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Oddfellows: William Lithgow and Thomas Urquhart

Alan Riach

The first sentence of Rafael Sabatini's novel *Scaramouche* (1921) is one of the best ever written: "He was born with the gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad." The two writers we're considering today are like that.

In our essays on Scottish literature we've discussed a number of great writers – Robert Henryson, William Dunbar, Elizabeth Melville, Duncan Ban MacIntyre, Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair, Walter Scott, Hugh MacDiarmid and others, and we've talked about major themes that come up again and again. But there are other writers who don't easily fit with any pattern of great themes and don't seem central as "major authors" by virtue of the quantity, if not the quality, of their work. It would be a bad mistake to neglect such writers. Sometimes the most non-canonical authors bring unpredicted things and new ways of thinking, insights of unusual character, to our reading. Here are two of them.

First, Scotland's earliest most international traveller, a vagabond, possibly a spy: William Lithgow, otherwise known as "Lugless Will" (c.1582-after 1645). Then a translator, a chivalrous courtier, a soldier and prisoner-of-war, another traveller and a committed Rabelaisian: Sir Thomas Urquhart of Cromarty (1611-60). Their lives overlapped and extended through the 16th and 17th centuries. Each of them gives to Scottish literature unique and treasurable qualities.

William Lithgow is one of the most unusual characters in all literature, a world-traveller whose most famous work, *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) is an exhilarating account of his experiences.

Born in Lanarkshire, educated at Lanark Grammar School, he started travelling early, being possessed of what he calls "a large infusion of the wandering spirit common to his country-men." Lithgow's book describes a world of otherness: people, places, cultures, habits and ways of life. He was a tough, seasoned traveller, starting with trips to Orkney and Shetland, and going on to Germany, Paris, and then on the three major expeditions depicted in his *Totall Discourse*, taking him to Italy, Corfu, Greece, Crete, Constantinople, Aleppo, Palestine, Jerusalem, Egypt, Malta, Sicily, Ireland, Rome, Spain (where he was imprisoned as a spy by the Spanish Inquisition and severely tortured), and elsewhere, and finally back to Scotland. He was known as "Lugless Will" because his ears were cut off by the brothers of a young woman he was courting.

Edwin Morgan, in a lecture of 1990 published in the periodical *Chapman*, drew attention to what Lithgow himself called “the science of the world”: “this is it above all things that prefereth men to honours and the charges that make great houses and republics to flourish, and render the actions and the small words of them who possess it agreeable both to great and small. This science is only acquired by conversation and haunting the company of the most experimented: by divers discourses, reports, by writs, or by a lively voice, in communicating with strangers; and in the judicious consideration of the living with one another; and above all and principally by travellers and voyagers in divers regions and remote places, whose experience confirmeth the true science thereof and can best draw the anatomy of human condition.”

He encounters some of the best and worst specimens of humanity. The *Total Discourse* culminates in his capture by the Spanish Inquisition, who tortured him viciously. His description of this is horrifying: “Now mine eyes begun to startle, my mouth to foame and froath, and my teeth to chatter like to the doubling of Drummers stickes. O strange inhumanity of Men-monster Manglers!” When he finally made it home, he was crippled for life.

My destiny is such,

Which doth predestine me,

To be a mirror of mishaps,

A Mappe of misery.

Extreamely do I live,

Extreames are all my joy,

I find in deepe extreamities,

Extreames, extreame annoy.

This foreshadows the verse from Hugh MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), inscribed on his headstone at the cemetery in Langholm:

I’ll hae nae hauf-way hoose, but aye be whaur

Extremes meet – it’s the only way I ken

To dodge the curst conceit o’ bein’ richt

That damns the vast majority o’ men.

But it also adds depth to Lithgow's expression of love and affection for his native land. At the end of his book, he bids the reader farewell by acknowledging his own journeying in search of "the trueth of it": "The general computation of which dimmensious spaces, in my goings, traversings, and returnings, through Kingdomes, Continents, and Ilands, which my payneful feet traced over (besides my passages of Seas and Rivers) amounteth to thirty six thousand and odde miles, which draweth neare to twice the circumference of the whole Earth. And so farewell."

