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## ON THE ABOLITION OF THE SCOTTISH DEPARTMENT

*Willy Maley*

Until recently, I worked in a University with the only Scottish Literature department in the UK.<sup>1</sup> Restructuring in 2009-10 meant the abolition of the Department of Scottish Literature. Before claymores are reached for or dirks drawn, let me reassure readers that it remains a “Subject Area” within a new School of Critical Studies, and in any case, all other departments were abolished at a stroke. Forty years after Ngugi and his colleagues argued for it in Nairobi, the abolition of the English Department was achieved by managerial diktat in Glasgow.<sup>2</sup> Murray Pittock’s comment in his position paper that “From 1971, Glasgow had an independent department of Scottish Literature, an important safeguard for the study and recognition of the subject” rings hollow. We are having a steep rise taken out of us. New marketing brands like “Global Scottish Studies” and the “Global Burns Network,” sitting alongside “Global Security” as the new funding flavours, can hardly compensate for departmental devolution. The safeguard has been sacrificed on the altar of Mammon. To speak of “the growing internationalization of Scottish

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<sup>1</sup> Since this analysis differs from that of my colleagues Murray Pittock and Gerard Carruthers, I should note that I have collaborated with both on projects in the past: Gerry submitted an essay on James Kelman to a special issue of the *Edinburgh Review*, while Murray contributed a chapter on Jacobite literature to a volume on *British Identities*. See Alan McMunnigall and Gerard Carruthers, ‘Locating Kelman: Glasgow, Scotland and the Commitment to Place’, in Ellen-Raïssa Jackson and Willy Maley (eds.), *Kelman and Commitment*, a special issue of the *Edinburgh Review* 108 (2001), pp. 56-68, and Murray Pittock, ‘Jacobite Literature and National Identities’, in David Baker and Willy Maley (eds.), *British Identities and English Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 226-242.

<sup>2</sup> See Ngugi Wâ Thiong’o, Taban Lo Liyong, and Henry Owuor-Anyumba, ‘On the Abolition of the English Department’, in Vincent B. Leitch (Gen Ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: Norton, 2001), pp. 2089-97.

literature” at a time when universities, and especially the arts and humanities, are tottering under new managerialist initiatives is cringe-worthy. “Internationalization” is management-speak for funding to feed what our American colleagues call “administrative bloat.” It is not the seedbed for new voices that Creative Writing has proven to be over the past twenty years. Scottish literature has in recent years enjoyed an efflorescence unsurpassed in its richness and diversity. We need to branch out beyond capitalizing on Burns. In the context of stealthy moves to privatize our ancient civic universities in the wake of the banking crisis, and with a vote on independence on the horizon, this is a moment of danger and of opportunity.

In his position paper, “Rejecting Inferiorism and Superiorism: Normalising Scottish Literary Studies in the Early Twenty First Century,” Gerry Carruthers invokes – without quoting – Craig Beveridge and Ron Turnbull’s provocative and pioneering study, *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture: Inferiorism and the Intellectuals* (1989). For Beveridge and Turnbull, Fanon’s notion of inferiorism “to describe those processes in a relationship of national dependence which lead the native to doubt the worth and significance of inherited ways of life and embrace the styles and values of the coloniser” applied to Scotland: “These processes are not to be seen as ‘merely superstructural’; it is through the undermining of the native’s self-belief and the disintegration of local identity that political control is secured.”<sup>3</sup> The structural changes at the University of Glasgow, where the Business Model has taken hold like a pit bull with its jaws locked on a Scots Terrier, may be reversible, as the Scottish Government has just issued a report critical of restructuring and its cost-cutting agenda, saying that it is out of step with Scottish higher education ethos.<sup>4</sup>

In a footnote, Carruthers comments: “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

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<sup>3</sup> Craig Beveridge and Ron Turnbull, *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture: Inferiorism and the Intellectuals* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989), p. 5. The work of Beveridge and Turnbull has arguably informed recent studies such as Michael Gardiner, Graeme MacDonald and Niall O’Gallagher (eds.), *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), and Silke Stroh, *Uneasy Subjects: Postcolonialism and Scottish Gaelic Poetry* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> See the *Report of the Review of Higher Education Governance in Scotland*, Chaired by Professor Ferdinand von Prondzynski, submitted to The Scottish Ministers, 16 January 2012.

