

Ewan MacColl, “the brilliant young Scots dramatist”: Regional myth-making and Theatre Workshop

Claire Warden, University of Lincoln

Moving to London

In 1952, Theatre Workshop had a decision to make. There was a growing sense that the company needed a permanent home (Gorney 1981: 85) and, rather than touring plays, to commit to a particular community. As they created their politically challenging, artistically vibrant work, group members sought a geographical stability, a chance to respond to and become part of a particular location. And, more than this, the group wanted a building to house them after many years of rented accommodation, draughty halls and borrowed rooms. Ewan MacColl and Joan Littlewood’s company had been founded in Manchester in 1945, aiming to create confrontational plays for the post-war audience. But the company actually had its origins in a number of pre-War Mancunian experiments. Beginning as the agit-prop *Red Megaphones* in 1931, MacColl and some local friends performed short sketches with songs, often discussing particularly Lancastrian issues, such as loom strikes and local unemployment. With the arrival of Littlewood, the group was transformed into, first, Theatre of Action (1934) and then Theatre Union (1936). Littlewood and MacColl collaborated well, with the former bringing some theatrical expertise from her brief spell at *RADA* (Holdsworth 2006: 45) (though, interestingly in light of the argument here, this experience largely taught Littlewood what she did *not* want in the theatre!) and the latter his experience of performing on the streets of Salford. Even in the early days of Theatre Workshop, as the company sought to create a formally innovative and thematically agitational theatre, the founders brought their own experiences of the Capital and the regions, of the centre and periphery.

Consequently, Theatre Workshop took over the dilapidated Theatre Royal, Stratford East in 1953, moving the whole operation to London. This solidified a shift that had surfaced in the previous months. MacColl was disgusted by the decision and left the company (Leach 2006:

102). The attitude behind his response was clear in a number of earlier comments and perceptions. Attending a theatre conference in London in 1934, MacColl was unimpressed by his Capital-based compatriots, saying, “what else can you expect from Londoners? No guts! Decadent lot! Not like us Northerners” (Goorney and MacColl 1986: xxxiv). Furthermore, he went on, “we felt that the London [theatre] groups were a bit out of touch with the problems that confronted us in the industrial north” (Samuel et al 1985: 231). MacColl allied himself firmly with a northern sensibility. He evidently regarded Londoners in general (though there were individual exceptions, of course) as unable, or indeed unwilling, to gird themselves for the fight ahead, as entirely disconnected from the everyday issues of the northern cityscapeⁱ. Nevertheless, despite MacColl’s concerns, the company moved southwards regardless. Theatre Workshop went on, of course, to become one of the most influential companies of the period and, with *Oh What a Lovely War!* (1963), created an enduring template for politically engaged musical theatre.

However, before the company decided on its move to London, there was another alternative: Scotland. In a letter (dated 9th February 1950) to Scottish folklorist, Hamish Henderson, MacColl confided that, “we are mad keen to settle in Scotland” (Henderson 1950-1986). Henderson suggested that he had found a perfect home for Theatre Workshop in East Kilbride (Henderson 1950-1986) but speculation was ended by the final decision to move to Stratford East.

Identity and Community: creating a Scottish myth

MacColl’s decision to propose Scotland as a permanent home for Theatre Workshop was partly a personal resolve to affiliate himself with the Scottish nation. This intention strengthened as MacColl’s career progressed. Certainly he had a particular Scottish pedigree; his parents were part of a close Scottish exile community in Salford. MacColl recollected that they “spoke often of Scotland and their life there. They were exiles and still regarded themselves as visitors [to England] rather than settlers” (MacColl 1990: 21). The innate ‘Otherness’ of the exile clearly made an impression on him. This personal affiliation with Scotland, central to his young constructed selfhood, seemed to become even more

pronounced as he got older; he even changed his name from 'Jimmie Miller' to the noticeably more Scottish, 'Ewan MacColl'.ⁱⁱ This name change was partly to situate himself in a particular geographical and cultural space, and partly to cover his tracks after going AWOL; as Robert Leach concludes, Jimmie Miller had "gone on the trot from the navy, grown a beard and changed into a Scotsman born in Auchterarder called Ewan MacColl" (Leach 2006: 48). His Scottish roots were undeniable, but this transformation led to a fascinating self-reconstruction of his origins. And MacColl continuously perpetuated this myth. In recorded interviews there is the implication that MacColl was born in Scotland but moved to Manchester at an early age (Orr and O'Rourke 1985: Part Two). Hugh MacDiarmid extended the myth in his introduction to MacColl's 1946 play *Uranium 235* by citing the response of a Glasgow Herald critic who believed that, "the little Perthshire town of Auchterarder has produced a truly great dramatist" (u.d.: 6). In addition, when Littlewood told the Theatre Workshop company that MacColl had actually been born in Salford he seemed angry that his true origins had been revealed (Littlewood 2003: 389).

