A Man for all Seasons

by Anna Cahill

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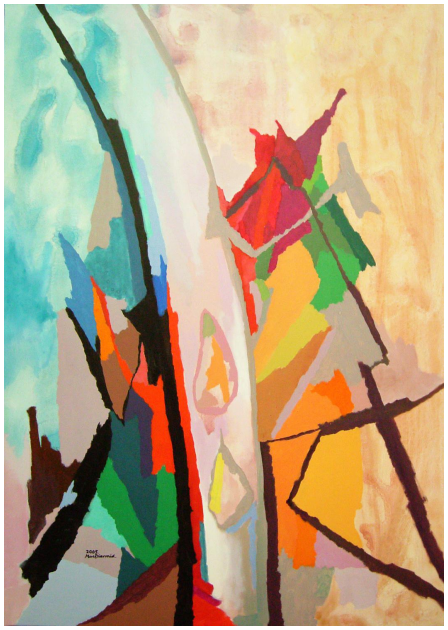
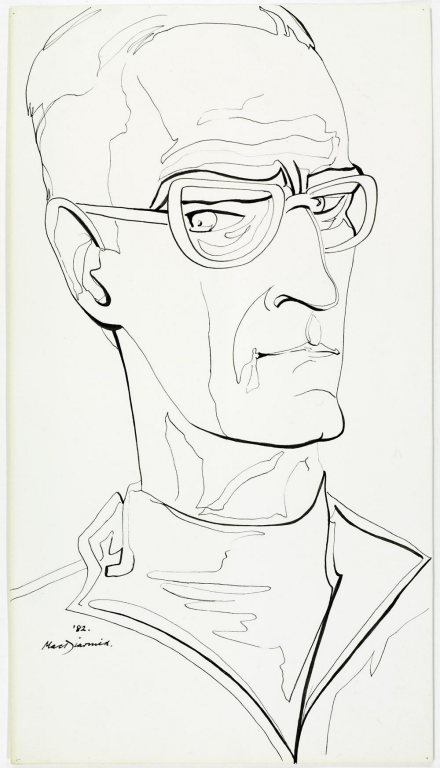
Douglas and partner Patrick in their top floor studio, Rue St Martin, Paris, 1972.



Douglas MacDiarmid, *La Seine a Paris*, 2005. Private Collection, Auckland.



Douglas MacDiarmid, *Selfportrait*, 1982. Pen and ink drawing on paper.

Douglas MacDiarmid, *Megapolis*, 1992. Pen and Ink drawing on paper.

Now 94, Douglas MacDiarmid is the undoubted pioneer of New Zealand expatriate painters in Paris. He has lived in France permanently since 1951—much of that time in Montmartre—and forged a successful international career, continuing into his 90s to paint, exhibit and push new boundaries. Having outlived his

contemporaries, he remains the epitome of a luminous creative spirit.

MacDiarmid grew up in a highly cultured and literary family in Taihape, a small town in the centre of the North Island of New Zealand, where his father was a doctor and surgeon. A commodious home library of the latest books on every imaginable subject ignited his passion for the classical world, the origins of language, arts and culture, and the beauty of landscapes and human form.

Resolutely self taught, MacDiarmid began his painting journey as the youngest of the Christchurch art phenomenon, The Group—mentored and encouraged by the likes of Evelyn Page, Rita Angus, Leo Bensmann and Theo Schoon. MacDiarmid believes that "painting is a classic business, you learn by imitation, there is no other way" and his early paintings indicate that he was a fast learner.

As a university student he acted in Ngaio Marsh's first Shakespearean productions, and had the great good fortune to have the celebrated wartime migrant Karl Popper as his philosophy professor. Such singular influences shaped his beliefs and ideals.

After World War II, with a degree in English literature, music, and languages, MacDiarmid set off at the first opportunity to "devour the world."

He felt impelled to get away to immerse himself in the sources of civilisation, see the great paintings he only knew from reproductions, and find a place of long human continuity that spoke more than "narrow little sheep tracks on hillsides." More critically, the impeded freedom of expression in buttoned-up New Zealand meant he was hiding his bisexuality in the shadows, when his sensual inclinations were as much part of his creative spirit as his passion for painting.

