

Scottish Theatre Archives at Edinburgh University Library

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Edinburgh University Library holds major collections of manuscripts, correspondence, and personal papers by some of the foremost Scottish writers of the twentieth century. There are particularly extensive archives for Hugh MacDiarmid, George Mackay Brown, Norman MacCaig, and Fred Urquhart. Other writers for whom there are significant holdings include Edwin Muir, William Soutar, Sydney Goodsir Smith, Helen B. Cruickshank, Tom Scott, and Duncan Glen. Although poetry is clearly the dominant genre, these papers include many neglected theatrical manuscripts by writers more widely celebrated for work in other spheres.

Edinburgh University Library's most significant theatrical resource is unquestionably the Papers of George Mackay Brown (GB 237 Coll-50) which contains the manuscripts for no fewer than thirty-four plays written between 1949 and 1990. Today Brown is recognized almost exclusively as a writer of verse and fiction, yet he is known to have written over fifty plays. Although only five of these were published in his lifetime,¹ and fewer than half performed, the lack of critical interest in Brown the dramatist is puzzling. To date, only one article (Campbell 2000) has been published on the subject. Elsewhere, critics have treated Brown's plays as rehearsals of themes explored more fully in his novels. Brown himself, is partly responsible for this trend, describing how he 'rigged' the novel *Magnus* (1973) onto the 'stark framework' of his play *The Loom of Light* (1972), 'making as full use as possible of the more varied techniques at the novelist's disposal'. Critics such as Timothy Baker (2009, p. 68), P. H. Butter (1987, p. 22), Donald Campbell (2000), and Ron Ferguson (2011, p. 240) have followed Brown's lead and traced a similar relationship between the 1967 play *A Spell for Green Corn* and Brown's debut novel *Greenvoe* (1972). Others, such as Maggie Ferguson (2007, p. 247), have noted that Brown's 1984 novel *Time in a Red Coat* emerged from a play of the same name. A perception has thus arisen that Brown's dramatic writings are essentially an intermediary stage whether in the elaboration of individual texts or in the evolution of Brown's career towards full realization as a novelist. Yet the sheer number of self-

standing dramatic works in Edinburgh University Library's Brown Papers, and the forty-year time-period which they cover, surely demand that they be treated on their own terms.

Brown himself was strangely reticent about his theatrical writings. In his autobiography *For the Islands I Sing*, he persistently presents himself as, above all else, a poet and short story-writer. Yet he offers tantalizing hints as to his lifelong engagement with drama, recalling, for example, how as a twenty-one-year old:

I tried my hand at a little play, set in the Viking period. I remember that finishing it gave me a small but agreeable surge of power. Walking along the street the next day I felt for the first time like a free townsman: no need to slink from doorway to doorway like a leper any more. I had made something that I knew in my bones to be good. (Brown 1997, p. 62)

He includes no similar description of his feelings upon completing his first poem, short story, or novel. Discussing his spell as a mature student at Newbattle Abbey in the early 1950s, Brown recalls visits to Glasgow Citizen's Theatre to see Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* and a Theatre Workshop production of Ewan McColl's *Uranium 234* (p. 102). The latter performance has subsequently been highlighted by Brown's biographers as the scene of his first meeting with Hugh MacDiarmid, but perhaps Brown is offering a key to his own theatrical influences. Theatre Workshop might be an unsuspected model for Brown's use of a chronicle structure, his mixture of poetry, song, and dramatic dialogue, and his preference for charting the effects of social change on communities rather than foregrounding the major actors of history. As the Brown Papers indicate, the early 1950s were clearly a period of intense dramatic activity for Brown. He writes of 'stories, poems, plays' coming to him 'in a steady stream' at this point (1997, p. 62). He also extensively reviewed drama for the Orcadian press and for student publications at Newbattle Abbey and Edinburgh University. Yet from the mid-1950s onwards, as Brown established himself as a published poet, both he and his biographers relegate his theatrical works to the background, again promoting the belief that they consist essentially of juvenilia and writing-desk experimentation.

