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REJECTING INFERIORISM AND SUPERIORISM: NORMALISING SCOTTISH LITERARY STUDIES IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Gerard Carruthers

Since Tom Scott opened the first issue of the first series of *Studies in Scottish Literature* (July 1963) with a series of justified complaints about the resources of “Scottish Studies,” the situation has changed. The “ghastliness” of the 1963 landscape with no “Department of Scottish Studies, Literary or otherwise” in Scotland was remedied in 1971 with the establishment of the Department of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow.¹ It came near to closing in the 1980s in the wake of endemic economic constriction in the British higher education sector.² However, it has gone since then from a full-time academic staff of three to six at the present moment, and has scored excellently well since the 1990s in terms of internal and external assessment of its teaching and research. A year prior to the establishment of Scottish Literature at Glasgow the Association for Scottish Literary Studies was formed, and it has contributed to the discipline since then a much needed annual critical volume, periodical and occasional publications on literature and language (and to some extent Scottish culture generally), as well as study notes for schools, a series of special interest committees, not one but two annual conferences (one aimed at pedagogy in Scottish literature, the other of a

¹ Tom Scott, “Observations on Scottish Studies” *Studies in Scottish Literature* 1.1 (July 1963): 5-13, p. 5. It should be mentioned that in 2010 the University of Glasgow abolished departments so that Scottish Literature is now a “subject-area” within the School of Critical Studies. Throughout the history of the Department of Scottish Literature there were, and remain in the present, those with influence at the University of Glasgow who would choose to have a merger of “Scottish Literature” with “English Literature.”

² See David Robb, *Auld campaigner: A Life of Alexander Scott* (Edinburgh, 2007) for a fascinating account of the first head of Scottish Literature at Glasgow, the formation of the department and its history through to Scott’s retiral in the 1980s. Following on from Robb’s work, a history of the Department of Scottish Literature 1971-2010 (at least in the form of an article, perhaps on the internet) is now keenly wanted so that instructive lessons might be drawn from that history.

more general nature) and most recently internet publications and resources.³ In a way that it could not in 1963, Scottish Literature in 2012 can justifiably be called a “discipline.”

The 1960s saw a proliferation of university courses in Scottish Literature in Scottish universities, with a steady augmentation of the situation in Scotland since then with such courses also being more widely taught in Canada, Europe (including England, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain and Wales), New Zealand and the USA. Recent years have seen recognition of Scottish Literature by the MLA. The establishment of a visibly growing, moving corpus of Scottish literary criticism (where both creative and critical works were also extensively reviewed) by, especially, *Studies in Scottish Literature*, since 1963, *Scottish Literary Journal* (now *Scottish Literary Review*), since 1971, the new *Edinburgh Review*, since 1984, and *Études Écossaises*, since 1992, transfused the intellectual capital of Scottish literary studies. Many new monographs and editions appeared by individuals with a generally supportive institutional base in higher education. There was a sense from the 1960s of moving away from the previous commendable lay activism engendered by the generation of Hugh MacDiarmid and his followers (1920s-50s) to a more solid professional state of affairs. This especially can be witnessed in two multi-volume histories of Scottish Literature, produced by Aberdeen University Press in the 1980s and by Edinburgh University Press in the first decade of the twenty first century.⁴ There was a professional quickening of pace also from the 1980s in Scottish scholarly editions with the establishment of the Edinburgh edition of the novels of Walter Scott and the Stirling-South Carolina edition of James Hogg, as well as the ongoing work (from the 1960s) of the Yale edition of the private papers of James Boswell and the Edinburgh edition of the letters of Thomas Carlyle. In 2014 there is planned a “World Congress” of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow, a marker one should hope, of the deep and wide maturity of the discipline. At that event the plan is to establish an international society of Scottish Literary Studies. There is much to be grateful for to many people since the 1960s for obtaining for Scottish Literature a visibility that, in general, can be claimed to be rightfully the due of a rich and historic Scottish creative expression. There is, however, a complicated fact underlying the growth of the discipline. The relative stability and plenitude of Scottish literary studies in the early twenty-first century has been contributed to by

