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## Journals for a New Age

### Little Magazines and Literary Revival in Interwar Scotland

This paper is concerned with the importance of little magazines in the furtherance of the twentieth-century interwar literary revival movement in Scotland which became popularly known in its own time as the 'Scottish Renaissance', but which can now be seen as a Scottish manifestation of literary modernism. A particular emphasis will be on the magazines edited and published by C.M. Grieve, better known as the poet Hugh MacDiarmid.

The first thing to be noted in the period immediately after World War One is the absence of Scottish magazines which could offer themselves as a forum for the dissemination of new cultural ideas. The great days of the *Edinburgh Review* and *Blackwood's* were over, and although these magazines were to continue for a few years longer -- and *Blackwood's* in particular had a revival during the war as a purveyor of British war propaganda -- it was clear that they were in decline. In the first issue of the new magazine *The Scottish Chapbook* which he founded in August 1922, C.M. Grieve (or the poet Hugh MacDiarmid as he was soon to become) lamented the lack of 'the appearance in Scotland of phenomena recognizable as a propaganda of ideas'; and he continued:

None of these significant little periodicals - crude, absurd, enthusiastic, vital - have yet appeared in Auchtermuchty or Ardnamurchan. No new publishing

houses have sprung up mushroom-like [. . .] It is discouraging to reflect that this not the way the Dadaists go about the business!<sup>1</sup>

This ironic comment by Grieve points us towards his interest in artistic developments in Europe and his awareness of avant-garde activities in the small literary and cultural magazines which had appeared in London in the pre-1914 period. He may have been over-optimistic in hoping to find such ‘places of exchange’ in Auchtermuchty or Ardnamurchan, but they could reasonably have been expected to have made an appearance in Edinburgh, a capital of some cultural importance in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Scotland. MacDiarmid’s revolution, however, was orchestrated from the small east-coast town of Montrose: a modernist revolution from the periphery as opposed to the metropolis or city.

Before taking up the story of the periodicals which were to be founded by Grieve/MacDiarmid in order to carry forward the aims of the literary and cultural revival movement, I want to look briefly at what might be termed an honorary Scottish modernist periodical as a result of the influence it had on the self-education of at least two of the principal writers of the literary revival: the poet and critic Edwin Muir and Grieve/MacDiarmid himself -- and I think that for convenience I should call him MacDiarmid from now on despite the fact that most of his work as editor in the 1920s was carried out under his own name of Grieve. This honorary Scottish modernist periodical was *The New Age*, edited by A.R. Orage from 1907 until 1922, a ‘Weekly Review of Politics, Literature and Art’, as it styled itself.

As other conference speakers have also suggested, in the early years of Orage’s editorship *The New Age* was one of the liveliest weekly magazines in London, with its eclectic mix of arts, philosophy, politics, science and social

concerns, and its introduction of European ideas and writers to an English-speaking audience. The young MacDiarmid had been introduced to the magazine by his English teacher at Broughton Student Centre in Edinburgh a few years before the outbreak of the First World War, and it was to be for him a principal source of education about avant-garde ideas and European writers and artistic movements. He himself had a modest contribution ('The Young Astrology') published in it in 1911, but it was not until 1924 that he became a regular contributor. The Orkney-born Edwin Muir also educated himself in philosophy and the arts through *The New Age* when a young man living in Glasgow and he became a regular contributor during World War One under the pseudonym of Edward Moore. His first book, *We Moderns*, published in 1918, began life as a series of aphorisms or short essays on modern life in the *New Age*. Edwin Muir followed *We Moderns* with a regular series 'New Values' which discussed, among other topics, the philosophy of Nietzsche (a strong influence on both Muir and MacDiarmid) and the 'modern science' of 'psychology'; and between 1920 and 1922 he contributed an important regular series called *Our Generation*, which explored social and political concerns as well as the arts. He also wrote poetry reviews for the magazine. The eclectic nature of the *New Age* and its capacity to bring together politics, social concerns and artistic ideas was therefore a very relevant influence for a Scottish literary revival movement which believed that a nation's art could not be divorced from its social, economic and political life and that lasting cultural regeneration must go hand in hand with the revitalisation of the nation as a whole.

