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The Scottish Diaspora

Alan Riach

Last week our survey of travel writing in Scotland took us to the 1930s. Since then, a whole industry has grown up in the genre. Primarily anecdotal and light, George Scott-Moncrieff's *The Lowlands of Scotland* (1939), Halliday Sutherland's *Hebridean Journey* (1940) and T Ratcliffe Barnett's *Scottish Pilgrimage in the Land of Lost Content* (1942) are exercises in travel writing whose pleasure is picaresque and unstrained. Moray McLaren, in *Stern and Wild: A New Scottish Journey* (1948), relates his return and rediscovery of Scotland, offering a series of questions about the country and what might be made of it, in the wake of the Second World War. ARB Haldane, in *The Drove Roads of Scotland* (1952), seems to be on a similar quest, but this book connects back explicitly to a previous economy and social context, where priorities arose from different needs. As such, it is part of the reconstruction of a modern Scotland that understands its past more thoroughly than superficial travel accounts normally allow.

James Campbell's *Invisible Country: A Journey Through Scotland* (1984) takes its cue from Edwin Muir. Campbell follows a similar trail, eager but gloomy in his appetite for meeting ignorant, indifferent or hostile people, generally unimpressed by local distinctions, especially when close to the cities. In the south, he meets few people who seem to know anything about the literature, culture or history of the country they live in. In the north, though, he uncovers the current traces of the Clearances in memorials that show how memory can be made public, with effort and dedication. And these are not only memories worth celebrating, but memories that give us, in the 21st century, reasons to condemn things that are as awful now as they were then.

Jaunty entertainment characterises another retracing of previous trails, in *A Walk to the Western Isles after Boswell & Johnson* (1993) by Frank Delaney, while Alastair Scott, in *Native Stranger: A Journey in Familiar and Foreign Scotland* (1995), sets the terms of his encounters in his title. But SNP MSP Michael Russell's *In Waiting: Travels in the Shadow of Edwin Muir* (1998) has a different function: this is a voluntary "taking stock" of Scotland's resources, people and mood. It's an investigation that should be required of every one of our politicians, whether based in Edinburgh or London.

Particular motivation drives Iain Banks in *Raw Spirit: In Search of the Perfect Dram* (2003), taking us along well-known and unfamiliar roads in Scotland, from distillery to distillery with coruscating perceptions tossed out in happy cascades. Andrew Greig's *By the Loch of the Green Corrie* (2010) follows a mission prompted by Norman MacCaig a short while before his death, to find and go fishing in a small loch in the north-west of Scotland. But Greig's real search is for things in the land itself that connect him with MacCaig and modern Scottish poetry more broadly. The book enacts a deeper human need for things not easily disclosed in the modern world, wherever we are. And in the end, that's what all travel writing is for.

So what of travelers from Scotland, setting off to the wider world?

For hundreds of years, people from Scotland have settled in locations throughout the world and established their own lives and literatures across generations. James Hunter's book, *Scottish Exodus: Travels Among a Worldwide Clan* (2005), describes his encounters with many people of the clan MacLeod in America, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. Yet Exodus is a biblical term describing a movement of people to a new homeland; Diaspora, also a biblical term, describes the movement of people away from their homeland. For many who left Scotland, a new home was an ideal prospect, but for many, equally, the sense of leavetaking was not driven by choice and idealism, but economic necessity and brute force. In terms of Scottish literature, particular authors in many locations, writing in the context of different traditions, to a greater or lesser degree self-consciously, have identified their affiliations with Scotland.

The distinct tradition of poetry in Ulster Scots, in the north of Ireland, arose mainly on the foundations of the vernacular Scots tradition and the poems and songs of Burns. There are similar traditions in New Zealand and Gaelic traditions in Canada, the social context of which is nowhere more movingly described than in Alistair MacLeod's fine novel *No Great Mischief* (1999).

To name only a few of the writers of the 20th and 21st centuries for whom Scotland and Scottish literature are of personal and literary significance, there are Les Murray (b. 1938) and Chris Wallace-Crabbe (b. 1934) in Australia, Helen Adam (1909-93) in the Beat movement in America, Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1902-87) in Brazil, James K. Baxter (1926-72) and Bill Manhire (b. 1946) in New Zealand, Veronica Forrest-Thomson (1947-75)

in Cambridge, Douglas Oliver (1937-2000) in Cambridge and Paris, John Sutherland (b. 1938) and Mick Imlah (1956-2009) in London.

In the West Indies, some Scots were deeply involved in slave-trading while some maintained an anti-slavery position of remarkable moral authority. The pastoral tradition established in the overlap between Scottish and English literature in the 18th and 19th centuries, especially through the work of James Thomson, Burns, John Clare and Wordsworth, is related to the work of two of the earliest poets writing of the West Indies: James Grainger (c.1721-1766), whose 'Sugar-Cane' describes the workings of a sugar plantation, and James Montgomery (1771-1854), whose desire to see the abolition of the slave trade was expressed in a four-part poem in heroic couplets published in 1809, 'The West Indies'. The adventures described in Tom Cringle's Log (1834) by Michael Scott (1789-1835) have less moral scruple but vividly evoke the West Indies its author knew at first hand.

