



Hugh MacDiarmid, *Un Enterrement dans l'île*,
traductions de Paol Keineg

Brest, Les Hauts-Fonds, 2016, 122 p. – ISBN: 978-2-919171-14-9

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- 1 “Any author ought to be a translator for translation enables us to learn our own language, to measure the gaps between languages and to break free from the linguistic manacles that enslave us”, Paol Keineg declares. The Breton poet, playwright and academic has translated into French several American authors and was awarded the Maurice-Edgar Coindreau prize for his 1995 translation of William Bronk’s *The World, the Worldless*. Keineg’s *Boudica* (1980) was also translated by Keith Waldrop in 1994 and was saluted by the American Book Review as a “work that moves from the specific to the universal, a work that would reclaim lost ground, both politically and poetically”. Setting on to work on Hugh MacDiarmid, and being confronted with his wide range of linguistic experiments, from Synthetic Scots to scientific poetry, from Joycean portmanteaus to terse statements or found poetry, is a new and daring step towards poetic claims. It is also a very personal challenge as Hugh MacDiarmid has been a recurrent interest for Paol Keineg, from his discovery of *In Memoriam James Joyce* in the early 70s to his affirmation in *Préfaces au Gododdin* (1987): “I am brother to all ransomed nations: Dafydd ap Gwilym, Hugh MacDiarmid, Salvador Espriu, Aimé Césaire, Jane Austen and the Brontë Sisters.”
- 2 Despite the indisputable brilliance of his poetry, the poet of the Scottish Renaissance remains a confidential author among French English speakers as very few of his poems were translated beforehand, among which parts of *A Drunkman Looks at the Thistle*, translated by Jacques Darras and Ivar Ch’vavar, respectively in French and Picard, and the

few pieces published in *Anthologie bilingue de la poésie anglaise*—a title MacDiarmid would have cringed at—La Pléiade, 2005. Paol Keineg's *Un Enterrement dans l'île* hence appears as the first and long-awaited collection of poems by MacDiarmid's in French.

- 3 The Breton poet spent half of his life in the USA, notably teaching at Duke University where he lectured on national and linguistic minorities, nationalism and regionalism, and translation. He was an active member of the Democratic Breton Union and, in 1983, founded *Poésie Bretagne* with fellow poets Alain Le Beuze and Denis Rigal. The magazine aimed at publishing Breton authors and reviving and promoting a poetry disenfranchised from hackneyed Breton stereotypes. There is hence no coincidence in Paol Keineg translating one of the main figures of Scottish twentieth-century literature, a poet whose motto was “precedent, not tradition”. There is, in any case, a great comprehension of MacDiarmid's antiszygic love of the country and the faraway, and his need of variety, innovation and social changes, which the collection aims at showing.
- 4 *Un Enterrement dans l'île* starts with a foreword which gives a presentation of Hugh MacDiarmid's life, focussing on his linguistic, political and literary struggles, while introducing the selection as a “personal choice” whose aim is to give an overview of his works and to “arouse the reader's curiosity”. The book is then dedicated to a selection of forty-three poems set chronologically that speak for themselves, their author and, perhaps, their translator. Subsequent endnotes on Scottish culture are greatly helpful to French readers, whose knowledge of Scotland is often rather sparse. To some, these notes might however be looked upon as over-translations, over-explanations somewhat attenuating MacDiarmid's modernism and the reader's thrill at being confronted with linguistic daze and shock.
- 5 Apart from the longer “On a Raised Beach”, “Island funeral” and “In the Slums of Glasgow” which are fully translated, the book is mostly composed of shorter pieces, more than half of the poems being one-page or less than one-page long, and four extracts from long poems, “To Circumjack Cencrastus” (“Hokum”), “Second Hymn to Lenin”, “In Memoriam James Joyce” and “Dìreadh” (“Scotland Small”). Shorter texts appear as a good compromise especially when their density allows a full view of the author's style and thoughts. Translated or partly translated poems are among MacDiarmid's most famous, such as “On a Raised Beach”, “Scotland Small”, “The Caledonian Antisyzygy”, “The Little White Rose”, “Second Hymn to Lenin”, “In Memoriam James Joyce”, “Harry Semen”, “Advice to Younger Writers”. Others such as “The Fool”, “At my Father's Grave”, “Crystals like Blood”, “Facing the Chair”, “Bracken Hills in Autumn”, “Two Memories”, “The Ross-shire Hills”, “Reflections in a Slum” are less known though they offer a clear vision of MacDiarmid's cultural and philosophical ideas or social claims, while hinting at Paol Keineg's preferences, hence giving the collection a more personal aspect. Some famous poems such as “The Watergaw”, “The Kind of Poetry I Want” or “Scotland my Scotland” deserved a place in a MacDiarmid Collection yet, of course, this would have required another volume—which we are actually hoping for.
- 6 As a title to his selection, Paol Keineg chose *Un Enterrement dans l'île*, from one of the poems, “Island Funeral”. Such a choice may come as a surprise to those who would have expected more nationalist hints and who are not acquainted with Paol Keineg's first collections, *Le poème du pays qui a faim* (*The poem of the starving country*) or *Chroniques et croquis des villages verrouillés* (*Chronicles and sketches of locked up villages*), where both men and landscape are confronted with immobility. When taken separately, the title may moreover refer to MacDiarmid's long stay in Whalsay, the Shetland island where he lived

