

CULTURAL CENTRALITY AND DOMINANCE: THE CREATIVE WRITER'S VIEW – CONVERSATIONS
BETWEEN SCOTTISH POET/PLAYWRIGHTS AND IAN BROWN

LIZ LOCHHEAD – GLASGOW, JANUARY 4TH, 1984

I. Brown How do you feel as a writer in Scotland, working by choice in Glasgow, about the metropolitan focus? Do you in fact see a metropolitan focus towards London?

L. Lochhead Well, there obviously is one, but it just doesn't interest me. I find that on my few forays down there to do things, say to the Poetry Society, less people turn up, twenty or less, than you'll get at the Third Eye Centre in Glasgow. Of course, that's probably an effect of not being known there, but it seems to me that very well-known poets very often don't get an audience at the Poetry Society. I remember Dannie Abse telling me he went along and there was one very drunk guy there and that was the audience for the lecture he was going to give. I suppose there is focus, though. When I was presenting my play, *Blood and Ice*, in 1982 at the Traverse, both the management and the director, Kenny Ireland, said it must go to London. Really I didn't care. I was much more interested in it being done right here.

I. Brown So when you come to write you don't have any sense of having to come to terms with an audience in, say the south east of England?

L. Lochhead No. Though I would hate to think my world was only relevant to Scotland. I suppose what I mean is that I don't really think all that much in terms of 'audience' at all. That sounds self-indulgent. It's just that I feel that I can't afford to worry about that. I find that the things I've done have often gone down better in America or Canada when I've tried them out there than they have in London. Recently I've been getting more appreciation in London, but I don't really feel that they're people the stuff clicks with.

I. Brown Who do you see yourself as addressing, then? You say you don't really think about audience, but there must be some sense of a community.

L. Lochhead

I think there is. I think being a poet is very concerned with that and I think that's why there haven't been many female poets. The novel is a much more private form of address because the novelist is addressing the individual inside the head. But somehow poetry is a mixture of incredibly private forces for example, Emily Dickinson is the most private poet you could think of – and at the same time, there's a definite feeling of something in poetry that is bardic or of a public conscience, however privately it might grow. Actually, poetry's much more public form of address than the novel and I think that's why so many poets go from writing poetry into writing plays and very few poets go into the novel. The forms are just different, but I think the public utterance of the poem fits into the drama.

I. Brown

That's interesting. Your drama so far has been done in Scotland. Is there a clear Scottish community as distinct from, say, the English community that you're writing to?

L. Lochhead

No. I think my country is women. I'm not at all female chauvinist and I don't want my work limited to women, but I feel that the things that I've got to say are specific and that mine come from wanting to delineate that territory rather than the physical territory of Glasgow – which I feel very much at home in. I do like to use Glasgow and West of Scotland register, but that's only because it's part of my own childhood and private register that I know intimately, I'm certainly interested in Scottishness, but I feel that the territory that gets delineated is a macho William McIlvanney and Tom Leonard world and that's what Glasgowness feeds into. I'm quite interested in writing Glasgow or Scottish material, but really femaleness seems to be my country. Tom McGrath went to see my recent play, *Red Hot Shoes*, at the Tron Theatre and hated it. He said 'You've got to forget you're a woman while you're writing.' I thought, 'Why should you? You never ask men to forget they're men at all.' If anything, that show was about mothers and daughters, about Snow White and the wicked queen, about Demeter and Persephone, about the old woman having to die so the young one can live. It is very cyclic in form and therefore more mythic than dramatic. Tom hated it because of that. I said, 'What I really wanted you to do was forget you were

a man when you were watching.’ He said, ‘How can you attack men like this?’ It wasn’t addressed to men particularly at all. It was addressed, in the Jungian sense, to the mothers and daughters in men and women, it was addressed to that particular archetype and I don’t think it’s the province of women to have it to themselves, though all the specifics were recognisably female, of course. He was saying things like, ‘Do you think we don’t realise our women suffer in childbirth?’ You see he was actually possessing it as an audience, as having been addressed to men and against them. It wasn’t at all. I don’t want to forget I’m a woman. I don’t want to forget I’m Scottish or urban and working-class either. I remember when I was writing school essays, there would be work that would get 18 out of 20 if in it you could pretend you were English, middle-class, male and posh. That was natural. They didn’t feel like lies when you were writing, but lies were institutionalised in the whole way you saw language being possible to work. Now my writing is to do with saying that I’m female, working-class, Scottish – but in that order really.

I. Brown The next thing I was going to ask you was if you had to fight for the identity of your work in terms of these three, the class, the community, the gender.

L. Lochhead It’s interesting the way they intercept each other in odd ways and contradict each other. I mean, there’s no way I can think of myself as being oppressed as a female more than working class men are oppressed. That would be self-indulgent. I’m not really interested in documenting female oppression. I’m just interested in stopping the silence, and thinking that you don’t have the right to express something if it’s female because males don’t worry about it. For example, if you write a poem where the imagery is cooking, it’s regarded as using female imagery, whereas nobody says that hunting imagery isn’t female. That’s just universal. It’s just a question of not accepting these categories. It’s not that I just want to write for women by any means. It’s just that I don’t want to have to pretend I’m a man writing any more.

I. Brown Have you had to fight obstructions?

L. Lochhead Not really. I suppose the fights are all with yourself, trying to win freedom to write what you want. Certainly I had to fight Tom McGrath down the Tron the other week and I know he's wrong for me. I can't say he's wrong in an absolute way, but I know there's no way that what I should do is forget I'm a female while writing, because that's all the things that I'm exploring and that gives me strength and interests me at the moment. So, to forget them would be stupid but I expect I'm going to have to fight more than with my earlier work. That was just working-class and youth culture and that was fine. In the kind of things I wrote earlier on, I did try to describe femaleness from the point of view of an individual but it was more childhood stuff.

I. Brown Have you found as you've developed your writing and moved in the direction you've just described, away from the kind of thing that Tom McGrath used to approve, that you've been influenced by other women in a similar position?

L. Lochhead You read a lot of things, but many of the things I've read that have made me make up my mind have not been at all feminist, for instance, Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, a look at Canadian literary criticism in which she tries to define Canadianness. It seems to me a lot of the arguments she's using could define why you want to be Scottish in your work, why you want to be part of your nation. Often it's translating things that are not directly about that, using them to get a bit clearer about why you do certain things.

I. Brown It's often said that MacDiarmid, the earlier Scottish literary influence, who's always there in the background, even if not a direct influence, is rather male-oriented. Is that your perception?

L. Lochhead I love the Scottish lyrical short poems of MacDiarmid. They're delightful, but I don't think he's been an influence, while Eddie Morgan has been a huge influence because of his humanism, and his Glasgowness too. That's been much more of an influence. I mean, MacDiarmid's work I feel excluded from, you know?

I. Brown

Why's that?

L. Lochhead

I think it's because it is so male and bardic in the old priestly kind of didactic tradition. The females in it – the females are very much the object of the poetry, the pursued object. They're obviously other. And so his taking femaleness as the other especially in those early poems that I love makes me feel that *he* is the other. It's just a fact of life. It doesn't mean I don't enjoy them. I enjoy them much better than the later poems.

I. Brown

I much enjoyed your essay for Trevor Royle's book on childhood in Scotland, *Jock Tamson's Bairns*. That got me thinking about Hoggart and Williams and their concept of culture and class and their interaction. What have you found about these dimensions in your development?

L. Lochhead

The thing I find specifically exciting at the moment is the interaction between class and gender, the way they cross each other a lot. These days I'm sort of middle class in that vague liberal, *Guardian*-reader way. There are certain people I have a lot in common with and that's much more so than maleness or femaleness and yet if I go and do some WEA teaching there's a sort of gender identity in the people that attend that goes much deeper. And there's something like that about Scottishness which I find happens when I'm not here. It's only living in England that defines your Scottishness really. Do you find that?

I. Brown

Yes, I do. I suppose when I was up in Scotland, I was more conscious of trying to work through Scottish issues. Now I realise any issue I wrote about was Scottish. When I wrote about Andrew Carnegie, even the American material, however sympathetically treated, was filtered through a Scottish perspective. When I worked in Scotland I felt I had to work hard to come to terms with the Scottish elements in my work, but now I work in England, I'm more laid back about it. I can see I'm not English, and so can take my Scottishness for granted, in myself and in my writing. That brings me back to the point you've just very clearly made that you find what has happened for you is that cultural exchanges, having helped you to find yourself becoming

more known in the English context, have helped you to be more aware of the Scottish dimension.

