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An Excursion to India

Alan Riach (Friday 26 August 2016)

Bankura University was established in 2014, that auspicious year, and earlier this year the first-ever Indian university courses in Scottish literature were established. Their start was marked by a Scottish-Indian Association for Scottish Studies conference in January, reported in *The National* by Nan Spowart (24 December 2015). I couldn't get to the conference but promised I'd go at a later date. The university Vice-Chancellor, Professor Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay invited me to take part in the last week of lectures to that first intake of 23 postgraduate students, August 8-12. I thought about it, packed a bag, and went.

Scottish literature is what I profess. I felt obliged. I doubt if I could have prepared for the trip, though. Three days travelling: Ayr to Glasgow, train to London, pause, fly to Delhi, pause, fly on to Kolkata. Driving out from the airport, a huge billboard advert seen from the road on the outskirts proclaimed: 'We can cut anything – except your throat!' Further on, a big sign on the wall of a derelict-looking building read: 'Swastika Hostel for Working Women'. Everything seemed tilted, the cityscape itself creating distortions, disorientations, angled approaches, lines of departure, all coming in from everywhere. Was it just jet-lag? We drove fast, getting out of the city.

Then there was the car journey, Kolkata to Bankura, a 7-hour ride with horns blasting, potholes, cracks, ditches and mud everywhere (this was monsoon season). Our excellent driver, unceasingly vigilant, found the means to get us there and get ahead of the traffic in ways that kept me wide awake far beyond the weight of jet-lag. He would slip off the concrete and drive along the grass verge for a while, or nip over into the oncoming lane of the road and dodge approaching traffic for a while, or on one occasion, to avoid an immense congestion of demonstrators and parked vehicles, nip across the central verge, cross the oncoming lanes, go down a side road, and head back the way, then go through a tunnel under the main road and into a small village, then through what seemed an oceanic puddle, not knowing what might lie beneath, then up, round and back the right way. All this kept the attention from drifting too far. I began to think this experience might be better to look back on than to have.

Then there was the landscape: miles and miles of flat fields of water and green, rice paddies everywhere except where the forest comes in, thick forest, trees clustered and clotted, up close to the road or in long stretches, far distant from it.

I'd watched the new Disney *Jungle Book* film on the plane on the way over. Great visuals, intolerable Yankeedoodle Mowgli cutiepie voice, Idris Elba doing a nice nasty Shere Kahn and a happy ending. Trite as you like. But the real thing's here, not that, of course. Nothing I can describe and nothing you'll read or see on screen gives the sense of what India truly is. On the way, in the car, I mentioned this to one of the lecturers who had joined us for

the journey. “Yes,” he said, “we’ve just come past that part of the area where there’s an elephant walk. There are a few elephant corridors. If you’re very unlucky you see them.”

“Unlucky?” I said. “You mean they walk right across the road?”

“Yes,” he said, “and sometimes stop. And you can’t get past them. Until they decide to walk on...”

“Hm,” I said. “Some things you can’t argue with.”

“Yes,” he said. “Deforestation is ruining their world and they can be very angry with human beings. Not a month goes by without an elephant killing someone. But the answer is not to kill the elephants. No, that is not the answer.”

And so to Bankura: through the crowded narrow dust-filled streets, people walking, cycling, driving all sorts of vehicles, cars, taxis, buses, vans, honking horns, or steadily walking carrying all sorts of things in bundles on their heads, past the kiosk-shops, dust-filled, grime-stained, grit-covered. The country all around is pastoral, cultivated, but every few miles there’s a cement factory, an iron works, industrial workplaces. So most buildings look as though they’ve been burned and covered with ash, grey, grimy, brown. Some have collapsed, roofs propped up with thick bamboo poles. Intermittently there are bright new-looking buildings, sheer white and gold or turquoise, and among the dingy street-shops suddenly there’s a shiny well-lit motor bike emporium or a computer shop. But the whole town is abundant with life. In fact, if anything is reminding me of the value of this visit, apart from the profession, it’s that: here’s a living world that says this is how we get on with things even in poverty and whatever circumstances, and it’s not the Hollywood Jurassic cliché, “life will find a way”: it’s that life finds millions of ways, all sorts of things, strategies, methods, practices, all around. And there is no sense of smug, self-righteous resentment: scavenging, salvaging, finding things to help make life possible, is daily practice, everywhere you look.

I taught three long class sessions, gave a poetry reading and had an afternoon’s visit to the Hindu temples of Bishnupur over the four days I was there. I’d been asked to prepare classes giving a summary of the entire story of Scottish literature and culture from prehistory till now. No pressure, then.

The first class was a broad overview of Scottish literature, starting with a timeline, history and myth, caricatures and clichés: Victorian cartoons and the wars of independence, religions and politics, Columba and Wallace, affinities and self-determinations. We slowed down to read closely poems by William Dunbar, Elizabeth Melville, noted the unions, the Jacobite risings, Culloden, and slowed down again with Robert Burns and Walter Scott, and came up through the 19th century to international traveller Robert Louis Stevenson, the “broad road that stretches and the roadside fire”.

