

REFLECTIONS ON READING HAMISH HENDERSON'S ALIAS MACALIAS.

Murdo Macdonald

A week or so after the general election of April 1992 several hundred people encircled the Royal High School building in Edinburgh and sang Hamish Henderson's 'Freedom Come All Ye'. This was just one of a number of major events at which this song was sung in the immediate post-election period and for many the election changed it overnight from a respected piece of poetry into a symbol of the constitutional will of the community; it has remained so since. The key is that the words, and in particular the words 'So come all ye at hame wi freedom / Never heed whit the hoodies croak for doom' that flowed over and around that empty parliament building were not written for politicians but for people. At a time when most politicians and journalists were croaking for doom these words were apt and they have been apt ever since, not least when they symbolised the desire for democracy expressed by the crowd of 25,000 people who marched through Edinburgh on December 12, 1992, to be met in the Meadows by more indeterminate croaking from the platform as usual. But in this case the somewhat pathetic 'political' spectacle was given context by the presence and singing of Hamish Henderson himself. For this is what Hamish Henderson does: his words and actions give context, enable things to be seen in perspective. Or to put it another way, he has spent his life doing things which have helped others to discern more easily the cultural and political fault lines and strengths of their situation. Hence his pioneering translations of Gramsci, who understood the importance of seeing that what might seem to be common sense might equally be part of a giant con-trick serving the interests of a particular class. Hence also his writings on songs, folk, and literature collected in **Alias MacAlias**. This book was warmly received on publication and it is one of a number of books published

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in the last few years (including Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull's **The Eclipse of Scottish Culture**, Duncan Macmillan's **Scottish Art: 1460-1990**, and David McCrone's **Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Stateless Nation**) which once read seem indispensable. Henderson, in writings of accessibility, warmth and penetration provides jumping-off points for thought, and in so doing illuminates the human condition and the condition of Scotland. The book engages one in a dialogue and at the same time acts like a selective but powerful cultural dictionary, essential to scholar and general reader alike.

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At the heart of the book lies Henderson's love of the ballad tradition which he has done so much, through his work at the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh, to assert as a living thing of beauty, vitality and durability in the Scotland of today. This is a part of Henderson's work which is central and symbolic; it is where his soul is and at the same time it sheds light on concerns expressed throughout the book, not least the constant and wonderfully productive interplay in Scotland of the literary and the folk traditions, an interplay that undermines any oversimplified cultural divides.

The words that give the book its title, **Alias MacAlias**, deserve attention, referring as they do to Hugh MacDiarmid. What this title does is to begin to illuminate an intriguing set of cultural dynamics. It draws attention not only to the fact that MacDiarmid was an alias in the grand tradition of Scottish literary aliases, but to the fact that MacDiarmid regularly plagiarised other writings. So what is concealed is not only the immediate author but also the identity of other authors. But what is the nature of this concealment? The essay, 'At the Foot o' yon Excellin' Brae: The Language of Scots Folk Song', illuminates this from a quite different perspective. Henderson quotes Lorca: 'Y yo que me la lleve al rio / creyendo que era mozueta, pero tenio marido.' These lines from a ballad can be translated as: 'And I took her to the river believing her a maid, but she had a husband'. Yet are they lines from Lorca? As Henderson points out, in the account of J. L. Gili, the poet's brother Francisco remembers the words being sung by a mule driver during an excursion in the Sierra Nevada. But according to Francisco, Frederico had no recall of this. He found some words so congenial to his own way of thinking that he had no reason to suppose that they come from anywhere other than himself, or perhaps it just didn't seem important to identify them as 'other'. Suddenly the notion of plagiarism gets a bit more interesting, a bit more social. Plagiarism at first sight seems to imply a kind of cunning theft of the

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soul. And yet the great plagiarist MacDiarmid, while he didn't publicise his plagiarisms, did make them extraordinarily obvious. His plagiarisms sit there like chunks of collage in a Picasso. Henderson makes this clear when he rewrites MacDiarmid's own dictum so that it reads 'the poetry I want = the poetry I take'. So what can we make of this: we have Lorca unconsciously plagiarising on the one hand, MacDiarmid consciously plagiarising on the other. The interest here is not to try and decide whether or not plagiarism is a legitimate literary device, but rather to make the point that by his remarks Henderson opens up something of much more interest and of crucial cultural importance. For the notion of plagiarism (and associated ones such as intellectual copyright) makes little sense in a folk culture in which everyone has an active role and in which material is continuously re-used; but it makes every sense in a culture which is owned and distributed by an elite; here the re-use of material becomes an offence.