L. Lochhead

I think so. It showed me how really Scottish my work is, and I hadn't thought of that. My experience of Scottishness, though, is different from yours. You were saying when you lived here you had to explore that dimension consciously, while now you take it for granted, while I realised, when I went South, I've always taken that dimension for granted. I didn't need to do anything about that in a way I don't take for granted the class or gender dimensions. I suppose that, being in England, I still take it for granted, but I accept it more as an actual factor. I used to say that, as a Glaswegian, I always felt much more in common with Liverpoolians or people from Sheffield than I did with people from the Western Isles because living in a big Victorian steel or heavy industrial city, with that kind of class mix that you get or the class not-mix you get in these places, made me feel a lot more in common with them than with people from a Scottish small town in the Borders or Western Isles, or Highlands.

I. Brown

That's the difference, you see. You come from industrial Lanarkshire, whereas I come from Alloa, just outside Stirling. I really am from the small town you're talking about, even if in my case it's in the Central Belt. Maybe that partly explains our different perceptions of Scottishness.

L. Lochhead

And yet I realise there was this very strong Scottish feeling that was beyond the urban context too. There was the language of my grandmother and that's becoming more important, that voice. Sometimes it comes out when I've written something. It's not that I'm interested in Lallans, but I've written some Scots things when it's been the right language.

I. Brown

You used the term, register, earlier in regard to this area and to class. What makes it right to use Scots or a particular register of language in your writing?

L. Lochhead That's just instinctive. You just know. Poems anyway come about their own business in that way. They come alive with their own language attached to them, quite physically and it's only afterwards you can analyse where and why you got it and why you wanted the grandmother voice. I suppose it's a matter of realising that all the people who spoke to you all your life – that you somehow internalise them and you can get back so many different voices that you've heard.

I. Brown Is there a difference in that respect between your poetry and your playwriting, in the way that you use language or the way that language asks to be used?

L. Lochhead Not generally – which is what Tom McGrath was saying was the flaw in my playwriting. He was saying that you've got to strangle 'language' at birth. I just don't bloody agree. I don't. I want a drama of language. And the things I've written have been incredibly different from each other. *Blood and Ice* was very much about language and the arguments of drama about poetry and what I feel about creation and voice. And the next thing I did, immediately after that was a play for telly, set down in Irvine, called *Sweet Nothings*, and that had to have the right kind of television realism. I was determined not to write 'Pass the salt', so that I tried to write both very naturalistically and in a way full of double meanings for me, because that would give a richness, a resonance. What I'm more interested now is in trying to get that more demonstrated in the physical effect, the action. It's beginning to come a wee bit better. What was lovely was working with the dancer who choreographed for my play at the Tron, Peter Royston of Scottish Ballet. He taught me a lot about that because, obviously, when you've got dance the amount of narrative you can use is very simple. Gestures and jokes that became visual helped too.

I. Brown You mean linking your language as a playwright with the movement of the actors in an expressive and communicative whole?

L. Lochhead It tended to go from one to the other, back and forward. What was a pleasure was writing a big scene and have him put it to dance and put across eight pages of script I'd written. And I thought I'd written it, but I hadn't. He'd written it; I'd written the thing that started the dialogue with him and helped him to write it. That taught me a lot I would use in more straightforward drama. I think in my telly play and in *Blood and Ice* there weren't enough things that were demonstrated by the physical. *Blood and Ice* was very badly directed at the Traverse – it was blocked badly – but if I'd written the thing really right as a stage play it couldn't have been cocked up so much.

I. Brown That was your first play, wasn't it?

L. Lochhead Yes. With a greater linking of the two levels of expression it would have been better. Bits of it, but only bits, worked physically. I still tend to do too much with language and I want to stop doing that.

I. Brown The way you're talking suggests the concern you have is that the language is an unconscious element that you still have to come to terms with, but also as something you've begun to find the kind of language you want to use at any given time so that now you want to find out how to use it theatrically or poetically or lyrically.

L. Lochhead I think language is always going to be the interest to me. I'd like to find a language more minimal and still resonant in all kinds of ways. In my television play the director tended to see my language as simply telling a story in a naturalistic way, but it was more than that. One scene, a birthday party, opened with a woman saying to another, 'Oh, your house is beautiful, Doll.' Now there's a theatrical reference in there, to Ibsen, and it was important here because these women, though they're working, still define themselves in terms of their homes and domestic roles. Their husbands are out of work and at home all the time, but still don't define themselves in terms of the home. It was very important to me that the line was at the top of the scene, not lost in a general barrage of noises, 'Happy birthday' and so

on. The problem was trying to convince the television people you care enough about the language, every bit of it. But I've got to watch it because there's got to be more room for life and that concern with language can be too rigid.

I. Brown In *Interface* No. 1, Denis Donoghue is interviewed by Mary FitzGerald and they talk about Irish politics and say that the Irish see politics in aesthetic terms, that culture for them and politics are closely related, that what O'Casey said is a political fact. Do you see anything like that in Scotland, or with women in Scotland?

L. Lochhead Yes, that's the same. My writing about women embodies the way they identify themselves with home, though they have jobs, and are meant to cope with jobs on the side, while men have jobs and cope with home on the side. These plays embody objective facts. I've had a director say, 'I don't believe men and women live in different worlds' and I say, 'You better believe it or I don't do the play'. You've got to demonstrate these things.

I. Brown I feel that is almost the converse of what the Irish people were saying, because they were saying for them politics is an art-form, whereas what you're saying is that the cultural act, the writing of the play, becomes a political act.

L. Lochhead I think it does. I like that idea.

I. Brown Is that a very Scottish thing? When one thinks of the way MacDiarmid and Compton McKenzie linked their writing and their political activity...

L. Lochhead I don't know. I don't think I realised how political many things are. It's only when people take issue with what you've done that you begin to take more responsibility for it. I believe you put down things you thought were totally unpolitical, and then you realise they're very political. That might be a Scottish thing. I feel so new to all my writing that I don't feel I've gone very far in working out positions. I can work out what my position was

afterwards, a lot of the time, and see how it's changed. It's only that by the time I've worked out my positions I want to do something different anyway. I'm sure the political *is* bound up with the writing. I'm beginning to come to grips with language in myself. I've never had to say 'That's not enough'. I want to write something where there's no words left in before I put it on. I've so many things to deal with.

I. Brown

I wonder if one of the things that has happened is this. There was the generation before us, McLellan in the theatre and MacDiarmid. For them, the big thing was to use the language and have the right to use the language. McLellan has been underestimated as a dramatist because of the language problem he presents outside of Scotland. Do you think what they've actually won is not so much the independence of a Scottish literary language, whether it's Lallans or whatever, so much as the freedom for people of our generation to say, 'I don't need to fight this battle. I have that as a resource, but now I can use that resource to go on to more fundamental issues.' Is that it?

L. Lochhead

I suppose that always happens with one generation's fights, that a fight is done and other people take it for granted. I think I took Scottishness for granted, which I think I can't really afford to do. At some point, my interests will move away from femaleness and it'll become the class thing and probably then it'll become the Scottishness. Because all these things are strands in one.

I. Brown

Your impact in Canada and America is obviously a reflection of the universals you touch on in your work, but it's also perhaps a result of the diaspora, given there are over five times as many Scots throughout the world as they are in Scotland itself. I wonder if you feel that there's a broader culture there?

L. Lochhead

Certainly there's a cultural interface feeling of being slightly excluded in the south-east of England and not really giving a damn about that. I don't find English poetry that close to me, especially when it's involved with linguistic

experimentation. I don't find the language exciting. I don't find they've got a culture or roots. The only English poet that I find exciting is Tony Harrison. Andrew Motion's poetry, its register, seems so alien to me. It's not that it's not quite beautiful when I read it, but it's just so unexciting. Awful. Recently, what's happened to me is that I feel the consensus, not the things I'm reading. I find it's places I've got to in my writing already unconsciously. That consensus is usually female, but I'm still very interested in exploring the class and, therefore, the Scottish thing. I feel that my strength is that I feel the consensus as well.

