

**‘Tomorrow, songs / Will flow free again, and new voices /  
Be born on the carrying stream’<sup>1</sup>:**

## **Hamish Henderson’s conception of the Scottish Folk-song Revival and its place in literary Scotland**

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*Descendant o’ the unkent bards wha made  
Sangs peerless through a’ post-anonymous days,  
I glimse again in you that mightier poo’er  
Than fasheswi’ the laurels and the bays  
But kens that it is shared by ilka man  
Since time began*

– ‘First Hymn to Lenin’  
Hugh MacDiarmid (*First Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems*, 1931)

*. . . Lie alongside me, put your ear to the ground and listen: the earth rocks  
with fruitful adventures  
and listen: the sap rises – sweet springs of song  
like hymns of belief to the buds that will blossom*

– Unpublished poem/jottings  
Hamish Henderson (Henderson archive)<sup>2</sup>

Hamish Henderson first came to prominence in 1947 with the publication of *Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica* which won the Somerset Maugham Award. He later became the translator of Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Letters*, and an anthologist and essayist of note. However, it is as a defender of the Scottish Folk-song Revival that he has perhaps had the most extensive effect on Scotland’s cultural life. He was a polymath who emphasised the interconnectedness of all the elements of his cultural interests, though folk-song often found its way to the foundations of his ideas.

Literary discourse on Henderson is scant, however the Folk-song Revival in which

he played such an integral part, is merited even less significance by Scottish literary historians. In recent years, Roderick Watson’s *The Literature of Scotland: The Twentieth Century* (2007) neglects the Folk-song Revival and its influential, but ambivalent relationship with the major literary figures of the post-war period. A recent relaxation of inter-disciplinary

parameters has however encouraged the literary study of folk-arts and particularly the oral folk tradition: which had formerly been the exclusive terrain of folklorists, ethnomusicologists and anthropologists.

Henderson’s life’s work provides an extensive critical



account of this defining period of national, cultural and artistic renewal. His writings appeared in a range of publications: from national newspapers to political pamphlets and song collections. This variety of types of publication reflects the absence of a coherent academic climate suited to Henderson's particular expertise. His correspondence provides a great source of intellectual engagement in all topics of cultural, historical, social or political importance. The 'flying' debates in the opinion columns of the *Scotsman* between Henderson and Hugh MacDiarmid are of particular interest as they publicly exposed the controversy that became apparent in placing folk-song in the context of the national culture.

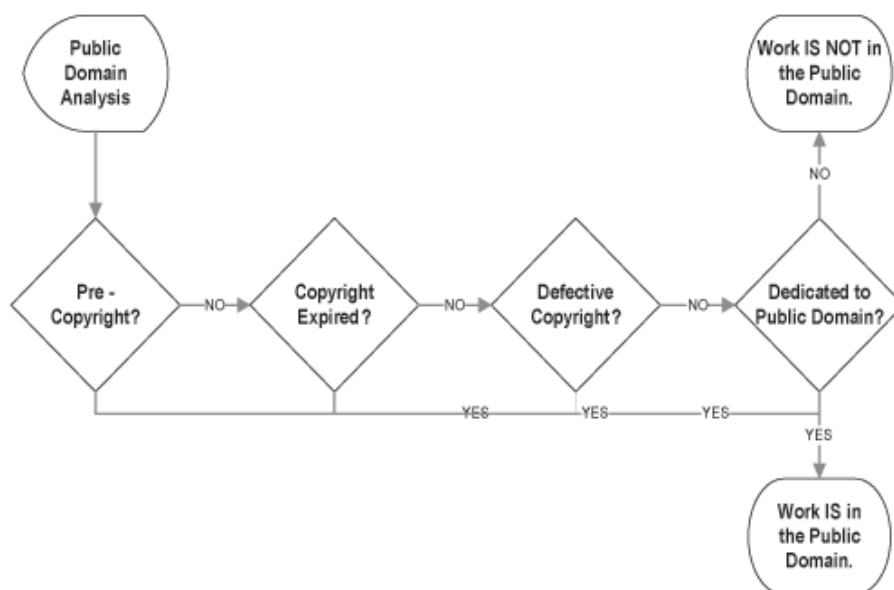
Popular folk revivalism was flowering across the western hemisphere in the fifties and sixties, and Scotland was no exception, though it had its own characteristic resources and processes. Henderson theorised 'folk-song' in terms that were defined by the medium itself, rather than those imposed from without. He considered the nature of its authorship and transmission, its politics, the 'tradition' it perpetuated and those it was entwined with, and finally the strange relationship folk-song had with the literary 'establishment'. Locating folk-song in the literary tradition and recognising its capacity for the kinds of innovation and renewal that were demanded of more conventional 'literature' was a primary concern of Henderson's. Through the consideration of such elements, the literary 'value' of folk-song projected by Henderson can be accredited with the significance it deserves.