This constructed ancestry was central to MacColl's desire to settle in Scotland. It was a search for an authentic homeland, a means of connecting himself with a particular Celtic lineage. However, Theatre Workshop's decision-making process also coincided with a particular moment in Scottish cultural history, which began in the 1920s and continued on for the next couple of decades. The Scottish Renaissance, as it was termed, was a disparate idea but, broadly speaking, encompassed those attempting to address a Scottish audience and use Scottish tradition in their work while actively encouraging a sense of internationalism, connecting artist's innovations in Scotland with those overseas. Rather than create a sentimental image of tartan-wearing Highlanders and romantic village communities, the Scottish Renaissance directly challenged this Kailyard image. It was an attempt to look forward rather than a valorisation of the past. Perpetuating this movement were figures such as Neil Gunn, Edwin Muir, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and, perhaps most importantly, Hugh MacDiarmid, who, in 1922, claimed that the Scottish Renaissance would be "swift and irresistible" (McCullough ed. 2004: 53). MacColl recognised this movement and clearly wanted to interpolate Theatre Workshop into the Scottish Renaissance community:

“Scotland was in the throes of a cultural renaissance; it was an exciting place to be and the poets, novelists, painters, composers and dramatists that we met greeted us with open arms” (MacColl 1990: 265).

It was the like-minded community that really appealed to MacColl here. Theatre Workshop had an enduring commitment to creating cross-generic work, incorporating modern dance techniques, folk music and visually arresting set designs into its productions. The artistic diversity of the Scottish Renaissance must have been extremely attractive.

MacColl was impressed by this movement. In fact, at one stage MacDiarmid spoke of MacColl heading up the Scottish Renaissance theatre work (Calder, Murray and Riach 1998: 309). Over the years, MacColl and MacDiarmid developed a relationship of mutual respect and cooperation. Indeed, MacDiarmid became a Theatre Workshop director and attended the company’s meetings in both Manchester and London (Bold ed. 1984: 269). He was impressed both by the company which he referred to as “probably the best experimental theatre group in Western Europe” (Bold ed. 1984: 289) and by MacColl himself who he affirmed as, “the brilliant young Scots dramatist of Theatre Workshop” (Bold ed. 1984: 277). For his part, MacColl respected MacDiarmid’s commitment to his art and, in his autobiography, called MacDiarmid his “dear friend” (MacColl 1990: 281). While writing his anti-war play, *The Travellers* in the early 1950s, MacColl discussed the possibility of collaborating with MacDiarmid in the writing of a Scots language version of *Macbeth* (MacColl 1990: 257). Although there are suggestions that the two clashed later, mostly over MacColl’s decision to abandon his theatrical career in favour of folk music (Harker 2007: 192), there remained a lingering admiration of each other’s work. In many ways MacDiarmid acts as a guarantor for MacColl. Here were two figures seeking to explore modern methods while addressing particular northern concerns. This process led to a debunking of myth (confronting the Kailyard sentimentality) while simultaneously constructing a new narrative: engaged Scottish internationalism.

Dialect and accent: a working-class speech

There was another distinct artistic reason why MacColl wanted to move the company to Scotland in the 1950s: “I wanted to write in Scots” (MacColl 1990: 265). Constructing particular linguistic systems that could more adequately describe the everyday lives of its audience remained a preoccupation for Theatre Workshop and for MacColl in particular. He asserted, “I had attempted to evolve a dramatic utterance which would crystallise, or at least reflect a certain kind of working-class speech” (MacColl 1990: 269). This search often manifested itself in experiments with accent and dialect.