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.’” I have taught at Glasgow as long as Gerry, in English Literature but with Scottish interests in research and teaching, and never heard any talk of a merger till Murray Pittock came to the University, and departments were corralled into school unions determined from above.

It is one of the curiosities of the Scottish higher education system that literature departments are not always accommodating when it comes to teaching Scottish writers, both in terms of teaching Scottish literature, and in terms of students who also happen to be writers. A number of Scottish writers have experienced university as an alienating episode marked by anglocentrism and cultural conservatism. Some of those who start off by taking literature end up finding more inspiration in the study of philosophy or linguistics. Thus Janice Galloway, James Kelman, and Tom Leonard all found direction in the work of Noam Chomsky.

One consequence of this unease within academe is that there are Scottish contemporary writers whose work is sophisticated conceptually and linguistically but who are neglected by literary critics, and who in turn are justifiably suspicious of the critical establishment. Living writers, contemporary writers, were until recently neglected in Scottish literature. That has changed dramatically, helped along by the development of Creative Writing as a discipline. It’s no coincidence that some of our greatest modern Scottish writers have worked as creative writing tutors, including John Burnside, Alasdair Gray, Janice Galloway, Kathleen Jamie, Robert Alan Jamieson, James Kelman, Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead, Don Paterson, Muriel Spark, and Alan Spence. Philip Hobsbaum’s pioneering efforts at the University of Glasgow, where he mentored a whole generation of writers, and Robert Crawford and Douglas Dunn’s work at St Andrews are especially noteworthy in this regard, though the universities of Aberdeen, Dundee, Stirling, and Strathclyde have also been key in promoting new Scottish writing in this grassroots, ground-up, hands-on way.

Pittock’s claim that “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” also strikes me as false. At Strathclyde University, where I studied as an undergraduate, Derek Attridge and Colin MacCabe championed Alasdair Gray.<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson drew on

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<sup>5</sup> Attridge included Gray in a list of postmodern authors: ‘Among the many writers in English one might think of in connection with such an art are John Ashbery, Donald Barthelme, Angela Carter, Alasdair Gray, Thomas Pynchon, and

the work of Tom Nairn in order to develop and finesse his theory of postmodernism.<sup>6</sup> Pittock's assertion that "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" is also problematic, and his observation that "If Fanon had been as fashionable as Deleuze, this might have been different: but he wasn't," ignores the fact that Fanon was indeed fashionable, and was the starting-point of a book that neither he nor Carruthers see fit to cite, Beveridge and Turnbull's *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture*. This anti-theory line is what the critics want to see. The writers, like Kelman, were reading Achebe and having their own ideas. So when Pittock says that "Ireland was seen as more like Burma or Nigeria than Scotland" he might have mentioned Chinua Achebe's receipt of the Scottish Arts Council's second annual Neil Gunn International Fellowship, or Jackie Kay's moving memoir telling of her journey of discovery back to her Nigerian father.<sup>7</sup> You wouldn't know from reading Carruthers or Pittock that we now have a number of established and emerging black Scottish writers. The critics' tartan time warp has hidden them from sight.

To Pittock's invocation of Donne's unreachable craggy truth, I would oppose Muriel Spark's Scottish rock of ages, "the primitive black crag rising up in the middle of populated streets of commerce, stately squares and winding closes, like the statement of an unmitigated fact preceded by 'nevertheless.'"<sup>8</sup> In other words, to the quest for elusive truth I would oppose the craggy facts. This is not a time for normalization or for career climbing, for cultivating one's own garden or cherry-picking fellow travellers, for "I'm alright, Jock" or let's go global while the local suffers. There are new critics on the block who take us beyond Burns, figures overlooked by Carruthers and Pittock: Eleanor Bell, Rhona Brown, Sarah

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Salman Rushdie'. Derek Attridge, *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 119.