By such an introduction to Henderson's ideas and their relevance in the modern history of literary Scotland, it is hoped that study of the 'Scottish Literary Renaissance' in particular might be expanded to consider other such cultural activities of the time.

### Authorship and Transmission

The clearest difference between folk-song and literature, and a major cause of the cultural gulf that Henderson sought to bridge, is that of medium. A folk-song is characterised predominantly by its performance, whereas a lyric poem or a classic novel is typically received in an individualised reading experience. This apparent dichotomy of orality and textuality has important implications for the authorship and transmission of folk-song.

Folk-song collectors have customarily envisaged their efforts as conclusive, retrospective anthologies of a condemned art-form, of a strictly perishable commodity soon to be reported only in history books. The ominously titled *Last Leaves of Traditional Ballads and Ballad Airs* (Greig 1925) carries such connotations. Henderson opposed this convention, instead celebrating folk-song as a 'living tradition'. He saw its survival not as the last desperate gasps of an antiquated form, but as the inevitable continuation of a 'permanent aspect of human culture, which will go on persisting whatever social and technological changes take place, and will certainly adapt itself, as it has always done, to changing circumstances' (1958, in *Alias*



MacAlias 2004, 19-20).<sup>3</sup> These ‘changing circumstances’ relate in part to increases in literacy and developments in printing and publishing. However, it has been argued that these changes, which naturally facilitate the dissemination of literature, had a negative effect on folk-song by diminishing the significance of oral-transmission. This was explained to Sir Walter Scott in a now famous rebuttal of his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*:

There was never ane o my sangs  
prentit till ye prentit them yourself,  
and ye hae spoilt them awthegither.  
They were made for singing an no for  
reading; but ye hae broken the charm  
noo, and they’ll never be sung mair.  
(as cited by Henderson, *AM*, 23)

Thankfully such prophecies were also contested by Henderson. By adopting textual elements of collection and dissemination into his own theory of the flexibility and adaptability of folk-song, Henderson undermined any suggestion that transcribing songs was necessarily at odds with the nature of the medium and would bring about its extinction. He recognised the American folklorist Alan Lomax’s observation that ‘the Scots have the liveliest folk tradition of the British Isles, but paradoxically it is the most bookish’ (as cited by Henderson, *AM*, 24).



Broadsheet ballads for example could improve the circulation of a song, taking it to regions it may never otherwise have reached (*AM*, 22). One of Henderson’s most significant source-singer ‘discoveries’ was Willie Matheson from Aberdeenshire, who had since boyhood collected songs, poems and broadsides in three great manuscript books which were later copied into the archives of the School of Scottish Studies (Bruford, ed. 22). This act alone is a great example of the usefulness of a textual resource in bolstering the continuation of an *oral* tradition.

Henderson’s conviction in the survival of folk-song rests on a concept of the folk ‘process’ which gives primary agency to the songs and their singers. With the sharing of songs comes a freedom of artistic licence and interpretation which can only promote the diffusion of folk-song:

Singers who are singers remake their own version, which may gel for themselves and others, or may dissipate again . . . the greatest thrill is to hear one’s own songs sung in new variants by singers who felt themselves totally free to re-make them in any old way – or in any new way – that seems good to them.  
(*AM*, 429)

This liberty of adaptation was later developed and theorised by folk-scholar David Buchan in *The Ballad and the Folk* (1972):

The traditional singer does not learn individual songs as fixed texts, but learns instead both a method of composition and a number of stories. By this method he re-composes each individual story each time he performs . . . he composes the text as he re-composes the story. Each rendering of the story is, then, an “original text” (52).

Although Henderson went on to challenge Buchan over some of the assertions made in his book (see *People’s Past*, 72), the passage cited above seems like a logical advance on the freedom of adaptation that was widely discussed by Henderson. There are countless examples in Henderson’s work explaining this process in detail; following a song through its various forms and performances, observing personal, regional, rhetorical and musical influences that it may be subject to from its conception right through to the prevailing versions that survive in the contemporary folk currency.<sup>4</sup>

The renowned folklorist Alan Dundes famously called for a relaxation of the inter-disciplinary parameters between folklore, literature, history and anthropology (1965). In particular he identified the dangers of misinterpretation that were a consequence of the divided interpretative schools in folklore studies; in the ‘literary’ and ‘anthropological’ approaches (1990, 136). Henderson was acutely aware of similar contentions between literature and





