

Hamish Henderson – the Art and Politics of a Folklorist

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Published books include his two volume biography of Hamish Henderson – Vol. 1, The Making of the Poet (2007), and Vol. 2, Poetry Becomes People (2009).

The hard way is the only way.

The worst enemy is acedia:

The great mental weakness, the failure to tackle it at the root.

HH, Poetry Notebook, 1949

It is an honour to speak here in celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the School of Scottish Studies. It is also an honour for me to speak about my old friend Hamish Henderson – recognised as one of the outstanding scholars to have worked at the School but also, I suggest, one of the great figures of Scottish history: a 20th century Modernist hero fit to stand with mythic figures like Calgacus, Columba, Duns Scotus, Wallace, Bruce, Montrose, Burns, John MacLean, Hugh MacDiarmid. If there is a dichotomy in this dual assessment, it raises questions this conference might address.

Hamish Henderson (1919–2002) became a professional folklorist in 1952 but long before that he was poet, a big artist, and Hamish could never divide his vision of ‘the folk’ from his vision of poetry and the public

good. For Hamish, folklore was a means rather than an end: it was a tool to achieve philosophical, philanthropic and artistic ends. With the courage of his surprising originality, Hamish used folklore as Michelangelo used marble, as Titian used paint, as Leonardo used chiaroscuro, as Brunelleschi used proportion, as Galileo used mathematics, as Turner used weather, as Shakespeare used the stage, as Homer and Michelet used national history, as Beethoven used his deafness, as Tolstoy used the Russian people, as Freud used libidinic analysis, as Bernard Leach used clay: – Hamish used folklore as his means of comprehending, honouring and changing the world, in his time. Folklore was the giant on whose shoulders he stood. Like Luther, he could do no other. His people's past was the vantage point from which he re-perceived their nation's future. As a boy of nine, Hamish's sense of destiny was apparent, even in the 'Irish Jokes' he wrote out in his mother's recipe book.

The wife and I went to a football match. During the play a man next to us kept on shouting – fifty-one thousand men, fifty-one thousand men. Fifty-one thousand men says I – what's the idea of fifty-one thousand men? Says he – fifty-one thousand men! So why did that pigeon pick on me?

Hamish was precocious and the values that would shape his life were established early. In 1928 he adapted a Burns quatrain, to honour one of his great, great grandfathers killed as a First Officer at the Battle of Trafalgar: it demonstrates the moral imperatives that drove him.

After the battle of Trafalgar – a Thanks-giving Service

*Ye Hypocrits!
Mon be yer pranks
Tae murder men
And then give thanks.*

*Stop!
Go no further,
God won't accept
Yours thanks for murder.*

Lifelong, Hamish would fight for common humanity against hypocrisy and for peace. Humour was native to him. Down-to-earth sexuality was there from the start:

*One day a simple country girl
Stooped down to pick a lettuce,
A bumble bee came buzzing by
And said, shall us, let us!*

Hamish's schoolboy poems owe much to folk tradition and a determined resistance to bourgeois values. Born illegitimate, he felt the full force of Victorian propriety, but brought up in Glenshee, in Highland Perthshire, Hamish knew himself part of the collective life of Auld Scotland. Flung-out of respectable society he felt himself tested, like a Spartan boy left overnight on the hillside. Such testing nurtured in him a Marxist/Darwinian vision of society and he seems to have intuitively comprehended, long before Richard Dawkins presented his theories to the world, that the 'selfish gene' is just part of a larger, 'unselfish' genome; that the selfless love of the she-wolf ('*My mother*,' he would say '*had a heart that would sink a battleship!*') is a fundamental aspect of the wider 'poetry' of the life he lived to celebrate.

'The Carrying Stream' is an old 'folk' phrase. Hamish gave it new meaning when he used it as a metaphor for the folklore process itself. His statements, 'The politics follows the culture' and 'Poetry becomes People' expand the concept to include all. For Hamish, folklore was never a narrow academic discipline but 'the proper study of mankind'; a truly human phenomenon that can provide a fulcrum for all modern humanist studies.

The Scotland of Hamish's boyhood was a land deeply scarred by war, depopulation, emigration, poverty, disease, urban decay, industrial decline and imperial self-centredness. By the early 1930s Hamish was using poetry and folklore as revolutionary tools to change a rotten *status quo*. His approach was many faceted. He looked back with a romantic Jacobite eye but, also, ruthlessly forwards. The spoken word – the great, neglected, oral tradition could, he believed, re-invigorate contemporary Scots poetry

(as Synge and Joyce, Hardy and Eliot had shown in Ireland and England) to the great benefit of the Scots people. Some things, he knew, could only exist and exist much more richly, within purely human intercourse as opposed to formal documentation. He notes: “*The oral tradition / The lived moment / Thrusting a rock in the craw of devouring time.*”

Hamish sought to exult ‘the humble lowly’. He sought to bring folklore out of the ghetto into which it had been flung by our increasingly institutionalised society, the rule of law, the absolute authority of the printed word. Any vital art, Hamish believed, needs to be continually renewed. The stale of yesterday is the yeast – the fresh bread – of the morrow. Hamish knew ‘tradition’ could easily degenerate into flaccid convention, and ‘the tyranny of a gereocracy’ but that ‘living speech’ was exactly that – and it was the folklorist’s duty (the poet’s duty) to use and build on the best of popular culture. He honoured those things which stood the test of time, that gave expression to permanent realities (his druidic, Celtic, Northern heritage) but he was very much a New Testament man, opposed to the ‘killing times’. Indeed, his embrace of this ‘folk’ philosophy was so powerful that he was quite prepared to see his own career, as an art-poet, snuffed-out for the greater good of society. Some have questioned this self-destructive selflessness, but true originals cannot help themselves. In 1994, I read Hamish a section from my book, *PART SEEN, PART IMAGINED: Meaning and Symbolism in the Work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald*. It deals with originality, and it was clear he was moved by what he heard.

