

2012

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Recommended Citation

Pittock, Murray (2012) "SETTING A STOOT HERT TAE A STEY BRAE: FIFTY YEARS OF THE STUDY OF SCOTTISH LITERATURE, 1962-2012," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 38: Iss. 1, 6–12.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol38/iss1/6>

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**SETTING A STOOT HERT TAE A STEY BRAE:
FIFTY YEARS OF THE STUDY OF
SCOTTISH LITERATURE, 1962-2012**

Murray Pittock

Until 1945 or so, Scottish Literature—or rather, a fragmentary selection of its periods and authors—flourished to an extent under the rubric of junior partnership in the Union or local identity in Empire, or as part of a greater English Literature, as in the *English Men of Letters* series. Scott was taught in England’s grammar schools and universities; Burns had only recently begun the catastrophic decline he was to suffer at the hands of Romanticism’s new paradigm and the postwar distrust of the *volkisch* and autochthonous; even Ramsay was regarded as a significant figure in William Courthope’s *History of English Poetry* and elsewhere. Douglas, Dunbar, Henryson and James I enjoyed a certain place in the sun as “the Scottish Chaucerians.”

Before 1914, books such as John Ross’s *Scottish History and Literature* (1884) and J. H. Millar’s *Literary History of Scotland* (1903) had begun to present a national literary tradition in an imperial localist vein, but one shorn of Gaelic culture. Despite the establishment of a Chair in Celtic at Edinburgh in 1882 and academic journals dealing with both the Celtic languages and Scottish History from the beginning of the twentieth century, literature became divorced from both and thereby weakened. In 1913, a Chair in Scottish History and Literature was established at Glasgow University: but none of its occupants concerned themselves with Scottish literature, which in its turn rejected Gaelic literature, sometimes in crudely racialist or essentialist terms.

Essentialism was a two-edged sword as Scottish confidence declined together with its industry after World War I. The Anglophone literature of Scotland became the expression of a particular identity, often one which hardly flattered the country, as in Gregory Smith’s *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919) and other works. The divided self became a leitmotif of interpretation, as in Smith and in Edwin Muir’s *Scott and Scotland* (1936), which pronounced a modern Scottish literature to be impossible: and this in the era of the Saltire Society, the National Trust for Scotland, and the Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue. The

cultural revivalism of the thirties was not always positive for the idea of an independent Scottish literature, despite the emergence of a number of significant literary figures.

By 1945, Scottish writers were in decline in the canon of English. The description of Scotland as a “region” in the World War II planning documents for perhaps the first time heralded the regionalization of Scotland within a notionally unitary “Britain” and the decline of a multinational British Empire, two political and cultural time bombs under the old Union settlement, in which (as commemorations of Burns, Scott and Shakespeare repeatedly showed) national difference had been celebrated within the context of imperial unity. Now to be Scottish began to be more and more that “species of Northumberland” which Scott had feared as his country’s ultimate fate—and who would wish to study literature in terms of a province or a county?

Excellent work continued to be done: editorially in the mediaeval period and the eighteenth century by figures such as Matthew MacDiarmid, whose 1954 introductory essay to his Scottish Texts Society Fergusson edition remains one of the best things written on the poet, and in the Boswell editions at Yale, which published the *London Journal* in 1950 and sold a million, helping to emplace Boswell’s other work—notably the *Life of Johnson*—as part of the American “English” canon; in 1960, Tom Crawford’s *Burns: The Poems and Songs* opened up a huge range of new questions about the poet which are only now beginning to be addressed. But these were largely efforts which foregrounded individual authors, not “Scottish literature.” Such a term was potentially toxic. Even Kurt Wittig, in his groundbreaking *Scottish Tradition in Literature* (1958) began by apologizing that he had “no subversive aims, no reactionary or revolutionary intentions.” “I am not surreptitiously attempting to separate things that are better joined,” he wrote, a clear confession that what would have perhaps have been unproblematic in the context of imperial localism (and Scottish art was proposed separate representation under the saltire flag as late as the 1951 Festival of Britain) was now seen as potentially narrow nationalism. Arguably, in making the case for a distinctive and essential Scottish aesthetic, Wittig did not rescue it from this accusation and unintentionally reinforced Smith and Muir’s essentialism, but his attempt to identify a coherent “tradition” was—if Leavisite in its critical and chauvinist in its national aesthetic—still one of the most important developments in the years leading up to the establishment of *Studies in Scottish Literature* in 1963.