I was asked to devote the second session to the Gaelic tradition. This was a challenge: how to tell this story without recourse to the language of which I know little enough and the students, less. There are ways. The Celtic mythic cycles of the gods (one north European polytheistic world meets another subcontinental one), of the warriors, of the Fianna, and the

earliest recorded sources, such as *The Book of Deer* (c. 1150), James MacGregor's *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* (1512-42) and John Carswell's *Book of Common Order* (1567). Main themes sustaining the bardic Gaelic world and the MacMhuirichs, the idea of "duthchas": the correlations between land, people and culture (which, now that I think of it, was the underlying structural balance of the TV series I was writing about a few weeks ago, "The Promised Land"). And so to Sileas MacDonald of Keppoch's "Lament for Alasdair MacDonald of Glengarry" and then to post-Culloden Scotland, the break-up of the clans, the Clearances, and slow down for Duncan Ban MacIntyre's "Praise of Ben Dorain" and Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's "The Birlinn of Clan Ranald". Take in James MacIntyre's magnificently scornful "Song to Dr Johnson" and move on to Donald MacLeod's Gloomy Memories and the work of John Murdoch, before coming into the 20th century with the Celtic Twilight, Modernism and new ways of reading, from Sorley MacLean's "Hallaig" to contemporary poetry by Meg Bateman and Anne Frater.

The third session was in some respects the easiest: "Modern and Contemporary Scottish Literature". Pick up where the first session ended, with RLS, Scottish to the bone and marrow, international traveler, intrinsically optimistic in his curiosity, essentially open to a range of different readerships in his forms of address. Then consider the cataclysmic disruptions of the First World War, Ireland, Russia, and the long walk towards independence in India. Violet Jacob's poems from India had an airing. We noted Joyce, Eliot, MacDiarmid in 1922. We saw how poems, journalism, anthologies, writing of all kinds, were engaged in re-definitions of self and potential. I read and translated MacDiarmid's poem "The Sauchs in the Reuch Heuch Hauch" and had the whole class reciting it, delighted at their own new-found ability to be fluent in Scots. Then we came to after WWII, with that generation of pre-eminent men: Iain Crichton Smith, George Mackay Brown, Norman MacCaig, and Edwin Morgan leading on to another generation of pre-eminent women: Liz Lochhead, Kathleen Jamie, Jackie Kay. We looked at other genres: Lewis Grassie Gibbon's prose fiction of the 1930s, John McGrath's historical drama, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* of the 1970s, and Alasdair Gray's novel *Lanark* (1981). The third class tied back to the second and first and together all three formed a resumé of the entire course the students had been on since the beginning of the year.

Among their course texts had been Scott's *Waverley*, Stevenson's *Kidnapped*, Barrie's *Peter Pan* and Spark's *Jean Brodie*. The texts I brought were designed to overlap, complement, open out from them, and suggest various ways of reading across a wider range that might help.

At the end of the week, Professor Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay gave me some details about his own commitment to the Scottish literature course. Most literature taught in India, he said, is traditionally canonical English literature, with extra and optional courses in American, "New Literatures" and of course literatures in Bengali and Gujarati. Some scepticism from certain quarters had met his proposal to teach Scottish literature as a discrete subject. He had persevered with it for two reasons: first, there was no question about the quality of the material being as good as anything else; and also, the whole history of India and the country's relation to the British Empire was the context for studying the arts of his

country. Now, increasingly, this also was understood to be the context for the study of Scottish literature. Such a course would be a study of literature, intrinsically, but it would also prompt questions about political history and future potential that need answers in the world we live in now. These answers only come through art. That value should be evident to anyone, he said.

But I'd been reading Gandhi's *Autobiography* (1929), and marked out for emphasis three quotations: "I realized that the sole aim of journalism should be of service. The newspaper is a great power, but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges a whole countryside and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy. If the control is from without, it proves more poisonous than want of control. It can be profitable only when exercised from within."

Then there was the warning: "What surprised me then, and what still continues to fill me with surprise, was the fact that a province that had furnished the largest number of soldiers to the British Government during the war, should have taken all these brutal excesses lying down... [Now] the reader [will be able] to see to what lengths the British Government is capable of going, and what inhumanities and barbarities it is capable of perpetrating in order to maintain its power."

And finally, there was the point of principle embedded in resistance: "It was clear that a new word must be coined by the Indians to designate their struggle... Mahatma Gandhi coined the word 'Sadagraha' (Sat = truth, Agraha = firmness)... But in order to make it clearer I changed the word to 'Satyagraha' which has since become current in Gujarati as a designation for the struggle." This implies not only "passive resistance" or "civil disobedience" but what is at the core of things that makes it all worthwhile.

India became an independent country at midnight on 15 August 1947. Nearly seventy years ago. A few folk genially said, "You have some catching up to do, in Scotland."

[Boxed off:]

Robert Louis Stevenson, from 'Songs of Travel': XI

I will make you brooches and toys for your delight

Of bird-song at morning and star-shine at night.

I will make a palace fit for you and me

Of green days in forests and blue days at sea.

I will make my kitchen, and you shall keep your room,

Where white flows the river and bright blows the broom,
And you shall wash your linen and keep your body white
In rainfall at morning and dewfall at night.

And this shall be for music when no one else is near,
The fine song for singing, the rare song to hear!
That only I remember, that only you admire,
Of the broad road that stretches and the roadside fire.