SALTIRE SOCIETY SCOTLAND
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THE CENTENARY CONFERENCE · 1926–2026

A DRUNK MAN LOOKS AT THE THISTLE

Hugh MacDiarmid and a Hundred Years of the Scottish Renaissance

SATURDAY 21 NOVEMBER 2026 · STRATHCLYDE SUITE · GLASGOW ROYAL CONCERT HALL

'A centenary that comes not to praise MacDiarmid, but to argue with him.'

SPEAKERS AND PERFORMERS

Sir Tom Devine — Scotland's pre-eminent historian; opening address: the Scottish Nation in 1926
Sally Magnusson — broadcaster and writer; presents the day

Maureen Beattie — actress; performs passages from *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*
W.N. Herbert — poet; performs dialogue passages with Maureen Beattie

Gerda Stevenson — actress, writer and director; roundtable on the origins of the national movement
David Torrance — political historian, author of a new history of the SNP; roundtable and closing conversation

Deirdre Grieve — remembers Christopher Murray Grieve, the man who created MacDiarmid
Alexander Linklater — conference co-organiser and MacDiarmid's biographer; the life behind the persona

Scott Lyall — Edinburgh Napier University, conference co-organiser; is the poem Scotland's modern masterpiece?
Mystery Guest Speaker — the controversy: was the Scottish Renaissance a force for national renewal or regressive nationalism?

Murray Pittock — historian; roundtable on the origins of the national movement and closing conversation with David Torrance
Pat Kane — musician and writer; roundtable

Patrick Crotty — pre-eminent MacDiarmid scholar; introduces the new *Complete Collected Poems*
Dorian Grieve — director, the MacDiarmid estate; introduces Patrick Crotty

Organised by Alexander Linklater and Dr Scott Lyall · Sponsored by the Saltire Society and the National Library of Scotland · Supported by the Centre for Scottish & Celtic Studies, University of Glasgow, and the Centre for Arts, Media and Culture, Edinburgh Napier University

Edinburgh Napier UNIVERSITY
Centre for Arts, Media & Culture

Centre for Scottish & Celtic Studies
Ionad Eòlas na h-Alba is na Ceiltis

THE CONFERENCE

On 22 November 1926, the Edinburgh publisher Blackwood issued a poem of 2,685 lines in which a drunk man, sprawled on a hillside under the moon, addresses a thistle and, through it, the condition of Scotland. Hugh MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* was comic, cosmic, lyrical and abusive, written in a fantastic Scots that reached back past Burns and forward to the pinnacles of literary modernism. It exhorted the emergence of a new movement, certainly literary, possibly political. Patrick Geddes had proclaimed a "Scots Renascence" as early as 1895, but the idea of a Renaissance at once modernist and independence-driven was MacDiarmid's: original not because he had the ideas first, but because he made them radical and extreme. At the time, a national movement was little more than a minority report, but from the 1960s to the 1990s, MacDiarmid's notion of a "Scottish Literary Renaissance" would be reinvented as a determining moment in modern Scottish culture.

The Renaissance may have been merely a gleam in MacDiarmid's eye, but something really was happening in Scotland. The year before the poem appeared, an Act of Parliament created the National Library of Scotland — which marked its own centenary last year — turning two and a half centuries of the Advocates' collections into a national memory bank; the year of the poem itself saw the first issue of the nationalist newspaper *The Scots Independent*, last surviving remnant of the Scots National League. In 1928, MacDiarmid – along with Compton Mackenzie, RB Cunninghame Graham and John MacCormick – founded the National Party of Scotland, forerunner to the SNP. The National Trust for Scotland followed in 1931, and in 1936 a handful of scholars and journalists, dismayed at how little Scots knew of their own culture, founded the Saltire Society, to "foster and enrich" a living Scottish tradition rather than embalm a dead one. Within a decade, Scotland had acquired keepers of its memory, its politics, its heritage and its living culture.

On the eve of the Drunk Man's hundredth birthday, the Centre for Scottish & Celtic Studies at the University of Glasgow and the Centre for Arts, Media and Culture at Edinburgh Napier University bring that ferment to the Strathclyde Suite of the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall for a full day of celebration and critique, sponsored by the Saltire Society and the National Library of Scotland, the two institutions that share the poem's origins. The day is organised around three questions. Were the origins of the national movement cultural or political? Is *A Drunk Man* one of the great works of world literature? And who was the man behind the poem?

Sir Tom Devine sets the scene of the Scotland of the 1920s, out of which MacDiarmid and his Renaissance emerged. **Scott Lyall** asks whether his poem is Scotland's modern masterpiece. **Maureen Beattie** and **W.N. Herbert** perform passages from *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, **Patrick Crotty** introduces the new *Complete Collected Poems of Hugh MacDiarmid*, and **Deirdre Grieve** remembers Christopher Murray Grieve, the ordinary man who created the extraordinary persona. With the National Library holding the MacDiarmid archive, **Alexander Linklater** asks how we can piece together the truth behind the myths and controversies of the most influential Scottish writer of the last hundred years.

The ferment of the 1920s and 30s was not confined to the period. It carried through the twentieth century and into the early years of what Andrew Marr once called the "exuberant optimism" of Alex Salmond's SNP, with its favourite emblem: the white "MacDiarmid rose". Marr's *The Battle for Scotland* traced the making of the movement up to the 1990s; **David Torrance**, whose history of the SNP is forthcoming, takes up the story where Marr left off. He joins the historian **Murray Pittock**, the writer and musician **Pat Kane** and the actress and writer **Gerda Stevenson** in a roundtable on the origins of the national movement, chaired by **Sally Magnusson**. A **Mystery Guest Speaker** addresses the controversy: was the Scottish Renaissance good or bad for Scotland? And the day closes with a debate on the unresolved Scottish Question: what is left of the National Movement, and does it still have anything to do with Hugh MacDiarmid's revivalist dream?

Doors 9am · Conference 9.30am–4.30pm · Tickets £25 (£10 concessions), including refreshments and a light lunch, from the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall box office