Strictly speaking there is no such thing as an original work or opinion. Facts do not change, the lights upon them do. What is known as originality therefore consists of bringing a new light to bear on some fact known to all before; and in the power of forcing others to recognise it as such. Everyone is original in the true sense of the word, but every mind has not this power of impressing itself upon other minds; of forcing them to see its light and no other... It is the focusing of light upon one point, commonly called the concentration of energy, which alone can bring general recognition of originality. Men and women are original

only because they cannot help themselves. With the original character it is always, 'Here I stand for I can do no other'. No man ever yet did an original thing intentionally, your true original is unconscious... It is a great thing for a man to find out his own line and keep it. You get along so much faster on your own rail. It is not the amount of genius or moral power expended, but concentrated, that makes what the world calls a great man.

These words, from Glasgow School of Art student Janet Aitken, were published in the GSA 'Magazine No.1' in April 1893, and Hamish seemed to recognise that the statement validated lifelong the stance he had taken. There can, however, be no doubt that Hamish, at times, wondered whether he had betrayed his genius by his promiscuous embrace of all that was folk – but he stuck to his last. And it interesting that the subject of Janet Aitken's article, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, used vernacular functionality as a base-camp for his brilliant architectural adventures, very much as Hamish was to use Scots traditional song, music, speech, rhyme and metaphor in his best creative work.

Hamish had a 'druidic' memory for words, poetry and song. The 19th century art critic John Ruskin exulted this capacity for 'total recall' and suggested that many of the world's great artists had thriven, not on the production of 'new fantasies', but on the involuntary summoning, at precisely the right moment, of things actually heard, seen, experienced. Writing of Dante, Tinteretto and Turner, Ruskin asks his readers to:

Imagine all that these men had seen or heard in the whole course of their lives, laid up accurately in their memories as in vast store houses, extending with the poets, even to the slightest intonations of syllables heard in the beginnings of their lives, and with the painters down to the minute folds of drapery, and shapes of leaves and stones; and over all this unindexed and immeasurable mass of treasure, the imagination brooding and wondering, but dream-gifted, so as to summon at any moment exactly such groups of ideas, as shall fit each other; this I conceive to be the nature of the imaginative mind.

As a poet and folklorist Hamish had just that kind of mind. Such a mind can be problematical for academics and Hamish's 'dream-gifts' indeed proved problematic to some of his colleagues. For Hamish, folklore was an aspect of the brotherhood of man. He believed that renewed recognition of folk values in Scotland would sharpen social awareness, stimulate Scottish culture across the board and lead to political renewal. Ruskin also speaks eloquently of the local, the particular, the national – that underlies all pan-national achievement.

I am certain, that whatever is to be truly great and affecting must have on it the strong stamp of the native land: not a law this, a necessity... all classicality, all Middle-age patent-reviving, is utterly vain and absurd; if we are to do anything great, good, awful, religious, it must be out of our own little island, and out of this year 1846, railroads and all.

As a schoolboy at Dulwich College in the 1930s Hamish was recognised as a talented classical scholar, a linguist, a historian but, even then, he consciously used his knowledge and skills as folk poet to advance his folkloristical thesis. For example, he was sixteen when he wrote the following ballad for his Clapham Orphanage magazine, 'The Raconteur'. It tells the story of a 'pilgrim youth' impelled to search-out an aged Picto-Gaelic seer/oracle, who, when found, entrusts the wanderer with the responsibility of renewing and carrying forward the cultural and political causes of his people. The pilgrim is the young Hamish, and with prophetic power he sets out the quest to which he was to dedicate his life. It is entitled 'Fellow Traveller' (1936). It is long but well worth reading.

Sunk deep in brooding thoughts, I strode a-main
O'er the rough track once cut deep in the moor
– by the command of Angus, long ago,
Before the Gaelic power was crushed to nought –
But now o'ergrown with bracken and rank turf
And heather, dry and bloomless, it was scarce
Discernable even in that wilderness.

*I lifted my eyes from time to time
To view the far blue hills of Fraech Og,
The longed-for goal of weary pilgrimage
Through this bleak, barren land towards the East.*

At last I knew that e'er the moon was up,
Shedding her soft, sweet radiance on the hills,
I would be climbing, joyful in my heart,
The first smooth gentle slope of Ben na Craich;
And ere the first gleams of the dawn appeared –
In Kenneth's cave I, safe, would humbly kneel
And speak my mission to the forgotten seer
Who, once renowned throughout an hundred isles
For weird sixth sight and many prophecies,
Had wandered like our erstwhile lord, his king,
In the black veil of man's forgetfulness
Since waning horror visited our land:

*Beset by giant devils from the north
Who came in dragon-ships from o'er the sea
And burned and razed each clachan to the dust,
Slaying the last of our great hero-kings –*

I dreamt of all the glories old men tell
And heard the minstrels tell of ancient days
When Ian, Brude and Oscar of the Dirk
Built up their mighty empire – now destroyed –
Which made our Celtic fame ring round the world.

But one day light at heart, I heard a song,
A slow, sad ballad of the East Sea's edge
Telling how, patiently, a hermit sat
In humble mountain cave far to the West
Awaiting who should come – as willed the Gods –
To beg his magic aid to make anew
The glory of the kingdom Angus ruled,
And ever in my head rang the refrain:

*'Come to the West, where great Kenneth awaiteth thee,
Come to the westerly isles of the sea,
Over the moorland the seer'd desire
Fateth thee – on to the mountains of heather with me.'*

Fired by the ballad's lilt, with goal I searched
In ancient screeds, yet treasured by our priests
And found a tale like to a minstrel's lay
Promising great reward to him who sought
The distant cavern of one Kenneth Begh,
An aged mighty seer, born in the days
When Sheamus Ian slew the Picts – and yet
Alive! – I tarried not, but seized my staff
And spear, and started on my pilgrimage.

