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Languages, Literature and Common Humanity

Alan Riach (Friday 23 September 2016)

When Edwin Morgan was invited to contribute to a commemorative anthology of poems and paintings, *The Wallace Muse* (2005), he was at first reluctant, but after a few days, he said, he felt a deep compulsion, a desire to write in tribute to Wallace that he had not expected. The poem begins: “Surely it is better to forget?” then the next line gives the answer: “It is better not to forget.”

Wallace stands for an embodiment of the commonality of all people in his resistance to tyranny and oppression: an essential value. If we put forward the notion that egalitarianism is a recurrent theme in Scottish literature, Wallace must be a central figure. The story goes – and here I’m not dwelling on historically verifiable data, but rather a myth with moral purpose – that the aristocrats of Scotland were in an awkward position when Wallace demonstrated his capacity for leadership: they had to give him a knighthood and title – the Guardian of Scotland – to allow him to circulate freely in the higher echelons of society.

Egalitarianism is the message of Burns’s anthem “A Man’s a Man” and the revolutionary potential in the sentiment is explicit in the lines from “Tam o’ Shanter” which find Tam planted in the pub: “Kings may be blest, but Tam was glorious / Owre a’ the ills o’ life, victorious” – in other words, this Ayrshire farmer drinking with cronies in a small town bar one market day evening is as good a man, with as valid and fortunate a life, as any of the crowned heads of Europe. In the context of the French Revolution and the American Declaration of Independence from Royalist Britain, Burns’s throwaway couplet in praise of common humanity was a dangerous and potent gesture.

This is one of the central myths of distinctive Scottish identity – though the word “myth” doesn’t mean that it has no basis in reality. Myth has more potency than documented history and that can work in more than one way. From the Columban Celtic church with its principle of the missionary working as “first among equals” (as opposed to imperial coloniser reporting back to central authority), through to the Reformation of the 1560s, with Knox’s insistence on a school in every parish, the myth of education as a birthright rather than a privilege of class or economic strata is deeply embedded and even today has resonance in real conditions and prevailing ideals, distinctively, in Scotland. It’s emphatic in the very title of

the philosopher George Davie's study of nineteenth-century Scottish university education, *The Democratic Intellect* (1961).

The egalitarian ideal – equality of opportunity – is represented both in terms of education generally and in terms of social organisation even more generally. However stratified in social structure Scotland was and remains, this ideal is profoundly different from that of hierarchical structures embodied in feudalism or class division. Arguably, it's a conservative ideal, endorsed by the idea of community associated with small-town Scotland, as opposed to the industrialised cities. At its worst it can be debilitating, as in Alexander Scott's two-line poem, "Scotch Equality": "Kaa the feet / Frae thon big bastard!" At its best, it can fuel connective sympathy and social support. The radical intervention of the voice of the "common man" – John the Commonweal – is heard most clearly in the satiric attack on church, civil and royal abuses of power, David Lyndsay's *Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* (performed in Scotland in the 1550s, published in London in 1602); it is even heard in the literature of the Court, as when Dunbar, in "The Thistle and the Rose" (1503), has Dame Nature remind the Lion, the King, to "do law alike to apes and unicorns" – to look after the poor as well as his courtiers. Walter Scott's ballad, "Jock o' Hazeldean" theatrically enacts the story of a young woman rejecting the aristocratic husband promised to her by his father, the local Northumbrian landowner. Her preference is for Jock, the name suggesting a Scottish peasant, and in the end they escape: "She's owre the border and awa' / Wi' Jock o' Hazeldean!" In other words, romantic love triumphs and validates the worth of the common man or woman, dismissing the attractions and splendours of propertied families.

There is a specific political bias to this idea: the King doesn't give audiences (they're called "surgeries" these days) – he goes out anonymously among his people and learns for himself what their conditions are like. This is the Gaberlunzie Man, the king as wandering beggar. It appears in numerous forms in songs, stories and fiction, most famously perhaps in Scott's best-selling narrative poem *The Lady of the Lake* (1810). The principle opposes the notion of insulated modern politicians, patrician aristocrats and unassailable members of a royal family to whom the languages and lives of most of their "subjects" remain incomprehensible. To end the tyranny of false aristocracy is an imperative felt from Wallace through Burns to James Kelman, to Nan Shepherd writing about elemental realities in the Grampians, or the contemporary rapper Loki, or The Proclaimers, singing: "I don't understand / Why you let someone else rule your land / Cap in hand."