I. Brown

It seems to me that what's emerging from everything you've said – it doesn't matter whether you refer to class, sexual politics, community, nationality – what you're actually saying is what gets you going in your writing whether it's for stage or poetry is actually the interaction of all those elements. Whereas the Southern writers don't seem to have a hold on that interaction, to be more compartmentalised, more arid, the vitality you feel comes from the battling together of those elements.

L. Lochhead

Especially when they're in actual conflict. Sexual politics and class politics can be in conflict and that's what I find very exciting. There's all sorts of things that I want to document, just to state them. Like the other day I was going over to Edinburgh on the train. Two guys were sitting opposite facing each other and one was just chewing a match and looking out into the dark and bloody blustery rain. They just sat there and occasionally the match-chewer glowered at the guy opposite him. So I realised they were together, but not a word was exchanged. Just before they got to Haymarket station, the one with the match said, 'See if that cunt's drunk that bottle, I'll kill her.' It was the shockingness of the misogyny enshrined in the language, the total divorcement of them from each other and the way they could communicate was by hatred. O.K., there was a class thing, two working class guys. And there's the aspect of Scottish culture it's a part of. But it seems to me there's a great divide between men and women and that's there to write about. That's very clear in O'Casey. In a way, he almost institutionalises it further. I mean, he's criticising it totally, but there's a certain sense where he does

idealise the mother. I would like to reserve the right for women not to be the salt of the earth. I get a row from feminists if I don't present them that way. I spend a lot of my time actually taking the piss out of women and the little adjustments that women do to preserve the status quo with regard to men. That's the kind of area I can document quite graphically. Sometimes it's not liked a lot by feminists, as I say, but I feel if you can't identify the problems and you can't show up the patheticness of our little strategies and own up to them as well and say 'I still do them myself because I want to live in this world and communicate with both men and women', then you're suppressing a truth. I don't want to become a radical, feminist, lesbian separatist. Therefore, one's still stuck in all these wee strategies to prove that you're a 'real woman'. But in trying to find them funny there's a fine line to draw because that can become self-congratulatory and smug – Posy Simmonds territory. You've got to laugh at yourself in a straightforward way. I really want to write about women but not in an idealised way, one in which we're the object, always totally idealised. The same can happen with class; if you think of Bill Bryden's play, *Willie Rough*, that was a big idealisation of the working class.

I. Brown

What strikes me about your response is that you don't seem to use language consciously and the kind of thing that Bill was trying in *Willie Rough* was quite consciously to use the language of that class and that rather self-conscious use was part of the idealising process. Because the language was seen as 'vital' or 'earthy', those aspects of it were highlighted so that it became an end in itself for the writer. Or perhaps because the view of the working class was idealised, the language seemed somehow polished, staged even, when he seemed feel he was merely recording everyday speech patterns. Does that make sense? For you, on the other hand, what you're saying is the language comes out because it's right and that rightness is something to do with perception and the fact that the language is part of the perception and part of the expression of that perception.

L. Lochhead

Then that becomes very conscious in a very particular sense. One of the things that interests me the most is cliché and ordinary language and getting

a consciousness of that, but I tend to get there instinctively. Then I start to play with what that does, so it has an ironic stance to it.

I. Brown So once you're there you can work on it rather than saying from the beginning this language is where I start from. What you do is start from what you want to say, the language emerges, and that's the point where you start to work on it. Is that it?

L. Lochhead I think so. It's got to emerge. You start off in the black with two images, two pathetic wee images, and keep working on them and hope that things'll catch fire.

TOM MCGRATH – GLASGOW, JANUARY 4TH, 1984

I. Brown How do you see your role as an artist in Scotland given that there is a very strong metropolitan South Eastern bias in many of the cultural activities in the U.K.?

T. McGrath I can't separate my work as an artist from the person my life has made me, the place that my life has made me live in. Obviously I come from this part of Scotland but I have worked in London for a number of years and I feel at home in London in a lot of ways. I have experienced a lot of alienation there, not so much in the world of the Arts, as in the streets, experienced the power of the place. What brought me back here? Now, when I started emerging as myself as a musician and writer at about thirteen or fourteen, the thing that was always said was 'Oh, he'll go to London'. I did what it was assumed I would do and I went to London, via Dublin and Edinburgh, and spent about seven or eight years there involved in newspapers, *Peace News* and then later on the *International Times* in the sixties and was very involved in poetry reading and in the theatre to an extent. There was one period when I went and did the London bit and became fairly prominent in the scene down there, read at the Albert Hall poetry reading and all that, so I never felt any sense of failure in relationship in London as some people have done. When I did *The Hard Man*, and *The Hard Man* was very

successful in London, often I felt on that theatre Fringe world I'd made an impact again. However, the reasons for coming back here were mostly personal, and mainly to do with the fact that I had a family. I had a family of four and a wife and living the precarious life of a writer was actually easier here because there was more support, there were more relatives, and Glasgow was an easier place to live in, less expensive and easier to get about in. That was partly the reason for coming back, but there are other reasons that are more romantic than that, like to do with the look of the trees up along the Kelvin. Things like that. I remember my wife writing from Glasgow, saying you must come back and see this and then the feeling of identification with the place.

I. Brown Is that also with the people?

T. McGrath Yes. Coming back was having gone through that stage with London that took from about twenty to twenty-nine. It was meeting other writers here, Alan Spence and Tom Leonard, basically the two of them. They were roughly ages with me, I think. And then it was going into a whole new phase that was to do with understanding your identity as a Glaswegian first of all. That's what it was. And then later trying to understand your relationship to the Scots identity which is a more complex thing. But it was first of all understanding yourself in relationship to the language – and then there's the dialect – and the gradual realisation that what had been there originally in my writing when I was about sixteen or seventeen was the most valued thing in me. And that was this place, and the people within this place, and the voices of the people in this place, and this is what I had come out of and this is what I had grown up in among and there was this enormous power in it, both for comedy and violence, and there is a tremendous richness just in the speech. When I was in London I had been living in Brick Lane in among the West Indians and Africans and had been appreciating all the same qualities with them and coming back here was like discovering that. But I did not fully discover it until I was writing drama. I started though, to build up the language techniques through the poetry and the little character studies that happen in your poetry.

The first play I did wasn't about here. It was about Laurel and Hardy. In the next one, *The Hard Man*, I faced up to here, but again it's very complex. I don't agree with the people here altogether. I find that there's a lot of complacency and a lot of kidology goes on, because Glasgow has a very subtle identity now because it has this very tough and violent image but in actual fact when you examine it in relationship to other cities and what is happening there is not really very much violence here. You can get away with living here and having this kind of rough and tough thing but it's actually quite sheltered in a lot of ways so that I'm in two minds: we are grown into a James Joyce relationship. You know what I mean; Joyce's relationship with Dublin was so critical. I don't know if that is what you mean though.

I. Brown

That is exactly what I mean. Who do you see yourself addressing? Is it Glasgow? Is it Scotland? Obviously beyond there are the universals, but in terms of the immediate audience?

T. McGrath

Well, I actually believe that I can make the most truth in my work by talking to the most popular audience. And I get into terrible fankles about that because, when I start off at the ideas level, the audience I would have to speak to at the ideas level are a specialist audience that will understand my reference points, understand the type of thing I am trying to do and will at least be quiet enough to listen to it. But in actual fact when I am working with drama – because drama is very specific, I can only achieve this with drama – the thing is to get the work to a pitch where anyone can hear and understand and then the fact is, that it is the people you are talking to that are helping you to fulfil the truth which is something beyond the intellectual processes. The best example I have got of this was when I saw *The Hard Man* at the first night in the Pavilion, which is a big theatre. I thought that Glasgow had seen the play previously and it had been in studio theatres all over Britain, but when I saw it at the Pavilion I thought the audience was actually tougher than the play. There was a general noise from the audience most of the nights and comments going on all the time. A lot of the audience's responses were totally different from what they had been in the

other venues, like when Paisley said to the audience, 'If you're going to excuse him on the basis of being a product of the social system you're going to have to excuse me too.' With the middle-class audiences that was always a very devastating point, when we did it in the Pavilion somebody shouted out 'No way'. They were all against him. The liberal points just shrivelled up.

