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## **Sport and God – our twin obsessions**

**Alan Riach**

Religion and sport are not major themes in modern Scottish literature. That's surprising, perhaps, because they're major presences in Scottish life.

Looked at from distant countries, the United Kingdom seems distinctly characterised by two things, both of them absurd: the class system and the royal family. Focus more closely on Scotland and the two things that seem to pervade the lives of many people in one way or another are religion and sport. Deep contexts and questions of religious sectarianism are in the strata, conspicuous by their absence in most popular culture. One of the funniest and most horrible scenes in *T2: Trainspotting* is exceptional in this regard. Then there's the vastly disproportionate amount of attention given to "sport". How would it be if as much time on TV "news" programmes and page-space in newspapers were given to serious accounts of the arts as is currently given to "sport"? We'll leave that question hanging. Since our subject is literature, we should focus on that, and the odd thing is that our writers have dealt so infrequently with these subjects. The exceptions prove the rule.

There's a famous anonymous four-line mediaeval poem that describes "The Bewteis of the Fute-Ball":

Brissit brawnis and broken banis,

Strife, discord and waistis wanis,

Crookit in eild, syne halt withal –

Thir are the bewteis of the fute-ball.

That about sums it up. Then there's Dunbar's poem about the Friar of Tunland, Damian Damiani, who seems to have made an early attempt at hang gliding (with feathered wings) from Stirling Castle and crunched to earth (Edwin Morgan picks him up in his *Sonnets from Scotland* sequence). Dunbar's younger contemporary Gavin Douglas, in his translation of

Virgil's *Aeneid*, *The Eneados*, included vivid accounts of public sporting contests, a foot race, a boat race and a boxing contest from the funeral games section in Book 5. In 2014, when Glasgow hosted the Commonwealth Games, the Scottish Poetry Library and Glasgow University produced a little anthology of these episodes, in Douglas's original, sinewy Scots alongside an immediately accessible modern English translation by the Latin scholar David West. A few copies of *The Games* are still available for purchase from the SPL at:

<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/shop/catalogue/games>

David Lyndsay's *Satyre of the Three Estaitis*, of course, is the great engagement with the religious and political world on the eve of the Reformation, and Walter Scott's *Old Mortality* explores fanaticism and moderation, while *Ivanhoe* is centrally about racism amongst Normans, Jews and Saxons, confronting codes of chivalry and the violence of jousting with social and religious prejudices that were sweeping through all of Europe, both at the time the novel was written and when it is set. Religion and politics are the same thing in these works, or at least, inextricable from each other. This was likewise the case in the great disruption in the Church of Scotland in 1843, the subject of Robin Jenkins's novel, *The Awakening of George Darroch* (1985).

In the 20th century, as a young man, Hugh MacDiarmid considered converting to Catholicism, but then maintained a fierce atheism and materialism confirmed in the shocking, deeply consoling materialist elegy "Crystals Like Blood" and explored thoroughly and remorselessly in his crucial poem, "On a Raised Beach". Marshall Walker's description of MacDiarmid in his book, *Scottish Literature since 1707* (1996), is precise: he was "sending out from the unforgiving disappointment of his atheism playful or intensely searching feelers to the space where God was."

"Disappointment" isn't a word we easily associate with MacDiarmid, but it's accurate here. If his political effort was to redress the disappointing, mealy-mouthed half-heartedness of so many of his compatriots, there's a much deeper, more spiritual, materialist and philosophical context for his enquiry too. Darwin and Nietzsche lead straight into it. His early poem, "The Fool" says it in brief:

He said that he was God

"We are well met," I cried,

“I’ve always hoped I should

Meet God before I died.”

I slew him then and cast

His corpse into a pool,

– But how I wish he had

Indeed been God, the fool!

Fionn Mac Colla, Compton Mackenzie, George Mackay Brown and Muriel Spark all converted to Catholicism, and Mackenzie’s book *Catholicism and Scotland* (1936) remains a valuable extended literary musing on the subject. Yet the surprising fact remains that in the later 20th and early 21st centuries, there were almost no Catholic writers telling stories about the experience of Catholics in Scotland. Again, the exceptions prove the rule.

The title of Tom Leonard’s poem “The Good Thief”, from *Six Glasgow Poems* (1969), refers to the two thieves said to have been crucified on either side of Christ, the lesson being not to despair because one of them was saved, but not to be complacent either, because one of them was damned. However, the poem represents a speech ostensibly delivered by a supporter of Celtic football team to a companion who appears to have fallen, comatose with drink, on the floor of a bar. In the midwinter context of a New Year’s Day game between the teams, Celtic (predominantly Catholic) and Rangers (predominantly Protestant), the two of them have been drinking heavily before going to the match, and the speaker notices that it’s “nearly three a cloke thinoo”: winter dark is coming down. He concludes: “good jobe they’ve gote thi lights”: that is, the floodlights at the stadium.

Theresa Breslin’s remarkable novel for young adults *Divided City* (2005) programmatically but with sharp effectiveness addresses religious sectarianism in Glasgow and takes us through a number of issues raised by religious bigotry, prejudices and commonplace assumptions that lead to incomprehension and violence. Liam McIlvanney’s novel *All the Colours of the Town* (2009) and its sequel *Where the Dead Men Go* (2013) deal directly with Catholic-Protestant violence in Glasgow and Belfast, the interconnections between the two cities and the religious culture of both Scotland and Ireland, while taking the

form of thriller or detective genre fiction, with the main character an investigative newspaper reporter. These are rare examples of novels that take religious sectarianism as a central subject.