With the Scottish parliament resumed in the late 20th century some measure of reclamation began. Walter Scott's character Mrs Howden in *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818) says this: "When we had a king, and a chancellor, and parliament-men o' our ain, we could aye peeble them wi' stanes when they werena gude bairns – But naebody's nails can reach the length o' Lunnon." It is salutary that these words are engraved on the Canongate wall beside the parliament building in Edinburgh.

Intrinsic to this egalitarian ideal is an understanding of languages and voices as various and relative. The languages, voices and speech of Scottish people, the fluency of our songs and the artifice of our writing, are another identifiable theme in Scottish literature generally. From the mix of languages Dunbar was familiar with at the court of James IV in the early 16th century, to the meticulous English prose published by the Enlightenment philosophers and the written and spoken Scots and Gaelic of their contemporaries in the late 18th century, all demonstrate this heterogeneity. Even while the written prose of the Enlightenment philosophers was determinedly English, by all accounts they usually spoke rich vernacular Scots fluently, and Adam Smith was equally fluent in Gaelic.

Scottish literature is predominantly a trilingual tradition, having been written or composed mainly in Gaelic, Scots and English. There is also significant poetry in French and major work in Latin. It is in that sense a polyphonic literature, as distinct from the English tradition that runs through the development of a single language from Chaucer to Shakespeare to Milton and on; and it is distinct from Irish literature, which is predominantly bilingual, written in Irish Gaelic and English, although there is a strong, neglected tradition of Ulster Scots writing in the north. A particular sensitivity to the values of respect, curiosity and understanding in different languages may be developed by the polyphonic condition of Scotland, rather than the ignorance, isolation and indifference sometimes inculcated by monolingual identity. However, the danger of dividedness is also present. Divide and rule has always been our bane. Hostility between Gaelic, Scots and English-language writers was once typical; now, hopefully, it is no longer so. Incomprehensibility and ignorance lead to fear, prejudice and hostility. But when they can be remedied, they might prompt curiosity, learning, sympathy, and conversation across differences. The other side of dividedness is diversity.

How people speak is of singular importance in Scottish literature – regional accents, voices trained by virtue of class and received pronunciation, tones of voice and registers of

eloquence and inarticulate frustrations are all crucial aspects of major works. Sometimes this is valued, sometimes it's a liability. In Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian*, Jeanie Deans's speech before Queen Caroline is a masterpiece of impassioned rhetorical eloquence in Scots, while her nephew, The Whistler, whose name registers his distance from the language of words, is beyond the scope of civil society and leaves for America and life among "the savages" at the end of the book. Gaelic-speakers are lampooned in William Dunbar's poetry, and he identifies the language he writes in as "Inglis", aligning himself with Chaucer. But Gavin Douglas, Dunbar's younger contemporary, explicitly states that he is writing in the language of the Scottish nation and that it should be called Scots, to distinguish it from Gaelic, on the one hand, and on the other, from English.

In the twentieth century, writers from William McIlvanney to Liz Lochhead have described the emphatic distinction in childhood between the language of the school playground – Scots – and the language of the classroom – English. In Scotland in the early twenty-first century, voices draw on American, urban Scots, Japanese, various African, European and Russian languages and idioms to inform the writing of, for example, Andrew Greig, Alan Spence, Kokumo Rocks, James Meek, Suhayl Saadi, Anne Donovan and Ali Smith. In some parts of Scotland, Polish is as familiar a spoken language as Gaelic.

As the poet and translator Peter McCarey says in his essay, "Language, Politics, Policy": "Knowing who you are and where you are from is not only a matter of being able to say things to your friends without being understood by foreigners, useful though that can be at times. There are two main functions to speech: communication and identification. One function conveys messages and the other shows where the messages come from. One makes bridges and the other draws borders, often between two people who are trying to talk to each other. Both are vital. The importance of identity was always apparent – if only negatively – to those in power. The Gaelic language was outlawed in 18th-century Britain after a political revolt. Linguistic suppression since has become more subtle and more effective."

