



University
of Glasgow

Riach, A. (2017) Before MacDiarmid changed Scottish literature, there was the Kailyard. *National*, 2017, 29 Sept.

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/161626/>

Deposited on: 01 May 2018

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Beyond the Kailyard: Part One

Before Hugh MacDiarmid galvanised the Scottish Literary Renaissance into existence in the 1920s, the prevailing school in Scottish writing has been described as “Kailyard” but a closer look at writers associated or contemporary with this group reveals very different directions of purpose than might be supposed. In Part One of a three-part series, Alan Riach begins his revaluation of these writers with R.M. Ballantyne, David Rorie, S.R. Crockett, Ian Maclaren, J.M. Barrie, Neil Munro and Marion Angus.

Kail is a green vegetable like cabbage and the word kailyard means “cabbage-patch” or vegetable garden, an essential in self-sustenance in late 19th- and early 20th-century Scottish small-town or village life. The implication is that in the communities of Scotland, people grow their own and look after themselves quite happily; domestic virtues prevail in little societies presided over by minister and schoolteacher. In this world, sentimentalism and small-mindedness go alongside anti-intellectualism and evade the difficult questions. Novels, stories and poems of the “Kailyard School” (especially the fiction of the minister Ian Maclaren and the poems collected in the “Whistlebinkie” anthologies) are characterised by respect for community values, social conservatism, political unionism and subservience to the authorities of church, state and education. Genuine as such virtues may have been to many, and commercially successful as they clearly proved, they don’t match the tide of feeling that the end of the Victorian era and the rise of the modern world came to embody. We live and learn.

In Scotland and more generally, children’s literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries may have sought to inculcate imperial certainty, to confirm that being patriotically Scottish is a good component part of British identity, and to keep your attention diverted from mad desires and unpredicted wildness. Thus is the status quo maintained, as children become adults. In this respect, the children’s novels by R.M. Ballantyne (1825-94), most impressively *The Coral Island* (1858) and *The Gorilla Hunters* (1861), were part of a unionist, conservative ideology. In the former, boys marooned on a desert island adapt themselves nobly, resourcefully and with common purpose, making the best of things; in the latter, intrepid big-game hunters penetrate darkest Africa, with the main purpose of shooting gorillas and taking corpses, or bits of corpses, back as trophies. The courage of both groups, boys and men, in each novel, their integrity and unwavering self-confidence, are appalling to

most modern readers, as we understand the extent to which they are driven by imperial self-righteousness, extreme racism, and unrestrained self-gratifying destructiveness. The profound liabilities in their behaviour are indicated by the extent to which William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) is a reimagining of Ballantyne's other famous novel, *The Coral Island*, but they also suggest the reason why so many major Scottish writers of the early 20th century found the Kailyard as a defining idea so abominable. The implicit assumptions of these fictions have their foundations in unquestioned imperialist priorities, and these have direct political consequences.

Yet there is more in the Kailyard writers than such absolute condemnation allows, whether in the jocular and ironic humour of poems such as "The Pawky Duke" by David Rorie (1867-1946), or in the fiction of those writers most closely associated with the term, S.R. Crockett and Ian Maclaren. J.M. Barrie and Neil Munro, often linked to the Kailyard, are not at all contained by what the label implies.

The novels of S.R. Crockett (1859-1914) are varied. *The Raiders* (1894) and *The Grey Man* (1896) are adventure stories set in Galloway, the latter with the 18th-century cannibal family of Sawney Bean as central villains. *The Lilac Sunbonnet* (1894) and *The Stickit Minister* (1893) are rural romances and gently satirical sketches of the church in small-town Scotland, where melodrama and moral fortitude prevail. Urban Edinburgh is the setting for *Cleg Kelly, Arab of the City* (1896), which begins with Kelly's astonishing exclamation that throws his entire Sunday-school congregation into astonished silence: "'It's all a dumb lie! – God's dead!'" The words repudiate the Sunday-school teacher's comment that God sees all, punishes the bad and rewards the good. On this assumption, the Kailyard school of benevolent fiction, boy's own adventures or small-town homiletics, rested. But clearly, even Crockett (a minister himself and paragon of Kailyard sensibility) seems to have encountered Nietzsche.