³ See the ASLS website: <http://www.asls.org.uk/>

⁴ Cairns Craig (General Editor), *The History of Scottish Literature* (Aberdeen, 1987-88) 4 vols; Ian Brown, Thomas Clancy, Susan Manning & Murray Pittock (eds.), *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh, 2007).

promoters who were, on the one hand, over-zealous in their cultural nationalism and, paradoxically, on the other, Anglocentric. Another way of putting this would be to say that there have been those who have talked in an over-determined way about the separate, essential distinctiveness of Scottish literature and those who have seen Scottish literary distinctiveness as boiling down to being, when compared to English Literature, *less literary* (interpreted alternatively as weakness, but sometimes as strength).

In an exchange in *Studies in Scottish Literature* in 1964, we see tendencies of Anglocentricity and Scottish cultural nationalism at loggerheads. David Craig, addressing the question of “A National Literature? Recent Scottish Writing,” struck the first blow as he wrote of the recent past where “Scottish writers went on clinging with a mad Japanese courage to the idea of their cultural separateness.”⁵ Leaving aside what we might today regard as a politically incorrect couching of his point, Craig was irritated, I think rightly, at versions of Scottish creativity that were too essentialist, too distinctively Scottish, and that, in effect, cut off discussion of Scottish literature and its connections in the context of British literature and, indeed, of the western world more generally. At the same time what Craig does not acknowledge is that in his own critical mode he is also an essentialist, though one thirled primarily to the essence of the English literary tradition. His book, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680-1830* (1961), had been a keenly intelligent essay in placing in its social and historical context a period of Scottish literature (though with numerous comments also included that relate to the pre-1680 and post-1830 situation revealing his obsession with tradition or its lack).⁶ If we look at Craig’s overarching mentalité, though, we find him locked into an organic conception that sees the broken nature of Scottish history and culture inevitably leading to a Scottish literature that is less than, implicitly, the more holistic entity that English history, culture and literature is supposed to be. He belongs, then, in a very recognisable tradition of twentieth-century Scottish literary criticism that even when it is supposedly admiring the aspects of the object it studies concludes that something is ultimately not right with it. For instance, we might turn to Craig’s particular coinage, the “reductive idiom” that he finds often in Scottish literature, especially in the likes of eighteenth-century poetry in Scots. Most generally, this is a satirical voice that Craig enjoys and commends, but all is not well that ends well: the

⁵ David Craig, “A National Literature? Recent Scottish Writing,” *Studies in Scottish Literature* 1.3 (January 1964): 151-169, p.151.

⁶ David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680-1830* (London, 1961).

reductive idiom, according to Craig, is a voice or mode of polished bitterness achieved by Allan Ramsay, Robert Burns *et al.* as a reaction to not being part of a properly supported literary culture. To take Craig's comparator, Alexander Pope, alternatively, was able to develop a much more complete literary voice supported as he was by a lavish country house system and mature cultural system generally in the south east of England.

We need to leave aside Craig's precise comparison of Pope and Burns, because this is more or less irrelevant overarched, as it is, by his large, indomitable, old-fashioned cultural prejudices. We should instead be aware of where Craig is originating. First of all he is a critical child of an English line of what might be called "organic criticism," running roughly from the 1930s to the 1960s, and from T. S. Eliot to F. R. Leavis (the latter being warmly acknowledged by Craig in *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People*). Generally this critical line saw its business as sorting out the "correct" line of literary expression, the truly great texts that expressed somehow naturally not only the mature genius of the individual talent but also complimented and completed those other great works that had gone before. Implicitly, sometimes explicitly, Eliot, Leavis and others set out the greatness of English literature that articulated the great cultural fullness of the English nation.

