

2012

## DIGITAL SCOTLANDS

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### Recommended Citation

McCracken-Flesher, Caroline (2012) "DIGITAL SCOTLANDS," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 38: Iss. 1, 41–48.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol38/iss1/11>

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## DIGITAL SCOTLANDS

*Caroline McCracken-Flesher*

*Welcome to convergence culture*

—Henry Jenkins

Weaving Scottishness into the world wide web might seem to risk losing the nation's distinctiveness or compromising its character in the imprecisions of an ungoverned but highly invested global medium. In the early days of the new Scottish Parliament, Tom Nairn invited distant Scots to gather in a "House of Return" and "find a new, creative role" helping to determine a recuperated nation.<sup>1</sup> Nairn activated a trope of post-Jacobite identity—coming home—hoping for "the invention of new traditions, and the recovery of the past in new modes, or in new accents."<sup>2</sup> But digital media and its convergence culture—which Henry Jenkins describes as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences, who will go almost anywhere" – suggest a broader audience and a wider renegotiation of Scottishness already in process, at home and away.<sup>3</sup>

In a digital era, Scotland is as much a virtual as it is a concrete reality. Migrating, reassembling, inviting others, across the web the nation is inevitably porous, inherently different. And a Scotland negotiated amid the uncanniness that is the internet renders even more problematic David McCrone's conundrum: Where, when, and whose is Scotland?<sup>4</sup> Perhaps never just *now*, exactly *here*, or solely *ours*.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Nairn, "Beyond Nostalgia: Scots at Home and Abroad," keynote at *Culture, Community and Nation: Scotland at Home and Abroad*, Simon Fraser University Centre for Scottish Studies, March 9 2000. See "Centre's First Conference a Success," [www.sfu.ca/scottish/conference.html](http://www.sfu.ca/scottish/conference.html), accessed January 7 2003. The second quotation is from the manuscript address: 11 (henceforth MS).

<sup>2</sup> Nairn, MS, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>4</sup> David McCrone, *Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Stateless Nation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 31.

This awareness may not be shared by those who aggressively tout Scottish connectivity. Jenkins situates the problem: “Political economists and business gurus make convergence sound . . . as if . . . all of the parts will work together to pursue maximum profits” (Jenkins 7). In Scotland’s case those profits are supposed to come on home. The Parliament explores “how best Scotland can maximise the social and economic benefits derived from the development of digital technologies.”<sup>5</sup> Yet across the Scottish web the social changes attendant on any new medium quickly fall by the wayside, remaining uninterrogated and repeatedly trumped by the commercial expectations of an economy at last on the move. For too long Scotland has considered itself “out of history,” in Cairns Craig’s well-known phrase.<sup>6</sup> The internet seems to offer a fast-track to the future—with social effects, for sure, but with economic opportunities for Scots in the know.

Even in the Scottish Executive’s 2001 publication *Digital Inclusion: Connecting Scotland’s People*, digital media quickly recast internet competence as a matter of profit and loss: “[Web literacy] is important for the economic wellbeing of our country. . . . To be denied access to this resource would impoverish the individual and, ultimately, the nation.”<sup>7</sup> By 2011 the governmental discourse had only verged closer toward internet opportunity as purely economic. *Scotland’s Digital Future: A Strategy for Scotland* aims to ensure “that Scotland is positioned to take full advantage of the opportunities offered by the digital age. . . . [and to] build the solid infrastructure, skills and competitive base which is [sic] an essential element of the *Economic Recovery Plan*.”<sup>8</sup>

The drumbeat is louder among those less interested in the commerce among Scots, and more interested in commerce as mere economic exchange. *Scotland IS*, the government’s interface with business and “the trade body for Scotland’s ICT industry,” goes to the heart of the matter:

Our Vision is for Scotland to rank amongst the best of global economies, where the great majority of our citizens are skilled in

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<sup>5</sup> See Cross Party Group in the Scottish Parliament on Digital Participation, post for [September 5, 2011 <dpcrosspartygroup.wordpress.com>](http://www.dpcrosspartygroup.wordpress.com) accessed January 5 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> *Digital Inclusion: Connecting Scotland’s People*, September 25 2001. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/158435/0042935.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> *Scotland’s Digital Future A Strategy for Scotland*, Edinburgh: The Scottish Government, 2011, at [www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/981/0114237.pdf](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/981/0114237.pdf). See 5.

using digital technologies, where entrepreneurs, businesses, public servants and civic society, together with Government, fuel growth and improve productivity year on year . . . [by] exploiting information technology.<sup>9</sup>

No namby-pamby talk about interconnectedness and social change here: Scotland's future is a matter of economic progress achieved through manipulation of the internet.

