THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

HAMISH HENDERSON AND SCOTTISH CULTURAL POLITICS

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CHAPTER

1

THE FLYTINGS

It is perhaps ill-mannered for a visitor to intervene in a debate between two such masters of ‘flyting’ (surely a folk-art in itself) as Mr Henderson and Mr MacDiarmid. (Thomas Crawford, letter to The Scotsman, 25 January 1960) (TAN, p. 99)

From late 1959 through to early 1968, Hamish Henderson and Hugh MacDiarmid engaged in a series of public debates on Scottish literature, folk art, and politics that were to become known as their ‘Flytings’. They comprised three separate disputes: ‘The Honour’d Shade Flyting’ (1959–60), ‘The Folksong Flyting’ (1964), and ‘The 1320 Club Flyting’ (1968). Though other contributors were involved, Henderson and MacDiarmid were the most prominent participants, and their particular conflicts provided the debates with their most dynamic and resonant episodes. Other notable parties included academics and authors such as the Marxist literary critic, David Craig; the nationalist, classicist, and poet, Douglas Young; the critic and pioneer of modern Scottish literary studies, Thomas Crawford; the poet, Stewart Conn; and Scots language poets, Tom Scott and Sydney Goodsir Smith. Yet this series of impassioned debates has garnered almost no critical attention.1 Existing material on the ‘Flytings’ comes substantially from those whose remit is simply to survey Henderson’s long and varied career. As such, the ‘Flytings’ are approached, straightforwardly, as the public dimension of his complex relationship with MacDiarmid. The debates have become part of Henderson’s reputation as a ‘folk-hero’ and are seen – like most of Henderson’s creative and critical work – in biographical terms, as context for the political and cultural vision of this ‘father’ of the Scottish folk revival.

Given this critical lacuna, the ‘Flytings’, their contributors, and their principal concerns, deserve clarification. The immediate contexts of the ‘Flytings’ ought to be understood; in particular, the cultural movements MacDiarmid
and Henderson came to represent: the Scottish Literary Renaissance and the popular Scottish folk revival. An in-depth analysis of the ‘Flytings’ affords the most direct access to Henderson’s cultural politics in the absence of a manifesto or magnum opus. In challenging him, MacDiarmid took to task a political-cultural programme that had been inspired by, and partially founded on, his own poetry and public persona. The ‘Flytings’ were performance pieces whereby the folklorist sought to publicly co-opt the poet to his cause. The support of a writer whose poems, to Henderson at least, constituted ‘the operations of a radical surgeon on the rotten flesh of contemporary society’, would lend critical and intellectual substance to his popular folk revival, which during this period, was increasingly identified with the commercial commodification of traditional song-cultures (AM, p. 316).2

The ‘Flytings’ were originally published in the ‘Points of View’ columns of The Scotsman as open letters ‘To the Editor’. Though these columns were a common setting for public debate, they seldom hosted disputes as prolific or volatile as the ‘Flytings’, which constituted a series of fundamentally irresolvable conflicts over the relationship between art and society, scattered throughout these pages, over almost a decade. The letters of the ‘Flytings’ were interspersed among other episodic disputes on various issues: from local interests to geo-politics and economics. Although this format meant that the debates gained an air of urgency, which may not have translated in an edited collection or a less-frequent cultural magazine, the momentum of the discussion was fragmented. Contributions appeared days, sometimes weeks, after the letters to which they responded. Ripostes were sandwiched between advertisements and unrelated, miscellaneous text, often under column headings that referred to other popular topics of the day.3

Heated public debates on Scottish culture and history were commonplace during this period, and remain so. In late 2009, the historian T. M. Devine and Neil Oliver, presenter of the BBC’s ‘History of Scotland’ series, engaged in a series of exchanges over the historiographical credentials of this popular television series;4 in February 2010 short articles by Paul Henderson Scott and David Greig were published in The Scotsman setting out their opposing views on the national aspect of the work of the National Theatre of Scotland (25–6 February); and in November 2011 the Scottish Review was, according to its editor Kenneth Roy, the site of a personal ‘flyting’, quite consciously in the tradition of MacDiarmid, on what constitutes a ‘Scottish writer’ (14 November).5 The years and months approaching Scotland’s independence referendum saw an explosion of such ‘flytings’, from the chat-room to the debating chamber, the comments thread to the high-wire presidential-style debate. In recent years, the established cultural and political debates to which these periodical clashes belong have become a more explicit part of their performance. In addition to old-fashioned intertextual referencing, hyperlinks have allowed these exchanges – through online editions of print publications, blogs, comment
threads and tweets – to cohere, and become part of a single trajectory, supported by the momentum of online trending and search-engine algorithms. Debates gather and accumulate others without becoming unwieldy. This has also enabled commentators, professional and amateur alike, to banish data and supporting evidence to the paratextual level, freeing up their prose for rhetorical acrobatics. The range and specificity of cultural references in Henderson and MacDiarmid’s ‘Flytings’; the highly stylised language and carefully cultivated tone; the self-conscious performance; the length, focus, and intensity of the debates, sets them apart from many of these more recent disputes. However, they do share one aspect. The mutual exclusivity of the two opposing views portrayed is not in itself the point of interest; rather, it is how this opposition over one – often, carefully circumscribed – problem, intersects with broader assumptions: about the function of art in society, the tensions between the academic and the popular, or the motivations behind, and consequences of, constitutional resettlement.

This exploratory function of the flyting was forefront in the minds of the ‘National Collective’ – an online forum of ‘artists and creatives for Scottish Independence’ – when they proposed, in March 2013, that Henderson and MacDiarmid’s 1964 ‘Folksong Flyting’ be a model for the movement. They envisaged this aspect of self-reflexive debate as that which distinguishes a movement from a mere campaign:

The creative side of National Collective is the side that eschews party politics; we attempt to appeal not to ideas of the Scottish state or nation but to the more human ideas of creativity, individual and collective potential, and creative autonomy.

Though the vituperative side of the flyting project seems not to have had the same appeal, the proposal put forward by the ‘National Collective’ did include a degree of performance: independent meetings between supporters in locales across the country were to receive questions from others, and respond in any format they thought appropriate (‘photographs, films, pictures, writings, drawings, or anything else’). The questions included: ‘What are the main components of “Scottish Identity”?’; ‘What is meant by “social justice”?’, and ‘What are the best ideas from “Freedom Come A Ye” [sic]?’. The principal focus of this project was to explore the ways in which the question – ‘Should Scotland be an independent country?’ – cuts across more substantial ideas about the kind of country or society that might be imagined, and the role the artist has in this task.

The first dispute, the ‘Honour’d Shade Flyting’ of 1959–60, saw the emergence of the Henderson-MacDiarmid polarity that characterised later exchanges. The debate took its name from a 1959 anthology of contemporary Scottish verse selected and edited by Norman MacCaig. Published to mark the bicentenary of the birth of Burns, the dust jacket proclaimed that it was
to present ‘a picture of the widely various ways in which Scottish writers find it natural to express themselves’. The title of the collection was taken from Burns’ ‘Address to Edinburgh’. Praising the city’s ‘palaces and tow’rs’ and its status as the former seat of sovereignty, Burns describes his sheltering in the ‘honour’d shade’ of Edinburgh as kin to that beneath the boughs ‘on the banks of Ayr’. While it is Burns’ (and by inference, Scotland’s) ‘honour’d shade’ that is explored in the anthology, the ensuing debates were concerned with a coterie of established poets strongly associated with Edinburgh. An anonymous reviewer from *The Scotsman* noted the absence of Henderson, Alan Riddell, T. S. Law and David McEwan, and suggested that on the basis of this neglect the collection might simply have been named ‘The Muse in Rose Street’, given its editorial bias towards the poets identified with that part of Edinburgh (TAN, p. 79). MacDiarmid responded with typical recalcitrance, stimulating a debate on how a representative selection of Scotland’s ‘best’ contemporary poetry should have been determined (TAN, p. 80). Inevitably, the correspondents gave voice to various criteria that might inform the selection of a ‘truly representative’ anthology, and the discussion looked likely to descend into a tedious reflection on the tyranny of taste. However, another provocative interjection from MacDiarmid focused on the issue of popularity as a determinate factor in, or signifier of, literary quality. The folk revival was then examined as a forum for testing these ideas, after Henderson wrote of his vision of a progressive popular literature tied closely to the oral tradition. It was only in the final few exchanges that this first flyting condensed into the Henderson-MacDiarmid antithesis that was to become the central thread of the later ‘Folksong Flyting’.

The intensified fervour of the ‘Folksong Flyting’ was immediately apparent, and as Henderson and MacDiarmid’s private correspondence shows, this was due in part to the fact that they had anticipated the revived public debates. In March 1960, Henderson wrote to MacDiarmid:

> Travelling in various parts of Scotland, I have become aware – as you probably have too – of the widespread interest in our recent flyting. Some time this year I intend to write a lengthy article about the whole question of literature and the oral folk art, so no doubt you will be emerging from your corner for the second round! (TAN, p. 102)

This article never materialised but Henderson deployed his research in the flyting that followed (TAN, p. 102n). The controversy was this time initiated by a letter from the literary historian David Craig lamenting the under-representation of traditional song by the Scottish Home Service and the recent depreciation of the idiom by some of Scotland’s well-known poets. He directed his disapproval at MacCaig in particular, who, in Craig’s words, ended his Third Programme comments by saying that ‘folksongs might be good
enough for berry-pickers and steel mill workers, but not for him – he had read Homer’ (TAN, p. 117). Again, MacDiarmid responded incredulously, and by describing folk-song as inherently antithetical to the demands of modern literature, he lit the touchpaper of another more vigorous and drawn-out dispute (TAN, pp. 118–9). Picking up the impetus of the Honour’d Shade controversy, Henderson and MacDiarmid were quickly established as the central combatants. The primacy of their particular disagreements was further emphasised by the titles for the ‘Points of View’ column: Henderson alone provided the editor with ‘Full-Blooded Folk Poetry: More and More Becoming Known’ (3 April 1964), and ‘Why Does MacDiarmid Despise Folk Arts? Apostle of a Kind of Spiritual Apartheid’ (15 April 1964). Gradually the discussions centred on a broader consideration of how art, and particularly literature, ought to relate to society as a whole. In this context, the history of interaction between ‘folk’ and ‘art’ literature was scrutinised, as was the figure of the genuinely popular and yet distinctly ‘literary’ poet. Both men reflected on the nature of literary endeavour, and each accused the other of opposing forms of philistinism. Once MacDiarmid left the conversation, Henderson and Douglas Young continued on a tangential discussion over Young’s editorship of the collection Scottish Verse 1851–1951 (1952) (TAN, pp. 136–40). Henderson accused Young of neglecting folk-song, and the altercation soon became tangled in semantic fine-tuning. Compared with the vitality of the Henderson-MacDiarmid opposition, this confrontation was merely technical, and lacked the responsiveness and flexibility that characterised earlier exchanges.