The Brown Papers show, however, that Brown remained perennially active as a dramatist, and there are suggestions elsewhere that his theatrical ambitions were greater than his public pronouncements suggest. In a unpublished interview from 1970, quoted by Rowena and Brian Murray (2004, p. 230), Brown talks of the urgent need for new dramatic forms, based on chronicle rather than conflict-and-resolution; the traditional three-act or one-act mode being, in his view, 'played out'. Alan Bold, in a monograph based on extensive interviews with Brown, observed that Brown was increasingly interested in writing plays that combined conversational naturalism with a fabulous framework, and looked forward to seeing Brown blossom as a dramatist (1978, p. 85). The following decade did, in fact, see a prolific burst of playwriting, with no fewer than ten of Brown's dramas performed at Orkney's St Magnus Festival between 1981 and 1992 (Beasant 2002, pp. 245-94). Yet critics to date have preferred to represent the 1980s as a relatively fallow period for Brown as poet and narrator, without noting that his creative focus lay elsewhere.

Edinburgh University Library's theatrical manuscripts, then, offer researchers the opportunity to explore a largely uncharted area of Brown's writing, permitting a reappraisal of the role of drama in his work and a reassessment of his status as a modern Scottish playwright. They consist primarily of hand-written texts, and include both fair copies and drafts written on an astounding variety of media, ranging from cheque stubs through royalty statements to issues of the *Radio Times*.

Of most interest perhaps are Brown's post-1975 manuscripts which includes four plays performed at the St Magnus Festival (*The Well* (MS 2842/6), *The Island of the Saints* (MS 2846/4/3), *Edwin Muir and the Labyrinth* (MS 2844/4), and *The Road to Colonus* (MS 3115/3a-b)), plays for BBC Orkney Schools Radio and Television, and nativity plays written for Orkney school-children. An appreciation of the community-focussed nature of Brown's work may counter criticism that has been levelled at Brown's published plays. Donald Campbell (2000) has influentially detected 'a certain technical deficiency' in Brown's plays, 'arising from [his] apparent lack of interest in - or, indeed, awareness of - the requirements of the professional stage'. Brown's stagecraft is 'no more than elementary'. Although he 'writes a multitude of speaking parts, these have a statuesque, almost inert quality, allowing the actors few opportunities to develop a performance'. If, however, Brown is engaged in

a community project, in which untrained players, often children, relate their own island chronicle, then indifference to the requirements of the professional stage and a dearth of meaty parts for professional actors is surely understandable.

Nonetheless, the Brown Papers also offer material of interest to those who share Campbell's frustrations with the limitations of Brown's community drama. It includes the MS of the unperformed *Olaf Isbister* (MS 3115/4) which, for Campbell, revealed a vein of satirical humour missing from Brown's other plays. There is also the dramatic monologue *Edwin Muir and the Labyrinth* (MS 2844/4) which Campbell praised for conveying a welcome sense of dramatic voice, a belated awareness on Brown's part that someone is going 'to have to speak these words, [...] give them life and meaning, make them real'. This play is set at Newbattle Abbey College in 1952 when Muir was Warden and Brown a student. Muir looks back over his own life as a writer and records his frustrations with the Philistine demands of the Newbattle College Committee. Here we hold another invaluable document, thirty-eight letters sent from Muir to Brown recording his travails as Warden at Newbattle on which Brown surely drew while writing the play (Gen 767/7).

The most extensive dramatic manuscript in the Brown Papers is, however, *The Holy Voyage* (Gen 2029/1-3), describing the pilgrimage to Jerusalem of the Viking warrior-poet Earl Rognvald Kolson. This consists of a series of obsessively reworked drafts dating from 1960 to 1977 and never entirely completed to Brown's satisfaction.² Although this play has received no critical attention, Dominique Delmaire (2012) notes that Rognvald recurs constantly in Brown's verse and short fiction, but remains a shadowy figure, never achieving true depth or substance. In particular, he features in the short story 'The Eye of the Hurricane' in *Time to Keep* (1969), in which a writer, clearly modelled on Brown himself, struggles to complete a historical novel on Rognvald's pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The novelist finds himself unable to portray Rognvald's dalliance en route with the Spanish princess Ermengarde of Narbonne, an episode falling somewhere 'between lust and sanctity' (Brown 1969, p. 170). For Delmaire, Rognvald represented an unrealizable union of the carnal and the spiritual for both the sexually inhibited Brown and his novelist counterpart.