Edwin Muir's reputation in the immediate post-1918 years was as critic, not poet, and he was the most significant critic on the Scottish literary scene, writing for the *New Age* and for the American *Freeman*. A contract with the *Freeman* allowed

him in 1921 to leave London, where he had been working as assistant to Orage, and to travel with his wife Willa in Europe, sending back his journal articles to Britain and America. There was as yet, however, no literary or cultural journal in Scotland which could accommodate his writing, something MacDiarmid was determined to remedy. In addition, and in relation to his aim to revive Scottish literary culture generally, MacDiarmid wrote that ‘Scottish literary criticism [. . .] -- as distinct from British (which really means English) -- scarcely exists at all’<sup>2</sup>. In founding *The Scottish Chapbook*, he hoped to remedy both problems.

This first periodical of the revival movement (as opposed to the three *Northern Numbers* poetry anthologies edited by MacDiarmid between 1920 and 1922) appeared in 1922, the memorable year of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and the establishment of the *Criterion* under his editorship. *The Scottish Chapbook* just beat Eliot’s *Criterion* on to the periodical stage, its first issue appearing in August 1922 prior to the *Criterion*’s appearance in October. With its red cover, lion rampant cover-image and motto ‘Not Traditions – Precedents’, the *Chapbook* was explicitly revolutionary. Among its aims were: ‘to encourage and publish the work of contemporary Scottish poets and dramatists, whether in English, Gaelic or Braid Scots’; and, importantly, ‘to bring Scottish Literature into closer touch with current European tendencies in technique and ideation’<sup>3</sup>, objectives which the editor emphasised in his first ‘Causerie’ -- the term which he adopted for his editorial discussions of contemporary cultural affairs. Its contents also included poetry and creative prose and biographies of Scottish writers: the last-mentioned an important item for a revival aimed at educating its readers in a new Scottish literature and its authors. This was therefore a magazine for a literary revival which was to be in no

way parochial, but one which would bring a distinctively Scottish presence on to the European stage -- a stage made familiar to a large extent by Orage's *New Age*.

As things turned out, however, it was MacDiarmid's second periodical *The Scottish Nation*, which proved closer to the *New Age* in 'technique and ideation'; for the *Scottish Chapbook* soon became the centre of a controversy as to whether the Scots language could be revived for literary purposes, and it is therefore for the editorial arguments leading to 'A Theory of Scots Letters' in the spring of 1923, together with the appearance of the new Scots-language poet 'Hugh M'Diarmid' in its third issue of October 1922, that this first *Scottish Renaissance*, or Scottish modernist, periodical is chiefly significant.

The Scots language controversy had initially come about as a consequence of the London Robert Burns Club proposing in March 1920 to establish a Vernacular Circle of the Club in the attempt to revive and support the use of the Scots language: a proposal warmly supported by prominent Scots such as John Buchan and the poet Violet Jacob.<sup>4</sup> Although it therefore in part derived from the same impulse towards national self-definition and regeneration which motivated him also, the Burns Club's wish to revive Scots by the promotion of Scots-language speaking and writing competitions in schools was not the modernist revolution MacDiarmid had in mind. In this context, it is interesting to remember that MacDiarmid's postwar literary ambitions for himself and his country had initially little place for the Scots language. Although he had published poetry in Scots by what he considered the most adventurous of his contemporaries in his *Northern Numbers series*, he clearly did not believe that the literary future lay with them or with the Scots language. 'The whole trouble with the Doric as a literary language today' he was to write in the *Chapbook* 'is that the vast majority of its exponents are hopelessly limited culturally -- and that

the others [. . . ] use it only for limited purposes'. Yet while he considered English as 'an immensely superior medium of expression'<sup>5</sup>, his aim was to use that English in a distinctively Scottish way, just as Yeats and Synge and the writers of the Irish revival had used English in a distinctively Irish way. In an acrimonious correspondence in the *Aberdeen Free Press* in late December 1921 and January 1922, some months before the founding of the *Scottish Chapbook*, he attacked the London Burns Club for its interference in attempting to revive Vernacular Scots and insisted that 'any attempt to create a Doric "boom" just now [. . . ] would be a gross disservice to Scottish life and letters'.<sup>6</sup>