The ‘1320 Club Flyting’ of 1968 was a brief scuffle by comparison. It primarily dealt with the political strategy of the Home Rule movement, with which both Henderson and MacDiarmid were attached, rather than aesthetic concerns. MacDiarmid was a founding member of the 1320 Club, which took its name from the year of the signing of the Declaration of Arbroath, and had originated as a think-tank on independence. By the time of the ‘flyting’ it had become an extremist branch of the nationalist movement, even advocating militarism. Though Henderson supported Scottish Independence, he sought an outwardly democratic route, as opposed to the initiative of what he called the ‘self-elected elect’ of the 1320 Club (TAN, p. 164). These discussions, though not directly concerned with conceptions of literary value, reflect an opposition similar to those of the ‘Honour’d Shade’ and ‘Folksong’ flytings. Henderson again countered MacDiarmid’s promotion of an intellectual elite with his belief in the wisdom and autonomy of the ‘commonweal’ (TAN, p. 166). Each of these flytings addresses its own distinctive set of concerns, yet a deeper opposition between Henderson and MacDiarmid informed all three. The turbulence of these ‘Flytings’ was not due to the fact that their fundamental beliefs stood in stark opposition, in fact they agreed on a great deal, fought for common ideals, and shared many enemies, yet their cultural-political visions appeared incompatible.
The popular Scottish folk revival was well established by the time the first public flyting began in 1959, and by the mid 1960s it was clear that this constituted the national branch of a larger movement of traditional music revivalism flowering all across Western Europe and North America. The revival was also becoming increasingly visible. The School of Scottish Studies had been established at the University of Edinburgh in 1951, and Henderson joined the Gaelic scholar Calum MacLean as one of its first full-time staff in 1952. Edinburgh University Folk Song Society was founded in 1958 and many similar associations appeared across Scotland in subsequent years, followed in the 1960s by the rapid spread of resident folk clubs. Enthusiasts like Norman Buchan MP, and Morris Blythman held folk-song workshops in Glasgow schools. Even the BBC, which had been perceived as unfairly dismissive towards the traditional arts, began to broadcast some populist folk-song performances. In 1962 a collection of political songs that had emerged around protests against the docking of American Polaris-equipped nuclear submarines in the Holy Loch was published as a pamphlet and recorded and released for Moses Asch’s ‘Folkways’ label. The next year, 1963, saw the establishment of annual folk festivals in Aberdeen, and in the following year Arthur Argo published the first Chapbook, which was to become the leading Scottish folk music magazine of the period.

Outside these channels of folk revivalism – in which Henderson was instrumental – the movement fuelled a huge commercial market. Taking full advantage of developments in mass communication, traditional songs were broadcast widely. As a consequence, many politicised founders of the Scottish and British revivals, like Henderson and Ewan MacColl, found only a parody or, at best, a thinly veiled artifice of genuine folk culture in the contemporary folk music market. Naturally, MacDiarmid saw the commercial aspect as a convenient brush with which to tar the entire movement in his contributions to the ‘Flytings’ (TAN, p. 120). As folk clubs arose in all major towns and cities, the revival made inroads into urban centres with an art form traditionally associated with a rural, even pastoral, setting. The major redistribution and re-contextualisation of traditional folk-song was an undeniable reality by 1964.

This year also marked forty years since the French scholar Denis Saurat’s heralding of a new movement in Scottish literature, in his essay ‘Le groupe de “la Renaissance Ecossaise”’. It has been noted that the Literary Renaissance, beginning in the inter-war period, passed through a ‘second wave’ in the 1940s and 1950s, which saw the emergence of poets like Goodsir Smith and Norman MacCaig. However, in the late 1950s, and certainly by the early 1960s, a new generation of Scottish writers was beginning to reject the poetic models of the so-called Renaissance ‘establishment’. Poets like Ian Hamilton Finlay and Edwin Morgan sought out new forms that were not directly influenced by those older poets. In fact, in lieu of the Honour’d Shade controversies, and in response to the editorial bias towards Lallans poets in the anthology, a group
of young poets expressed their distance from the established literary coterie by releasing a recording of their readings under the title *Dishonour’d Shade: Seven non-Abbotsford Poets*, in February 1960 (TAN, p. 80n).\textsuperscript{13}

This generational fracture among Scottish writers was put into sharper relief by incidents like MacDiarmid’s infamous rejection of Alexander Trocchi’s ‘spurious internationalism’, at the International Writers’ Conference of 1962.\textsuperscript{14} In the same year MacDiarmid published a pamphlet titled *The Ugly Birds Without Wings* (1962): a concerted attack on the ‘concrete poetry’ of Finlay. MacDiarmid also became embroiled in another dispute in *The Scotsman*, defending the ‘renaissance establishment’ from the attacks of the ‘Teddyboy Poetasters’ of the younger generation.\textsuperscript{15} MacDiarmid’s predilection for controversy is well illustrated by a host of other oft-repeated anecdotes. Two of the most common examples are his rejoining the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1956 after the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and his listing of ‘Anglophobia’ as a hobby in his *Who’s Who* entry. By the late 1950s the greater part of MacDiarmid’s poetry, and all of his most celebrated work, had been published. As the final chapter of Alan Bold’s biography testifies, though these later years were not dedicated to poetic production, his active engagement in Scottish culture was sustained, and he was almost continually embroiled in controversy of some kind.\textsuperscript{16}

A Festschrift for the poet was published in 1962, which was followed in 1964 by Duncan Glen’s monograph *Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance* and Kenneth Buthlay’s *Hugh MacDiarmid*. From this period onward, book-length studies of MacDiarmid’s oeuvre began to appear more frequently, and in publishing terms the early 1960s represents the beginning of an on-going discourse on MacDiarmid’s poetics and politics. In the period of his flytings with Henderson, discussions on how MacDiarmid’s work should be read, and how it should be placed in a national literary tradition were being extricated from the poet himself, and recentralised as an issue of national concern among literary critics. The *Collected Poems* (1962) won the William Foyle Poetry Prize in 1963, which bolstered the process of public appropriation. Interpretations of his poetry were, and continue to be, complicated by the persistence with which he sought to divulge his aesthetic project in different forms at different points in his career: from *Albyn; or, Scotland and the Future* (1927), through *Lucky Poet* (1943) to *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (1961). Contradictions and inconsistencies are never far away in MacDiarmid’s corpus and these provided fodder for Henderson in the ‘Flytings’. Indeed, MacDiarmid’s opponents tried to make his own work undermine the position he professed to take. Henderson, and his ally Craig, capitalised on the opportunity to disentangle the poetry and the poet.

MacDiarmid’s vision of a Scottish Literary Renaissance prompted controversy over the use of ‘synthetic Scots’, over the appropriate subjects for poetry in modern Scotland, and over the political principles that ought to inform
such poetry. Public disputes in print were not uncommon and, in the 1940s alone, MacDiarmid contributed to, and was often the subject of, debates in the pages of the *Daily Worker, The Scotsman* and the *Glasgow Herald*. The bitter altercation between MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir following the publication of Muir’s *Scott and Scotland* (1936) is perhaps an equivalent example of the way in which timely debates on the national culture can be embodied by the opposing views of two cultural figureheads.\(^{17}\) Henderson’s ‘Flytings’ with MacDiarmid, though not well documented, represent a more constructive conflict, circumventing the language question and the national paradigm, in favour of the continuum between the literary, and that romantic construct, ‘the people’.

Henderson’s collected writings and selected letters testify to the fact that he was also no stranger to public debate. Early essays like ‘Enemies of Folk-song’ (1955) show a carefully constructed argument directed at a public who needed to be woken to the suppression of traditional folk arts under the authority of the ‘high’ arts. His regular contributions to publications like *Saltire Review, Our Time, Daily Worker, Conflict, The Scotsman* and the *Glasgow Herald* demonstrate an acute awareness of contemporary cultural and political debates. Henderson defended the ‘Lallans Makars’ throughout the ‘plastic Scots’ debates of the late 1940s, and continued in later years to incite lengthy exchanges on a variety of subjects in the ‘Points of View’ columns of *The Scotsman*. For example, in 1966 Henderson and John Prebble engaged in a brief ‘flyting’ of sorts over inaccuracies in the historian’s recent work, *Glencoe* (1966) (*TAN*, pp. 146–9); a few weeks later he debated with the playwright Bettina Jonic over her understanding of the circumstances around the death of Federico García Lorca (*TAN*, pp. 149–52); and in early 1984 he swapped blows with V. T. Linacre over the need for ‘rapprochement between the West and the Soviet Union’ (*TAN*, pp. 248–52).\(^{18}\)

The dearth of critical material on Henderson and MacDiarmid’s ‘Flytings’ is perhaps a reflection of the problem they present as a series of exchanges both highly polemical and utterly sincere. Eleanor Bell has, for example, referred to Henderson’s ‘famous “flytings” with MacDiarmid’.\(^{19}\) However, this ‘fame’ cannot be understood as the type that is sustained by scholarly work and critical appraisal. The ‘Flytings’ are remembered in anecdotal terms, as entertaining episodes that demonstrate the thorniness of the poets of the period. In this sense, the ‘Flytings’ can be added to the already swelling store of oft-repeated MacDiarmid-isms, and to the long list of fond remembrances so often attached to the cult of personality that has grown around Henderson.

In two retrospective pieces for *Cencrastus* (1994): ‘Tangling with the Langholm Byspale’ and ‘Flytings Galore: MacDiarmid v. The Folkies’, Henderson recounts these public debates, quoting extensively from the original letters, and setting them in an autobiographical context (*AM*, pp. 381–404, 405–26). In the first, he describes his schoolboy discovery of the poet; his early
experiences ‘jousting . . . on the subject of folklore and the oral tradition’ (AM, p. 384); the relationship he enjoyed with MacDiarmid in the years after the War; and the emerging divide between the ‘Rose St Poets’ and the ‘Folkies’ (AM, p. 396). In the second, he details his relationship with Allan Riddell, the poet and founder of Lines Review, who promoted the work of writers like Trocchi, Morgan and Finlay; those who had at various points found themselves the object of MacDiarmid’s ire. By providing the ‘Flytings’ with these pretexts, Henderson encouraged particular interpretations of the debates and fostered their growing reputation as the ‘muckle flying’ (AM, p. 409), an event that was to gain currency in the collective memory almost like a folk tale.