almost as an exile but where he wrote much of his later work. Traditionally, the island also epitomises the Scottish culture one has to leave—possibly betray to some extent—to be open to the wider world, an echo, perhaps, of Paol Keineg's own extended stay in America. Bearing the poem in mind, the reference is not only to the funeral yet future revival of the Gaelic language and culture, but also to a “weather-beaten people with eyes grown clear, / Like the eyes of travellers and seamen, / From always watching far horizons”, reminiscent of Paol Keineg's own description in *Le Poème du pays qui a faim*: “*plongez vos yeux dans mes yeux / vous franchirez les cap-horns inaccessibles*” (“Look deeply into my eyes and you will round inaccessible Capes Horn”). “Island Funeral” also tells the story of “a people one of whose proverbs / Is the remarkable sentence: ‘Every force evolves a form.’”

- 7 MacDiarmid's poetic force is indeed his modernist form—or forms—with texts that would challenge any translator. One should have expected a poet to rewrite rather than translate, hence be on the whole closer to the target language. However, it seems Paol Keineg chooses, whenever possible, to remain as faithful and close to MacDiarmid's words and although readers may, as a result, sometimes be confronted with rhythmic or idiomatic slips—which anyway is the common lot of English readers delving into MacDiarmid's texts—Keineg does justice to the Scottish author's intricate wordings, while remaining faithful to his own later style as a poet. As for the Scottish poet's efforts to revive Scots and develop its literary form, they are fully acknowledged by the translator as he uses French in the poems, emphasizing Scots as a language in its own right which does not require a translation in dialect. French readers will, however, miss the difference between MacDiarmid's Scots poems and his later English texts and some may have appreciated a translation in Breton or perhaps Gallo of the former. These options were probably partly rejected as Paol Keineg, being a Breton from Finistère is not a speaker of Gallo, and as he feels uncomfortable with the synthetic Breton spoken nowadays.
- 8 Despite the inevitable limitation resulting from the dilemma which comes with the translation of minority languages, Keineg's French anthology of Hugh MacDiarmid will be saluted as a first and major step towards giving French poetry readers some access to the genius and linguistic experiments of Hugh MacDiarmid, to the wide range of his themes and styles, while unveiling the translator's personality. The selection will thus be a plus to French students who find it hard coping with MacDiarmid's Scots or English and as an introduction to Scottish poetry, to translators for its rich, resourceful dealing with cross-references, to poetry readers for its world which is definitely other and which debunks Scottish clichés, to readers of Paol Keineg who will find in his translation parts of himself in the content, parts of his poetry in the form.

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Stéphanie Noirard est maître de conférences en littérature britannique et traduction à l'université de Poitiers et membre du FoReLL, EA 3816. Ses recherches portent sur la poésie écossaise contemporaine et elle a publié des articles sur le sujet dans diverses revues comme *Études anglaises*, *Scottish Literary Studies* ou *Civilisations*. Elle a également contribué aux ouvrages *Mountains Figured and Disfigured in the English-Speaking World* (Cambridge Scholars 2010), *Brittany/Ireland: What Relations?* (Centre de recherche bretonne et celtique, 2015) et *Taking Liberties: Scottish Literature and Expressions of Freedom* (Scottish Literature International, 2016). Elle s'intéresse plus particulièrement aux langues et cultures minoritaires, au rythme et à la voix, et à la poésie de guerre et du trauma.