



Shetland Museum and Archives
- Writing the North -

Hugh MacDiarmid

Shetland Museum and Archives are searching for a group of young people who could form a media company to make a short film about the life of Hugh MacDiarmid, the well-known Scottish poet who spent ten years in Whalsay, and some of his poems about Shetland.

The purpose of the film will be to bring Hugh MacDiarmid's work to life and give pupils the chance to read and respond to his poetry.



Activity 1

Working in pairs or groups of 4, complete the following activities. These activities are designed to get you thinking about what life was like when MacDiarmid lived in Shetland.

1. Talk about what you know about what life was like in Shetland in the 1930s when the herring fishing was an important part of the local economy. Make a note of your ideas.

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2. In what ways do you think someone newly arrived in Shetland might have had a different view of 'going to the fishing' from the people who had to make their living at it? Make a note of your ideas.

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3. Discuss the idea of making poetry from what you see around you in Shetland. What kind of images immediately spring to your minds? Make notes of your ideas.

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4. Nominate a spokesperson for your group. Share your answers with the rest of the class.

You may want to take a note of other ideas from the class below:

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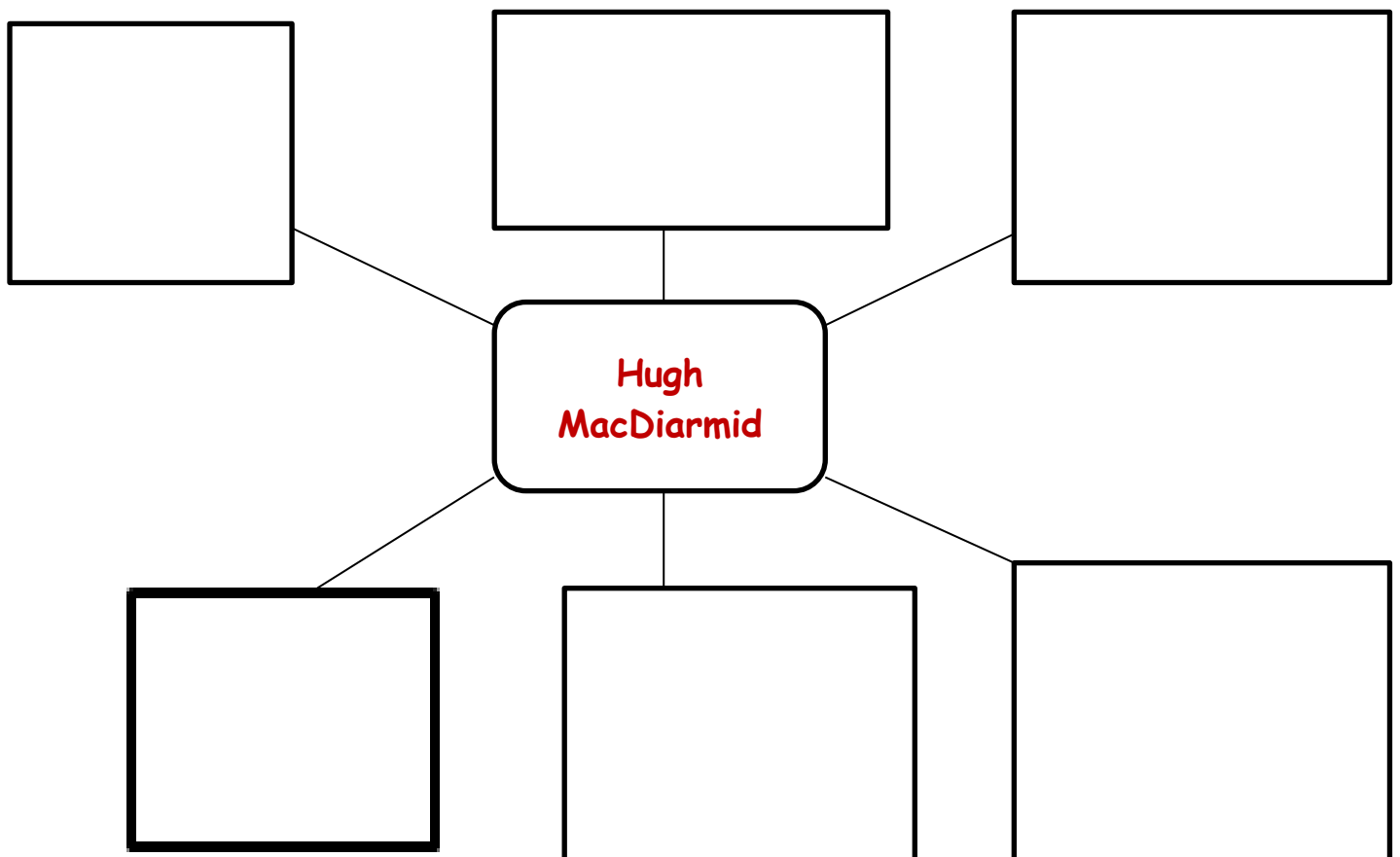
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Activity 2

