

## *Celebrating the Scottish Imagination*

What is it we want really?  
For what end and how?  
If it is something feasible, obtainable,  
Let us dream it now,  
And pray for a possible land  
Not of sleep-walkers, not of angry puppets,  
But where both heart and brain can understand  
The movements of our fellows;  
Where life is a choice of instruments and none  
Is debarred his natural music...

Louis MacNeice, from 'Autumn Journal'

Imagine.

No Scottish Storytelling Centre, Scottish Poetry Library, School of Scottish Studies.

No Edinburgh International Festival and all that grew around it in our capital city.

No Scottish Opera, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Royal Scottish National Orchestra,  
National Theatre of Scotland or Scottish Ballet.

No Creative Scotland or its predecessor the Scottish Arts Council.

Some may relish these thoughts, some may not notice, but many would feel the loss.

Yet that was Scotland in 1936.

The men and women who started the Saltire Society felt the absence deeply. Not necessarily of those specific entities. But they feared Scotland's cultural gas was at a peep, that the achievements of the past were unrecognised, great traditions were being lost and contemporary arts lacked vitality.

They did something about it. Probably encouraged by the efforts of MacDiarmid and his peers in the Scottish Renaissance they formed a movement that for 75 years has promoted,

presented, published, agitated and debated and in doing so helped create the conditions for today's thriving and confident creative Scotland. But there is more to be done.

For today's generation, for those who share our passion for the arts, culture and traditions there is a different rammy to be had. On one hand it is about the form of government we choose as the Scottish people. But beyond that it is surely about the extent to which **any** government values and respects our cultural lives.

Who will take us beyond the dreary old arguments about what we get in return for investment and instead thank our lucky stars for every insight, challenge and moment of beauty?

Who will drive ahead with the policies and support that allows every Scottish citizen, every man, woman and wean to thrive in a country 'where life is a choice of instruments and none is debarred his natural music.?'

Who will have the courage and commitment to accept, if not respect, artists for the disloyal, troublesome, inspiring, entertaining, thrown, radical people that they sometimes are?

Who will support the arts the not for what they can do to charm and entice the international tourist but for what they do for our humanity.

These are questions that the Saltire Society sees as a proper concern. We hope that an element of the independence debate will be about what **any** political construct means for our creative lives, about how the exceptional individual can excel, how everyone can enjoy, learn from, be inspired by those insights of artistry, craft and critique. As the debate on independence unfolds many artists have declared their political hand for or against. But let's also consider how we can imagine a Scotland which proudly and actively better promotes the conditions for artistic success. And lets make it personal.

When I worked at the Scottish Arts Council we were dismayed to discover that one of our best writers, Tom McGrath, a man generous in his time and efforts in encouraging others, was ailing in his health, and didn't have enough money to support him as he struggled to complete his memoirs. We managed under the cover of bureaucratic darkness to liberate a few thousand pounds to ease his situation. That process involved the generosity and care of a number of people including Dr Gavin Wallace, Richard Holloway and Faith Liddell.

A similar situation befell Hugh MacDiarmid. Suffering poverty at the end of his war service in the Merchant Navy he describes what happened. 'Help came from an unexpected quarter. At a meeting of the Saltire Society the Earl of Selkirk praised my work for Scotland and the quality of my lyrics, and a little later his brother, the Duke of Hamilton,

offered me a commodious house adjacent his Lanarkshire mansion.' The landed gentry offer support to the communist/nationalist poet, alive to his importance as an artist, regardless of political preferences.

And just last year at the announcement of the Saltire Literary Award to James Kelman his stated appreciation of the award had a pragmatic aspect; the receipt of £5000 is no small matter in relation to his income the previous year of £15,000.

The Society was then and is now concerned to ensure that due recognition and support would be a matter of civic responsibility for Tom McGrath and Hugh MacDiarmid and James Kelman.

The human factor in each instance is critical. There wasn't a strategy in sight. It was simply people who cared doing something about the things they cared about.

So if you care about Scotland in all its diverse aspects we would love to have you in our company.