The Royal Society of Edinburgh makes visible the connection between present economic desires and past dreams of national success:

Two hundred years ago, Scotland was in the forefront of an industrial revolution. . . . The Royal Society of Edinburgh's newly created Business Innovation Forum [has] identified the crucial role of national infrastructure in supporting the national economy and the activities of companies competing in global markets. . . . What is [certain] is the need for Scotland to be at the forefront of this revolution, as it was in that of the 19th century.<sup>10</sup>

Digital worlds provide a natural habitat for today's lads and lassies of parts. As earlier peers set out into Africa or the inner cities to chart a course beyond the determinations of conventional history, twenty-first-century Scots should seek new fortunes on the internet.

This would seem the reverse of Nairn's call for an inclusive, many-voiced Scotland, not one in thrall to any past or to dreams of power. But we might consider that official Scotland's insistence on control of and dominance through the web only poorly conceals long-established anxieties. In any discourse, the strong will dominate. And in any new medium, the weak may never achieve voicing. A 2010 episode of the BBC Scotland sketch show *Burnistoun* expresses the problem for the digital age.<sup>11</sup> Iain and Rob attempt to get to the eleventh floor in a voice recognition elevator:

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<sup>9</sup> *Enabling a Digital Scotland* (Livingstone: ScotlandIS, 2011), 2, online at: <[www.scotlandis.com/assets/files/EDS%20document%20PDF%20style.pdf](http://www.scotlandis.com/assets/files/EDS%20document%20PDF%20style.pdf)>.

<sup>10</sup> *Digital Scotland*, Edinburgh: Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2010. Available online [www.royalsoced.org.uk/cms/files/advice-papers/inquiry/digitalscotland/Digital%20Scotland%20%28med%20res%29.pdf](http://www.royalsoced.org.uk/cms/files/advice-papers/inquiry/digitalscotland/Digital%20Scotland%20%28med%20res%29.pdf). See 2.

<sup>11</sup> Iain Connell and Robert Florence in *Burnistoun* Season 1 Episode 1, BBC Scotland aired 1 March 2010: available in the UK from the BBC website at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/collections/p00hvv42>; elsewhere from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAz\\_UvnUeuU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAz_UvnUeuU) (credited to BBC).

*Iain:* Where's the buttons?

*Rob:* Oh no, they've installed voice-recognition technology in this lift, they have nae buttons.

*Iain:* Voice-recognition technology? In a lift? In Scotland? You ever tried voice-recognition technology?

*Rob:* No.

*Iain:* They don't do Scottish accents.

*Rob:* Eleven.

*Elevator:* Could you please repeat that?

*Iain:* Eleven.

*Rob:* Eleven. Eleven.

*Iain:* Eleven.

*Elevator:* Could you please repeat that?

*Rob:* E-LEV-EN.

*Iain:* Whose idea was this? You need to try an American accent. "E-leven. E-leven." . . .

*Rob:* Try an English accent. "Elehvin! Elehvin!" . . .

*Elevator:* Please speak slowly and clearly.

*Rob:* Smartass!

*Iain:* E-leh-vin.

*Elevator:* I'm sorry. Could you please repeat that?

*Iain:* Eleven! If ya don't understond the lingo, away back hame to yer ain country!

. . .

*Elevator:* Please speak slowly and clearly.

*Rob:* Eleven. Eleven. Eleven. Eleven.

*Iain:* You're jist sayin it the same wy!

*Rob:* I'm goin to keep sayin it till it understands Scottish, awright?

Eleven. Eleven. Eleven! Eleven!

Here, the digital future is Anglo-American and Scots not merely secondary and out of history, but unintelligible. Technological prowess matters not at all. Social change as a side effect of global business immobilizes those whose language is not recognized within the discourse of modernity.

Scots might be viewed as complicit in their own difficulty. The more Rob and Iain attempt English, the less the elevator understands them; the more Scots focus on business success, the less they may register as Scots. Perhaps this is why contemporary Scottish writers imply the digital world as the only world there is, and thus as a world that both produces and

requires otherness, even criminality, in its Scottish participants. In Matthew Fitt's *But n Ben A-Go-Go*, the life of the body is circumscribed by disease and the sole possibility for human contact, or to determine meaning, is virtual, but the virtual world is the site of illegality and must be entered by contravening the law.<sup>12</sup> For Edinburgh graduate Chris Wimpres in the e-book *Joe is Online*, child rape produces an English cyber criminal whose exploits implicate St. Andrews academics when they venture online to identify him.<sup>13</sup> In this context it may seem inevitable, if troubling, that Scotland's rise to gaming dominance arose through *Grand Theft Auto*, repeatedly subject to mainstream censorship.<sup>14</sup> Scots must embrace the otherness of non-conformity both to resist and to enter digital discourse.