Thus thought I as, my journey's end in sight,
I gazed upon the hills, beyond whose ridge
Lay the blue waters of the Western Sea; –
When suddenly I felt a presence near
And turning, saw a noble, upright man
Of comely countenance and raven beard,
A leathern bonnet on his head,
Stalking with heavy pace ten steps behind.
'Who art thou, friend, and whence has't come?' cried I,
Gripping my spear-shaft and the studded targe.
Advancing to my side, the stranger said:
'Continue not thy journey, foolish youth –
All is a dream, deceiving fantasy
Arising from thy restless, foolish brain.
The splendour of our race hath gone, hath gone,
And for no childish fretting may return.
Go back! Thou searchest for thy seer in vain.
There is no seer, enchantment, in the world
Can ere restore the mountain glory more!
This land is drear and waste and nevermore
Can be ought else but hideous wilderness;

And only I remain to wail the past,
The dauntless spirit of the Celtic race!’

And with those awesome words, the demon wraith
Vanished, as melt the wisps of mountain mists.
Yet ever in my ears there rang anew
The plaintive haunting ballad, which seemed now
To double its appeal and wistfulness.

*Come to the West, where great Kenneth awaiteth thee.
Come to the westerly isles of the sea.*

Then Cast I off the spirit’s powerful spell
– augering nought but horror and despair –
And heeding but the lilting melody
Strove onwards o’er the moor through many hours,
At last with gladsome stride the uplands reached
And ran, such was my ardour, to the scarp: –
How changed and fair the whole surroundings were!
Under my brogues the rich blue heather bent,
I passed midst leafy trees and heard a stream
Go rustling midst the ferns upon the slope.
I reached the crest – the moon already up –
Bathed in the moonlight, by the western sea,
And all the mighty company of the isles
– Here on this further slope the Cavern lay!

Forgetful of my weary journey, I
Ran hard adown the hillside, and at last
Espied a hollow underneath a rock,
From which a gleaming light shone through the gloom –
With reverent steps the Cavern I approached
And whispered; ‘Holy seer: thy wait is o’er!
The gods have willed a pilgrim youth to come
To beg the magic aid to make anew
The glory of the kingdom Angus ruled.’

I entered then the cave and knelt to wait
The longed for charmed answer of the seer.
But nought but silence reigned within the cave,
The lighted bracket flickered eerily,
Then saw I at the bleakest corner's edge
A fleshless skull and hideous skeleton,
And by its side a leathern bonnet lay.

Not surprisingly, when Hamish came to write his last poem, 'Under the Earth I Go', almost fifty years later, he reprises the values set out in this youthful 'pilgrim ballad'.

Change elegy into hymn, remake it –
Don't fail again. Like the potent
Sap in these branches, once bare, and now brimming
With routh of green leavery
Remake it, and renew.

Makar ye maun sing them –
Cantos of exploit and dream
Dain of desire and fulfilment
Ballants of fire and red flambeaux...

Tomorrow, songs
Will flow free again, and new voices
Be borne on the carrying stream

Hamish's commitment to the values of Scots folk tradition is set out more intellectually in a letter he wrote to Jamie Cable, a fellow student at Cambridge, in 1939. They had quarrelled about Hamish's wish to listen to Cable's wireless:

... a word or two I would like to add about yourself and the 'gutter music' which you switched off. When I reflect that you are prepared to condone the flat and insipid vulgarities of Rupert Brooke, merely because he dangles on the end of a sagging 'civilized' literary tradition, it annoys me all the more that you can condemn the rombusuuous

*Rabelaisian vulgarities of an Irish street ballad, because it comes out of the 'gutter'. Villon came out of the 'gutter' – he was a boozer, a whoremaster, a thief and a murderer, but he was a great poet. Sean O'Casey's characters breed and brag over the 'gutter' but they are blood-brothers of Falstaff and Bardolph, of Pistol and Nym ... Falstaff, with the 'cynicism that comes of a cold, cold feet.' says 'Honour is a mere scutcheon, and so ends my catechism'. The peddler Seumas Shields, with the same cynicism mocks at the sufferers for Irish freedom, 'O Kathleen ni Hooligan, your way's a thorny way'. Will Kemp sang 'With hey ho, the wind and rain' as he danced with his drum to Norwich along the common roads. 'While going the road to sweet Athy', the Irish ballad-monger made his immortal song – which Auden included in the Oxford book he edited, as well as in his *Poet's Tongue*. Burns, who drank himself sick with his *Jolly Beggars* is one of the great poets of the world – greater than Villon because his range is wider. But the poetic works of Wilde are an object lesson in how not to write poetry, even though he was O so civilized.*

*The truth is that art and civilisation are not synonymous and it is farcical to protest they are. As Clive Bell points out the Congolese fetish-makers were artists, but they were not in the restricted and proper sense of the word, civilized. I have not the faintest wish to disparage those great artists who were civilized – Phidias, Sophocles, Aristophanes, Raphael, Racine, Milton, Wren, Jane Austen; but I want to take up my cromak in defence of those who were not:- the builders of the Gothic Cathedrals, Villon, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Emily Bronte, Rousseau, Whitman, Turner, Wagner, as well as the authors of the *Iliad*, the Scottish Border ballads, the Mabinogian and the folk-songs of all countries – and last but not least the sculptors of the Congo, and Easter Island. Their glory I take pride in proclaiming.*

And I continue to protest, unashamably, that in a Dublin tenement or a Hebridean 'black house' I find a richer and sweeter human spirit than in the town house of my aunt's friends, the Montroses. You told me a

while back that you are no poet, and I shrewdly suspect that one of the chief reasons is that you lack the wider humanity which would tell you that all art, from the Cockney, 'Knees-up Mother Brown', to W. Von der Vogelweiden's songs, and from Paul Robeson's Plantation songs to Goethe's Faust – is good and excellent because it is a manifestation of the human spirit. When art turns in on itself, when it exists for Art's sake, it is bad art, art gone rotten, and is hardly worth the name art at all. That is why I send Wilde skipping into ever-hunting Acteon with a stinging slap on his yielding buttocks.