MacDiarmid did not share Henderson’s view on the importance of their public disputes. In fact, outside the debates themselves, and his private correspondences with Henderson, MacDiarmid barely mentioned them. The relative significance of the ‘Flytings’ is reflected in the subsequent criticism: in Bold’s biography, MacDiarmid (1988), for instance, Henderson is entirely absent. The ‘Honour’d Shade Flyting’ and the ‘Folksong Flyting’ appear as two examples among many, of MacDiarmid’s much-relished newspaper controversies. In this instance, the ‘Flytings’ are lost in the hull of a greater narrative of ‘travel, cultural controversy, political engagements and public speaking’ in these later years of the poet’s life. Henderson’s commentators award the ‘Flytings’ more prominence, though this might be explained by their attendant panegyrical tone. The character-led portrayals that celebrate the folklorist-poet, through all his various interests and endeavours, always retain the image of ‘Big Hamish, Seumas Mór . . . his eye twinkling and his fists swinging in time to the chorus of “Tail Toddle”’ at their centre.20 Andrew R. Hunter’s article, ‘The Odyssey of a Wandering King’ (1987), reads like an obituary, and records the ‘Flytings’ as simply another episode reflecting Henderson’s personal and creative development.21 Henderson’s holistic approach to academic and creative work, making no distinction between poetry and song, and engaging directly in the ‘folk process’ while seeking to understand it, has perhaps encouraged his admirers to adopt a similar approach. As a result, a body of text like the ‘Flytings’ is homogenised into this rendering of Henderson as ‘folk-hero’, battling for his political vision and its foundation in the radical folk tradition. This public debate becomes Henderson’s attempt to identify the folk revival as the true inheritor of MacDiarmid’s early poetic promise. Arnold Rattenbury notes that Henderson colluded in cultivating this version of himself: ‘around such a figure myth and legend quite naturally swirled and, sometimes with his own help, stuck’.22

Raymond J. Ross, in his article ‘In the Midst of Things’ (1985), though writing principally of Henderson’s poetry, draws on the interconnectedness that is apparent in his various interests, and makes concise yet illuminating use of the ‘Flytings’ to reflect upon the humanitarianism of his poetry and song, as opposed to the elitism that seemed to inform MacDiarmid’s attitudes.23
Henderson and MacDiarmid embarked on their ‘Flytings’ at a time when the folk revival was already well established; a younger generation had emerged who were rejecting the poetic models of the inter-war Renaissance; and MacDiarmid was beginning to be sequestered by literary historians and fellow poets. Neither figure was new to public debate, yet these discourses were to expose, with remarkable self-consciousness, the tension between two opposing cultural dimensions of a common political agenda: the appeal to the ‘common-weal’, and an extension of the perceived cultural heritage of the many; and the narrower, pioneering work of the avant-garde; the intellectual elite.

**Negotiating MacDiarmid**

In one of Henderson’s later contributions to the ‘Honour’d Shade Flyting’, he revised one of MacDiarmid’s attacks and turned it back on the poet:

> There is a witless philistinism of the streets which can be very galling. But there is also a philistinism of the boudoir (and even of the Rose Street pub) which can be considerably more dangerous, since it more often than not camouflages itself as a protective interest in literature and the arts. 
> 
> *(TAN, p. 93)*

This strikes at the heart of Henderson’s struggle with the idea of the ‘poet’. Here, Henderson situates himself between two apparently opposing positions: first, the dismissal of cultural forms due to preconceptions of their high-mindedness or elitism, and second, due to their apparent populism, or popularity. However, Henderson’s inclusive conception of literary value extends to both the ‘monumental’ and the ‘epic’, which MacDiarmid champions in his contributions, and to the ‘crambo clink’, or bucolic poetry, which the poet maligns *(TAN, pp. 127, 89)*. While this brings us no closer to a concrete conception of literary value, beyond the fact that work cannot be dismissed on the grounds of either its intended audience, or its actual audience, it does demonstrate the ‘creative clash of contradictions’ that comes out of Henderson’s negotiations with MacDiarmid.24 From Henderson’s point of view, open conflict with MacDiarmid was the supreme testing ground for his ideas on art and society. Arriving at the position whereby neither extreme of philistinism can be forgiven, Henderson is forced to accept neither ‘impenetrability’, nor ‘accessibility’, as terms by which literature can be evaluated. This in turn means that his commitment to reconciliation between the artist and society is not necessarily to be achieved directly, by consciously appealing to the people’s tastes, nor by seeking to elevate the audience through the difficulty of the material. If the ‘value’ of artistic practice is to be judged by Henderson’s own terms, in its capacity to appeal to ‘the people’, then this is no more or less achievable by patronising the people and pandering to what you imagine their
tastes to be, or by self-consciously cultivating ‘high-art’ that is defined as such precisely because it excludes the majority. The ‘genuine people’s culture’ that Henderson envisaged would, like the work of the folksinger, connect with the ‘people’ without being populist; and embody resolute political principles and a ‘revolutionary humanism’, without retreating into ‘self-gratificatory elitism’.25

Early in his career Henderson subscribed to MacDiarmid’s infamous tenets. He acknowledged the threat of an English cultural imperialism; he was wilful and confident about the capacity of Lallans for great art-poetry; he demonstrated a consciousness of the need to reconcile the new movements within Scottish writing with national political and cultural traditions; and, like MacDiarmid, he believed that the currents of Scottish cultural practice could and should be concentrated on broadly socialist, nationalist and internationalist perspectives. These positions were, in fact, largely inspired by MacDiarmid. Later, Henderson wrote of his teenage discovery of the poet’s work and ‘the exact moment I first read this amazing poem ['The Bonnie Broukit Bairn'], and antiszyzygy first took me by the thrapple’ (AM, p. 381). In this instance, the ‘antiszyzygy’ ought not to be understood in terms of G. Gregory Smith’s rendering, as an abstract notion of the contrary nature of the Scottish people and their culture(s). Instead, it can be appreciated in a more technical sense, as a structural aspect of these early lyrics. MacDiarmid describes this approach as like nightingales’ song, cognisant of its contradictory impulses:

\[
\text{. . . whose thin high call} \\
\text{And that deep throb,} \\
\text{Which seem to come from different birds} \\
\text{In different places, find an emotion} \\
\text{And vibrate in the memory.}\]

In the lyric Henderson had in mind, the beautiful neglected child at the parade of dignitaries, and the tragic figure of the earth among the planetary gods, describe two such voices ‘in different places’ chiming in the mind of the reader. MacDiarmid’s influence was invigorating. His early lyrics offered positive proof of what could be achieved, where his prose was directed with unremitting precision at what must be overcome.

In a 1948 survey of contemporary Scottish writing, Henderson asserted that MacDiarmid’s ‘most positive service’ was not, however, his work with the Scots language, rather his ‘furthering the great cause of the proletariat in Scotland’ and his ‘clarifying the relation of the cultural revival to the political struggle’:

He [MacDiarmid] realised clearly, and stressed over and over again that no literary revival is worth a damn if it fails to identify itself with the present difficulties and tasks of the people. And conversely, that no poetry which desires to be actual
can afford to neglect the ramifications of exploit and dream in the people’s past. In short, that Scottish poetry, if it is to contribute anything of value to the international complex, must first of all throw off the alien mummy-wrappings we have heard of, and recover its true identity. (AM, p. 376)

In the late 1940s, Henderson was in awe of MacDiarmid’s seemingly unassailable position. The quality of MacDiarmid’s poetry and the remedial, restorative effect of his public attacks and proclamations on national cultural and political life set him up in Henderson’s view as one ‘[towering] in rugged monolithic eminence above the contemporary Scottish scene’ (Ibid.). While Henderson joined his peers in celebrating MacDiarmid’s early Scots lyrics, accolades like the one cited above were reserved for the poet’s role as an outspoken critic, facilitating the search for ‘true identity’ by clearing the path of obfuscations. It is in this capacity that Henderson was a committed convert both to MacDiarmid’s project, and to the discarding of those interpretative frameworks (or ‘alien mummy-wrappings’) that would obscure the present conditions of the people by misappropriating and misrepresenting their inherited histories and folk-beliefs (those ‘of exploit and dream’). MacDiarmid encouraged Henderson to explore the precarious conceptual terrain between the political and philosophical reaches of poetry, and the actuality of the lives of the people.

In 1951, Henderson began editing a volume of selected poems by MacDiarmid to be published by the Scottish Committee of the Communist Party. Though it was never printed, the selection exhibits something of Henderson’s view of the political-philosophical value of MacDiarmid’s poetic voice. Henderson gives prominence to many of the poems that would feature in his own writings, such as the three Hymns to Lenin and ‘The Seamless Garment’. He heralded the Hymns as ‘a landmark in European literature of the period between the wars’ (AM, p. 378), and compared the effect of this work on the Scottish poets of his and Sorley MacLean’s generation to being in the basement of a house being shelled (something he had experienced during the Italian campaign): ‘It was like receiving a giant’s blow between the eyes, and still retaining consciousness’ (AM, p. 444). He agreed with the critic John Speirs, who suggested that ‘Second Hymn to Lenin’ was perhaps the ‘only really contemporary poem in Scots for many generations’. Henderson recommended ‘The Seamless Garment’ to anyone ‘wishing to see how perfectly colloquial speech and fifty-fathom profundity can be blended in the best of MacDiarmid’ (AM, p. 378).

These poems helped Henderson to express, in vivid poetic descriptions, his understanding of the ‘folk process’ in which songs can be picked up, adapted and passed on (AM, p. 430). To this end he cited the sixth stanza from the ‘First Hymn to Lenin’: ‘Descendant o’ the unkent bards wha made / Sangs peerless through a’ post-anonymous days . . .’ Henderson also quoted the ‘Second Hymn to Lenin’ (‘Are my poems spoken in the factories and the
fields?’) in the ‘Folksong Flyting’ (TAN, p. 124), and concluded the extended introductory essay to his translation of Antonio Gramsci’s Prison Letters with a considerable portion of ‘The Seamless Garment’ (PL, p. 21). While these uses of MacDiarmid’s poetry are calculated to support particular discursive points, the terms in which they are couched and the frequency with which they appear, suggest that Henderson’s perceived alliance with MacDiarmid as a poet was more than simply tactical.

