

UNDER BRIGGFLATTS

*A History of
Poetry in Great Britain
1960-1988*

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Contents

Foreword	7
 <i>PART ONE: The 1960s</i>	
A Religious Dimension	11
MacDiarmid and MacCaig	14
Remembering the Western Desert	22
Edwin Muir and Austin Clarke	29
Basil Bunting	38
The Gurus	44
Elaine Feinstein	49
1968	51
Sylvia Townsend Warner	58
Larkin's Politics, and Tomlinson's	61
Thomas Kinsella	68
'Ferocious Banter': Clarke and Hughes	74
 <i>PART TWO: The 1970s</i>	
Thom Gunn	83
Elaine Feinstein and Women's Poetry	90
<i>The Waste Land</i> Drafts and Transcripts	98
C. H. Sisson's Politics	103
C. H. Sisson's Poetry	109
Philip Larkin and John Betjeman	113
Prosody	120
Bunting, Tomlinson and Hughes	127
Translations and Competitions	132
Poetic Theory	139
R. S. Thomas	147
Jack Clemo	151
Anglo-Welsh Poets	158
Poets' Prose: Hughes and Hill	164
The Edward Thomas Centenary	167
Thom Gunn	177

PART THREE: The 1980s

Sisson's <i>Exactions</i>	185
Ivor Gurney Recovered	194
The Thomas Hardy Industry	204
Geoffrey Hill	208
Jeremy Hooker and Tony Harrison	211
Hughes as Laureate	218
Michael Hamburger	223
Sylvia Townsend Warner, Posthumous	229
Kenneth Cox's Criticism	234
Seamus Heaney's <i>Station Island</i>	245
Afterword	252

Foreword

This is a book about the poetry of the British Isles since 1960. A narrow topic, it may be thought. But only when the field is thus narrowed can the achievements in the field be honoured as they deserve to be. And a main intention has been to give to certain men and women their just deserts: grateful recognition that up to now, in all too many cases, has been denied them. To do them that justice involves – so it has turned out – measuring them against past masters of poetry: against Byron and Shelley, John Dryden and Walt Whitman and others, who accordingly are found to be, and treated as, presences still living in the Britain of Elizabeth II, of Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson, Edward Heath and Margaret Thatcher, of the Beatles and the Sex Pistols. These ghosts like Lord Byron still walk, not ghostly at all; though a more sweeping survey over a longer span of time would – we may suspect from past experience – have failed to detect them. Among them walk ghosts who speak other languages than English.

Accordingly, this is an essay in literary history rather than literary criticism. Each of these, to be sure, involves the other; and confounding or compounding the two kinds of attention can often be fruitful, though at other times obfuscating. Having in the past functioned as a critic, in this book I try to perform as a historian. And the difference between the two functions is clearer to me than it may be to my readers. Principally, literary history, like other sorts of history, is concerned to *commemorate*, to keep in memory – a concern that some literary critics may share, but to which criticism as such is not committed. Of its nature, therefore, literary history is more indulgent than criticism is. It is readier to suspend judgement, to give the benefit of the doubt. It is more anxious to ensure that no deserving name falls out of the historical record, than to make sure that undeserving ones do not creep in.

There are limits, however; and it is by not observing these limits that literary historians have brought their discipline into disrepute. The historical record cannot be comprehensive, in the sense of all-inclusive; and the literary historian presses it towards that unattainable condition only by being indiscriminate. There are books and authors that are eminently, properly, forgettable; and nothing

is gained by rescuing these from the oblivion that they deserve. Accordingly, the literary historian makes value-judgements, just as the responsible critic does, though the historian makes them mostly by implication – by choosing to deal with certain works and authors rather than others. This makes him a principal architect of ‘the canon’ – an institution that some commentators ask us to see as of its nature sinister and oppressive, though it is hard to see how this can be, since every historian’s canon can be revised by the next historian in line. If this book seems to promote certain British authors as, however modestly, canonical, it is on the understanding that these judgements are disputable and ought to be disputed. Nevertheless my judgements were not arrived at lightly; and so the reader may safely assume that I deal with no poet whom I do not consider as in some measure admirable.