If you were to write poetry now, you would write in a tradition moribund among its likes and languors, the last throes of romanticism in its dismal decline. Poetry can free itself at long last from the Georgian and neo-Tennysonian tradition, but only by going back to the realities of life – to the vigour of folk poetry and the class-struggle – for example – which realities conservatives are blind to. And the folk culture of America, White and Black, has also contributed to the healthy movement of modern literature. 'I hear America singing' wrote Walt Whitman, and from the voices of freed slaves in the Deep South; from the cowhands and hill-billies of Tennessee and the Mid-West, from the rain-storm-roaring-hobos who hitch-hike from Mexico to Maine, the song has come. (Burns-songs, just to remind you, are not book songs.) The folk culture of America lives – like that of the Celtic Countries, the most vital in the world.

... Like Lorca I declare war on the conservatives, political and literary, just as I hate all those who attack culture, or worship militarism, or think the 'poor', in the lump are bad! – and just as I despise those who find in great music stimulation and not satisfaction, or who confess, almost in so many words, that they are amongst the lowest of the low – music imagists! –

All this is the consequence of a rollicking Irish song! Yet it is all true, I think. My truth any way. I sign myself, as is fitting, in Gaelic – Seamus mac Eanrig.

In January 1952, fourteen years after that letter was written, Hamish was offered his first short-term contract as a folklore research assistant at the new School of Scottish Studies – and the Golden Age of Scottish Folk Collecting began. 1951 was the year of Alan Lomax, Jimmy MacBeath and Willie Matheson. 1952, the year of the Horseman's Word and John MacDonald the Singing Molecatcher. 1953, the year of the great Jeannie Robertson (the kind of seer and song-carrier he had imagined in his poem 'Fellow Traveller'). 1954, the year of the Stewarts of Blair, 1955, the year of 'The Tinker Project', 1956, a year of tours to Galloway, the Hebrides and Ireland. 1957, the year of Ailidh Dall and the Stewarts of Remarstaig. 1958, the year of the Edinburgh University Folk Club, 1959, the year in which the Scots Folk Revival began to make it big internationally with a plethora of folk singers and musicians under-pinning the upsurge of Popular Music. No wonder Hugh MacDiarmid lavished praise and fierce criticism on this extraordinary phenomenon of a man.

It is difficult to say when the Modern British Folk Revival began but whatever date is chosen – the name Hamish Henderson is likely to loom large. In 1938/39 he was singing ballads for W. H. Auden, Benjamin Britten, Dylan Thomas, Paul Potts and speaking for folk tradition within the Cambridge Union, and Socialist Society. He carried his zeal into the army in 1941, when he began seriously collecting (and writing) soldier's balladry. 'The Ballad of Section Three', 'King Faruk', 'The Highland Division's Farewell to Sicily' and 'The D Day Dodgers' are just three of his major contributions during WW II. In 1947 Hamish published his 'Ballads of World War II', in Glasgow. In 1948 he composed his immortal 'John MacLean March' and used magazines like 'Conflict' to forward his Marxist folk-political vision. During that year his 'Elegies for the Dead in Cyrenaica' were awarded the first Somerset Maugham Award for Poetry. In 1949 Hamish was in Ireland – working for the WEA in Ulster: there he worked to stimulate an Irish folk/literary revival – and founded the Irish Peace Movement. As ever his folk studies provided him with the platform from which he could address 'everything concerning people'.

In 1950 Hamish went to Italy to translate 'The Prison Letters of Antonio Gramsci', and found himself feted as a hero. In Milan, Bologna,

Venice, Rome, Hamish inspired many of the revolutionary poets, artists and film-makers then leading the post-war *Risorgimento*. He spoke about Hugh MacDiarmid, Sorley MacLean, and Gramsci. He also spoke against the nuclear arms race and the war in Korea and, in October 1950, found himself expelled by an unholy alliance of the CIA and the CD government. Financially and politically 1951 proved a hard year for Hamish but – he founded the Edinburgh People's Festival (which consequently blossomed into the Edinburgh Fringe) and, in 1952 he was offered a research job at the School of Scottish Studies.

There is no doubt that during the early post-war period Hamish had high communist/nationalist political ambitions but – the times they were against him: and, gradually, he realised it was not revolution but the folk process that would see his dreams realised. Hamish made himself part of a process that Lao-tse had understood almost two thousand years previously: *'How did the great rivers and / Seas gain dominion over / The thousand lesser streams? / By being lower than they.'* Like Brer Rabbit in his briar bush, Hamish got himself flung exactly where he wanted to be. After his letter of appointment (to the SSS) he wrote to a friend that he would be *'collecting ballads and finding singers, God's own job – and hospitality money provided ... And sae at last this bonnie cat / He had a stroke o' luck!'* Five years earlier he had written to his friend Geordie Hamilton:

It is in the unsounded deeps of the great laments and in the ecstatic vortex of the dance that you will find the Scottish unity... and today is a morning of splendid winter sunshine. If you could only be here now you'd see a vision of Scotland, of the Sgurr of Eigg and dark green Arisaig of the birchwoods, that would take the sting out of pre-destined damnation...

Hamish lived in a state of semi-permanent euphoria and many of those around him felt touched by what he enabled them to see, to do, to be. A letter from John A. S. MacDonald (written in the 1960s but referring to 1940s) suggests something of the transforming impact Hamish could have:

You were renewing wartime friendships [Rev. Norman MacDonald and Norman Robertson] – the food in the hotel [Lochmaddy] was superb, and there was an atmosphere of almost joyfulness about, which I, at least, never experienced before or after...

Hamish was an unleasher of forces. He championed his informants and wanted their voices to be heard both within and outwith the SSS, on the BBC, and across the world. He also wanted the material piling up in the archives of the SSS used – as templates for a folk revival that would have far-reaching cultural and political consequences. The frustration of Hamish's wishes (and Calum Maclean's) in these areas stimulated questions at the School, at the BBC, and within the British Intelligence Services that remain unresolved.