In the introduction to *The Faber Book of Modern Scottish Poetry*, Douglas Dunn quotes the proverbial saw, "A language is a dialect with an army and navy." I've always felt that gives far too much away to the fascist belief in the authority of military power and it's never seemed to me to be really true. Rather, I would say: *A language is a dialect with a literature.*

Dialects are forms of speech, effective structures of communication, but by definition, their provenance is limited to their location. When writers start to use such dialects in literature, they open up the address to readers anywhere in the world, and this transforms the experiences it describes, the lives of the local people about whom it is talking, into the writing itself, the stories and songs that can be transmitted and conveyed across borders, away from the places of origin. One conspicuous example, taking place especially since the twentieth century, is in the relation between speech and writing of the Shetland archipelago. Robert Alan Jamieson's novel *Da Happie Laand* (2010) ranges from Shetland locations to New Zealand and other islands in the South Pacific in a global context that pays close attention to local forms of communication. But the argument applies emphatically to the Scots language in all its dialects, throughout Scotland. There are two validities at work: that of speech and that of writing. When writing becomes literature, dialect becomes language.

Imperial armies and navies often brought with them enforced impositions of language. English occluded local dialects the world over: a wonderful gift, in some ways, but in others, a usurpation. Yet there is redress. Understanding predicates interpretation. Judgements will also be judged. As Satan says in Book 1, line 106, of the English John Milton's greatest poem, "All is not lost".

[Off-set and boxed:]

In a poem composed after studying Verbiest's Chinese map of the world (1674), on display in the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow University, Christine De Luca writes in Shetlandic, and translates into English, about the residual strengths and potential of the islanders whose archipelago map-makers still often enclose in a box.

Hentilagets*

No dat I'd lippen dee, Verbiest, sae trang wi
da Chinese Emperor, ta ken about dis hentilagets
o skerries. Or, for dat maitter, wi der namin.

Even da best map-makkers missed wis oot or,
whan dey fan wis, prammed wis ida Moray Firt
ithin a peerie box. Maistlins we wir jöst owre
da horizon, a vague prospect, *Ultima Thule*.

I canna blame dem, for dat nordern ocean
stippl't apö first maps wis buskit wi wrecks

an sea munsters; hed da likkly o a graveyard.

Hendrik Hondius man a read da starns wi
a Davis quadrant an checkit better charts,
Mercator's, afore he teckled *terra incognita*,
dat *Orcades and Schetlandia* Blaeu engraved.

An sae da box appeared: tree dimensions flatcht
ta twa; latitude an longitude forgien;
laand scaled doon, crubbit up, sae da rest could braethe.

But tap dat box an, boy, we'll loup oot! Gie you
sic a gluff, you'll nivver trust a Verbiest again!
We'll rex wis, i wir ain place, prood an prunk
boannie as a weel-med gansey, newly dressed.*

**Hentilagets* are tufts of sheep's wool often caught in heather; usually the softest.

**Dressing* a newly knitted garment involves washing and stretching.

Odds and ends

Not that I'd expect you, Verbiest, so busy with
the Chinese Emperor, to know about these oddments
of skerries. Or, for that matter, with their naming.

Even the best map-makers missed us out or,
when they found us, crammed us into the Moray Firth
in a little box. Mostly we were just over
the horizon, a vague prospect, *Ultima Thule*.

I cannot blame them, for that northern ocean
stippled on to first maps was decorated with wrecks
and sea monsters; had the appearance of a graveyard.

Hendrik Hondius must have read the stars with
a Davis quadrant and checked better charts,
Mercator's, before he tackled *terra incognita*,
that *Orcades and Schetlandia* Blaeu engraved.

And so the box appeared: three dimensions flattened
into two; latitude and longitude compromised;
land scaled down, confined, so the rest could breathe.

But tap that box and, boy, we'll leap out! Give you
such a fright, you'll never trust a Verbiest again!
We'll stretch out, in our own place, visible and confident,
beautiful as a well-made jumper, newly finished.