There is a real sense of variation in MacColl’s dramatised accents; while Scottish dialects became increasingly important to his dramatic linguistic repertoire, he seemed keen to promote a range of regional linguistic varieties in his plays. This is perhaps shown most clearly in his 1945 play *Johnny Noble* which, in addition to the north-east coastal accents of lovers Johnny and Mary, contained a Clydesider, a Durham miner, a Welshman called, predictably, Taffy, a stoker from Salford and a Bolton-born soldier who is killed in war. This sense of multi-vocal space is key in a number of other plays including *Operation Olive Branch* (1947), in which the traditional narrative of Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* is articulated through the speech patterns of a “Scottish peasant”, Myrine from Anagyrus, and the “Irish” Crytillice from Corinth. Indeed, his plays seem to incorporate the accents of a number of northern and/or Celtic regional spaces into their narrative. Importantly, these accents are connected to specific geographical spaces, landscapes that are important to MacColl on both a personal and political level. MacDiarmid declared in a letter of 1952 that “as you probably know from my *Lucky Poet*, I am as much interested in the Irish, Welsh and Cornish as I am the Scots” (Bold ed. 1984: 288) and MacColl seems to concur with this multi-lingual perspective. In his linguistic experiments he seems to intrinsically connect these local dialects with his search for a working-class language.

In one sense dialect and accent represent tradition and origin; according to MacDiarmid, speech patterns such as the Doric “unquestionably...[have] a past” (C.M. Grieve in McCulloch ed. 2004: 27). They are part of landscapes and familial generations, inscribed in the topography and central to articulating community history. Indeed, in his poetry MacDiarmid constructs the Scottish landscape and character through distinctly Scottish

speech patterns. I use the term 'construct' intentionally because MacDiarmid's search for a distinctly Scottish voice was really an academic project. Taken from Jamieson's *Scottish Dictionary*, MacDiarmid "aimed at a Synthetic Scots...combining the various dialects with the richness of literary Scots" (Bold 1988: 166). Certainly this experiment was an attempt to revive Scots as a national language, but it was also an aesthetic venture. Alan Bold even suggests that "MacDiarmid's position becomes much clearer if we regard him as a contemporary of Joyce, Eliot and Pound rather than as a poet intent on renewing traditional Scottish verse" (Bold 1983: 8). This intention was emblematic of the Scottish Renaissance as a whole: artistic, engaged experimentation rather than nostalgia.

In using dialect, MacColl was traversing a similar dialogue, at once maintaining an aesthetically experimental stance while attempting to place his plays within a particular tradition. This may seem a perverse tension; 'artistic experiment' suggests change and innovation while 'tradition' seems rather static by comparison. However, MacColl's understanding of these two ideas meant that 'experiment' and 'tradition' were no longer oppositional; rather, they informed each other in a mutually beneficial dialogism.

Georgina Boyes suggests, "tradition is, by definition, a function not of origin but of continuance" (1993: 12). Correspondingly, MacColl was actively attempting to create a dynamic sense of tradition in flux, a tradition that can be added to and expanded, and used for contemporary political ends. However, this was not just a socio-political decision; it was also an aesthetic commitment. Theatre Workshop was directly reacting against the language conventions of much of the West End theatre; it was a rebellion, defying the established theatres that, at least in the Company's view, contained "the language of the cocktail bar rather than the workshop" (Goorney 1981: 2). Further, like MacDiarmid, and in line with attitudes overseas, MacColl was committed to linguistic innovation, to creating a "new theory of dramatic poetry" (Orr and O'Rourke 1985: Part Four). For both these figures, dialect was not only a means of bringing regional identity and association into their work but was also part of a distinct, perhaps avant-garde, project.

Regionalism and Internationalism

This dialogue between tradition and experimentation, central to the Scottish Renaissance, was not just present in the language structure. A steadfast commitment to a regional, working-class theatre was coupled with a search for innovative forms, looking not to London particularly, but to the European and American avant-gardes. The “new theory of dramatic poetry” MacColl (and indeed MacDiarmid and other practitioners in the Scottish Renaissance) was searching for could be found in a range of experiments outside the British Isles. In a *Modern Scot* editorial statement of 1932, the author concluded, “It is often forgotten that Scottish Nationalists are for the most part ardent Internationalists...and aim at achieving direct contact, as a distinctive Scottish entity, with the continent, without waiting for Continental influence to percolate to Scotland through London” (McCullough ed. 2004: 188). This constructed dialogue between local engagement and international artistic innovation is crucial to understanding the intentions of MacColl and Theatre Workshop. Derek Paget suggests that “Theatre Workshop was the Trojan horse through which European radical theatre practices from the 1918-1939 period entered post-war Britain” (Paget 1995: 212), and certainly innovation, in line with modern methods on the Continent and in America, was a central aim of the company. Such commitment to radical aesthetics can be seen throughout MacColl’s canon from the *Living Newspaper*, *Last Edition* (1940) to the uniquely Expressionistic, *The Other Animals* (1948) (Goorney and MacColl 1986). Yet, MacColl’s plays retain their distinctly local perspective in theme and form, producing a fruitful marrying of the international and the regional.

