

## **Honorary members of 1963 – 1966**

**1963 Christopher Murray Grieve ('Hugh MacDiarmid'), W D Cocker**

**1964 Sir Alexander Gibson, William Ross**

**1965 Sir Alec Douglas-Home, Harold Wilson**

**1966 Rev James L Dow, Duncan Macrae, Maurice Lindsay**

### **1963 Christopher Murray Grieve ('Hugh MacDiarmid') (1892-1978)**

Harry A Gaw (President 1962-1963) - contributed this biographical note on his nominee:

Of all the outsiders who accepted Honorary Membership of our Club I recall no other who, from the time of receiving the Honour, accepted the Irvine Burns Club as a deep interest in his life. Hugh MacDiarmid and his second wife Valda found pleasure in just sitting in the Board Room with the Director on duty (mostly Andrew Hood) studying the Club's Historical Documents.

1963 was a time when Communists were frowned on in Scotland and MacDiarmid was drawn intellectually to the ideas behind the Communist faith. The Directors of the Club at that time had to be persuaded that MacDiarmid's Communism was idealistic and not based on the late leadership and politics of Stalin. They took some time to eventually accept MacDiarmid as an Idealist and agree to his Honorary Membership. In his home town of Langholm it took a long period of assessment before they eventually agreed to erect a memorial in his Memory. MacDiarmid's wife Valda, a sensitive poetess in her own right, sums up the problems of holding intellectual views in a wee Scots town. Her poem about this period in her husband's life has the following verses:

#### On his 80th birthday

"Scars there will be in plenty,  
Let's hope they'll be in their natural creases,  
For your home-town is silent and moonstruck.  
Reaching out you find no welcoming hand;  
Hell! What need have you to care  
You are meeting your 80th year,  
Head held high. Haud forrit MacDiarmid;  
Like Muhammed Ali - You're the Greatest!"

Hugh MacDiarmid had so much to recommend him as an honorary member of our Club. He was a founder of the Scottish National Party and in this connection he addressed huge audiences in Trafalgar Square in London. On the occasion of the Burns Bicentenary (1959) he toured Eastern Europe giving talks on Robert Burns in Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary. In 1950 together with the Scottish USSR Friendship Society he visited Russia and made a contribution to the good cause of the Society - U12 International Friendship.

The library of Irvine Burns Club contains books of MacDiarmid's poetry - so many of his poems are in 'Scots' and they are difficult, in today's use of a Universal English, to fully absorb - BUT THEY ARE WORTH THE EFFORT.

In conclusion, as much of MacDiarmid's poetry requires a deep sensitivity and concentration, I offer as an example the following two verses:

The Fool

He said that he was God  
"We are well met", I cried,  
"I've always hoped I should  
Meet God before I died."  
I slew him then and cast  
His corpse into a pool  
- But how I wish he had  
Indeed been God, the fool!

Letter of acceptance, written from his home at Brownsbank, Candymill, Biggar, Lanarkshire on 8th December 1962, to William Phillips, Hon. Secretary:

Dear Sir,

Many thanks for your letter of 26th November informing me of the intention of the Irvine Burns Club to elect me as an Honorary Member. I regard this as a very great honour, especially in view 1) of the Club's proud place as having the longest continuous record of any Burns Club in the world, and 2) the very distinguished list of those who have been honoured previously in this way. I look forward to having an opportunity to visit Irvine some time and see the important Burns manuscripts and other treasures belonging to the Club. Please thank your members on my behalf, and accept my high regards and best wishes,

Yours for Scotland,  
Christopher Murray Grieve  
("Hugh MacDiarmid")

### **1963 W D Cocker (1882-1970)**

W D Cocker gained some reputation after the war as a journalist and writer of humorous verses in Scots, but the poems written out of his experiences with the Highland Light Infantry and the Royal Scots and as a prisoner of war (from 1917), written in English, are worth inclusion in any anthology of war poetry.

While we do not yet have any biographical details about him, we can indicate his work by mentioning some of his books, and quoting a few lines of his poetry. Poetry included "Dandie and Other Poems" (1925), "Poems Scots and English" (1932), "New Poems" (1949). Other books included the 64-page "Loch Lomond, The Trossachs and Loch Katrine". His plays included the four-act "Folk Frae Condie" (1949) and several one-act plays such as "Gretna Green". He contributed to the 'Daily Record'.