These poems held a particular appeal for Henderson because they all feature a pronouncedly reflexive poetic voice and demonstrate an awareness of the task of the poet and of the potential of poetry to achieve something vast, inclusive, unitary and absolute. Of ‘The Seamless Garment’, Henderson wrote: ‘he moves effortlessly from . . . a tweed mill in his native town . . . to a philosophical discussion concerning the nature of fully achieved poetry like Rilke’s and the unremitting relentless unity of Lenin’s revolutionary thought and praxis’.30 ‘Second Hymn to Lenin’ also addresses the philosophical reach of poetic and political endeavours and the challenges they represent: ‘Ah, Lenin, politics is bairn’s play / To what this maun be!’31 Henderson’s conception of poetry was therefore informed by his appreciation for the balance between this highest of artistic disciplines that must have the capacity to express all of human knowledge and experience, and the impulse to give voice to the lives of the people – as exemplified in MacDiarmid’s poetry.

MacDiarmid offered the young poet-folklorist a literary surface on which to project himself. Not only was Henderson inferring an alliance with a poet he considered to be one of the greatest living poets of the day and perhaps Scotland’s greatest ever (AM, p. 427); he was also setting in motion a more calculated process of appropriation. Henderson wanted to square his cultural-political project with that of his MacDiarmid. The well-documented excesses or ‘extremes’ of MacDiarmid’s thought need not be reconciled if the ‘MacDiarmid’ you choose to draw out from his work is one that consistently undermines or transcends the flippant sound-bites that have frequently come to characterise his ‘anti-humanist’ or ‘elitist’ positions. In expressing his own cultural-political agenda Henderson cited particularly contemplative lines, empathetic passages and abstracted philosophical verses from MacDiarmid’s corpus. In doing so he gave the impression that MacDiarmid’s poetry constituted an endorsement of his ideas, even if the poet himself disapproved: he appealed to the poetry to refute the poet. In his later, retrospective pieces, Henderson often referred to MacDiarmid as the ‘Langholm Byspale’, which is both personalised and eulogistic.32 ‘Byspale’ can denote a parable or a proverb, as well as a person of rare or wonderful qualities. Given the poet’s well-documented relationship with his native Langholm, it might also have been intended to evoke the role of an ‘outcast’ or an ‘illegitimate child’ (OED). An epithet such as this allows for the ambiguities and difficulties in Henderson’s appreciation for MacDiarmid.
As Alec Finlay has confirmed, by the 1940s Henderson had positioned himself securely on MacDiarmid’s side of those polarities that the poet had himself fostered in Scottish cultural life (TAN, p. 306). In an article titled ‘Scotland’s Alamein’, Henderson demonstrated not only his political alignment but also his rhetorical affinity with MacDiarmid, echoing the journalistic hyperbole that typified the poet’s prose. Published in MacDiarmid’s The Voice of Scotland, it details the symbolic currency of the Highland 51st Division throughout the North African and Italian campaigns, and goes on to compare this ‘picture of Scotland at war’ with ‘the spectacle of our country-men in peace-time’.33 The comparison culminates in Henderson’s explanation of the ‘Alamein’: the strategic battle that might determine the outcome of an ongoing war, a scenario that, apparently, Scotland still faced. The article should be read in the context of the National Assembly of the Scottish Convention, which took place on 22 March 1947, and the editorial line of the publication in which it appeared, which was forcefully pro-independence. Henderson confidently sketches the details of this metaphorical ‘Alamein’ in robust and proclamatory language. He attacks ‘pious platitudes’, especially those of the Kirk, reasoning that ‘spiritual uplift is no substitute for earthly élan’, and asserts that forms of cultural distinctiveness (like the Mod, or programmes to encourage the use of the Gaelic language) are toothless and ‘pathetic’ if detached from direct political objectives, such as the establishment of a Scottish Parliament:

The fight to maintain and develop a distinctive Scottish way of life must be invigorated and sustained by political action. Without the latter the former is – in the last analysis – only an elaborate form of shadow-play, which in time must become inept and meaningless.

Henderson recognises that the writers of the Renaissance, ‘MacDiarmid, Young, Maclean and the rest’, are among the few who had ‘maintained some kind of superstructure of Scottish culture over the gutted desolation of the national like [sic] in this century’.34 The defence of the Renaissance is an extension of those accolades Henderson consistently awarded MacDiarmid: ‘He is the man who has sacrificed everything to purge Scotland of its deadening Philistinism and who – in John Speirs’ words – “still stands for health and life and sincerity in Scotland against complacency and indifference”’ (AM, p. 390). Henderson attributes the apathy and ignorance that MacDiarmid railed against to a lazy self-satisfaction common to the comforts of peacetime and to the depoliticised discourses of a community that does not feel threatened. The language suggests an embattled position on the national question, though Henderson avoids identifying the ‘enemy’ in this formulation. There is no mention of the ‘English imperialist Ascendancy’, ‘consolidated . . . with the full acquiescence of the Scottish bourgeoisie’ of which he also wrote elsewhere during this period (AM, p. 374).
Though he is careful with his terms, Henderson invokes a committed and resolute campaign. Couched in the language of military strategy, he acknowledges that one cannot afford to be discouraged by the possibility of defeat:

Scotland’s national situation to-day is fully as perilous as the Eighth Army’s when it faced the defensive battle of El Alamein . . . It was necessary to check the Axis army, and then throw it back – nothing else would do. For Scotland, here and now, the same alternative presents itself. If this nation does not forthwith rally and hurl back once and for all the forces which for two centuries have been encompassing its obliteration, it will henceforward be fighting nothing but a forlorn rearguard action. It will have had it.

[. . .]

One cannot exclude the possibility that they ['the Scots'] will be defeated. But they had better not be. History does not pardon the defeated. She seldom even provides them with a gravestone.35

The dramatic strokes of his rhetoric are similar in tone to MacDiarmid’s on this subject. Structured around a basic metaphor the article pre-empts various counter arguments. Henderson is emphatic: spiritual platitudes must be rejected, apathy must be rooted out and the cultural must be tied fast to the political if it is to be of use. While he notes that the Highland 51st Division is a valuable symbol despite the ‘cheap propaganda which stuck in the Jocks’ gullets’, this is justified by its use as an image of absolute resolution and of the ‘perfervid spirit of our ancestors’ – which seems no less propagandistic.36 The structuring thought is then not only historically evocative and romantic; it also allows for the exacting language of military strategy and elicits a programme for change that would cut through ‘sentimentalisms’ and drive aggressively at the ultimate aim: political self-determination.

After the War, Henderson was a regular contributor to MacDiarmid’s National Weekly. Towing the editorial line, he wrote on the state of the nation, Irish Republicanism, James Connolly – ‘Ireland’s greatest Marxist and revolutionary leader’ – and Scotland’s place at the World Peace Congress of 1949.37 Like other contemporary Scottish writers such as Alexander Scott, Douglas Young, GoodSir Smith and Maurice Lindsay, Henderson was part of MacDiarmid’s publicity machine in the post-war period. Like these figures, he was never wholly subsumed into MacDiarmid’s project, though he did share in the poet’s ambitions for cultural and political life in Scotland and presented himself as a disciple to the poet’s cause. Henderson conscribed to some degree to what GoodSir Smith described as ‘the gospels [MacDiarmid] bears witness to . . . those seeming irreconcilables, Scottish Nationalism and Communism’.38 However, Henderson’s position was one marked by its humanism and, as it transpired, by a commitment to the ‘democratic muse’ of folksong. Henderson looked back on MacDiarmid’s membership of the CPGB
(a ‘Stalinist’ organisation as he saw it) and placed himself, instead, in ‘the Dubcek wing, in all this’ (AM, p. 443).³⁹

Henderson carried *A Drunk Man Looks At The Thistle* with him through the War and at this point still looked forward to the day when he might meet its author. Even at this early stage, he expressed some of those tensions that would be publicly performed in the ‘Flytings’ more than a decade later. In northern Italy, in the autumn of 1945, Henderson composed a response in verse to MacDiarmid’s autobiography. He later explained:

I read *Lucky Poet*, and sat reflecting on MacDiarmid’s bewildering poetic and political career, and all the paradoxical and self-contradictory things I had heard about him, which seemed to me not so much a fruitful interplay – or clash – of opposites as hopelessly disparate ideas and contentions collapsing into an incoherent jumble. (AM, p. 385)

In the poem, which became ‘To Hugh MacDiarmid: On Reading *Lucky Poet*’, Henderson praises the incisive criticisms his subject had made of the ‘blubbing company’ of the ‘Scots burghers’. ‘If there were just two choices . . .’ writes Henderson, ‘mine would be yours’ (CPS, pp. 119–20). However, he goes on to detail those ‘maladies of Scottish, not of English making’, lamenting the easily bought loyalties of the Scots, and their taste for ‘the jackal’s pickings’ of empire. While MacDiarmid’s achievements in showing ‘the shame of our idiot Burns Suppers’ are celebrated, those truly damaging elements in Scottish society, ‘the meanness, the rancour, / The philistine baseness, the divisive canker’, are regarded as internal issues. Henderson writes, ‘If we think all our ills come from “ower the Border” / We’ll never, but never, march ahead in “guid order”’, and in this light, he struggles to make sense of MacDiarmid’s ‘tortured logomachy’. The poem ends: ‘Just what do you stand for, MacDiarmid? I’m still not certain. / I don’ wanna step behin’ dat tartan curtain . . .’ Henderson is frustrated by the medium of MacDiarmid’s political and cultural project, suggesting that vicious hyperbole achieves certain aims but neglects to offer positive solutions to the nation’s various ‘maladies’. The potency of Henderson’s suspicions even brings him to fear that there may be a vacuum beneath MacDiarmid’s staged persona, behind the ‘tartan curtain’, where there ought to be an ideological foundation and a plan for its implementation. The complex of intertextual references in *Lucky Poet* and the density of its prose no doubt contributed but Henderson’s concerns were established early and would deepen in the following two decades. In a collection dedicated to the poet on his seventy-fifth birthday, in 1967, Henderson’s contribution was set apart from the fawning of some others. Adapting Maurice Lindsay’s ‘somewhat lightweight effort of 1943’, ‘The English see you as an angry eagle / Who tears at them with sharp and furious claws’, Henderson’s rendering is ‘The English see you as an ancient beagle / That limps along on mangy calloused paws’ (AM, pp. 387–8).
In an article on MacDiarmid published in *Edinburgh City Lynx* just weeks after the poet’s death, Henderson included a photograph of MacDiarmid cutting peat in Whalsay. It is a double-exposure image and shows two figures, one standing upright and the other stooping over. The two appear on the same spot, sharing the task and the landscape, though the standing figure’s horizon is a shadowy copy of the darker, more clearly defined one below it, which belongs to the crouching man. Henderson notes that the dedication reads ‘To Hamish, Hugh MacDiarmid and Chris Grieve at the peat in the Shetlands’. While many who have written on the poet have qualified their use of ‘MacDiarmid’ and ‘Grieve’, delineating between these identities as and when the poet did, Henderson’s inclusion of this image speaks to something more personal.

