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Scotland, mongrel nation: healthy curiosity and zombie priorities

Alan Riach (Friday 7 October 2016)

Scotland is a main theme in the literature of Scotland, from “Deirdre’s Farewell to Alba” to Dunbar’s poem on the marriage of James IV and Margaret Tudor in 1503 to MacDiarmid’s numerous poems that take “Scotland” as their title. One of MacDiarmid’s poems definitively sums up the whole question, “Separatism”: “If there’s a sword-like sang / That can cut Scotland clear / O’ a’ the warld beside, / Rax me the hilt o’t here!” However “romantic” the metaphor seems, it is meaningful: “For there’s nae jewel till / Frae the rest o’ earth it’s free” – pause on that. It’s true, isn’t it? You see the value of something in its singularity – and yet, also, in its measurement against, and connectedness with, other things – and so, MacDiarmid’s hope is to give a “starry separateness” to Scotland, that the country might be valued accordingly. And connected to reciprocal values internationally.

Not a priority in London today, or Birmingham last week, clearly. Yet national identity remains a central question even in ostensibly conservative texts. Scott’s *Waverley* and John Buchan’s recasting of the story of a native uprising in South Africa, in *Prester John*, leave the values of the rebels Fergus MacIvor and John Laputa intact, even if their cause in each novel seems defeated. The representation of the just ideal in literary terms has a preservative effect: we do not forget it.

So the theme of national identity and what it might mean has a long lineage in Scotland and in the work of Scotland’s major writers, radical or conservative. The three novels of Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s *A Scots Quair* were deliberately intended to address the whole matter of Scotland, from the farming community in *Sunset Song*, through the small town in *Cloud Howe*, to the industrial city in *Grey Granite*. His contemporary Neil Gunn, although most of his work describes the Highlands, also set novels in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and took an epic view of Scottish history through three novels, *Sun Circle*, *Butcher’s Broom*, and *The Silver Darlings*. Once again, the whole vision is an all-in view of national identity and national potential. The great precedent here is Walter Scott, writing about Scotland from the Borders to the archipelagos of Orkney and Shetland. One major twenty-first century novel taking the historical scenario of Scotland since the Second World War is James Robertson’s *And the Land Lay Still*. The epic scale of these works of fiction was self-consciously intended to address the matter of the nation. And the nation, in Scotland, means differences. To know who and what we are we have to find out about others. These works encourage healthy curiosity. What stands in the way of that impulse of enquiry are the

usurpers: oppressors, enemies, zombies. Even the dead are not safe from these enemies, when they win.

When Columba arrived in Scotland from Ireland, and when, before him, the Celtic warriors and lovers travelled between and throughout both countries, the foundations of a myth of kinship were laid down: kinship across differences. Let's call this a foundational myth of Scotland. The difference between peoples and the common things that connect us all are at the heart of it. Columba's legacy, through to the kingdom of Scotland in the time of Malcolm Canmore ("canmore" meaning "great leader"), was to endorse the understanding that a nation is made up of different groups, of languages, geographical areas, terrains, economies and cultural preferences. The early Celtic Church established this with the idea that the missionary was not coming among people to condescend to them and exploit their resources, but to live with others and give them his own expertise, freely. If Scotland is a major theme, the variousness of the nation's people is equally so. Liz Lochhead's poem "Something I'm Not" seems to set forth difference in its title, but that title is actually the poem's first line, so it goes on: "Something I'm Not // familiar with, the tune / of their talking..." and we begin to make the acquaintance of the poet's neighbours, a mother and her child, in a tentative, friendly way. They have come to Glasgow from somewhere far away, but the neighbourliness the poet expresses is encapsulated in the sympathetic question at the heart of the poem: "How does she feel?" – and with that, a kinship of sympathy is established. It's needed more than ever, these days.

