

## Acknowledged Legislators: ‘Lived experience’ in Scottish Poetry Films

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In his 2014 book *Arts of Independence*, co-authored with artist Alexander Moffat, Alan Riach asserts that, while Scotland has had more than its fair share of important and experimental filmmakers, from John Grierson and Bill Douglas to Margaret Tait, the country still lacks a coherent film industry (p. 42). David Archibald’s Forsyth Hardy Lecture at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in 2014 also engaged with the lack of a national film industry in Scotland in the context of the independence referendum, and highlighted the transnational nature of cinema in general and Scottish cinema specifically. He argued for a more concerted effort towards an independent film industry in the country, and we argue here that one of the strategies for starting to foster an independent, national film identity could arguably be through a focus on the lives of poets and writers in film who are themselves devoted to issues of nationhood and national identity. In the case of this article, the poets in question are Hugh MacDiarmid, Norman MacCaig, Sorley MacLean, Liz Lochhead and Robert Alan Jamieson. While these are not the only poets who have been subjects for Scottish films, we wish to focus on these as they are well-known, and have a consistent interest in the medium of film.

From early on poetry has held a privileged position within documentary filmmaking as both a component and a subject, for instance in the GPO’s Anglo-Scottish *Night Mail* (1936) where W H Auden’s poem, recited by Stuart Legg (in England) and John Grierson (once they cross the Scottish border), matches the rhythms of the steam-train carrying mail. Riach states that Scotland is usually captured on film by those living outside Scotland whose work might not capture any sense of a ‘lived experience of Scotland’ (p. 42). Sarah Neely and Alan Riach suggest that even within Scottish-born filmmakers, it was those, like Norman MacLaren, who operated outwith Scotland, who attracted ‘the most significant support and critical acclaim’ (2009, p. 2). Film scholar David Martin-Jones’s study *Scotland: Global*

*Cinema* captures these sentiments exactly, but claims that popular genre films made by foreign producers or directors in Scotland are an inherent part of the Scottish lived experience, often disregarded (2009). Scotland's long association between film and poetry provides us with a strong sense of place and the lived experience for poets and the society they write about, for or against.

At this point it is worth explaining to what the phrase 'lived experience' refers. Alex Pirie, in interview in 2006 with Sarah Neely, defined the work in poetry and film of his wife, Margaret Tait, as a 'poetry of presence,' which Neely has taken to mean a 'unique rendering of place' and a 'commitment to capturing the momentary' (Pirie 2006). The poetry and literatures of the twentieth century have increasingly come to be seen through the lens of various influential theoretical movements, such as post-structuralism and practical criticism. For T. S. Eliot, practical criticism meant a move away from the man who suffers to the mind which creates, thus severing a text from any sense of authorial biography. Later, post-structuralist theory as expounded by Roland Barthes argued for the 'death of the author', where texts were infinitely intertextual and no one creator could claim complete, single ownership of what had been written (1967). One corollary of these theoretical and literary movements has been to drive a wedge between the identity of the poet and their immediate, domestic 'lived experience' and the work they have written. In tandem with this, the second half of the twentieth century saw a sudden rise in the cult of celebrity and an interest amongst audiences in cultural or popular culture figures. Artists of all kinds have been feted for centuries before this point, but this cult of celebrity has given rise to a renewed interest in the lives of authors and the projection of these figures as pundits or spokespeople on radio, talk-shows and in interviews. Hugh MacDiarmid, for example, had many guises and personae, and as such was both a private and public figure, and Margaret Tait's 1964 film aims to capture as sense of the lived experience of a public and private man, from his art to his domestic modesty, in a but-and-ben, a small country cottage, near Biggar. Such a film presents MacDiarmid as a figure of national and cultural importance, but it reacts against the trend to mythologise its subject by presenting a form of 'lived experience'.

The aim in this article, then, is to look at how Scottish poets and poetry have been represented on the screen, how they are captured or commit themselves to film, and how form and place create a sense of value and 'lived experience'. More than this, it seems films about poets and their poetry seek to acknowledge their cultural contribution to the country in which they live and work, ceasing to be the anonymous 'unacknowledged legislators of the world' Shelley claimed they were (Shelley 1890, p. 41). In many cases the poets in these films share the post-war drive to improve and reform society, to highlight ways of change in their lives and poems, thus ameliorating the 'lived experience'. This is clear in the films on Sorley MacLean who fights for the survival of the Gaelic language or Liz Lochhead, which shows her challenging the old male-dominated Scottish poetry scene. Speaking in defence of his friend Hugh MacDiarmid, Dylan Thomas said that Scotland should not wait for MacDiarmid to die to begin celebrating him, but that the money this would cost should be given directly to the living and indigent poet:

If only one could think of all the statues that will one day be put up to him all over Scotland, work out roughly how much these statues will cost and give him the money now. Posterity can look after itself: that is its function. Honour the brief lives now. (MacDiarmid 1948)

It is perhaps via the screen that the sense of belonging between a poet, their country and their audience can be stressed and extended, providing us with a living monument, in many cases a celebration within the natural lifetime of the poet.