folk-song scholars, and sought to encourage closer collaboration between the two. Consequently, the work of aforementioned folklorists and that of literary theorists can be seen to converge within Henderson's coverage of the Folk-song Revival. Where Henderson celebrates the freedom of folk-song to adapt, and Buchan develops the principal of an 'original text' in every performance, literary theorist, Roland Barthes in his 'Death of the Author' asserts that the agency of the writer is completely subsumed by that of the interpretative reader and the text itself (1466). When applied to Henderson's 'folk-song' this concept is literally enacted. A singer as performer is also a reader (or perhaps more accurately a "listener") in their own right as part of the process of oral transmission. The folk-singer's own impulsive agency, manifested in intonation, emphasis, lyricism and every other aspect of a performance is compounded by that of the listener, who themselves have interpretative powers, and of course the potential to carry forward their own rendering of the song. Using this theory in regard to folk-song is illuminating for both disciplines. It cannot, however, be emphasised in folk-song as unremittingly as Barthes does in literature. Henderson, though emphatic on the importance of oral transmission, was not so completely dismissive of the relevance of the song-writers (or 'authors'). While the true carriage of a song may be in those that hear it or sing it rather than write it, the agency and context of the 'writer' was still a composite influence on any given 'song' for Henderson.

The themes related above are all evident in Henderson's writings, but they are also endorsed by his direct involvement as a song-collector. Buchan's emphasis on the distinctively regional roots and formation of folk-ballads (13-17), and Dundes' psychoanalytical approach to lore as projections of unconscious social issues and anxieties (1980), both echo the practice of Henderson as a collector. For Henderson, it was important not only to *collect* songs but to trace them and their carriers within historical, social and personal frameworks. These songs were – as he often espoused – 'living traditions' and therefore had valuable connections to the lives of the 'folk'. The role of the collector is then a deeply humanistic one (Henderson in Goldstein, x) and Henderson's field recordings themselves demonstrate his sensitivity to this. In one instance, recording a Stirlingshire Horseman, Jock Ainslie, Henderson gently guides the conversation from Ainslie's first hearing of a particular song towards his personal experiences as a ploughman in the Stirlingshire area: the impromptu ceilidhs and singing-sessions, the demographic of the workforce on the farms, the living conditions, and even the little known, secretive cult of 'The Horseman's Word' that was once active all over Scotland (Bruford, ed. 51-58). For Henderson, a song was indivisible from its oral history, inseparable from the life of its singer(s) and from the lives of countless unnamed others who may have crossed its path.

### The Politics of Folk-song



The anonymous masses that Henderson felt living through the folk-songs of Scotland were for him the collective vehicles of the 'carrying



stream' of folk-song tradition, and played their part in perpetuating a politicised cultural process. By preserving this form, quite literally 'the song-voice of the people', the Revival unearthed and popularised an indigenous art-form that came directly from the lives of its carriers. Henderson was emphatic on the political nature of folk-song:

It is a sort of 'anti-culture' and embodies ideas, predilections and values which are not those of learned culture . . . such genuine folk culture as survives coexists uneasily with the majority 'art-culture' and it is quite possible to live right in the middle of it and never to apprehend its existence. (*AM*, 34)

In this sense the folk-song tradition is political in its suppression under the dominance of the 'high arts', but is also further politicised in its capacity as representation of an autonomous, collective cultural expression of 'the people'. Although Henderson was convinced of the inevitability of folk-song as a force throughout history, he also recognised that it had endured periods of bitter repression under the entrenched machinations of 'official' society and had equally revelled in periods of revival like that he sought to sustain. This cyclical historical course saw folk-song deemed as 'the cult of the damned' (Henderson, *AM*, 28) under the puritanical Calvinism of Reformation Scotland, only to rise up again in the context of European romantic nationalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It would again be repressed throughout the Industrial Age. For Henderson, post-war Scotland seemed ready for the next cycle, another revival which sought to expand the avenues of folk-song's existence and breathe life back into its rebel veins.

Folk-song naturally lends itself to this role as the voice of the dispossessed. The autonomous power of a song created by a person not for publication or recording, but for the enjoyment of expression, and entry into a flexible process of oral transmission, means that the prerogatives in action have a unique sincerity. The anonymity of the process furthermore encourages the genuine articulation of social conditions on behalf of the common man. This democratic quality is widely recognised in the literature of the Revival, and was of increasing importance in the rhetoric of the revivalists (Munroe, 1, 20).

Henderson began to formalise his conception of folk-art and its wider cultural significance

shortly after finishing his translations of the letters of Antonio Gramsci. Due to his political imprisonment under Mussolini, Gramsci was often unable to articulate his political theory explicitly in his writings and so turned to other forms of predominantly cultural and literary study, forms that nevertheless convey a forward-thinking, developmental Marxism. Throughout the variety of his studies he claimed: 'there exists a certain homogeneity which binds these . . . subjects together: the creative spirit of the people, in its diverse phases and degrees of development, underpins each in equal measure' (*Prison Letters*, 46). It is this fundamental outlook that appealed to Henderson and underlined his all-encompassing vision of the role of folk-song and the imperatives of the Revival in its greater cultural, national and indeed international context.