I. Brown They just accepted the contradiction?

T. McGrath Aye, they'd accepted it. But what was amazing that there's a big long speech at the end of that and the whole place was reduced to silence. You could feel them getting it. You could feel them understanding it and when that happens there's a completion then. I find all the time you need to spell it. I keep looking to find, in terms of audience, the broadest audience that I can get to. And over the last year I have been doing specific work for children. I did a play for Borderline called *The Phone Box* for children and that's a very specific task in relationship to audience. You are having to study your audience and how they are going to understand you and it really puts you beyond what you could normally create if you were just expressing your intellect. Through that work for children you begin to see by contrast what the work for adults should be. Because that's the first time I've taken a particular limited audience and tried to approach them. But that's why I write for the theatre. And actually do it in relationship to a people, a recognisable people.

I. Brown Is that why you said you came back to the Scots language at the same time as you came into the theatre? Are the two things connected in that way?

T. McGrath Yes, definitely. I find that all the time when I'm writing the life in the thing coincides with the moving into phonetic ways of spelling the words. The life in it comes in through dialect and then funny processes go on in relationship to that because you can accept them. You can be broader, or not as broad, and what I find is that there is actually a folk element. I can see it in other much greater playwrights. If I look at Brecht or Molière I can see the same folk element expressing itself in them.

I. Brown What do you mean by that? Can you give me an example, in Brecht's case?

T. McGrath You know the way Mother Courage goes on and on. She is just this big earthy mother. You could imagine a Scottish part, you know, exactly the same. You first hit the tap and you're away, because you would get the same thing coming out. It's something that is in a people and he was getting it. I mean what he was doing with it with his exceptional powers was to resolve the intellectual and the folk element and all that into the one thing but it's the same thing and it's something that you daren't move away from. I went away to the States.

I. Brown You were in Iowa, weren't you?

T. McGrath Yes. And that was very good for me because there had always been a part of me that was very heavily influenced by American poets. There was a whole part of me that longed to be an American writer. So when I was in Iowa I was able to write American style poetry. I was able to write about an American place name and all that. Get it out of my system. I found the speech patterns there were very interesting and I loved the ideas in America because the technology is so far advanced that the ideas are always moving ahead. It's to do with affluence and capitalism. You become very aware of the fact that the kind of avant garde that they have in the theatre totally coincides with the existence of particular types of wealth. But even so because they are so advanced technologically and they are dealing with technology before we're dealing with it, the sort of perceptions they have are really stimulating. You feel you are thinking in the future there. I found that great, but at the same time I kept going to red-neck bars and if you drink in the red-neck bar you appreciate the people there that you see in all the movies. But they weren't actually my people. The only way I could write about them would be by some form of mimicry. I couldn't write about them in a directly expressive way. They were someone else's people and I suppose American writers in American films do express a lot to American people, all their own speech patterns and so on. I had a peculiar experience there of

reading my work to people and of reading them dialect work. I had playwriting students who started to talk like me. The head of the drama department said to me 'I had one of your students in the other day. I knew every time he was telling me one of your ideas because his voice changed.' It was interesting to see that they could understand Glasgow dialect, you know? Then of course the ways in which the American writers approach language, like Carlos Williams and Cummings and a lot of the urban poets, the way they approach the writing down of place names, streets they lived in, and the voices of those streets, casual incidents that happened in the streets, a lot of that obviously helped me to accept and find ways of writing about where I was. At the same time Edwin Morgan in Scotland was doing a lot of work like that, and Liz Lochhead. They both influenced me in terms of portraying the place, describing its characters and the techniques for doing that. I learnt a lot of the techniques from what they both were doing. But the American influence on that was first and the American concern with language was very important. I never got very much from English poets, I mean, apart from all the stuff that was taught at school.

I. Brown

I was going to ask you about that. You talk about affluence and that in a sense leads back to the question of class. I wondered if you had to fight for the identity of your own work through class or through the community, or even within the very male-dominated society which might have a very particular view of what an artist might or might not be and especially what a poet might or might not be.

T. McGrath

I had to, I suppose, fight but I didn't have to fight very hard because the city itself helped me. You see, I think that there's a literary thing built in the Celtic people, whether Scots or Irish. You know I find it particularly noticeable in the Irish, the value that they place on the book. I suppose it's because I know more of them, but when I was at school, a big Catholic boys' school in Glasgow, one English teacher that we had in particular, Willy Brogan, he was the brother of Denis Brogan, the historian, and his brother Dermot also taught at the school. You know when I wrote essays for him later on at school it wasn't anything to do with exams or anything; he just let

me write for him about anything that was happening at the time and it was just encouragement to see what you could actually express. I remember there were competitions at the school. I never won any of them because my work was too gloomy. But when I left school and I went to a club which was a sort of CND club called 'Saturday Late' that happened in the middle of the town and that's when I was able to read my poems first. The person that gave me the courage to do it was Matt McGinn. You know the folk singer. And Matt encouraged me, and I discovered things that night. It was definitely the story of my life, what I discovered in relationship to the audience there. Because there was no fooling that audience. It wasn't like an arty audience. There were a lot of people interested in arts but a lot of heavy people there too. It was just on the edge of Anderston, it was a late night club, going on until two or three in the morning, and it was really heavy. And I read two things that night. I read a set of poems about Autumn and the girl that I was in love with at the time, all these wee tender poems. And I read a big poem about Sauchiehall Street, just full of images of the street and they all just took off on that, on the second one. So then you get into funny situation you see, because all the Iowa poems I've written they're all about Autumn too. You develop two selves: you know that there's a big broad aspect to your work to do with the space and the city and a common understanding of the city and the power of the city, the reality of the city that everybody will respond to and there comes another part of it, which is more your private self. You keep looking for an audience that will get that too. You do get into a dichotomy and I feel that's why you get into a resistance with it. But you see the City helped me to do that. Then when I came back it was more of a fight, and it was a fight for not just myself but for other people too. My wife was publishing stuff then, just little pamphlets and things and we were doing a lot of readings and we were being very assertive about lines of poetry development at that time. And there was a lot of resistance but we started to get our work published, just because the work had a lot of vitality in it.

I. Brown

So, there was a kind of class resistance in a sense.

T. McGrath

I don't know if you would class it class resistance. It was a resistance from a sort of Scottish literary establishment. It wasn't all that powerful. People that I had nothing against, but just sort of felt threatened by us. It was all grouped around Hugh MacDiarmid. There as a whole complication because of his relations with previous writers in Glasgow. That was another thing, you see, there were always other writers you could talk to, fifteen or sixteen. There was always somebody else you could show your work to but that particular group of writers Tom Wright, W. Price Turner, Joan Ure and Edwin Morgan had all fallen foul of MacDiarmid in different ways. So there was a war that you grew into which I really went much too far into for my own good. But I felt a great resistance against MacDiarmid's idea of Scottishness. My identity wasn't his identity at all. I couldn't identify with that type of language at all. I could identify with it much more now. I had to take a lot of routes to get there. It was Neil Gunn that made me accept being Scottish, it wasn't MacDiarmid.

I. Brown

Neil Gunn was an influence on you, then?

T. McGrath

Because he was writing about people, he was very concerned about the work processes of those people and the making, the durability of what they did.

I. Brown

He was very much West Coast, Isles, Highlands, that Celtic part of Scotland, and obviously your background is very much also West Coast. Is that part of it too? You have already referred to the Irish experience.

T. McGrath

I can identify with the people he described and expressed in his books. I can identify with them through the Irish side of my own family. You see there is always this terrible split. Especially if you are brought up a Catholic because you're immediately at a distance, especially in Glasgow. My background is Irish/Italian so I get identified as much with Gregory Corso as I can!

The weird thing is that, I don't really reckon that my writing started to fulfil itself until I started writing for the stage. And Edinburgh was the place that allowed me to do that. It wasn't actually London that helped me find myself;

it was Edinburgh. For a Glaswegian there's a strange paradox. It was because of something else. We are talking about religion and all of that. The thing that I value that Edinburgh gave me is modernism in the arts, through the Traverse, through Rickie DeMarco, through a whole range of situations. And then it allowed me to be something beyond those contradictions that I had got locked into Glasgow. It just enabled me to be a bit more than the home city would allow me.

I. Brown

One of the things that strikes me is that you talked earlier about how in London you felt alienated from the power of London although you were part of an artistic community and I then wondered if that meant something more political, but then you talked about how you felt at home with the power of the people in Glasgow and now you say Edinburgh released you. You seem to give a very strong sense of the power of the place and how you relate to it. I am not quite sure if I know what you mean by the power of a place.

