

HAMISH HENDERSON

THE EDINBURGH PEOPLE'S FESTIVAL, 1951-54

When the political decision was made in 1946, under Clem Attlee's government, to inaugurate an International Festival of the Arts in an attempt to counterbalance the effects of world war weariness, the likeliest venue seemed to be not Edinburgh, but Bath. Indeed the latter appears to have been that most favoured by the Festival's guiding spirit, Rudolf Bing. The rival claims of these two handsome cities were by no means based on their respective cultural qualifications or backgrounds; the context was purely a matter of the number of undamaged buildings which would be at the hands of the organisers. It was a close run thing, but Edinburgh came out on top.

There was a club on the go in Princes Street at the time, International House, which had been founded during the war by the British Council to cater for the off duty needs of officers of the Polish Forces, and the 'arty' sections of the Edinbourgeoisie were encouraged to join it. After the war it widened its appeal somewhat, and for practical reasons – I used it for years as a *poste restante*, when I was 'in the field' collecting songs and stories up north – I eventually applied for membership myself. Not long after the end of the war, while I was still 'sounding the joint out' I overheard a priceless conversation between H Harvey Wood, who was an official of the British council, and an ex-army colonel who had been co-opted to join the organisation. They were discussing the opportunities that this new projected International Festival of the Arts offered the local branch of the British Council and they were talking entirely in terms of which celebrated foreign orchestras, opera companies, ballet light-footers and suchlike they might be able to attract to Auld Reekie. Right enough, it was to be an *International* festival but the idea that the host nation, Scotland, might be considered as one of the participant nations seemed not to enter into it.

Inevitably, news of this and similar discussions reached the ears of the great Hugh MacDiarmid, Scotland's leading poet, and one of the outstanding poets writing in Europe at that time. His reaction was not difficult to forecast. He regarded the entire International Festival project as a sort of English/cosmopolitan plot to subvert our native Scottish culture and thus to put paid to the Scottish Renaissance in literature which he had inaugurated – almost single-handedly – way back in the 1920s. In 1949 he wrote a virulent article for an Edinburgh-based magazine called *The Galliard*, the implicit tenor of which was that all nationally committed Scottish poets and cultural figures should unite to oppose the International Festival and try to ensure its eventual failure.

This appeared to me and to several other left-wing individuals an entirely self-defeating attitude. The Communist Party had welcomed the festival, which has been covered in the Daily Worker since 1947 (when Sir Hugh Robertson,

conductor of the Glasgow Orpheus choir, had reported on the first festival for the paper.)

And for all its faults the Festival did bring to Edinburgh, in its first five years, a great many films from the Soviet Union and the 'new democracies'. The Party's support was not unqualified, however. The announcement, during the second Edinburgh Festival, that the Arts Council of Great Britain was to withdraw funding from Glasgow Unity Theatre, confirmed out feelings of a widening gap between what the festival was and what it could have been. So long as the festival relied on 'big names' (mainly non-scots) it isolated itself (by high admission prices) from the Scottish people and therefore from new cultural developments in Scotland. The Communist Party was greatly interested at the time in helping to develop a national cultural identity for Scotland. I was asked to review books by and about Scottish writers (Sorley McLean, Burns, McDiarmid, Boswell, Stevenson) for the *Daily Worker*, which also gave generous space to a number of literary controversies among Scottish readers at this time (notably regarding Burns, Lallans and Gaelic.)

Shortly before Christmas 1950 a meeting was convened by Martin Milligan, a Communist Party member and a man of great brilliance. He had just returned a short time before from Oxford, where he had studied philosophy, although his philosophy was hardly the establishment kind. The meeting took place at the Scottish Miners HQ in Rothesay Place, Edinburgh. The central idea behind the discussion was that, far from opposing the 'big' festival, the left should welcome its existence, take advantage of the presence of so many five-star foreign actors, singers, etc. on Scottish soil, and try to present an Edinburgh People's Festival which would complement its senior brother, and in some select zones of cultural enterprise, actually outdo it. And this in fact is what actually happened.

