by Chas. Quinn to William Kerr, Chief Constable of Kirkcudbright Constabulary, TNA.
 42. Letter of 12 March 1941, to R. Brooman-White, Oxford, TNA.
 43. Letter of 1 March 1941, from J. Mair to R. Brooman White, TNA.
 44. Intercepted letter of 17 February 1941 from C. M. Grieve, Whalsay, to J. H. Miller, TNA.

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45. Intercepted letter from a report of 18 March 1941 from C. M. Grieve, to W. D. MacColl, London, TNA. 'In May [1942], Muirhead set up the Nationalist Mutual Aid Committee as an organisation designed to provide financial support to conscientious objectors and encourage them to oppose military service.' Richard J. Finlay, *Independent and Free: Scottish Politics and the Origins of the Scottish National Party* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1994), p. 224.
 46. Report of 12 March 1941, by Chas. Quinn to William Kerr, Chief Constable of Kirkcudbright Constabulary, TNA.
 47. Letter of 31 March 1941 from William Kerr to Major P. Perfect, Edinburgh, TNA.
 48. Douglas Young, *The Free-Minded Scot: Trial and Defence of Douglas Young* (Glasgow: The Caledonian Press, 1942), pp. 11-12.
 49. See Finlay, *Independent and Free*, pp. 226-8.
 50. Hugh MacDiarmid, Foreword to *Auntran Blads* by Douglas Young, 1943, rpt. in *Hugh MacDiarmid: The Raucle Tongue: Volume III*, p. 51.
 51. See Finlay, *Independent and Free*, pp. 206-16.
 52. *Ibid.*, pp. 209-10.
 53. See *Hugh MacDiarmid: New Selected Letters*, pp. 193-4; Grieve actually omits to mention Donaldson in this letter.
 54. Intercepted letter of 18 June 1941 from C. M. Grieve, Sudheim, Whalsay, to Arthur Donaldson, Kilmarnock, TNA.
 55. Letter of 25 May 1941 from Christopher Murray Grieve, to Thomas Johnston, *Hugh MacDiarmid: New Selected Letters*, p. 192.
 56. Oliver Brown, *Hitlerism in the Highlands*, fifth edition (Glasgow: [The Author, 1942]), p. 2.

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57. Ibid., p. 12.
58. Intercepted letter of 12 July 1941, submitted to MI5, from C. M. Grieve, Whalsay, to Oliver Brown, Glasgow, TNA. Grieve's Scottish nationalism grew from his experience of the First World War (see Lyall, *Hugh MacDiarmid's Poetry and Politics of Place*, Chapter 1) during which, according to T. M. Devine, 'Of the 557,000 Scots who enlisted in all services, 26.4 per cent lost their lives. This compares with an average death rate of 11.8 per cent for the rest of the British army between 1914 and 1918.' *The Scottish Nation 1700-2000* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p. 309. The centralisation of the British War effort during the Second World War – the united front that radical Scottish nationalists such as MacDiarmid objected to – makes it difficult to establish Scottish fatalities for 1939-45; see Richard J. Finlay, *Modern Scotland 1914-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004), pp. 179-80.
59. See 'The Lion Upside Down', rpt. in Angus Calder, Glen Murray and Alan Riach (eds), *Hugh MacDiarmid: The Raucle Tongue: Hitherto Uncollected Prose: Volume II: 1927-1936* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), pp. 401-3.
60. Intercepted letter of 11 September 1941, submitted to MI5, from C. M. Grieve, Whalsay, to Dr David Orr, Leith, TNA.
61. 'The German Bombers' [untitled poem], in John Manson, Dorian Grieve and Alan Riach (eds), *Hugh MacDiarmid: The Revolutionary Art of the Future – Rediscovered Poems* (Manchester and Edinburgh: Carcanet, in association with the Scottish Poetry Library, 2003), p. 45.
62. See Brian Smith, 'Stony Limits: the Grieves in Whalsay, 1933-1942', in Laurence Graham and Brian Smith (eds), *MacDiarmid In Shetland* (Lerwick: Shetland Library, 1992), p. 64.

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63. Report of R. Retallack of 24 February 1942, sent to Major Perfect, Edinburgh, TNA.
 64. Report P.F. 43271/F.3b of 10 March 1942, from T. M. Shelford, to Major P. Perfect, TNA.
 65. Report P.F. 43271 of 19 April 1942, from R.O. Glasgow re: meeting of the Scottish Secretariat Study School, TNA.
 66. Extract from C. C. Glasgow's Special Branch report of 10 April 1942, TNA. Defence Regulation 18b allowed for the internment without charge or trial of those, such as Arthur Donaldson, suspected of being Nazi sympathisers.
 67. Extract from C. C. Glasgow's report of 20 April 1942 re: Scottish Socialist (1940) Party meeting held in Clarion Rooms, Wellington Street, Glasgow, TNA.