

Summer 2014

Kenneth Simpson, 1943-2013

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Publication Info

Published in *Scottish Literary Review*, Volume 6, Issue 1, Summer 2014, pages 99-101.

Patrick Scott, "Kenneth Simpson, 1943-2013," *Scottish Literary Review*, 6:1 (2014): 99-101; (c) Association for Scottish Literary Studies and Patrick Scott, 2014.

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Kenneth Simpson (1943-2013)

Kenneth Simpson played a role in the modern development of Scottish literary studies that was both representative and also distinctive. Born in Kilwinning, and educated at Ardrossan Academy and the University of Glasgow, Ken had trained initially to teach at the secondary level, and joined the recently-created Strathclyde English department in 1969, aged 26. Many new lecturers then were only a few years older than their students, and neither the PhD nor a publication record was expected for a first appointment. He would spend the next thirty plus years at Strathclyde, beginning his career in the optimistic, teaching-centred university of post-Robbins expansion, and working through the grim overloaded retrenchments of the Thatcher years into the more entrepreneurial if perhaps less individualistic world of the modern research culture. After retiring in 2003 as Reader, he was pleased to go on teaching, part-time, for Glasgow.

Ken was in his early thirties before he published his first article (on Smollett in the newly-founded *Scottish Literary Journal*), followed after two years by a book review and then two years later by a book-contribution (on Galt's *Annals*). Then in the 1980s, his forties, he produced a series of substantial essays on Fielding, Smollett, Home's *Douglas*, Smollett, Henry Mackenzie, Burns, and Stevenson, leading to his major book, *The Protean Scot* (1988), as well to as the edited collection *Henry Fielding: Justice Observed* (1985). In 1981, for *SLJ*'s annual Year's Work in Scottish Literature, he had complained that "Scottish studies tend to be preoccupied with minutiae," but "have been spared the narcissistic cleverness" dominating adjacent fields. Ken's was teaching-led research, rather than research-led teaching. Unlike Glasgow or Edinburgh, Strathclyde had no separate departments for Scottish and English literatures, yet (aside from Fielding) Ken focused his writing on Scottish authors. Its strengths are often those of a first-rate 50-minute lecture, accessible to students as well as specialists, offering a distinctive viewpoint on a single major author or text through generous and apposite quotation, and leaving his listener or audience with the sense that the topic will repay further discussion. His special contribution on his chosen authors, as reflected in the subtitle of his PhD, "Multiple Voice in 18th century Scottish Literature" (1984), was in rhetorical or new-critical analysis, carefully distancing a text's narrative personae from its author, and relishing "complexity," "diversity," the "multifaceted," "many-sided," and "complex." *The Protean Scot*'s published subtitle, "The Crisis of Identity," points instead to Ken's interest in psychological, as well as rhetorical, complexity. It is an allusive, tantalizing, self-conscious, and sometimes frustrating book, yet it is also based on wide reading, shrewd critical insight, and contagious enthusiasm, and it was deservedly successful.

His new research profile brought him wider recognition and contacts. He joined the Eighteenth-Century Scottish Studies Society in its first year, participated regularly in its conferences, and was the society's president in 2008-2009. He participated in the NEH-funded conference on early Scottish literature at South Carolina in 1990, returning to speak in 1996, 1989, and 2004. He was among the earliest W. Ormiston Roy Research Fellows there, in 1992, returning in 2001, and he taught twice at the University of Connecticut as Neag Visiting Professor. In 2008, Glasgow appointed him an honorary professor. In 2011, he was among the foundation Fellows elected to mark the fiftieth anniversary of ASLS.

In the later part of his career, he also became involved with the impact of Scottish literary studies outside the University, particularly in fostering a richer and more nuanced public understanding of Burns. He became Director of Strathclyde's Centre for Scottish Cultural

Studies, and one outcome was an annual Burns conference, started at Strathclyde but continuing at the Mitchell Library, from which he edited two important essay collections, *Burns Now* (1994, drawn from several early conferences) and *Love and Liberty* (1997, based on an expanded conference for the Burns bicentenary). He edited a popular Burns anthology for Collins (1993), and later provided the text for an illustrated Burns gift book (2005). In due course, he contributed several pieces to the most successful U.S.-based Burns web-site, *Robert Burns Lives!* He spoke at innumerable Burns club meetings, and in 2009 he was elected honorary president of the Greenock club. He served ASLS on its Schools Committee and wrote the ASLS ScotNotes volume on Burns, *Robert Burns* (1994). Designed to help advanced secondary students, and covering the whole range of Burns's work, this work allowed Ken to comment critically, if briefly, on aspects of Burns (such as the songs) that he would not typically have discussed. A modern academic administrator, one eye cocked for research assessment points, might regret that often-original ideas appeared only in such modest format, but Ken took great satisfaction in its success with its target audience, and like his other outreach work it is of a piece with his central career commitments to literature and to teaching.

Even in retirement, and as health problems became clearer, Ken continued to complete significant projects. He published further characteristic essays, on Stevenson (in *Scotland and the Nineteenth Century World* and *The Bottle Imp*) and on Burns (in *Studies in Scottish Literature* and the *Burns Chronicle*). He was a scrupulous co-editor with me on a new essay collection, *Robert Burns & Friends* (2012), a festschrift for the late G. Ross Roy. He was co-editor also with Gerard Carruthers and Pauline Mackay on the grant-funded digital edition *The Letters of James Currie* (2012).

It is tempting to see Ken's career as representative of the steady institutional growth and professionalization of Scottish literary studies, but he had his multi-faceted career on his own terms. He spent the whole of his life in the West of Scotland, much of it in the part of Ayrshire where he had been brought up. An untypically-personal footnote in *The Protean Scot* notes in surprise, as Keats had noted, that Burns, who "at home in Ayrshire had daily before him the truly sublime prospect of the mountains of Arran," never wrote a poem about them (p. 270, n. 66); Ken would gladly put other things on hold for a week, or even a day, on Arran. Starting his career at a time when Scottish literature had little curricular standing, Ken nonetheless published almost exclusively on Scottish authors. And (with the exception of *Studies in Scottish Literature*), he published almost exclusively in journals or with presses based in or closely connected to Scottish universities. Yet Ken had the respect and friendship of several generations of scholars and students far beyond Scotland. A wide range of friends and colleagues will miss his voice, his wit, and his slightly wistful smile, as well as invaluable advice from a trusted scholar who was always both knowledgeable and supportive.

Patrick Scott