The claims to natural maturity of English literary culture were taken most at face value by Edwin Muir in his *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (1936), which developed in sombre fashion what had been first fully ascribed with a little more cheerfulness by G. Gregory Smith in *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919). This was the view that the historical fissures in Scottish cultural experience, particularly recessions in (Scots) language, in properly healthy national psyche (due to the harsh Calvinist Reformation), the loss of monarch (1603), the loss of parliament (1707) and ensuing bouts of Anglo-centered Britishness (during the Enlightenment and the Victorian periods perhaps especially, as the Scots pursued opportunities opened up by the British market-place and Empire) had evacuated Scotland of a truly functioning indigenous culture. In so far as Scotland did produce literature against such a surrender of nationality this was perforce negative. Gregory Smith's "Caledonian Antisyzygy" was essentially a tale of Scottish cultural decenteredness, Edwin Muir's "dissociation of sensibility" (a term appropriated from T. S. Eliot) provided a narrative of Scottish cultural (and wholesale mental) confusion. David Craig's "reductive idiom" fits precisely with Smith's and Muir's diagnosis of psychological incompleteness and a resulting diminishment of expression, creative and otherwise. David Daiches, in his *The Paradox of Scottish Culture* (1964), provided more of the same in terms of his

suggestion that Scottish literature in the eighteenth century was “paradoxical.” Heavily influenced by the assumptions of Gregory Smith, Muir, and Craig, Daiches attempted to account for such spectacularly effervescent creativity as is to be found in the Scottish Enlightenment and the Scots poetry revival of the eighteenth century. What it all boils down to for Daiches is that these voices must be wanting, must be synthetically constructed, must be hollow coming as they do in the wake of the abject defeat of the Scottish nation (in 1707 as it votes its own parliament out of existence) and so the annihilation of any “genuine” Scottish culture.⁷

A much more real paradox was that the brilliant David Daiches (and numerous teachers of Scottish Literature who followed in his wake) were genuinely dedicated to the promotion of the study and teaching of Scottish literature, but at the same time offered a version of this that was fatally compromised and diseased.⁸ It was with some justification that Sydney Goodsir Smith pointed the finger in *Studies in Scottish Literature* in October 1964, in response to Craig’s *SSL* article, identifying “Trahison des Clercs or the anti-Scottish Lobby in Scottish Letters.”⁹ However, it was not the case that Craig *et al.* were “anti-Scottish” in any simple sense. Critics like he and Daiches believed whole-heartedly in the *lesser* plentitude of Scottish literature. They adduced facts like the paucity of Scottish drama following the Reformation or the purging of Scotticisms from their writings by Enlightenment *litterati* and read Scots turning their back on the full possibilities of expressive culture. Craig identified here a constitutional “alienation from things native.” However, critics like Craig did not consider that these large-scale failures in the Scottish cultural system or tradition, if these things were such, did not necessarily mean that everything was in the cultural pond thereafter. Craig and Daiches were wedded to an Eliotian idea of a necessarily unbroken “tradition,” where all parts of the system at all points in history must function healthily. Such, in effect, was their one-dimensionally essentialist idea of

⁷ For a longer discussion of Gregory Smith, Muir, Craig, and Daiches, see Gerard Carruthers, *Scottish Literature, A Critical Guide* (Edinburgh, 2009), especially pp.4-28; see also Gerard Carruthers & Catriona Macdonald, “Fictive Pasts and Past Fictions,” *Scottish Historical Review* (forthcoming, 2012).

⁸ Daiches’s view of the Scottish literary tradition as something ultimately deficient is an aspect of his career about which the contributors to William Baker & Michael Lister (eds.), *David Daiches: A Celebration of His Life and Work* (Brighton & Portland, 2008) are all too circumspect. This is explicable when we consider the many particular goods that Daiches did for Scottish literary studies in his energetic teaching, writing and encouragement of other scholars (including, I would want warmly to acknowledge, the present writer).