### **Film Poems and Poetry Film**

The films mentioned and analysed in this article are non-fiction films, including films made for television as well as more experimental, cinematic films.<sup>1</sup> They address a wide variety of audiences. While we would hesitate to call them documentaries, it is with documentary theory that we approach the relationship between the filmmakers and their poetic subjects. We distinguish between film poems and poetry film through this relationship. Film poems are the more experimental type of films where film and poem are integrated, whereas poetry film prefers a straightforward, descriptive approach to poetry. Time is as important as space in these

films: where space enables a sense of lived experience, so do time and pace. One of the salient differences between Tait's approach and that of others can be summarised by William Wees' statement that

poetry-film describes films based on or directly inspired by poetry, while the term film-poem refers to works characterised by impressionistic or semi-abstract imagery carefully edited for rhythmic effects, complex formal relationships, and metaphorical or symbolic significance. (Neely and Riach, p. 1)

Tait's film poems are liminal and shape-shifting, moving effectively between both camps.

In line with this emphasis on space and time, we argue that documentary and poetry have an emphasis on the voice in common. Authoritative narration, or the voice-of-god, was prevalent particularly in the early days of documentary. From the early documentaries, poetry and film have been closely associated. In his theoretical writings on documentary, Grierson commented that 'while the world is sure of nothing, the voice [in documentary films] is supremely sure of itself' (Kozloff, p. 29). Even if he was working at the GPO at the time (and therefore not always in Scotland – the Empire Marketing Board and GPO made films in Scotland, but they were not 'Scottish' films, while the first Scottish documentaries were made by the Films of Scotland Committee in 1938), Grierson has been a central figure to Scottish documentary making in particular. Drawing on his work with the GPO film unit, he used narration liberally and experimented with poetry and pace, laying the foundations for finding new kinds of voices and modes of narration. This is where the main difference between film poems and poetry on film lies: the voice in film poems is singular – the relationship between poet and filmmaker is one (whether they are the same is a different matter), whereas the voice in a film about poetry is plural: poet and filmmaker each have their own distinctive voice.

Riach and Neely wrote that 'avant-garde practices in Scotland have often been over-shadowed by the dominance of a strong documentary tradition' which calls for,

in John Grierson's words 'a creative treatment of actuality' (Riach and Neely, p. 2). This may go some way in explaining the neglect of a filmmaker such as Orcadian Margaret Tait. Her film-oeuvre engages with poetry, often with Tait herself reciting her own work or the work of others, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo'. This poem, which George Mackay Brown said Tait 'translated' into film, released in 1955, deals with the evanescence of life through a heightened sense of beauty. Tait focuses on people as if they were objects of intense scrutiny, closely observing textures and forms. She wanted to really look closely, and sees a parallel with poetry, so she called her films 'film poems'. As Neely writes, Tait was a writer before she was a filmmaker, and when her focus shifted from page to screen, 'the relationship between writing and filmmaking [...] remained constant and strong throughout her life' (Neely 2012, p. 10).

Bill Nichols, the 'father' of documentary theory, has offered a genealogy of documentary through his different modes of documentary filmmaking. One of these modes is poetic documentary. In this mode of documentary-making there is a distinct move away from the objective approach to filmmaking, and instead it aims for an inner, atmospheric expression, using the 'inside' to express the 'outside'. Nichols emphasises that form in these films takes centre stage, rather than content (Nichols, p. 105). Contemporary criticism of Nichols' genealogies of documentary as 'reductive compartmentalisation' (Bruzzi, p. 3) is inspired by a belief in documentary as a form of filmmaking that is not attempting to represent reality, but – just as any other form of filmmaking – deals creatively with subjects that are present in reality. Margaret Tait herself has written that 'there's no poetry in [presenting real things in that documentary way]' (Neely 2012, p. 166). Yet she immediately follows that with 'I think that film is essentially a poetic medium' and that 'poetry is inherent in what is being made' (Neely 2012, p. 167). This indicates an existential struggle with compartmentalisation. So if we move away from that, and look at a diverse body of film poems and poetry on film simply as film, we may start to see the strong poetic reality of Scotland's poets' lived experiences.

The main risk of a documentary approach to poetic film is poetry and film's inherent performativity. However, as we will argue, the films in this article, and

Margaret Tait's film of MacDiarmid in particular, do capture moments of genuine unselfconsciousness on the part of their subjects. For instance, Tait shows MacDiarmid playing by a stream, caught unawares and throwing rocks into the water, as well as moments within Brownsbank and around Edinburgh when MacDiarmid seems to forget the presence of a camera at all, shown through his subtle gestures of sudden self-consciousness when he notices the camera. This chimes with Bruzzi's observations on documentary performance. She shows how post-structuralism has exacerbated the crisis Barthes described in film as well: she stresses the first documentarists' relaxed attitude towards the documentary and its ability to represent reality. They were much more comfortable with the fluidity of truth and objectivity than many theorists are now (Bruzzi, p. 8). She argues for an engagement with the dialectic between reality and representation and a less problematic acceptance of the performative fluidity of documentaries (Bruzzi, p. 5). She urges documentary researchers to consider 'notions of performativity and the belief that documentary's meaning, its identity is not fixed but fluid and stems from a productive, dialectical relationship between text, reality and spectator' (Bruzzi, p. 7). The documentary truth is the entirety of the performance unfolding itself in front of the camera. For Bruzzi, 'documentaries are performative acts whose truth comes into being only at the moment of filming' (Bruzzi, p. 10). Film poems and poetry on film in our reading then, focus on the voice, on time and place, elements that come together in our analyses to shape the 'lived experience' of poetry and poets on film in Scotland.