In its striking commitment to internationalism, Theatre Workshop’s aesthetic seemed to be a direct, and conscious, rejection of London-centricism. Nowhere is this more striking than in the issue of language and dialect. When Littlewood arrived in Manchester she responded, “I loved the northern city at first sight. No horse guards, no South Kensington accents, no sir or madam stuff” (Littlewood 2003: 75). This attitude is perpetuated throughout MacColl’s plays; Southern accents are generally regarded with a certain suspicion as somehow representing the forces of the hegemony that the company was trying to attack.

Searching for a working-class audience

So, as well as illustrate MacColl's commitment to aesthetic experiment, dialect also audibly represented the company's antagonism towards hegemonic culture. Yet, and in conjunction, it was also an integral part of its commitment to a regional locale. Dialect actively constructs a sense of community, reaching out to a specific audience. MacColl remained convinced that "we wanted our audience to be a working-class one, it was as simple as that, we weren't interested in anything else" (Samuel et al. 1985: 241). Remaining in the regions and writing in the dialects of those areas rather than heading to London was central here. This is not, of course, to suggest that there was no working class in London; however, for MacColl, London was emblematic of the hegemony in contrast to the diversity, political engagement and authenticity of the northern space, whether in Manchester or Scotland.

The former had been the Theatre Workshop's home for many years in its various incarnations, though the Company had toured around Britain and further afieldⁱⁱⁱ and its relationship with the city "from which all labour movements emanate" (Engels 1987: 82) was a close one. It also provides a useful precedent as we seek to understand MacColl's desire to move to Scotland. Rather than a *tabula rasa*, the Mancunian urban space was a palimpsest; the political history of the city influenced the very theatre that was being produced there. Littlewood considered the architecture of Manchester in terms of historical layers of political meaning, alluding to Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in Manchester*:

"Beneath the Free Trade Hall, and somewhere beyond, was the site of the Battle of Peterloo. This was the Classic Soil of Communism" (Littlewood 2003: 75).

Manchester is inscribed with past events. This was theatricalised in MacColl's Salford play, *Landscape with Chimneys* (1951). In order to welcome the soldiers home, Ginger writes messages on the walls with chalk. Swindels reflects, "wonderful stuff, bluemould. I remember some young chaps chalking strike notices on the wall of Tilling Dock in 1933. Thirteen years ago, and you can still read it" (MacColl 1951: 6). The historical layers can be clearly seen here. The written words connect the young strikers in 1933 with the returning soldiers in 1945; the regional space becomes a collective territorial myth infused with

politics. It is the urban, working-class inhabitants of this space that Theatre Workshop was seeking to address. For MacColl, a move to Scotland would have provided him with a new, layered topography, a space of dynamic political history.^{iv}

Going back to his early agit-prop pieces dramatising the Lancashire mill strikes in 1931-2 (Goorney and MacColl 1986: xxiv), MacColl was committed to providing theatre for a local audience, asking spectators to devise its own subjectively constructed environment. Take the opening scene of his *Landscape with Chimneys*, which begins with the Stage Manager encouraging the audience to use its imagination in the creation of scene:

Above the street one sees a slag heap rising like a miniature volcano or a gigantic burial mound, according to your fancy. Or if not a slag heap there are the tall cranes and derricks of the docks, looking like steletoidal stegosaurus [sic] or monstrous gallows, according to your fancy" (1951: 3).

The whole description relies on a local audience with an understanding of the area. The 'according to your fancy' encourages the audience to create the scene in its own image. This is a Manchester play with a distinctly Mancunian backdrop; however, it also has a sense of universality, depending on the audience to construct its own industrial scene. So, although it is patently a Manchester play, it is also a more general comment on post-War society. This universality is important given that Theatre Workshop toured *Landscape with Chimneys* in the Welsh mining communities. It is perhaps best explained by Adamson in MacColl's adaptation of Ben Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass, Hell is What You Make It* (produced by Unity Theatre in 1950) in which, overhearing a conversation between striking miners, he declares, "I recognised you as my kind of people" (MacColl 1950: 44). Behind this affirmation is a hope that the working class will ally themselves with others who speak in a proletarian regional accent, that there will be something inherently recognisable in localised speech patterns. This is not only important for onstage dialogue, but is also vital to the relationship between audience and the stage. This intimate connection with the audience was, presumably, what MacColl had in mind when he sought a move to Scotland.