The School, however, despite its problems, quickly established a remarkable international reputation and, for sixty years, it has been a uniquely homely meeting place for scholars, students, tradition bearers, creative artists and thinkers – and a wonderful resource for Scotland and the world. But from the beginning Hamish and Calum Maclean (the two pre-eminent collectors at the School) found themselves at odds with the Secretary/Archivist Stewart Sanderson. Disagreements centred on the importance of oral, as opposed to literary conservation; on copyright; about money, about the censoring of bawdy texts, about broadcasting policy. Naturally it was the secretary/archivist who had the power and pulled the purse-strings, it was he who had a secretary and a car. It was he who organised technical support and oversaw external policy-making. Neither Hamish nor Calum were technical wizards and both would have done more, and better, recordings if they had been given better technical assistance. Both men frequently travelled by bike or shanks pony and, after Calum lost an arm to cancer, this was not easy. Hamish's interest in developing a stronger film/TV/video collection was also minimally developed. No small institution can do everything but since the Golden Decade of the Fifties the School has, too often, fallen between stools – collection, preservation, archiving, research, teaching, creative making and broadcasting.

In addition, it seems clear that as the years passed Hamish would have benefited from sabbatical leave but, in over thirty years of full-time employment, he got not a term. Genius is rare and university administrators – like great patrons – should recognise and nurture particular talents in particular ways. That Hamish achieved much as a scholar and artist, that he recognised the genius lying dormant in the Scots folk tradition, should not blind us to the fact he could have done more with more encouragement and assistance. Hamish honoured Everyman but also knew that one thousand plasterers cannot achieve what Michelangelo achieved. He knew that life and art need to be addressed ‘whole’ and unified. For him the folk tradition was the bedrock. In 1952 he noted:

No one can interest me in ‘fine’ writing as such. Any fool poet can write well if he happens to have talent – but the poets who love have a much larger problem, not only to write well, but to express once again the whole world, and this impinges not on one individual but on the collective.

Hamish saw the folk process as democracy in action, folk collecting as something for the collective but – the individual voice was crucially important and Hamish had no hesitation in acknowledging the special powers of the best of his informants. For example, Hamish found in Jeannie Robertson something more than information, songs, stories of international importance; he recognised her as an independent artist – a fellow artist of high degree – a woman of genius with whom he was proud to develop ideas and a conjoint-art. And, over the years, he was happy to collaborate with Jeannie – as she summoned-up and developed her repertoire. Such attitudes and actions raise questions that academic folklorists rarely address. For example, to what extent do all interviewers affect and nurture the performances their subjects give? Are informants ‘untouchable’ objects of scientific and ethnographic interest, or human beings interested in presenting themselves and their traditions in the best light? Are informants free to ‘improve’ their performances as most professional singers and TV presenters seek to do to improve theirs? When

does improvement become untenable? These questions raise questions about the Western intellectual tradition itself – high art and low art – etc.

Hamish was a folk scholar but also a troubadour – happy to light the blue touch-paper of renewal (the Folk Revival) and stand back. His recognition of the authentic and ancient was unrivalled – but life, renewal, these were the things. If this compromised his integrity in the eyes of certain folk scholars and authorities so be it.

With regard to the Revival performers themselves – Hamish’s policy was to encourage the revival artists to acquaint themselves with the best and most authentic source-singers, story-tellers and musicians but then to trust them to do what they would. Life, love, art – not dead precept – were his beacons. Who, today, has Hamish’s grasp of the big principles? Today, specialisms drive most university departments, and breadth of study is an increasingly marginalised concept, however, if you drive breadth of life from folklore you have nothing more than ‘the leathern bonnet’ Hamish described at the end of his ‘Fellow Traveller’ ballad.

For Hamish – as for the tinkers – the lifestyle was the culture, the culture was the lifestyle. He was a Rabelaisian man but, like Rabelais, also a font of timeless ideas and ideals. As with Socrates, as with Christ, as with most visionary thinkers, Hamish’s ideas were implied rather than laid down hard, and, crucially, they depend on other people – to recognise and take them on. I will now outline just a few of the big ideas that Hamish sought to cultivate: all have that common humanity that the folk traditions so frequently distil.

1) **Hamish’s lifelong stance against war** was impelled by folk imperatives of the kind every mother knows. In his poem ‘Dark Streets to Go Through’, Hamish articulated the idea that one of the prime legacies of war is more war. The poem was a response to a night spent in his aunt Mabel’s top-floor flat at 42 Ashley Gardens, Kensington, in April 1941. The flat enjoyed fine views across Westminster Cathedral. Mabel had appointed herself an unofficial fire-bomb watcher and enjoyed directing the fire-fighters by telephone! Sitting together they witnessed one of the heaviest raids of the London Blitz. In the morning he wrote this poem, dedicated to ‘Lotte’, a little Jewish girl whom he had helped across

Germany in 1939. Watching London burning he thinks of her, hoping, that somewhere, out there, in a Europe aflame, she is alive – and will live on to see such madness ended.

... Dark streets to go through, in nights debauched of quiet
Dark Streets blazing like an *auto de fe*, till cease
Well after dawn the bombers' roar and riot.
And the city, in daylight's drawn and haggard relief
Shifts on its side to sleep for half an hour.
And then goes to work, not bothering to count the dead.
Dopes, morons, mortal cousins, fools, heroes, of heroes flower –
From my heart I say it, not minding what others said.

Yet this 'terrible beauty' must not blind us;
men who have lost the power
To think without anger are not a pretty sight.
Planes tilting over the quaking black ant-heap of houses
Will have much to answer for
(much surely to answer for)
Besides hell through a long-drawn April night.
Making our task less easy.

Still, a task we must carry through.
In spite of murderous men.

In the fable
God is murdered but born again too...