### **Hugh MacDiarmid (1892-1978)**

Hugh MacDiarmid is often referred to as Scotland's greatest poet since Burns (Bold). He was Scotland's foremost Modernist poet and as such was the founder and major driving force behind the Scottish Literary Renaissance, which was at its peak between 1920 and 1945 and continues to influence Scottish music, poetry, song, art and film. In many ways, both direct and indirect, MacDiarmid's work exerted an influence on the work of all the other poets in this article, even as a figure to challenge: many later Scottish poets reveal his impact on them, often in the very way they challenge his practice and status. Margaret Tait's first experimental work on this poet is not simply hagiographical or even biographical, but a wry, innovative and at

times arch look at his two lives as Hugh MacDiarmid the public figure and Christopher Murray Grieve the private man and intellectual. In *Hugh MacDiarmid: A Portrait* (1964), the binary life of the poet portrayed in the film is emphasised by footage equally from rural Biggar, in and around Brownsbank Cottage where he lived, and as a dishevelled flaneur in Edinburgh, balancing to tipsily walk along walls and drinking in the Abbotsford Bar with his wife, Valda and Alex Pirie (Tait's husband).

The image the film poem provides is much more rounded than an interview or recital could be. The film is more than a record: it is an observation that speaks of an intense curiosity. Here, we are offered a privileged glimpse of a poet of national importance, from his introspective isolation in his Parker Knoll armchair in Biggar, to the social poet in the smoky pubs of Edinburgh.



MacDiarmid in Brownsbank, still from *Hugh MacDiarmid* (Tait, 1964)



MacDiarmid in Edinburgh, still from *Hugh MacDiarmid* (Tait, 1964)

MacDiarmid and Tait both make it clear that he belongs to, and indeed thrives in both places. More than this, there is a mutual regard for each other's work. MacDiarmid was a steadfast supporter and promoter of Tait's poetry and films. He published her poetry in his magazine *The Voice of Scotland* and wrote about her films in a 1960 essay 'Intimate Film-making in Scotland' where he praises Tait's 'singular achievement' and says that 'she is ploughing a lonely furrow, but she has set a process in motion which is bound to develop' (MacDiarmid 1960, p. 417). This personal history between the two imbues the film with intimacy and does not make the filmmaker's task subordinate to that of the poet on screen: the poet and the filmmaker's voices are one. Tait has written that the paradoxical thing with documentary, depictive films is that objects on screen can lose their reality for being specially photographed and presented, what mattered most in her films was a sense of 'presence [...] soul or spirit, an empathy with whatever it is that's dwelt upon' (Neely 2012, p. 166).

The familiarity present in this film enables the subject to fluctuate from moments of high seriousness as he recites his poems 'Somersault' and 'Krang' and extracts from his long, experimental work *The Kind of Poetry I Want*, to the revealing glimpse of him playing by a stream and smiling at the camera. The mixture of directed performance and acting by MacDiarmid is balanced by these moments of sheer unselfconsciousness when the poet seems to forget he is the subject of anything at all. This brings to mind the belief of one of MacDiarmid's own favourite writers, Bertolt Brecht (whose *Threepenny Opera* MacDiarmid translated into English in 1973) that writers concerned with their craft and with the state of their country, can never be entirely 'in earnest', meaning that MacDiarmid's creative vision has not removed him wholly from the realm of lived experience, that his whole life is not dominated by the pursuit of a singular vision, but plurality of experiences and influences.





MacDiarmid playing in a burn, still from *Hugh MacDiarmid* (Tait, 1964)

From the opening credits, created by Tait from old letters, shells and film-reels and the music by Francis George Scott (MacDiarmid's friend and collaborator), it is clear that this film is a multi-media endeavour where the poet is called upon by the director to act out lines from his poems. Scott, the celebrated Scottish composer, takes MacDiarmid's early lyrics written in a rejuvenated Scots and sings them to piano composition as if they were the pinnacles of high art. This act is not one of overstatement, for these small lyrics were the touchstones in many Scottish poets' minds that marked a new era in Scottish literature in the twentieth century. Indeed, Sorley MacLean placed them on 'the high tops of European art' (MacLean, p. 32). Early in the film we see the contrast between Scott's renderings of MacDiarmid's poems, MacDiarmid's own voice and MacDiarmid's hand tuning the radio into the BBC news. A tension emerges between the Received Pronunciation of the London-based BBC broadcaster's voice and the poetry we hear, a tension that underlies MacDiarmid's work and is made more explicit in the subsequent work of Scottish poets such as Tom Leonard. Riach and Neely write that 'Tait evokes large questions about authority, the dissemination of information, how it is sanctioned or disapproved, and therefore how people are empowered or disenfranchised – all questions equally central to the poetic work of the film's human subject' (p. 5). In this film we are being given something more than a document or an historical artefact: the tensions that were at work in MacDiarmid's poetry come alive in Tait's film.

While MacDiarmid is at home both in Biggar and in the Abbotsford Bar in Edinburgh, there is still a clear difference in the way both are presented on screen. The contrast between the country and the city, the domestic and the poetic, was viewed by George Mackay Brown as representing MacDiarmid's homeliness within the most cosmic themes of his work (Brown, n.p.). Scott Lyall reminds us that MacDiarmid's nationalist stance in his early work was one of 'anti-metropolitanism' against 'the violent perils of imperialism' and he saw the internationalism he longed for as 'an alliance of different localisms' (Lyall, p. 66). The motley range of people and voices in the pub can be seen to represent the plurality and the coming together of localisms MacDiarmid wanted to see, but it also shows he was never truly out of the world, that even at his most intellectual, he was still a deeply practical and physical man connected to the public and people he wrote about, which brings us back again to the concept of Brecht's 'earnestness' and the artist.