Sir David Lyndsay's *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaits* (first performed the mid-16th century) is essentially a play about the difference between people of various economic, professional and religious strata, but its comprehensive picture is a presentation of national complexity, a searching exploration of the corruptions of civic Scotland, and the dynamics that were to lead to the Reformation. Once again, the worst aspects of Scotland lie in the dividedness of the people; the best are to be found in a confident, knowledgeable familiarity with their diversity and relatedness, a compassion for the worst-off, and a practical, reforming zeal to condemn hypocrisy and improve the way things are.

William Lithgow, travelling from Scotland throughout Europe and as far as Constantinople, while always attached to the home base in Lanarkshire, stays open to the experience of foreign territories. His experience of otherness and his appetite for it is unlike anything else in literature. He places himself in the most vulnerable positions and suffers terribly sometimes, yet his sense of connectedness to the whole human story is a main force running through his astonishing book, *The Totall Discourse of The Rare Adventures &*

Painefull Peregrinations of long Nineteene Yeares Travayles from Scotland to the most famous Kingdomes in Europe, Asia and Africa (1632).

Of all early twentieth-century Scottish writers, perhaps Norman Douglas embodies the spirit of the myth of kinship most challengingly. His novel *South Wind* (1917) is utterly devoted to the life of pleasure on the island of Capri in the Mediterranean, and would seem as far removed from Scotland as possible. Douglas's devotion to hedonism is not merely self-indulgent narcissism but a necessary corrective to the self-denials of Calvinism. The same nation that produced John Knox and the "Wee Free" Church, produced Ian Fleming, James Bond and his playgrounds in the Seychelles. There are many ways of being Scottish.

Kinship across difference is a deep myth, less obvious than the other early myth of Scottish identity: liberty, held in the image of the damned but defiant fighter: Braveheart and Edward, Scotland and England. It's a biblical trope: David and Goliath, except in the Bible (happily), David wins. When we meet Calgacus and his small army of warriors, resisting the encroaching, overwhelming might of imperial Rome, in the *Agricola* (98AD) of Tacitus, it's the same idea, but Rome overwhelms the resistance. It didn't quite happen that way, of course. Still, the nature of the opposition, the little guy against the bully, is perennially familiar. It may be projection to think that it underscores every one of the brief stanza-snaps in the kaleidoscope of martial disaster that is *The Gododdin*. The ideal of "Freedom" – conceived as independence from imperial English authority in the wars led by William Wallace and Robert the Bruce – was translated from historical event into literary artefact by John Barbour in *The Bruce* and Blind Harry in *The Wallace*, and into political rhetoric of the highest order in the *Declaration of Arbroath*. The posture recurs again and again. In the 18th century, Hamilton of Gilbertfield rewrites Harry's *Wallace* in a contemporary idiom, and Burns reads it fresh, and writes in an autobiographical letter of August 2, 1787 to Dr John Moore: "the story of Wallace poured a Scottish prejudice into my veins which will boil along there, till the flood-gates of life shut in eternal rest."

He writes his own version of Bruce's address to the troops at Bannockburn, in "Scots Wha Hae", providing an image of the defending Scots sending the invading army homeward to think again, that will reappear in the 20th century in the Corries' famous song, "Flower of Scotland". The danger, as usual, is cliché, but the corrective is there in that crucial sense of diversity. Scotland is not uniform. Geographical variety is one of the country's defining characteristics. Few nations contain so many vastly contrasting locations within such a short space of each other. Few cities are as different as Glasgow and Edinburgh, few archipelagos so different in character as Orkney and Shetland; every island in the Hebrides has an

individual feel and sound to it. The acoustics are different. A map of the country opens up so many forms of terrain and landscape, different kinds of nature: the long plains of Caithness, the Alpine mountain ridges of Skye, the lush fields of Perthshire, Ross-shire and the eerie landscapes of the Borders, dramatic Dumfriesshire and the benign hills of Ayrshire, the Rhinns of Galloway, the historical densities of Argyll, the vast extending fields and sharp edges of Aberdeenshire.