T. McGrath

I went up to the North East of Scotland and lived in a wee village called Inverallochy, near Fraserburgh. I went up there because of the oil boom and I wanted to see it. I actually wanted to live in Aberdeen, but I didn't manage that though the connection with Aberdeen has stayed. I have two daughters there at University and now I'm going to Dundee to work in the Art School. I feel a lot of the power has actually moved to the East Coast.

I. Brown

What do you mean by 'power' in that context, Tom?

T. McGrath

It's different each time. I'm using 'power' in a different way. In that context, it's just simply something that's happening. Aberdeen is the only expanding city in Britain at the moment and you see it through football teams. It's an extraordinary phenomenon. When it comes to Dundee, it seems to me on one level, well I've got a family, I've got to survive. It's a bit of security, but it's also creative. The power in London is really more like a power that goes back to the Tudors. It's the enormous buildings, the flags, and the sense of a real capital, the power of the dominant city state, that kind of power. I think

I'll always be alienated from it; I'll always have to live somewhere else. And I think that's probably because of where I come from.

I. Brown That's very interesting. Are you drawn to anyone like Williams or Hoggart in that tradition of looking at a culture, that is not the dominant culture, trying to find an expression. Do you feel yourself part of that?

T. McGrath With Williams and Hoggart? Yes I heard Raymond Williams talking at the Cheltenham Literary Festival, when I was reading there. He described my dilemma very well. I have always felt like that about them. You see that's the thing, I'm not actually alienated from the English because I find myself identifying a lot with Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and the things that they have studied. I can identify with them, I suppose that's through a class background. Also I've imbibed a lot of Marxism, so the left point of view and their work on culture is one I've always found very interesting. And they led through to an acceptance of popular culture which I've always been involved in through jazz. All of that. And then English playwrights that I know, David Edgar, I feel a lot of identification with him. We even occasionally actually get on to the same subject matter. But at the same time, with English playwrights it's interesting that I feel that they have got problems that I don't have. They are really hung up about the father, and they have to keep rejecting England as if it's their personal responsibility. I don't feel England's my personal responsibility. So there are a lot of concerns in their work and a lot of agonising about development or socialism I just can't identify with at all. But at the same time I can identify with them as writers, and I can also identify with their political point of view.

I. Brown In Issue 1, we printed an interview between Denis Donoghue and Mary FitzGerald in which they talked about how they thought the Irish saw politics in aesthetic terms. O'Casey was, in effect, political fact. What's the relationship you see in Scotland, let's say, between the cultural and the political? Do the two interact in your view?

T. McGrath

The cultural and the political? I think they must, absolutely, but it's very much more introverted in Scotland. It's taken on a much more devious, sort of psychosomatic, form in Scotland, O'Casey, I think is the playwright that I relate to most strongly, just the central key works he wrote. I didn't like the expressionist works or anything later just as much. I related to *Juno*, *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *The Plough and the Stars* very strongly to such an extent that I want to keep making references to O'Casey out of the work that I'm doing now because I think the situations are all connected up. The difference is, in Ireland, that it's explicitly political: the nationalism is explicit. The situations that they pass through were really and actually happened. Whereas the situations that we pass through happen at a level that is almost an imaginary reality: it's like Scotland and England at Wembley and stuff like that. The dominance that we experience has got more like cultural dominance. What we experience has got more like cultural dominance. What we experience is more like descriptions of the Algerians by Franz Fanon, Fanon described Algerians as coming to him, who had a sickness that he couldn't find any cause for. It was a kind of identity sickness that they had. I'm particularly thinking a lot about the Scottish male. I think we suffer from a sickness which is partly expressed through the political and the cultural thing – all snarled up and they are very complexly interlinked. I'll give you an example. In Ireland you get the highly political and nationalistic phenomenon of the hunger striker. In Scotland you get at one stage in the development the razor slasher. It's not political and then later you get the junkie, which is also not political. But I see them as being unconscious expressions of something similar, but not the same, and somehow each time it keeps getting lopped off here. I'm glad we don't have a Republican Army, I don't want a Republican Army. The Merchants of Glasgow never wanted Bonnie Prince Charlie to succeed. Coming out of the kind of background I come out of, you see Hugh MacDiarmid talking about a pure Scottishness, and it's frightening. It's like a form of Fascism. A racially exclusive view of things. You just have to adopt a kind of relativity strategy in relationship to nationalism or something. You take parts of it, you accept parts of it and, as you are expressing it, you know you are part of a great big political complex.

I. Brown So that plays of yours like *The Hard Man*, which is about razor slashers, or *The Innocent*, which isn't about junkies but is about the kind of hippy world, are in a way political plays?

T. McGrath I think they are political. They're metaphors, emotional metaphors. *Animal* is the one that's the deepest in terms that people have seen it as being about the Third World. People have seen that as having all sorts of political significance. But I saw *The Hard Man* as being about Ireland because of the very blatant thing that happened when I was writing it. At one stage I was having to transfer real names into fictional names and I was going through the names of the prisoners and I kept shouting through to my wife, who was born in Ireland, 'Give me another name for Boyle', and she'd shout through 'Byrne', 'Meechan' became 'Mochan' and so on. And then I got on to names of prison officers and shouted these through to her. She said, 'What are you doing in there? The first set of names were all Irish Catholics and the other set were all Irish Protestants.' It was prisoners and prison officers. You begin to see some sort of psycho-social form of madness is getting worked out through all these forms of delinquency and authority, and other factors. A number of ex-ministers of religion are involved in the prison service. Then you begin to see a figure like Jimmy Boyle as being just like what we were saying. O'Casey in a way is a much more ethically conscious creature in what he was doing, but you begin to see figures like that as having a significance and having an inevitability. I think that's the main thing: you see them as having an inevitability. It is a form of sickness that's totally unconscious. When you start to see it that way you start to withdraw from it. You see it all normal again.

I. Brown So that language becomes an expression of that sickness. The need to use the language of the people arises because that's part of it you can't separate yourself from.

T. McGrath You can't separate the sensibility from the way of expression so you start to value that way of sensibility. I wrote a lot of things early on about ways of speech and how some forms excluded the body and some forms included

the body. I was really committed to physical forms of speech. I have also found sometimes I've taken a great perverse satisfaction in destroying - consciously destroying - English syntax. I think McGonagall because I get really charged up by his energy, because his utterance, whatever he was saying, however banal it might have been, was genuinely out of his language with no glib conceptual overlay. He's always coming out with what he had to say, no matter how cumbersome he made the sentence constructions. So I really value him. I find I read him and get a fantastic energy out of reading him. Then you start to accept this mawkish identity - because it is a mawkish identity - because you're existing then within a racial stereotype and it's not one that has as many outs as, say, the Jewish one has for a writer. I don't want to be terribly *Scottish* Scottish writer. I can't really identify with that.

I. Brown

Does that in any way help you to focus, though, not being extremely Scottish, but thinking about what identity we have? You've worked overseas, you've worked in England, there's the whole diaspora of the Scots, so that one can say that there is an identity which is very complex, and not just about living in Scotland. Does that help you to focus your work in any way?

T. McGrath

I can never figure out whether I'm doing it because I think I'm a Scot or whether I'm doing it because I am a Scot. When I went to London that first time the people I got to know that I was friendliest with were people like Alex Trocchi, the novelist - and he was from Otago Street in Glasgow, had gone to France, gone to America, and by that time had a weird mid-atlantic Scottish accent - and Ronnie Laing. Definitely, the part of Laing that I identified with was the Glasgow side of him, because we could speak and understand one another in a particular way. That doesn't answer the question about focussing the work. Every phase of your writing life is different. The phase I've been through recently has been very specifically focussed. I've been in between plays so there's been a lot of specific work and there is always this joy of closing the gap between yourself and Scotland. I did a recent live reading for Radio Clyde. Alexander Scott was

there. He had been so resistant to us years before and suddenly we discovered the gap had closed, that we weren't different anymore.

I. Brown With reference to what you were saying about MacDiarmid earlier, how do you see that difference, how do you see it changing?

T. McGrath I suppose at that time we were coming up with a different ideology. We were coming up with a different approach after all that work, work that had been done in Scots language. We were coming up with this street level sound of existentialist man in the street, 'black man in the ghetto' type of writing. I just upset the applecart.

I. Brown It's funny that because with a Marxist poet, MacDiarmid, when you get some kind of demotic language coming, you would think he would welcome that. In fact, he didn't seem to.