Inside Brownsbank, MacDiarmid seems to be more aware of the camera and its movements. We also see it reflected in the glass of the artwork frames, and hear it on the soundtrack. In contrast, we do not notice the camera in Edinburgh, where it at all times keeps its distance whilst still presenting an affectionate portrait of the man. The camera itself often moves away from its intended subject, to the tools and accoutrements of MacDiarmid's art; pens, ink, newspapers, books all scattered around the small room. The film seems deeply unhurried, and yet it is a little over 8 minutes long. According to Neely and Riach, the viewer comes away from the film with the feeling that their time has not been as exploited as it would have been in feature length commercial cinema (Neely and Riach, p. 4).

An altogether more rambunctious and chaotic affair, is Oscar Marzaroli and Douglas Eadie's 1972 film of Hugh MacDiarmid, *No Fellow Travellers*. In this poetry film, place is given prominence again, and as in Tait's film we see the contrast between the homely and the urban, with MacDiarmid present in Brownsbank while younger generations of poets celebrate his work in Edinburgh. In the city, shots focus on the downstairs part ('Little Kremlin') of Milne's Bar on Rose Street, a favourite watering hole of Edinburgh poets of the time. Joy Hendry, editor of *Chapman*, recalls the invitation to take part in the filming and explains how some people decided to

give it a wide-berth because it was likely to be a very boozy occasion (personal correspondence). One contributor, Roderick Watson, who appears on film as a young academic, now confesses his embarrassment at his appearance in the film (personal correspondence). Indeed, John Herdman, in his reminiscence of that time in Edinburgh in *Another Country*, remembers how: ‘one of the many amusing spectacles that night was that of a somewhat plastered poet who managed to maintain a flow of impassioned discourse while moving his chair around the tiny back room to keep pace with the wanderings of the camera’ (2013, p. 99).

Herdman also said that Eadie’s literary documentaries maintain ‘a kind of running commentary on Scottish culture’ (p. 99). Of all of Eadie’s works *Hugh MacDiarmid: No Fellow Travellers* (1972) is one of the most entertaining for its juxtaposition of MacDiarmid’s reading and learned statements, combined with the shots of a smoky and beery Milne’s Bar where some poets are struggling to speak about MacDiarmid’s work without slurring. The sound-bites from the poets in the bar offer little in the way of insight on MacDiarmid’s work. For instance, Alan Bold, who would later become MacDiarmid’s biographer, states ‘It’s a question of a man who can write bloody good poetry!’ and William Neill, the trilingual poet, shouts ‘MacDiarmid is a man of considerable poetic ability!’ The film is as near as Scottish films on poets have ever come to capturing a sense of the ‘macaronical’ – the code-switching in Scottish poetry from high registers to gutter-slang, from peaks to troughs. The liveliness of the film and the drunkenness it depicts help to banish the notion of the preciousness of poetry and its usual academic setting. Most importantly, the film is the first to give a voice to Valda Grieve, the poet’s wife and the woman without whom MacDiarmid might well have died. She speaks openly about her relationship with the ‘great poet’ who was a ‘bastard’ out of ambition and she accepts that this was what he had to do to see his work through. The multiplicity of voices not only places MacDiarmid at the centre of Scottish literary society, it also reveals his more intimate life and experiences with friends and family.



Poets discussing MacDiarmid's work in Milne's Bar,  
still from *No Fellow Travellers* (Eadie, 1972)

### **Norman MacCaig (1910-1996) & Liz Lochhead (b.1947)**

Since the 1970s, a range of poetry films has been made for Scottish television. Earlier films such as *Auld Reekie* (1966)<sup>2</sup> show poets Norman MacCaig, Hugh MacDiarmid and Sydney Goodsir Smith discussing the effect life in Edinburgh has on their work. The STV series *Off the Page* ran from the late 1980s until the early 1990s and offered viewers a glimpse into the daily and creative lives of Scotland's poets, novelists and playwrights. A whole gamut of figures were interviewed, from Edwin Morgan, Norman MacCaig and Sorley MacLean to Liz Lochhead and Tom Pow, along a similar formula of biographical background and a question-and-answer session punctuated with readings by the poets. The poets were most often filmed in their homes or places of work. While the questions could occasionally be critical and revealing, the format was a largely stilted one, with shot-reverse-shots and the narrative controlled mainly by the interviewer. In the case of Norman MacCaig, he made for a slippery and arch interviewee, often subverting the questions, or highlighting their flaws. In considering the dry and static nature of such a programme as *Off the Page* we find that Hugh MacDiarmid criticised STV as 'an ineffectual body concerned with side-issues, but on the cultural side backward-looking and careful not to align itself with the new tendencies in Scottish literature' (Herdman, p. 61).<sup>3</sup> The main success of the *Off the Page* series was that it showed its home population a living writerly and poetic tradition unfolding around them, not only rooting its poets firmly in Scotland, but also Scotland and a sense of place in the poetry. At the same

time, it showed the film or television and poetry could go together in visualising, educating, entertaining and even consuming poetry.

