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The National and the Arts of Scotland

On Friday August 25, at 4.30pm, the Edinburgh International Book Festival hosts an event entitled “Framing the Arts” with Alan Riach, Sandy Moffat and John Purser. (There’s also a “preview” event on Monday August 21 at 1.45pm in the Quaker House, 7 Victoria Terrace, Edinburgh.) We’ve been contributing articles to the newspaper regularly now since January 2016 and the EIBF event is also the launch of our book, *Arts and the Nation*, a collection of these essays from the first year. Here Alan Riach introduces the book and its central proposition.

When a new daily newspaper was launched in the wake of the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, it might have seemed doomed to failure: sales of hard-copy papers were sharply declining throughout Britain and the distinction of *The National*, displayed on its front cover, “The newspaper that supports an independent Scotland” branded it, for some, as a political cyclops. Both presumptions were proved wrong.

The *National* picked up a respectable readership and published articles and letters both approving and criticising Scotland’s potential as a resumed nation-state., showing no allegiance to any political party but addressing a major democratic deficit in the press. In the referendum, 45% of the electorate voted for independence but almost every mass media news outlet, all the daily papers and television news programmes explicitly or implicitly favoured the union.

In January 2016, Alan Riach, professor of Scottish literature at Glasgow University, began writing a weekly essay for the paper which has now appeared every Friday for more than a year, covering different areas of Scottish and international literature and the arts, sometimes in collaboration with the artist and former Head of Painting at Glasgow School of Art Sandy Moffat, sometimes introducing work on Scottish composers of classical music by composer and musicologist John Purser. The new book, *Arts and the Nation*, gathers a selection from the first twelve months of them.

The first essay is about one of the first Scots Makars, William Dunbar, but then less familiar Scottish poets like Duncan Ban MacIntyre, Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair and Elizabeth Melville, are considered alongside modern and contemporary international authors such as Wole Soyinka and Edward Dorn; Scottish artists like J.D. Fergusson, Joan Eardley and John Bellamy are introduced along with American Alice Neel and the art of the ancient

Celts; composers like John Blackwood McEwen, Cecil Coles and Helen Hopekirk are there beside discussions of education, political and social priorities, the role of TV and mass media, different genres of writing and a panorama of ideas about nationality and culture.

We'd like to acknowledge the risk taken by *The National* in publishing these essays. No other daily newspaper in Britain has covered arts subjects to such an extent and so regularly.

Let that sink in.

Target audiences are the object of commercial planning today to a degree unthinkable fifty years ago. Financial strategies endorse categories to help sell things: you know what you're getting, with specific papers, magazines, films, TV programmes, box sets, online information quests, so forth. But what about serendipity, going into a library and finding something you weren't looking for that turns out to be far more valuable than whatever you were trying to find? Boxed knowledge is what passes for professionalism these days. We've always been more interested in opening things out.

Newspapers don't usually allow this degree of freedom. Maybe it's something we can say about the movement for independence. It was certainly there in the Yes movement running up to the referendum in 2014. Once you are united in a common cause, and the cause is good, and once you're among people with a degree of professionalism and expertise you can trust, you can allow things to happen in concert without micromanaging and controlling everything to such an excessive degree that paranoia rules over energy. The latent liability in energy is anarchy, but when it's working in a direction with a sense of purpose like the independence movement, and according to the priorities of the arts, and not violence, there's a lot you can do. There's a lot of self-respect to be regained. There's a lot of fun to be had. There's a lot to be learned. And that's what we trusted to.

Our argument has always been that news of the arts is vital, the work of understanding what truths the arts can bring to people takes effort and time, is at odds with the instant gratification to which "rolling news" 24/7 is not just dedicated but enslaved. The distinction we were proposing, and that *The National* took on, was that all news of the arts, and pre-eminently literature, music and painting, would not only be helpful educationally, because most formal education in Scotland still tells pupils and students next to nothing about the nation's cultural history, but it would also be a crucial complement to 'news of the day'. Or, whatever

the “news of the day” is, its significance might be measured against what the arts have to tell us about humanity in its historical depth and geographical range.

Writers from Africa or America are sometimes going to be more relevant to immediate, pressing Scottish political questions than contemporary local commentators. And surely, calling on such resources is more useful, literally, than the embarrassment of “vox pop” soundbites TV and radio so stupidly gives us. When the newsreader says, “And what do the people in the street think?” and the microphone is thrust into the mouth of someone who knows nothing but has an opinion, the only sane response is to switch off. But the question remains: why do the programme makers do this? And why do they edit these responses to give a micro-climate of opinion not only at odds with informed opinion but incalculably different from anything a majority or even a fair variety of people might say? The obviousness of the manipulation is so blatant it’s taken for granted, and as such, becomes even more dangerous.

So we set ourselves to oppose this, in however small a degree. And *The National* took it on. It started with a promise to deliver essays irregularly but it quickly turned into a regular feature.

