

# A view of Scottish poetry from Sicily

by NAT SCAMMACCA

How can I competently comment on Scottish poetry I ask myself, if I have never been to Scotland; how can I do this if I am only a Sicilian who has returned to Sicily from the United States after three generations and can only consider Scotland's problems in poetry and language from a very long way off, that tremendously great distance stretching between English and Scots, Sicily and Scotland? Many a night, bathed in a perspiration hardly cooled off by the sirocco winds of Sicily, I could feel my hair curl to its very roots every time I had to face a totally new expression in Scots and work out its meaning, find how to say it in the same, or, at least, nearly the same way, in Italian. This expression (in *Nuova Poesia Scozzese*) was just one amongst the many Scottish expressions of such a northern latitude that I could smell the brine of cold wintry seas crashing against rocky cliffs and feel that salty water edge up about me darkly, mysteriously and deep, and sense that Scottish expression was as deep as the murky water I imagined. How could I be satisfied with a sweet melodious expression in Italian, formed of words that are usually so feminine, to replace a masculine expression in the Scottish language? Perhaps the harsher Sicilian would have been a more suitable language for the translation, especially if it were entrusted to some great poet like *Santo Cali*, but there would have been the drawback of limiting its circulation to Sicily and not widening its circle of readers to all Italy. And it took me a good two years before I was fairly sure I had translated anything at all accurately from Scots into Italian.

I know many parallelisms come to mind when we talk of *Sicily and Scotland*, even though these two outer worlds have two totally different peoples. Yet, both must struggle (a losing battle?) to maintain their original identity and not be always forced to express themselves in a language which was imposed upon them, a language not their own. The necessity to stubbornly protect what is intimate in one's heart is the reason why languages like Scots and Sicilian never disappear; writers and poets, great

and small, have not only felt the need to save their «root» language as a noble commitment, but save themselves in the process. And I must not forget to mention the common man who, I have seen, fights his battle too, though very often his efforts are belittled and neglected because they are not considered worthy of attention. In Sicily his minor cultural expression is usually relegated into the dark nimbus of folklore and this includes his «dialect», poetry, music, cradle songs as well as his prison songs. (I have found Sicilian prison poetry of high quality especially in reading Antonino Uccello's remarkable book on jails in Sicily, in which there is a collection of prison poems dealing with the poor who had sadly served their terms in lurid cells).

Sometimes, because they fear ridicule, even those poets and writers amongst us who, in their hearts, feel the call of their local cultural language, strategically beat a retreat by regarding everything written in Sicilian as folklore and thereby cause a breach in the defences of local culture: all local culture should be defended, whether of high or low quality. Usually those who despise local culture and expression do so because they feel it does not meet with the high standards of a falsely established water line which has always satisfied only an elite.

I, for my part, feel honoured when others limit and include me in a «provincial» cultural area; I stand up and bow! I am always ready to defend this culture too often ironically included in the third world. I am more than proud to be associated, therefore, with Scotland and treated as another writer from a fringe area similar to that of Scotland.

And I think it is appropriate to declare what I believe in and feel, so that the Scottish readers know with whom they are dealing and understand what I say about local culture in that light. I am one who believes in the Greek city-state as the only happy solution for any man who wants to live the good active life of participation in a community of men. This means direct democracy as against representative democracy which we know to have been a relatively unhappy experience because its excessively large size has always worked towards the exclusion of the common man from all decisions directly concerning his future. Thus, in my opinion, local culture (recognized in its dialects, by which the reader knows I mean languages) goes hand in hand with the city-state, the small against the big. It is therefore a position which spiritually places me at Hugh MacDiarmid's side. I share Duncan Glen's enthusiasm for everything that helps carry on Hugh MacDiarmid's battle in favour of Scottish cultural and local freedom in Scotland. In fact, does not cultural freedom mean local political freedom in every sense, freedom which is antagonistic to far-off representation, especially when it is so far off it would take a man weeks to walk to London or Rome? Did Hugh MacDiarmid not fight hundreds of battles everywhere all his life for his true homeland which he certainly knew was not London. And I have met men even here in Italy who remember the skirmishes fought by Hugh MacDiarmid in debates and discus-



sions and how provocative he was. Englishmen have since had to admit through their teeth how much they admired this brilliant «skinny» Scot.

