

Diary

“Bedding in at Brownsbank: Five Days in March.”

by Tom Bryan, the Sixth Brownsbank Writing Fellow.

Brownsbank Cottage, north of Biggar just off the main Edinburgh Road (A702) is the only A-listed farm labourer's cottage in Scotland. It was the home of the iconic poet Christopher Murray Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid) from 1951-1978 and his wife Valda, who lived on alone there until her own death in 1989. The pair lived there (rent-free) longer than any place else, the cottage being provided by its owner, local farmer Thomas Tweedie, whose family still farm the area. A local committee under the aegis of the Biggar Museum Trust bought the cottage. It is maintained as a small museum as well as a base for the Brownsbank creative writing fellow, a post established in 1993. South Lanarkshire Council and the Scottish Arts Council jointly fund the post. The writing fellow works to encourage creative writing in the local community (South Lanarkshire) whilst giving time for the writer's own work. I am a widely published poet, non-fiction and fiction writer Canadian-born but long resident in Scotland, based in Kelso. I'm the sixth writing fellow to date, following James Robertson, Matthew Fitt, Gerry Cambridge, aonghas macneacail and Linda Cracknell. I assumed the post in November 2005 and have spent much time since in the cottage, using it as a base for the tutoring work I do all over South Lanarkshire with writers and writer's groups.

To arrange a visit to Brownsbank Cottage call Tom Bryan on 01899-860327 or email: tbrownsbank@hotmail.co.uk

Thursday, 1st March 2007. St. David's Day.

My first day back at Brownsbank, after over six weeks away in Australia and New Zealand. I leave the main Edinburgh road, driving up the crumbling and muddy farm track to the familiar blue gate. It is a bright sunny day, no wind. Snowdrops all over the garden, daffodils up but not yet open, one dead male blackbird lying under a holly tree. No marks on it, probably flew into the workshop window.

To the blue door with its immense wooden thistle doorknocker. At your feet is a slab of concrete with MacDiarmid's "The Little White Rose" poem. Next, into the outer porch, then through the next blue door festooned with all the Celtic flags, the Cornish one pride of place (Valda was fiercely Cornish). Appropriately, I wipe the dust from the Welsh dragon. The cottage, built circa 1860, is a classic "but and ben", turn left into MacDiarmid's room, right into Valda's.

Only two phone messages and a smattering of post. Into the scullery for a cup of tea (the kitchenette and toilet with indoor plumbing were only added in the early sixties) When I stay in the cottage, I sleep in the wee iron folding bed that was MacDiarmid's. I usually have a good log fire roaring in the fireplace. I dress by the fire in the morning with at least 19 pairs of Shug MacDiarmid's eyes upon me, from various sketches, paintings, and photographs, what MacDiarmid called "a growing shrine to my vanity." First-time visitors note the intellectual MacDiarmid's unexpected reading material on the shelves: potboilers, mysteries, and crime thrillers. (To Neil Gunn he wrote in 1954: "I have little or no use for novels of any kind-except

detective stories.”) The orange or green bindings are like rows of discoloured teeth. Dick Francis is easily number one here, followed by Agatha Christie, Peter Cheyney, Ngaio Marsh and Erle Stanley Gardner. The poet’s many pipes lie on the mantelpiece as though still arrayed for use.

I’m a country boy at heart so I quickly got used to sleeping in an isolated cottage museum, shared with mice, slugs and slaters. A pair of hoolets in the nearby pines often provide an eerie soundtrack but the cottage itself is usually very quiet. I light a fire and go to bed, watching shadows flicker on the wooden ceiling. The wood spits and crackles. It’s strange to be back in the cottage but comforting too.

Monday 5th of March 2007.

Drove over from Kelso. A skim of ice on the Brownsbank rain barrel. A bright winter’s day. One March, decades before, MacDiarmid wrote to a friend that the water supply at Brownsbank had remained frozen for two months and that he and Valda had to melt snow to get water to wash their clothes, having to haul drinking water from the farm in milk churns!