Years later, in a conversation recorded by the National Gallery Resource Centre (that preceded Te Papa Tongarewa, the National Museum of New Zealand), he recalled that his first experience of Europe was "like cool water to a man who has been in a desert." He couldn't absorb it all fast enough, especially on an empty stomach as there was precious little to eat on the continent straight after the war. "That doesn't matter, the hungrier you are the more beautiful your visions are likely to be!"

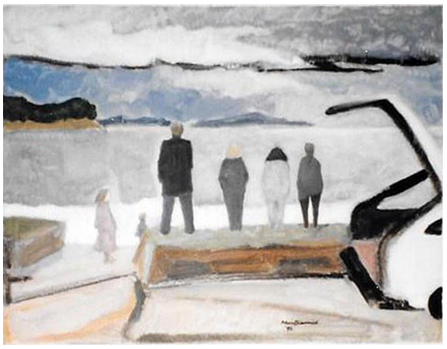
When he first came to France in the late 1940s, Matisse was still working, Picasso in his prime. He met Utrillo, and was richly amused to observe Salvador Dali just behind him in a circus audience, stealing the whole show just by being there. Here was a climate of inspiration, opportunity and experience unobtainable in his home country of New Zealand. However, he quickly discovered how an individual can also be lost in anonymity in a city like Paris.

At first, MacDiarmid supported himself by teaching English at the prestigious secondary school Lycee Henri IV, before taking a leap of faith into hovels and hardship to paint full time—grateful for generous friends who were good for dinner invitations even if they never bought a painting. The harsher it was the more it strengthened his resolve and no matter how malnourished and desperate he was, he made a point of always appearing well-groomed and cultivated—to be acceptable company in any social circle.

Gradually, by talent, characteristic self-discipline, and sheer determination he found a foothold in Paris, that most challenging

of all art markets at the time. In the 1950s and 60s he appeared in *s alons* in Paris including the Salon des Indépendants (1958), Dessin et Peinture à L'Eau and Terres Latines. He was included in the Exposition du Prix Othon Friesz (1955 and 1959) and had solo exhibitions in trendy Parisian galleries frequented by the city's aristocracy, such as Galeries Morihien, Royale, Ror Volmar, du Colisee, Chardin and Berri-Lardy, as well as London's Chelsea and Redfern Galleries.

Douglas MacDiarmid, *Mont St Victoire*, 2012.



Douglas MacDiarmid, *Wet Sunday New Zealand*, 1996. Private Collection, New Zealand.

MacDiarmid represented New Zealand at the 1960 Commonwealth Week in London and Norwich International, the 1964 Stamford International, USA and 1968 Bristol Commonwealth Exhibition. Such exposure, together with occasional commissions, good luck and favourable reviews, led wealthy collectors to take notice, which slowly opened doors to further exhibitions in Morocco, London, Greece and New York. Exciting as this recognition was, it was still decades before the attention translated into any real degree of comfort. "There were years when I suffered grievously from working hard and selling almost nothing. That is very flattening because you know you're not getting through to people. Yet when I show people things I did in those years, they are rapidly drawn to them. Maybe it's something to do with the way painters see something before other people are aware of it."

Exploring the visual rhythm

Ever inquisitive, MacDiarmid habitually experimented with new forms, surfaces and mediums. Even today, his early New Zealand urban and cityscapes, painted when landscapes were typically empty, bucolic countryside, have a contemporary immediacy and freshness. He was an early adopter of acrylic paint for the intense colour and fluidity it afforded, and mixed his paint with fine Fontainebleau sand at one point to add texture to particular images. Less successful were attempts to diversify into sculpting acrylic resins in the 1960s, as the unpredictable results never satisfied him.

There was a worrying period in the late 1960s when art pundits condemned painting as a spent force in France, in the face of newer, more three-dimensional forms of expression. Douglas seriously considered uprooting to New York, the happening place at that moment, and even stayed there for a while to test the waters. Exciting and energising as the Big Apple buzz was, Europe and his beloved Mediterranean drew him back to evolve on his chosen path.