His poem "The Deluge" is an account in Scots of Noah and the Flood; two verses (of 20):

"Then doon cam a lashin o rain,  
Like the wattest wat day in Lochaber;

The hailstones like plunkers cam stot,  
An the fields turned tae glaur, and syne glabber.

An the burns aa cam doon in a spate,  
An the rivers ran clean ower the haughs,  
An the brigs were aa soopit awa,  
An whit hid been dubs becam lochs."

and a verse from 'The Ploughman's Lament':

I'm fee'd tae a fermer in Fife,  
A Renfrewshire lad kens the differ;  
It's oh, for a sicht o' the Gryffe,  
Or a blink o' the Braes o' Gleniffer!

Letter of acceptance, written from his home at 23 Belmont Street, Glasgow, on 30th November 1962, to William Phillips, Hon. Secretary

Dear Sir,

I beg to acknowledge receipt of your letter informing me of the great honour done me by the Members of Irvine Burns Club in electing me an Honorary Member of your old and distinguished Society.

When I read the names of the august ones who have already been admitted to that fellowship I feel proud indeed.

I am interested to know of the Original Manuscripts & other relics of the poet which you possess. These are great treasures.

I am over eighty years of age now, & as one's life draws near the gloaming it is good to receive recognition & to be deemed worthy to follow in the footsteps of Burns.

Thanking you & all your members for this honour.

Yours very sincerely

W D Cocker

### **1964 Sir Alexander Gibson (1926-1995)**

This Scottish conductor was also well known for his service to the BBC and his achievements during his reign as the longest serving principal conductor of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra during which the orchestra was awarded its Royal Patronage.

The prompt for his nomination may have been that in 1962 Gibson created and launched Scottish Opera and served as its Music Director from then to 1986.

Letter of acceptance, written from The Scottish National Orchestra Society Ltd, 150 Hope Street, Glasgow C.2, on 2nd January 1964, to Bill Phillips, Club Secretary:

Dear Mr Phillips,

I am most honoured to accept nomination as an Honorary Member of Irvine Burns Club and would be most grateful if you would convey my humble gratitude to the officers of your distinguished club for thinking of me in this connection.

As a Scot and as a lover of Burns I am very conscious of the distinction you propose to bestow upon me.

It is a matter of regret that my duties never take me to Irvine, but I hope to have an early opportunity of being shown your treasured collection of Burnsiana.

I am,

Yours sincerely,

Alexander Gibson

Notes: The acceptance, in his own hand, is written on headed notepaper.

### **1964 William Ross (?1888-1971)**

This 'Irvine Herald' owner and editor was a key figure in the Irvine of his time, keeping the people of the town up-to-date with all the news and views, including full reports of Irvine Burns Club Annual Celebrations and other activities. Read his letter and the notes below it.

Letter of acceptance, written from the Herald Office, Irvine, on 17th January 1964

Dear Mr Phillips,

It is with great pleasure I accept nomination as an Honorary Member of Irvine Burns Club - the greatest Burns Club in existence. Never did I aspire to such eminence nor that my name should be associated with such an illustrious list of notabilities.

May I be permitted to say two things. My firm has been associated continuously with your club since its inception in 1826. First there was Maxwell Dick, a founder and president, then my immediate predecessor, the late Provost Charles Murchland, a former president and a man who wrote a number of books about Burns. My son & I are carrying on the tradition.

The second thing I would like to say is that I have not missed a Burns Anniversary for more than fifty years and I have enjoyed every one of them.

Thanking the members once again for the honour done to me I would like to say that anything I can do to further the interests of your club will be done with the greatest pleasure.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

William Ross

Notes: The addressee is Club Secretary Bill Phillips.

Maxwell Dick, a founder member of Irvine Burns Club in 1826, had served as President in 1835 and again in 1854.

William Ross' predecessor Charles Murchland (Irvine Burns Club President in 1879) died in 1926, aged 78.

The 'Irvine Herald' regularly carried verbatim reports of the Annual Celebration speeches, often noted in shorthand by Mr Ross.

His son, Charlie Ross (d. 2007, on his birthday) followed in his footsteps as joint owner and editor of the 'Irvine Herald'.