Two other documentaries of note are Tina Wakerell's 1982 portrait of Liz Lochhead *Time to Think* for STV and Michael Alexander's 1977 Scottish Arts Council and Films of Scotland-sponsored film *Norman MacCaig: A Man in My Position*. Taken chronologically they reveal a form of continuity, in that younger poets such as Lochhead are shown to draw from the teachings and support of figures like MacCaig, challenging the notion that older poets wanted to create a male-dominated poetry scene. For instance, in the Lochhead film, she discusses the 'donnée' that marks the start of a poem for her, which is something central to MacCaig's work, and she mentions how MacCaig defended her work from criticism. In Alexander's film about MacCaig we see the poet talking about how he begins poems with a phrase or donnée too.

Parts of Alexander's film are textured like Tait's and *No Fellow Travellers* in its movement between city and countryside: MacCaig denies he is a poet of the city and he opens up and clearly enjoys the chance to film in his beloved Assynt, in Sutherland in the Scottish Highlands, where his responses to questions become less guarded and more enthused or emphatic. It was in Assynt that MacCaig would spend ten weeks of every summer, fishing and walking and 'fattening up' on images for his poems. Other parts of this poetry film use elements of the television interview: in Edinburgh he remains seated in place in his home and is interviewed somewhat brusquely by Magnus Magnusson. MacCaig's responses, although good-humoured, are evasive and at times prickly. He denies any sort of mystical connection to inspiration and states that six out of every ten poems he writes go straight into the bin. As such he subverts the impulse to mythologise poetry. It takes a second interviewer, John MacInnes, to get MacCaig to open up, through a more combative and critical interviewing style where MacInnes adopts stances towards MacCaig's work that bring it into question. Of particular note in *A Man in My Position* is MacCaig's discussion of a landscape 'in miniature' in Assynt where he clashes with MacInnes over mythologising the landscape. MacCaig reluctantly accepts he does so at times, but he insists he does not want to burden the landscape with his own ideas or pathetic

fallacy. Rather he wants to ‘tell it like it is’ and learn to celebrate the ‘extraordinariness of the usual.’

Whereas the format of this film takes MacCaig out of the city and places him in Assynt to speak almost as if in retrospect of his poetic career, Tina Wakerell’s treatment of Liz Lochhead in *Time to Think* captures a sense of a rising star on the poetry scene in the city. The film focuses on a cabaret act/reading given by Lochhead, showing her engagement with song, poetry and questions of language. Most importantly, this film shows the poet sharing with the community in a wider way than merely a poetry reading. We see Lochhead giving a talk on poetry to schoolchildren, in which she attempts to de-mystify the craft and make it appealing. The film is well-textured with shots of Lochhead in readings, teaching, singing, at home working as well as in photographs of manuscript versions of her handwritten poems. This film shows the nexus between poetry and song on screen, in the importance of broadening its reach and accessibility. The strength of these poetry films then lies in their emphasis on space, and the dialectic between urban and rural. Voices of filmmaker and poet are distinctive from one another and as such place the poetry in a wider lived experience-context. Both MacCaig and Lochhead are made to be aware of their voice and their surroundings, thus also drawing attention to their performances and the distinctness of their relationships with the city.

### **Sorley MacLean (1911-1996)**

The great Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean has been the subject of no less than six films between 1974 and 2002, making him perhaps the most telegenic poet in Scotland: *Sorley MacLean’s Island* (Ogam Films, 1974), *Hallaig: the poetry and landscape of Sorley MacLean* (Neat, 1984), *Somhairle MacGill-Eain A Bhàrdachd agus A Shealladh* (BBC Alba, 1986), *Cursaí: Sorley MacLean and Maoilios Caimbeul visit Ireland* (RTE, 1989), *Off the page / Far na Duilleige* (Abu-Tele/STV, 1991) and drama-documentary *Somhairle MacGill-Eain* (Cuillin Films Earranta, 2002). Watching even a few minutes of footage of the poet in any one of these documentaries is to experience the electrifying bardic presence of MacLean and his incantatory readings, perfect for dramatic recordings.

Of all the films on MacLean, Timothy Neat's film *Hallaig: the poetry and landscape of Sorley MacLean* (1984) presents a rounded, less immediately deferential approach. For instance, we are given a sense of MacLean's otherworldliness as he figures out how to speak into the camera, at one point his wide-eyed gaze in close-up switching from the person asking questions to the camera and nodding emphatically as if to add a visual element to his voice. He also speaks directly to his audience, breaking the fourth wall, perhaps comparable to MacDiarmid's playfulness with the camera in Tait's film, but less confident and more self-conscious. We see MacLean playing with his grandson on the beach in a spirited way that is reminiscent of MacDiarmid throwing stones into the burn in Tait's film. Neat deftly segues from topic to topic in the film, focusing on marriage, family, war, Edinburgh, Skye, often bookended by a song or a singer, such as MacLean's daughter Catriona. When the sequence with his daughter comes to an end, the image zooms out extremely slowly, and then tilts up only for the space between the frames to come into view, as if sliding a new shot into the film as the singing continues. This signifies a break in the tone of the film, highlighting the fact that we are moving on to a new topic. One of these topics is the Gaelic language. MacLean talks about his fears of losing memories and language. He is attached and committed to the music and sound of the Gaelic language, and his poetry – and with it, this film – becomes a repository, a material archive, of these songs and this language.

Neat's film takes the time to reflect on what the poet is saying, and brings into focus the landscape in which the poet functions best, and the one he talks about the most. He stands by the side of the loch and the sea, looking out over the islands, and looking back at the camera to indicate through body language and facial expressions an admiration for the landscape that he is keen to share with the director and by extension the audiences of the film. Every film on MacLean leaves the viewer with a strong sense of the importance of place to his work, particularly Raasay (the island where he was born and the place of his signature poem 'Hallaig') and Braes, on Skye, where his Grandparents lived and where he settled, the site of cottars resistance during the Clearances in the nineteenth century.