*The Scottish Chapbook* was therefore launched as a monthly magazine in August 1922 in the context of this developing dispute over the viability of Scots as a contemporary and forward-looking linguistic vehicle. Its *Causerie* sections between the first issue and March 1923 provide an interesting demonstration of its editor's shifting position -- and of the usefulness of small magazines in the furtherance of the exploration of new directions such as this. What precisely brought about MacDiarmid's change in view is not certain, but his own successful experimentation with Scots as a modern literary medium in the short lyrics published in the magazine from the autumn of 1922 onwards must have had something to do with it; as also, perhaps, had the recognition that, as with other small countries, a distinctive language could be a signifier of distinctive nationhood. MacDiarmid's biographer, Alan Bold, suggests that it is very possible that he succeeded in obtaining an early copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, published by Sylvia Beach in Paris in February 1922, and that his excitement at the linguistic experimentation of Joyce encouraged his own experimentation with the Scots language.<sup>7</sup> This is a credible suggestion, since by

February 1923, a year after the publication of *Ulysses*, Joyce had replaced Yeats as MacDiarmid's Irish exemplar.

So far as the arguments of MacDiarmid's editorial *Causeries* are concerned, in September 1922 we find him still wary of the antiquarian and sentimental element in the London Burns Club's activities: 'the struggle is between those whose allegiance is to the letter of Burnsiana; and those who are filled with the spirit of Burns'. In October, he is still cautious: 'A modern consciousness cannot fully express itself in the Doric as it exists'. And talking of the new poet 'M'Diarmid' now appearing in the *Chapbook's* pages, he stresses the difficulties he faces in using Scots: 'He is, I think, the first Scottish writer who has addressed himself to questions of extendability (without psychological violence) of the Vernacular to embrace the whole range of modern culture. [. . .] What he has to do is to adapt an essentially rustic tongue to the very much more complex requirements of our urban civilization'.<sup>8</sup> In this passage we therefore have the intriguing situation of the editor, C.M. Grieve, talking about himself as the new Scots-language poet 'M'Diarmid', and arguing out incognito the difficulties which face him in his new role. In later issues we find him in three roles, with English-language poems by C.M. Grieve presented alongside Scots-language poems by the new 'M'Diarmid' and editorial comments by Grieve. Yet, despite this seeming confusion, the interest in psychology and the primitive and the awareness of its place in modern European art that he has developed from his reading in the *New Age* and other modernist magazines, has enabled Grieve/MacDiarmid to recognise that 'the value of the Doric lies in the extent to which it contains lapsed or unrealised qualities which correspond to "unconscious" elements of distinctive Scottish psychology.'<sup>9</sup> By February and March 1923, in the important series of editorials titled 'A Theory of Scots Letters', while he is still insistent that any revival of the

Scots language must be alive to the needs of the modern world and not lead to ‘a sort of museum department of our unconsciousness’, he is sufficiently confident to proclaim that ‘the Scots Vernacular is a vast storehouse of just the very peculiar and subtle effects which modern European literature in general is assiduously seeking.’ He continues:

The Vernacular is a vast unutilized mass of lapsed observations made by minds whose attitudes to experience and whose speculative and imaginative tendencies were quite different from any possible to Englishmen and Anglicized Scots to-day. It is an inchoate Marcel Proust -- a Dostoevskian debris of ideas -- an inexhaustible quarry of subtle and significant sound.<sup>10</sup>

He would now appear to have established, in his own mind at least, that the Scots language can be a vehicle both for Scottish regeneration and for taking Scottish culture back into the mainstream of modern European thought and art. In addition, Joyce has now replaced Yeats as his Irish exemplar:

We have been enormously struck by the resemblance – the moral resemblance – between Jamieson’s Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish language and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. A *vis comica* that has not yet been liberated lies bound by desuetude and misappreciation in the recesses of the Doric; and its potential uprising would be no less prodigious, uncontrollable, and utterly at variance with conventional morality than was Joyce’s tremendous outpouring.<sup>11</sup>



The Edinburgh publisher Foulis, who had published the first two issues of MacDiarmid's *Northern Numbers* anthologies, had initially been supportive of the *Scottish Chapbook* project also. In the end, however, Foulis went out of business and MacDiarmid himself published both the third *Northern Numbers* anthology and *The Scottish Chapbook* from his home in Montrose. Although the financial situation was precarious, having control of his magazine to this extent allowed him a regular platform for the language debate with himself. However, the debate generally was furthered also by his ability as a working journalist to place and syndicate material in small newspapers throughout the country (for example in the *Dunfermline Press* in which 'The Watergaw' by his 'friend' appeared shortly before its more official appearance by the new poet 'M'Diarmid' in the *Scottish Chapbook*)<sup>12</sup>. Several supporters of the new movement were also journalists, and through them the arguments were carried into national broadsheets such as the *Glasgow Herald* and the *Scotsman*. In this way, the *Scottish Chapbook* fulfilled the need for a regular platform for new ideas in matters of contemporary Scottish interest which could then be promoted elsewhere. The language debates it inspired were also of immense importance to MacDiarmid's own development as a modernist Scots-language poet.