### **1965 Sir Alec Douglas-Home (1903-1995)**

Sir Alec Douglas-Home had served as Prime Minister for just under a year from October 1963, succeeding Harold Macmillan, to October 1964, when he was narrowly defeated in the 1964 General Election by Harold Wilson. As a (ex-) Prime Minister and a Scot, Irvine Burns Club naturally invited him to accept Honorary Membership. He had succeeded to the title Earl of Home in 1951 but renounced it in 1963 to take his place in the House of Commons.

A talented sportsman, he was unique among British Prime Ministers in having played first-class cricket. Later in his career, when he had become Prime Minister, Sir Alec wrote in a memorandum: "I went into politics because I felt that it was a form of public service and that as nearly a generation of politicians had been cut down in the first war those who had anything to give in the way of leadership ought to do so." As Lord Dunglass, he represented Lanark from 1931 to 1945 and from 1950 to 1951, when he inherited the earldom and entered the House of Lords. He is best remembered for his two periods in office as Foreign Secretary, which included support for the USA in the Cuban missile crisis.

Letter of acceptance, written from The Hirsell, Coldstream, Berwickshire, on Jan 14 [1965], to Club Secretary Bill Phillips

Dear Mr Phillips,

Thank you so much for your letter telling me that the Irvine Burns Club is to elect me an Honorary Member.

I am very honoured to be named among the distinguished company of my predecessors. Will you please express to the Club my real gratitude & appreciation.

Yours sincerely

Alec Douglas-Home

### **1965 Harold Wilson (1916-1995)**

Harold Wilson served Britain twice as Prime Minister, from 1964 to 1970 and again from 1974 to 1976. Irvine Burns Club has often invited Prime Ministers to accept Honorary Membership. He is the only Labour leader to have formed administrations following four general elections.

As readers will have no trouble finding more about Harold Wilson in other more detailed sources, this entry is intentionally short. Originally MP for Ormskirk, he was later MP for Huyton, for 33 years. After demitting office, he was granted a life peerage as Lord Wilson of Rievaulx in 1983.

Letter of acceptance, written from 10 Downing Street, Whitehall on January 11, 1965:

Dear Mr Phillip [sic],

Thank you for your letter of December 30 and for your kindness in inviting me to become an Honorary Member of the Irvine Burns Club.

It is very good of you to suggest this, and I am honoured to accept.

Yours sincerely,  
Harold Wilson

Notes:

The letter, on 10 Downing St notepaper, is typed, with the exception of the Dear Mr Phillips, the Yours sincerely, and the signature.

**1966 Rev James L Dow (1908-1977)**

James Leslie Dow became minister of Cartsburn Augustine church in Greenock in 1943 and in 1965 became minister of St Bride's church, Lochranza – his letter explains why he is using notepaper from Cartsburn. He retired to Arran.

He frequently contributed to the local newspaper, the *Greenock Telegraph*, and was a contributor to religious programmes on the BBC including *Songs of Praise* and on Scottish Television (*Late Call*).

Letter of acceptance, written from Cartsburn Augustine Church of Scotland, Greenock, on 12 January 1966, addressed to Wm Phillips, Hon. Secy

Dear Mr Phillips,

You will observe that with characteristic Scottish Carefulness I am using my Greenock notepaper, but since any slight prominence I have gained was achieved while I was minister there, it is possibly fitting that I should use Greenock paper to thank your club for the very signal honour which they have done me, and to accept most humbly and most gratefully.

You select for this honour distinguished poets, men of special national eminence, or those who have been special benefactors of the Club. I cannot see in which category I qualify.

I am a versifier of sorts but would not dare to call myself a poet. Of national eminence I have none, though I neglect no chance to speak the good word for Scotland. What I have done for Irvine Burns Club I know not, though I did have a year in Irvine almost quarter of a century ago & may have helped some of your members home.

However you are the judges of qualifications, not I: and if I satisfy what I am sure will be your strict standards I am all the more happy and proud.

Will you convey to your officers, your Committee, your members, & accept on your own behalf, my genuine thanks for this rare distinction & my assurance that nothing will give me greater pleasure than to render to you any service within my power.

With warm regards  
Yours sincerely  
James L Dow

Notes:

The letter is (handwritten) on his church notepaper.  
His sheet of verses is filed with his letter.