The Edinburgh Labour Festival committee soon comprised 40 people, representing 17 trade union branches, five Labour Party organisations, the WMA, the Musicians Union, the local Labour League of Youth and the Edinburgh Trades Council. There were various poets, artists and story writers belonging to the Cultural committee of the Scottish District of the Communist Party – Norman and Janey Buchan, Hugh Paterson, Simon and Ella Ward, Bill Maclellan; several left-inclined Labour Party members (and indeed one or two who turned out to be right-wingers) and last, but not least, one or two non-attached cultural figures such as John Mac~Donald, a Highland psychologist who originally hailed from Sutherlandshire and who spoke up vigorously for a Gaelic component in any future People's Festival. He it was who in the event, with his wife, did a great deal of donkey work of organisation when the People's Festival got going. The organiser was Martin Milligan. Under the slogan 'By Working People for Working People' we wanted to show the International Festival what it still could be.

To initiate action designed to bring the Edinburgh International Festival closer to the people as a whole and to make it serve more fully the cause of international understanding and good will; and also to initiate

action such as will more generally make what is best in the cultural life of our country more accessible to working people, and will secure fuller facilities for the development of the cultural activities of working people.

Attracting people who felt excluded by the International Festival, keeping the admission prices low and including children – it was Gramsci in action! One of the things that attracted me to Gramsci was his great interest in popular culture. He was a Sardinian, and the Sardinian folk song is rich and bountiful and vigorous to the nth degree. When he was in prison he wrote to his mother and sisters asking for details about their folk festivals. Gramsci in action was the People's Festival.

The committee set its sights high. The festival ran for a full week, from 26 August to 1 September. Glasgow Unity Theatre performed Joe Corrie's *In Time of Strife* and there was a Theatre Workshop production of Ewan MacColl's brilliant historical gallimaufry, *Uranium 235*, which, when first produced in London, had been accorded great praise by both Bernard Shaw and Sean O'Casey. There were performances by Barrhead co-op Junior Choir, the Tranent Fa'side Players (winners that year of the NCB drama festival), the Lesmahagow Male voice Choir, and a production by the Ferranti Drama Group of Ena Lamont Stewart's *Starched Aprons*. There were 'film-strip lectures', coffee-time lectures and tea-time lectures (given by Ralph Bond, Tom Driberg, Ewan MacColl, Helen Criukshank, Hugh MacDiarmid and myself, among others) designed to show how all forms of cultural activity, at their best, depend on ordinary working people and also how much the happiness of the people as a whole depends on the condition of science and the arts. There was a festival club and a day conference, 'Towards a People's Culture', attended by over 170 people.

Abe Moffat, Secretary of the Scottish Area NUM, spoke on the last night, an evening's entertainment of drama, song and poetry by Scottish miners and their friends.

One of the committee members was very insistent that the festival should not only provide a platform for 'Hamish folksy finds'. However, as things turned out, it was the Oddfellows Hall Ceilidh, drawing on native Gaelic and Lowland Scots folk singers, which drew the most appreciative comments from the press. One critic even asserted that the most interesting musical experiences of the entire festival period were not to be found on the 'high heid-yin' (or official) side of the event but on the non-official side. The singing began at 7.30pm and finished, rather hilariously, about two o'clock in the morning. It was an event of incalculable importance, because from it sprang a hundred other fruitful cultural enterprises in subsequent years. Instead of 'Muckin' the Byre' in white tie and tails and Kelvinside accents, there was the glorious singing of Flora MacNeil and Calum Johnston from the Isle of Barra, John Strachan singing the classic ballads 'Clyde's Water' and 'Johnnie of Breadislee', the artistry of Jessie Murray, a Buckie fish-wife whose incomparable 'Skippin Barfut Throw the Heather' enjoyed its city debut at the same 1951 Ceilidh. Over from Glasgow to witness the event was the

Communist Party cultural stalwart Norman Buchan, who was overwhelmed by the Ceilidh. He said he had never heard anything like it, and afterwards admitted that his folk song enthusiasms and his resolve to propagate authentic singing styles among West Country children dated from that moment. In the festival programme I wrote:

In Scotland, both north and south of the Highland line, there is still an incomparable treasure of folk song and folk music. Very little is known to the ordinary Scottish public, and even less to the world public which is patron to the Edinburgh International Festival. What is known is often irredeemably spoilt by normal 'concert-hall' technique and arrangements.