Ian Maclaren (1850-1907) was the pen-name of John Watson. Educated at Edinburgh University and ordained as a Free Church of Scotland minister, he worked in Logiealmond, Perthshire and Glasgow, before a long residence in Liverpool. He published religious works under his own name but his first fiction collection, *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* (1894) established him at the centre of the Kailyard school. The book is a series of interconnected stories, set in the village of Drumtochty, where Church affairs and piety are the focus of attention. Any bright young man aspiring to an education may win out to university, and any

elderly member of the community may stay resident and gain a wealth of local wisdom, but both will end up on their deathbeds, either taken off too early or passing on in the fullness of time, presided over by a weeping mother or devoted descendants, under the minister's spiritual guidance.

Between the extremes of Kailyard and anti-Kailyard stands J.M. Barrie (1860-1937). Barrie was born in Kirriemuir, the son of a hand-loom weaver, the small town in the north-east of central Scotland he fictionalised as Thrums. He went to school in Glasgow, Forfar and Dumfries, took an MA from Edinburgh University and worked as a journalist in Nottingham before basing himself in London from 1885. He began writing stories and novels, then turned to plays, including *Quality Street* and *The Admirable Crichton* (both 1902) and probably the most famous children's play ever written, *Peter Pan* (1904) The poignancy of the idea of the boy who would never grow up resonates throughout his career.

Barrie's fiction and plays make up a complex, significant body of work, a greater achievement than many critics have allowed until recently. His early books, including *Auld Licht Idylls* (1888) and *A Window in Thrums* (1889), gather stories and sketches evidently defining Kailyard conventions: a benign world of small-town Scotland presided over by the local minister and wise schoolteacher or dominie. Summers are warm and sunny, winters cosy by the fireside. But his novels *Sentimental Tommy* (1896) and its sequel *Tommy and Grizel* (1900) take the conventions and wilfully destroy them. Tommy, the bright young man of the small town, goes to London to make his fortune, but fails to realise his ambitions, either socially or in love, and at the end of *Tommy and Grizel*, hangs himself accidentally in a horrifying moment of futility. This desperately pitying aspect of Barrie's work is less well-known.

His late ghost-story *Farewell, Miss Julie Logan* (1931) is the most haunting and powerful of all his works. A small-town minister, Adam Yestreen (his name boldly declares that he is from and of the past), reveals, in an extended first-person narrative, the ambiguous and tempting world that surrounds him. The community of people he finds himself among prompts his disclosures, revelations of his own unstated desires for the sensual, the sexual, the world of art and shapely forms. Austerity is not enough. Liberated habits displayed by the annual English tourists bring out the contrasts: Andrew is envious, at first seems disdainful, claiming moral superiority, but begins to see the flaw and lack in himself, recognising his own need for the beautiful Julie Logan. An actual, physical need and a spiritual longing play

against each other in the elusive, palpable energies of the novella, reminiscent of the ambiguities of *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. Yet where Hogg is dark and his novel is ultimately tragic, Barrie is poignant. The novella retains a sense of tempered wonder and the inescapable good purpose of human imagination. Julie Logan herself is one of Scottish literature's mythical figurations of a lost, unattainable past, a figure of youth, of childhood and arcadia, a reminder of how much potential is wasted by adults, yet also a symbol of a present, haunting, perhaps still imaginable future. She is Scotland's Lolita. This is Barrie at his ambivalent best.