I, being down in the provinces, in fact the one furthest south, constantly face the same problems as those which Scottish poets experience: no publishing houses of any importance anywhere nearby. I can sympathize with the many doubts that besiege these writers forced to write in English, a situation leading them to give up their most important cultural roots. No amount of argumentation, though, will convince me it is too late to fight back and re-activate a native language. It is never too late to be ourselves. We often betray ourselves even before we betray our fellow- countrymen, be they Scots or Sicilians. Like Sydney Goodsir Smith, even I returned to the land of my origins, to Trapani, a place so rich in cultural traditions that Samuel Butler felt absolutely convinced that the epic poem, *The Odyssey*, was written by a princess, half Ionian Greek and half Sicanian, who once lived down the street from where my villa is situated on the slopes of Mount Erice, the sacred mountain of Venus.

The Scottish Renaissance began precisely when it seemed all the valid poetry of Scotland expressed in Scots had disappeared. So it seemed it had, before the onslaught of English pouring into Scottish ears and minds from the radio, cinema, newspapers, and later on from television reaching every corner of Scotland. Did an intelligent and tenacious Scottish poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, then begin a cultural movement which swept others writers and poets along, everything beginning and ending in Hugh MacDiarmid? I am sure it did not amount to this. The others were not swept along. The Scottish area was ready for the Renaissance. Hugh MacDiarmid was only the first, or one of the first, overt expression of it, and what it said was in the hearts of hundreds of Scottish writers and poets. Scotland was waiting for someone to begin. And I would even risk saying the common man in Scotland was also waiting for someone to light the match and put a flame to the dry wood that had accumulated over the centuries and which was always there ready to blaze up. I know this through the many poetry readings in Sicilian that were given by my wife, Nina, during my tour of the American universities in 1975. The Americans of Sicilian heritage were deeply stirred; listening for the first time to poetry in Sicilian, they felt their roots stirring after generations, after the American school system had done nothing but preach the American way of life and the English language, and had made every effort to destroy in each and every Sicilian immigrant the culture and language of his island home. In this way a great emptiness was left in him and his children; they had no background they could be proud of. Anything Sicilian was ridiculed.

I know that poetry and prose in Scots had mostly dragged its feet tiredly along after Robert Burns, permitting the English to monopolize all levels of cultural endeavour. However, I cannot fully agree with the Scots today that Robert Burns was even partially to blame for the condition of Scottish poetry that followed him owing to the kind of Scots he used in his poetry. Instead, I would wager that his poetry has helped

keep Scots alive and that only when the Scots were ready for a denser linguistic expression did they themselves encourage such an enriched poetic language as Hugh MacDiarmid's. I still think Robert Burns was one of the greatest poets this world of ours has known. Perhaps I favour Burns because of my populist Antigruppo ethics and poetics and also because of my love for the popular poetry forms of the people, such as the ballad, that the Romantic Movement propounded (see William Blake, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge).

Santo Cali, just as Hugh MacDiarmid began the Scottish Renaissance long after Robert Burns, made his appearance after the great Sicilian poets, Domenico Tempio (1750-1821, Catania) and Giuseppe Marco Calvino (1785-1833, Trapani); in their way they had given vent to a protest literature in Sicilian through pornographic poetry. Santo Cali, astride the Antigruppo poetry movement, demonstrated to the Northern Italians that Sicily too, after centuries, had its own valid poetry to express in Sicilian.

It is difficult, today, to bring this kind of cultural information to the attention of the large and small centres of the world. Much merit must be given to Duncan Glen and the other poets of *Akros* for their incessant work so that the world's cultural centres and even the provinces receive information about the Scottish Renaissance and any other poetic activity in Scotland. Issue after issue of *Akros* has kept me and Sicily informed. I have been impressed by what the Scots have produced in poetry and criticism, equal to (or better than?) what has been coming out of England. The critics in *Akros* are fearless, allowing no leaf to go unturned, subjecting themselves to no-one. The body of poetry I have read in *Akros* alone, produced by the Scots in this century, is second to that of no other country and should, for this reason, be translated into all the languages in the world. And do not think I am being over-generous. There are very few Italian poets who can claim my praise.