As I argued in *The Road to Independence?* (2008), the 1960s was a crucial decade, which witnessed many changes in Scottish consciousness of self and its relation to the wider world: in Winnie Ewing’s words in

1967, “Stop the world. Scotland wants to get on.” In literature as in politics, this gallus braggadocio quickly ran into reality, but nonetheless significant changes were under way as a new generation of scholars emerged from Scottish universities. These figures began a major change in the evaluation of Scottish literature in both schools and universities which was borne witness to in the founding of a national association, the Association for Scottish Literary Studies in 1970, and with it a second Scottish literary journal in 1974 (*Scottish Literary Journal* to 2000, then *Scottish Studies Review* and now *Scottish Literary Review*), joined in the 1980s by review supplements and a Year’s Work in Scottish Studies. From 1971, Glasgow had an independent department of Scottish Literature, an important safeguard for the study and recognition of the subject. Glasgow remains unique in maintaining Scottish Literature as a separate subject within the University, though now the study of the literatures and languages of Scotland is also pursued in English Literature, Language, Celtic and Gaelic and History.

The 1970s generation of scholars largely—though by no means entirely—focused (as did ASLS itself) on recovering a Scottish national tradition based heavily on the “Renaissance” and the development of modern writing as an imaginative counterpart to nationality, with strong subsidiary interest in the Romantic era. This did a great deal to make Scottish literature seem national and contemporary, but it arguably suffered from the problems associated with literature’s becoming a formula for national rebirth. A canon was created which excluded certain authors of immense appeal and influence, such as J. M. Barrie, James Boswell, John Buchan, and Arthur Conan Doyle, either because of their perceived politics, their place of residence or their subject matter. It was to be Ronnie Jack, as a mediaevalist, who emphasized the importance of Barrie, and Jack’s emphasis on the international standing of Scottish literature was evident from the beginning of his career, in the still standard *Italian Influence on Scottish Literature* (1972). Jack was also one of the most outspoken critics of essentialist assumptions about “Scottishness.”

Although a large proportion of critical work focused on the twentieth century, and on the “whither Scotland” question, the importance of major textual editions—which still remain a core part of the success of Scottish literary endeavor—was early evident, with the Carlyle edition (1967) emerging at Edinburgh with strong involvement from Ian Campbell and Aileen Christianson, and James Kinsley’s landmark Clarendon Burns appearing the following year.

But while Scottish literature was establishing itself as a national literature, devising a canon and writing itself a history, literary studies in general were moving elsewhere. Just as New Criticism had helped to