The Irish novelist Colm Toibin, in his book, *The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe* (1995), devotes one chapter to a sojourn in Scotland, in which he talks to a journalist about the mid-1990s literary urban scene: “Do you mean, I asked him, that all of the writers, with their street credibility and their working-class heroes, are Protestants? Yes, he said. And do you mean that no one has ever raised this matter? Correct, he said. And do you mean that most people do not think this is a significant fact? Correct, once more.”

The one Catholic writer Tobin made contact with was Thomas Healy, author of two novels: *It Might Have Been Jerusalem* (1991) and *Rolling* (1992), and a book about boxing, *A Hurting Business* (1996), and a memoir, *I Have Heard You Calling in the Night* (2006). These books are raw and painful, full of loneliness, despair, resilience and hopelessness. Imagine Charles Bukowski entirely stripped of humour, and with appetite turned to compulsion. They are moving and significant, isolated instances.

There are a few further exceptions to note. The work of the poet Peter McCarey, which was published by small presses since the 1980s, until Carcanet Press published his *Collected Contraptions* (2011), arises from his Catholic Glasgow experience, though it does not depend upon it and rarely describes it specifically. James Kelman, whose novel *Kieron Smith, Boy* (2008), subtly and sensitively and with consummate skill, describes the experiences of a Protestant boy with a Catholic name, his family, friends and social circumstance. The same question of social displacement had arisen in Kelman’s earlier novel *A Disaffection* (1989), whose main character is named Patrick Doyle.

And there is Edwin Morgan, who once commented that sport was probably the most difficult thing about which to write well, perhaps thinking of Alan Bold’s sequence of poems about Scottish footballers, *Scotland, Yes! World Cup Football Poems* (1978). When challenged to produce the worst sporting poem ever written, Morgan obliged with a small-press rare publication entitled *The South Sea Brotherhood: A Poem from the Fort Baskerville Golf Club* (1989). However, Morgan also tackles the matter of spirituality – rather than religion – directly in two major works written at the end of the millennium: a sequence of poems entitled *Demon* (1999) and *A.D.: A Trilogy of Plays on the Life of Jesus Christ* (2000). The latter succeeded in offending senior representatives of both Catholic and Protestant churches. His poem

“Pelagius”, from the book, Cathures (2002), affirms his belief in the Pelagian heresy: there is no such thing as original sin, and the future belongs to the future’s generations, where they will do what they will, with “only human grace”.

That sense of what is “only human” informs the myth of kinship across differences which Morgan endorses. Perhaps there is an affinity with historical early Celtic Christianity, exemplified in the journey of St Columba from Ireland to Scotland in 563 AD. Only by being out of sight of Ireland could he do his work in Iona. This is the last verse of Edwin Morgan’s translation of Columba’s poem, the “Altus Prosator” or “The Maker on High”:

Zabulus burns to ashes all those adversaries  
who deny that the Saviour was Son to the Father  
but we shall fly to meet him and immediately greet him  
and be with him in the dignity of all such diversity  
as our deeds make deserved and we without swerve  
shall live beyond history in the state of glory.

That phrase – “the dignity of all such diversity” – is a rejection of uniformity and an affirmation that human variousness is a benison enabling human dignity. Securing such an understanding was heroic work, whether undertaken by a 6th-century Christian missionary or a 20th-century middle-class gay Scottish poet.

Des Dillon was born and grew up in a Catholic family in Coatbridge, one of the darkly sectarian post-industrial heartlands of Lanarkshire, and his fiction, plays and poems frequently address his experience directly. Sport and religion come together in his play *Singin’ I’m No’ a Billy, He’s a Tim* (2005), written for three actors, a dialogue between two religion-and-sport fanatics locked up in a prison cell on the day of a football match between the teams each supports (Rangers and Celtic, again). The mediating figure is the turnkey, Harry, who keeps in the background but supplies a constant tone of human compassion as he speaks intermittently on the phone, asking about his grandson, in hospital undergoing an operation. The lurid language, wild humour, violent aggression and, finally, shared sympathy of the two main characters, infuse the overall structure of the play. It is a comic play, ultimately leading to reconciliation, so the idealistic hope presented at the end might seem formulaic. But there’s nothing easy about what it presents.

Alex Gray's crime novel *Pitch Black* (2008) is a similar example of a work tackling a sports subject rarely directly addressed in literature. It's a generic "police procedural", with Gray's familiar characters, Detective Chief Inspector Lorimer and his friend the psychologist and criminal profiler Solomon Brightman. But the exploration of the novel takes us into the world of football in a way readers with a healthy lack of interest in sport of any kind might find compelling.

Perhaps the one major novel centred crucially on football is Robin Jenkins's *The Thistle and the Grail* (1954). Harry Reid, former sportswriter and editor of *The Herald*, has an excellent introduction in the Birlinn edition (2006). *The Thistle*, the local football team in a dismal Lanarkshire town, is down on its luck. Players' morale is low as they have to deal with a hopeless president, a conniving policeman, a pious minister and their justly sceptical wives. They hold on to "the beautiful game" as a last ideal. Then they start to win and their fortunes begin to turn, raising the expectations of their community. They set their hearts on the Grail, the Scottish Junior Cup. Being a Robin Jenkins novel, ambiguities abound: real hope and severe scepticism compete to pollute or temper the vision of the novel and nothing is carried through with simple conviction.

And maybe that's the answer to the question why there's so much more religion and sport (in one form or another) in Scottish social life than in our literature. These two strange forms of human activity are usually designed to produce confirmations. Pick a team. Cheer for the goals against the other side. Literature and the arts, at their best, help us ask questions, to find things out about the other sides, to see things from other points of view, to want better, and to work out how to make that betterment real.