You need to get to know Hugh MacDiarmid and find out about his interest in Shetland. Complete tasks 1-3

Task 1:

Find out some of the facts about his life. (See biographical details below). Use the mind map below to detail all the information you find - this could help you share all the things you discover.



Task 2:

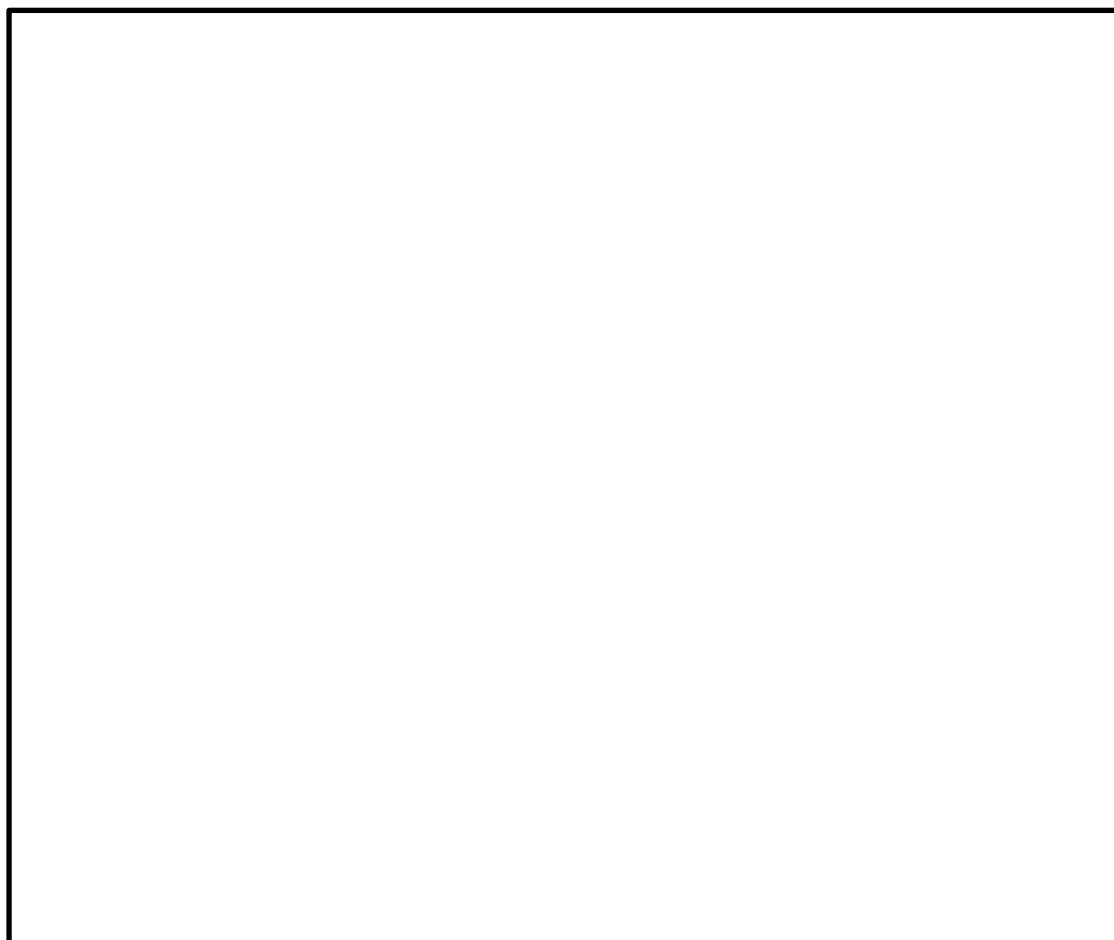
Find out about what life in Shetland was like in the 1930s, particularly focusing on traditions and customs in a fishing community. (For this, you might want to arrange short interviews with older people in your community).