The poem is a noble tribute to the people of London. It carries echoes of the beauties Wordsworth had seen from Westminster Bridge and it ends with a classic folk motif of redemptive continuance but, above all, the poem looks modern warfare in the face. The 'terrible beauty' Hamish sees, links the present war to past calamities and he recognises that Europe is facing a crucial moment in its history, not unlike that which Ireland faced in 1916. When he writes '*Making our task less easy*', he raises a profound question. The battle now joined will be long, hard and bloody and, after victory, Hamish foresees that the consequences will

corrupt mankind for centuries to come. He knew that the Reformation (in Scotland) was once, exactly, the same kind of all-consuming issue now confronting twentieth century Europe: the Reformation had triumphed and brought great benefits and glory to Scotland but it had, also, planted poisons and pernicious constraints that still circulate in the body-politic and psychology of the nation, four hundred years later. He foresees that the great campaign against Nazi tyranny, even if it ends in total victory, is likely to leave Britain doused with similar long-lasting poisons. In this visionary poem, in praise of London's will to resist, he foresees that the heroism born in these streets will, in the years to come, make the work of the peacemakers more difficult because the satisfactions and moral self-righteousness of the victors will hook them on the 'necessity' of future wars – to be fought for 'the democratic good' imposed by technologically superior force. He recognised that the generation sickened by the bombing of Guernica was now accepting the mass of bombing of whole nations and that the idea of the destruction of mankind itself would soon be regarded, by apparently sensible leaders, as just another military option.

2) Hamish believed that the Poet and the People must have their say in War Policy. He had personal experience of modern warfare and he determinedly used his experience to tackle the brutalities of war head-on. His thinking came to a head in Sicily in July 1943. Having left the African desert he determined to start planning a post-war renaissance – a new Italy, a new Europe, a revived and independent Scotland. And, as soon as Sicily was won, Hamish began orchestrating his thinking in a historic series of 'debriefing' lectures – given to the victorious battalions of the 51st Highland Division. Hamish was the division's Intelligence Officer and bard, and he knew exactly what he was talking about: he had helped draw up the orders of battle, watched the conflict unfold, interrogated hundreds of enemy prisoners, witnessed terrible slaughter. He spoke the languages of the combatants and the civilian population. He knew the history of Mediterranean civilisation and had a clear understanding of the international struggle their battles were part of. He presented each of the Highland battalions with a detailed account of the specific actions in

which they had been engaged and, whilst the reek of battle was still in their nostrils, Hamish did something seminal in the history of modern warfare. He sang them; out of blood-shed into new being. It was the oral tradition given contemporary focus, here was a modern panegyric delivered with civilising authority. Like a tribal bard. Hamish reviewed bloody facts, spoke of home, spoke sacred names. He gave honour to men who had survived five weeks of savage fighting: he helped them digest grotesque experience and go forward, fortified and cleansed. It was folklore in action. It was post-traumatic stress disorder – forestalled. The man who, in Cairo, had sung King Faruk to shame, now spoke of Scotland's pride in them – the battalions of the 51st Highland Division: he told them of the debt they owed the dead, and of their duties in going home: and they cheered him to the echo. In his fifth Elegy he writes:

Strong-winged
our homing memory held us
on unerring course...

Aye, in spite of
the houses lying cold, and the hatred that engendered
the vileness that you know, we'll keep our assignation
with the Grecian Gael (and those others). Then foregather
in a gorge of the cloudy Jebel
older than Agamemnon...

These words conjure Highland Scotland, Ancient Greece and the cloudy mountains of North Africa. Hamish's Turneresque image of '*a gorge of the cloudy Jebel* / '*Older than Agamemnon*', summons Horace's immortal ode to the unsung to mind. Two thousand years earlier, Horace had written '*Many brave men lived before Agamemnon's time; but they are all un-mourned and unknown, covered by the long night, because they lacked their sacred poet*'. In Hamish (still only twenty-three-years-old) the men of the 51st Highland Division had found 'their sacred poet' and they understood that his words would sing them: that they, their dead, their deeds would live whilst Scotland stands.

There were our own, there were the others.
Therefore, minding the great word of Glencoe's
son, that we should not disfigure ourselves
with villainy of hatred; and seeing that all
have gone down like curs into anonymous silence,
I will bear witness for I knew the others.
Seeing that littoral and interior are alike indifferent
and the birds are drawn again to our welcoming north
why should I not sing, *them*, the dead, the innocent?

3) **Hamish's plan for a Second Italian Risorgimento** was an amazing 'folk concept' that would play its part in the pan-European Renewal that followed it. Relaxing above the Straits of Messina in late August 1943, Hamish noted: '*Popular solidarity is the price of popular victory*' and addressing the failure of the socialist revolutionaries of 1848 he set down his 'collective' but highly personal folk-thoughts.

Above all they did not learn that in a revolution, only those who have the élan which drives to innovation can hope, if they are of the left, to succeed; for it is in innovation that the masses find courage and proof that they have the capacity to govern. Delay to experiment, in a revolutionary time, is always the bulwark of reaction; for when men are not pressed to hope they are driven to fear. The power of property has always been in its ability to re-establish its claims by postponing the hopes which threaten its dominion ... Kingsley Martin's writing confirms my own duty and makes it sharp for me. Defeat of Fascism does not stop short at the defeat of the Italian and German armies. It will mean an intensified campaign when I return to the shores of Britain...

Or must it always
seem premature, the moment always at hand,
and never arriving, to use
our rebellious anger for breaking
the vicious fetters that bind us.

Endure, endure. There is as yet no solution
and no short cut, no escape and remedy
but our human iron.

And this Egypt teaches us
that mankind, put to the torment, can bear
on their breast the stone tomb of immolation
for millennia. The wind. We can build our cairn. (Fourth Elegy)

4) Racism, religious bigotry and Western imperialism were all forces Hamish believed reducible by the folk imperative. In 1947 he campaigned against the visit of George VI to South Africa, writing; *‘there is no place on earth where black people are worse treated’*. In 1949 he presented Paul Robeson on public stages in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Belfast:

When I was last in Scotland, my visit coincided with that of Paul Robeson. I met him speaking to the Edinburgh students about the artist and the citizen. One is never justified in trying to draw a line between one and the other – but there are times when the role of the writer (or artist) must be subordinated to that of the citizen ... My task in introducing Paul Robeson to Belfast is to commend the way in which he is exploiting his magnificent voice to the full – for the good of the citizens of this city and working people of the world...