The manuscript of *The Holy Voyage* suggests that in ‘The Eye of the Hurricane’ Brown is transposing his own difficulties in completing the play. Like his fictional novelist, Brown had little difficulty with Rognvald’s journey to Spain – ‘straightforward stuff, boisterous, epic, gay’ (Brown 1969, p. 168) – but came unstuck in the constantly reworked depiction of Rognvald’s romance with Ermengarde. Neither Delmaire nor another critic, P. H. Butter, appears to know of *The Holy Voyage*, although Alan Bold cites it as a forthcoming work in his 1978 monograph (p. 85). Butter also notes Rognvald’s frequent appearances in Brown’s work but argues that his blood-thirstiness rendered him too morally equivocal to be developed in the same way as St Magnus, subject of Brown’s play *The Loom of Light* and novel *Magnus* (1987, p. 23). The Brown Papers raise the possibility, however, that *The Holy Voyage* was conceived as a sister-piece to *The Loom of Light*. The plays appear to have been written in tandem. Edinburgh University Library’s manuscripts of *The Loom of Light* (Gen 2083/2, Gen 2134/3/2, and MS 2842/6/5) suggest that it was begun much earlier than the 1969-72 period cited by Brown in the published version of the play (Brown 1984, p. ix). The first drafts in the Brown Papers are dated 1962 (MS 2083/2/1). That Brown failed to complete *The Holy Voyage* to his satisfaction suggests, however, that Butter and Delmaire are right in detecting an ambivalence in Rognvald – berserker and saint, war-criminal and courtly poet – that defied dramatic representation.

The Brown Papers also contain texts of all Brown published plays. The manuscript of *A Spell for Green Corn* (1967) (Gen 1865/1-6) is accompanied by a letter to BBC drama producer Stewart Conn, dated 16 July 1967 (Gen 1865/7), which offers a detailed symbolic interpretation of the play and hints as to staging. Brown declares that he is all for ‘restraint’ and ‘reticence’ and that he distrusts ‘all displays of ‘naked emotion’. ‘The nearer a play like *A Spell for Green Corn* gets to ritual’, he writes, ‘the better it’ll be’. The Brown Papers also include an embryonic version of *A Spell for Green Corn* in the form of the 1951 play *The Magic Fiddle* (Gen 2083/10, Gen 2134/2/1). There are, in fact, seven Brown one-act plays written between 1949 and 1952, some in Orkney dialect. As we have seen, this period has largely been treated in terms of the development of Brown’s poetic voice under the tutelage of

Edwin Muir at Newbattle. The Brown Papers indicate, however, that it was equally a period of intense engagement with drama.

After Brown, Edinburgh University most significant theatrical resource is the Sydney Goodsir Smith Papers (GB 237 Coll-497). These include an actor's prompt copy (with notes by Smith) of his best-known play *The Wallace* (Gen 1774), premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival in 1960. There are also galley-proofs, corrected by Smith, of the 1960 Oliver and Boyd edition of *The Wallace* (Gen 1765). There are five typescripts of Smith's one-act play, *Full Circle, or, The Stick-Up*, including versions for radio and television. This play, set in Depression-era Clydeside was broadcast by the BBC Scottish Home Service in 1961, published in Smith's *Fifteen Poems and a Play* (1969), and turned into an opera by Robin Orr in 1968.

Perhaps of greatest interest are manuscripts of four unperformed plays by Smith, *Ishmael, or, Ye Gods and Little Bitches* (Gen 1755), *Colickie Meg* (Gen 1758, Gen 1762-63), *The Mask of Minos* (Gen 1772), and *The Prince in Skye* (E2005.27/1). These remain unpublished with the partial exception of the riotously bawdy satire *Colickie Meg*, an extract of which appeared in *Lines Review* (Smith 1955). Manuscript versions of this play were, however, widely circulated among Smith's fellow poets, for many of whom it constituted his masterpiece. A letter to Hugh MacDiarmid, dated 8 August 1950 (MS 2960.16/49) reveals that Smith conceived *Colickie Meg* as 'the only successor to [David Lindsay's] the *Three Estates*'. Further letters to MacDiarmid express frustration that no company was willing to take the play on, a problem that beset all Smith's early dramatic ventures. Similarly, an undated letter (ca.1948) to Maurice Lindsay about *Ishmael, or, ye Gods and Little Bitches*, laments Smith's perennial difficulty in placing his work: 'the Smith school seems to take a long time to percolate through' (Gen 2030/31/196).