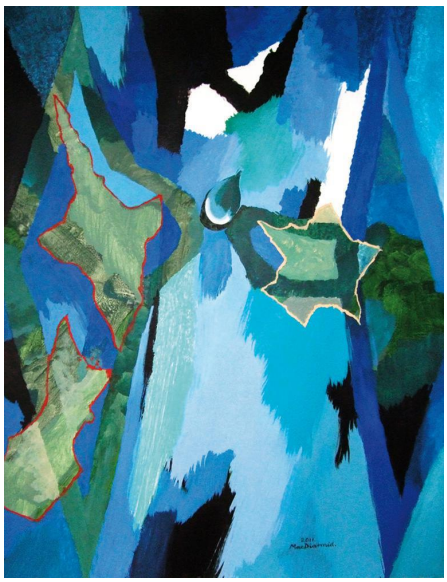
MacDiarmid considers himself driven by emotion rather than intellect. He shuns labels and has never been one to follow trends. When pressed for a description, he settles on “expressionist painter—one who expresses the visual rhythm of things”—in other words, he does what the vision calls for and the painting exacts. He found it necessary that every fourth or fifth painting be abstract, “to keep the vision pure.” Hence there are two distinct MacDiarmid styles: one very controlled, the other very free. ‘’I have just as much interest in doing something totally abstract as doing something totally figurative. It's a question of what I'm trying to evoke. You can't feel the same thing about everything you see.”

During a Radio New Zealand interview in 2006, Douglas was quizzed on his principal influences. Nobody, he replied, could wipe out the formative years of their life. “The way we look depends on where we were born, how we were brought up, what we were encouraged to look at and so on. With the result that when I paint Paris pictures, French people look at them and say: ‘Oh yes, isn't it interestingly exotic!’ There are still traces of accent in what I say just as there are traces of New Zealand in everything that I paint.”

Douglas MacDiarmid, *Christchurch March*, 1945. Oil on board, 229 x 317mm. Wells Family Collection, New Zealand.

Douglas MacDiarmid, *La Condition Humaine*, 2008. Acrylic on canvas. Douglas and Patrick in hot air balloon over the pyramids in the Valley of the Kings, Egypt.

Douglas MacDiarmid, *Papa Cliff Pool with Bathers, Taihape*, 1947. Oil on carton. Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa Collection.



Douglas MacDiarmid, *Conscience Tectonique*, 2011. Private Collection, France. Part of Canto Fermo series based on MacDiarmid's electrocardiogram readings.

Inherent New Zealand-ness

Gradually MacDiarmid realised he had come a full turn of the wheel. From having longed to get away, he discovered that his origins continued to be a part of who he is: “The other day I asked a friend if I could ever be mistaken for a Frenchman? He roared with laughter, and I realised that this native stamp on me is very important. I don’t want to be mistaken for a Frenchman. I am a New Zealander and will be so till the end...”

Indeed, the painter never neglected his home market, selling paintings privately through friends before being represented by dealers including André Brooke's Gallery 91 in Christchurch; Louise Beale in Wellington and Nelson, as well as the Medici, Ferner, John Leech and Christopher Moore Galleries in the North Island. Over a 64 year period, Douglas visited regularly and delivered 33 one-man shows in New Zealand—starting with his first solo appearances at Wellington Library and Helen Hitchings Gallery while back from Europe in 1949-50, to his exhibition at Jonathan Grant Gallery in Auckland during Artweek 2013. The intervening years have seen him exhibit in major city galleries and small regional entities from Dunedin to Whangarei.

He regularly contributed to group exhibitions of 'kiwi' artists at home and abroad and made a number of successful appearances on 'New Zealand ground' at embassies overseas, including the NZ High Commission in London in May 1964. He also initiated a fundraising exhibition at the New Zealand Embassy in Paris with fellow expatriate sculptor Marian Fountain in April 2011 to support the Christchurch Earthquake rebuilding effort. When asked to contribute a significant painting for his country to an international charity auction for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s 50th anniversary of its War on Hunger Group in September 2014, he didn't hesitate to give a personal favourite—a large 2008 canvas of a hot air balloon carrying he and his partner Patrick over the pyramids of the Valley of the Kings on a memorable visit to Egypt.

His work continues to find a steady following. But despite his long career and prolific output, MacDiarmid is frustrated to find that his early paintings in New Zealand national collections—such as *Portrait of Constance* (1948), *The Immigrant* (1945) and *Papa Cliff Pool with Bathers, Taihape* (1947)—continue to be recycled in publications in New Zealand, ignoring the work he has painted since. In Europe by comparison, from the 1970s (and except in the years of grimmest economic conditions), he struggled to keep up with the demand for new work.