Hamish also met Robeson in Glasgow and, using the pseudonym Brenda Sharpe, described his performance at a concert there in these inspiring words:

For well over an hour he treated us to what was neither just a political speech, aesthetic or cultural analysis, nor a song recital, but fused all these into one spontaneous and indissoluble creative expression, using song as his theme. His message of the essential brotherhood of man was hammered home by the common lilts and harmonies of folksongs from all the peoples of the earth. Thus Robeson affirmed his great conviction that all great art belongs to the people, is born of the people, and addressed to the people ... His hearers became profoundly aware of

the justice and strength of his cause, which is nothing less than the cause of humanity. He stood there as the representative and champion of countless millions of ordinary people, speaking with their voice and embodying their strength, so that as he spoke, the forces of prejudice, seemed dwarfed to pigmy significance. We were infected and inspired by his own tremendous faith that the cause of the people, the cause of right and justice, is the cause which shall inevitably triumph in the end...

In 1964 Hamish wrote the world's first song in honour of Nelson Mandela, 'Rivonia'. In 1970, he noted: '*The Colour Question? The biggest threat to the world.*' In 1994 Hamish sang, hand in hand with Mandela, above George Square in Glasgow. Fifty thousand people joined in, with them. It was a moment of universal folk solidarity: music, story, universal brotherhood – one in joy – but also a consequence of intellect, courage and political commitment by a folklorist with attitude.

5) '**The Role of the Artist in Society**' was an issue to which Hamish gave much serious thought. Lectures he gave, as Secretary of the WEA in Ulster in 1948/49, suggest the originality and breadth of his approach:

Art depends on the society. In primitive societies the poet or bard was an honoured person. Integrally part of the community. His songs or hymns were a part of reality for the people. The poet's 'illusion' of the harvest field was part of the reality... But in this anxious, despondent, febrile period of late capitalism, artists have become more and more isolated, more and more shut in on themselves. Artists have tended to become very arrogant, capricious and pretentious. Poets, of course, realize this – realize what has been lost. The Scot MacDiarmid, and the Irishman Yeats have expressed it with poignancy... But others have retreated into 'contempt', into what would seem to be a contempt for life... What is the alternative?

Artists must try to reach completeness again – though, in our age, they are unlikely to achieve it. How should the attempt be made? By a

patient road of study, sacrifice and understanding, by a refusal to be rattled, refusal to accept the values of external mediocrities, the clique of letters. And by a growth of understanding of the duties and problems that face us. Artists must address the age in which they are living and show an increasing awareness of their social duties.

This is a time when the artist must try to write for the whole people, not just a section. He must give (express) the social struggle of his time – and (in the wake of Imperialism) the struggles of national communities for cultural and political freedom – their poetic and aesthetic justification. That does not mean they should not write about love – but they should show love as it really affects human beings, united together in society, and not in the barren heraldic manner of Phedre... In all countries, but especially in countries like Ireland and Scotland, we must take the trouble to find out that throughout the period when artists were estranged from the people – there was folk-art, the art of the people – a continuing ‘unified sensibility’. People are only now beginning to realize that much folk poetry is actually superior to the art poetry of such periods.

The real study of folk art – the art of the labouring classes, the work songs of the community – how they come about, how they grow, what their energy and aesthetic force consist of – is still in its infancy; – for the very good reason that it has not suited the powers that be to further such studies. Folk art is an implicit – and in many aspects an explicit challenge to the ruling class way of looking at the world. There is a philistinism in the working class and in their organisations but these things can be taken in their stride ... The poet and the community must be threaded together again – and we must start here, where we stand – we can do no other.

Hamish believed there was a Marxist lock, into which his ‘folk-spirit key’ could be inserted to affect communities everywhere.

6) Hamish recognised that Folk Art – like all significant art – functions at levels beyond reason. One of Hamish's early source-singers and storytellers was a young Morayshire Traveller, Geordie Stewart. In 1954 he gave Hamish a superb rendition of international folk tale, 'The Green Man of Knowledge', published as a key text in the first issue of the journal *Scottish Studies*, in 1957. Thirty years later Geordie gave Hamish another story that shows how, sometimes, Hamish's big ideas found their best expression in the mouths of his folk informants.

Tricking the Laird: Old tinker couple. Poor. On the estate of a mean and vindictive laird. Old woman, one day, puts here sales earnings in the donkey bag – for safety. The old man feeds the donkey. The donkey eats the money! A problem. Old man watches, catches, sifts the shit: – watched by the laird. The laird wants the donkey! Finally offers five pound and a year's rent. Agreed. Laird gets nothing. Reneges on his promise. Demands rent! Old tinker gets a bag of blood – in a cow's intestine – from butcher. Ties it to his wife's chest. Laird visits and asks for money ... Old tinker asks his wife to bend backwards. Takes up a knife – and cuts her throat. The blood gushes and she falls to the ground. The Laird is surprised. The old tinker says, 'I don't know what I've done – but don't worry!' And he takes down an old brass horn from the wall, lifts his wife's skirt and blows, 'Dedididid ...' And she rose and went ben the hoose, washed herself doon – and threw away the intestine. 'Does it really work?' said the laird. And back she came!

'Well,' says the laird, 'I want that horn very much. I tell you what, I'll sign the cottage over to you – for life – if you give me the horn.' So, a deal was struck. The laird said: 'I must get hame wi' this!' Says the old wife: 'O, now I've done it. I dread to hear the consequences...'

The laird was having a lovely evening meal. The Justice of the Peace and the auld minister were there, and all the important people of the town. Suddenly, the laird stops the party and says: 'Im going to show you something! You wont believe it!' 'Ah,' they say, 'What's he up to now?' He was very eccentric ye ken. He says to his wife: 'Bend backwards –

bend backwards – not ben!’, and he lifts up the carving knife. Cuts her throat! She’s lying there. They all look at him. ‘AaH!’ Like that! ‘No problems. Don’t worry!’ he says, and he lifts up the horns: ‘Dedididid... Dedididid...!’ She doesnae move! He was locked up for life. He was locked up for life! Well, there you are – that’s an old tinker story.

Geordie told Hamish this tale, at the time that the Lindow Man was being dug up in Cheshire. Hamish made contact with the archaeologists involved; one wrote back.

