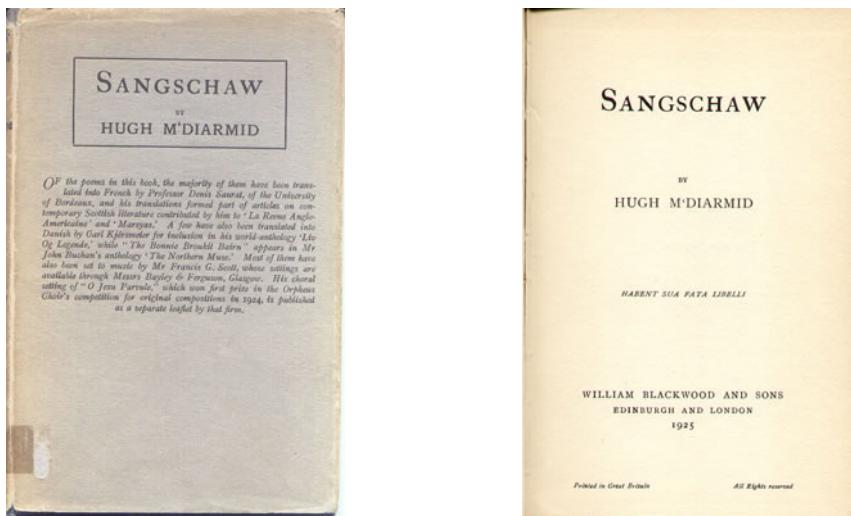


On *Sangschaw* (1925) by Hugh MacDiarmid

Ken Cockburn



Preface

This essay was one of eight written for the Scottish Poetry Library's website, offering an introduction to 20th century Scottish poetry by considering the work of the eight poets represented in the painting [Poets' Pub](#) (1980) by Alexander Moffat. Covering the decades from the 1920s to the 1990s, a collection by each poet is considered in detail under the headings The Book, The Title, The Decade, A Contemporary Reading and Further Reading.

- 1920s, Hugh MacDiarmid, *Sangschaw*
- 1930s, Sorley MacLean, *17 Poems for 6d: in Gaelic, Scots and English* (with Robert Garioch)
- 1940s, Sydney Goodsir Smith, *Under the Eildon Tree*
- 1950s, Norman MacCaig, *The Sinai Sort*
- 1960s, Edwin Morgan, *The Second Life*
- 1970s, Robert Garioch, *Doktor Faust in Rose Street*
- 1980s, George Mackay Brown, *The Wreck of the Archangel*
- 1990s, Iain Crichton Smith, *Ends and Beginnings*

The essays were written in 2003 by Ken Cockburn for the Scottish Poetry Library's website, where they were available from 2004 until c.2010. They are presented here with some abridgements, corrections and amendments.

The Book

MacDiarmid, Hugh

Sangschaw

(Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1925)

Hardback, 190mm x 122mm, paper wraps

The title page includes the Latin epigraph HABENT SUA FATA LIBELLI, taken from Maurus, *De Litteris, Syllabis et Metris*, and given as 'books have their destinies', in *Chambers English Dictionary* (1988).

The volume as a whole contains the dedication TO MY MOTHER (Elizabeth Grieve, née Graham, 1856-1934).

A Preface by John Buchan claims that MacDiarmid's task is "at once reactionary and revolutionary... he would treat Scots as a living language and apply it to matters which have been foreign to it since the sixteenth century [i.e. since the Reformation, and the introduction of an English-language bible]. Since there is no canon of the vernacular, he makes his own, as Burns did."

The CONTENTS page lists and numbers the POEMS: in Scots, 1-27; in English, 28; in French, 29, without giving page numbers.

There follow the poems (pp.1-54) and a Glossary (pp. 55-58). 'Opinions on Mr M'Diarmid's Poetry' offers seven texts, in English & French, whose authors include G.R. Malloch and Alexander M'Gill, the dedicatees of, respectively, the poems 'The Sauchs in the Reuch Heuch Hauch' and 'The Scarlet Woman'.

The Title

The word 'sangschaw' is used only in the title of the collection, and not in any of the poems. It seems to be a new coining by MacDiarmid: the *Concise Scots Dictionary* (1985) offers the following information:

sangschaw a song festival e20 [a new coining based on WAPPENSHAW]

wappenshaw la16, 18-e20 n 1 a periodical muster or review of the men under arms in a particular lordship or district 16-, now hist. 2 chf wapinschaw a rifle-shooting competition organised by volunteers, private rifle clubs etc la19-, now Bnf

Jamieson's Scottish Dictionary (1808 & 1825), which MacDiarmid is known to have consulted, gives the following words and definitions:

To SCHAW, v.a. To show

SCHAW, SCHAGH, s. 1. A wood; a grove. 2. Shade; covert.