History is narrative, and I conceive of my three chapters as chapters in one unfolding story. However, there is no strong and single story-line, no ‘thesis’. If there were, this book would be a polemic; and that I very much did not want, because the poets among my contemporaries who matter to me have all suffered – some more, some less – from being treated as case-histories by commentators with axes to grind. (I am not without such axes myself; but in this book I have tried not to grind them.) Accordingly I have attempted to arrange my material in such a way that a reader with a special interest – for instance, in Irish poetry – can satisfy his or her curiosity without having to read the book from beginning to end. On the other hand, of course, I hope that many readers will read from first to last. That there is no *one* story-line does not mean that there are not any such; there are several, and they intertwine. Moreover, unless I am mistaken, they have to do with poetry in general, not just British poetry of the last thirty years.

PART ONE

The 1960s

A Religious Dimension – MacDiarmid and MacCaig – Remembering the Western Desert – Edwin Muir and Austin Clarke – Basil Bunting – The Gurus – Elaine Feinstein – 1968 – Sylvia Townsend Warner – Larkin's Politics, and Tomlinson's – Thomas Kinsella – 'Ferocious Banter': Clarke and Hughes.

A Religious Dimension

William Empson's *Milton's God* (1961, revised 1965, and still being amplified as late as 1981) may be thought to have inaugurated a new era not just in British poetry but in British culture generally, a period in which questions of religious belief would move back – uncertainly, and at first imperceptibly – towards occupying that central position from which, decades before, they had been dislodged, as it then seemed irreversibly. To those, Believers and Unbelievers alike, who understood that Empson had taken Milton's *Paradise Lost* as a text by which to inveigh against Christianity in all its forms through the ages, it may have seemed that this was a simple lapse of taste or else an amusing anachronism, breaking the unspoken compact of mutually contemptuous tolerance by which Believer and Unbeliever had long ago agreed to lie down together. But of course Empson, the author of *The Gathering Storm* (poems, 1940) and *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), meant to imply that the tacit compact must be abandoned because it was intellectually disgraceful: the issue as between Christian Belief and Unbelief was too important to be smuggled away under the facile though civilly serviceable formula, 'Live and let live'.

It would be some time before this challenge was taken up. Through the next several years it would continue to be supposed that social engineering, working through political and administrative or elsewhere, necessarily violent, action, could solve and heal social divisions. But subsequent public events, notably in Northern Ireland, seemed to vindicate Empson's undeclared assumption that social conflicts were on the contrary metaphysical, or at least were conceived to be so, very bitterly, by the parties in conflict; and that such antagonisms could be handled and contained only by recognizing the metaphysical dimension to the contending allegiances. Of such antagonisms, the one between Believer and Unbeliever, however it might be muffled by the amiability of English social life (itself a frail prophylactic, as subsequent developments would show), remained the most crucial, and potentially the most explosive, in a nation that now included Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Rastafarians as well as Christians and Jews, atheists and agnostics. Already when Empson's book appeared, the preoccupation with Christian belief

and the Christian church in the poetry of David Jones and John Betjeman, R. S. Thomas and Geoffrey Hill and C. H. Sisson – very different poets, not all of them believers, but all on the way to being prominent and influential – chimed in with Empson's polemic, and vindicated it as timely. His book and theirs, taken together, helped to defuse the situation by at least assuming once again that religious experience of some kind was what British people of whatever colour had a right to get heated about, for or against.

In Ireland, in Scotland, in Wales, few citizens had ever doubted this. It was peculiarly English culture that had been secularized. And so as religious experiences very gradually moved back near the centre of English concerns, the English reader who cared could begin to bridge the gulfs that had yawned between him and Irish or Welsh or Scottish poets. This was particularly important in respect of two veteran poets who survived into the 1960s: Austin Clarke in Ireland, Hugh MacDiarmid in Scotland.

They had much in common. For MacDiarmid's quarrel with the culture of post-Reformation Scotland, his vehemently reiterated appeal over the head of John Knox to the pre-Reformation Scotland of James IV and William Dunbar, was in important respects very like Austin Clarke's appeal from the Jansenite Romanism of modern Ireland to the medieval Irish Catholicism of Cashel and Clonmacnoise. To the Scottish poet as to the Irish one, what had been cramped and thwarted by an arrogant and hysterical Church (Protestant in the one case, Roman in the other) was above all the capacity for joyous sexuality. And so they were both insistently erotic poets, defiantly obscene when they judged that was called for.