Although the *Scottish Chapbook* continued publication until December 1923, to some extent it appeared to lose impetus after end of 'A Theory of Scots Letters', becoming more of a poetry magazine. Contributions continued, however, from MacDiarmid himself and from writers such as Edwin Muir and the Highland novelist Neil Gunn who appeared as poet rather than fiction writer. There were translations of MacDiarmid's Scots lyrics into French by Denis Saurat, another *New Age* contributor, and the linking of Scottish and international affairs continued with, for example, the editor's exploration of a 'Russo-Scottish Parallelism'.

The second periodical edited by MacDiarmid, *The Scottish Nation*, began in May 1923 and ran in parallel with the *Chapbook* until December 1923, when both ceased. *The Scottish Nation* was a weekly publication, closer in format to Orage's *New Age* and with an explicitly international agenda. It covered a wide range of topics, although many of its 'contributors' were MacDiarmid himself in disguise. He was, for example, the 'Isobel Guthrie' who wrote about 'modern Continental Poetry and Other Topics' and who also contributed articles on Scottish music. Like its eclectic *New Age* mentor, *The Scottish Nation* included articles on contemporary art, religion and ethics, on politics and poetry. It dealt more sympathetically, however, with women's grievances and included Scottish material on Gaelic affairs, Scottish arts and the Irish in Scotland which had no place in its southern model. 'Down to the Sea', a significant early short story by Neil M. Gunn, which explored the reality and psychology of decline on the north-east fishing coast, was first published in its pages, while Edwin Muir contributed two important essays on 'The Assault on Humanism', an attack on D.H. Lawrence and the nihilistic direction Muir considered his work was taking. His attack was then refuted by MacDiarmid in a subsequent issue. Muir also contributed 'A Note on Friedrich Hölderlin' in September 1923, an essay which was the first introduction of Hölderlin's poetry to an English-speaking audience. *The Scottish Nation* also reviewed Babette Deutsch and Avrahm Yarmolinsky's *Modern Russian Poetry* and *Contemporary German Poetry*, collections which influenced MacDiarmid in his incorporation of adaptations -- or 'recreations' (as Edwin Muir called Ezra Pound's translations in a *New Age* review) -- of European poets into his long poem *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, published in 1925. The presence of such European poetry collections in translation and the accompanying discussion of translation may well have inspired other poets such as William Soutar to experiment

with translation in their own work. The Scottish literary revival, of course, featured regularly in the editor's series 'At the Sign of the Thistle' with essays under titles such as 'Burns and Baudelaire' and 'Braid Scots and the Sense of Smell'.

Although it was so short-lived, *The Scottish Nation* can be seen as a symbol of a new intellectual and European-oriented movement in Scottish culture, which was also rooted in contemporary Scottish life. Despite the superhuman energy of its editor, however, and the support of a small group of contributors and readers, a weekly magazine following the pattern of the metropolitan *New Age* (which itself had never made a profit) clearly could not be sustained without greater financial and human resources, both in relation to contributors and audience. And these, apparently, were not yet to be found in Scotland. Nor was there the type of rich, internationally-oriented patron who was willing to support the work of metropolitan contemporaries such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and H.D.

Following the demise of *The Scottish Nation*, MacDiarmid began in April 1924 to contribute to the *New Age*, now under the editorship of Arthur Brenton, writing articles, for example, on Paul Valéry and the Dadaists. He simultaneously (in May 1924) started up his third Scottish periodical, *The Northern Review*, published in Edinburgh with the help of two assistant editors and returning to the more modest format and monthly frequency of the *Scottish Chapbook*. *The Northern Review* lasted for four issues only until September 1924.

Although these periodicals founded, edited and published by MacDiarmid were short-lived, they had an impact out of all proportion to their short lives. By the mid-1920s the principal Scottish newspapers regularly contained articles and letters on the new directions in Scottish cultural life and the terminology 'Scottish Renaissance' was in common use. In May 1925, the *Scottish Educational Journal*

commissioned MacDiarmid to write a series of assessments of Scottish literary figures. This caused much controversy in the Journal's pages and a collection of the essays was published in book form in 1926. Other new periodicals began to appear, not edited by MacDiarmid, but to some of which he contributed. These were not 'modernist' or specifically literary in nature, but all aimed to further regeneration in various areas of contemporary Scottish life. At the same time, the Porpoise Press, a small publishing company founded in 1922 by two Edinburgh University students, was bringing a number of new poets into publication, most of them writing in Scots and encouraged by the new climate to experiment with language and poetic form.