undermine the particularity of Anglophone literary and cultural experience outwith England, so the turn to theory—particularly to deconstruction and postmodernism—in the 1980s made Scottish literature’s canon formation and identity politics seem provincial intellectually as once they had seemed provincial socially. Peripheries might suit Scottish literature, but metanarratives, discourses, marxisant analyses, mythologies and the death of the author did not suit a national literature which relied on its iconic authors to speak for and safeguard that historic solidarity of mutual identity and sacrifice which Ernst Rénan had long ago and in a more innocent age declared to be the essence of nationality. If Fanon had been as fashionable as Deleuze, this might have been different: but he wasn’t. As it was, Irish literature—which had emerged from the shadows into canon formation a century earlier in an age more comfortable with nationality—evaded some of these challenges by taking refuge in the most comfortable theoretical zone—that of postcolonialism. Efforts were made to get Scottish literature to join it there, but these lacked force, were sometimes ridiculed, and did not enjoy the institutional and cultural sympathy Irish Studies could rely on in the theoretical heartlands of North America. Internal crises of landownership along religious and political fault lines affected Ireland and Scotland in not entirely dissimilar ways historically: but while Irish Land Leaguers saw the link with the crofting counties in the 1880s, in the high era of Said’s *Orientalism* and Curtis’s *Apes and Angels*, Ireland was seen as more like Burma or Nigeria than Scotland, except in the Republic itself, where revisionism began to take root as the country both became more comfortable in its nationality and also more concerned with the evident and persisting political atavism in the North. By the mid-1990s, Ireland and Scotland were seen as much closer, and in each case appropriate subjects for more measured postcolonial interpretation. The Irish-Scottish academic initiative and its successor research institutes, strongly supported by UK and Irish government funds as the cultural wing of the peace process, cemented that changing perception, and led to an Irish turn in Scottish Studies. It was fitting that Cairns Craig, who had engaged Scottish literature and culture with high theory as effectively as anyone in the 1980s, acting as general editor of the first multi-volume *History of Scottish Literature* (1987), took over leadership of the Scottish Irish-Scottish research institute in 2005, becoming in that year the first person to be elected to Fellowship of the British Academy solely for his achievements in Scottish literature.

In the 1980s, there was little realization in many quarters that Scottish literature needed time to get through the canon formation stage before developing its own terms of theoretical engagement, and in truth perhaps its ability to develop those terms was handicapped by the partial nature of

a canon with relatively little interest in Gaelic literature, Royalist or Jacobite literature from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, right-wing writers from later eras, or those who lived or imagined furth of Scotland. However, despite a lack of sympathy in many universities, Glasgow's distinctive separate department with its unique programmes was joined by a four-year programme in Scottish Literature at the University of Edinburgh and a joint honours programme at Aberdeen by the close of the decade. At Edinburgh in particular, large numbers of overseas and European Union students studied the subject, with at times up to 70% of the first year being composed of such students.

In the last generation, one of the most influential roles played by Scottish literary study globally has been through the textual editions, which have been fortunate to have been headed up by a succession of single-minded cultural entrepreneurs, such as David Hewitt, Douglas Mack and Gerry Carruthers. The first of these editions, the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels, was launched in 1985 with Hewitt as general editor and Ian Alexander as his more than capable deputy. Support from the Bank of Scotland and other sources followed in the construction of a landmark edition of Scott's novels which in its turn helped to support the development of Scott scholarship and teaching in North America. The Stirling-South Carolina Hogg edition was launched in 1991 by Douglas Mack with support from USC and other sources, and the Oxford Burns edition followed in 2008. After an earlier false start, the Edinburgh Collected Stevenson (with Penny Fielding as one of the general editors) got under way in 2009, and Scott's poetry is next in line.

In the 1990s, a new generation of scholars emerged in increasingly senior academic positions: John Corbett, Robert Crawford, Kirsteen McCue and Murray Pittock, whose undergraduate degrees were at Glasgow; Ian Duncan, Susan Manning and Alan Riach from Cambridge; Gerry Carruthers from Strathclyde. This new group were different in a number of ways: more of them came from England's ancient universities, or were educated there later (as the majority of the Glasgow contingent were), and they generally adopted a broader range of approaches to "Scottish literature," which reflected the extra space which colleagues had already secured for Scottish Literature through twenty years of effort. This expanding pattern has continued. In 2011, staff with a Scottish Studies specialism in "English" in Scottish universities had undertaken their undergraduate work at Aberdeen (4), Brigham Young, Calgary, Cambridge (4), Cork, Dundee, Durham, Edinburgh (6), Glasgow (10), Goldsmith's, Lausanne, Oxford (2), Queen's, Belfast, Southern Nazarene, Stirling, St Andrews, and Strathclyde (2). Including creative writers, there were seven academics with a primarily Scottish Literature focus on the staff at Aberdeen in 2011, one at Dundee, eleven at Edinburgh, fifteen at

Glasgow, two at Napier, four at St Andrews, three at Stirling, and three at Strathclyde. The founding of the association for the teaching of Scottish Literature in 2008 recognized these strengths. Scottish literature was also now better linked to history and other art forms, and in the early twenty first century at last began to address its relationship to Gaelic, notably at the landmark ASLS *Crossing the Highland Line* conference at Sabhal Mor Ostaig in 2005.