T. McGrath He didn't particularly reject it I think it as just the whole friction that had grown up with that generation. And probably a lot of it was the Edinburgh-Glasgow conflict, I don't know. I don't really fully understand it.

I. Brown So that the kind of political act implied in his cultural concerns, the connection of his politics and his poetry, became identified with *his* version of Scottishness, so that if someone came up with another version of Scottishness that would reject his political stance.

T. McGrath That's right. It was that sort of thinking. I personally saw his stance at that time as very artificial. The thing was it had a stranglehold on the publishing situation. There was all of that too. You'd get resistance to recognition of what you were doing. You couldn't get through. It's still very difficult to get through in this country because there's a strong upper middle class culture, with a landed gentry still very dominant through various cultural organs. I'm well known now as a playwright and I still watch them doing it. That's one side. I can see different establishments. There's a strong Labour establishment in Scotland too and you just watch them and you're

somewhere in the middle. You are anarchic, you're not aligned in a lot of ways. You're the despised non-committee one, but that's the position I prefer to be in.

MacDiarmid talked about Glasgow though, you know. He has some very good poems about Glasgow. The one where he's drunk on gin and is walking along and sees the street, sees the buildings and sees the children and things. I identify very strongly with these poems because the particular part of Glasgow he was walking in hasn't really changed all that much. There was a poem he wrote on the top deck of a bus about the people, about how there could never be any change in a place like this and how it would always be backward. He was despairing of what he saw in the working class.

I. Brown Do you think that's partly because he came from a small town himself?

T. McGrath Yes, it's completely different. I didn't understand it until I went there. It's a completely different identity again, that's something too. How can you generalise about the Scottish identity when you get so many? It's really a kind of conglomerate. We are a sort of agreement. When you are in Aberdeen they talk about Glaswegian, and Edinburgh people. We experience a lot of differences within ourselves as a nation. The fact that we are a nation is an agreement and then the fact that we are in agreement to be a nation is a conspiracy against somebody that's ultimately got the power. It's a kind of joke isn't it?

I. Brown It's a joke that every nation lives by too.

T. McGrath The trouble about it is you can stay in a state of permanent adolescence if you adopt an identity like that. Coming through to maturity, responsibility, is, I find, a great problem and that's compounded by the fact, in the theatre, that I'm a writer. You know that thing about writers and directors? You know that's a whole other version of the same thing.

I. Brown Can I just take what we are saying now about power and link it with one other thing you mentioned earlier which we really didn't follow through, the

maleness of Scottish society. Liz Lochhead was talking earlier, - I said I would raise it with you, - about your reaction to *Red Hot Shoes*. You had a very definite response to her not fully feminist but women's movement orientated stance, and I wondered if you could enlarge on that.

T. McGrath

I wasn't really reacting to the fact that that was feminist. I was reacting to the fact that it was old feminist. It was like I didn't feel that she had done herself justice as a writer in that, and this is what I was saying to her that day, that the feminist mantle was getting in the way of her exploration of herself as a writer. I see writing as very much an exploration of the self. I see a lot of these things as barriers for writers of real ability as I think Liz is. It's too easy in Glasgow to start to mention place names. It's too easy too, in committed forms of theatre to come out with lines that people are going to agree with, preconceived lines. I don't think writing's about that. I think it's about exploration of experience. I think it's a difficult confused action out of which comes some sort of certainty. But you have to go into uncertainty to get it and I felt that she was sitting inside a number of preconceived positions that I didn't think were worthy of her writing. It wasn't really an argument with feminism – it became that.

I. Brown

So what you are saying, if I understand you, and it relates to a lot of what you said earlier, is that if you are a Scottish writer – which you are – it's because you are a Scot, not because you are a Scottish writer. You are a Scot who writes.

T. McGrath

Yes. That's part of the thing I have to explore and express. Well, sometimes you feel you are expressing yourself, and other times, you feel that these things are expressing themselves through you. You really don't know what is going on. You can say that about O'Casey. You often don't know what the hell's going on, but these things are coming through and you know you are right. You see I get worried about John McGrath, on the same basis I worried about Liz, because I've such a great admiration for his writing and for him and yet I see him locked inside ideologies. At the same time I can see why, just as Romanticism got to a point and then after that there had to be some

sort of focus and some way of dealing with all the social changes that were happening through industrialism and all that. You can see why it moves off into ideology. But what I don't agree with is them throwing away the complexity of the self that has evolved through Romanticism.

STEWART CONN – JANUARY 5TH, 1984 – EDINBURGH

I. Brown Do you find, as a writer, a difficulty of focus and language working in Scotland, in a national community which is part of a political entity with a very South Eastern London metropolitan focus in many aspects of its culture?

S. Conn This is something which I have become increasingly aware of in two ways: linguistically – in terms of the language and the forms that are being used in poetry and plays – and also through the imposition of outlets and markets – commercially if you like. The two are inextricably mixed because attitudes in the South dictate what is popular in the field and what is likely to be performed in the South. I think that, traditionally, there are elements of Scottishness which prevent a play in, say, broad Scots from being marketable in the South. I think that this can go more subtly, and occasionally invidiously, under the surface, and has to do with content. Very often when a reservation masquerades as a reservation about thickness of language actually other factors are involved. I think this is something of which I've become increasingly conscious.

When I started to write, in plays and in poems I wrote simply in the language that was natural to me or in the language, for characterisation in plays, of the people about me: it seemed a natural thing to do. What's strange, looking back, is that at the time that I started writing poetry, the Scottish Literary Debate in the columns of literary magazines was still swelling with the ideas of MacDiarmid's philosophy in the rather grandiloquently self-styled Modern Scottish Renaissance. This was an attempt to 'revitalise all areas of Scottish life and culture' – in literature through the use of Scots. In these magazines I remember very clearly a debate trying to agree on written

forms – for instance, uniformity of spelling for the present participle, whether it should be ‘-an’ or ‘-in’ or ‘-and’ which, I must admit, seemed rather paradoxical to me because that, in terms of oral history, seemed to be imposing uniformity on something multifarious. Poets at that time, however, had apparently to make a public choice to write in Scots or in English. I know from Norman MacCaig that he went through a phase of being accused of being a quisling because he didn’t write in any brand of Scots. He wrote in Scots-rhythm English. Norman himself put it rather nicely that, when they realised that his poetry was ‘not bad’ rather than keep him outside the fold they decided he had a ‘Scots accent of the mind’. I didn’t have this choice because I wrote in the language in which I am speaking just now, the language that was natural to me, probably peppered with a few, what are now archaisms from the farm, from a generation or two older than myself. Because I was not hearing Scots spoken around me, it would have been a contrived, mechanical, reconstructed, language which would have been alien to me. Nowadays, instead of there being any pressure for writers to write poetry in Scots, or in dictionary or reconstructed Scots, I think that there is an option to use formal English as Iain Crichton Smith or Norman McCaig himself has done, or to resort to spoken Scots, phonetic Scots, simulating, presenting on the page, Glasgow *patois*, in the way poets like Tom Leonard or Edwin Morgan have done, as part of our very wide poetic armoury. I think that this can work if it is a natural language and usage with which the poet is familiar rather than a reconstructed one to meet a thesis or a fashion.

Where I think there is a danger in this, is if there is any compulsion on the writer to use this form. In Scotland, there seems to be a retrenching of attitude, which suggests that it is less *Scottish* somehow to use the English that is natural of the Lowland Scot than to use Glaswegian Scots – not nowadays Lallans, classic Scots, or revived Scots, but urban Scots. This is so particularly in drama, for instance. I think that, in the same way as at social occasions and in social rapport I suspect that the bulk of jokes told by middle-class people involve simulating working-class accents and situation, in playwriting too many Scots write what is their impression of working-class

behaviour. In this they contrive situations which are actually grossly sentimentalised and particularly sentimentalise violence in a totally spurious, because purportedly hard, presentation of working-class life. That seems to be part of the Scottish middle-class behaviour pattern which is very much reflected in writing. In reading play scripts, as I do working in radio, it's this sentimentalisation of violence and working class circumstances which I now find a weakness. Here I feel writers need to be steered towards areas where they can express themselves more truthfully, according to their own experience, because that is not their experience, that is not their own middle-class background. We don't now get the bulk of Scots historical plays written in Lallans; though it isn't really Lallans, it's the writer's notion of what Scots was then.