⁹ Sydney Goodsir Smith, “*Trahison des Clercs* or the Anti-Scottish Lobby in Scottish Letters” in *Studies in Scottish Literature* 2.2 (October 1964): 71-86.

a holistic culture that they did not see that literature might well be produced that was completely “healthy” or “accomplished” even if the institutions of the nation, arguably, were not. Do writers need an independent national parliament to produce what they write? The answer, obviously enough, is that a parliament, or any other national institution, might, at different times, be good or bad or, even as it functions either positively or negatively, be an inspiration to a writer. In their adherence to the equation, healthy Scottish nation must align with healthy Scottish literature, Craig *et al.* exemplified, ironically enough, the same inferiorism (as they constantly compared Scottish literature to the superior example of English literature) of which they accused David Hume, James Boswell, Robert Burns, Walter Scott and just about every other Scottish writer in one way or another down to the twentieth century.

With some lack of fairness, however, Goodsir Smith, in his *Studies in Scottish Literature* essay, took David Craig to task for being “British” politically (Goodsir Smith, p. 74). Craig, a Marxist who has held steadfast and even endured academic persecution for his political beliefs through a long career, thought, rightly I think, that there was a tendency in Scottish writing and criticism alternative to his own that vaunted in too overarching fashion the positive distinctiveness of Scottish literature. To a large extent this was the product of an agenda that we might call MacDiarmidism, after Hugh MacDiarmid’s near psychobabble on occasion about the uniqueness of Scottish culture and literature. If we can see an inferiorism in the face of English literature, we might also identify in MacDiarmidism, whose subscribers included Goodsir Smith, a similarly wrong-headed superiorism, or isolationism. Scottish literature must, according to MacDiarmid, be written in its essential languages (Gaelic or Scots), though MacDiarmid had little of the former and as his career progressed wrote as much in English as in Scots. Scottish writers must express, according to MacDiarmid, the unique Scottish mentality (an idea as one-dimensional and holistic as the idea that there was broken version of the same).

The uniqueness of Scottish literature and culture (either in its deformity or in its healthy national difference) ascribed by both David Craig and Sydney Goodsir Smith in their oppositional ways represents two sides of the one coinage (the overweening desire for a separate systematic or traditional national formation). Both sides of that coin tended to cut Scottish literature off too much from English, European and Western literary history. Why could Scotland not have a literature that was connected to the rest of the world, sharing similarities and having also at certain moments undoubted differences sometimes in concern, accent or mode? An all too active anxiety in the face of England and its culture beset both the inferiorists and the superiorists.

In the early twenty-first century we have largely outgrown both of these mentalities. There remains, however, in a number of quarters, anxiety over the discipline of Scottish Literature. There are those even now who charge it with being inadequate in quantity or not distinctive enough to study separately from English Literature. If we reject both inferiorism and superiorism, are we left with anything really to study in terms of Scottish cultural distinctiveness, it is sometimes nervously asked? My response would be that there is plenty of interesting Scottish Literature through all periods to study and that if we have moved towards a position of normalisation, where Scottish literature is sometimes seen to be not out of step with culture elsewhere (Scotland does have a Renaissance, an Augustan period, a Romantic period, and a Victorian period that is not simply about the “kailyard,” a Modernist period, etc.), then that is normal and healthy. If we cannot any longer maintain the notion of a singular Scottish literature and culture, and if its pluralities do not all make for easy bed-fellows, as in the case of almost any other national culture (including most certainly that of England), then so what? Scottish Literature, as with almost any academic discipline can be, should be, constantly questioned in its critical, institutional, and theoretical premises. We need not be insecure about this. We have in Scottish literature a huge corpus of material that is worthwhile studying, researching, and teaching from many angles. The political, the national, case pertains that Scotland and Scotticists the world over (who may have no “connection” with Scotland other than sheer intellectual interest) have in the past been denied full opportunities to exercise Scottish literature by both inferiorists and superiorists, as well as in the past and the present by those institutions and individuals who are simply downright prejudiced. Scottish literature is often not under-developed compared to elsewhere; often it is remarkably similar to elsewhere, marching to the same historic beats of international culture. Scotland and its literature have more in common with western cultural history than otherwise. These factors are justification enough for the discipline of Scottish Literature.

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