Freud refers to 'the uneasiness inherent in culture'. How much greater does that uneasiness become when, as Henderson has shown over the years, the finest sources of Scottish tradition are found among the berry pickers and the Travelling folk? At a stroke the previously peripheral is recognised as culturally central, and when that happens, what of the so-called centre? What we see here is a complete disjunction between what is culturally central and what is politically central. What Henderson presents us with is a very clear example of this anomaly. When on the basis of this we ask ourselves the simple question 'who is more important to Scotland, the ballad-singer or the Secretary of State' there is really no contest. But perhaps the most interesting fact is that we are not surprised that there is no contest. The disjunction between culture and government is so complete that we have forgotten that cultural incompetence is not a necessary condition of government. The Folk Revival has been a key element in the development of the sense of cultural identity in Scotland today. It seems no coincidence that as the cultural energies of Scotland are delineated by such as Henderson, the old, imperially-based institutions of the state are in crisis.

The cultural questions Henderson draws attention to are straightforward but tend to have endless ramifications. For example there's a review reprinted here of John Prebble's book **Glencoe** which reveals, with clarity, a fragment of 'history' in the making. What Henderson shows is that Prebble is not just ignorant on certain points, but is confidently ignorant. For example, there is Prebble's assumption that 'haughs' means 'heights' when in fact the meaning is virtually the opposite. Here Prebble assumes that a Scots word means the same as a similar English word: i.e. he assumes that Scots is a very close dialect of English, and is confident enough of his position not to bother

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checking. It's not my intention here to criticise Prebble via Henderson. The point is that in his assessment of Prebble, Henderson isolates a key cultural problem for Scotland, that of an attitude of confident ignorance among figures of influence, which is only becoming fully clear today.

Let us explore this problem with a question: Should a person who does not know the meaning of the word 'haughs' be made director of, for example, the recently established (and very welcome) Scots Language Resource Centre in Perth? Surely that would be absurd. And yet many of our cultural institutions find themselves in precisely that position of absurdity today. For example, the two major public gallery directors in Edinburgh and Glasgow had their horns locked last autumn over the claims of their respective cities to establish a new Gallery of Scottish Art. When this article was originally written, 'victory' had not been decided; the Gallery has since gone to Glasgow, which, it can be argued, has as much right to it as Edinburgh, but Edinburgh or Glasgow is not the point. What sort of 'victory' is this? It is a curious coincidence that the National Galleries of Scotland and their director Timothy Clifford no longer have the services of one of the most respected historians of Scottish art of today, Lindsay Errington, while Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries and their director Julian Spalding no longer have the services of the one of the most respected social historians in Scotland, Elspeth King. The loss of these major figures is disturbing in itself, but its significance here is that it exemplifies the peripheralisation of those who ought to be centrally placed in the cultural institutions of Scotland. At a time when issues of moment with respect to Scottish art are being decided, the loss of even one of these eminent scholars might be deemed careless. Such carelessness is not what the institutions of Scotland need at present, however well it may complement the already well-entrenched ignorance.

What matters at the moment is not where a New Gallery of Scottish Art is sited, or indeed whether there is such a gallery. What matters is that institutions, new or old, in Scotland ought to be run by people who are distinguished by their knowledge of Scottish culture rather than by their ignorance of it. Since Clifford and Spalding are both English there are unavoidable resonances here with 'Englishing of Scotland' arguments but note that what I'm concerned with is ignorance, not Englishness. My argument in no way implies that English or people of other nationalities should not run Scottish institutions, just as it in no way implies that Scots or French or Italian people should not run English institutions. What it does do is to demand a certain level of cultural awareness on the part of these people. In Scotland, this has been conspicuous by its absence in recent years. What is called 'Englishing' is thus an artefact of an appointments policy which sees an

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awareness of Scottish culture as completely irrelevant to living and working in Scotland. So I repeat, ignorance is the key here, not nationality.

The thing about Hamish Henderson's book is that it resonates with key issues such as this. It does more than just reflect the career of a great poet, folklorist, thinker and translator. It is a living document, part of a growing body of literature which is laying the basis for the intellectual vitality of Scotland over the next generation. What makes a great book? I don't know, and I wouldn't presume to attempt a definition. But there are certain books that shed light and **Alias MacAlias** is that sort of book. Its greatness is a social thing, a celebration of the work of one author by many readers, not an arbitrary elevation.

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October 1993