Place is shown to be central also in Douglas Eadie's 1974 film *Sorley MacLean's Island*. The film takes the shape of a road journey taken by poet Iain Crichton Smith from mainland Scotland to Skye and then by boat to Raasay. We are shown all stages of the journey so that by the time the car arrives outside MacLean's croft in Braes on Skye, anticipation at seeing the great poet is maximised. The choice of Crichton Smith as interviewer is effective: not only is he a Gaelic speaker, he is also a poet with an intimate knowledge of MacLean's work. Much of the talking takes place either inside MacLean's croft or on the boat to Raasay. In a sense the film barely shows poet and interviewer set foot on the island, as we see Raasay in a series of stock scenic panning shots and some archive footage – never in any shots showing the poet's presence in the landscape. This suggests that while Raasay remains a topographical, emotional touchstone in MacLean's work, it has ceased to be a part of his lived experience. However, like Tait's 1964 film of MacDiarmid, we are shown a figure both in his native milieu and in a communal place, reading his work at the end of the film to a large audience at a ceilidh. We are given a sense of creative community, a sense that the island motif does not in any way mean isolation.

### **Robert Alan Jamieson (b.1958)**

Perhaps the most substantial and ambitious poetry films being produced in Scotland today are the films that feel like the result of a labour of love or homage. Most notable is Susan Kemp's lyrical and moving portrait of Shetlandic/ Edinburgh writer and poet Robert Alan Jamieson, *Nort Atlantik Drift: A Portrait of Robert Alan Jamieson* (2013), after his poetry collection of the same title. The film is charged with pathos from the very start as we discover Jamieson's father died only the week before filming started. The filmmaker writes that at first this fact inhibited them but simultaneously provided a way for both the filmmaker and the poet to reflect on the importance of family and legacy. Kemp says:

'I met Robert only twice before filming was due to start. His father died the week before, and so I just told him not to worry about filming. I had a ticket booked so I said I'd go up [to Shetland] anyway and see



how he felt after the funeral. We drove up to his Dad's house and talked a lot, over a bottle of whisky. I think we both realised that it was quite good for him to have a chance to talk to me and the camera. Me not being a member of the family, nor a close friend, meant that he was more open, and he stayed longer in Shetland than he might have done otherwise. It gave him a chance to reflect and consider and he very generously let me film him doing so.' (Personal correspondence)

The film then is self-reflexive and nostalgic. It covers Jamieson's own writing and its beginnings, and reveals the great importance of place to Jamieson's work. Besides Kemp's quietly unobtrusive and percipient filming, the film stands out for the way in which the poetry is delivered to both those familiar with Jamieson's Shetlandic and those looking for an English translation. More than any other film discussed here, *Nort Atlantik Drift* foregrounds both the visual quality of poetry in the landscape and the aural quality of his performances. If they had been walking and filming, Kemp would ask Jamieson whether he had a poem that would work in a certain location, and he very often had a poem that corresponded to the place. Other times, they went to specific locations precisely because the poem was about that place. Yet another time, Kemp explains, they had gone to the sea to do a reading but the wind made recording impossible and instead Jamieson decided to draw in the sand. This highlights the fact that Jamieson is at home in this space: 'he knew all the best spots, the unexpected places and of course those he had written about', Kemp says. While one can hear Kemp's voice asking questions, and her shadow is on occasion visible in the open space (the way in which Margaret Tait also leaves eerie sounds and shadows in her film poems), the filmmaker leaves Jamieson to recite his work on location and after he finishes gives a few moments before bringing up on screen the written English translations of his work. This multiplicity of voices is accepted in such a way that the film retains a focus on Jamieson's experience of his immediate surroundings, of which the filmmaker is a part. Their dialogue maintains focus on Jamieson's direction rather than the director's.

The film opens with a long static image of the coast and a few small islands off Sandness. The colour is blue, the music melancholic and the general atmosphere

one of calm. Clearly, Kemp is an admirer of the landscape and she roots Jamieson firmly within it. Jamieson himself then fills the screen and laughs as the waves behind him, from where he sits on a rock, splatter him. This juxtaposition already hints at the feeling both of being at home and being a stranger. He reads 'Konstint Starn' in midshot, with his book in his hands, reading from it and looking away behind him at the waves. When Jamieson has finished reading, and after a few lingering seconds on his face, in a frame fixed on another long shot of islands and rocks, the translated text of the poem is brought into focus in white writing, left completely silent:

Summer's dim came down about the cliffs, and up above the crouch  
body of Eshaness, light lay over the northland like a shawl.

One solitary eye keeps blinking, just as it does in the black heart of  
winter. All around swells up and dwindles,

Grows up green and withers away. Moonrise and sunset, neap tide  
and spring tide.

Constellations drop below the land and others rise to cut  
a new shape in the changing heavens.

But Eshaness light's always blinking – blink, blink, blinking –  
a star eye watching, watching and shining.

He thinks – It's good to know the Shepherd's there.

Whereas the rest of the film's soundtrack is dominated by a talkative Jamieson and a contemplative musical score by Chapelier Fou, the poetry is accompanied by nothing more than the sounds of the wind and the sea, indicating how the poems are deeply imbued with a specific sense of place.