By the early 1930s, however, economic, social and political affairs had begun to dominate public life in Scotland as economic depression took hold and nationalist parties were established to fight for self-government. The intellectual and artistic adventurousness of the literary revival of the 1920s appeared no longer to be at the centre of events. MacDiarmid himself had gone to London in 1929 to work with Compton Mackenzie on his shortlived magazine *Vox*, a disastrous move, personally and professionally, and after a short period of employment in Liverpool, a traumatic divorce and remarriage, he found himself in a kind of exile on the small Shetland island of Whalsay, where he remained throughout the 1930s. He did not return to periodical publication until his founding of *The Voice of Scotland* in 1938. In the earlier 1930s, the avant-garde role of MacDiarmid's little magazines was taken over by *The Modern Scot*, edited and published in St Andrews by a wealthy young American James Whyte, who continued the promotion of a forward-looking artistic culture and the focus on links with Europe. This magazine would deserve much fuller attention in any longer consideration of modernist magazines in Scotland than can be given in the short space available here.

Although the foregoing discussion has provided a brief introduction to Scottish interwar little magazines, and primarily to those edited by MacDiarmid, it hopefully has given some idea of what was happening in the north of the United Kingdom in this interwar modernist period. What is especially important for Scotland itself is that the little magazine project MacDiarmid began, and the other periodicals which appeared as a result of his venture, encouraged a contemporary debate about the regeneration of Scotland and its culture which succeeded in recovering a distinctive national literary presence in its own time which we can now see as offering a distinctive Scottish form of modernism. Most importantly, the legacy of this interwar recovery can be seen in the confident national and international Scottish literary and artistic culture we take for granted today.

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<sup>1</sup> C.M. Grieve, 'Causerie', *Scottish Chapbook* 1.1 August 1922, p.5; reprinted in Alan Riach ed., *Hugh MacDiarmid: Selected Prose* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), p.7. (For convenience of access, quotations from *Scottish Chapbook* will, where possible, be referenced also by reprint details.)

<sup>2</sup> C.M. Grieve, 'A Theory of Scots Letters', *Scottish Chapbook* 1.9 April 1923, p.241; reprinted in Alan Bold ed., *The Thistle Rises: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose by Hugh MacDiarmid* (London; Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p.138.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Chapbook Programme', *Scottish Chapbook* 1.1 August 1922 and all subsequent issues; reprinted in Margery Palmer McCulloch ed., *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918-1939: Source Documents for the Scottish Renaissance* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2004), p.xii.

<sup>4</sup> See *Modernism and Nationalism*, pp.11-13.

<sup>5</sup> C.M. Grieve, 'Causerie', *Scottish Chapbook* 1.3 October 1922, p.63, *Modernism and Nationalism*, p.25; C.M. Grieve quoted in Duncan Glen, *Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve) and the Scottish Renaissance* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1964), p.78.

<sup>6</sup> C.M. Grieve, *Aberdeen Free Press* 30 January 1922 in Alan Bold ed., *The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid* (Athens Georgia: University of Athens Press, 1984), p.755, *Modernism and Nationalism*, pp.19-23.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Bold, *MacDiarmid: Christopher Murray Grieve: A Critical Biography* (London: John Murray, 1988), p.130.

<sup>8</sup> *Scottish Chapbook* 1.2 September 1922, p.38; 1.3 October 1922, p.62, *Modernism and Nationalism* p.24.

<sup>9</sup> *Scottish Chapbook* 1.3 October 1922, p.62, *Modernism and Nationalism*, p.25.

<sup>10</sup> *Scottish Chapbook* 1.7 February 1923, p.182; 1.8 March 1923, p.210; *Modernism and Nationalism*, pp.26, 27-8.

<sup>11</sup> *Scottish Chapbook* 1.7 February 1923, p.184, *Modernism and Nationalism*, p.27.

<sup>12</sup> C.M. Grieve, 'Scottish Books and Bookmen', *Dunfermline Press* 30 September 1922, p.7.