On the other hand they were also very different. The difference showed in verses that MacDiarmid contributed in 1966 to a 70th-birthday tribute to Clarke by several hands (assembled by John Montague and Liam Miller, Portlaoise):

Thinking of the corpus of Austin Clarke's work set against the entire production of contemporary English poetry known to me.

The Muse to whom his heart is given,
 Historia Abscondita,
 Is already working like a leaven
 To manifest her law.

The Gaelic sun swings up again
 And to itself doth draw
 All kindling things, while all the rest
 Like fog is blown away.

This hectoring tone is quite foreign to Austin Clarke, as is the headlong improvisation which unaccountably has recourse in the sixth line to the archaic 'doth draw'. Moreover Clarke never had, as MacDiarmid implies, set up Gaelic poetry and culture in opposition to English; on the contrary, true to the precepts of his first teacher Thomas MacDonagh, martyr of the Easter 1916 rising, he had sought always to enrich the repertoire of English poetry by grafting on to it the assonantal and off-rhyming patterns of classical Gaelic (which Clarke knew, whereas the Lowlander MacDiarmid – born Christopher Grieve – never had more than a smattering). So too with their religious apprehensions. Like many relentless anti-clericals in Roman Catholic countries, Clarke was firmly a Christian Believer; whereas MacDiarmid, professing no Christian belief, satisfied his religious needs with an indefinite mysticism for which, maverick Stalinist that he was, he seems to have found hints in pre-Stalinist Russians like Leo Shestov and Vladimir Solovyev. In all these ways and others, pre-eminently for present purposes in the finesse of his verse-writing techniques, Clarke is infinitely the more scrupulous and subtle intelligence. What remains on MacDiarmid's side of the account is not just his courage (for Clarke showed plenty of that in flouting the unwritten laws of republican Ireland), but a *public* risk-taking that cannot be disentangled from his brazenness, his roughness in polemic, even his slipperiness in argument. By these means MacDiarmid became, and remained indisputably, the intransigent though not always consistent spokesman for cultural nationalism on behalf of the Welsh and the Irish as well as the Scots. And the same risk-taking is an exhilarating and distinctive element among all the imperfections of his poems.

MacDiarmid and MacCaig

MacDiarmid's poems had not always been imperfect. When his *Collected Poems* appeared in 1962 (revised 1967), no one suggested that the Lallans lyrics of *Sangschaw* (1925) and *Penny Wheep* (1926) could be much improved on. But the cultural nationalism of MacDiarmid and his more fervent Scottish admirers had for years back-fired, so as to validate the malicious lethargy of non-Scottish readers, who could always expostulate that they had to take these poems on trust, since they were written in a foreign tongue. Common sense with no axe to grind had always supposed, on the contrary, that MacDiarmid's Lallans or 'synthetic Scots' was a dialect of standard English, not different in principle from the Scottish English of Robert Burns, though certainly more forbidding when first encountered. English-speakers had not thought themselves definitively excluded by Burns's language; why should they think themselves shut out by MacDiarmid's? There were several reasons, and at least two pretexts: on the one hand Scottish nationalism, needing non-Scottish recognition yet resenting that need, had insisted that MacDiarmid's language in these lyrics was not a dialect of the colonialist oppressive language, English; on the other hand, on the poet's own admission, what he called Lallans was not a literary transcription of what was spoken in any region of twentieth-century Scotland, but represented an amalgamation of the spoken lexicon of several Scottish regions, crucially augmented by archaic usages retrieved from dictionaries. If Lallans was a dialect, it was an artificial dialect. But in Scandinavia and elsewhere there were precedents for such fabricated languages being successfully adopted as media of literature. What bypassed all such terminological quibbles, and the special interests of linguisticians and ideologues, was the experience of a few non-Scottish readers who delightfully encountered 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' and 'The Watergaw'. 'Crowdieknowe' and 'The Eemis Stane' and 'Wheesht, Wheesht', and were not to be bullied out of their possession of these poems, which characteristically delighted them as unprecedented orchestrations of sound before ever, by applying themselves to the glossaries, they construed them as lexically coherent also. There was and is considerable duplicity on the part of the metropolitan Englishman: two hours with his ears open in King's Cross or Euston railway stations

would, as he overheard arriving Scottish travellers, give such a London reader quite enough access to the acoustic world that poetry in Lallans assumes, and reverberates in. A decisive landmark was reached in 1984 when, after decades of Scottish explanatory glosses and English bemused inattention to them, the American Harvey Oxenhorn showed that these poems were thoroughly accessible to non-Scottish readers with a little patience, and that such patience was amply rewarded.¹

