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Carol McGuirk
Florida Atlantic University

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ROSS ROY AND *STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE*: A MEMORIAL TRIBUTE¹

Carol McGuirk

From its first appearance in July 1963, Ross Roy's journal *Studies in Scottish Literature* defined the best in Scottish literary studies, a thriving specialty today and one that the journal itself helped to bring about in its modern form. In that first issue, Professor Roy described his editorial goal as "creating a common meeting ground for work embracing all aspects of the great Scottish literary heritage":

[SSL] ... is not the organ of any ... faction; it welcomes all shades of opinion. It will publish articles on Scottish authors including biographical studies or appreciations; or their influence on others; or trends in the literary history of Scotland, including aesthetics. As a journal devoted to a vigorous living literature it will carry studies of contemporary authors.

That he so briskly dismisses any number of stubborn shibboleths was entirely characteristic of Ross Roy's intellectual and editorial style: his first editorial shows no status-anxiety about defining, let alone defending, any rigid Scottish canon. No preference is expressed for any one methodological approach, and work on emerging writers is as welcome as continuing research on long acknowledged classics. Professor Roy's first editorial issued a broad invitation for scholars to send along anything worthy on any Scottish writer, past or present.

The thirty-six volumes that followed under his editorship were built on the same unwavering trust in the instincts of working scholars in the field, although, as with any highly successful journal, *Studies in Scottish*

¹ *Editorial note*: This historical assessment of the journal Ross Roy founded was originally written for a conference on his 80th birthday. We are grateful to Professor McGuirk for allowing us to print an updated version here, in the first volume since his death, as a memorial to Ross Roy's editorial achievement.

Literature was also shaped by the skills of its editor. Ross Roy wore his learning lightly yet knew everything there was to know about the field, and his editorial and scholarly standards set the bar very high for accuracy and clarity. In producing each year's issue, he also relied on the sound editorial judgment and copyediting acumen of his wife (and latterly associate editor), Lucie Roy.

Recent literary studies have been much preoccupied with literature's complex interaction with communities and nations, but a similar focus marked *Studies in Scottish Literature* from its founding. It was by no means common during the 1960s to find journals that were open to "all shades of opinion" and unfriendly to "faction"—or for journals to invite contributions from many perspectives and on many topics. Perhaps Professor Roy's emancipation from academic snobbery and cant was linked in some way to his lifelong study of Robert Burns. Most who spend much time around Burns come to appreciate the happy coexistence of popular and canonically "literary" elements in his writings: Burns, as is well known, would often produce a letter in elaborate neoclassical English and then would copy at the bottom of the same letter some salty stanzas of satire worded in the least polite forms of demotic Scots. If it was the great good fortune of Scottish studies to have G. Ross Roy as its most influential modern editor, I suspect that it was also a boon to the field at large that the founder of *Studies in Scottish Literature* happened to specialize in the poems and songs of Burns.

That first issue in 1963 featured essays on Sir Walter Scott, the aesthetics of sensibility, Scottish popular ballads, and violence in the fiction of Neil Gunn. Contributions on contemporary Scottish poetry very soon followed, undoubtedly encouraged by Hugh MacDiarmid's name at the head of the small but highly distinguished original Editorial Board—MacDiarmid served from 1963 until his death in 1978. MacDiarmid's name was, of course, a lightning-rod for controversy as well as poetry. One especially heated exchange, discussed recently in *SSL* 38 by Gerard Carruthers, appeared in the first volumes. Sydney Goodsir Smith's contribution of October 1964 (*SSL* 2:71-86), "The Anti-Scottish Lobby in Scottish Letters," responded to David Craig's "A National Literature?," which had appeared in January that year (in *SSL* 1:151-169). Craig had suggested that it was time for Scotland to forget about vernacular Scots, forget about a separate identity, and get on with the imperative task of resigning itself to becoming British. "A National Literature" also challenged the reputation of some wonderful writers, dismissing Norman MacCaig's poetry as "largely fake" (155).

In his answer to Craig, Smith enumerates dozens of Scottish intellectuals over the centuries who have scorned Scottish literature and the Scottish language. His rogues' gallery includes eighteenth-century writers such as the novelist Dr. John Moore (who advised Burns to abandon dialect and study Greek mythology) and a large group of twentieth-century figures, from G. Gregory Smith and T. H. Henderson to Edwin Muir and Maurice Lindsay. Smith concludes that "It is a long story which seemingly has no end, for the poets continue with horrible intransigence in their unregenerate ways. Can any country match such a continued belittling of its own literature by its own literary pundits—in the face of the recurrent appearance of artists, some of them geniuses, to prove them asses?" (77) Smith's eloquent rebuttal to Craig reads as freshly today as when it was first printed. It is a Scottish poet's spirited defense of the idea of a Scottish literary tradition, and Professor Roy told me in 2004 when we were chatting about the journal's high points that Smith's was his own favorite among the early articles.

In addition to essays such as these debating the very possibility of a Scottish literature, the journal served as a showcase for more focused material, including bibliographies, biographies, and monographs. *SSL* has published many articles on aspects of material culture as they relate to Scottish literary traditions. One early essay considered what must have been marvels of condensation: "Chapbook Versions of Scott's Waverley Novels" (*SSL* 3:189-220). From the beginning, the journal showed a tremendous range across literary, historical, and cultural-studies topics.