The potential interpretations of this photograph are many, particularly for the student of modern Scottish literature: the duality of the man and the poet perhaps lies closest to the surface, especially given MacDiarmid/Grieve’s inscription. Furthermore, the image brings to mind G. Gregory Smith’s familiar visualisation of the ‘Caledonian Antisyzygy’: a ‘grinning gargoyle at the elbow of a kneeling saint’. It shares aspects of its composition with another double-exposure image of the divided self said to embody Smith’s concept: that of Richard Mansfield crouching in front of himself as both Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Henderson showed his awareness of the currency of such an image and extends this sensitivity towards the difficulties of interpreting MacDiarmid’s work in the text of the article. Writing in 1978, Henderson concludes with something of an understatement: ‘it will be a long time – possibly years – before MacDiarmid’s gigantic oeuvre can be seen in perspective and appraised properly’. He continues, ‘for all his savage arrogance in controversy, MacDiarmid is revealed by the greatest of his poetry (and by the testimony of many friends) as a very different kind of being’.

The challenge that MacDiarmid presents to those who try to negotiate with his writings and with his political and aesthetic principles is central to Henderson’s tribute. Having briefly outlined his own sometimes strained relationship with the poet, Henderson closes his article with a passage from the poem ‘Depth and the Chthonian Image’, including the lines, ‘*Ein Mann aus dem Volke* – weel I ken / Nae man or movement’s worth a damn unless / The movement’ud gang on without him if / He de’ed the morn’. By centralising the contradictory elements of MacDiarmid’s oeuvre, voicing his frustrations with *Lucky Poet*, and his admiration for *In Memoriam James Joyce*, Henderson was to maintain MacDiarmid’s legacy and the ‘movement’ that he promoted. The demand for the poet to be ‘*Einn Mann aus dem Volke*’ emerges as one of Henderson’s chief concerns, and one of the major battle lines in *The Scotsman* disputes.
The ‘Flytings’ as Flytings

The designation of the flytings as ‘Flytings’, by contributors at the time and by subsequent commentators, affiliates them with a literary tradition particular to Scotland. Flyting is generally associated with Scottish poets of the sixteenth century, and with *The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedie* (c.1503) in particular. Dunbar and Kennedy’s contest is widely recognised as the earliest example of a model of flyting in Scots verse, which was revisited with David Lyndsay’s *Answer to the King’s Flyting* (c.1537) and *The Flyting of Montgomerie and Polwart* (c.1585). In this context ‘flyting’ denotes a formalised bardic contest, distinguished by its show of virtuoso versification and powerful invective. In deference to this literary tradition, the term ‘flyting’ has become synonymous with the period, and with these defining characteristics. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* states that ‘Scottish flyting is marked by its vivid language, hyperbolic slander, and underlying playfulness’. However, as Priscilla Bawcutt has suggested, the etymological implications ought not to be overlooked and, in fact, this literary-critical sense is a comparatively recent conceptualisation. Bawcutt explains that there was a common usage of the word in Scots (with variations in Old English) in the medieval period, which corresponded more simply to terms like ‘dispute’, ‘quarrel’ or ‘scold’, and did not necessarily refer to literary endeavour but to any such publicly expressed disagreement.

In a late interjection in the *Honour’d Shade* disputes, Thomas Crawford was the first to use the term ‘flyting’ to describe the debates, and in doing so he taunted MacDiarmid with the remark that this was ‘surely a folk-art in itself’ (*TAN*, p. 99). Throughout the controversies the various participants show a clear awareness of the terms of their debates as being rooted in an oppositional format that is synonymous with a flying and not necessarily associated with the newspaper’s ‘points of view’ page. The language of contestation is apparent whenever the correspondents reflect directly on the nature of their discourse: MacDiarmid refers to Henderson and Craig as his ‘opponents’ (p. 134), Henderson talks of their ‘controversy’ (p. 131) and Douglas Young repeatedly laments Henderson’s ‘renewed attacks’ (pp. 134, 138). Of all the correspondents in the three ‘Flytings’, Henderson is most vocal in his recognition of their participation in a kind of modern-day flyting. He thereby establishes himself as one side of the opposition that is implied. In this sense, the ‘Flytings’ are something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: as the discourse is increasingly recognised as a flyting, both Henderson and MacDiarmid distinguish themselves as the two conflicting voices that define it as such. This differentiates them from those who intervene in an effort to mitigate the conflict, often by pointing out that both sides set out arguments that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. William Smith’s contribution is a prime example. In his letter in the ‘Folksong Flying’, he calls attention to the ‘spuriosity of applying to folksong the criteria employed in the appraisal of formal literature’ (*TAN*, p. 129). By interjecting
in this manner Smith displayed his fundamental misunderstanding. Henderson and MacDiarmid were under no illusions as to the most apparent differences between folk-song and art-poetry. Smith’s reductive reasoning had no place in the performance of the ‘Flytings’, where broader conceptions of art and its function were under discussion, and not the fact that a song is sung and a poem is not. In response to an onslaught of particularly barbed comments from MacDiarmid, and in framing his own invective response, Henderson took note of the ‘bold figures of speech in polemical correspondence’ (TAN, p. 96). Later in the ‘Folksong Flying’ he writes of how ‘the correspondence is taking on with every letter more and more of the high mottled complexion of a Celtic flying’ (p. 124). Furthermore, in a particularly fervent climax, Henderson makes a show of his efforts to account for MacDiarmid’s position:

Some readers may have put Mr MacDiarmid’s growlings down to mere testiness, or regarded them as understandable excrescences on a flying which in the nature of things may tend to get a bit inflamed. In my opinion it goes much deeper than that. (p. 132)

Henderson goes on to explore the fundamentally ‘unresolved contradictions’ in MacDiarmid’s outlook and identifies what he calls an anti-humanist ‘kind of spiritual apartheid’ (Ibid.). As this example illustrates, the tendency of participants towards hyperbole, and various other rhetorical strategies, are to be expected in this context. Though quotations are unburdened by context, opponents are rendered as caricatures, straw men appear at every juncture and the intellectual and imaginative limitations of each are invoked with snide remarks from the other, this performative aspect is crucial. Personal attacks and lofty intellectualism are bundled up together and spat onto the opinion columns of The Scotsman.

Both Henderson and MacDiarmid were well aware of Scotland’s flying heritage. MacDiarmid famously drew from one of the original innovators of the form in his call to go ‘back to Dunbar’ and his most celebrated work, A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle (1926), opens with the claim that his ‘. . . flytin’ and scaltrie sall be / . . . / As the bauch Earth is wi’ the lift / Or fate wi’ mankind!’ (emphasis added). Furthermore, in an editorial for Voice of Scotland in 1948 MacDiarmid described contemporary debates over the poetry of the Scottish Literary Renaissance under the title ‘The Flytin’ o’ the Makars’. Henderson wrote an extended song-poem of his own called ‘The Flying o’ Life and Daith’ (CPS, pp. 144–5) which revises the ‘playful’ element of the traditional flying, transposing the form onto the seriousness of an internalised verbal contest between ‘Life’ and ‘Death’, where each makes competing claims on ‘the world’. Bawcutt asserts that flying is ‘one of the few poetic traditions that survived, unbroken, from the time of Dunbar to that of Allan Ramsay’. Kurt Wittig, in The Scottish Tradition in Literature (1958), projected the ‘flying spirit’ onto
Fergusson, Burns, Scott, Byron, Carlyle and, finally, MacDiarmid.\textsuperscript{49} Kenneth Simpson’s essay ‘The Legacy of Flying’ (1991), though it focuses on the vernacular revival of the late eighteenth century, includes a note on the west-coast tradition of ‘sherracking / shirracking’ – as it appears in the novel \textit{No Mean City} (1935) and in Edwin Morgan’s poem ‘King Billy’ – which is described as a descendant of the flying tradition.\textsuperscript{50}

There has, however, been a tendency to find evidence of the ‘flying spirit’ in any example of stylised polemical writing by a Scottish author. Signifiers of the flying form become part of the apparatus of critics who inadvertently reduce the rich variance of Scottish literature to a handful of recognisable tropes, themes and techniques. In \textit{Scottish Literature and the Scottish People: 1680–1830} (1961) Craig notes that such ‘forced Scotticising’ ‘runs amok’ in Wittig’s book, and relies on a narrow conception of the ‘truly Scots’, with ‘no word of either the practical needs which threw up such features or of the quite other cultures in which they also occur’.\textsuperscript{51} This same danger is apparent in attempts to understand the heritage of flyting in Scottish literature, and it cannot be allowed to colour our consideration of the relationship between \textit{The Scotsman} ‘Flytings’ and the literary mode to which they allude. In this respect, it is important to note that Henderson and MacDiarmid’s is a conscious parallel with this medieval literary tradition and not necessarily part of an instinct or state of mind that the Scottish writer has no choice but to function within.

The political wing of the folk revival found an important place for the flying tradition in conceiving of their programme for cultural renewal. Writing in the sleeve notes for \textit{Ding Dong Dollar} (1962), a collection of ‘Anti-Polaris and Scottish Republican Songs Recorded in Scotland’ and written and performed by various revivalists, folk poets and songwriters, Henderson describes the parallel traditions of ‘literary’ and ‘sub-literary’ satire in Scottish cultural history.\textsuperscript{52} From the literary flytings of early ‘Celtic’ society, through ‘partisan and often scurrilous satirical verse and song’ these traditions are said to have ‘cross-fertilised’, converging most famously in Burns and, in the twentieth century, in MacDiarmid. As the modern-day inheritor MacDiarmid had reasserted ‘with all the power of faith, passion and intellectual ferocity, everything that is most important in this tradition’. Henderson then claims that the ‘new direction’ of younger poets towards a ‘Scottish Folksong Renaissance’ was inevitable, and that the establishment of a ‘new metropolitan folk-song corpus’ is part of the direct inheritance of this satirical vein.\textsuperscript{53} Politically minded revivalists, therefore, seem to have endorsed Henderson’s vision of the descent of the modern movement and considered themselves part of a continuum of literary and folk-based interaction, of which the medieval flytings were an early example. The modern ‘Flytings’ also validate Henderson’s thesis by having staged debates on the place of folk culture in Scottish society: the folk revival and the ‘Folksong Flying’ then belong to the same tradition, as Crawford insisted in his observation (‘two such masters of “flying” . . .’).
Many of the defining characteristics of flyting are apparent in *The Scotsman* debates. Simpson posits that flyting is informed by paradox as ‘apparently spontaneous expressive energy is channelled through a form and a mode suggestive of ritual and formality’. Besides the ‘ritual’ element, which is presumably a feature tied to the poetic form of the traditional flyting, this is also true of the later ‘Flytings’. The carefully structured arguments presented by Henderson and MacDiarmid in particular, often appear impulsive and almost conversational. Both enlisted a strategy whereby they would nonchalantly disregard the other’s argument before expressing their own in altogether more forceful and precisely articulated terms. MacDiarmid’s response to Henderson’s suggestion that he was ‘the apostle of a kind of spiritual apartheid’ is a good example:

> How silly can Mr Hamish Henderson get? Everybody in some degree practices what he calls ‘spiritual apartheid’ if he or she likes one thing and dislikes another, prefers to associate with certain people and not with others, and so forth . . . But all this has little or nothing to do with the essential argument . . . At the present stage in human history, there are far more important things to do than bawl out folksongs, which, whatever function they may have had in the past, have little or no relevance to most people in advanced highly industrialised countries today. (TAN, pp. 133–4)

These comments precede MacDiarmid’s own assertions on the progressive force of literature, which, due to his apparently tenable disregard for Henderson’s accusations, can be presented in sharp relief, as a model of rationality. This introduces another technique employed in the ‘Flytings’: the purposeful misinterpretation of the other’s arguments. MacDiarmid’s reading of the ‘spiritual apartheid’ is, for example, not the same as that which Henderson intended. A highly qualified statement on the poet’s marked ‘anti-humanism’ in some of his early work and under ‘one of his persona’ (TAN, p. 131), is thereby transformed into an absurd and indiscriminate pronouncement made by a desperate antagonist. Bawcutt asserts that Dunbar and Kennedy’s famous flyting is ‘a quarrel, not a reasoned argument’; that it has a ‘pattern less of argument than of accusation and rebuttal’. It is the kind of exchange that goes on forever and gets nowhere. It invites ingenuity and dynamism but not necessarily in the pursuit of truth, only perseverance: outlasting your opponent, always ready with another rebuttal, another accusation.

Simpson recognises the reductive juxtaposition of formal and vernacular diction as another prevalent technique used in flyting, and again this can be seen throughout Henderson and MacDiarmid’s debates, even in the excerpt cited above. The informal language – ‘how silly can Mr Hamish Henderson get’ and ‘bawl out folksongs’ – has the desired effect: portraying the ease with which MacDiarmid can dismiss his opponent’s ‘silly’ comments, especially in light of the altogether more eloquent presentation of his own views:
Folksong, and other folk-arts, may be the root from which all else has sprung, but a root is best just taken for granted, if the tree or plant is flourishing . . . It does not matter one iota if we never see the seed (or root), nor would it matter if we just failed to realise there is one. (TAN, p. 134)

Though these modern-day flytings do not demonstrate the complex versification, metrical ingenuity, alliteration and rhyme schemes that are paraded in the traditional form, they are nevertheless characterised by their ‘display of rhetorical skills’. At times, they also demonstrate biting invective, as in MacDiarmid’s tirades against folk-song as ‘a wallowing in the mud-bath of ignorance’ and a ‘re-emersion in illiterate doggerel’ (TAN, p. 94). The performance of the medieval flyting and its apparent standing as court entertainment, has encouraged literary historians to question the sincerity of the poet’s animosity in these exchanges. Bawcutt suggests that few readers seem to have taken the participants’ anger seriously, and Simpson refers to the ‘joke’ that some of the audience would interpret such insults literally. In reference to the ‘Folksong Flying’, Angus Calder remarks that MacDiarmid had only ‘pretended to believe that folksong was intellectually worse than insignificant’. However, it would be a mistake to see the exchanges of The Scotsman debates as merely performance. Henderson and MacDiarmid’s quarrel also harboured genuine disagreement over the fundamentals of artistic production.

In a 1958 essay for Lines Review, ‘The Flyting Scotsman’, W. A. Gatherer traced a ‘peculiarly Scottish sin . . . Ire’ and the virtue made of it among the nation’s writers. Having followed the transformations of the flying form through Scottish literary history, Gatherer identifies a hiatus of ‘flyting’ that only ended with MacDiarmid’s A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle (1926) and To Circumjack Cencrastus (1930). He explains that in these works the poet rediscovered the ‘true force of poetic flyting’; that is, not as mere ‘scolding’ but as ‘the working-out of an argument in terms of passion and sarcasm’. Writing in the following year for the same publication Morgan cited The Battle Continues (1958) – MacDiarmid’s response in verse to Roy Campbell’s pro-Franco poem Flowering Rifle (1936) – as an example of a particular ‘branch’ of the ‘Scotch flying tradition’ that is less comedic than its sixteenth-century precedents, and more purposeful and ‘hortatory’. Morgan emphasises the palpable anger, and even hatred, that MacDiarmid harnessed in this long poem. While MacDiarmid does not betray such ‘hatred’ in the modern ‘Flytings’, it might still be argued that ‘amusement is subservient to political zeal’, as it is in The Battle Continues. Certainly, any given flying contributor need not choose between the impulse to entertain and the desire to emerge victorious from their debate; both compulsions are evident in Henderson and MacDiarmid’s contests.

The poet’s power to ‘satirise’ is recognised as a prominent factor in the
historical practice of flying and Henderson and MacDiarmid sustained this climate of ridicule in their public debates. It is not enough to dismantle an opponent’s argument, to expose contradictions or inconsistencies in their position: a flyting participant must also belittle the contributions of their opposition and render them unworthy of considered response. In another of MacDiarmid’s controversies, this time with Hamilton Finlay, he published a pamphlet outlining his views, which began with the following passage:

The instance of this pamphlet... serves for a final word on a recent bewildering exchange of public addresses which, in truth, do not really affect the answering poet. On the contrary, it is hoped that it is only an opportunity to clarify further his system of immediate reaction to a situation he would regard as extraneous nonsense.

Flytings in the Middle Ages are thought to have been a form of ‘court entertainment’, to be performed publicly, or else written on manuscript and passed around, or displayed in a public place, for instance, pinned to a church door. The monarch, or another patron, then named the triumphant poet on the basis of their skill in versification. Among a professional class of poets these contests had an important function, determining the future of art-poetry in that court or principality. As Bawcutt describes, ‘the combat is envisaged as part of a judicial process, in which the contestants put their own veracity and their opponents’ lies to the test of battle’. Similarly, these mid twentieth-century flytings were public discourses set in the opinion columns of a national newspaper, perhaps a modern equivalent of the church door. Although no victor was declared, two aesthetic programmes were set at odds, in open discussion, exposed to the scrutiny of the Scottish public. Subsequent generations of poets and poetry readers were perhaps to be the ultimate adjudicators. However, the ‘Flytings’ did not begin and end with this small selection of letters ‘to the Editor’: the core issues are critical to the worldview of any creative artist. As such, everything Henderson and MacDiarmid ever wrote can conceivably be interpreted as an extension of this series of debates, especially in Henderson’s case. He frequently revisited the ‘muckle flying’, and, perhaps more than any of his peers, wrestled with the contradictions of MacDiarmid’s project as though they were his own.

Core Issues

The Scotsman ‘Flyings’ are difficult texts to analyse precisely because of the characteristics they share with their medieval antecedents. The complex of tactical arguments, reductive readings and flamboyant rhetoric, make an interrogation of the core issues of the ‘Flyings’ problematic, as they are inextricably bound up in, and often obscured by, the self-conscious performance of the flyting form. Indeed, Bawcutt’s conception of flying as simply a process...
of ‘accusation and rebuttal’ is perhaps the only framework within which the
diverse subject matter of the three debates can be fully understood.\textsuperscript{65} Beneath
the complexities of form, it is possible to identify four major issues that are
most extensively, or most emphatically, discussed. These are: first, the problem
of the prescription of literary ‘value’; second, the problem of the ‘popular’ in
literary production; third, the disputed dichotomy of ‘high’ and ‘low’ arts; and
finally, the guiding principles of the ‘individual’ and the ‘communal’ in the
pursuit of a progressive literature. Each of these issues represents a different
aspect of the interface between literature and society.

These four principal issues do not function in isolation. They give shape to
the debate, and articulate the grounds on which Henderson and MacDiarmid
built their disputes. The problem of the appraisal of literary ‘value’ is made
immediately apparent in the ‘Honour’d Shade Flyting’ with arguments over
which poets should have been represented in the 1959 anthology (\textit{TAN}, pp.
79–91). It is also clearly an issue for the ‘Flytings’ as a whole, as Henderson
and MacDiarmid establish themselves as the spokesmen of two opposing
conceptions of how literature in Scotland should advance. Where Henderson
extols the advantages that could come of a synthesis of folk-song and art-
poetry (p. 95), MacDiarmid reasserts his belief in the contemporary demand
for ‘higher and higher intellectual levels’; a pursuit that is, he assures us,
 incompatible with Henderson’s vision (p. 119).

The ‘Flytings’ are awash with competing value judgements and claims
made, particularly by MacDiarmid, on unequivocal terms. MacDiarmid refers
to the folk-song so passionately promoted by Henderson as ‘the simple out-
pourings of illiterates and backward peasants’ (p. 128) and smugly informs his
opponents that ‘a preference for the inferior is one of the commonest disguises
of envy’ (p. 84). In regard to the \textit{Honour’d Shade} disputes he defends the
progressive impetus of the ‘Abbotsford Poets’ as a literary avant-garde (deri-
sively reworded as a ‘clique’ by other correspondents) (p. 80), and dismisses
other contributors’ views as ‘the kind of contention and conception of poetry
that has bogged Scottish verse in ruts of worthlessness so long’ (p. 85). In this
context, MacDiarmid imagines himself ‘protecting literary and artistic \textit{value}’
(emphasis added) (p. 94). He prompts his opponents to question how much
authority is afforded to MacDiarmid due to his standing as a poet, or due to
the forcefulness with which he asserts his criteria for literary greatness. Other
commentators, including Henderson, are far less categorical in their claims.
Indeed, in response to MacDiarmid’s outspoken attitudes Henderson charges
him with ‘that very same self-centred provincialism which he is forever and a
day claiming to combat’ (p. 90). For Henderson, the most damning charge is
that of provincialism, as it speaks of a narrow, regressive perspective, which
is precisely the national malady that both figures propose to remedy. Such
disputes over objective literary ‘value’ are invariably informed by subjective
analyses and are, in this sense, inherently irresolvable. As Young states in one
of his letters in reference to a short series of exchanges on the matter of linguistic choices in Scottish poetry: ‘it is a matter of taste’ (p. 89). This is not to say that the discourse is simply a turgid, unproductive affair where stubborn contributors refuse to develop their arguments; the contributors provided The Scotsman readers with an investigative dialogue that compels us to question the constitution of literary value, though they do not come close to reaching a consensus on the issue.