I have been overwhelmed by the vast amount of remarkable poetry (I would say only the United States has produced as much poetry of high quality) by George Bruce, Robert Garioch, T. S. Law, W. S. Graham, Edwin Morgan, Alexander Scott, Duncan Glen, Alan Bold, David Black, James Rankin, Tom Scott, Donald Campbell, J. K. An-nand, Alastair Mackie, Sydney Goodsir Smith, George MacBeth, and, of course, Hugh MacDiarmid.

The Scottish poets, fortunately, are not like the Sicilians in one thing: we have developed an inferiority complex since our isle was included in Italy and there after swamped by Italic culture encroaching upon, usurping and replacing our entire cultural pattern through a centralized school system having its head, that of an octopus, in Rome. We have been forced to think and even express ourselves with the thoughts of that head, using its language and not ours. The Italian school system is still riddled with a method of teaching which encourages the school body to be divided into social classes. Teachers favour the students from the families of the professional middle classes and the landed aristocracy. In fact, these students are grouped together in spe-



cial classes and protected so as to avoid contact between them and the children of peasants and common workers. At the oral examinations the examiners almost always favour the promotion of the students from the upper classes and make ironic comments on the inability of the poor to express themselves in Italian free of Sicilian. However, Italian is enforced through the long-established institution of seeking a promotion called the *raccomandazione*. I think a few lines from my story, *India or La Raccomandazione* should give the reader a better idea of what I mean.

«While teaching in Sicily I learned the importance the *raccomandazione* had for the Italians... I know now that the use of the *raccomadazione* in Italy has become a sanctified institution, the clergy itself established this custom and still makes a widespread use of it, even wielding influence in bureaucratic and political quarters this way. Everyone in Italy knows a priest can move mountains. «...Professore, for the love of God, do not fail this boy. He has a weak heart and one never knows. He cannot study for long hours. Professore, his mother has had an operation a short time ago and would never survive such displeasure. And remember, he is an orphan, too ...»

A wife can make an Italian teacher do anything she wants. «Oh ...Signora, you can if you want to! My son can be promoted if you mention it to your dear husband, the Professore. A word from you can make my whole family happy. I know you can convince your husband ...» Telephone conversations crisscross over the telephone wires and the professore's house becomes a general headquarters.

At the breakfast table then. «Dear, you must do me a favour. It would seem so inhuman to say no to la Signora, the Baronessa. I feel it is so right to help her. You must promote her son. You are one of his examiners. You must convince the others to do likewise. Don't make a face! What does it cost you to promote one more student?» All this just as he is swallowing a mouthful of food. He may try to say no... «But dear...» he begins. «No, no! I do not want to hear any of your ethical excuses. You know I have made a promise. Do you want me to go back on my word? Do you want people to think you will do nothing I say? What will the Baronessa think of me? You must!» And then there are teachers and headmasters who are completely without any scruples. They should have been salesmen or businessmen, instead. They are the teachers who exchange hundreds of students for private lessons, for which they are exceptionally well paid because they promise all these wealthy students a sure promotion. In Italy this exchange of students is called a «closed circuit». In many cases the headmasters of schools are right in the middle of these matters. This usage has become so entrenched that the students, now, MUST get a *raccomandazione* in order to pass. The news concerning tricked-up promotions travels like lightning and every student (but not the poor) at the oral examinations has his *raccomandazione*.

In this way the Italian school looks down on anything originally provincial and ignores the past cultural history of Sicily and all its poets, favouring only those of the north. (And, take note, the first body of formal literature in Europe began in Palermo

at King Frederic's court with Ciullo D'Alcamo and Iacopo Da Lentini, the poet who in Sicilian invented the sonnet.) And yet, through Santo Cali's efforts and those of the Antigruppo, Sicilian may soon be taught in the State schools on a primary and secondary level.