And the response has been astonishingly positive. The very first essay prompted a letter to the editor: “How fantastic to see an article about William Dunbar in a mass circulation paper.” One Member of the Scottish Parliament commented: “To think we have lived to see cultural writing in a Scottish newspaper again – a time of marvels.” Over the year, there were further approvals. A poet and university professor said: “I’m glad we have a paper capable of running such articles [especially when teaching] bewildered students who sense there is/was a Scottish culture, but know of nothing beyond the last decade.” Another writer emailed: “We don’t get enough well-thought out analyses like [this] of the Scottish cultural and linguistic world and explanation of our myths...” There were many others.

Our priorities and commitments were firmly and happily confirmed when we read the comment by the Edinburgh-born, Aberdeen-educated Westminster Conservative Member of Parliament for Surrey Heath, England, Michael Gove, who “tweeted” to the public at 11.44pm on 6 December 2016: *The National* is “the worst newspaper in the world!”

Each essay in this book is a fresh take on new and old subjects, addressed to as wide a readership as possible. They arise from the conviction that the new Scotland we might imagine and help bring into being can never be really democratic unless it gives the arts the priorities

of place and attention they demand. As Ed Dorn said of his shorter poems, “Take them in the spirit of the Pony Express: light but essential.”

So, where to begin?

The five senses are our first modes of perception: hearing, sight, touch, smell, taste. Together, and in language, intellectual apprehension of the world becomes possible. They connect. They are different things, but not entirely separate from each other, just as the arts are different things, but never entirely cut off from each other. All the arts involve writing and reading, in the widest sense: writing as in composition, creation, production, publication, and reading as in attentive analysis, interpretation, conversation, comparisons and contrasts. Specialists abound in each specific area, but we should never overlook the connections between all the specialisms, the fact that they arise from our common human being, our senses and our sense.

John Berger famously began his seminal work, *Ways of Seeing* (1972) by noting that seeing comes before words. But hearing comes before seeing. If there is a normal natural sequence of biological development in human sensual sensitivity, it has to be from sound, through visualisation, to verbalisation and the use of language. This is not to suggest hierarchies of authority, but it is to root our intellectual work in the physical and creatural reality of our humanity.

Touch, taste, smell, are literally immediate, but hearing, seeing and reading meanings – whether in literature, musical compositions or paintings – admits metaphoric understanding, analogy, simile, metaphor: in short, connections between literal things. These connections might emphasise the differences between things, or they might demonstrate the affinities between things, and sometimes they’ll do both.

All this is to explain partially why, at the heart of this book, pre-eminence is given to three forms of creative expression: literature, music and painting. Each embodies a vital aspect of human creativity, each arises from common human creatural life, and each connects to the others in ways we often take so much for granted that we forget the complex investment required in experience and education to make good sense of them.

The modern world is dense with signals: constant streams of sounds and images, information false and true: these water-board us all the time. Most of them are decoys. Most distract us from the real. Art commands its own time, our submission to its lasting authority,

our healthy appetite to engage with its manifestations directly, to ask questions of it, both irreverently and respectfully, to learn what it has to give. That's the essential difference between art and advertising: the latter is designed to take, the former to give – but you have to learn how to get the most from its gifts.

So what does the “work” of art offer?

Start with painting and John Berger's answer is this: ‘Painting is, first, an affirmation of the visible which surrounds us and which continually appears and disappears. Without the disappearing, there would be perhaps no impulse to paint, for then the visible itself would possess the surety (the permanence) which painting strives to find. More directly than any other art, painting is an affirmation of the existent, of the physical world into which mankind has been thrown.’

We might describe music from a different corner, paraphrasing Berger: Music is, first, an affirmation of the invisible which surrounds us and which continually appears and disappears. Music never really ends, though, it simply becomes inaudible, then it rises again from the depths like the beginning of Sibelius's Seventh Symphony, or comes to you as if with the dawn, light slowly rising out of darkness, emptiness and space, as in the opening of William Wallace's ‘Creation’ Symphony. More directly than any other art, music is an affirmation of the potential which such movements enact, of the immaterial world we can sense beyond, and crucially through, the material world of performers, conductors, concert halls and audiences, real people in real places with real instruments, working.

Literature, poetry especially, but all stories and songs, partake of both that permanent sense of the visible that painting affirms, and that equally permanent sense of the invisible movements we can hear affirmed by music. It is both still structure and always moving, always at play.

In the same essay, Berger goes on to say something crucial that applies to all artists, composers of music, writers of literature, alike: “The modern illusion concerning painting (which post-modernism has done nothing to correct) is that the artist is a creator. Rather he is a receiver. What seems like creation is the act of giving form to what he has received.”

The great Irish artist Jack Yeats said something similar in more vernacular terms: “The novelist who respects his workshop more than life, can make breasts heave, and arms wave, and even eyes flash, but he cannot give his people pulses. To me, man is only part of a splendour

and a memory of it. And if he wants to express his memories well he must know that he is only a conduit. It is his work to keep that conduit free from old birds' nests and blowflies.”

This book is in the service of that freedom.