The problem of the ‘popular’ in literary production pervades the ‘Flytings’. In response to Henderson’s insistence on the virtues of folk-song, a mode ‘in the idiom of the people’ (TAN p. 88), MacDiarmid declaims ‘the philistinism that attacks literature and the arts for not appealing to the big public, but does not expect science to do anything of the sort’ (p. 94). In comments like these MacDiarmid expresses his disregard for the need for popular endorsement and reaffirms its irrelevance in determining ‘literary quality’. In another of his eloquent retaliations he writes:

In all literatures there is a vast undergrowth of doggerel and mediocre versifying, but it is a remarkable instance of trahison de clercs if Dr Craig would have us believe that this is to be valued as equal to or better than acceptably great poetry simply because, thanks to their minimal literacy and because it corresponds to their ignorant tastes and reflects the sorry condition of their lives, it is more popular among the broad masses of the people than the poems of, say, Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe, Rimbaud, Rilke, Pasternak, Montale, etc, etc. (p. 118)

MacDiarmid explains the basis of these attitudes in a quotation from an early essay on his work, ‘The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid’ (1938), by Nan Shepherd:

The actuality . . . [is] that men are obtuse, dull, complacent, vulgar. They love the third-rate, live on the cheapest terms with themselves . . . they refuse to explore the largeness of life. This refusal he [MacDiarmid] sees as a cowardice. If for the mass of men this picture is true, he believes that human society is wrongly ordered. Therefore the poet demands a political change that will give men such living conditions as may make the finer potentialities actual. (p. 97)

MacDiarmid’s endorsement of this analysis suggests that he writes for a society that has already passed through the political reordering he sought. It also implies that the ‘popularity’ of a literary work, in this context, is in fact a mark of its betrayal of the writer’s creative duty. The ‘mob ignorance’ that he laments is, in another contribution, ascribed to failures in popular education and to the class-structure of modern society (p. 122). Nevertheless, MacDiarmid refuses to let extenuating circumstances like economic base and socio-political superstructure diminish his determination not to pander to ‘popular’ taste.
Though his is an incisive critique of the cultural landscape of twentieth-century Scotland, and the increasingly sophisticated and pervasive channels of mass culture that emerged, MacDiarmid must also concede that he requires nothing less than revolution if his poetry is to find the society for which it was written. Where Henderson tries to excavate and re-popularise traditional arts that have survived, in isolated pockets, into the present day, MacDiarmid demands that the whole of society transform itself to accommodate his art.

In his account of Scottish Labour and their conceptualisations of ‘popular culture’, Angus Calder describes the same theoretical tensions explored by Henderson and MacDiarmid in their flytings. Calder recounts debates over whether the party ought to encourage ‘“proactive” rather than “reactive” cultural expression’, and whether it should support, or initiate, ‘challenging work which, because of innovative forms and new ideas, may begin to puzzle audiences and be, in one sense, “unpopular”’. As with Henderson and MacDiarmid, elements in the Labour movement shared political ambitions, but differed on the role popular culture might play in realising these aims. In a direct response to this resolute opposition between the ‘popular’ and the ‘literary’, Henderson drew upon the figure of the simultaneously popular and distinctly literary poet. He contested MacDiarmid’s revulsion for the Burns cult, insisting that Burns’ popularity was maintained ‘in spite’ of the cult rather than because of it. He drew from his experiences fighting with the Resistenza (the Italian Resistance) during the Second World War, where partisans recited whole passages of Dante by memory (TAN, pp. 123–4). In *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People: 1680–1830* Craig sought to establish a ‘social history’ of literature in Scotland:

> [tracing the] particular facts and particular passages of poetry or fiction in which the life of the people seems to reveal itself most genuinely, and hence to give actuality to themes such as community, society, class, speech-idiom, tradition – which are so apt to remain vague.

In the ‘Flytings’, he was therefore well placed to make claims for the grassroots popularity of Burns. He also suggested that Arnold Wesker’s ‘Centre 42’ movement and Vladimir Mayakovsky’s poetry represented examples of successful artistic engagement with the ‘popular’ (TAN, p. 126). Both Henderson and Craig cited MacDiarmid’s poetry, allegedly showing his own ‘attempt to bridge the modern cultural gulfs and to reach the people with his work’ (p. 122):

> *Are my poems spoken in the factories and fields,*  
>  *In the streets o’ the toon?*  
>  *Gin they’re no’, then I’m failin’ to dae*  
>  *What I ocht to ha’ dune.*

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*The Voice of the People*
While MacDiarmid deemed ‘popularity’ under the contemporary political and social structures a mark of failure, Henderson sought to harness it by bringing about the kind of class-consciousness and public politicisation that both poets desired. In this movement towards a ‘popular poetry’ Henderson saw folk-song as the best hope for ‘communication across the apollyon chasms’ between the artist and the people (TAN, pp. 96, 125).

The rhetorical devices and discursive strategies employed by the correspondents can lead to confusion over the precise nature of their arguments. At certain points in the debates it seems that, for Henderson, the ‘popular’ poet and the art-poet indebted to folk-song became interchangeable: to be popular is to invest in the creative potential of the folk tradition and to invest in this tradition is to be popular. MacDiarmid’s original attacks on folk-song were largely based on its appeal to popular taste. Therefore Henderson and Craig considered a defence of either as a defence of both: that is, folk-song and the autonomy of the people in determining their own forms of cultural self-expression and artistic appreciation. Cultural terms are frequently co-opted or conflated and both Henderson and MacDiarmid, in their efforts to undermine one another, frequently fail to delineate their terms clearly, presenting instead a torrent of argumentation that conflates, for example, the idea of the duty of the poet to write for the people, with an appreciation of the artistic value of traditional Scottish folk-song. This can be explained in part by the tactical decision to purposefully misrepresent an opponent’s position and respond to a simplified or parodied version of their argument.

In this context the issue of the ‘popular’ becomes a determining factor in the division of ‘high’ and ‘low’ arts, or more precisely, ‘literature’ and ‘folk-art’ – a dichotomy that Henderson explores frequently in his early essays. Henderson and MacDiarmid both felt that their cultural interests were under attack; Henderson’s from the world of ‘art-poetry’ and its associated ‘culture vultures’, and MacDiarmid’s from ‘ignorance and apathy . . . the greatest enemies of mankind’. The division ran along the lines of two opposing forms of philistinism that Henderson and MacDiarmid were eager to put to one another: a ‘witless philistinism of the streets’, that MacDiarmid saw in the propagation of the folk arts, and ‘a philistinism of the boudoir (and even of the Rose street pub)’ which, in Henderson’s view ‘can be considerably more dangerous, since it more often than not camouflages itself as a protective interest in literature and the arts’ (TAN, pp. 93–4).

Henderson sought to bridge this perceived division between the ‘high’ and ‘low’ arts by extolling examples of the fruitful exchanges between folk-song and literature, a task that Crawford supported in his contributions to The Scotsman disputes (TAN, p. 99). However, MacDiarmid interpreted such instances of the influence of folk arts in accepted ‘literary’ art, not as a synthesis of the two forms but as the utilisation of folk sources by the literary artist. In his estimations folk-song could, at best, only be a ‘springboard for
significant work’ (p. 121). It does not matter whether the ‘great writers, painters and composers of Europe have owed anything decisive to folksong’, the real measure of their quality is in ‘what they did with the influence in question’ (p. 134). This contention was based on MacDiarmid’s understanding of the nature of folk-song, which was typified by his relegating it to the confines of history and to a form of society that had not existed since before the Industrial Revolution (p. 122). This assessment of folk-song, as an archaic and moribund form, sits in stark contrast to Henderson’s concept of a process free from constraint to any particular historical period. He was convinced of the role of folk-song as an expressive and instinctive reflex of ‘the people’, flexible enough to adapt to societal changes throughout human history. These conflicting conceptualisations of folk-song are in turn based on divergent views on the nature of ‘authorship’.

Alec Finlay prioritised this aspect in his coverage of the ‘Flytings’, distinguishing between the arguments of MacDiarmid and Henderson in terms of their respective commitment to the figure of the literary poet as an individual, and to the ‘communal’ nature of the art of folk-song (TAN, pp. 322–6). Indeed, the principles of the ‘individual’ and the ‘communal’ can be used to explore MacDiarmid and Henderson’s ideas about the nature of the relationship between poetry and society and therefore the basis of their ‘Flytings’. More precisely, these models of authorship provide a framework within which to analyse their proposals for the prospective character of a progressive political literature. In an effort to clarify his position in the ‘Honour’d Shade Flyting’ MacDiarmid cites Lenin:

Communism becomes an empty phrase, a mere façade, and the Communist a mere bluffer, if he has not worked over in his consciousness the whole inheritance of human knowledge . . . made his own, and worked over anew, all that was of value in the more than two thousand years of development of human thought. (TAN, p. 95)

MacDiarmid’s understanding of the purpose and function of poetry relies on the individual’s relationship with the sum of human history, science and culture. In contrast, he sees those ‘who insist that the level of utterance should be that of popular understanding’, like Henderson with his proposed synthesis of folk art and literature, as part of a ‘parasitical “interpreting class” . . . who are the enemies of the people, because what their attitude amounts to is “keeping the people in their place”, stereotyping their stupidity’ (p. 127). Scott Lyall notes that MacDiarmid likely lifted his notion of the ‘interpreting class’ from John Buchan who, in his autobiography Memory Hold-the-Door (1940), used the term to describe those who were ‘by profession atomisers, engaged in reducing the laborious structure of civilised life to a whirling nebula’. Lyall describes MacDiarmid’s disapproval of ‘the managerialist cultural brokers who professionally create the artificial, academic divisions between the high
culture of the educated few and the mass culture suitable for the ignorant many’. MacDiarmid concludes that ‘the interests of the masses and the real highbrow, the creative artist, are identical, for the function of the latter is the extension of human consciousness’ (p. 127). On an individual basis, any one of the ‘masses’ can therefore engage in ‘highbrow’ art, and thereby expand their consciousness as part of an individuated but potentially universal process of poetic realisation.