Following an inner beat

MacDiarmid has painted Paris in all moods and weathers, from rooftops and pavements, as well as favourite locations throughout France and across Europe. He painted Via Appia Antica, the ancient Roman Way, 23 times over the years, and was regularly drawn back to Montagne Sainte-Victoire in Aix-en-Provence—on the last occasion in 2010 he painted *Love Letter to a Landscape*. By the same token, he has painted visual poems to the New Zealand landscape—the Taihape and Rangitikei region, Christchurch and the Canterbury Plains, Bay of Islands, Wellington, Piha Beach, the Whanganui River, as well as the everyday mood of small towns across the country.

The painter turned his back on sterile gallery spaces and cut-throat commercial dealers in the early 1990s, in favour of intimate 'chez lui' shows. The upheaval of converting his Montmartre apartment into a gallery for a couple of weeks every two years was an inspired gamble; his collectors loved the intimacy of the shows and the opportunity to see the painter in his studio environment.

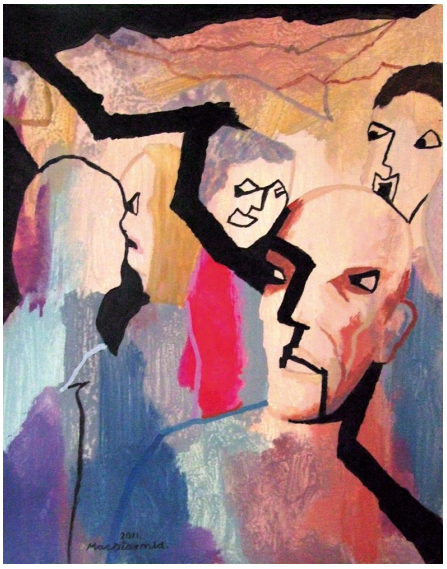
He harrumphs the blurring of art and craft, art and technology, and what he perceives as a materialistic, reality show approach to contemporary culture, as largely lacking communicative intent. "I'm fortunate in being able to receive as fresh a shock of feeling

from a piece of Egyptian statuary, wall of Giotto, canvas of Van Gogh, as something seen in a contemporary gallery right here and now. I live with all those past artists and the continuity of what they represent is my oxygen." Apart from the great masters and the extraordinary movement in Van Gogh's pictures, painters he has most appreciated include Atlan, Alechinsky, Zao Wou-Ki, and the most enduring, Nicholas de Staël. "I think of them now with a strange blend of pleasure and immeasurable distance."

Well before the advent of mass tourism, he travelled extensively driven by insatiable curiosity and to nourish his work—particularly around the Mediterranean, but also clocking up far-flung destinations on early cargo ship voyages to and from New Zealand. The wide distribution of his paintings mirror his travels. MacDiarmid paintings are owned by French and New Zealand governments, the City of Paris, and located private collections across the world from Scandinavia to South Africa, Korea to Tahiti. Significant clients include the late Duke and Duchess of Windsor, and one of his most zealous collectors was known to buy paintings ten at a time from exhibitions.

Over such a long career MacDiarmid has undertaken many private commissions and portraits, and lectured on art around New Zealand and in Samoa. He supported the 5th Australia/New Zealand Film Festival at St Tropez with a solo exhibition in 2003 and had the distinction of being declared a New Zealand Living Cultural Treasure in 1990 when brought back to his homeland for an official Sesquicentennial exhibition in Wellington, as part of the country's celebrations to mark the 150th anniversary of white settlement. But some of his greatest pleasures have been less august, such as the reciprocal rewards of teaching a small, weekly painting class at the British and Commonwealth Women's Association of Paris for almost 40 years—much loved by his pupils for encouraging them to express themselves rather than being told what to paint.

Douglas MacDiarmid on his 94th birthday, Paris, November 2016. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Douglas MacDiarmid, *La Calunnia*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas.

"The vision is very hard to capture. To understand when one must stop was one of the most difficult things to try to encourage in my pupils. It's quite extraordinary how a painting can be killed dead with one stab too many. One needs to be constantly thinking of Michangelo's 'Infinita'—unfinished. When I finish a painting, I'm usually exhausted and, knowing I can't take it any farther, have a moment of nausea. It's like being seasick after a beautiful voyage…"

Although France has long been his adopted home, he is not a French citizen. By the 1990s he found himself increasingly looking to early memories and influences to inspire his work. "It is of importance for someone like me to feel his 'New Zealandness' alive and confirmed". An old school friend, poet Helen Shaw, observed that MacDiarmid was 'more of a New Zealander in Paris than in New Zealand, where he seems almost Parisian…' The painter sees it thus: "There is a side of me that is profoundly New Zealand but I live in France, and I live as everybody else there but with a difference—I take from my surroundings what nourishes me, what suits me, and I keep a discreet distance from the rest because I am a foreigner. It's not my business to go rushing about, pointing out that the truth is out here to people who have another idea on the matter."