The 1990s witnessed another important development: the growing internationalization of Scottish literature. This was no longer a matter of students getting in touch with their roots or encountering Scottish Studies as the cultural dimension of a junior year abroad, or of individuals—primarily in North America—who supported Scotland and its literature with the dedication of Ross Roy and others. Rather, Scottish Literature began to be actively contributed to, enlarged and developed in a significant way by critics operating far from Scotland. Of course, Jane Millgate’s work on Scott or the work on the Yale Boswell editions had been significant contributions to Scottish literature long before this, but they were not normally articulated from a perspective consonant with the idea of a “national literature.” This was not the case with books such as Katie Trumpener’s *Bardic Nationalism* (1997), Leith Davis’s *Acts of Union* (1998), Janet Sorensen’s *Grammar of Empire* (2000), or Ian Duncan’s *Scott’s Shadow* (2007). These were significant—at times transformational—contributions to Scottish literature, showing its importance, context and articulation with the literatures of the Anglophone world in general. Thanks to work by Ian Duncan and others, Scottish Literature became a national discussion group at the MLA Congress from 2000, and its gradual insertion into the US Academy was supported by increasing international engagement on the part of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, which became regularly involved in the MLA, showing off Scottish publishing to a large American audience from the first Scottish Publishers’ Exhibition of 2004 onwards. In 2006, the Scottish Romanticism in World Literatures conference, held jointly by Manchester and UC Berkeley, brought together American scholars working on Scottish topics who did not recognize them as “Scottish literature” with Scottish literary scholars who did for the first time, and became a landmark for the globalization of the subject and a conference which also spurred the development of discussion of a specifically Scottish Romanticism. Scholars in England began occasionally to work on Scottish Literature too, and the present author was appointed to the first Chair in the subject in England, at the University of Manchester in 2002. Glenda Norquay was appointed to another chair at John Moores University, Liverpool, and the growing links between Scottish and Irish literature made it increasingly easy to

find some room for Scottish writing in a looser and more modern curriculum. In 2005, the Higher Education Academy sponsored a Teaching Irish and Scottish Literature day at Manchester which was very heavily subscribed.

Scottish literature now benefited to much a greater degree from the revival of interest in other Scottish-related topics, through Michael Lynch's *Scotland: A New History* (1991) and through histories of Scottish architecture, art and music. It was no longer divided as it had once been: as general editor of *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* (2006), Ian Brown and his team (which included a senior Gaelic scholar, Thomas Clancy) produced a history of literature which addressed geography, language, history and law among other topics. Scottish literature was now part of a holistic vision of a national culture. Its intellectual integrity was increasingly recognized by a stream of major funding awards to accompany its high profile publications.

However, despite the significant increase in activity in universities, the school curriculum—not least in Scotland—failed to respond. Although up to 200 teachers came to the annual Scottish teachers' conference, advocates of Scottish literature in the profession encountered a long and only partially successful struggle to emplace Scottish literature in the curriculum. With the government's promise in 2011 that Scottish Studies would become part of the curriculum throughout Scotland, this is now expected to change. In 2014, the first World Congress of Scottish Literatures at Glasgow will mark a fresh threshold of change within the academy, with the foundation of a global society. Scottish literature continues to evolve: rapidly, excitingly, dynamically, and this evolution is now led from other countries too.

Four hundred years ago, John Donne wrote that "on a huge hill / Cragged and steep, truth stands." We cannot quite get there—the nature of being human is that one never gets there—but standing far up above the *selva obscura* of fifty years ago, Scottish literature has indeed set a stoot hert tae a stey brae, and is preparit tae birse yont. *Studies in Scottish Literature* is the oldest journal dealing with the Anglophone literature of Scotland in existence. It has helped us to climb so far, and its renewal gives us strength for the remainder of the journey.

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