Where MacDiarmid draws on Lenin to express his ‘guiding principle’, Henderson looks to Antonio Gramsci and his concern with the ‘creative spirit of the people in its diverse phases’ (TAN, p. 131). Henderson believed that a reinvestment in the folk arts was not the work of a ‘parasitical interpreting class’, who shored up artificial divisions in the provision of culture, but the hope for a revived, collective mode of self-expression for ‘the people’, on their own terms (pp. 139–40). MacDiarmid’s unremitting commitment to the ‘extension of human consciousness’ fuelled Henderson’s accusations of a kind of ‘anti-humanist’ ‘spiritual apartheid’ in the poet’s work. In these attacks Henderson drew upon direct quotations from MacDiarmid’s earlier works, including this one, from his essay “Lewis Grassic Gibbon” – James Leslie Mitchell’ (1946): ‘I . . . would sacrifice a million people any day for one immortal lyric. I am a scientific Socialist. I have no use whatsoever for emotional humanism’ (TAN, p. 132). Indeed, this aspect of MacDiarmid’s worldview can be traced on a personal level as well as on a political one. In a letter to David Daiches in 1975 he explains that in relation to ‘the men and women who have interested me most I only have my idea of what their interests and affiliations were – that is, my own idea of them, and never any ordinary human understanding’. David Davie pointed out the essential difference between the two projects represented in the ‘Flytings’ when he explained MacDiarmid’s argument:

There is . . . a struggle between the elite, the intellectual few who do the discovering, and make possible the progress, and the anti-elitist many, who are not equal to participating in the general argument, and who seek [to impose] egalitarianism, of which the Burns international is for [MacDiarmid] the great example.

The ‘individual’ and ‘communal’ emphases can also be seen in action in the later part of the ‘Folksong Flyting’ where MacDiarmid’s promotion of the Communist model of ‘monumental’ and ‘epic’ art, aiming for a ‘grand synthesis’ for the ‘grandeur of the times’, is challenged by Craig and Henderson’s support for a renewed investment in ‘communally shared and developed folk arts’ (TAN, pp. 127–9, 132). Where MacDiarmid imagined himself at the vanguard, dragging the people into class-consciousness and revolutionary fervour; Henderson sought to dissolve himself in a vast, anonymous resurgence of collective political (and poetical) action. The ‘Flytings’ asked how political action is taken: in the minds of individuals, or through a collective consciousness.
These four central issues of *The Scotsman* ‘Flytings’: the problem of the prescription of literary ‘value’; the problem of the ‘popular’ in literary production; the disputed dichotomy of ‘high’ and ‘low’ arts; and the guiding principles of the ‘individual’ and the ‘communal’ in the pursuit of a progressive literature, are a crucial part of the dynamism and intensity of the debates. They do not, however, provide a comprehensive account of the importance of the ‘Flytings’ between Henderson and MacDiarmid. Without situating them within the distinctive formulation of these modern-day flytings, they cannot be wholly understood.

Dialectics

In his article on the legacy of flyting, Simpson emphasises the mutual respect and friendship that is presupposed by such ‘contests of vilification’. On the basis of this familiarity, the combatants of traditional flytings are said to have used the poetic model as a ‘liberating device’ for their dramatic invective, allowing for exchanges that could not otherwise have been openly expressed. This dynamic is equally applicable to Henderson and MacDiarmid’s ‘Flytings’. By the time of the disputes they were well acquainted, as Henderson’s autobiographical essays record. The strength of their relationship combined with the forum of debate made available in the ‘Points of View’ columns contributed to their own ‘liberation device’, facilitating the free debate that followed. The debates may even have been orchestrated with the purpose of bringing issues of great national cultural concern to a wider audience. Though it seems unlikely that this was their primary motivation, it is clear from their resolve that both men were alive to the seriousness of their subject matter.

Neill Martin, in his study of ritual dialogue in Celtic marriage traditions, compares the oration in Celtic marriage ceremonies to the literary tradition of flyting:

> [There is] both interdependence and opposition in these events; as the dialogue proceeds, the two adversaries are continuously collaborating in a joint course of action to which they are both committed. As the poet puts forward a new insult, or opens an allegorical allusion, he is offering his opponent the opportunity to display his ingenuity at his expense; the principle of concord is as important as that of contest.

The exchange and interchange between Henderson and MacDiarmid functions in a similar way. Though any kind of resolution is effectively impossible, as it would require a concession from one or the other, they both participate in a kind of mutual reliance whereby neither MacDiarmid’s aesthetics nor Henderson’s can be fully articulated except within this adversarial framework: if agreement were possible, the debates would never have begun.
self-awareness of their performance, it becomes a more honest investigation: impartiality and objectivity are not staged, but rejected outright. The cynicism of gesture politics is dispelled with and replaced with something more provisional, equivocal, and inquisitive.

In *Lucky Poet*, MacDiarmid described his conception of the ‘Caledonian Antisyzygy’ in terms that might also apply to the relationship between his cultural-political position and Henderson’s: ‘It is not an easy relationship. It entails unceasing conflict, a conflict not of extermination, but rather akin to that state known in biology as “hostile symbiosis”.’ Their debates represented deep-running conflicts within Scottish literary production in the post-war era. These conflicts could not be expressed in any single-perspective format, but required argument and discussion by their very nature. In the sense that they investigate truth through discussion, the ‘Flytings’ signify a dialectical relationship between the two combatants, one inherent to the depth and consequence of the issues at hand. It is a process akin to that described in MacDiarmid’s poem ‘Utterly a Creator’:

A poetry that takes its polish from a conflict  
Between discipline at its most strenuous  
And feeling at its highest – wherein abrasive surfaces  
Are turned upon one another like millstones,  
And instead of generating chaos  
Refine the grist of experience between them.78

The reciprocal ‘wearing-down’ of more acerbic points streamlines their arguments, producing a cleaner sense of the opposition that is expressed. Points are made and countered, absorbed and responded to on both sides. Consequently, the seeming irreconcilability of Henderson’s humanism and MacDiarmid’s intellectual elitism is put into stark relief; their common purpose and mutual reliance is revealed. Most importantly, the precepts of literature that are at stake in these debates – its habitat and its audience – are explored in a public discussion and placed explicitly in several historical and national contexts at once.

As Finlay has noted (*TAN*, p. 342), Henderson extended the ‘Folksong Flyting’ by publishing a rejoinder in his article, ‘McGonagall the What’ (1965) (*AM*, pp. 265–85). Besides cruelly comparing some of MacDiarmid’s less successful verse to that of ‘the supreme practitioner of the art of the belly-flop’, Henderson interrogates the work of William McGonagall (1825–1902) as inhabiting a ‘debatable land’ between art-poetry and folk-song:

The hard truth is that folk-song becomes poetry – or has a chance of becoming poetry – as and when it gets rid of McGonagall. He is, as it were, the sump into which all that is least creative in folk-song is bound to drain.
In other words, this ‘anti-hero of the un-folk process’ drew, perhaps unconsciously, from the detritus of folk-song and balladry in an effort to achieve art-poetry, though he failed spectacularly (AM, pp. 280–1). For Henderson this represented an inverted equivalent of all those who had successfully produced a confluence of art and folk poetry; poets like Burns and Lorca (AM, p. 281). This ‘debatable land’ is essentially the same territory occupied by the ‘Flytings’. As Henderson and MacDiarmid swap blows, it is in fact poetry itself with which they are most directly engaged in debate. Though they do not approach any kind of reconciliation, they bring life to the connecting principles of the dialogical relationship between art and society. Drawing from various sources, often the same ones, Henderson and MacDiarmid construct their opposing conceptions of what literature is, and how it might advance, all the time perhaps doing more to explore the problems inherent in such a task than actually achieving it.

Analysing The Scotsman ‘Flytings’ within the context of the cultural movements to which Henderson and MacDiarmid were respectively attached lifts them out of the anecdotal margins to which they have been confined. The significance of the allusion to the literary tradition of flyting also contributes to this re-contextualisation by providing an opportunity to explore how the forms of these debates are as relevant as their core issues. The distinctive marriage of form – the dialectical nature of the modern-day flyting – and content – the ‘debatable land’ of poetry and its relationship with ‘the people’ – is crucial to the expressive and investigative power of the ‘Flytings’. Though the controversies discussed here were the only direct flytings between these two figures, Henderson’s writings, from the post-war period through to his death in 2002, perpetuate this dialogue with MacDiarmid and the aesthetics and politics he promoted. Henderson’s various writings on folk-song, literature, culture and politics consistently anticipate the kinds of attacks that MacDiarmid made real in the ‘Flytings’. In his manuscript, George Bannatyne added a short postscript to the ‘Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy’: ‘Juge ye now heir quha gat the war’. It is an invitation to the reader to evaluate the performance, not the truth of the combatants’ attacks (whether one was pox-ridden or the other incontinent). Similarly, Henderson and MacDiarmid invite us to judge who ‘gat the war’ in their ‘Flytings’. It is no good to ask who is right, when the effect of the debates is to enact, through collaboration and altercation, a series of contradictory truths.

Though the dialectical nature of their relationship ought to be emphasised, Henderson had more invested in these conflicts than the firebrand he faced, as subsequent writings by and about these figures indicate. MacDiarmid’s contribution to these debates was partly informed by his appetite for controversy, whereas for Henderson there seems to have been more at stake. The ‘Folksong Flying’ was essentially an interrogation of Henderson’s model of revivalism, and of his conception of its political potential. Before his interjection in the ‘Honour’d Shade Flying’, the discussion was wholly concerned with the
arbiters of literary value in relation to the editorial remit of the anthology; afterwards, it turned to more substantive issues like the social dimension of literary production. Henderson endowed the ‘muckle flyting’ with enormous significance: these melees were the intellectual testing ground for his cultural politics, developed over half a lifetime. In his piece on the flying tradition, Gatherer wrote: ‘It might be said that few Scottish poets have not also been preachers: that the true Scot is dicephalous . . . That the two heads should be on the same shoulders is surely monstrous – but that is the doom and the delight of the nation’. Flying, and all that comes with it – the performance, invective, and dialogue – was an appropriate form for Henderson to set out the foundation for his folk revival strategies, and his own work as a poet and song-maker. The collusion that is required in this mode of public dialogue, and the dialectical relationship it represents, are in keeping with Gatherer’s image of the two-headed poet. Though Henderson synthesised the work of many figures in his writings, MacDiarmid was his most persistent and resilient influence. In working through his vision of the revival and his conception of the role of literature in society, Henderson found himself embracing MacDiarmid as his dicephalous other. To proceed, he had to negotiate with that part of the task that the poet represented. Despite his viciousness, this was a man who ‘[had] sacrificed everything to purge Scotland of its deadening Philistinism and who – in John Speirs’s words – “still stands for health and life and sincerity in Scotland against complacency and indifference”’ (AM, p. 390). Though Henderson could not give his unreserved support to MacDiarmid’s cure for the national malaise, the poet had correctly diagnosed it, and had, in turn, inspired Henderson to look for his own solutions.