And the relation between people, land and economy is crucial, not to be defined by sublime Romantic notions of the spectacular or picturesque. A comprehensive review of Scottish literature would have to take into full account the relation between writing and specific terrain, geographies of land, sea and imagination. And there are affinities between cultural priorities in different places and times, extending far beyond Scotland. The exhilarating, anti-Romantic realism of Duncan Ban MacIntyre's poem "Praise of Ben Dorain" takes the form of a musical structure, a bagpipe pibroch, to describe the vigorous, crafty experience of hunting deer over the mountain slopes and through the woods. There is a shrewd balance or combination in the poem, of, on the one hand, respect for the spirit of other living creatures and our human place in the world beside them, and on the other, an understanding of the material reality that insists that the deer must be hunted, shot and used as good food. This calls to mind the words of the Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka (as reported in *The Times Literary Supplement*, April 11, 1997, p.16), whose laconic reply to the question posed in a radio programme about the place of animals in Utopia, was: "Mainly for hunting." While he loves a quiet wander in the forest, "it is marvellous when that peace is occasionally shattered by the sound of gunshot."

Few literatures are so heavily populated by writers who show particular care for specific places: the Edinburgh of Dunbar, Fergusson, Scott, Spark, Garioch, MacCaig, Ian Rankin; the Glasgow of Catherine Carswell, Archie Hind, Edwin Morgan, Alasdair Gray, James Kelman; the Borders of the Ballads, Burns, Hogg, MacDiarmid; the Hebrides of MacLean, Crichton Smith or Marie Hedderwick; the north-east of Grassie Gibbon, Violet Jacob, Marion Angus; the Orkney of George Mackay Brown, Edwin Muir, Eric Linklater; the Shetland of William J. Tait, Stella Sutherland, Christine de Luca, Jen Hadfield. Every school in Scotland might have a detailed map of their area showing all these literary links. The extent to which the superficialities of internationalised mass media and commercialism encroach upon such imaginative and linguistic sources of nourishment is obvious. But the legacy of this concern with the lived environment of people – most powerfully prioritised in the work of Patrick Geddes and Charles Rennie Mackintosh – is a deeply regenerating

sensitivity and commitment to the human ecology. This is closely described in the critical study by Louisa M. Gairn, *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature* (2008).

William McIlvanney once famously called Scotland a “mongrel nation” and was happily praised for doing so. Edwin Morgan’s exemplary lead in finding out what “others” are all about is a key to all the arts: in study and discovery, you exercise that most valuable thing, the intrinsic optimism of curiosity.

[Boxed off:]

***The Wallace* of Hamilton of Gilbertfield (c.1665-1751) neither sentimentalizes the violence of warfare, nor trivializes the ideals being fought for.**

**Now all is death and wounds; the crimson plain
Floats round in blood, and groans beneath its slain.
Promiscuous crowds one common ruin share,
And death alone employs the wasteful war.
They trembling fly by conquering Scots oppress’d,
And the broad ranks of battle lie defac’d;
A false usurper sinks in ev’ry foe,
And liberty returns with every blow.**

Burns transforms this into his own anthem:

**By Oppression’s woes and pains!
By your Sons in servile chains!
We will drain our dearest veins,
But they *shall* be free!**

**Lay the proud Usurpers low!
Tyrants fall in every foe!
LIBERTY’s in every blow!
Let us DO – OR DIE!!!**

The word ‘Usurper’ – someone who is taking the place of someone else who should

rightfully be there – is horribly resonant. Most memorably, it is the understated last word of the first section of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). In the stance of resistance to imposed authority, there is a political continuity that runs across conspicuously different ideologies, from Harry's Wallace and Barbour's Bruce of the Catholic millennium, to the Protestant Reformers, through to the Catholic Jacobites, then on to the Protestant Covenanters once again. Pride may be a liability in any such configuration, but self-determination is its heart.