I had a visit today from Paul Sutherland and his wife Afifa. Paul is the Canadian editor of the Lincolnshire literary magazine “Dream Catcher.” Paul left a small poem in the visitor’s book in Valda’s half of the cottage. Paul and Afifa were both quite taken with the place, its setting and size, noting the difference in Valda’s reading tastes compared to her husband’s. Valda’s shelves contain Cornish biography, Cornish history, very serious stuff. On the subject of visitors, I’ve had my share. Students, poets, scholars, townspeople, especially on our annual Open Day in September where poets read under the flourishing rowan tree planted by Edwin Morgan in 1993.

MacDiarmid had a famous visit from the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko in May 1962, about the time the poem “Babi Yar” came to light. The Scot and Russian talked all night. More interesting to me (and less documented) was the visit made by Allen Ginsberg in the 1970’s, whereby the American eschewed whisky for something he had brought himself, smokable and probably illegal. By the way, Valda’s half of the hoose is listed in a few guidebooks as “haunted” and some sojourners have remarked on strange goings on in that room. My feeling is that she had abundant soul and presence, keeping their lives going, from chopping wood to making furniture. Her Cornish wall map in the bathroom is another memorable icon (next to the heaviest wooden toilet seat ever seen!) The cartooned map is the size of a small quilt.

“GWR” Great Western Railway: The Route to Beauty and Pleasure.
|Cornwall: Land of Legend, History and Romance. We are told: “Fish, tin and copper” (an old Cornish toast) “A giant’s coffin over 11 feet long was found at Tregoney.” More facts about Davy, Quiller-Couch, King Arthur and Edward the Black Prince.

Valda is certainly remembered hereabouts more than her husband because she did the shopping, the negotiating, the enforcing when necessary. She also left more packets and packages of henna hair dye lying around than any museum needs. The “haunting” in her room might just be the psychic residue of a formidable and remarkable life lived to the full.

Tuesday, 6th March 2007.

Woke at 6a.m. The day is dreich. Begins to clear later in the morning. Snowdrops everywhere. Daffodil stems like fists of arrows, not open yet. Dead blackbird still undisturbed under the holly. A slow-rolling grey/blue/cloudy sky. Cold wind. Sheep in the fields, no lambs yet. Jacketed Shetland ponies grazing in the neighbouring field. A key Brownsbank theme over the decades is simply keeping warm. Hence kindling, logs, peats, coal. For lighting fires I prefer the diagonal newspaper roll up method and have burned a lot of my own wood this winter, mainly a damson and yew cut down in Kelso.

Preparing this evening for a "Starting to Write" workshop in the East Kilbride Arts Centre. My job is to encourage the wider population to write poetry and fiction. I know this would have been clearly at odds with MacDiarmid's stated notion that most women give birth "tae bairns nae worth haein." I also know that writing can be encouraged, if not taught. MacDiarmid had the support of other writers of his generation and met with them constantly in the howffs of Edinburgh. The South Lanarkshire writing groups are merely similar howffs--- safe places to improve poetry and fiction through discussion and comparison.

By noon, the sky has as much cloud as blue.

Evening, to East Kilbride by my preferred method: car, train, bus and taxi, with my tote bag of books, papers and worksheets. The workshop went well." Starting to Write" is maybe a more difficult topic than most. My own writing prejudices come to the fore here.