Lithgow's younger contemporary, Sir Thomas Urquhart was born into a family which held the sheriffdom of Cromarty. He shared the Royalist and Episcopalian views of his father, which meant that when the Civil War (1642-51) interrupted everything, he was on the losing side. He was among the ten thousand prisoners taken after the battle of Worcester (1651), imprisoned in the Tower of London and Windsor Castle, where he wrote copiously to prove his own worth and seek freedom, and began his translation of Rabelais. Tradition has it that he escaped from the Tower, travelled to the continent again, and "died suddenly in a fit of excessive laughter, on being informed by his servant that the King was restored."

It is as if Lithgow and Urquhart both had set out to discover and experience for themselves the furthest reaches of human capacity, for good or ill, seriousness and humour, at the risk of their own well-being. I don't know of any other writers quite like these two.

Urquhart's great writing was done in prison. In the *Pantochronachanon* (1652), he traces his genealogy elaborately through 153 generations back to Adam and Eve. In *The Jewel* (*Ekskybalaaron*) (1652) he portrays the Admirable James Crichton (1560-82), the exemplary Renaissance man whose exploits are described to astonish and inspire, mounting what Urquhart calls "a vindication of the honour of Scotland". This is made alongside severe castigation of the worst aspects of the Scots abroad, embodied in London bankers: "There hath been in London, and repairing to it, for these many years together, a knot of Scottish bankers, collybists [usurers], or coine-coursers, of traffickers in merchandise to and againe, and of men of other professions, who by hook and crook, fas et nefas, slight and might, all being as fish their net could not catch, having feathered their nests to some purpose, look so idolatrously upon their Dagon of wealth, and so closely, like the earth's dull center, hug all unto themselves, that for no respect of virtue, honor, kinred, patriotism, or whetever else, be it never so recommendable, will they depart from so much as one single peny, whose emission doth not, without any hazard of loss, in a very short time superlucrate beyond all

conscience an additional increase to the heap of that stock which they so much adore...” Not all their compatriots, Urquhart insists, are similarly “infected with the same leprosie of a wretched peevishness”: Scots are not all “quomodocunquizing cluster-fists and rapacious varlets”.

In Logopandecteis (1653) he describes a vision of a universal language which he promised was “contrived and published / both for his own utilitie, and that of all / pregnant and ingenious Spirits”. His version of the first two books of Rabelais’s Gargantua and Pantagruel appeared in 1653 and the third book was published posthumously in 1693, the translation later completed by Pierre Motteux. Like James Joyce’s Ulysses and Finnegans Wake, Urquhart’s work is “a farraginous outpouring”. His translation of Rabelais follows the original works in revealing and relishing the bodily world, the physicality of pleasure. It’s a celebration of corporeality in all its poise, appetite and propensity for self-extension, redolent with honest recognition of the facts of defecation, corruption and decay, thoroughly robust about the delights of the body.

To understand Urquhart, and have a sense of what he was extending and elaborating upon in his translation of Rabelais, you have to understand something of the great French writer too. He’s one of the world’s greatest writers, there with Shakespeare, Dante, Cervantes, Euripides and Aeschylus: you name them. Francois Rabelais (c.1494-1553) was a doctor in Lyon whose satirical pamphlets criticizing church and civic authority and his great books Pantagruel and its prequel Gargantua were condemned by the Roman Catholic Church as heretical. No wonder. Here is Gargantua’s father, translated by Urquhart: “Grangousier was a good fellow in his time, and a notable jester; he loved to drink neat, as much as any man that then was in the world, and would willingly eate salt meat; to this intent he was ordinarily well furnished with gammons of Bacon, both of Westphalia, Mayence and Bayonne; with store of dried Neats tongues, plenty of Links, Chitterlings and Puddings in their season; together with salt Beef and mustard, a good deale of hard rows of powdered mullet called Botargos, great provision of Sauciges, not of Bolonia (for he feared the Lombard boccone) but of Bigorre, Langaulnay, Brene, and Rouargue. In the vigor of his age he married Gargamelle, daughter to the King of the Parpaillons, a jolly pug, and well mouthed wench...” After a little while, to this happy couple a son is born: “The good man Grangousier drinking and making merry with the rest, heard the horrible noise which his sonne has made as he entered into the light of this world when he cried out, Some drink, some drink, some drink...” And after a large quantity of wine is poured into his “great and