Yet insofar as modern technology encourages commerce between people and not just in monetary terms, Scots might see communicative opportunities opening to them across the web. The issue may be not how to control or contravene the discourse, but how to mobilize Scottishness as a term within it—a term helpfully informed by Scots near and far, and even by the wannabe Scots who populate Scotlands online.

Here Scots might look to their past for precedents on how to deploy Scottish signs in creative—rather than “criminal”—cultural play. Walter Scott circulated Scotland such that this land of the powerless dominated the telling of contemporary identity. As Sarah Greene told it, everyone became a Scot: Greene's ingenué vamps as a Scott heroine, so the hero has to pass as a highland soldier, with all the losses contingent on successful campaigning (he hasn't arm and he hasn't an eye . . .), to get her back.<sup>15</sup> When George IV arrived on a royal progress, he enthusiastically joined in his own remaking as a highland Chief.<sup>16</sup> Scott clothed his readers in Scottish narrative and thereby situated Scotland not on the periphery but as an originary point for national tales. Moreover, since Scott was read around the world, Scottishness was now energetically supported and promulgated from elsewhere and by others.

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew Fitt, *But n Ben A-Go-Go* (Edinburgh: Luath, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Chris Wimpres, *Joe is Online* (2011). ebook available [wimpres.wordpress.com/joe-is-online/](http://wimpres.wordpress.com/joe-is-online/). Accessed January 5 2012.

<sup>14</sup> The BBC reports: “Grand Theft Auto comes under fire: One of Scotland's biggest hi-tech success stories is facing increasing pressure from campaigners against violent video games.” Accessed January 5, 2012, at [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/scotland/3680481.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/scotland/3680481.stm)

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Greene, *Scotch Novel Reading*, 3 vols. (London: A. K. Newman, 1824), 1:92-93, 107-108, 3:238.

<sup>16</sup> Caroline McCracken-Flesher, *Possible Scotlands: Walter Scott and the Story of Tomorrow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 73-113. Hereafter *Possible*.

Scott had learned to exploit the modular identities that we think contingent upon postmodern ideas and today's multiple media. Denis-Constant Martin argues that, "multiple identification is the rule."<sup>17</sup> Walter Scott taught a generation how to assemble their own, playful identity by participating in someone else's. He vogueed as British statesman to orchestrate the king's visit, and thereby encouraged George IV to reinvent himself as a Scot. Such cross-identification, from Scott's perspective, served all parties. So having encouraged it, he stood back and let it run: he refused requests to regulate the motley Celtic Society or rein in the obstreperous Scottishness of Glengarry.<sup>18</sup> And these displayed identities contributed to establishing Scottishness as distinct yet not too different and thus, from a Westminster perspective, worthy of a Parliament. If such renegotiation could evolve through a time when personal and national identity was discussed across newspapers and broadsheets, how much more might it be enabled among the avatars and instantaneous communications of the web?

Is this entirely a good thing? Nairn considers tartantry to have become a delimitation visited back on the Scottish people.<sup>19</sup> The web provides a plethora of examples and a troubling symbolic effect: in earlier days of cyber scholarship, it was not uncommon to find investigation preempted by sites that wove a tartan before one's eyes, hogging bandwidth and freezing screens. But current theories of digital media and the experience of Walter Scott's steam-driven publication suggest that in a discourse speeded by technology, writing, reading, and rewriting are suddenly less sequential and thus less hegemonic activities. If Scott posited the monarch as Chief, and the king embraced the designation, Edinburgh Whigs and London cartoonists simultaneously debunked the idea.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, when Prince Charles ostentatiously bares his knees, he stands as no figure of authority but rather constitutes a locus for contentions past and present. And online, the mega-resort planned by capitalist royalty Donald Trump in "the home of golf" and touted by the Scottish Executive stands alongside his fights with local farmers—who resist the American Scot's vision of scenic Scotland by bringing their

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<sup>17</sup> Denis-Constant Martin, "The Choices of Identity," *Social Identities* 1.1 (1995): 5-20, 14.

<sup>18</sup> McCracken-Flesher, *Possible*, 101-02.

<sup>19</sup> Nairn cites "Sporranry, alcoholism, and the ludicrous appropriation of the remains of Scotland's Celtic fringe as a national symbol" in "Three Dreams of Scottish Nationalism," Lindsay Paterson, ed., *A Diverse Assembly: The Debate on the Scottish Parliament* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1998), 31-39; see 34.