In Gramsci, Henderson found a pragmatic Marxist thinker who recognised the value of studying folk-culture in conjunction with wider revolutionary politics. There is however a seeming paradox in Gramsci's writing on the subject: 'on the one hand he elevates folklore to the status of a world-view which demands serious study, and on the other hand he defines it as an incoherent heap of detritus which must be swept away by the class-conscious broom of a future working-class hegemonic culture' (Henderson, *AM*, 353). In other words, a healthy tradition of folklore is at once a powerful expression of the world-view of the downtrodden, and simultaneously it is a resignation to that condition, to which a revolutionary thinker cannot condone. Although Gramsci's vision of an upward-bound revolutionary culture had no space for parochial folklore, he recognised the power and implication of its collective voice: 'That which distinguishes folk-song in the framework of a nation and its culture is neither the artistic fact nor the historic origin; it is a separate and distinct way of perceiving life and the world, as opposed to that of 'official' society' (Gramsci, as cited by Henderson, *People's Past*, 13). Due to its unstable, organic spontaneity, the 'life-view' expressed in folk-song exists on a plain untouchable by the tentacles of 'official' power; it is free to absorb elements of a dominant culture, whilst sustaining its autonomy. Herein lies its 'progressive quality' (Crehan, 108).

In the late fifties and early sixties Henderson increasingly aligned himself with the New Left; with academics like E. P. Thomson, Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, and publications like *The New Reasoner* and later *The New Left*



Review. This new school of Socialist thought was more receptive to sociological and cultural studies and could to some extent verify Henderson's theorisation of the politics of the Revival (*The Armstrong Nose* 93). Williams's work on 'popular culture' and 'mass-communication' in *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, distinguishes folk-song as a 'valuable dissident element' (320) against the mass-produced 'culture' imposed by a 'powerful media of persuasion and suggestion' (311). In a later article he condemns the restricted control of our cultural institutions in the hands of a few, whose purpose is not that of art or freedom of expression but profit (1960, 54). Henderson considers the same order in 1955:

The élite are to a big extent also the elect, and consequently have a vested interest in keeping the songs of the damned well battened down under hatches. Firmly entrenched in all key positions of administration, religion and the organisation of culture, the elect deny just as long as they are able that anything so vulgar as popular culture exists (AM, 46).

It is easy to conceive of folk-song's role in this opposition, for Henderson it is the precedent of Williams's 'long revolution' (1958, 335) to bring the formation of a 'common culture' (Williams, 1958, 317), an all-encapsulating artistic vision and a deep conviction 'that art must address the 'whole' and that both the poet and the politician must go back to 'the folk' (Neat, 2007, 173).

Besides the politics of its form, the Folk-song Revival developed connections with the contemporary political climate. A defining event in the formation of the Revival was the first Edinburgh People's Festival of 1951 which was funded and organised in collaboration with the Labour Movement and trade unions. It was to offer a showcase of national art and folk-song, neglected by the Edinburgh International Festival since its inception in 1947 (Henderson, AM, 16). As well as a common heritage in Socialist politics, many revivalists had significant connections with Scottish Republicanism. In this sense, the Folk-song Revival shared political attributes with many of the most significant advocates of the continuing Scottish Literary Renaissance. Indeed, the Edinburgh People's Festival during the three years of its existence had elements both literary and folk-based. It presented lectures and poetry recitations by MacDiarmid alongside the singing of ballads and

broadsides by 'source-singers' (Henderson, *People's Past*, 97). The John MacLean celebrations of 1948 had a similar significance, bringing literature and traditional song together in commemoration of a popular political figure of the people.<sup>5</sup> The ceremony incorporated folk-songs, including Henderson's own 'The John MacLean March', and the poetry of Sydney Goodsir Smith, Sorley MacLean and MacDiarmid. In this context Henderson's biographer, Timothy Neat writes; 'one can see that this was the day when Hamish's Scottish Folk Revival joined MacDiarmid's Scottish Renaissance as an equal partner, in the process by which the twentieth-century culture of Scotland was to be transformed' (2007, 227). Though this may seem a little heavy-handed and unanalytical, it nevertheless recognises the outwardly common ground between the two movements, and the significance of their cooperation under the auspices of this event.

Henderson celebrated the natural 'rebel underground' element of folk-song; the love-songs that reject the values of a materialist bourgeois society and the Puritanism of organised religion, the bawdy songs which revel in the comedy of sex and the labourer's bothy songs which were, of course, distinctly anti-farmer (*People's Past*, 8). He also enthusiastically observed the continuing development of songs in the folk-idiom inspired by contemporary political events. The 'reiving' of the Stone of Destiny from Westminster Abbey in 1950, and the arrival of American ships carrying Polaris missiles at the Holy Loch in 1961 both stimulated great circulation of protest songs (AM, 3).