nimble” throat, seventeen thousand, nine hundred and thirteen cows furnish him with a milk supply appropriate to his needs. Accordingly, the child is named Gargantua.

Gargantua and his own son Pantagruel are giants who, along with their friends Panurge and Brother Jean, are in search of the Divine Bottle, and food and material comfort adequate to their enormous appetites. One famous passage discusses the best kind of toilet-paper and concludes that a live goose swept between the legs while held by the neck is as close to perfect as human beings can get. Their search takes them to the Abbey of Theleme, which is equipped with swimming-pool, maid service and a conspicuous absence of clocks. The inscription upon the great gate of Theleme begins as follows:

Here enter not, religious boobies, sots,

Impostors, sniveling hypocrites, bigots:

Dark-brain distorted owls, worse than the Huns

Or Ostrogots; fore-runners of baboons:

Curs’d snakes, dissembling varlets, seeming sancts.

Slipshop caffards, beggars pretending wants;

Fomentors of divisions and debates,

Elsewhere, not here, make sale of your deceits.

Your filthy trumperies,

Stuff’d with pernicious lies,

(Not worth a bubble)

Would only trouble

Our earthly paradise.

Likewise banned from the Abbey are lawyers, demurrers, usurers and gold-graspers, while made welcome are all noble sparks, the brave, the witty, the honest, faithful and true, and ladies all “of humour gay and free”. Here the inhabitants spend all their lives “not in laws, statutes or rules, but according to their own free-will and pleasure.”

With luscious ease and shocking familiarity, Rabelais shows how humanity is healthily attracted to sensuality, and exposes the hypocrisy of those who would deny it. Yet the “creaturality” of his vision is also a moral correction of the exploitation so hideously indulged even more by our own contemporaries than by those of 16th-century France. Urquhart embellishes Rabelais and goes further. The translation is almost twice as long as the original, and full of lists. For example, where the Frenchman catalogues the noises of animals that break into the pleasant quiet of the countryside, he names nine of them, including the unlikely calls of elephants and snakes. Urquhart supplies us with the noises of seventy-one species, including “the drintling of turkies, coniating of storks,” the “rantling of rats” and the “snuttering of monkies”. Which leads one to reflect that Cromarty must have been an exceptionally curious corner of Scotland in the 17th century.

In any case, a national literature that boasts an author who died laughing has something going for it.

[Boxed off:]

William Lithgow was a Lanarkshire man, his international travels giving depth and authenticity to his expression of longing for his native country, county, and town of origin.

Would God that I might live,

To see my native Soyle:

Thrice happy in my happy wish,

To end this endless toyle:

Yet still when I record,

The pleasant bankes of Clide:

Where Orchards, Castles, Townes, and Woods,

Are planted by his side;

And chiefly Lanerke thou,

Thy countries Laureat Lampe:

In which this bruised body now

Did first receive the stampe.

Then doe I sigh and sweare,

Till death or my returne.

Still for to wear the Willow wreath,

In sable weed to mourne.

Since in this dying life,

A life in death I take,

Ile sacrifice in spight of wrath,

These solemne vows I make,

To thee sweet Scotland first,

My birth and breath I leave:

To Heaven my soule, my heart King James,

My corpse to lie in grave.

My staffe to pilgrims I,

And Pen to Poets send;

My haire-cloth roabe, and half-spent goods,

To wandering wights I lend.