After this first poem, the film focuses on the domesticity in Jamieson's father's old house. The filmmaker decides to discuss sound with the poet, as she

foregrounds the sound of the clock and the kettle. She takes the poet outside through their conversation: they talk about the sounds of the waves and the animals on the moors. Taking the camera outside, she brings these animals to the foreground: a weasel, rabbits, geese and seals to the ska-like and fair-ground sound of the soundtrack, which is almost incongruous with the sense of place we have just established. No words are spoken, but several minutes of slowed-down and sped-up landscape shots move towards another poem performance, in which Jamieson appears to really find his performative pose: pulling faces, and gesturing with his hand, performing as it were for the lake he is facing. Again, the performance is set in the place the poem is about, in 'At Da Eela' and a good couple of seconds give the viewer time to reflect on the poem in Jamieson's Shetlandic, before the English translation appears on screen with the background of sea, croft and islands framed in a silent, still long shot.

Jamieson's focus on the land and, perhaps even more importantly, the use of that land, and the buildings (and their functions) on that land, guide Kemp's filming. More than illustrating what Jamieson is saying, Kemp is rooting him in this community while also, through his voice-over, setting him apart from it. We are made acutely aware that he was born and grew up on Shetland, but that he is now at home elsewhere, as a university lecturer in Edinburgh. This point is subtly made on a visit to his brother's Fair-Isle jumper factory and how he reminisces with family members and old friends about the declining old way of life on Shetland. The camera approaches the machines and the wool very closely, as opposed to the distance it maintains to the landscape. The close-ups echo Margaret Tait's caress of objects, and their texture. Before this episode at the factory, Kemp opts to feature the Shetlandic poem on the screen in Shetlandic, putting the poem line by line on the page/ on the screen.

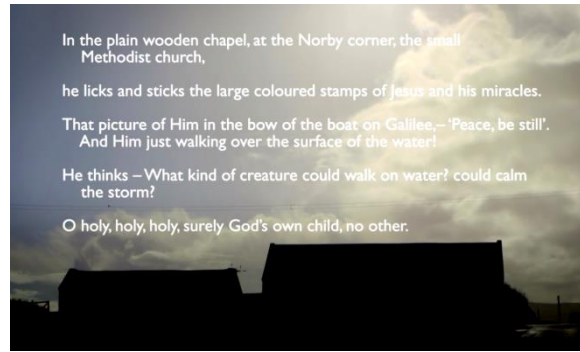
The change in visualisation of the poetry here perhaps says something about the lighter tone of the poem 'Frisk Waatir Troot', in which a young boy fishing on Melbie Loch disobeys his parents and gets told off for it. Moreover, the poem is accompanied by a jaunty tune as opposed to the silence that accompanies most of the other poems, again indicating the playfulness in tone in the poem. The poem that

comes immediately after the visit to the factory, 'Atlantis', is again translated as the poems before. The seventh poem however, is performed in Shetlandic, filming the page in the book, 'Laamint Fir Da Tristie'. The book in fact is a constant presence in the film. Jamieson carries it around and reads from it or performs and holds on to it 'for reference'. This materiality of the book is reflected in the preservation of memories that Jamieson attaches a lot of importance to, like MacLean. He says he writes the things he does because otherwise these memories and events, and instances, would be lost. The local material, he says, needs to be depicted in the local language. He tried to get as close as possible to the local dialect in writing down these memories. So does the filmmaker. The materiality of land, wool, people, book and words stands out in the film.

Jamieson does not focus solely on himself, or his father's death, but also on his mother's rootedness in the Shetlandic community in Sandness. She was an 'outsider', an immigrant, to whom 'place' meant 'home' and 'family'. The fact that Jamieson lost her at a young age (he was 23, and as she had been very ill for a long time, he had been called to her bedside three times already, 'in anticipation of her passing on', as he says in the film) doubtlessly influenced his perception of place in general, and Shetland in particular. The third poem in the film, a poem about her, 'Metadist Metafir' is again read/performed on location, in his mother's Methodist church.



Jamieson in his mother's chapel, still from *Nort Atlantik Drif* © Susan Kemp, 2013



'Metadist Metafir' on the screen, still from *Nort*

*Atlantik Drif* © Susan Kemp, 2013

Family is central, up until the last poem, and intricately linked to the land. 'Da Boat Biggir's Nefjoo' is again a very introspective poem, performed with his hands and then silently translated on the screen. The movement from 'Konstint Starn', 'At Da Eela', 'Metadist Metafir', 'Frisk Waatir Troot', 'Atlantis' 'Ta Da Hum' and 'Da Boat Biggir's Nefjoo', functions as a narrative line, almost structured like a tragedy, moving from a reflection on community, mother, father, family and back to community, with the constant focus on the self, the island and the land. The self-reflexivity is created perhaps through circumstance and time, as the film is set only a week after his father's funeral and in a place filled with memories. As Kemp said, 'when we were talking it could become quite intense at times, and we would talk for hours, so it was good to pause and read a poem, almost as a break in the heavy conversations' (personal correspondence). At all times the film has a poignant undercurrent of loss and displacement, but a triumphant joy in the art of making and reciting poems in the right place that transcends any sort of simple lament syndrome.