Theatre Workshop's Scottish legacy

Theatre Workshop's move to London proved to be a blessing and a curse. With *Oh What a Lovely War* the company had constructed one of the most influential pieces of twentieth-century politically engaged theatre. In staging this production in London it undoubtedly made more of an impact. However, as Robert Leach notes, Stratford East was "nowhere near 'the heart of London boulevards; yet it was not 'the provinces' either. This proximity that was not regional was to remain an unsolved problem" (Leach 2006: 102). So, Theatre Workshop were not really close enough to the West End to really influence mainstream theatre, nor was it close enough to a real regional audience. Despite post-1953 Theatre Workshop's tremendous achievements, this was to remain an issue.

And what of Theatre Workshop's legacy in Scotland? For this it would seem appropriate to turn to the experience of 7:84 and its founder and playwright, John McGrath who, by his own admission, was influenced by both Littlewood's innovative Variety Theatre mode and by MacColl's polemic, politically engaged plays. Touring its shows round the regions of Scotland, 7:84 was struck by mention of Theatre Workshop's productions of MacColl's plays. During her time with 7:84, Linda MacKenney spoke to many who remembered the performances:

Loading the van after a night on a housing estate on a windswept hilltop outside Greenock: "We used to watch the Ewan MacColl [sic] plays in the old days – do you know them? You should be doing them" (MacKenney 2000: xiii)

McGrath corroborated MacKenney's recollection:

In Scotland people still come up to me after 7:84 Scotland shows and talk with clear and fond memories of 'the Ewan MacColl' shows during the late forties. I am told they were *very* well attended, and I imagine there were very few Rolls-Royces outside the door (McGrath 1996: 47).

7:84 concretised the relationship between "the Ewan MacColl shows" and Scotland with its 1982 Clydebuilt Season. The company performed a selection of four 'Scottish' plays: Ena Lamont Stewart's *Men Should Weep*, Joe Corrie's *In Time O' Strife*, George Munro's *Gold in his Boots* and MacColl's *Johnny Noble*. The season placed MacColl within the canon of Scottish politically engaged theatre. McGrath said, "these pieces have been ignored; they've been cut out of the theatrical history – it seemed to me that this was completely wrong,

that this is the way the working class loses its history, its self-awareness; it loses, if you like, a cultural richness” (McGrath 2002: 135). This season was an act of resurrection, an opportunity to unearth these important moments in Scottish theatre history. Despite his Mancunian origins, MacColl’s strong sense of Scottish heritage, and his subsequent construction of regional selfhood (both personally and artistically), brought him into a fruitful dialogue with figures like Lamont Stewart, Corrie and Munro. Indeed, he must have been delighted that his consciously constructed national identity enabled him to be part of such a season and so ensure Theatre Workshop’s connection with Scotland remains a key facet of its history.

Endnotes.

ⁱ This is not to suggest, of course, that there was no connection between the early incarnations of Theatre Workshop and the London scene. Indeed, one of the Red Megaphones’ earliest productions was a version of North West London Hammer and Sickle Group’s *Meerut* (1931). However, generally MacColl and Littlewood looked past the London scene and sought to create an indigenous northern theatre with connections with America and the Continent rather than with London.

ⁱⁱ Interestingly Hugh MacDiarmid also changed his name from C.M. Grieve in order to construct a more Scottish epithet.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although Theatre Workshop was based in the Manchester area at first, in the post-war period the company spent a great deal of time in Kendal before touring in Czechoslovakia, West Germany, Scandinavia and Butlin’s at Filey!

^{iv} See William Kenefick’s *Red Scotland!* for a thorough and even-handed analysis of left-wing politics in Scotland. Undoubtedly the notorious radicalism of Scottish politics (whether in reality or as constructed myths, as Kenefick suggests) would have been enticing for the politically engaged MacColl, especially as his own father, Will Miller, had learned his own radical politics through the teachings of Clydesider, John MacClean (Harker 2007: 6). Once again, the personal and political conflate as the reasons for MacColl’s determination to move northwards become clearer.

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