The practical politics of national independence and Socialism that were associated with the Revival sit hand-in-hand with the politics of form and expression that defined the processes of folk-song for Henderson. This can be summarised in his analysis of an old folk-song, once collected in an earlier form by Burns, and since repeatedly reinvested in the oral tradition:

['MacPherson's Rant'] is tied fast to time and place and circumstance; in spite of this (or maybe because of this) it transcends these and speaks proudly with a universal tongue for the outlaws and dispossessed of the world (AM, 48).

### 'Tradition'

This powerful oral tradition, which carried songs like 'MacPherson's Rant' through hundreds of years of singers and collectors,



was central to Henderson's Revival. His faith in this process was unshakable. The Revival he helped to formulate was not simply a renewal of antiquated artistic models and forms, but was the continuation of a long tradition which had experienced ebbs and surges throughout its history. This tradition could naturally adapt to suit the modern age whilst also retaining something of its heritage. Its longevity can indeed be attributed to this adaptability, or as the great collector Gavin Greig put it:

the field of folk-song admits no delimitation either in a geographical or a secular way, reaching forth ultimately to the ends of the earth through countless affinities, and back to primeval times through an unbroken chain of derivation (as cited by Henderson, *AM*, 93).

As the Revival was a product of the 'living' tradition, it could not be taken as the resurrection of a dead form. For Henderson it was the exposure of a roots-movement that had never disappeared. The folk-tradition had, until the Revival, been obscured under the 'culture of the élite' (Henderson, *AM*, 46). It was disrupted by the rapid urbanisation of the Industrial age, and sanitised in the early twentieth century by Music Hall culture. In 1948, in a discussion on the state of Scottish writing at the turn of the century, and with more than a little of MacDiarmid's fervour, Henderson deplores the 'English imperialist Ascendancy', its 'domination in academic circles', and stresses that 'the indigenous traditions of the people, both Gaelic and Lallans, seemed to have been left tattered and defenceless before the big battalions of alien aggression' (*AM*, 374). Consequently, folk-song had been marginalised in the period leading up to the Revival.

In spite of these oppressive conditions the folk-song tradition had carried on quietly, in the hands of academic collectors such as Gavin Greig and Professor Francis James Child, or in the work of literary figures that recognised this great untapped resource and sought to collect material and inspiration. Scott, Burns and Hogg are the well-known examples of this. The underground current of inherited songs, passing from older generations to the new, and in particular folk-singers like Willie Matheson who privately gathered their own immense archives of folk-songs, were perhaps the core of this endurance (Bruford, ed. 22).

When Henderson and his contemporaries came to their collecting work, they had a long tradition of folk-song and ballad collections to refer to. These resources would help them to map the progression and transmission of songs into contemporary folk-song currency. But the true magnitude of 'underground' song-culture could only be traced by finding the contemporary inheritors of this 'oral tradition'. His greatest connections in this respect were among the travelling people of the northeast, especially Jeannie Robertson, whom Lomax considered 'the greatest ballad-singer in the world' (as cited by Henderson, *Armstrong Nose*, 119). Robertson was from 'travelling stock', and so represented 'the carriers, dispensers, performers and glorifiers of one of the most voluminous oral cultures in Europe' (Henderson, *AM*, 101). As a marginalised section of society the 'travellers' or 'tinkers' escaped the developments that hindered a healthy and open folk-song tradition elsewhere. As one interviewee of Henderson's expressed, they were a people 'living entirely in the past' (*AM*, 229). They were 'contemporary ancestors' (Neat, 2007, 340) of an ancient culture, and they embodied the 'living tradition' that would fuel the Revival among enthusiasts in Edinburgh and Glasgow.

With Henderson's introduction to portable tape-recording technology in 1951, with the establishment of the School of Scottish Studies in the same year, and the founding of folk-song societies such as that of the University of Edinburgh in 1958, there developed a lively forum for the dissemination of folk-song material. The folk-songs of rural Scotland, and gradually those of the urban centres, were being gathered and re-distributed to those who had never experienced them before. The folk-song tradition emerged as a popular movement employing new avenues of oral transmission while at the same time retaining those it always relied upon.

Henderson's folk-song tradition, however, is not one that functions in isolation. He always emphasised the symbiotic traditions of folk-song and literature. The People's Festivals and the John MacLean commemoration had combined the two cultural forces, but Henderson found evidence everywhere for his contention. In 'the lean subtle grace of the ballad-Scots' he recognised 'its ability to deal with themes as varied as the great tragic narratives as well as the grotesque randomness of comic Child ballads . . . [giving] fresh insight into the way the Scots literary and folk



traditions through the centuries have been constantly and inextricably intertwined' (AM, 9). In his article 'The Ballad and Popular Tradition to 1660', Henderson traced an almost universal movement of migratory folktale-types that are vested in both folk-based and literary forms. Stretching back to the early medieval period they are clearly recognisable both in the Child ballads and the work of early Scottish literary figures from John Barbour to David Hume of Godscroft (AM, 78-94). Henderson maintained that Scots Balladry was embedded in the legacy of medieval poetic forms and content (AM, 384). The interaction between literature and folk-song was for Henderson entirely natural, he said of Burns and Federico García Lorca, that they had 'learned much from a lively and virile folk-culture, and have themselves written songs which were to become absorbed into local folk-traditions' (AM, 281-282). This tradition of association then extends into the twentieth-century, where Henderson was insistent in reminding the leading art-poets of their common heritage with the 'folk' (Neat, 2007, 296). In Sorley MacLean he heard the 'sinewy strength' and 'passionate intensity' of 'anonymous Gaelic song-poetry' (AM, 10) and in MacDiarmid's early lyrics, he heard the lexis and metre of pure folk poetry (AM,443).