When I started to write plays, which was in the sixties, the brand of drama that was being performed primarily at the Gateway in Edinburgh and at the Citizens' after Bridie was what I initially wanted to revolt, bounce, against. Funnily enough, one play which comes from that period and has a quality of its own and does something that English drama was not doing at that time, is *The Flouers of Edinburgh* by Robert McLellan. Why I think it is particularly interesting is not only the use of Scots – at which McLellan himself was adept - but what it chose as its theme. This goes away back to the historical source of the whole business – James's departure in 1603 from Edinburgh as James VI to become James I of England. The consequent aping of South East mores, the magnet of the court being the South, is the legacy of that. McLellan set his play in the 18th century and depicted two characters who are ridiculed on their return from London to Scotland. Now it's the variety of characters that makes the play work: one aspect of this is that Scots is used correctly in the social scale, by way of contrast to the English-aping speech of the two characters that return from England. I don't think though that one can argue from that that use of Scots language is necessarily dramatically successful. Another play of McLellan's *Jamie The Saxt* I don't think is, because I think that too much of the language is, in fact, sentimental cliché. It reduces the struggle between James VI and his cousin,

the Earl of Bothwell, to a level of mawkish comedy which precludes any serious analysis of the politics and the threat and the danger of the time.

I. Brown Can the language be made responsible for this?

S. Conn I don't think so. I think a writer can only use language rigorously to measure up to the concept behind the play in the first place. It is paradoxical that one of the finest, best constructed, plays using Scots is by John Arden who based the rhythms of *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* on David Lindsay's rhythms. What makes *Armstrong* difficult to play, I think, is that these are written rhythms not spoken rhythms. I think two other paradoxes come out of that play. One is that that was only one play by Arden, whose *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* and subsequent plays have been very different. He wasn't, because of it, branded a Scottish playwright. In the same way Osborne was not considered a traitor to the English theatrical scene because he wrote about Luther. It is, however, a strange millstone round the neck of a Scottish writer (and this gets back to your question), this imposition to use explicit detectable Scottishness. Otherwise, it is suggested, the writer is somehow seen to be less Scottish. As a result the writer is trapped because even that minimal Scottishness which can lead to his being accused in Scotland of not being true to his linguistic inheritance, his social inheritance, his national inheritance can, to the Southern or the London ear, appear very Scottish. So you are not actually jumping from one safe standpoint to another.

I. Brown It strikes me that in your response the way you frame the discussion is to take for granted that there is a clearly discernible Scottish culture which has its conflict, its battlegrounds and its parameters of discussion which are more or less independent of London, although people have to be aware of London and somehow relate to it – so you can have the term, 'quisling', used of Norman MacCaig. It seems to me that you very clearly see this cultural community as autonomous, though not perhaps fully independent. Is that fair?

S. Conn

I think that now there is probably more poetry and more drama being published in Scotland; there are fewer new plays being performed, partly due to policies as a result of cutbacks, partly the use of the repertory theatres. London, I suppose, is still the Mecca for many writers, as it was for Barrie and Bridie who tailored their work for the West End of London. Elements of it weren't Scottish at all, or they diluted the Scottishness. It worries me that the reaction, or the counter, to that is a retrenching which would argue that there should be a Scottish Language Theatre in Edinburgh, because I'm not sure that by retrenching or retaining some prescribed specific gravity of Scottishness you are overcoming the problem of quality. I don't see the point in reverting to a language or diction or a linguistic form that is not common currency.

I. Brown

One of the things that struck me in the reference in *The Flowers of Edinburgh* was the way that you thought that language worked effectively there. It seemed to me that when the play presents these people who, returning from London, have anglicised their language and their vocabulary, the language there to be anglicised might be seen as Scots at a time when everyone spoke Scots dialect, but there is also a cultural ideology behind that language. The dialectic of the play is represented through the language – Scots versus Anglicism – and the language is part of the dialectic. Is that a fair summary of how you see that working?

S. Conn

Yes, indeed, but I think that can apply also to a Scottish writer using the English language, and again, I think ingrained attitudes can dictate a response to a play. One of mine, *Play Donkey*, centred on a Scots mercenary in an African state. It was written after the Angolan trials. The play indicated that there were social factors behind his choice. It was argued that there were economic and indeed other reasons why he became a mercenary. What it really looked at was the small print that does not appear in the papers, the effect on his girlfriend and his parents, the suffering, the pain, their inability to understand what was happening. What the play very pointedly stated was that, although there was human pity at the waste of the individual, there was a moral indictment of his decision to do this in the

first place and, rightly or wrongly, the suggestion was that this was ultimately a *moral* choice. There was no *sympathy* for his behaviour. There was no condoning of his involvement with the others. In his cell after being sentenced to death at the trial, he sang to keep his spirits up. One detested what he had done. One still, I think, is entitled to admire the courage with which he is willing to meet death. He sings to stop himself from disintegrating before he is taken out and shot. I think that would have been a perfectly valid thing for him to do. What he sang was 'Scotland The Brave'. What was interesting was that a couple of English reviewers were very angry at this. They accepted the first half of the play but they suggested that the second half was an affront to them because this was purveying a brand of nationalism. This was ironic for me because it was totally counter to the intentions of the play. Now it may be that there was a sentimentalisation built into the play. It may be it was wrongly handled dramatically. I do think, however, that there was this potential, particularly at that time, before the referendum vote put an end to the Assembly and the climate cooled again, a prior readiness to detect something threatening in the content of the play. The English ear is always said to resist broad Scots, but again I think the quality of the writing and the metaphoric and visual quality of the writing *can* carry as John Byrne's plays do because simply of the force and the vigour and the dynamic quality of his writing and use of imagery.

I. Brown

Is there a particular audience that you start addressing? Your work very clearly succeeds in working through to dealing with the universals and in that sense is beyond a particular community but, nevertheless, is there a community whether in your poetry or your plays that you address, as it were, as a first resort?

S. Conn

Initially, I think I was preserving a community, a dying community, the pre-industrial, horse-using, rural community of Ayrshire, a Calvinist inheritance that is mine. I would have liked to have thought that I was preserving it for them. I don't think that the formal units that these poems comprise was something that they would appreciate or in which they would recognise the idealisation of themselves. Therefore, it had to be partly for myself and

partly for the wider public, who I think would care about anything that is slipping away in any area of social strength or endeavour, in the same way as I think a photograph archive of say the Newhaven Fishwives has value. I think the poems are addressed to a much wider area of people, not limited to Ayrshire or Scotland, because I think the purpose of the poems is to awake similar chords or memories in a reader with no knowledge of Ayrshire at all. In the case of the plays, I don't think the impulse, the statement of the play, can take an audience or an individual into account. The demand that it be written is too fierce. Where I think audience comes into account is not in tailoring a statement or modifying the intensity of the conviction behind the writing. I think it is in the subsequent area of consciously crafting and in aiming at intelligibility. Because I don't write in a broad Scots, I don't find that this is an intelligibility related to vocabulary. I think it is related to the structure and the sequential presentation of images in the theatre, that these, however surrealistic or surprising or apparently non-logically or chronologically progressive they are, at the end of the day should still – in the mind of the audience – create, or seem to have created, a pattern. There again, although I think plays should entertain – because I think that something that is totally without any element of entertaining is rather self-defeating, although that doesn't necessarily mean one is saying one must 'sugar the pill'. What is difficult too is that unless you are simply covering old ground, there is the need to break, not to say 'I'll break new ground in this play', but the need not to duplicate what you have done yourself or not to duplicate, you hope, what anybody else has done. Therefore, I suppose, there must always be a certain rigour that you are not compromising and making over-simple.

I. Brown So it is very much a dynamic relationship between you and, as you perceive it, the Scottish community that you write. Is that specifically the theatre community, would you say?

S. Conn I think that is very dangerous as soon as you start. I know that Strindberg wrote studio plays for a particular audience. But I think one can only write for a specific audience in the abstract. I think it is to do with the physical

dynamic, the space and the way in which the play is being presented. It becomes terribly dangerous once you start writing for people in W.2 or S.W.1, or wherever. Apart from everything else, even between Glasgow and Edinburgh, both of which to the Southerner are equally Scottish cities, audience response varies. In fact, some of the most satisfying responses I've had have been in Dundee where there is a warmth of audience response similar to that one gets in Glasgow but without demanding 'Dundee-ness' of content.