I found out:



Task 3:

When feedback has taken place, you should already have some interesting information that could be included in your film. Each person should then write a paragraph or two about Hugh MacDiarmid and what he would have observed of Shetland fishing traditions.

A large, empty rectangular box with a black border, intended for students to write their paragraphs about Hugh MacDiarmid and Shetland fishing traditions.

Hugh MacDiarmid biographical details

Christopher Murray Grieve, who was best known by his pen-name Hugh MacDiarmid, was one of the best known Scottish poets in the 20th century. He wrote thousands of words in his lifetime.

He was born in 1892 in Langholm in the Scottish borders where his father was the local postman. He lived below the local public library and spent much of his childhood reading. His first job was as a journalist in Wales but when World War One broke out in 1914 he signed up to the Royal Army Medical Corps. At the end of the war he settled in Montrose where he began writing poetry. In 1922 he began using the name Hugh MacDiarmid for his writing which was often written in Scots dialect.

Grieve decided in 1933 to come to Whalsay at the advice of his friends. When he arrived he stayed with David Orr who was the local doctor at the time. Grieve's new wife Valda and their young son Michael soon joined him in Whalsay and the family moved to a small house at Sodom. The family were quite poor. Valda and Michael would gather birds' eggs to eat and driftwood for the fire, and Valda made furniture for the house from old boxes. Michael fitted in well with the community and attended the Livister School.

Most of the time Grieve enjoyed his life in Whalsay and he wrote lots of new poems and other works while he lived there. He went to the fishing several times and his trips inspired many poems. More than half of all his work was written in the tiny cottage in Whalsay. His early poems are mostly in Scots but, after coming to Shetland, he wrote mainly in English. The poetry he wrote in Whalsay ranges from short pieces about being at the fishing, to complicated poems about Shetland's rocky landscape, to a very very long poem called 'Mature Art' which MacDiarmid never managed to complete. His Shetland work divides opinions. Some people like what he wrote in the isles, but others claim that his earlier work is more exciting.

The family left Whalsay in 1942 and headed to Glasgow, where Grieve had to work in a munitions factory to help make weapons for World War Two.

Christopher Grieve died in Edinburgh in 1978.

Whalsay in the 1930s

From the article 'The Island of Whalsay' by Isabella Stewart in *Manson's Almanac*, 1935

The population is 950 and out of the 207 occupied houses, 129 are attached to crofts. The average size of a croft may be 5 to 10 acres.

The herring fishery started in the island in about 1880 and at the beginning of the 20th century there were about 30 large boats and 210 men. This year there were seven boats and 49 men. There is a herring curing station at Symbister, and coopering and shore work connected with fishing are to some extent replacing fishing as an occupation. Haddock-fishing grounds surround the island, especially to the north. This is a growing industry. The bulk of the young men however, are in the Merchant Service.

Activity 3

NOW you need to discover some of the powerful poetic skills of Hugh MacDiarmid. Your study will focus on three of his poems written in Shetland during the 1930s.

Section A: 'With the Herring Fishers': Poem 1

Step 1:

Using poem 1, discuss the following with your group:

- Read the poem two or three times. Use a highlighter to pick out the words spoken (or sung) by the fishermen. Talk about who or what the fishermen are talking to, and how the words might have been spoken or sung. (It is generally thought that the word 'growl' should have been 'grow' - think about the way we say 'grow' in the Shetland dialect and it is easy to see that MacDiarmid might have made a mistake)

Step 2:

- Use a different colour to pick out the words spoken (or sung) by God. Talk about who God might have been talking to, (as imagined by MacDiarmid), and how the words might have been spoken. What comparisons do you think MacDiarmid might be suggesting?

