

11-15-2014

Doing and Teaching

Roderick Watson
University of Stirling

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Watson, Roderick (2014) "Doing and Teaching," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 40: Iss. 1, 31–36.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol40/iss1/7>

This Symposium is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Doing and Teaching

Cover Page Footnote

Roderick Watson, "Doing and Teaching," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 40 (2014): 31-36; (c) *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 2014

DOING AND TEACHING

Roderick Watson

In thinking of how the modern Scottish literary canon has changed in both its context and its content, in the aftermath of creative writing as a university subject, we must first of all acknowledge the input of creative writers themselves. Two dates and three seminal publications spring to mind.

In 1968 Edwin Morgan's poetry came into its full force with the publication of *The Second Life* —a milestone collection that showed that a contemporary Scottish poet could respond to the modern media-saturated world, and generate poetry that was accessible, and (however experimental or playfully avant garde) entertaining, engaging, popular and wholly readable. Morgan understood the significance of the Scottish Literary Renaissance more than most, recognising the importance of what MacDiarmid and later writers had done to generate creative confidence in Scottish letters. Indeed his own writing more than matched that confidence, not least in a passionate engagement with his home city, and in later collections with imagining different futures for an independent Scotland. But it is as if he could take that confidence for granted without the need to revisit the past nor to reiterate the case every time he wrote.

In the same way, in 1981, the modern Scottish novel acknowledged its roots, but moved on from the imperatives of the Literary Renaissance, with the publication of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*. This was a bildungsroman that referenced a grimly Scottish tradition of early twentieth-century realism (from *The House with the Green Shutters* to *From Scenes Like These*) by drawing on its author's own education and upbringing, only to throw that genre into fantastic, science-fictional relief, and while it was playfully "postmodern" in its narrative devices, it was principally driven and given focus by deep political conviction.

One further landmark remains to be charted, the publication of Liz Lochhead's *The Grimm Sisters* — also in 1981. Here, as with Morgan, we see a poet coming fully into her own, and from now on, the old questions of identity would engage as much with gender and sexuality as with the more traditional tropes of Scottishness. In fact the perennial issues of identity, being and Scottishness were expanded, refreshed, liberated and set on wholly new creative courses by this important shift, as the output from a remarkable number of leading (female) writers in Scotland today can testify.

The impact that these books have had on younger writers — many of them unmoved by, or less than sympathetic to, MacDiarmid's original agenda — cannot be underestimated. These three were by no means, of course, the only texts or authors in the field, but they are signally emblematic, both reflective and constitutive of the cultural paradigm shifts at issue, and in terms of their general impact and popular readership they remain preeminent.¹

But equally striking and much more broadly influential was the way in which young Scottish writers could now embrace popular culture (in the footsteps of Morgan, Gray and Lochhead) adopting, adapting and creating Caledonian hybrids of its tropes to fuel the rock and roll delights of John Byrne's plays, for example, or the heterogeneous Brechtian political panto that characterised the 7:84 theatre productions. The irresistible linguistic energy and accessibility of such works, not to mention their popular impact, has been evidently and significantly inspiring to generations of younger writers and the reading public alike.

And many of those later writers — like our three exemplars indeed — have since found University posts as teachers. There are almost too many to name, but Douglas Dunn, Robert Crawford (even if he is primarily a scholar), W. N. Herbert, Tom Pow, John Burnside, Don Paterson, Ron Butlin, David Kinloch, Jackie Kay, A. L. Kennedy, Kirsty Gunn, Janice Galloway, Ali Smith and Kathleen Jamie all spring to mind. Times have changed. With the possible exceptions of Neil Gunn and George Mackay Brown — hermit-like in Orkney —, none of the leading writers of the Literary Renaissance managed to live directly on their creative talent.

¹ For an account of the early years in this cultural shift in Scottish art and letters, see the essays in *The Scottish Sixties: Reading, Rebellion, Revolution?*, ed. Eleanor Bell and Linda Gunn (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), including Roderick Watson, "Scottish Poetry: The Scene and the Sixties," pp. 69-92.

Schoolteachers, broadcasters, academics, editors or journalists, they all had to wait until their retirement, and the arrival of public poetry readings, or in more recent years literary festivals, to feel what it might be like to live by their work alone. With the arrival of the Scottish Arts Council, which received Royal Charter status in 1967, and then of writers' foundations, writers' retreats, programmes for writers in schools and in local authorities, the authors experienced a significant change in their economic conditions — even if, for many, it led to an uneasy dependence on short-term contracts. By comparison, the growth in creative writing as a university subject has offered much more secure employment and a steady salary.

I am not alone in being slightly sceptical about the possibility of *teaching* creative writing, as opposed to helping students make the very most of what they have to say creatively—for better or worse. But then again, this is also how I feel about teaching “literature” and critical literary study in the first place. From the point of view of the jobbing writer, the rise of universities as the new patrons of the creative arts can only be welcomed; Raphael, after all, was happy to take his commission from the Borgia Pope.