Learn to touch type. Appreciate the universality of the A5 envelope. Read good poetry, read contemporary fiction. Don't worry too much about publication at first. Get a good dictionary. Pay attention to form. Show not Tell. Discipline yourself to write something every day. No, poetry doesn't need to rhyme but it must have rhythm and variety. Use your hobbies, your jobs, your own experience. Appeal to all the senses. Don't overdo the adjectives. Consider not using adverbs in certain situations. Let your writing speak for itself. That first novel might rely too heavily on your own life, let it breathe a bit, break out of the shackles of what really happened. Beware writing poems about wise old grandmothers, cats, babies, standing stones, the evils of war (or of peace) moons, daffodils, Tony Blair. Get your facts right, especially about railroads, angling, fitba and royalty, otherwise you will hear about it! Beware what you are told by writers-in-residence for if they were any good, they wouldn't be doing what they're doing. Write for a living? Why not be a plumber, a teacher, a chimney sweep, something useful that pays the bills? I heard somewhere that 97% of the writers worldwide who have ever published a book do not make their livings as writers, but as something else. Poor Raymond Carver. Poor Sir Walter Scott and above all, poor Hugh MacDiarmid. And not one of them or one of us would have it any other way (except, please guv, just a bit more dosh)

Back to Biggar by 11 p.m. A cup of tea, hot water bottle in place, no fire--- just a welcome bed.

Saturday 17th March 2007. St. Patrick's Day

Cold wet driving winds, a *filthy* day as the locals say. Awoke at 5:30, put radio on and stayed awake. Off to East Kilbride Arts Centre for workshop on "publishing". Drive to Lanark to get train to Hamilton, bus to East Kilbride. On this, Ireland's national day, I note that MacDiarmid had a lot of time for Ireland and the Irish, maybe as a model for what Scotland could one day become. (MacDiarmid's "In Memoriam James Joyce" was one of his few major works published whilst he was at Brownsbank) On the bookshop is the vinyl LP of "A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle" which MacDiarmid recorded with Claddagh Records in Dublin. The album is still the best way to get at the heart of MacDiarmid and his work. The small cloth Irish flag on the blue door is faded but has always had pride of place in MacDiarmid's proposed "Celtic Soviet Republic", reflected by the flags of all the Celtic nations stuck to the front door with rusted drawing pins.

An irrelevancy: has anyone ever written about the social worth in Scotland of the humble folding card table? The card table is central to the work I do in the cottage, writing, eating, drinking, then folded away to give valuable space back to a cramped room. I think the card table was a major factor in Scotland's social and cultural life, from Glasgow tenements to Shetland crofts. Some of my best written work in the last two years was penned on its felt top.

Wednesday 28th March 2007

Up at 6:30 a.m. Heavy fog but not cold. A blackbird's song is heard even through the thick cottage walls. From the kitchen window I see a small Shetland pony galloping in the field.

Just as I have no romantic notions about living in old cottages in the Scottish countryside, it was one of the charms of MacDiarmid's life and work is that there was no room for sentiment. The old calendar hanging next to the fireplace is a case in point. It reads "John Lambie, Ironmonger, Seedsman and China Merchant, Biggar Lanarkshire. Established 1864." Hanging on the same nail is a horn with three holes bored in it to contain three of the poet's pipes, smelling as if they had been smoked just yesterday. Poignantly the calendar's displayed page is "August 1978." The poet died on 9th September 1978. What would MacDiarmid have written there in the last days before his death? I had never looked at the calendar closely before so I took it down to read, with great anticipation. With no sentimentality I can state that the calendar wasn't MacDiarmid's, because his funeral is penned in the same hand as subsequent entries! The calendar must have been placed above the hearth from elsewhere, as an appropriate museum backdrop. (MacDiarmid himself faced death with great courage and detachment).

Not every local remembers MacDiarmid, cares about him or even liked the man or his writings. However, the legacy he left is (characteristically) in the form of a challenge, inscribed on a memorial plaque on Northback Road, Biggar:

*“Let the lesson be to be yersels
And to mak that worth bein.”*

Hell, I'd forgotten the football match; a European qualifier tonight against world champions Italy! I switch on the radio to hear the final result: Italy 2 Scotland 0. *Noble defeat. Brave performance.* MacDiarmid would have understood this all too well.

I go to bed. The fire dies down. Shadows flicker on the ceiling. I hear the wind howling down the brae. Tomorrow there is a lot of work to do.

1964 words