I often find myself agreeing with those critics who compare Hugh MacDiarmid to T.S. Eliot and feel that the Scots poet is important for his two-fold ability to express something particularly valid to the mind and heart in an enriched Scots because he listened to the speech of men from all walks of life. And not satisfied with this, he also dipped into the past to find efficiently useful words which, perhaps, had been discarded through a process of over-simplification so that the reader not very familiar with Scots could understand too. In Sicily, today, the poet, Ignazio Buttitta, has weakened the structure and intrinsic strength of Sicilian because he has impoverished its vocabulary by diluting the island's language with Italian words, imitating the kind of Italianized Sicilian spoken in the middle-class homes of Palermo instead of using the harsher and more difficult Sicilian spoken by the farmer, sailor, worker and common man in the hundreds of small towns and villages in Sicily. I suppose that when they read Hugh MacDiarmid's poetry some middle-class Scots must struggle at times to understand the words that have fallen by the wayside or which many have forgotten now that grandfathers and grandmothers are no longer with us. This certainly is the case with Santo Cali. I needed help when I translated his book of poems, *La Notti Longa*, volume two, *La Paci*, and had to consult Italian university professors to help me interpret some lines of poetry. But their knowledge of Sicilian was faulty at times and only by going into the countryside where the farmhands were could I at last be sure of my translation, for Santo Cali had listened with great attention to the farmers working the black soil of Mount Etna where he lived. There he heard a language that only a sensitive ear could grasp, harsh as a green lemon and yet as sweet as the golden honey gathered from the hives of Enna.

In this way poets not only enrich their language, but they save it as well, buttressing it with what it was and what it is. Santo Cali's library was filled with dozens of Sicilian dictionaries and scholarly studies of the language from every century, into which his nose delved in the *Long Nights* when he wrote the two volumes of poetry.

For this reason I «sweated bullets» when I had to translate Hugh MacDiarmid's poems for the anthology, *Nuova Poesia Scozzese*. (I must admit that for a few years I lived with a person who frequently would speak to me in Scots, especially when she wanted to express intimate and personal feelings and thoughts. So I learned the cadence of Scots but never made any attempt at learning to speak it. Its melody has lingered with me through all the years since then.)

Yet I realized I was unable to translate even just parts of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. I knew my limitations from the start; nevertheless, with Duncan Glen's help and the other Scottish poets' suggestions, I think we succeeded in a small way in



making Scots and its poetry familiar to Italian and Sicilian readers. They know, now, that a Renaissance of poetry has taken place during this century in Scotland. Though I failed with *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, I feel I succeeded with Hugh MacDiarmid's shorter poems and with the longer composition, «By Wauchopeside». However, Edwin Morgan in his kind review of *Nuova Poesia Scozzese* in J.K. Annand's poetry magazine, *Lallans*, was not even satisfied with Carmelo Pirrera's attempt. Perhaps we had more success with some of the poems by Robert Garioch, Alastair Mackie, J.K. Annand, Duncan Glen and Donald Campbell. I think I felt and understood the essence of Hugh MacDiarmid's short poem, «The Watergaw». This great little poem touched me deeply. When I read my completed translation of it I felt very happy I could be the tool and vibrating conductor used to fathom the deep meaning of «The Watergaw».

The Scottish Renaissance has produced a poetry keyed to a higher pitch of music and quality than most of the verse written in Italy up to and including the avant-garde movement of North Italy, Gruppo 63. Perhaps only Franco Fortini, Roberto Roversi and Andrea Zanzotto can be favourably compared to some of the Scots; certainly Cesare Pavese in his last fifteen or twenty love poems. In the south, contemporary Sicilian literature offers me the farmer poet, Santo Cali, followed by the fierce city-worker poet, Crescenzo Cane, Gianni Diecidue and his fine poetry from the valley of the Belice River, the tireless Rolando Certa, another love poet, and Carmelo Pirrera from the Sicilian sulphur mines. When comparing Santo Cali to Hugh MacDiarmid one must remember Cali was a *separatista* and believed in the future sovereignty of Sicily. Studying the two poets, then, brings me to this conclusion: what the two great men searched for all the time and expressed in literature was their *national* identity. Duncan Glen has often expressed this well when explaining the crux of Hugh MacDiarmid's poetics.