Mary Seacole (1805-1881) was the daughter of a Scottish army officer and a free black woman. She was born in Jamaica and served as a nurse for the British Army during the Crimean war, after which a benefit Festival in her honour was held in 1857 in Royal Surrey Gardens. On the opening page of her autobiography, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs Seacole in Many Lands* (1857), she wrote: "I am a Creole, and have good Scotch blood coursing through my veins. Many people have traced to my Scottish blood that energy and activity which are not always found in the Creole race, and which have carried me to so many varied scenes: and perhaps they are right." The recognition of hybridity in personal and literary identity is one of the essential themes of West Indian culture and has a salutary presence in much that has been written about postcolonial literatures generally. One effect it helps bring about is the destabilising of hierarchic patriarchal lines of descent. In New Zealand, in the 1980s and 1990s, Keri Hulme emphasized her mixed background, coming from Maori, white New Zealand and Scots Orkney people, partly to question the idea of the superiority of secure racial identity. And in modern West Indian writers with Scots connections, this understanding of the complexity of identity is paramount, most explicitly in the novels of Wilson Harris, but also in the poetry and theories of "nation-language" of Edward Kamau Brathwaite. Seamus Heaney, in *Stepping Stones* (2008), a book of interviews with Dennis O'Driscoll, draws attention to the affinity between this aspect of West Indian writing and Irish literature in ways that apply even more closely to Scottish literature, when you think of the relations between Gaelic, Scots and English: "There were obvious parallels between the cultural and political

situation in St Lucia [Derek Walcott's home island] in the second half of the twentieth century and the situation in Ireland in the first half. In both places the writers were furnished with two languages, the vernacular of the home and the idiom of the school, and the choice between them had political implications.”

For Scotland, read three languages. And now, not only Gaelic, Scots and English, but Polish and Urdu and other languages brought by more recent settlers. The political question to which Heaney draws attention is crucial in Scotland now as much as it was in Ireland then: “In Ireland in the 1920s, for example, you had a cultural nationalist critic like Daniel Corkery promoting a nativist line, saying that you weren't a truly Irish writer if you couldn't find the heart of the matter in the crowd attending a Munster hurling final; the post-independence requirement therefore was to practise the government of the tongue and deny the imperial modes and matter. And in the 1960s these pressures were in operation elsewhere, with a poet like Edward Kamau Brathwaite turning from ‘the voices of his education’ in English to the voicing of the Afro-English of the Caribbean, tuning his lines to the African drum rather than the iambic metronome. It was a playing out in a different time and place of the conflict Joyce had designated in Ireland between the ‘full stoppers and semi-colonials.’ I was interested, at any rate, in [Derek] Walcott's refusal to renege on the inherited English strain and admired him for trying to let the whole problem play out in his work, and pay into it.”

In other words, in Scottish terms, hybridity in language (the use of English as much as that of Scots and Gaelic) may be a strengthening component of our literary, cultural and indeed social identity. To do so it must be used not as a term of denigration, with overtones of racist or linguistic superiorism, but as a term of critical appraisal. Modern Scottish novels have contributed self-consciously to this process, among them, most notably, Joseph Knight (2004) by James Robertson, *The Quiet Stranger* (1991) by Robbie Kydd and *Illustrious Stranger: Journal of my Sojourn in the West Indies* (2006) by Andrew O Lindsay, which explores what might have happened had Burns in fact gone to Jamaica. The question has been taken further in scholarly studies of Burns's attitudes to slavery.

One of the best discursive explorations of the evolving presence of Scots at large is Billy Kay's *The Scottish World: A Journey into the Scots Diaspora* (2008), both a scholarly exposition and a personal account of discoveries. In the Prologue, Kay writes of how he came across a newsletter of the Caledonian Society of Hawaii from 1975, in which “a young man from Ayrshire” lists various novelists whose work is recommended “for Hawaiian readers”,

including Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, George Douglas Brown, Iain Crichton Smith, Fionn Mac Colla, George Mackay Brown and William MacIlvanney. Kay adds to this: “For too long we Scots were content to look to the past and perpetuate a romantic myth about the country. Attractive though the myth might be, it hinders the natural growth of the culture, for no one confronts the problems of the present in their thoughts and writing. The writers listed above are among those who tried honestly to be aware of the values of the past, but only as they touch the present and are relevant to the future. Books on tartan are fine, but books on people are better. Enjoy your reading and come to a closer understanding of Scotland at the same time.”

In *Scottish Exodus* (2007), James Hunter draws attention to the darker side of the extensive emigration from Scotland: “What will forever make emigration problematic, as far as Scots remaining in Scotland are concerned, is its unremittingly negative impact on the communities our hundreds of thousands of emigrants left behind.” Yet in the same book, he quotes Anne Grant writing in 1811, noting a sense of human connection through time that literature itself helps to reinstate, to the benefit of all: “No Highlander ever once thought of himself as an individual... He considered himself...with reference to those who had gone before, and those who were to come after him.”

Or as the Yoruba people of Nigeria might put it, the world of the living is always in the cradle of understanding, between both the world of the ancestors, and the world of the unborn.

Or as Malachy Tallack in *The Un-Discovered Islands* (2016) says of Hawaiki, described as “the original home” of the Maori people: “It is the place from which the spirit comes and to which it returns. It is the source and the destination. In some stories, it is also the place in which the very first human being was created, a kind of Eden, where gods still dwell.”

Or in Hugh MacDiarmid’s words in “Gairmscoile”: “we ha’e faith in Scotland’s hidden poo’ers, / The present’s theirs, but a’ the past and future’s oors.”