An appraisal of Smith's drama by Iain Cuthbertson, who took the lead in the 1960 production of *The Wallace*, may suggest why producers fought shy of Smith's work. As an actor and director, Cuthbertson found that the 'tortuous world play' of plays such as *Colickie Meg* defied 'sustained vocalization' (Cuthbertson 1975, p. 68). For Smith, a word is not

a wee totty group of letters on a page, but a great Aladdin's cave filled with treasure, which one stacks and re-stacks according to one's whim. Syllables are muckle monuments to be wandered in and out of, or shoved around, for the hell of it. [...] . It is as if each word was a hurdle not to be jumped, but to be dismounted for, inspected, and chortled over. This makes a sentence awfully bumpy to ride. Often, by the time you've got to the end of it, you've forgotten how you've started.

A flavour of Smith's Rabelaisian word-play is given by the title page of the MS of *Colickie Meg* (Gen 1763):

The Rite, Riot, Rout, or Rutt of Spring, or, The Merrie Life and Dowie Death of Colickie Meg, The Carlin Wife of Ben Nevis: A Play or Diversie-Teazement in Twa Acts and Introvale, thegaiter with a Pologue and Peppibogue and bencluttering a Fooll Corpse de Ballyhoo, a Witches' Saubath, Striptease, and monie ither idle tracasseries, ongauns, dirrydans, tuimfuilossifeins, etc, etc, etc, etc, by the Anerlie Mythifictor Gude Schir Skidderie Smithereens, Barrelnut.

Smith's manuscripts reveal not only his restless linguistic invention but his skill as a semi-professional artist, for there are many detailed sketches of costumes and stage-sets.

Smith's letters to Hugh MacDiarmid also chart the journey from page to stage of *The Wallace*, and express frustration that Edinburgh has no National Theatre and, indeed, no 'decent permanent theatre ... apart from the usual Ibsen-cum-Shaw-cum-Barrie Lyceum' (17 April 1946, MS 2960.16/32-33). They also record Smith's dealings with Theatre Workshop 'a most interesting and go-ahead little gang' and his fruitless attempts to secure them an Edinburgh venue which include a hair-raising suggestion to drape a canvas sheet over the burnt-out shell of the Theatre Royal (1 May 1957, MS 2960.16/67).

The Smith-MacDiarmid letters are part of our C. M. Grieve Archive (GB 237 Coll-18). consisting primarily of letters and manuscripts sent to Hugh MacDiarmid by fellow writers. This archive includes MSS of Alexander Reid's *The World's Wonder* (MS 3008), Robert Garioch's Scots version of George Buchanan's *Jephthah* (MS 2976), and four plays by Ewan McColl: *Blitz Song* (MS 3007), *Landscape with Chimneys*, *Operation Olive Branch*, and *Rogue's Gallery* (all MS 2982). There is also

correspondence from playwrights including James Bridie (MS 2955.5), Stewart Conn (MSS 2964, MS 2976), Joe Corrie (MS 2946.6), Robert McLellan (MS 2954.14), Alexander Scott (MS 2960.5), and C. P. Taylor (Gen 2094/5).

Most compelling perhaps are the letters from Bridie (1945-49). As founder and director of Glasgow Citizen's Theatre, Bridie vigorously defends himself from MacDiarmid's charges that he excludes plays written in Scots, scorns the theatre of ideas, employs only London-trained actors, and produces a disproportionately high number of his own plays. How, asks Bridie, is the 'best dramaturgist in Scotland ever to make anything of his Theatre [...] if the best poet in Scotland contents himself with crazy and ill-informed abuse of his venture' (29 May 1945, MS 2955.5/1). He invites MacDiarmid to compose a comedy in Scots and submit his work to Bridie's impartial judgement, 'the only opinion in Scotland that is worth a row of Soya beans'. If MacDiarmid refuses and says that he 'would not be seen dead in the Citizen's Theatre, [Bridie] will know him for a Snob-Nazi, power-maniacal, sacerdotal, narrow-minded, literary Wee-Free and reflect sadly that it is possible to be that and a memorable artist at the same time'. Nonetheless, criticism of the perceived Anglocentric bias of the Citizen's Theatre is a constant of MacDiarmid's incoming correspondence, featuring prominently in letters from both Alexander Scott and Robert McLellan.