There was also to be, before Oxenhorn, John C. Weston's very careful American edition of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), a 'gallimaufry' of 1926 which it had become usual to consider MacDiarmid's masterpiece. Certainly it represents, thus early in the poet's career, a dissatisfaction with the constraints of the lyric, and a determination to move beyond them (even though the *Drunk Man* in fact incorporates lyrics of great beauty). However, MacDiarmid's strategy to this end was, even in 1926, strikingly old-fashioned, pre-modern. One critic in 1962 was reminded of Thomas Hardy's strategy when in *The Dynasts*, he too had wanted to find a form more ample and heterogeneous than the individual lyric. However that might be, one even older presence behind the poem was certainly Robert Browning.² The same critic, voicing what was plainly a minority view, spoke disparagingly and rashly of 'that awkward half-way house to drama, the Browningsque dramatic monologue'. This invited the obvious retort that Browning's achievement in the dramatic monologue could not be dismissed so loftily, and that if MacDiarmid seemed to ignore the more far-reaching structural innovations of Eliot's *The Waste Land* four years earlier, this was not necessarily a bad thing. But it was harder to set his objections aside when he quoted MacDiarmid's writing at its weakest:

Eneuch? Then here you are. Here's the haill story.
Life's connached shapes too'er up in crowns o' glory,
Perpetuating natheless, in their gory
Colour the endless sacrifice and pain
That to their makin's gane . . .

Of these lines this captious reader commented severely: 'The ugliness of this writing is not the sometimes functional ugliness of

¹ Harvey Oxenhorn, *Elemental Things. The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid* (Edinburgh, 1984).

² See D. Davie, 'A'e Gowden Lyric', in *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum* (Manchester, 1977).

modernism: it is something inseparable from the dramatic monologue, which fakes up by such uncouth gambols the liveliness of those dramatic exchanges it cannot provide. The speaker gets more and more embarrassed by his own garrulity, and the ugliness is how his embarrassment shows up.'

John C. Weston's devoted labours showed clearly the inadequacy of the *Collected Poems*, a volume in many ways even less reliable in its 'revised' edition of 1967 than in its original version five years earlier. Quite apart from the unreliability of the text and the wayward incompleteness of its Glossary, the *Collected Poems* did not, as it claimed, include all the poems that MacDiarmid wanted to rescue from oblivion. The poet, typically not apologizing but shifting the blame on to other people, acknowledged this by publishing three supplementary slim volumes, *A Lap of Honour* (1967), *A Clyack-Sheaf* (1969) and *More Collected Poems* (1970). The upshot is that a reader who has isolated certain poems that he particularly admires (for instance the astonishing 'On a Raised Beach', 1934) is at a loss where to locate it in what ought to be a definitive edition. An authoritative canon and text was still to seek. And when, after the poet's death, a selection of his letters appeared (edited by Alan Bold, 1984), it became clear that this lack was the consequence of MacDiarmid's always harried and opportunist habits: he did not keep track of all the poems he had published, let alone those he had written; and quite extended passages originally presented in the context of certain poems would be without warning cannibalized by him and wedged into quite different contexts. MacDiarmid in fact seems to have been a publisher's and sub-editor's nightmare. This would not matter so much if the same headlong and impetuous habits had not made it inevitable that, at all stages of his career but increasingly after 1930, his admirable poems would have to be sorted out from much disgraceful dross:

The sin against the Holy Ghost is to fetter or clog
 The free impulse of life – to weaken or cloud
 The glad wells of being – to apply other tests,
 To say that these pure founts must be hampered, controlled,
 Denied, adulterated, diluted, cowed,
 The wave of omnipotence made recede, and all these lives, these
 lovers
 Lapse into cannon-fodder, sub-humanity, the despised slum-crowd.

This is from a poem 'In the Slums of Glasgow', in *Second Hymn to Lenin and other poems* (1935) and there is still a readiness to believe that any objection to it has to do with hostility to its humanitarian