The main purpose of this Ceilidh will be to present Scottish folk song as it should be sung. The singers will all without exception be men and women who have learnt these splendid songs by word of mouth in their own childhood, and who give them in the traditional manner. This fact alone will make the *People's Festival Ceilidh an absolutely unique thing in the cultural history of Edinburgh.*

To explain the background of this truly fabulous event, we must go back six months, to February 1951, when I received the following letter from Ewan MacColl, the brilliant singer/playwright and communist Party activist, who was the intrepid 'battle-post' of Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop. 'Dear Hamish' she wrote, Just a brief note – there is a character wandering around this sceptered isle at the moment yclept Alan Lomax. He is Texan and none the worse for that. He is also just about the most important name in American folk song circles. He is over here with a super recording unit and a girl, Robin Roberts, who sings like an angel. Columbia Gramophone Co are financing his trip. The idea is that he will record the folk singers of a group of countries (he has already covered Africa – America – the West Indies – the Central European countries). And Columbia will produce an album of discs – an hour for each country. He is not interested in trained singers of refined versions of the folk songs. He wants to record traditional style singers doing ballads, work songs, political satires, etc. It occurred to me that you could help him in two ways.

1. Record some your soldier songs and add any other songs you know. You sang some to me in the little café opposite the Epworth Hall.
2. Introduce him to other Scots folk singers. You know the kind of thing he wants: bothy songs, street songs, soldier songs, mouth music, the big Gaelic stuff, weavers' and miners' songs, etc.

This is important, Hamish. It is vital that Scotland is well represented in this collection. It would be fatal if the 'folksy' boys were to cash in. If you can help, write to him – Alan Lomax c/o BBC, London. He intends coming to Scotland in about a week's time.

Do try and help.

Yours aye, Ewan.

P.S. If and when you meet him, get him to sing some of his American coal miners' songs. They are terrific.

I dropped a note to Alan – a member of the US Communist Party – and in the summer of 1951 spent two or three months with him collecting folk songs, especially in the Scottish North East (Aberdeenshire, Moray, etc.) and most of the singers we found they nearly all expressed readiness to make the journey to Edinburgh, to appear at the Ceilidh I was already planning. It will be seen, therefore, that the powerful stimulus behind the whole People's Festival enterprise was that splendid character Ewan MacColl. Ewan – real name Jimmy Miller – although born in Salford, was the son of two formidable working-class Scots. His father was an iron-moulder from Falkirk, his mother from Auchterarder, and (a fact I can vouch for) a really bonny singer. Ewan knew all about German agitprop troupes and had formed the Red Megaphones in Salford ('A Propertyless Theatre for a Propertyless Class') named after a German communist troupe from Red Wedding. So the People's Festival could claim a distinguished ancestry – both Gramsci, and the KPD's *Rote Sprachrohr!*

Encouraged by the success of the first People's Festival, the committee immediately began to plan for the 1952 event. This time it ran for three weeks, from 17 August to 7 September, under the banner 'That the People's Voice May Be Heard and the Needs of the People Met'. The committee appealed in the *Daily Worker* for new songs, poems and plays, and the festival included a 'People's Art Exhibition', including a 'People Like Us' photography exhibition. There were poetry readings by Sydney Goodsir Smith, Alexander Trocchi, Norman McCaig and Sorley MacLean; a series of lectures (including James Gibb on Beethoven, Desmond Greaves on James Connolly, myself on Scottish folk song, Ewan MacColl on MacDiarmid, and MacDiarmid himself on David Lindsay and on the 'Radical Tradition in Scottish culture'). We had an ambitious programme of foreign films, including *Bicycle Thieves*, the award-winning Polish classic, *That Others May Live*, and the first full-length film from the new China, *Daughters of China*. There was also a People's Festival Ball; a series of Beethoven Concerts; and three plays, *Flatter No Flesh* by the People's Festival Players. *Out of Bondage* by Lanark CLP and a new Theatre Workshop production, Ewan MacColl's *the Travellers*. The festival concluded with a day conference on 'Our Cultural Traditions and Their Advancement Today' and among the speakers were Hugh MacDiarmid, Ewan MacColl, Naomi Mitchison and several Labour MPs.

There was now no question but that the Ceilidh had to be one of the central features of the festival. By this time Hugh MacDiarmid had generously acknowledged the wisdom of our approach to the festival questions and had accepted the post of People's Festival Chairman. Furthermore, as 1952 was also the year of his sixtieth birthday, we resolved to dedicate that year's Ceilidh to him. In the event, this second Ceilidh was an even more resounding success than the first one. The aim was again 'to present the finest flower of our folk song tradition', but this time the emphasis was 'upon young singers who are carrying on the splendid tradition in its integrity'. 'We