Step 3:

- In this poem, Hugh MacDiarmid puts himself in the position of an outsider, observing an experience new to him. In the first verse, he uses strong images to bring the scene to life. Talk about his choice of descriptions, what he hears and sees - which words and phrases particularly help you to imagine the scene?

Step 4:

- In the third and fourth verses, MacDiarmid seems to move from observation to a deeper sense of reflection. Talk about how he suggests "God sees life" and how that compares with the work of the herring fishermen.

Step 5:

- Look again at verses 1 and 6 and talk about their similarities and differences. What do you think MacDiarmid wanted to communicate about life?

Step 6:

- Using a variety of voices, prepare a reading of the text to present to the whole group. Think about how you can stand/sit/group yourselves; think about how you can use rhythm to create a sense of the pace.

Poem 1. With the Herring Fishers

'I see herrin'.' - I hear the glad cry
And 'gainst the moon see ilka blue jowl
In turn as the fishermen haul on the nets
And sing: 'Come, shove in your heids and growl.'

'Soom on, bonnie herrin', soom on,' they shout,
Or 'Come in, O come in, and see me,'
'Come gie the auld man something to dae.
It'll be a braw change frae the sea.'

O it's ane o' the bonniest sights in the world
To watch the herrin' come walking on board
In the wee sma' 'oors o' a simmer's mornin'
As if o' their ain accord.

For this is the way that God sees life,
The haill jing-bang o's appearin'
Up owre frae the edge o' naethingness
- It's his happy cries I'm hearin'.

'Left, right - O come in and see me,'
Reid and yellow and black and white
Toddlin' up into Heaven thegither
At peep o' day frae the endless night.

'I see herrin'.' I hear his glad cry,
And 'gainst the moon see his muckle blue jowl,
As he handles buoy-tow and bush-raip
Singin': 'Come, shove in your heids and growl!'

Section B: 'Deep-Sea Fishing': Poem 2

Using poem 2, discuss the following with your group:

Step 1:

- In pairs or small groups, read the poem two or three times. Note down anything you don't understand - or any questions about the poem you would like answered by the poet.

Step 2:

- Find two descriptions that suggest MacDiarmid found the newly caught fish to be ugly and unsettling. Talk about why you think he had somehow expected them to be different? In what way do you think this shows him to be a newcomer to the fishing?

Step 3:

- In the second verse, how does MacDiarmid highlight the differences between himself and the fishermen? He has found himself to be "wrang" on two counts - what is the second one? (Note: The word "proof" here probably means resistant or insensitive).

Step 4:

- In the last verse, MacDiarmid seems to suggest that the fishermen are somehow more basic, more in tune with the realities of nature, than he is. Talk about how he contrasts himself with the fishermen - and what he means by describing himself as a "fribble".

Step 5:

- In the first verse and the last verse, MacDiarmid uses phrases that might be associated with God or a greater power. Talk about the effect that going to the deep-sea fishing seems to have had on him.

Step 6:

- Look back at the notes you made at Step 1. Are there still any questions unanswered?

(This is a poem that could lend itself to individual performance for filming: perhaps in the character of Hugh MacDiarmid in reflective mood, talking over his experience. Who would be good at this??)

Poem 2. Deep-Sea Fishing

I suddenly saw I was wrang when I felt
That the gapin' mooths and goggin' een
O' the fish were no' what we should expect
Frae a sea sae infinite and serene.

I kent I'd be equally wrang if I wished
My nice concern wi' its beauty to be
Shared by the fishermen wha's coarser lives
Seemed proof to a' that appealed to me.

Aye, and I kent their animal forms
And primitive minds, like fish frae the sea,
Cam' faur mair naturally oot o' the bland
Omnipotence o' God than a fribble like me.

Section C: Colla Firth in Winter: Poem 3

You need to know that in the 1930s, in the summer months, women travelled to the fishing station at Collafirth to work at the gutting.