In 1978, when *Studies in Scottish Literature* reached its thirteenth volume, it changed from several issues each year to a single annual volume and from being set on a linotype machine to being photographed from camera-ready copy. Professor Roy's tartly-worded editorial on the matter commented that "We can, of course, lament ... high prices and low budgets ... but we might be wiser to be glad that people who set type for a living are no longer underpaid" (preface to *SSL* 13). By that point in its history, the journal had printed articles on Henryson and Dunbar, to be sure; but also on early Scottish historiography, ballads, the "Christis Kirk" tradition of drink-and-fight poems, and the courtly poems of William Drummond of Hawthornden. Sir David Lindsay, Sir Thomas Urquhart, Robert Blair, James Boswell, Tobias Smollett, John Hume, William Smellie, and the eighteenth-century ballad collectors Percy, Herd, and Ritson had all been the topic of excellent articles. Eighteenth-century poetry and *belles lettres* had been represented by articles on James Macpherson's Ossian poems, James Beattie's *The Minstrel*, Henry

Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*, and the prose of David Hume, Lord Kames, and Adam Smith. Among nineteenth-century Scottish authors, Sir Walter Scott had been especially well-represented with several articles; but essays had also appeared on James Hogg, Thomas Carlyle, John Galt, Robert Louis Stevenson, George MacDonald, *Blackwood's* magazine, Francis Jeffrey's literary criticism, and even a full-length article (like Smith's, much admired by Professor Roy for its energy and originality) on the Dundee poet *manqué* William McGonagall (*SSL* 7:21-28). Ian Crichton Smith contributed essays on George Douglas Brown's novel *The House with the Green Shutters* and on Hugh MacDiarmid's early poems (*SSL* 7:3-10 and 7:169-179). The first volume had an essay on the pioneer Scottish science fiction writer David Lindsay (*SSL* 1:171-182). Other articles on modern writers had considered the work of Edwin Muir, Norman MacCaig, and Jane Duncan. Surveys of the state of contemporary Scottish poetry regularly appeared, as did comparative studies: Scott in Poland and Germany; Burns in Russia, Japan, and even Limbo. The Notes and Documents section had evolved for the occasional printing of primary materials, and there was a lively reviews section, swelling in some later volumes to over a hundred pages.

Studies in Scottish Literature has always been hospitable to women authors, publishing an early article on Susan Ferrier's 1818 novel *Marriage* (*SSL* 5:216-228), and also to woman contributors, even at the beginning of their careers. I never considered sending my own early essay on Allan Ramsay, drawn from the laboriously researched, gnarly first chapter of my dissertation, anywhere except *Studies in Scottish Literature*. Ross Roy's editorial criticism helped me to revise and improve it, and it appeared in 1980 (*SSL* 16:97-109). Among women whose work was printed in *Studies in Scottish Literature* during years when it was not always easy for women scholars to find venues in which to publish, I have counted Paula Backscheider, Anne Greene, Isabel Hyde, Helena M. Shire, Ann Sullivan Haskell, Harriet Harvey Wood, Mary Jane Scott, Mary Ann Wimsatt, Janet M. Templeton, Anna Jean Mill, Diane Bornstein, Lois A. Ebin, Joanna Spencer Kantrowitz and Penelope Schot Starkey. In 2012, the Editorial Board for the new series included six women scholars.

The door was open to newer writers as well as to newer scholars: Kenneth White, Scottish poet, had been publishing for only a few years when Lynn Novak surveyed his affinities with Gaelic ballads (*SSL* 12:190-206); and the radio playwright James Bridie was critiqued as early as volume 2 (*SSL* 2:96-110).

I suggested in opening that Ross Roy's broad conception of *Studies in Scottish Literature* helped to bring about the field of Scottish literary studies as we know it today. Its founding during the 1960s and subsequent international success undoubtedly encouraged the establishment in 1974 of *Scottish Literary Journal*. *Eighteenth Century Scotland* began operations in 1987, *Études Écossaises* in 1992, and the postmodern, postcolonial *Scotlands* in 1994. *Scotlands* and *Scottish Literary Journal* merged in 2000 as *Scottish Studies Review* (now *Scottish Literary Review*), around the same time that a Scottish Literature Discussion Group was finally established at the Modern Language Association. The all-digital *International Journal of Scottish Literature* was launched in 2006. Not all these survive in their original form, but today's diversity of journals and venues for discussion suggests the excellent state of Scottish literary studies, which in part results from the care with which Professor Roy tended what was for some time the field's only specialized journal, encouraging the best to flourish while keeping *SSL* open to any scholar with insight and knowledge to share.

The difficulties in getting out issues in the days before computers must have been nightmarish. Correspondence could not be simplified by email. Typed hard copies of manuscripts arrived, or didn't arrive, by post. It is a tribute to Ross Roy's devotion and to his extraordinary editorial acuity that the journal has thrived so long. After a period in which its future seemed undecided, his journal now is set to continue, a thought to balance the sadness of his recent death and the loss of this boundlessly curious, unfailingly generous spirit who founded, shaped, and sustained *Studies in Scottish Literature*.

Florida Atlantic University