<sup>20</sup> McCracken-Flesher, *Possible Scotlands*, 101, 99-100.

opposition to the internet.<sup>21</sup>

In a digital era, to read is instantaneously to rewrite; to be rewritten is to be challenged to reread and recompose.<sup>22</sup> Far from being silenced, online all comers find themselves forced into noisy and creative interaction. Those trapped in the *Burnistoun* elevator by BBC Scotland, once released onto YouTube by a legion of fans, only *seem* caught in translation. The video cited in this chapter offers an anglicized transcript “For those having trouble with the accent.” Whatever the implications of this post, it does not serve as an affirmation of the constrictions enacted by web hegemony; rather it constitutes an invitation to pursue a form, and develop a theme—even an implicit critique. “owynmerrilin” builds the discussion: “To add to the humor, turn on the ‘transcribe audio’ option in the captions. It actually recognizes the word ‘eleven’ most of the time, although it\_ struggles with longer sentences even when they come from the elevator itself.” YouTube’s own systems become part of the problem posed by the *Burnistoun* clip. Then “chinklicious” directs debate toward the question of accent in general (and thereby norms Scots): “the way they\_ say eleven isnt THAT different from the ‘american’ eleven. i wish they chose a different number!”

Discussion evolves to indicate not just a randomly international renegotiation of Scottishness online, but also a new alignment among online viewers: “TarasHealthyLife” enthuses that the video is “Highly recommended by our Irish Chiropractor!” “Next0gen0” declares: “I’m American, and I Approve Of This!” managing to rage against the machine in which he participates, marvel at Scots, and lament his own positioning: “Americans [voice recognition] can’t even understand American”; “‘please. Please? Suck my walley.’ ^\_^ OMG! I love the Scots, glad Im part scottish! I wish I had their\_ accent! \*sigh.” Scottish participants find their accent an obscure object of desire, and seem strangely empowered: “ldelainelizard” guffaws, “You should see my Baytown-Texan husband trying to undertand this. I wish I had a camera pointed at\_ his face... I d\*m near peed myself.” So “YorkJonhson” both echoes the final gesture of our two elevator captives and expresses what is in fact going on through this unpredictable online interaction when he bellows: “Freedooooom!!\_”

Henry Jenkins points out that “The circulation of media content—

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<sup>21</sup> Compare Trump’s official website [www.trumpgolfsotland.com](http://www.trumpgolfsotland.com) with “Donald Trump calls Mr Forbes farm a Pigsty” on Allvoices [www.allvoices.com/contributed-news/5938032-donald-trump-calls-mr-forbes-farm-a-pigsty](http://www.allvoices.com/contributed-news/5938032-donald-trump-calls-mr-forbes-farm-a-pigsty)>. Accessed January 13 2012.

<sup>22</sup> See Mary P. Sheridan and Jennifer Rowsell in *Design Literacies: Learning and Innovation in the Digital Age* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).



across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders—depends heavily on consumers’ active participation” (Jenkins 3). This “participatory culture” operates “according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands.” In this context, though “None of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills. Collective intelligence can be seen as an alternative source of media power. We are learning how to use that power through our day-to-day interactions within convergence culture” (4).

This is the world of multiplied, distributed, and recombined identities in Ken MacLeod’s *The Stone Canal*; the world boisterously embraced by Neil Forsyth as his avatar “Bob Servant” engages online spammers from Broughty Ferry in *Delete This at Your Peril*.<sup>23</sup> It is the fragmented yet coalescing world that Iain M. Banks imagines in *Feersum Endjinn*—a world where even the luddites are creatively renegotiated within a self-regulating system made of the remnants of many selves.<sup>24</sup> And this is where a Nairn might take heart. Away from government ventures and international trade, Scotland enjoys a lively career online. In an electronic multiverse of fluid identities, Scottishness is a term open to renegotiation. Such porosity of identity may be a curse, but it seems in no danger of undermining Scottishness. The random interconnectednesses allowed by the web, never mind the sporadic realignments caused by modular identities, renegotiate and thus affirm what it is to be Scottish—however shifting and different that Scottishness may be.

Who needs a “House of Return?” Scotland has already found an uncannily constructive home on the web.

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<sup>23</sup> Ken MacLeod, *The Stone Canal* (New York: Tor, 1996); Neil Forsyth [Bob Servant], *Delete This At Your Peril: One Man’s Hilarious Exchanges with Internet Spammers* (New York: Skyhorse, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Iain M. Banks, *Feersum Endjinn* (1994; New York: Bantam, 1995).