### **1966 Duncan Macrae (1905-1967)**

Duncan Macrae first made his name as a comic actor with an amateur group in 1937, enjoyed a successful amateur drama career, and gave up teaching to become professional in 1943. Among his many successes were a role in 'Whisky Galore' in 1949 and as Captain Para Handy. At the time of his nomination, he was appearing in episodes of 'The Avengers'.

Letter of acceptance, written from the Queensberry Court Hotel, London SW7, on 12th Jan. '66, addressed to Club Secretary Bill Phillips

Dear Mr Phillips,

In acknowledging your letter of the 9th, informing me that I have been elected an Honorary Member of the Irvine Burns Club, I am indeed conscious of the special honour you are conferring on me.

While I make no claim to justify your adding my name to a list of such high distinction, it pleases me to note that you have been able to mark the contributions made by a number of Burns's fellow-countrymen, most of them involved in the Arts.

In a nation given over, perhaps, too much to the disputation upon ends, I am most pleased to see a succession of names of persons concerned, as we all are in the Arts, with the means of life itself.

In humble gratitude,

I am

Duncan Macrae.

### **1966 Maurice Lindsay (1918-2009)**

Maurice Lindsay, after serving in World War II, became a radio broadcaster, and became well known as a poet and as a music critic. His career led to appointment as Programme Controller at Border Television.

He published very many of his poems and a large number of other books, mainly drawing on his love of poetry and his deep knowledge of Scottish literature and of music. His Collected Poems of 1974 drew on 12 published collections. In 1968, he produced "Robert Burns: the man, his work, the legend". In 1989 he edited Alexander Scott's "The Comic Poems of William Tennant" (Tennant accepted honorary membership of Irvine Burns Club in 1829, and our article about his life and works is available on this site). In 2001, Lindsay published the "Theatre and Opera Lovers Quotation Book". His work on "Castles in Scotland" is also popular.

For students of Burns, the publication of Maurice Lindsay which is probably the most consulted and the one which probably led to his being invited to accept honorary membership is "The Burns Encyclopedia", first published in time for the bicentenary celebrations of 1959. As he wrote in the Introduction to the 3rd edition of 1980, "The purpose of this book remains the furtherance of the enjoyment of Burns' poems and letters by readers who share my own pleasure and delight in them." One critic wrote: "Fascinating. An immediate treasure-house of information on every person or place involved in Burns' works."

Letter of acceptance, written at Woodlands Cottage, Heads Nook, by Carlisle, Cumberland on 12th January 1966:

Dear Mr Phillips,

Thank you for your letter of 9th January, in which you announce my election as an Honorary Member of Irvine Burns Club. I am deeply touched by the Club's gesture to me, and I shall make a point of accepting your invitation to inspect the Club's possessions when next I am in Irvine.

As a token of thanks, I should like to add in a small way to these possessions. I am therefore arranging to have sent to you for the Club's library, autographed copies of my two last books of poems, "Snow Warning" and "One Later Day".

With every good wish for the continuing ancient prosperity of the Irvine Burns Club,  
Yours sincerely,  
Maurice Lindsay

Notes:

The books mentioned are "Snow Warning and other poems" (Linden Press, Arundel, 1962) and "One Later Day and other poems" (Brookside Press, 1964); the signed books are catalogued respectively as 642 (was LPL4) and 643 (was LPL5) in our library.

In 1961, Maurice Lindsay wrote these comments about the use of Lallans in his Preface to 'Snow Warning', one of the books he presented to Irvine Burns Club:

The poems in this collection are . all . in English. . In view of my close association throughout the 'Forties and early 'Fifties with the group of writers known as the Lallans Makars, I think I ought to explain why I have recanted.

Lallans was a brave last-ditch effort to restore to Lowland Scotland its ancient language. It failed to arouse any measure of popular support. During the 'Fifties, the Scots tongue receded more rapidly than ever before under the impact of television, and has now been reduced to a mere matter of local accent. It is utterly unthinkable that this poor wasted and abandoned speech, however rich in theory its poetic potential, can possibly express what there is to be expressed of the Scottish ethos in the age of the beatnik and the hydrogen bomb. The fact is that Lallans has not been used with contemporary significance by any writer during the greater part of the last decade.

We are all Anglo-Scots now, whether we like it or not. The future of Scottish literature must therefore lie with English, albeit English tempered by something of the old Scots roughness of texture. In any case, the only thing that matters is what is being said in relation to the human dilemma.