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## The SSL Symposium on Editing: A Commentary

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## The SSL Symposium on Editing: A Commentary

### Cover Page Footnote

This essay is part of the SSL Symposium, 2013: Divergent Authenticities: Editing Scottish Literary Texts.

## **The SSL Symposium, 2013: Conclusion**

### **EDITING SCOTTISH LITERARY TEXTS: A COMMENTARY**

*Ian Duncan*

In her contribution to this symposium, Alison Lumsden comments on a series of scholarly editing projects that have been reshaping the critical landscape of modern Scottish literature in recent years. Major editions of the novels of Walter Scott, the collected works of James Hogg, and the letters of Thomas Carlyle have reached or are nearing completion, while new editions of Scott's poetry and the works of Robert Burns and Robert Louis Stevenson are in the offing. To these we can add the magisterial Yale Editions of the Private Papers of James Boswell, in progress for upwards of sixty years, and the University of Georgia Press edition of the Works of Tobias Smollett, ongoing since the 1980s. It is hard to think of a comparable recent case of a national literature that has been so transformed by projects of editorial recovery.

The impact of these projects is magnified, no doubt, by Scotland's "minor" status within the global field of Anglophone literatures. Burns and Scott loom larger in Scottish literary history than, say, William Wordsworth and George Eliot in English literary history, mainly for demographic reasons: English literature is more populous than Scottish literature; there's a great deal more of it. Qualitatively, the case is very different. Scotland may instantiate a minor national literature, but it's one that accommodates figures of world-historical stature: thanks to the combination (in the century and a half following the Act of Union) of semi-autonomous institutions of literacy, education and cultural production with access to British imperial markets. "Ossian," Burns and Scott bestride the "world republic of letters like colossi" – and that's without even considering the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers. The

three poets span the historical field of Scottish Romanticism, a phenomenon that until recently was not even supposed to exist.<sup>1</sup>

Scottish Romanticism has been a particular beneficiary of recent editorial projects; indeed it owes much of its current critical visibility to them. Retrieving an audacious, experimental, protean Romantic author in place of his marmoreal Victorian avatar, the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels has reinstalled Scott at the center of the national canon after a century-long expulsion – braced, to be sure, by changes in the cultural climate that have attended the reopening of the Scottish Parliament. The disavowal of Sir Walter as Tory Unionist Archimago no longer seems an urgent rite of ideological passage. The Stirling/South Carolina Edition of Hogg, meanwhile, is bringing to light a lost corpus swathed in the cool credentials of the subaltern, the disrespected, the underground.

Characterizing the complexity of the editorial process and the daunting array of tasks involved – not only providing “platforms for new critical activity,” as she puts it, but requiring critical skills of a high order – Lumsden issues a wise call for strategic flexibility in editorial policy. Principles and practices vary drastically according to a work’s historical period, conditioned by differences in the media and formats of literary production and by socioeconomic and legal changes in what constitutes a text, an author, an oeuvre, or indeed “literature” itself as a cultural category. Works produced before the invention of the printing press, in conditions of restricted literacy and/or in contact with cultures of oral transmission and performance, or before the wholesale restructuring of the literary field by industrial capitalism, pose specific challenges. Eras of historical crisis may disrupt the boundaries that demarcate literary genres and other forms of cultural expression.

Tricia McElroy’s essay highlights the categorical problem posed by the “disparate set of literary-historical-political-religious texts,” most of them circulated as broadside ballads, that comprise her new edition of *Scottish Satirical Literature, 1567-1584*. Their distinctively “literary”

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<sup>1</sup> See, on one hand, Tom Nairn’s analysis of “Scottish belatedness” in *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: NLB, 1981), 94-95, 103-05, 114-18; on the other, Murray Pittock’s history of constructions of the field in *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 1-31. For the “world republic of letters” see Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007).

qualities – far from being separable from their historical occasion – are intrinsic to the works’ intervention in a range of political debates that followed the Scottish Reformation: “the authors of these satirical pieces are using meter, fictions, and familiar literary genres for a reason, and their calculated transformations of these forms are crucial to the quarrels of this historical moment.” The main burden of the editor’s task lies, accordingly, in the apparatus, where she must explain the historical moment to modern readers and clarify the formal and rhetorical strategies with which the texts at hand engage it.

In his essay Ian Campbell identifies issues particular to the past hundred years: “questions of literary rights and copyright permission, of selection and priority in choosing which works can be brought back into print, and of audience in decisions about introductions, annotations, and apparatus,” as well as changing technologies, such as “the technical shift in the British printing industry in the 1960s and 1970s, away from letter-press to offset litho,” and more recent developments of software editing programs and electronic publishing and storage platforms.