are convinced,' I wrote in the programme, 'that it is possible to restore Scottish folksong to the ordinary people in Scotland, not merely as a bobby-soxer vogue, but deeply and integrally. The veteran Barra singer Calum Johnston again sang splendid Gaelic songs and played the pipes; the famous Lewis sisters Kitty and Marietta MacLeod enthralled the audience with 'Cairistiona' and 'Agus Ho Mhorag; an excellent bothy ballad singer from the North East called Frank Steele sang 'Come All Ye Lonely Lovers'; the young Arthur Argo, great grandson of the famous Aberdeenshire folk song collector Gavin Greig, sang 'The souter's Feast' in a boyish treble; 18 year old Blanche Wood sang songs she had learned from her aunt Jessie Murray; and Jimmy MacBeath gave of his best with 'Come All Ye Tramps and Hawkers' and 'The Moss o' Burreldale'. Hugh MacDiarmid, in whose honour they were performing, had been invited to sit on the platform and at the beginning the entire audience rose while Calum Johnston played 'Blue Bonnets over the Border' as a tribute to Scotland's greatest living poet and most celebrated Borderer. MacDiarmid was obviously deeply moved and at the end of the Ceilidh he rose to propose a vote of thanks to the performers.

As you all know, my personal vanity has always been notorious – but it is quite unequal to the present occasion. I've been absolutely overwhelmed by the honour that has been done me and by the honour that the various artists, and this magnificent audience, have done to themselves, and to Scotland, in doing it.

It would be wrong of me, even in proposing a vote of thanks, if I didn't point out that our tremendous treasury of folk song in Scotland, whether in lowland Scots or in Gaelic, is a treasury that has been occluded, very largely for political reasons, from the knowledge of the majority of our people. This Edinburgh People's Festival, and the movement in which my friends on the platform and others in the audience are concerned, is a re-assertion of that tradition, against the tide of all the things..... all the cultural enemies that are besetting us at the present time.

One thing must have struck you, I think, in the programme tonight – that is, the extent to which all the items on the programme have been correlated to the lives of the common people, to the work of common people, the daily darg of the common people.

We are not going to be taken from that – we're not going to be persuaded by the advocates of snob art, that some mystical palaver is better than that which comes from the working life of our own people.

Unluckily, Ewan MacColl's *The Travellers* played straight into the hands of the right-wing minority on the committee – two vociferous ladies who almost from the start had claimed to identify Communist Party propaganda in even the most innocuous events. Drawing on Theatre Workshop's travels in the New Democracies, *The Travellers* was the subject of an emergency committee meeting called at the insistence of the same ladies in October

1952. The result was that in December 1952 the Scottish TUC placed the festival on its long list of proscribed organisations and withdrew its support for future festivals. Two weeks later the Scottish Labour Party declared that association with the festival was incompatible with membership of the Labour Party (despite the fact that the chair of the festival committee, councillor Jack Kane, was also chair of the Labour Party in Edinburgh).

Thus the two main financial props of the enterprise were knocked from under us at a blow. This was in spite of – or possibly because of – the staunch outspoken support of Hugh MacDiarmid, who was later to rejoin the Communist Party in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Hungary. In 1950 I had been expelled, probably under US pressure, from Italy, where as a guest of the PCI, I had been lecturing on folk song traditions; apparently folk song was now deemed a subversive activity even in Scotland.

Despite this disabling setback, the committee prepared to plan for a People's Festival in 1953, holding meetings at factory gates and building sites to raise support, interest and money. Organised by Norman Buchan and myself, the third festival was inevitably a much smaller event. Hitherto the *Daily Worker* had maintained an even-handed approach to the 'two festivals'. Now it only mentioned the International Festival (which it pointed out was 'neither international nor Scottish') to pour scorn on the way 'Edinburgh breaks into tartan' once a year to the 'rustle of crisp dollar notes'. Theatre Workshop returned with two new plays, adaptations of *Lysistrata* and Moliere's *Le Malade Imaginaire*; the Glasgow YCL Choir sang and Ewan McColl gave a memorable three hour performance of unaccompanied folk song. The 1953 Scots-Irish Ceilidh was in many ways the most memorable of all, principally because it was the one which introduced the recently discovered Jeannie Robertson (universally acknowledged now as the greatest Scottish ballad singer of the twentieth century) to a wider public. It also featured the renowned Tennessee diva Jean Ritchie, singing her own people's version of 'Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah' a truly glorious, spine-tingling rendering.

The People's Festival limped on into 1954, supported largely by contributions from personal well-wishers, but later that year was forced to acknowledge defeat. However, the spirit of the festival continued in the Scottish Folk revival which it had helped to start. And the far-off repercussions of those early proposals from the cultural committee of the Communist Party can still be felt in the Fringe today.