From a Theatre Studies perspective, however, the most interesting correspondence in the Grieve Archive is that relating to a) MacDiarmid's involvement with Theatre Workshop and b) his translation of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*.

There are seventy-nine letters from members of Theatre Workshop to Hugh MacDiarmid (MS 2965.11), dating from 1945 to 1978, including twenty-two from Ewan McColl and fourteen from Joan Littlewood. This correspondence reveals that published histories of Theatre Workshop by Howard Goorney (1981) and Robert Leach (2006) have greatly underestimated the extent of MacDiarmid's collaboration. Where these essentially identify MacDiarmid as a sympathetic critic, the Grieve Archive reveals that MacDiarmid was a director of Pioneer Theatres, the limited company which governed Theatre Workshop, from 1945 to his death, and, perhaps more surprisingly, regularly attended board meetings. He put up Ewan McColl and

colleagues when they were seeking to establish a permanent base in Glasgow in the late 1940s, and advised as to possible venues and Scottish collaborators. He granted permission for his poems 'The Flaming Poetaster' and 'In Memoriam Garcia Lorca' to be incorporated into Theatre Workshop performances of the living newspaper *Last Edition* and Lorca's *The Love of Don Perlimplín and Belisa*. MacDiarmid also wrote the introduction to the published version of McColl's *Uranium 234* and, at McColl's prompting, wrote sympathetic articles in the Scottish press in the hope of opening the Scottish stage to Theatre Workshop. Tantalizingly, the letters reveal that McColl and MacDiarmid agreed to collaborate on a Scots version of *Macbeth*, a project which does not appear to have gone beyond the planning stage.

Perhaps the most startling letters in the archive are those from Joan Littlewood asking MacDiarmid to drum up Scottish support for Ewan McColl following his arrest for desertion in December 1946 and wondering, somewhat optimistically, whether MacDiarmid had a Scottish MP in his back pocket (MS 2965.11/9-11, 16). This episode, elided in McColl's autobiography (1990) and histories of Theatre Workshop, but covered in Joan Littlewood's memoirs, ended with the cancellation of McColl's court martial on medical grounds. Littlewood hired a Jungian psychotherapist who analysed McColl's works and persuaded the military that McColl was a 'paranoid personality with Oedipal tendencies' who was profoundly incompatible with army life (Littlewood 2003, p. 269). In a letter to MacDiarmid, Littlewood also reports advice received from George Bernard Shaw. Shaw said that it was no use telling the military authorities that McColl was 'a genius, an artist'. It was far better to say that he was a dentist. 'The English', Shaw declared, 'think art is immoral: don't for God's sake let them read his plays or they'll shoot him' (16 January 1947, MS 2965.11/11).

Despite the promptings of James Bridie, Ewan McColl, and Lewis Grassie Gibbon, MacDiarmid never wrote an original drama after *Some Day* (1923) and *The Purple Patch* (1924), both of which Grassie Gibbon, in a letter to MacDiarmid in the Grieve Archive, described as 'astoundingly good' (15 November 1933, MS 2955.11/18-19). MacDiarmid was, however, commissioned to prepare an English version of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* in 1963 by the West End impresario Oscar Lewenstein who met MacDiarmid while working for Glasgow Unity Theatre. Neither

the Brecht Estate nor Kurt Weil's widow Lotte Lenya were satisfied with existing English versions, and Lewenstein successfully proposed MacDiarmid as the ideal translator. The Grieve Archive contains MacDiarmid's incoming correspondence relating to this commission (MS 2965.12). This shows that MacDiarmid submitted a complete translation of the dialogue in 1964 but struggled to produce versions of Brecht's songs which matched Weil's music. In an interview with Alan Riach, Norman MacCaig recalled that the 'tone-deaf' MacDiarmid secured his help in creating a singable text (MacCaig 1998, p. 26). He did not mention that he had earlier produced his own full translation of *The Threepenny Opera* (ca.1950) of which Edinburgh University Library holds a manuscript (MS 3204/1/1).