Recently deceased writers, close to us in time but fallen from live contemporaneity, pose especially piquant issues of reputation and recovery, as Campbell shows in the case of Lewis Grassic Gibbon. Here the editorial project can be boosted (and potentially, perhaps, distorted) by adaptations of the work in popular media, such as film or television. Conversely, Campbell notes the symbiotic relationship between scholarship and teaching in the consolidation of an author’s reputation and the formation of a national canon. Academic curricula play a relatively new historical role, as scholarly editions fuel course assignments which in turn sustain sales and pedagogically shape literary traditions. The affordable paperback, with its editorial apparatus stripped down and replaced by a critical introduction (as in the Penguin Classics reissue of selected titles from the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels), has become a vital adjunct to the expensive scholarly edition designed for state and academic libraries. It is a shame, then, that so few of these editions have comprehensively pursued paperback reissue, no doubt because of financial constraints. Perhaps we may look forward to a future in which an enlightened Parliament – abetted by munificent patriots – will support a Library of Scotland, along the lines of the Library of America or (its model) the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade.

As well as differences in period, differences in genre call for different editorial procedures. In her masterly essay Gillian Hughes offers a lucid account of the tasks and challenges assumed by the editor of a collection

of author's letters. In doing so she also gives us an anthology-standard account of the genre itself, as one occupying the fluid boundaries of what counts as literature, projected across the domains of public and private life. "Are addresses to editors of newspapers conveying facts or opinions personal letters or literary works? Does a short literary work or a presentation autograph become a letter because it has been directed to a publisher or autograph-hunter and posted?" And as Hughes goes on to show (exhibiting her own deft detective-work), a letter's paratextual marks and edges may yield information no less significant than its contents. An editor does her work in the murky zone "between the unique object intended for the original reader and the inevitably different nature of a printed volume." Among the canonical literary genres of fiction, drama and poetry, with publication as their default condition, a very few special cases invite comparison: Emily Dickinson's fascicles, William Blake's illuminated books.

Hughes's attention to the specific gravity of a genre prompts me, in closing, to develop some of Lumsden's comments on the striking differences in editorial policy between the Hogg and Scott editions. The Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels curates a single genre, in which a consistent if not uniform set of principles and policies can be quite readily applied. Although (as the edition itself makes clear) there are significant formal variations across the range of Scott's historical romances, making *The Talisman* (for example) a very different work from *Old Mortality*, they did much to standardize the novel as a genre in the first quarter of the nineteenth century: not least, consolidating the three-volume format for first-issue publication that would prevail until the 1890s (as well as the five-shilling small octavo reprint edition inaugurated with "Magnum Opus," imitated, for example, in Bentley's *Standard Novels*).<sup>2</sup>

The Hogg Edition offers the very different case of a Collected Works: spanning, in Hogg's case, a bewildering diversity of genres and formats, from book-based poems and works of prose fiction (ballad and tale collections, song anthology, epic, metrical romance, three-volume historical romance, single-volume fictitious memoir) to poems, songs, tales, sketches, travelogues, essays, squibs and anecdotes generated for a

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<sup>2</sup> See Peter Garside, "The English Novel in the Romantic Era: Consolidation and Dispersal," in Garside and Rainer Schöwerling, ed., *The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles, Vol. II: 1800-1829* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 44-47, 93.

variety of periodicals and miscellanies. The list includes an entire miscellany, *The Spy*, edited and largely written by Hogg but also featuring work by other contributors, all quite properly included in Gillian Hughes's recent edition, as well as a practical treatise on sheep farming.<sup>3</sup>

Scott was the major author of the age, who came to wield unprecedented control over the editing, publishing, and reviewing systems through which his work appeared.<sup>4</sup> This control extended to self-canonizing and self-monumentalizing projects such as "Magnum Opus," which set the pattern for author's editions of novels (cf. Thomas Hardy, Henry James) throughout the nineteenth century, as Jane Millgate has shown.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Hogg's relation to the literary market and to contemporary publishing and patronage networks was notoriously precarious. Editors and printers interfered with his works in the course of production, "correcting" what they felt to be rustic or indecent, so that the gap between authorial intention and published artifact often far exceeds the period norm. Accordingly, it is much more difficult to establish a consistent set of scholarly editorial practices; and to do so, perhaps, would be to reiterate the violence done to Hogg's works in his lifetime. Because the publication process was often compromised, the Stirling / South Carolina editors have generally based copytexts on the earliest available states of the works, including manuscripts, restoring some major titles – *Queen Hynde*, *The Three Perils of Man* – to versions that have never been visible before.

Hogg and Scott – contemporaries, friends and rivals – represent extreme cases of what constitutes a Scottish author: one so successful that he dominated and reshaped not just the Scottish but the British literary field and, beyond that, world literature, as his romances were translated, imitated and adapted, from Sweden and Italy to Quebec and Japan, throughout the nineteenth century; the other embodying the Scot as imperial underdog, subject to condescension, censorship, neglect and abuse, but emerging in the late twentieth century to enjoy a kind of post-

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<sup>3</sup> James Hogg, *The Spy*, ed. Gillian Hughes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2000); H. B. de Groot's edition of *The Shepherd's Guide* is in progress.

<sup>4</sup> See William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 170.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Millgate, *Scott's Last Edition: A Study in Publishing History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1987).

colonial apotheosis. That we are no longer obliged to value one of them at the expense of the other, in some sort of tedious zero-sum game of reputations, is in large part thanks to the new editions, which perform the authentically democratic task of making their work available for us to read.

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