What remains is to determine the nature of the term 'tradition' in Henderson's writings. The theory of 'tradition' championed in Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger's influential collection of essays *The Invention of Tradition* would likely categorise Henderson's folk-tradition as a 'genuine tradition', rather than an 'invented' one (2-3). However, Hobsbawm distinguishes 'tradition' in general from 'custom' by its 'invariance', claiming that its continuance relies on this very fact (2). The inherent adaptability and evolutionary capacity of Henderson's 'folk-song tradition' clearly rejects this definition and even reverses it. For Hobsbawm, reference to the past is part of the process of inventing tradition (4), and though the Folk-song Revival did lay claims to the past, it looked forward in equal part. The revitalisation of the folk-song tradition did not rest on any 'literary ghosts' or 'falsified histories' like MacPherson's Ossianic fragments (Trevor-Roper, 41). A degree of inventedness could perhaps be argued in the Revival's political associations. Henderson's writings and other accounts of the Revival<sup>6</sup> would suggest, however, that these political affiliations were natural products of the folk tradition itself, and, naturally, were moulded in part by the political and cultural context from which the Revival

sprung. Ranger went on to revise the concept of the 'invention of tradition' (1993), suggesting the substitution of 'invention' for Benedict Anderson's term 'imagined' from his work *Imagined Communities* (1983). This reassessment would perhaps have made the study more applicable to the seemingly natural, anonymous folk-song and oral traditions that Henderson propagated.

A more flexible and encompassing concept of 'tradition' is apparent in T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919). Eliot's 'historical sense' conveys 'a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence', compelling writers with a feeling of the whole stream of European literary tradition in 'simultaneous existence' (1093). By this principle 'tradition' is not something that is passed down from the previous generation, demanding adherence (1093), rather, it is a process of perpetual innovation, of renewal and revival. Henderson's folk-song tradition relates well to this formula, as it evolves with changing circumstances whilst carrying the sum-total of literary and folkloristic heritage with it. The 'process of depersonalization' (1094), which Eliot deemed necessary for the artist, is even literally enacted by the anonymous folk voice and oral tradition which maintain folk-song. Henderson's 'living tradition' of folk-song speaks of the same vitality as Eliot when he asserts the importance of being 'conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living' (1098).

Neil M. Gunn suggests a similar responsibility to 'tradition' as something that can never be rejected, 'for our roots are there, however deep and however dark' (204). He claims that the best way to approach 'tradition' is by a kind of national psychoanalysis, whereby aspects of the nation's past and traditions are to be re-examined and understood, thereby determining the best route for progress (204-205). For Gunn, this practice explains the prevalence of the Scottish Renaissance and Scottish Nationalism at the time (205), and could perhaps go some way to explaining the origins of the Scottish Folk-song Revival. He summarizes, 'a people can drive underground the vital part of their tradition; but the time comes when that which was driven under must come to the surface if life and health are to continue' (205). The folk tradition which was 'driven underground' in the early nineteenth century was, then, ripe for re-emergence with Henderson and the Scottish Folk-song Revival.



## Literary 'value' and the place of Folk-song

The direction which Scotland's cultural traditions were to take was, however, a contentious issue. Some leading literary figures of the Renaissance refused to consider the Folk-song Revival as an equally progressive and 'powerful component part of the Scottish Renaissance' (Henderson, *AM*, 50) and nurtured a divide between the two based on the supposed want of literary value in the folk-arts. As the 'architect of a popular movement' (Finlay, 1996, 299) however, Henderson had conceived of a revival founded on the strengths of the unique independent authorship and oral transmission of folk-song, on its politics both inherent and explicit, and on the long tradition of adaptability and endurance from which it continued to bloom. For Henderson these qualities represented a new potential program of cultural renewal and innovation which was more than equipped to counter the overwhelmingly literary nature of the continuing Renaissance. Closer scrutiny of the relationship between the popular Folk-song Revival and the Scottish Literary Renaissance will clarify further the all-encapsulating and forward moving vision of Henderson's outlook, whilst exposing the peculiar polarity between the 'hiech' and 'laich' arts (Glen, 1988) at the heart of Scottish cultural identity.