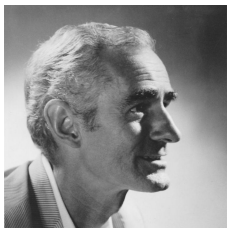
Very much in tune with the world around him, yet equally conversant with New Zealand life through the personal

correspondence he maintained until recently, MacDiarmid has however remained a ‘foreigner’ by choice, finding it an advantage for observation and critical insight. “A Stranger Everywhere” is the title of a 2006 documentary by film-maker Eric Grinda, which stands as a compelling signature of his philosophies and work. “Although I am and can never be anything but a New Zealander, there are times when I forget that I am not French.”

Having slipped under the New Zealand art history radar for much of his life as the painter who got away, MacDiarmid is increasingly recognised as a missing link. The turning point was little over 10 years ago when he came to the attention of influential art historians Jill Trevelyan and Associate Professor Leonard Bell. In the 5th Gordon H Brown Lecture in 2005, Bell described MacDiarmid as “one of the most technically and formally accomplished, imaginative, intellectually and philosophically sophisticated of New Zealand-born artists of his generation.” Three years later, Trevelyan wrote to MacDiarmid: “You are such an inspiration to me - you seem to have fitted the equivalent of at least a dozen normal lives into your 80-something years. Some people are just born with more gusto, curiosity, capacity for adventure, aren’t they?” Opening his 2013 exhibition in Auckland, Bell spoke of “a man who must have the longest career of any painter who is still working.” Consequently, he has been much in demand in recent years amongst art professionals and literary writers for his almost century-long reach of knowledge and insight, and his long friendships with creative contemporaries.

Douglas MacDiarmid is a charming, elegant, erudite and articulate man, with a lust for life, self-mockery and laughter; very much a citizen of the world and as fascinated as ever with human nature. A biography of his life and times, *Colours of a Life* is currently being written, for publication in New Zealand in the next year. Far from being ‘past it’ at 94, Douglas is fully engaged in the current creative chapter-editing process of the manuscript. Meanwhile, Auckland University’s Gus Fisher Gallery has mounted 'From Taihape to Paris: Douglas MacDiarmid's life in paint,' an exhibition of 22 works on paper previously unseen in New Zealand that runs from 4 February until 22 April 2017.

Biographies



Douglas MacDiarmid (b. 1922, Taihape, New Zealand) is an acclaimed painter and a significant missing link in post-war New Zealand art culture. He graduated from Canterbury College, Christchurch with a Bachelor of Arts in English, literature and music after World War II, and was based in Paris from 1952 until his death on 26 August 2020.

Since 1949, Douglas MacDiarmid has had more than 30 solo exhibitions in New Zealand alone, the most recent in 2017. In Paris, he staged an exhibition every two years until 2014. His paintings are owned by French and New Zealand governments, the City of Paris, and hang in public and private collections across the world, including the United States, France, England, Scotland, Greece, Switzerland, Morocco, Scandinavia, South Africa, China, Hong Kong, South America, Korea and Tahiti, as well as the collection of the late Duke and Duchess of Windsor. His work is also held in New Zealand by all major art collections, including Alexander Turnbull Library, Te Papa Tongarewa National Museum of New Zealand, New Zealand Portrait Gallery, Christchurch Art Gallery, Auckland Art Gallery, University of Auckland Art Collection, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Sarjeant Gallery, Dowse Art Museum, Victoria University of Wellington, Sir James Wallace Arts Trust, Manawatu Art Gallery, Wairarapa Museum of Art and History, Waikato Museum, Dame Ngaio Marsh House, Aigantighe Art Gallery, New Zealand Treasury, and the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade collection – Wellington, London, Paris and Cairo.

Anna Cahill is a writer living in Brisbane. As Douglas MacDiarmid's biographer, she regularly travels to Paris to continue working with the painter on his biography *Colours of a Life*. She is also helping to develop a new website profiling the life and work of MacDiarmid (douglasmacdiarmid.com).

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