Dear Mr Henderson – Thank you for your article on the Green Man of Knowledge ... I am currently digging at Lindow Moss ... I am really a beginner when it comes to oral tradition ... What impresses me most about your tale is how it shows a core of ideas found – not only in Scotland – but in Welsh, Irish, English, Romany archaeology. The phenomenon of the bog-burial occurs in broadly the same period of Pre-history across Northern Europe amongst tribes of different cultures and often at odds with each other. Perhaps rituals and stories are easier to transmit across cultural boundaries than objects, house-types, and even languages ... The argument you put forward is similar to the one which seems to rage constantly in archaeology – between the importance of the migration of people or the independent development of cultural traits. The more I find out about the British oral tradition, the greater value it seems to have for archaeologists concerned with pre-medieval sites and cultures in this country...

What Hamish’s folklore did for archaeology, it also did for a number of criminal police enquiries, for theatrical performances, films, television programmes, political campaigns and much more.

After being shown round Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s reconstructed flat, in the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow, Hamish’s friend John Berger remarked, in 1982: ‘*This is a man who by himself created a civilisation*’. Something similar might be said of Hamish. But where Mackintosh’s vision of civilisation was self-contained and perfect, Hamish’s vision was always of the lived moment – with us and ever before us. Like a potter,

working with the clay rising in his hands, Hamish saw folklore as an ever-changing feast. He loved the sensory realities of life and he particularly honoured artists in whom transparent love is the prime energising force – as in Dante, William Blake, Vincent van Gogh. In old age, he scrolled out his own adaptation of Corinthians XIII:

The three words. Love: love is the only God that I believe in. The books of the Holy Bible say but one time just exactly what love is, and in those three little words it pours out a hundred million college educations, and says, God is love. And that is the only definitive answer to the ten thousand wild queries and questions that I my own self tossed at my bible – that is the only real sensible easy honest warm plain quick and clear answer I found – when I was too ready to throw so-called cowardly thieving poisonous religion out of my back door. It was those three words that made not only religion but also several other sorts of superstitious fears and hatreds in me meet a very quick death. God is love. God is really love. Love casts out hate. Love gets rid of all fears. Love washes all clean. Love forgets all debts. Love forgets all mistakes. Love overcomes all errors, and excuses and pardons and understands the reason why the mistake, the error, the stumble was made. Love heals all. Love operates faster and surer than time or space or both. Love does not command you, order you, dictate to you. Love asks rather for you to tell its forces what to do, and where to go, and how to build up your planet here by the blueprint plan of your heart's desire. Love can't operate on your behalf as long as your own sickly fear will not permit love to act on your behalf. Your love commands must ever be just exactly the direct opposite of war's crazy baseless hatreds, peace, peace, and sweet peace must be the song on your tongue tip. – Peace is love. Love is peace. – Your love command must for all eternity be your peace command.

One reason why Hamish's reputation as a folklorist is frequently qualified is that he is difficult to categorise. His insights light lamps far beyond the narrow field of folklore but for this he deserves praise not criticism. The Scottish composer and musical historian John Purser is someone

who has responded appropriately. As an eighteen-year-old student Purser was inspired by Hamish's folk-thinking. Thirty years later when his book *Scotland's Music* was published, in 1992, Purser wrote:

Dear Hamish ... I remember being impressed by your insistence that the tradition was a living one. The impression never left me, though I was confused by it at the time because my knowledge was through print not lips. Now I know better and can put that down to a distant memory of your own vivid enthusiasm as well as to the wonderful burgeoning of music and song you and others have done to bring to the fore ... The best reward will, of course, be when younger generations take up the work – which they show every sign of doing.

The outstanding American ballad scholar, Bud Bronson, was even more enthusiastic in his endorsement of Hamish's work, writing, in the early 1970s:

Dear Hamish, 'The Muckle Sangs' reached me a fortnight ago. What a splendid album! And what an enduring treasure. My cup runneth over. I rejoice to possess it, and have read every word of your jacket summary and the handsome booklet. You have put it all in proper perspective ... it is wonderfully satisfying that living tradition continues to unlock its secret repositories to the deserving seekers. And it was your divining-rod, Hamish, that beyond all others in these latter days, found the springs of native song and brought them again to the surface for the refreshment of our generation and generations to come. It must be enormously gratifying, and exhilarating, to you to realize how fructifying your discoveries and your influence has been. You touched the rock and living waters gushed forth. Posterity's debt to you is incalculable and will not be forgotten.

Hamish was, in a real sense, here before us, and his vision will remain long after we have gone. It would not hurt us to be a little more generous towards him. Hamish, himself, was always generous to his finger-tips – as his eulogy for Calum Maclean makes clear.

Calum stood in the midst of a tradition, he was part-bearer as well as a collector (in the great Scottish tradition) and conscious of those who had gone before –John Francis Campbell of Islay, Hector MacLean, Alexander Carmichael, Ewan MacLachlan, John Lorne Campbell – yet in the end he can be seen to have excelled them all. His research papers were not numerous: he addressed the urgency of the task before him at a particular moment. He got down and announced, to the world, that which others must analyse and now take up.

In February 1949 the historian E. P. Thompson honoured Hamish, as poet, with similar insight and precision:

I greet you with humility compagno, for you are that rare man, a poet. You have achieved poems out of our dead century... you must remain in a poet. Remember who you are writing for: the people of Glasgow, Halifax, Dublin ... You more than any poet I know, are an instrument through which thousands of others can become articulate. And you must not forget that your songs and ballads ... are quite as important as the Elegies.

As ever, it is the folk aspect of Hamish's work that comes to the fore, marking it as original and important. And, the Pandora's box Hamish opened shows few signs of closing. In 1999, at the re-opening of the Scottish Parliament, it was Sheena Wellington who stole the show with a spine-tingling rendition of 'A Man's a Man for a' That'. In 2010 the prestigious Turner Prize was won by a Scottish sound-artist, Susan Phillipz – singing a ballad, 'The Lowlands Low'. Did these things have anything to do with Hamish and the folk? You bet.