I. Brown What about poetry? Is the same true?

S. Conn One thing that does intrigue me is the popularity of Philip Larkin's poetry. I have great respect for Larkin as a craftsman, for his emotional seismograph which I think focuses on the minutiae of emotional experience, the tiny cracks in the crazy paving of psychological experience and treat. He conveys a microcosm for a way of life which is a Southern, - I suppose a suburban - way of life. I don't decry or diminish Larkin's reputation or achievement. What saddens me, and what I wish still astonished me but no longer does because of what I think are the factors involved - and this gets to the root of the questions you're asking - is that there is a poet in my view, neglected down South, in comparison with Larkin. He is a finer poet than Larkin because an equal craftsman with a fuller emotional range and because a whole classic Western tradition and a Gaelic tradition is channelled into his use of the English language. He is unlike Hughes, where there is a grappling that is equivalent of hewing from stone, a roughness. Iain Crichton Smith to me achieves a hard intellectual statement with sensuous imagery and is deeply moving on the human condition. He uses iambic pentameter a lot. He achieves the apparent effortless which - whether it is Mozart or whoever - is to me something to do with the finest art. I think that the emotional ground, and the minefields that he tiptoes through, are more challenging than in Larkin. He takes on more in scale and yet with the same meticulous detail. He taps emotional reservoirs with as great metric facility as Larkin. He is not so popular in the south. I suspect it must be something to do with the eye of the South not identifying because his environment is

different but not different enough to be *exotic*. George Mackay Brown's wonderfully coloured but very often two-dimensional pack of cards being shuffled in the North on the edge of the sagas and in his poetry became popular in the South, at the same time as early Hughes and Heaney. Rural exotic poets were part of a fashion. Why I think these poets are durable, and why I think that Heaney is one of the finest living poets, rests simply in the quality of his intellect, and use of language over and above the exotic. Again Derek Mahon to me is like Crichton Smith. There is this fluency of line, a bright filament of intelligence and, in Mahon's most recent work, again this sensuousness and apparent effortless.

I. Brown

That's a very interesting statement, particularly about the Gaelic poets. Can I follow that up? Can I bring us back almost into the autobiographical dimension, and ask you whether there are any ways that you had to fight for the identity of your own work, class or community pressures that you had to resist in order to write or to be published. Did you find the male domination of the Scottish society something that you had to work through? Perhaps poetry was not seen as a proper thing for a boy to be doing?

S. Conn

It is funny that you should ask that because the writing of poetry at the age when I started, which was 16, in school, was not, as nowadays, more or less taken for granted. It was a rather secret activity. I think the most difficult thing is to be true to oneself. That can be difficult to define.

What fight there has been, oddly enough, I'm aware of now in the question of publication. In those days there weren't Scottish publishers and as it happened I was lucky in finding an English publisher and my three hardback books have been published by an English publisher. The last book, *Under the Ice*, although it got a Scottish Arts Council Award and although the previous one had been a Poetry Book Society Choice, was not publicised by the publisher. It sold 500 copies compared with its predecessor's 1500 which was quite astonishing for a virtually unknown poet in the South. My dilemma now is that Scottish publishers have, in recent years, published poetry, as excellently presented, as publishers in the South, but they don't

have money. It is an illusion, perpetuated by television programmes, this publishing renaissance. It is nice for them in publicity terms but it is unfair because it suggests there is more money than they have. They are fighting to make ends meet. Therefore it may be difficult for me to move now to a Scottish publisher though I would prefer to, partly because I accept that my poems, English in language, have a Scottishness and a localness which I believe reflects my voice. And I am, after all, Scottish, but without a sense of being one of a group of Scottish poets beavering away. I must admit my affinities were at that time with expatriate Scottish poets, W.S. Graham and Douglas Dunn, and with Heaney and Mahon, and with other poets in the South, rather than Scotland.

I. Brown

Can you think of influences or people you see in a similar position? You have just mentioned Douglas Dunn, but I wonder about more regional influences of the kind of the very strongly Lallans influence that might have come from MacDiarmid. There are also the influences that Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart talked about of the dominant ideology and culture, and the way people have to find their own voice or, in fact, are deprived of their own voice. Have any of these influenced your own thinking about your work?

S. Conn

Only when I think of the insidious thing; only when I think of the likely audience that a next play is going to get. I think it is insidious because I am not the kind of writer who can write for that audience in the way that some playwrights can. Having said that, there is the reassuring success of a writer who sticks to his own voice, I think very courageously, like Alistair Gray. I remember reading in the sixties, in magazines and in manuscript, work by Alistair Gray and work in manuscript by Tom McGrath which I admire very much. It is only now twenty years later that these pieces have come out, partly, in Alistair Gray's case, as chapters or sections in *Lanark* and partly in his *Unlikely Stories, mostly*. That is interesting: a book published by a Scottish publisher who, I suspect, cannot afford to give him an advance for the next one. So, there the economics of the necessity of the choice of the London publisher comes into it.

I. Brown

If I may strike a tangent to what we have been saying before, one of the interviews in *Interface* No. 1 is a discussion between Denis Donoghue, following up his Reith Lectures, and Mary FitzGerald. Both are Irish and, late in the conversation, they talk about Irish politics and the role of culture and how in some ways there a cultural act, like the making of a play, becomes a political fact, that in a very subtle way politics is seen in aesthetic terms. How do you see the relation of culture and politics in Scotland? Is there any similarity with the Irish experience in your view or is there a different kind of relationship?

S. Conn

I think the danger has been a blatancy and a trumpeting. The trumpeting get louder the more extreme the politics are and I think that damages the supposed works of art. The great drama of Scottish Nationalism was Sydney Goodsir Smith's *The Wallace* which I don't think is a very good play: I think it was a loud piece of nationalist rhetoric. It may be that circumstances in Scotland's recent history mercifully haven't provided the catalyst they have in Ireland. One of the most recent Irish plays I have seen, I think, a beautifully crafted work of art in presenting as a stage metaphor a political statement, was Brian Friel's *Translations*. Particularly exciting about that was the very clever way in which he made a theatrical conceit out of a boy, an English soldier who spoke no Gaelic, in a love scene with the girl, who only spoke Gaelic. He used the English language in each case but in one instance English represented the Gaelic actually spoken. That was theatrically successful: it was very touching. Here was an immensely talented playwright finding a way of doing something and I cannot think, quite honestly, of a Scottish equivalent in playwright crafting. What I find intriguing about that play – and this involves a whole social cultural area of response to the politics of it – is that I saw it at Hampstead. It was very discomfoting, very unease making. I found, to witness the extent of applause and the response at the end of the play given the audience who were watching it. I found it very intriguing that there was almost an assuaging of guilt, given the statement of the play and the indictment and the implication at the end where you know the community is going to be decimated because the English soldier who has disappeared has been killed.

It was a fascinating experience to see it so strongly applauded by that audience. But why I admire that play so much, apart from as a piece of dramatic writing – because the whole is so moving – is that the stage instruction to put up English place names instead of Gaelic place names was part of the behaviour of the soldiers who were in Ireland and *that*, in very simple stage terms, was telling us about the beginning of the corrosion of the community and the destruction of a culture and entire way of life. As I say, I can't think of a Scottish play that manages such effects. Again, the triumph of the play was, paradoxically, that it was doing that in terms that were intelligible to the other side, unlike *The Wallace* which was taking a historical standpoint of 'goodies and baddies'. It was there to be applauded and people sang 'Scots wha Ha'e' at the end. I don't think that is the ultimate purpose of drama.

I. Brown

Do you think that Scottishness provides any kind of focus? I mean, we have a kind of nationality, twenty-five million or so Scots outside Scotland, the diaspora. Does that provide any kind of focus to your work, in your own writing?

S. Conn

I don't think so. I think I have probably been made to feel more Scots at the moment, by your questions, but I don't sit at the typewriter thinking that I am Scots. I think that any 'Scotsness' that is in my blood expresses itself naturally in what I write rather than my choosing to put a conscious transfusion of Scottishness in. And I believe that is how it should be.

*The three interviews were originally published in **Interface: A New Interdisciplinary Journal for the Creative Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Issue 3: Cultural Hegemony, Theoretic and Creative Perspectives.** Summer 1984. Based at Crewe and Alsager College of Higher Education, Alsager, Stoke-on-Trent.*