SCHAWE, v.a. To sow

WAPINSCHAW... An exhibition of arms, made at certain times in every district.

'Sangschaw' offers a variety of meanings: firstly, a show of strength, a display of the 'weapons in the armoury' of the Scots language, its actual and potential range of effects, and in this sense, in 1925, a revolutionary 'call to arms' in keeping with the recent violent revolutions in Russia (successful) and Germany (unsuccessful). But 'schaw' is a wood, giving 'wood of songs', creating a sense of primeval or pagan mystery and ritual: not everything in the revolution is derived from the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Taking it a step further, the word 'schawe', to sow, gives a sense of these poems being seeds for a new type of song, and of these songs growing, of being cultivated to produce a new poetry or more generally a new culture - a renaissance. The fact that the word itself is a new 'compound' created from elements of old vocabulary underlines MacDiarmid's refusal to see Scots, even in its most archaic forms, as a static, 'given' repository of authentic expression, and his corresponding determination to create a new dynamic from the dialectic of the archaic and the modern.

The Decade – 1920s

The 1920s, between the Great War and the Depression, was a period in which the old pre-war hierarchies had been swept away, and the rise of Fascism on the back of mass unemployment was just beginning. There was a sense both of decline and regeneration, of exhaustion and a release of new energies. The change was most dramatically realised in Russia, where feudalism had given way to Soviet Communism without going through an intervening stage of bourgeois democracy (the process Marx had considered necessary to the creation of communist society). Scientific discoveries were changing the perception of the world, from technological advances (the development of the motor-car and the aeroplane) to conceptual leaps (Einstein's theory of relativity). *Sangschaw* reflects this sense of rebirth, of renewal, of a great release of energy.

With their source in the ballads of the Scottish border country, the poems in *Sangschaw* are opposed to the urban landscapes and fragmented form and narratives of many other contemporary modernists, especially Eliot and Joyce – although both drew in different ways on traditional material (whether derived from anthropology or classical literature). More direct parallels can be drawn between MacDiarmid's activities and the work of poets like Pound and Lorca, who were drawing on such mediaeval sources as the songs of the Provençal troubadours, and Spanish folk-song. Through these they aimed to create new poetic idioms in their respective languages, capable of dealing with the complexity of the modern world, and using the past as a foundation or ground of experience with which to attempt to overcome the sense of alienation created by the development of an advanced industrial society.

In Great Britain, the Labour Party became for the first time the party of government when Ramsey MacDonald led a minority government in 1923-24. The labour unrest which had followed the war culminated in the unsuccessful General Strike of 1926, which was solidly supported in Scotland. John MacLean, who had unsuccessfully advocated a separate Communist Party for Scotland, died in 1923, and thereafter for over sixty years socialism was defined as an all-British movement, with calls for Scottish self-rule generally viewed with suspicion on the left as nationalistic and reactionary.

Scottish writing was beginning to emerge from the so-called 'kailyard' a school of writing which sentimentally promoted small-town and rural values. The country's best-known writers, J.M. Barrie and John Buchan, became part of the British 'establishment', with Buchan serving as a Conservative MP from 1927-35, although in their work there are tensions between their British and Scottish identities, expressed partly through a selective use of the Scots language.

A Contemporary Reading

MacDiarmid's revitalisation of the Scots language in this collection, and his other work in the late 1920s and early 1930s, is well known. What is perhaps more striking revisiting the collection as a whole is the recurrent and vivid imagery of rebirth, new life, a release of energy. In this sense his use of Scots is not simply an end in itself, but serves as a further metaphor for this sense of new life deriving from old, from past resources thought to be exhausted. The other striking aspect is the emphasis given to the place of humanity in a cosmic scheme, on a par with or indeed greater than the gods, given its capacity for emotional engagement.

There is no discernible sequence, and the poems are varied in quality, but the most successful are short (between 8 and 20 lines) and tend to be based on the traditional ballad stanza (4 lines, each of three or four stresses, with lines 2 and 4 rhyming); though there is much variation on this, and no sense of the author writing to a strict sense of a given form. Right into the 20th century ballads remained essentially a spoken (or sung) type of poetry, and the meaning of MacDiarmid's poems is extended by their sound: from the rhythmic speeding-up and slowing down of 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn', to the suggestive near-rhyme of "Heaven / riven" in 'The Scarlet Woman', to the onomatopoeia of the directly transmitted sounds of the trumpets in 'The Last Trump', or of the hens in 'Farmer's Death'. MacDiarmid also draws on the uncanny ability of the Border ballads to tap into a metaphysical realm using direct and earthy imagery. Direct communication between humans and the divine realm is possible, even taken for granted, the divine being revealed through the senses, through the world, as when the narrator of 'Au Claire de la Lune' says of the moon:

She's seen me - she's seen me - an' straucht
Loupit clean on the quick o' my hert.

