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The Scottish Renaissance, Hugh MacDiarmid and Contemporary Writing in Scots

The Scottish Renaissance, in various ways, has played a key part in the reconstruction of a national identity in Scotland, as well as been a part of the forging of a new way of using the Scots language – even though it continues to be debated as to whether or not Scots should be classed as a distinct language or as a dialect of English, which might convey the idea that Scots is derived from modern English.

There is no real clarity on the subject of Scots: it's difficult to say whether a speaker is talking Scots or not, and whether a piece of writing is in Scots or not. There have been several attempts to classify its usage (both colloquial and literary uses) and its degree of purity and/or contamination. For sure, Scots is used in both speech and writing and it's clear that it is well-established in specific literary forms, such as poetry. For other purposes, such as scientific writing, it is not used.

This talk will be focused on the use of the Scots language for literary purposes, primarily poetry, and particularly with regard to the period following Hugh MacDiarmid launching his Scottish Renaissance revolution. He loved declaring that Scotland had strong and precise identitarian means of struggle, with Scots seen as one of them. He also repeatedly maintained that Scottish intellectuals and writers should refer back to Dunbar (and not back to Burns).

I will give a literary overview so as to discern what Christopher Murray Grieve intended when he made up his mask, Hugh MacDiarmid, trying to help a nation's renewal. I will briefly discuss the poetry of Dunbar and Burns the better to understand MacDiarmid's revolution, soon after late-19th-century Kailyard school of writing and its partial adoption of the Scots language. Since MacDiarmid, Scots has mostly been used in Scotland by various poets and writers. My discussion of contemporary writing in Scots will hopefully show that, after the creation of a new Scottish parliament in the late 1990s, the Scots language still maintains, far beyond its political mission, its strong linguistic and literary identity.