But he does an even better job in his long poem, «John Atman», the poem I had arbitrarily added to the anthology, *Nuova Poesia Scozzese*. It is a lovely liquid-like flow of verse through the mysterious stratifications of Scottish generations in the search for identity and roots. I fell into a trance and was lulled into a peaceful mood by this very beautiful piece of writing apparently stemming from T.S. Eliot but perhaps adhering more to the dictates of nominalism and to the poetic ideas of William Carlos Williams who, also, in his way, searched for roots in the New World, turning away (as T.S. Eliot did not) from the trite middle-class language and attitudes of a narrow-minded England. Just think, this England, composed of writers and critics who have always assumed themselves to be the literary overlords of Scotland, has never been wide or large enough of spirit to accept the originality of a poet so difficult to classify as D.H. Lawrence.

I must thank Robert Garioch for the letter he sent me and the kind and intelligent criticism of *Nuova Poesia Scozzese* and of my book of poems in English and Italian

called *Glenlee*. At the same time Robert Garioch criticized the way I translated his poem «At Robert Fergusson's Grave»; he questioned my free verse translation in Italian, my not respecting the original form of the poem in Scots and therefore its rhymed word endings. Here is my answer: I am convinced the attempt to spell out technically the exact form of the original would, in my case, have resulted in a loss of the tone, mood and Scottish feeling expressed by Robert Garioch in his Scottish words. To further the defence of my method, allow me to quote some pertinent points from our Sicilian Antigruppo manifesto, *The Twenty-One Points*:

1. The first aim of a poet (and translator) should not be the form but the tone in which he, the poet, expresses himself.
2. It is not form which creates the masterpiece but the poet's attitudes.
5. Let everyone accept the reality of the other and not impose, therefore, his own reality, experience, principles, poetics or language.

And the translator? If the poet and translator are of different opinions, each having his own kind of poetics, if they are born, as they would be, in different countries or even in different centuries, what is to be the translator's measure? I think the shadows of meaning and the inter-relationships between words all add up to something which is almost indefinable, but which, in «At Robert Fergusson's Grave», amounts to Robert Garioch's mood and attitude when he stood before a grave amongst a small number of people, a particular situation that will never be repeated in this world. My duty was to catch some of that in Italian words and I felt I did. But do not misunderstand me. My words in Italian tried to repeat the Scottish mood expressed by WORDS in the Scottish poem, not what Robert Garioch actually felt in the graveyard. That feeling and experience was unique and I can only be happy to have faintly echoed all that in WORDS. I cannot be Robert Garioch nor can my translation even be the beautiful poem he wrote in Scots. And yet something very fine was caught and I was particularly, satisfied with the translation. If I remember correctly, Edwin Morgan, or some other Scottish critic, was also, satisfied with this translation. But, after all, aren't words so inadequate when compared to the real thing? There are times when the poet does succeed in coming up with something and every time he does I am amazed and I begin hoping again, saying: what a beautiful mind man has!

I admit Robert Garioch's translation of Belli's sonnets, the two I read in the twenty-seventh issue of *Akros*, were superbly executed in rhyme. I think no-one could do a better translation. Perhaps later some other Italian translator will come along and do a fine translation in rhyme of «At Robert Fergusson's Grave». But also, he might sacrifice something I did not, for rhyme. Each and every translator to his own tastes and, I might say, poetics. Robert Garioch's «Alla Tomba di Robert Fergusson ott. 1962» has been read on many local radio stations and at numerous poetry readings in public squares in Sicily. This poem has sunk deeply into the minds and hearts of



simple folk such as farmers, workers, sailors and townsfolk standing patiently in the hot Sicilian sun to listen. And I am also sure such men and women have understood J. K. Annand's «Mallie», Duncan Glen's «Il Mio Papa», «Brand il Muratore» by Tom Scott, Emanuel Mandara's translation «Leopardi Sulla Collina» by Alastair Mackie, «Poi Vedere La Luna Mio Amore» by Donald Campbell and Carmelo Pirrera's translations «La Danzatrice Morta» by Alexander Scott.