It is worth taking the time to briefly compare Kemp's treatment of Jamieson in her film and Eadie's approach to sitting MacLean down and interviewing him in *Hugh MacDiarmid: No Fellow Travellers*. There is nearly forty years between these films, so some striking differences should appear, however the treatment of place is key in both. As both MacLean and Jamieson are islanders, and their poems focus on the place of the island, the filmmakers seem to want to root these poems and their performances and performers ever more firmly into these seas and beaches and islands. Kemp's approach is less intrusive: she may occasionally ask a question as a prompt, but she is not steering her subject in the way many poets have been with the

conventional sitting-down question-and-answer sessions on film. Her lack of appearance on film highlights her outsidership, that she is there to give Jamieson the freedom to take the film to new places and discoveries, and she also acts as the conduit between the Shetlandic poetry and the English translations or glosses. There is a feeling of carefulness and spontaneity to Kemp's film which can also be seen in Tait's film poems: a refusal to see the poet trapped or manipulated by an interviewer's line of questioning. By contrast, Eadie's film tries to present a sense of the living community of Gaelic poetry by having two distinguished poets discuss not only MacLean's work but the state of the Gaelic language. After intense and earnest discussions, our concentration is broken up with the movement outside, on the boat to Raasay, where the conversation continues. The questions dictate the direction of the discussion more so than the poet. Kemp's film is more collaborative and spontaneous than the pre-meditated and planned nature of Eadie's film. *Nort Atlantik Drift* seems to be the sensitive, textured progeny of Margaret Tait's film poems, and the direction in which Scottish film poetry must go, if it hopes to continue to achieve a sense of the lived experience of the acknowledged legislators of Scottish identity.

### Conclusion

We began this article with Alan Riach's assertion that films being produced about Scotland from an outside perspective do so to the detriment of a 'lived experience'. We would argue this is the case with Owen Sheers' BBC series *A Poet's Guide to Britain*, with one film based on the life and work of Orcadian poet George Mackay Brown. Meticulously researched for a slick on-screen production, this film nonetheless has the feel of being firstly about the presenter and then about its supposed subject. With a number of authoritative biographies of Mackay Brown's life already published, the film does not reveal anything new to readers of his work, in the way the MacDiarmid scholar might be surprised to see how playful he was in Margaret Tait's film in the 1960s, or how highly he was regarded among younger poets in the 1970s in *No Fellow Travellers*. One difference seems to be posthumousness: whereas these Scottish productions captured a capsule of a living tradition, Owen Sheer's documentaries could only revisit biographical truisms and as such only incompletely resurrect the spirit of the poet. Likewise, we see the rise of the relatively

new phenomenon of the celebrity interviewer or commentator, who in many ways becomes the subject of the show instead of the perceived subject, the poet. Neil Oliver's BBC series *A History of Britain* for example seriously misread and misrepresented Hugh MacDiarmid's political beliefs of the 1920s for the sake of making a sensationalist point about fascism in Scotland. He collates the Italian fascism MacDiarmid was interested in in the 1920s with a Nazi-related fascism during the war, which reveals an improper historical contextualisation. By contrast, Margaret Tait's or Susan Kemp's films seem to have been produced by readers and supporters of the poets who have tried to introduce a much more detailed and revealing human element to their subjects, instead of presenting them as dead authors held together by a series of biographical truisms.

The difference emerges between historical reclamation for educational purposes and possible entertainment on the one hand, and contemporary celebration projecting and extending via film the range of a poet's work and audience on the other hand. For us, it is in this latter category that films can depict a 'lived experience of Scotland'. Within this idea, each film deals with imaginative and literal place and shows these to be crucial to the development of the artists in their making and in their continued inspiration. Some filmmakers have been genuinely innovative in showing poetry on screen and moving away from the usual read-out-loud method. Margaret Tait uses visual primers and performance that subtly stress elements of spoken poems. She also shows the cross-fertilisation between poems, film and music. Eadie's and Neat's films show how enlisting the words of others can show an alternative but contemporary narrative which in many ways is as important as the words spoken by the poet when it comes to thinking through lived experience. Susan Kemp effectively deals with the issue of translation by setting the poem out in writing against a familiar backdrop, but distancing it from the original Shetlandic version. Kemp's film, more than any other here seems to occupy place and voice most fully and fill it with poetry. While each film adds new (or renewed) value and appreciation to the work of the poet, it also helps to distance us from the notion of poetry as the subject of ivory-tower prestige, or practical criticism within school or university. Film poems and poetry films thus prevent us from mythologising poets too easily, for these films show us human, multi-form, domestic and often vulnerable figures. These are figures who

have added in important ways to a better ‘lived experience’ of Scotland, and film has acknowledged them in innovative ways.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This article germinated after we saw Susan Kemp's *Nort Atlantik Drift* at the 2014 Glasgow Film Festival. We noticed that there is somewhat of a tradition of poetry films and film poems in Scotland (especially through Margaret Tait's work) and found other experimental and television films dedicated to poetry. Our selection is based on those available to us, online and through the archives. Due to space constraints we have not included several films we would have liked to, for example the animated films *Sisyphus* (Donald Holwill, 1971) and *Tam o'Shanter Rides Again* (Tom Steele, 1978), both available from Scottish Screen Archive. It is our hope that future research may (un)cover more Scottish poetry films.

<sup>2</sup> This film survives incomplete and without sound.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Sarah Neely told us that in Tait and MacDiarmid's correspondence they both distinguish between this type of poetry film and their own film poem. He writes to Tait: 'I think you were wise to refuse to allow your film to be shown merely for archive material. I don't think it would have fitted at all, and hope it may be given a separate showing.' (The Margaret Tait Collection, Orkney Archive, D97).