Neil Munro (1863-1930) was the illegitimate son of a kitchen-maid and it's been suggested that his father was an aristocrat from the house of Argyll. He was born and schooled in Inveraray and went to work in the office of the Sheriff-clerk of Argyll. Writing was his trade and he moved to Glasgow and a career in journalism, becoming the assistant-editor of the Glasgow *Evening News*. He retired from full-time journalism around 1902 but continued to write a weekly column for the *News* in which his most famous creations appeared in a series of short stories: his "droll friend" Archie, the commercial traveller Jimmy Swan and the best-loved Para Handy, irascible skipper of the *Vital Spark*, a puffer – a small boat – chortling through the waters of the Clyde estuary and the inner Hebridean seas, a merchant vessel for hire, whose nautical inadequacies call for special reserves of humour and resources of intelligence that bourgeois employers or admiralty officials might not suspect. Para Handy and his crew were loved companions for generations who read the stories and saw the television versions in more than one series, and recognised the big-screen version in the carefully-poised film *The Maggie* (1954). The stories are less easily given to sentimental coherence than the television series and the film, though they present reliable figures and structures as any genre series must. All Munro's stories have a good journalist's eye for light but serious social comment on events of the day.

Munro's fiction has often been grouped with Maclaren and Crockett as a Highland version of the Kailyard priorities of the pieties of small-town Scotland, but, as with Crockett and Barrie, close reading opens up greater depths and complexities. *The Lost Pibroch* (1896) collected his short stories and *John Splendid* (1898) began a series of novels describing the Highlands at the precise turning point of a Gaelic world being lost to compromised modernity. Munro's Highlanders are often vain, self-serving, mean-minded and desperately fallible. In *Gilian the Dreamer* (1899), a memorable episode recounts Gilian's failure to act at a moment of crisis due to his imaginative disposition. His dreaminess and hesitancy spring

the trap of misapprehension that closes on him through the book in a way very similar to the ambiguous haunting of Lord Jim, in Conrad's novel. That Munro and Conrad were friends and had discussed this proposition may not be accidental.

Munro's central theme is change in the Highlands. Instead of the placatory nostalgia often found in Maclaren and Crockett, there is a subdued anger and sometimes bitter resignation in Munro. *The New Road* (1914) has a fine portrait of malevolent intent in the villain, Simon Fraser of Lovat. Building the new road through the Highlands in 1733, between the Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745, will establish southern control of the indigenous people and, it is threatened, subdue any independent spirit. But Munro knows that the new road will become an old road in time, with its own ghosts and hauntings.

Munro's son was killed during World War I and although he continued in journalism through the war years, his later output diminished. Hugh MacDiarmid included his poems in the anthologies *Northern Numbers* in the early 1920s and by that time he was recognised as a senior figure in Scottish letters. He died in 1930 and is buried in Kilmalieu Cemetery, Inveraray and there's a fine monument on the hill overlooking the town. It's worth the climb.

The quiet life story of Marion Angus (1866-1946) belies the linguistic and narrative complexity of her poems. Her father was a Presbyterian minister and her mother came from the Borders. Born in Aberdeen, she spent her childhood in Arbroath but after her father's death, she returned to Aberdeen and lived there with her mother and sister for the rest of her life. Her poems, collected in various books through the 1920s and 1930, arise from traditional ballads, observing metre, narrative development, characterisation and tension, but they show a modern woman's sensibility at work in their deployment of hidden or oblique stories, a rich and unpretentious fluency with the Scots language, a strength of character and independence of mind that seems self-sufficient without recourse to abstraction or philosophy or the intrusions of ego. She refers to particular places and familiar characters of the north-east but she refutes conventional expectations. In "The Turn of the Day" the arrival of spring does not deliver hopeful renewal. Grief, loss and loneliness are poignantly expressed through understatement, in voices that tell their own stories without embellishment. Angus was also a fine writer of poems in English. Her portrait of Mary Queen of Scots, "Alas! Poor Queen" is beautifully poised, catching the vulnerability and graceful cultural resonance of a woman often crudely caricatured in popular perception. Angus's poems evoke unfinished stories, mysterious encounters, tales of lives unfulfilled: their restraint is part of their pathos.

And that deliberately unsentimental pathos is essential to all these writers at their best.
They knew their world was coming to its end.