Creative Writing as a university subject goes back to American practice in the 1940s, not entirely separate from the rise of the New Criticism. Its arrival in Britain was a much later development, starting in 1970 with the characteristically relaxed (but no less effective) pipe-smoking style of Malcolm Bradbury's classes at the University of East Anglia. A sceptical person might reflect that the quite astonishingly rapid proliferation of such courses in the UK ever since then, and especially over the last twenty years, has a lot to do with the marketising forces at work in tertiary education and the need to recruit students in the humanities, and not least to woo unlimited numbers of fee-paying one-year postgraduates. This does not mean, all the same, that good things (*pace* the Borgias) are not being achieved.² Having said that, my experience on the panel of assessors for the 2008 Research Assessment

² See Mark McGurl's controversial analysis of the impact of creative writing courses on modern American fiction in *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); and a trenchant response to this book by Eilif Batuman, “Get a Real Degree,” *London Review of Books*, 32, no. 18 (23 September 2010): 3-8.

Exercise (a calendar year of my reading life, no less) left me rather sceptical about the acrobatics required to demonstrate “high research value” in a succession of otherwise entirely worthy novels and poetry collections.

Thinking of our own engagements with creative writing at the University of Stirling, it seems to me that we were early adopters of a crucial principle but rather later adopters of the commercial practice. The principle at stake was that departments that lived by the teaching, dissemination and analysis of creative work, should owe at least some debt of acknowledgment to living writers. So it was that Norman MacCaig was invited to take up a post as a full-time teaching member of the Department of English Studies in 1970. He later became a Reader in English Studies and retired after eight fulfilling years as a valued colleague. He was not appointed as a creative writer in residence *per se*, and indeed he had recently left such a post at the University of Edinburgh. Of course he talked to students when they brought their poems to him (it was usually poems) but this was an informal and not a curricular arrangement. MacCaig’s contribution to the classes he taught — regular core units and advanced seminars on European poetry — was welcomed and valued by everyone, and he is remembered for his astringent comments at department meetings and (perhaps a little less welcome) his pithy and pointed remarks to students in the margins of their essays.

While there were no classes in creative writing in the early years at Stirling, it was always possible for students to submit a piece of creative work as their final year dissertation. This had been a formal feature of the Stirling degree from the very start, when the University was founded in 1967, with modular units and two semesters, along American lines. These dissertations were a considerable task, building upon the Department’s radical insistence on writing frequent essays in a system of periodic assessment, small seminar group teaching and no final exams. (Stirling alumni from the regular English degree include Jackie Kay and Iain Banks.) The nearest thing to a final exam, intended as the climax of four years’ work, was the dissertation. This was a thesis of some 15,000 words, introduced and annotated to postgraduate standard, on a topic of the student’s own choice, researched during the summer and produced with one-to-one supervision as the only project during their final Spring semester. At the end of term, each Honours student revisited their work in a *viva-voce* examination with whichever external examiner had read their thesis along with the departmental supervisor and the second reader.

The final grade was heavily weighted and the best work produced more than matched postgraduate MA and MLitt degrees in other universities. I mention this to signal that a creative project under these terms was by no means negligible, and yet, as time passed this became a more and more popular option with students.

From the start, too, Stirling had a policy in its foundational third semester Poetry course, of setting as part of the required reading a recent publication by a living poet, and inviting the poet to read from and speak to that book in a lecture to the assembled class. With a class of 200 students or more, this was not an insignificant sale for some small publishers.

It was not long before Creative Writing modules *per se* (in advanced seminar classes) were added to the regular Stirling curriculum and it was my privilege to teach many of these. I am not alone in believing that the act of writing creatively is a crucially useful focus for the act of reading attentively — which is, after all, central to all critical study, whether practical or theoretical. The act of revision applied to a line of your own is a powerful way to foreground the effect of small differences and the power of nuance. Attentive writers become attentive readers and *vice versa*.

This principle was applied directly to our undergraduate core courses for the first two years of study when creative writing questions in the regular literature modules were used to generate an increased focus on the texts at issue. Thus, for example, in studying Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," students were asked to rewrite an aspect of it, by changing its suffering protagonist Jane's intensely first-person narrative into the third person, with or without free indirect discourse. Or they were asked to do the same, but writing this time from the husband's point of view — is he as insensitive as the unreliable protagonist makes him out to be?

Creative Writing at Stirling has since developed into a fine postgraduate programme under Professor Kathleen Jamie and her colleagues. The inclusion of what has become known as "life writing" in the portfolio is a testament to how widely and fruitfully the discipline has developed. But I will always argue for its undergraduate application, too, and our adoption of it at a time when it seemed to be a more radical move than it might seem today. The critical focus and the technical understanding generated by such exercises was genuinely exciting for the students and hugely encouraging for us as teachers.

If the expansion of Creative Writing as a discipline has its controversial or at least its ambiguous implications for literary study and academic research, at least it has demonstrated the welcome possibility that “teaching” and “doing” need not be incompatible.

University of Stirling