The same poem also features abrupt, vertiginous changes of scale and mood, drawing the physical and the metaphysical into the same sphere:

Thunner's a tinklin' bell: an' Time
Whuds like a flee.

Landscape is presented as a process, dramatising and developing consciousness. In 'Wheelrig', a landscape is compared first to a tiny bird picked up in the hand, then to a lover watching his beloved, and finally to the soul of the world suddenly separated from its body: a movement from concern for the natural world, to love of another human, to a Zen-like moment of cosmic awareness. The world is capable - almost simultaneously - of consolation, joy, and of utter alienation. In 'The Sauchs in the Reuch Heuch Hauch' a sense of primeval powers is evoked by an image of trees which are said to be the "sauls o' the damned", their roots running down to Hell, with God unable to tame them. As in the ballads, the conventional Christian concept of God, and indeed the Devil, seem inadequate to deal with the tremendous forces perceived in the world. The poem is specifically located in "a field near Hawick": these are specific trees in a real place. That is how close we are, everywhere, to the divine.

Sensory experience, and love - a state of mind in which sensory experiences are infinitely intensified - act as conduits to the divine. In 'The Scarlet Woman', direct experience opens up the real and the divine in a way received or conventional wisdom is incapable of. The narrator of the poem comes to an acceptance of his place in the universe through his perception of her, the dynamic of the world being transformed from "the evil place" to "the love o' God".

Perhaps it is this dramatisation of the process of consciousness which gives the best poems here their immediacy and continuing freshness. The movement from one state of mind to another becomes the principal subject of the poem. In 'The Watergaw', the reader is challenged to resolve in his/her own mind juxtaposed but contrasting images, of a rainbow and the expression on the face of someone dying. On the one hand there is death, or less fixedly the act of dying, and the perceptions granted to the mind at that extreme moment, which essentially cannot be shared by anyone living, i.e. not in that situation; but a sense of what this might be is intuited by the poem's narrator through an unusual natural phenomenon, the "watergaw" (glossed as "indistinct rainbow"). The metaphysical or transcendent becomes accessible through the world.

Although MacDiarmid draws strongly on a pagan sense of god, Christ is a crucial figure in the collection, as a figure connecting in himself the human and the divine. MacDiarmid's conception of Christ is dynamic, expanding human consciousness, rather than a static example to be looked up to, impossible to emulate, beyond humanity. Even the baby Christ is not an object of devotion or wonder but an active mind with "nae thocht o' sleep". In 'I Heard Christ Sing', Christ finds freedom through man, and in a remarkable closing stanza Judas is seen to be accomplishing "God's will" by making "siccar o' Calvary": the realisation of the divine will becoming possible only through the intervention of the human.

God him(?)self appears as various 'authority figures', none of whom have much vigour. In 'The Dead Farmer', the life of the farmyard animals continues with undiminished vitality in his absence. 'Cophetua' calls to mind the indolence and languor of the Burne-Jones' painting 'King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid' (1884); and while MacDiarmid's poem features a king "gane gyte", he is simply bowled out of the way by the "ashypet lassie" when she is given a chance to show what she can do. The untenability of inherited power is contrasted with the energy and dynamism of the poor once they are given a chance to hold sway. In 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' the indifference of the old gods (planets) is overwhelmed by Earth's humanity, founded on its facility

for suffering, for emotion, which offers the basis for a new order. In 'God Takes a Rest', God abdicates, reabsorbs himself into the sea from which all life first came, entrusting humanity's destiny to itself. As in the world of the ballad, God is embodied in the world, rather than being a separate phenomenon or consciousness.

So the Last Judgement, when it comes, will be less of a calling to account of humanity by a higher being, than humanity's assertion of its own power, energy and dignity. 'The Last Trump' offers a dialogue between two men commanded to rise: one is reluctant, feeling unworthy, but the other insists that everyone, without exception, needs to be there. 'Crowdieknowe' moves beyond hierarchy, with humans no longer merely responsive and submissive to God's will, but challenging Him from a position of strength. Both poems can in this context can be read as allegories of (Communist) revolution, in which man rises up and discards the religious conventions and ideologies of the past, to create a measure fit for all humanity. As in Marxian philosophy, man, rather than God, is placed at the centre of all things.

Further Reading

MacDiarmid, Hugh
Complete Poems Volumes I & II
(Manchester: Carcanet, 1993 & 1994)

MacDiarmid, Hugh
Sangschaw; and, Penny wheep: the lyric poems by Hugh MacDiarmid
(Glasgow : Scotsoun, 1992)
Audio tape.

Kerrigan, Catherine
Whaur Extremes Meet: The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid, 1920-1934
(Edinburgh: The Mercat Press, 1983)