

2-2024

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Recommended Citation

Lyall, Scott (2024) "Introduction: Denis Saurat on “The Scottish Renaissance” Group’," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 49: Iss. 1, 183–185.

DOI: 10.51221/sc.ssl.2024.49.1.11

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol49/iss1/11>

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INTRODUCTION: DENIS SAURAT ON “THE SCOTTISH RENAISSANCE” GROUP

Scott Lyall

The French critic, Denis Saurat (1890–1958) was born in Toulouse. From 1917–1919 he had worked as a French language assistant at the University of Glasgow. In 1924, he was appointed director of the Institut Français du Royaume-Uni, a foundation based in South Kensington promoting French culture in the United Kingdom, and from 1926 he was also Chair of French language and literature at King’s College, London. His many books included studies of John Milton and William Blake, and he had interests in the occult that developed while he was in Scotland. Saurat and C. M. Grieve knew each other; in a letter of 1927, Saurat asks Grieve if he might visit him in London, addressing Grieve as ‘Dear Friend’, while in a letter of 1939 Grieve calls Saurat ‘one of my oldest and best friends’.¹

In April 1924, Saurat published an essay in French titled ‘Le groupe de “la Renaissance Écossaise”’, in the Paris-based journal, *Revue Anglo-Américaine*.² The essay has an historic significance as the first international reference to a modern Scottish renaissance. It was not the first account in print: in his periodical *The Scottish Chapbook* (1922–23), Grieve himself had proposed a ‘renaissance’, a movement seeking the regeneration of what he regarded as a timid and provincial literary culture. Nonetheless, Saurat’s article was important in providing timely critical endorsement from a respected continental academic for Grieve’s project to Europeanise Scottish letters, and it has remained a seminal work in the criticism on the Scottish literary renaissance.

¹ Denis Saurat, letter to C. M. Grieve (15 March 1927), in *Dear Grieve: Letters to Hugh MacDiarmid* (C. M. Grieve), ed. by John Manson (Kilkerran: Kennedy and Boyd, 2011), pp. 23–25 (p. 23); Chris Grieve, letter to Andrew Graham Grieve (18 December 1939), in Hugh MacDiarmid, *New Selected Letters*, ed. by Dorian Grieve, Owen Dudley Edwards and Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001), pp. 172–74 (p. 173). On Saurat and the Institut Français du Royaume-Uni, see Charlotte Faucher, ‘From Gaullism to Anti-Gaullism: Denis Saurat and the French Cultural Institute in Wartime London’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 54. 1 (2019), 60–81.

² Denis Saurat, ‘Le groupe de “la Renaissance Écossaise”’, *Revue Anglo-Américaine*, Number 4 (1924), 1–13.

In his essay, Saurat identifies Grieve and his chief pseudonym Hugh MacDiarmid as leaders of “‘The Scottish Renaissance” Group”, claiming there are ‘more than fifty writers’ involved in the movement. This is an exaggeration: Saurat may have been prompted by Grieve’s own propaganda to overstate the extent of the renaissance. It is notable too that the writers Saurat *does* mention – such as the novelists John Buchan and Neil Munro, and vernacular poet Charles Murray – are of the older generation whose work Grieve would fast renounce, and the Frenchman fails to identify any of the ‘new names’ he claims have been ‘summoned’ to the renaissance cause. However, he does indicate that the renaissance also has purchase in other forms, such as sculpture (in the work of Pittendrigh Macgillivray) and music, where he mentions the composer F. G. Scott, whose ‘work blends the most subtle French technique with the raw materials of Scottish folklore’.

Principally, though, Saurat focuses on the importance to the renaissance of MacDiarmid’s poetry in experimental Scots, particularly now-canonical work such as ‘The Watergaw’ and ‘The Eemis Stane’; Grieve would later attribute the devising of the term ‘Synthetic Scots’ – often used to describe his technique of composing poems from Scots words and phrases found in dictionaries – to Saurat.³ Saurat includes his French translations of those poems in his essay, along with translations of MacDiarmid’s Scots poems ‘The Bonnie Lowe’, ‘Cophetua’, ‘Feery-o’-the-Feet’, and ‘Crowdieknowe’, and Grieve’s English-language poem ‘A Moment in Eternity’, which Saurat rates as ‘among the great mystical poems of English literature’.⁴ While, for Saurat, MacDiarmid’s Scots poems reconnect Scottish culture to its racial core (and he quotes an especially crude example of MacDiarmid’s essentialism to endorse the point), Grieve’s English work will, according to Saurat, appeal to a wider public; for the same reason, English work predominates over Scots in the writings of the renaissance group more generally. According to Grieve, Saurat believed the poet was ‘making a huge mistake in writing in Scots’ and although the Frenchman does not say so explicitly in ‘Le groupe de “la Renaissance Écossaise”’, the substantial attention given to ‘A Moment in Eternity’ indicates his preference for English-language poetry of a spiritual bent over MacDiarmid’s more powerful work in Scots.⁵ In this, Saurat bet on the

³ C. M. Grieve, letter to *The Glasgow Herald* (11 November 1946), in *The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. by Alan Bold (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), pp. 784–86 (p. 785).

⁴ Saurat’s translations of ‘The Eemis Stane’, ‘The Bonnie Lowe’, ‘Feery-o’-the-Feet’, and ‘Cophetua’ had previously been published in *The Scottish Chapbook*, 2.1 (August 1923), pp. 13–14.

⁵ C. M. Grieve, letter to George Ogilvie (30 January 1928), in *The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid*, pp. 95–98 (p. 97).

wrong horse. Certainly, Grieve's poetry remains underrated. But the modernist energies of MacDiarmid's Scots lyrics, such as 'The Watergaw', are the lyrical high point of the Scottish renaissance project. Saurat was prescient, nonetheless, in identifying a significant and innovative programme for the revival of Scottish cultural life in the early 1920s, led by Grieve.

In 'Le groupe de "la Renaissance Écossaise"', Saurat included both his own translations and the original Scots or English texts of the poems he translated, some in the article text and some as footnotes. The article therefore made MacDiarmid's original poems available to a French readership, and the translations, though some are more accurate than others, were a significant contribution to the wider early awareness of MacDiarmid's poetry. Paul Malgrati's English translation introduces Saurat's important essay to a contemporary readership and will be useful in the continuing reassessment of MacDiarmid's work and of the Scottish renaissance more generally.

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