(The title and verses of this poem should be cut apart for a sequencing activity)

Step 1:

- In pairs or small groups, read and re-read the title and the four verses of this poem and try to work out the order they should be in. When you are satisfied that you have chosen the best order, stick the verses on a sheet of paper. If you had to give a title to each verse, what would it be? Write it beside the verse. Compare your version of the poem with others in your larger group.

Step 2:

- Now compare your version with MacDiarmid's poem. Talk about what clues helped you to make the decisions about the order. Which verses seem to be busiest? Which verses seem to be more reflective? Which repeated words or phrases helped you to find a structure?

Step 3:

- If you were using this poem in your film, what kind of techniques might you use? Work in pairs or small groups to EITHER plan a storyboard for this poem OR create the music to make the poem into a folk song OR ANY OTHER CREATIVE RESPONSE that would help you bring this poem to life for an audience.

Poem 3. Colla Firth in Winter

Nae mair wi' a bricht kerchief rowed roon her heid
Bonnie lass by bonnie lass eidently bends
Owre the lang row o' farlins doon the quayside
Wi' piles o' glitterin' herrin' at her quick finger ends.

There's a press o' craft roon the pierheid nae mair,
Sailin' boats, motor boats, drifters and a'
Wi' cran baskets swingin' and trollies kept ga'en
A' the 'oors o' the mornin' as hard's they can ca'.

I dodge oot and in o' the shadowy voes
Wi' nae fishermen to crack wi', nae lassies to tease.
There's naething to hear and naething to see
Save whiles a ferlie my ain spirit gi'es.

Why am **I** still here while a' else is awa'?
Why has time ta'en the lave and spared naething but me?
Is it friendship or juist the whim o' a foe?
Naething else can I miss wi' this riddle to reel!

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Application Form

Application for the rights and funding to make and produce a short film on the following subject:

Name of Poem:.....

By Hugh MacDiarmid

Name of Film Company:

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Address:

.....

Reasons why this film company should be chosen: (Make sure you read and discuss the ideas on the attached sheet before completing this section)

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What skills could your company bring to this important project?
(See attached sheet for ideas)

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Give one key reason why your film company would produce the best results:

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CONGRATULATIONS!

Your film company has won the rights and funding to make a short film about the life of Hugh MacDiarmid, the well-known Scottish poet, and some of his poetry written during his ten-year residence in Whalsay.

The purpose of the film will be to bring Hugh MacDiarmid's work to the notice of a much wider audience, particularly young people who may never have had the chance to read and respond to his poetry.

Your film must aim to arouse the interest of a young audience in this important writer and his poetry inspired by his experience of living in Shetland.

Your film **MUST** include:

- Biographical information about Hugh MacDiarmid
- Background material about life in Shetland at the time that MacDiarmid was living in Whalsay
- Some readings from his poems written in Shetland to show how powerfully lyrical and evocative his writing could be
- Soundtrack or soundscape to reflect the mood or sentiments expressed by MacDiarmid in his poems

On the next page you will find some suggestions of features your film **MIGHT** include - but your group will probably have some very creative ideas of your own.

Your film *MIGHT* include some of the following:

- Location shots of fishing boats - old and new; film footage of herring fishing, boxes of herring being landed, the sea in its many moods
- Some interviews with older people who remember the way of life in the 1930s, perhaps from different viewpoints
- A soundscape for the rhythms and movements of fishing - using instruments, voices
- A dance inspired by the rhythms and movement of fishing - perhaps with appropriate music or voices; or a dance inspired by the rhythms and movement of gutting the herring - again with appropriate music or voices
- Some poems inspired by the experience of fishing, or the traditions of fishing - perhaps some in dialect
- A song or two telling some of the story of the fishing in Whalsay
- A series of pictures, with captions, depicting the beauty and hardships of making a life at the fishing
- Some storytelling, perhaps in character, of what life was like at the fishing
- Some interviews with people who still remember something of the Grieve (MacDiarmid) family's residence in Whalsay

NOW YOU HAVE A LOT OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HUGH MACDIARMID AND HIS POETRY - IT'S TIME TO GET DOWN TO SOME FILMING. REMEMBER YOUR TASK: TO BRING HUGH MACDIARMID'S WORK TO A MUCH WIDER AUDIENCE.

It's time to get creative