<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 405. Neither Carruthers nor Pittock mention Tom Nairn's work, yet he is a critic who brought the Scottish Question to an international audience. See *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism* (London: New Left Books, 1977). Nairn has some telling asides on radical Burns too.

<sup>7</sup> See Jackie Kay, *Red Dust Road* (London: Picador, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Muriel Spark, 'Edinburgh-born', in *Critical Essays on Muriel Spark*, ed. Joseph Hynes (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1992), p. 22.

Dunnigan, David Goldie, Rosemary Goring, Stuart Kelly, Graeme MacDonald, Margery Palmer McCulloch, Robin Purves, Marilyn Reizbaum, Berthold Schoene-Harwood, Randall Stevenson and Alan Taylor. Michael Gardiner has in a series of book-length interventions published with Edinburgh University Press – *Cultural Roots of British Devolution* (2004), *Modern Scottish Culture* (2005), and *From Trocchi to Trainspotting: Scottish Critical Theory Since 1960* (2006) – established a theoretically astute, politically nuanced perspective with none of the tartan trews tourist talk of the smug or self-congratulatory. Reading Carruthers and Pittock, I had the feeling of stepping back in time, to a land where Burns was the only bard in town. Where are Carol Ann Duffy, Douglas Dunn, Jackie Kay, Tom Leonard and Liz Lochhead in their retrospective pieces? Pittock’s list of appointments fails to mention these professorial writers. Where are Janice Galloway, Alasdair Gray, A. L. Kennedy, Alan Warner and Irvine Welsh?

The word “Scottish” is scattered like confetti throughout Carruthers and Pittock’s position papers, but Scottish writers are conspicuous by their absence. Internationalization is not just about funding opportunities for Scottish academics. Some of the most significant contemporary Scottish writers were born or brought up in Africa – including the novelists William Boyd (Ghana) and Alexander McCall Smith (Zimbabwe), and the playwright David Greig (Nigeria). But the traffic is two-way. The great Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, from whom I borrow the title of this response, was introduced at school to Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, which he read many times both in English and Swahili. Ngugi acknowledged that the inspiration for his finest novel, *Petals of Blood* (1977), came from travelling in Scotland:

The writing of the novel took a period of six years. As an image it had started disturbing my mind while at Leeds. Travelling between Leeds, that vast industrial conglomerate with its pollution and wintry fogs and the soot on all buildings, and Inverness way up in Scotland, I used to play with the idea of what would happen if some capital fled from say Leeds or London to one of the beautiful coastal fishing villages to the West of Inverness? Or to the North? North Sea Oil had then not been discovered. What if some strong characters found themselves forced to retreat into such places by private griefs or secrets and they made a difference to the villages, awakened them to a capitalist modernity? What would that mean precisely? A reproduction of another Leeds or

Manchester? The idea had followed me back to Kenya in 1968, and to USA in 1970, and back to Kenya in 1971.<sup>9</sup>

*Petals of Blood* (1977) was Ngugi's last novel in English. His mother attended the launch unable to read the language the book was written in by the son she had sent to school exactly thirty years earlier. Ngugi resolved to write in future in his own language, Gikuyu. Fortunately we still have him in translation, and at the Edinburgh Book Festival in 2006 Ngugi spoke of the literary and linguistic links between Africa and Scotland. Writing "On the Abolition of the English Department" in 1968, Ngugi and his colleagues observed: "For any group it is better to study representative works which mirror their society rather than to study a few isolated 'classics,' either of their own or of a foreign culture."<sup>10</sup> It would have been good to have glimpsed the world beyond a few isolated classics in the position papers of Carruthers and Pittock. Alas, it looks like nothing but the same old story.

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<sup>9</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'A Novel in Politics: The Launching of *Petals of Blood*', in *Writers in Politics: A Re-engagement with Issues of Literature and Society* (Oxford: James Currey, 1981; 1997), pp. 83–94, at pp. 85–86.

<sup>10</sup> Ngugi Wâ Thiong'o, Taban Lo Liyong, and Henry Owuor-Anyumba, 'On the Abolition of the English Department', p. 2096.