The 'Honor'd Shade Flyting' of 1959-1960 and the 'Folk-song Flyting' of 1964 that appeared in the pages of the *Scotsman* newspaper present some of the main arguments that closely examined the relationship of Scotland's literature and its song, to the people. Alec Finlay describes the nature of flyting as 'a mode of rhetoric, part public performance, part personal compulsion; it is not however, an art-form which best serves objective fact. In these disputes we witness a shadow-play, with all the exaggerations and distortions that follow' (1996, 301). Nevertheless, beneath the polemics, Henderson and MacDiarmid battled over the cultural identity of the nation. The contention of the 'literary value' of folk-song was first voiced by MacDiarmid, who considered the attitude of the 'folk-song cult' to be 'a menace to the arts not less serious than, and in close connection with, the pressure to reduce all arts to the level of mere entertainment' (*The Armstrong Nose*, 100). In his more invective moments he described the traditional song of Scotland as 'the simple outpourings of illiterates and backward peasants' (*AN*, 127) which had no place in

resolving the demand for 'higher and higher intellectual levels' (*AN*, 119) and the 'attainment of higher consciousness' (*AN*, 97) which was for MacDiarmid the real aspiration of literature. He accused Henderson of postulating that the popular appeal of folk-song was necessarily a measure of its literary quality and goes on to discuss the 'mob ignorance' that is inherent in such popularity (*AN*, 122-123).

In response to these public charges Henderson and David Craig gave examples of the fruitful inter-connections of folk-song and literature; in Montale, Burns (Henderson, *AN*, 119) and Brecht (Craig, *AN*, 121). They also illustrated the common popularity of many great art-poets such as Dante (Henderson, *AN*, 124), Burns, and Mayakovsky (Craig, *AN*, 126). While Henderson, like MacDiarmid, recognised 'a witless philistinism of the streets', he also detected 'a witless philistinism of the boudoir (and even of the Rose Street pub) which can be considerably more dangerous, since it more often than not camouflages itself as a protective interest in literature and the arts' (*AN*, 93). In his *Second Hymn to Lenin* MacDiarmid wrote;

Are my poems spoken in the factories and fields,  
In the streets o' toon?  
Gin they're no', then I'm failin' to dae  
What I ocht to ha' dune. (*Selected Poetry*, 134)

For Henderson the Folk-song Revival offered the 'popular poetry' (*AN*, 96) that is apparently sought in this stanza. Henderson interprets this extract as 'an eloquent, and even poignant statement of the artist's awareness of his isolation in modern society, and of his duty to look outwards, and to attempt to communicate across the apollyon chasms' (*AN*, 125). George Davie pointed out the essential difference between the two projects when he explained MacDiarmid's argument:

'there is . . . a struggle between the elite, the intellectual few who do the discovering, and make possible the progress, and the anti-elitist many, who are not equal to participating in the general argument, and who seek . . . [to impose] egalitarianism, of which the Burns international is for [MacDiarmid] the great example' (1986, 111).

The controversy, firstly over the 'value' of popular artistic forms in terms of literature, and subsequently over the position of art in



society at large, signalled many of the issues that both MacDiarmid's Scottish Literary Renaissance and Henderson's Folk-song Revival encountered in their respective concerns. The renewal of folk-song in popular artistic expression was rooted in the same kind of aims that defined the Scottish Renaissance in its formative years. MacDiarmid's cry of 'Back to Dunbar!' is echoed by Henderson's emphasis on the old ballads and the vigorous folk-culture of Burns's era. Where the Renaissance 'made an open breach with the still vegetating "Kailyard"' (Young, 16), the Folk-song Revival sought to oust the Celtic Twilight 'obfuscations' of collectors like Mrs Kennedy-Fraser (Henderson, *AM*, 129) and the tartan-clad kitsch of 'folksingers' that were broadcast by the BBC, to replace them with the genuine material. As mentioned above, the two movements generally shared the politics of Socialism and Scottish Republicanism. Furthermore, they had a common investment in the 'language question'. Roderick Watson traces 'demotic Modernism' back to MacDiarmid in his essay 'Alien Voices from the Street'. He identifies in Scots language, a 'long historical association with the utterance of the common folk, with those, indeed, who have so often been presumed to be denied a voice in conventionally cultural production' (1995, 142). Henderson conceived of folk-song as the vehicle of this voice, the cultural self-expression of those who are elsewhere denied. A final example of the interconnection of the two movements is evident in MacDiarmid's 'creative plagiarism' (*AN*, 233), in which he re-contextualises the work of others in his poetry. Henderson points out the similarities between this 'acquisitive attitude' (*AN*, 233) and that which is active in the freedom to effectively plagiarise whole tunes, lines or verses in the conception of a folk-song (*AN*, 140).