Quite a number of important literary critics have requested, and written reviews of, the anthology *Nuova Poesia Scozzese*. Gilberto Finzi has reviewed it in the weekly magazine *Giorni* in Milan; Emanuel Mandara has dedicated a good part of the literary page in the daily newspaper *La Sicilia* to the anthology; *Impegno 70*, our literary review directed by Rolando Certa, has reproduced a small anthology of poets writing in Scots, as has *Foglio D'Arte* in Caltanissetta. The poet, Gaetano Salvetti, has also asked me to permit him to publish some translations of the poets of *Akros* in his important review *Crisi e Letteratura* in Rome. My weekly, *Trapani Nuova*, has often dedicated entire pages to Scottish poetry and once, for a Christmas-week edition, we published some of J.K. Annand's poetry for children. Next fall I hope *Trapani Nuova* will publish Domenico Cara's long review of *Nuova Poesia Scozzese* and the twenty-page essay on Scots and its poets by Maria Carmelo Coco Davani, Professor of English Language and Literature at Palermo University. Giuseppe Zagarrio, perhaps the most important critic dealing with Sicilian poetry in Italy has spoken of the Scottish poets favourably and has included a poem of the Scots in an anthology of three volumes for secondary schools published by Sansone, one of Italy's most important publishing houses. Even *Tuttilibri*, the largest weekly completely dedicated to reviewing books published in Italy, has spoken at some length of the Scots in *Nuova Poesia Scozzese*.

Before ending, I feel I should emphasise again that Sicilians and Scots are two very different kinds of people who have similar cultural and language problems. I think quoting a short section of the talk I gave in 1975 in my tour of the American universities will focus the similarity of our problems in the readers' minds.

«In the government public schools all decisions concerning culture emanate from the central monolithic hub which is Rome. The controlling factor in the choice of school books and their production is centred in Turin and Milan. The whole school system has been placed, then, entirely in the hands of a middle class either with a university-produced mentality or at least one which is completely dedicated to the Italian language and culture. The weaker elements of this professional group, the elementary school teachers, have constantly received a brainwashing meant to clear their minds of traditional languages and attitudes such as the local values of their island, and this has amounted to an attempt to cancel out their past peasant backgrounds, habits and origins.

From Palermo, the capital of Sicily, one can see an army of thousands of teachers and «professore» in the morning heading out into the hinterland of small towns and

villages on railway trains to teach the «peasants» Italian. I have often heard them remarking scornfully of the mistakes the lower classes make in their compositions when attempting to write in the almost new and unfamiliar language; these teachers belittle and discourage the Sicilian pupil when, at times, his idiom is pure Sicilian, and if that kind of an «error» continues, they fail him. They refuse to adjust their own Italianized measures to the values of the lowly Sicilian yokel who can only speak Sicilian well. These teachers are the defenders and distributors of the Italian culture they had learned at the *licèo* (the state school specializing in Italian and classical studies) and the university. They roar with laughter and imitate the yokel's feeble attempts at Italian. The teachers and the state schools in this way have knowingly or unknowingly become the enemies of the Sicilian people and represent an alien culture lacking tolerance or respect for a people in their own land. This is the heavy hand of centralized culture. The Sicilian unconsciously resists when he feels he is not accepted and usually becomes a «drop-out». But the Sicilian «drop-out» will continue plodding along more determined than ever before to speak in Sicilian. This is his only vendetta.

Instead, in the «white city», that part of Palermo where the well-off middle-class families live, everyone is busy Italianizing himself. There, Sicilian has almost become an unfamiliar language. But they, too, are temperamentally Sicilians, so much so that a northern Italian can even spot them in a crowd. There is always something very Greek or Arab, southern or Sicilian in their speech and gestures».

And I suppose, though to a lesser degree, the same thing is happening in Scotland. Yet, let there be but one living Scot or Sicilian, and the whole process of searching for identity will begin again. So it had begun with Hugh MacDiarmid and Santo Cali and so it will be for dozens of peoples in the world.

I am one who has always loved his opposites. Perhaps this strange contradiction is in every man. We want to be a part of something and at the same time we are always ready to emphasise our independence, be in a group but giving voice to a protest against closed groups and so preferring antigroups. The South seeks the North and the North the South. I have sought Scotland, the land of my childhood dreams, the land where I have never been but where, and I say this proudly, my Sicilian blood flows in the veins of a Scot.

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