In his efforts to revise the song lyrics, MacDiarmid also enlisted the aid of the composer Ronald Stevenson and his daughter-in-law Deirdre Grieve. MacDiarmid submitted a complete translation of the libretto by 1966, but his versions of the songs remained problematic. Lotte Lenya judged the translation of the dialogue to be 'brilliant' but felt that MacDiarmid's lexical choices in the lyrics were often unmusical. When the translation was finally staged by Tony Richardson at the Prince of Wales Theatre in 1972, the lyrics were substantially rewritten by Keith Hack who successfully argued that MacDiarmid should relinquish a percentage of his royalties.

We also hold an MS note by MacDiarmid on the translation that seems to have been prepared for a TV or Radio interview. He expresses his delight at being asked to translate Brecht, in whose work he had 'long been vitally interested' (MS 2965.12/63-64). He was frustrated, however, by the requirement to translate the text into English, feeling that modern English was too refined a medium to convey the essence of Brecht's work. He would have preferred to work in Scots which was much better suited to expressing 'ridicule, satire, rancour, and other Brechtian qualities'. Ideally, he would have liked to have conflated Brecht's text, Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, and Burns's cantata *The Jolly Beggars*, and might yet attempt it. Further correspondence in the Grieve Archive reveals that he approached Alexander Scott to collaborate with him on just such a project, with a view to premiering the work at the 1970 Edinburgh International Festival. Due to existing commitments, Scott suggested that they omit the *Beggar's Opera*, and focus on conflating Burns and Brecht, setting the play in 1790s Edinburgh, introducing Burns himself into Brecht's whorehouse scene, and

retitling the work *The Bawbee Beggars* (15 Jan 1970, (MS 2960.5/50-51). Regrettably, ill-health prevented MacDiarmid from ever proceeding with the collaboration.

The Papers of George Mackay Brown, Sydney Goodsir Smith, and Hugh MacDiarmid are unquestionably the resources of most interest to students of 20th-century Scottish drama. There are, however, further theatrical works among Edinburgh University Library's Scottish literary papers, including five radio-plays by Maurice Lindsay (Gen 2030/13-14, 16c and 24), three plays in Scots by Helen B. Cruickshank (Gen 1929/28, 30, 56-57, and 63), and complete or partial manuscripts of seven stage- or radio-plays by a young Fred Urquhart (MS 2803, MS 2827). The incoming correspondence of Tom Scott (E95.02) also includes material of theatrical interest, including letters charting his unsuccessful attempt to persuade the Royal Lyceum Theatre to stage his Scots version of *Oedipus Rex*, letters from G. S. Fraser (25 November 1959) and Robert Garioch (17 August 1956) in praise of Sydney Goodsir Smith's *The Wallace*, and letters from Alexander Reid (undated) and Alexander Scott (2 August 1967) on their own dramatic works.

Hopefully this survey has given some impression of the wealth of theatrical resources held by Edinburgh University Library and some hints as to how they might be exploited by students of Scottish drama. Details of all the manuscripts mentioned above, and links to hand-lists, may be accessed via a new online guide to our Scottish literary papers at:

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/information-services/library-museum-gallery/crc/collections/special-collections/scottish-literature/overview>

Endnotes

¹ *A Spell for Green Corn* (London: Hogarth Press, 1970), *Three Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984) (containing *The Loom of Light*, *The Well*, and *The Voyage of Saint Brandon*), and *A Celebration for Magnus* (Nairn: Balnain Books, 1987).

² A note in Brown's hand on the latest draft reads 'Earl Rognvald Kolson's pilgrimage from Norway/Orkney to Jerusalem and Rome, 1151-54 AD, a play in 8 scenes, begun in Bathgate 1960, still not finished 1977' (**Gen 2029/1**).

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