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# Fishy Masculinities?

Valentina Bold

*Gendering the Nation. Studies in Modern Scottish Literature*  
Christopher Whyte, Editor  
Edinburgh University Press.

*Gendering the Nation* is, by intent and content, highly provocative. Whyte begins by asserting: 'this collection ... serves notice Scottish texts are being read in new, disruptive, and not frequently discordant ways and the world had better sit up and pay attention'. The essays are passionate examinations of 'gender allegiances' within the national context. They champion creative writers (primarily from the nineteenth century onwards) considered to belong to, or write about, 'marginal groups': 'women ... black, lesbian, gay'. This is preaching to the unconverted and, at times, I felt an irritating sense of being patronised. On the whole, though, *Gendering the Nation* is hugely enjoyable.

Established writers are vigorously addressed from new perspectives. R.D.S Jack's meticulous 'Barrie and the Extreme Heroine' rejects modern dogma about Barrie as reactionary and disturbed. By looking at plays like *The Ladies Shakespeare* (1913), *Little Mary* (1903) and *The Adored One* (1913) Jack discerns a 'forward looking' presentation of women. This is qualified by noting Barrie's progressive adaption of texts to conservative demands. Parallel points are made in Adrienne Scullion's 'Feminine Pleasures and Masculine Indignities'. Scullion mentions Barrie's 'surprisingly sustained critique of the construction of gender' especially in comparison with later exponents of the 'gendered communities of Scottish drama', like Roddy McMillan, John Byrne and Sue Glover. In 'Men, Women and Comrades', Jenni Calder considers Naomi Mitchison's fiction of the 1920s and 30s. She skilfully illustrates Mitchison's vision of relationships between men and women which stresses, above all, comradeship.

Neglected writers, and the well-known, are treated with equal respect in Edwin Morgan's imaginative 'Scottish Trawl' through our 'gay literary history'. Those considered include the poet David Gray (1838-61), dramatist C.J.B. Birrell (fl. 1889-1917) and John Henry Mackay (1864-1933), the last a poet and polemicist appreciated by MacDiarmid and now receiving attention in America. A

'marked homoerotic feel' is discerned in Fergusson's 'Auld Reikie', investing the poem with new resonances. There are playful speculations too, regarding Fergusson's possible membership of the 'Beggar's Benison' club. This organisation interpreted the traditional thanks for alms - 'May prick and purse never fail you' - in a literal way.

Morgan's observations about the particular appeal of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* to gay readers (such as Gide) may over-simplify a complex text. Even so, the suggestion a 'painful homophilia' informs Hogg's narrative structure is fascinating. The dysfunctional Colwan family are displayed in a new light, devoting attention to the 'intense bonding' of the novel's brothers, and 'quasi-erotic attraction' between Wringhim and Gilmartin. This rereading suggests new possibilities for *The Confessions* descendants, such as *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Indirectly, too, Morgan supplies an unsuspected possibility regarding Hogg's long-sustained bachelorhood.

Among the alternative literary models proposed here is Alison Smith's 'modernist canon' of Carswell, Shepherd and Muir. In 'And Woman Created Woman' Smith presents these writers as powerful precursors of modern writers like Anne Smith, Janice Galloway and A.L. Kennedy. Arguing from their explorations of 'gender deadlock' Smith makes a convincing case for the stature of her subjects. However she risks reducing her triumvirate to solely gender-related terms. Crucial thematic concerns are overlooked: landscape and community; class; religion and the repressive Calvinism featured by Carswell and Muir in particular. Nor was I wholly convinced by the presentation of Muir as pioneer. Her concept (and description) of 'a damn fine woman' in *Imagined Corners* (1935), is significantly anticipated by the English novelist Sheila Kaye-Smith in *Joanna Godden* (1921).

Several contributors consider the effects of 'gendered' creativity on a writer's aims and output. Caroline Gonda's 'An Other Country? Mapping Scottish/Lesbian/ Writing', extends issues she raised as editor in the groundbreaking *Tea and Leg Irons*. Gonda, basing her comments on interviews with Christine Crow, Ellen Galford, Iona McGregor, Paul Jennings and Alison Smith, concludes that Scottish lesbian writers are constantly 'drawing and redrawing their own boundaries' within their 'debatable

ground' of identity. Margaret Elphinstone deals with a similar topic in 'The Quest' broadening Gonda's position out by comparing McGregor to the (heterosexual) Sian Hatton. Elphinstone's exploration is doubly fascinating as her remarks could equally apply to her own fantastic novels: 'Gender, sexuality and morality are fluid and mixed. There are neither heroes nor villains, no precise right or precise wrong'. Nation is, of course, an added variable, making clearer Elphinstone's identification of her own 'sense of being on the edge' (in interview with Alan McGillivray).

Iconoclastically, some previously eulogised texts are smashed in *Gendering the Nation*. Having been enthralled by John McGrath's recent stage version of *The Silver Darlings*, I was grudgingly convinced by the editor's debunking: 'Fishy Masculinities: Neil Gunn's *The Silver Darlings*'. Whyte demonstrates: 'Gunn uses an imagined retroactive vision of Gaelic society to underpin ... a masculinity he evidently felt to be endangered'. While frankly admitting that 'for as long as I can remember, the work of Neil Gunn has irritated and even angered me' Whyte goes too far in discerning a 'gender ideology' in Gunn akin to 'European fascism' (qualified by noting Gunn was not literally a fascist).

Creative writers are, at times, treated as moral custodians here. Berchtold Schoene's 'Angry Young Masculinity and the Rhetoric of Homophobia and Misogyny in the Scottish Novels of Alan Sharp', for example, attacks the novelist for producing 'dangerous reading, particularly for young people, both straight and gay, who are still unsure of their sexual identity and in search of adequate role models'. While Schoene justifiably confronts sexism in Sharp, it seems unfair to attack a writer for what he doesn't do ('question the authority of men over women'; allowing homosexual men a credible voice) rather than what he does (create a credible fictional society).

Despite a sometimes gratingly moralistic tone, though, taken as a whole *Gendering the Nation* is both scholarly and entertaining. Its central proposition, that gender must be considered as a key factor informing national literatures, is strong and convincingly presented. The wide-ranging scope of the collection makes it indispensable as a reference volume and, ultimately, its reasoned subversiveness is very appealing.