Although these cultural movements seem to have shared similar aims and responses in their practice, the old guard of the Renaissance, especially MacDiarmid, found the Folk-song Revival at odds with their aesthetic programme. This said, many artists of the Renaissance were open to the various cultural innovations which have developed since, and which, in some cases, were rooted in the precedents set by poets like MacDiarmid. Edwin Morgan, however, felt that movements of beat poetry, concrete poetry and folk-song were leaving behind the established masters: 'The Renaissance has begun to loosen its hold on life. It has allowed life both in Scotland and elsewhere, to move on rapidly and ceaselessly

in directions it chooses not to penetrate' (73). In this sense, Henderson 'moved out with the rebels' (Neat, 2007, 299).

The essential division that these developments, and the arguments arising in the 'flytings' show is one that appears inherent to the Scottish literary tradition. G. Gregory Smith famously first termed it 'the Caledonian antiszygy', 'a reflection of the contrasts which the Scot shows at every turn . . . in his literature the Scot presents two aspects which appear contradictory' (6). This strange duality of the national culture can be supposed to be manifest in the competing ideologies of MacDiarmid and Henderson's work; in the 'high' and 'low' arts, the popular and the elect, and the communal and the isolated. Though such a reduction to clear dualities is perhaps over-simplistic, these divisions are undeniably extant, and any effort to reconcile them becomes significant. In his essay 'McGonagall the What', Henderson illuminates William McGonagall as the symbol of this rift. Considering himself an art-poet, but ridiculed as a folk-poet rhymester, McGonagall sat in the mutable territory between:

'The hard truth is that folk-song becomes poetry – or has the chance of becoming poetry as and when it gets rid of McGonagall. He is, as it were, the sump into which all that is least creative in folk-song is bound to drain. However, the work of McGonagall, anti-hero of the un-folk process, serves, paradoxically, to illuminate a wide stretch of the debatable land between art-poetry and folk-song' (*AM*, 281).

This 'debatable land' has been bridged by arguably few figures, Burns being the generally accepted example. Henderson however saw in Lorca another who dedicated his artistic life to the resolution of this schism within his own national culture. Lorca acknowledged a distinct Andalusian tradition, and celebrated the rich culture of the persecuted in much of his work. Reviewing a new edition of his collected prose, Henderson stressed Lorca's conscious operation within an oral tradition and his distrust of print, citing his belief that 'poetry requires as interpreter a living body' (as cited by Henderson, *AM*, 288). Henderson also saw Lorca's words as relevant to the capacity of folk-song and literature in Scotland: 'The passionate wind of poetry will throw fuel on the dying fire, livening its flames and the people will continue to sing' (as cited by Henderson, *AM*, 290).



## Conclusion

Henderson's aesthetic project was insightfully accepting of other cultural modes. In his later opposition to MacDiarmid he saw Scotland's cultural identity and its future, as a space for the interaction of ideas, for collaboration and communality. Henderson traced the fundamental divide in the Scottish literary tradition as that between the 'Olympians' or established greats like Burns, Scott, Fergusson and MacDiarmid, and the 'underworld' of anonymous balladry and folk-song (AM, 443). He insisted that 'gradually, the poet and the community must be threaded back together again' (Neat, 2007, 235/6).

Henderson's conception of folk-song, and the imperatives of its popular revivalism, stood as a gathering point, in an effort to reunite the anonymous masses of folk-song and balladry with the exclusivity of Scotland's literary giants. The common heritage that destined these two groups to constant and infinite interrelation was for Henderson coded in the characteristics of folk-song. He recognised its strength in the malleable nature of its authorship and transmission, and as 'a fluid entity soluble in the mind, to be concretely realised at will in words and music' (Henderson, *People's Past*, 67/68). Its cultural significance was also evident in the potency of its implicit politics; anonymous and free from the control of any individual's agency, yet simultaneously representative of a universal humanity. Finally, in the inevitability of its continuing 'tradition' it is an accumulative and natural force that seems to exist as a reflex of society. It is with this power and consequence that Henderson's vision of the 'carrying stream' (2000, 154) of Scottish folk-song and its revival should be placed in its literary context next to the Scottish Renaissance, as a major developmental cultural movement of the twentieth-century.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Henderson, Hamish. 'Under the Earth I Go', *Collected Poems and Songs*. 154-155.
- <sup>2</sup> As cited by Timothy Neat, *Hamish Henderson: A Biography – The Making of the Poet (1919-1953)*, preface xvi.
- <sup>3</sup> Citations of Henderson's articles collected in *Alias MacAlias* will be referenced with the abbreviation 'AM'.
- <sup>4</sup> See his essays 'Folk-song from a Tile' and 'How a Bothy Song Came into Being' in *Alias MacAlias* (104-109, 115-118).
- <sup>5</sup> On the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death,

there was a commemorative meeting in honour of the life and legacy of John MacLean, the revolutionary socialist (1879–1923).

- <sup>6</sup> Again see Ailie Munroe's *The Democratic Muse* (1996).

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