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THE PRESENT STATE AND FUTURE(S) OF SCOTTISH LITERATURE

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Introducing the *SSL* Symposium:

THE PRESENT STATE AND FUTURE(S) OF SCOTTISH LITERARY STUDIES

In an address to the Edinburgh World Writers' Conference this past August, Irvine Welsh revisited a subject raised by Hugh MacDiarmid fifty years ago. "Can writing still be undertaken – and indeed, writers be formed – within a 'national' culture," Welsh asked, and he concluded that "The Scottish experience says a resounding 'yes'," listing recent novels by Alan Warner, James Kelman, Jenni Fagan, and Ewan Morrison as evidence of a literature that "clearly could not have been written by non-Scots."

Welsh notes that the "political and cultural landscape" have changed remarkably since MacDiarmid raised the question in a 1962 lecture. MacDiarmid's internationalism, which cast a somewhat skeptical glance on things nationalist, today has given way to a globalized culture whose homogenizing logic seems to threaten the very idea of a national culture or character. In such a moment it is important to ask the question again.

Fifty years ago, too, *Studies in Scottish Literature*, with MacDiarmid himself on its first editorial board, began by debating the nature and state of Scottish literary studies. The very first article in the journal's first number was Tom Scott's "Observations on Scottish Studies" (*SSL*, 1:1, July 1963, pp. 5-13), which was taken up by David Craig's essay "A National Literature?" (on recent Scottish fiction: *SSL*, 1:3, January 1964, pp. 151-169). The series culminated in Sydney Goodsir Smith's blistering attack on Craig, "*Trahison des Clercs*, or the Anti-Scottish Lobby in Scottish Letters" (*SSL*, 2:2 (October 1964), pp. 71-86). Scott had denounced "the ghastliness of the position here in Scotland" and condemned the Edinburgh School of Scottish Studies ("We need doctors and medicines, and what we get is an undertaker"). Craig denounced Scottish writers [i.e. MacDiarmid] for "clinging with a mad Japanese courage to the idea of their cultural separateness," asserted that "cultural values cannot exist for long in mid-air, without roots in practical social life," and asked mischievously "Now that nationalism is spent, what is there to feed sap to the literature?" Smith in turn denounced Craig for his

“quisling or collaborationist or simply anti-Scottish sclent of mind,” which Smith then paradoxically depicts as recurrent within, and characteristic of, Scottish culture: “Can any country match such a continued belittling of its own literature by its own literary pundits?” None of the three had a teaching position in a Scottish university, but that would not have surprised Scott, who remarked: “no Scots academic who has contributed anything to Scottish literature holds a chair in Scotland.” That at least has changed, as the contributors to this symposium demonstrate.

To open the new series of *Studies in Scottish Literature*, we decided to revisit the topic of this earlier debate and invited contributions on the present state of Scottish literary studies, on recent trends (positive or otherwise), on current needs or opportunities, and on desirable future developments. Murray Pittock and Gerard Carruthers each supplied a position paper on the state of the field, with Pittock providing a survey of the study of Scottish literature from 1962-2012 and Carruthers more explicitly engaging the arguments of that initial debate in *SSL* while highlighting patterns of what he calls “inferiorism” and “superiorism” in Scottish Studies.

Four responses follow the two position papers. Matthew Wickman and Willy Maley both take up points raised by Pittock and Carruthers. Wickman examines the possible advantages of inferiorism, through the lens of some recent critical and cultural theory. Maley asserts the centrality of contemporary writers to the definition of Scottish literary studies (as Scott and Goodsir Smith had done in the original debate) and challenges optimistic accounts of the subject’s institutional position. His essay, “On the Abolition of the Scottish Department,” invokes the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o, whose influential essay “On the Abolition of the English Department” (1968, but frequently reprinted), long ago argued for the recentering of literary studies on the students’ originary culture.

Two other respondents address connections and futures that follow from or alongside the developments outlined by Pittock and Carruthers. Leith Davis looks at how English Literature – or “Engl.Lit,” as she calls it – has changed in recent years “in such a way as to encourage attention to the matter of Scotland.” She charts four paths by which the field of Scottish Studies has come to the place it has and points to two possible directions we might take to keep the field vibrant. Caroline McCracken-Flesher turns to “digital Scotlands,” examining the fate of Scottish identity in our networked world and highlighting a shifting, playful sense of Scottish-ness already at work in Scottish literature from Walter Scott to the present and perfectly “at home,” as she says, on the web.

SSL will continue to feature symposia on topics of interest in Scottish Studies. We hope, too, however, that, as with the first issue of 1963 and responses to Tom Scott's opening salvo, future contributions will take up issues raised here in this lively opening discussion.

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