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## Tartan Noir and the Scottish Literary Canon

Matt McGuire

*University of Western Sydney*

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### Cover Page Footnote

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## **TARTAN NOIR AND THE SCOTTISH LITERARY CANON**

*Matthew McGuire*

The 2012 re-launch of *Studies in Scottish Literature* featured a series of discussion pieces addressing the state of the discipline in the early twenty-first century. The most provocative intervention came from Professor Willy Maley who, with an eye to recent reforms at the University of Glasgow, turned his attention to what he saw as the “tartan time warp” within recent scholarship on Scottish literature.<sup>1</sup> The target of his polemic was the elevation of Robert Burns, within both Glasgow and the wider academy, a development which Maley regarded as both critically backward and culturally nostalgic, indicative of a conservative agenda that has long restricted the study of Scottish literature.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, he singled out the rise of creative writing, particularly at the University of Glasgow, as providing the “seedbed for new voices” within an otherwise ossified and perennially inward-looking discipline (36).

Ironically, such arguments can be seen as reconvening the kinds of fractious critical debates—“my Scottish lit is better than your Scottish lit”—that defined the discipline throughout much of its early critical history.<sup>3</sup> One wonders, however, whether Maley is mistaken in his insistence on reading the disciplinary landscape as a zero sum game, a contested arena

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<sup>1</sup> Willy Maley, “On the Abolition of the Scottish Literature Department,” *SSL*, 38 (2012): 35-40 (38): <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol38/iss1/10/>.

<sup>2</sup> In 2011 the AHRC awarded £1.1 million to the University of Glasgow’s Centre for Robert Burns Studies to edit a new multi-volume Burns edition for publication by Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Matthew Wickman, “In Defense of Inferiorism (and Other Lost Causes),” *SSL*, 38 (2012): 28-34: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol38/iss1/9/>.

in which so-called conservative critical agendas threaten to overshadow and eclipse the more innovative and iconoclastic developments within the creative sphere. An alternative account might characterize recent Scottish literature as bolstered and emboldened by the interactions of creative writing within the academy. Arguably these two camps have served to reinforce and reinvigorate one another, increasing the global profile of Scottish writing and challenging key theoretical paradigms around canonicity, periodization and what should be in/excluded under the aegis of Scottish literary studies.

Moreover, one might argue that the radical revisionism of recent Robert Burns scholarship is itself a creative act, a deliberate and concerted attempt to fashion new cultural contexts in which this work might be interrogated and understood. Far from enthroning a tartan mythology, in fact, recent Burns scholarship has sought to dethrone such paradigms, to rescue the poet from the forces of cultural cringe and relocate his work within a variety of arenas including Augustan poetics, the genesis of Romanticism, eighteenth century musicology and the study of cultural memory. Given that questions of cultural legitimacy have preoccupied Scottish creative writing since the 1970s, and particularly in Glasgow through the likes of Tom Leonard, James Kelman and Alasdair Gray, might we not argue that the recent Burns revival is also a beneficiary of this important cultural-political tail wind? When it comes to creative and critical interventions, it would seem that the correct formulation is not “either-or,” but rather “both.”

In transgressing the boundaries between high art and popular culture, then, Burns studies might be read as a symptom of more general trends within the institutional study of Scottish literature and its relationship to creative writing. Take, for example, the emergence of *tartan noir* in the 1990s, that fusion of US hard-boiled fiction with the political and cultural specificity of Scotland in the late twentieth century. Originally coined by James Ellroy to describe the work of Ian Rankin, the term has come to designate a vast cultural sedimentation, from Calvinist self-loathing to the psychic legacies of Clydeside, and from working class existentialism to the gothic inheritance of the justified sinner. The presence and popularity of Scottish crime fiction, alongside the literary bent of certain

practitioners, has sent critics of Scottish literature back to the canon in search of both local and national antecedents.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst the 1980s saw crime fiction assume a newfound critical legitimacy, for the most part scholars remained ignorant of the important contribution that Scottish writers had made to the evolution of the form.<sup>5</sup> One might wonder, for example, whether Sherlock Holmes's quasi-religious belief in rational deduction could ever have been created, if Arthur Conan Doyle had not spent his formative years in that great city of the Enlightenment, Edinburgh? Moreover, might we not read Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as part of the Scottish proto-history of the genre, with Utterson playing the role of the amateur detective, desperate to uncover the mystery surrounding the behaviour of his good friend Dr. Henry Jekyll? In one sense, the neglect of Scottish writers by historians of crime fiction mirrors the marginalization of Burns within Romantic Studies, and the likes of MacDiarmid and Grassie Gibbon within international Modernist studies.

To date, the understanding of Scotland's place in the history of crime fiction awaits the kind of sustained scrutiny it undoubtedly deserves. A number of early interventions have been made, most notably by Christopher MacLachlan on the criminographical credentials of Scott and Stevenson, and my own work on James Hogg, research which attempts to situate the writer within the proto-history of crime fiction alongside the work of William Godwin, Charles Brockden Brown and Thomas De Quincey. Furthermore, whilst the rise of *tartan noir* has compelled a reevaluation of Scottish literary history, it has also problematized any lingering notions of an organic and essentialist national culture, one that

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the special Scottish issue of *Clues* 26.2 (2007); Gill Plain, *Ian Rankin's Black and Blue* (New York: Continuum, 2002); Gill Plain, "Concepts of Corruption: Crime Fiction and the Scottish 'State'," in Berthold Schoene, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007): 132-140; Matthew McGuire, "James Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and the Romantic Roots of Crime Fiction," *Clues* 30.1 (2012): 8-18.

<sup>5</sup> For the cultural legitimacy of crime writing see, for example, Stephen Priestman ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Rosemary Herbert, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Lee Horseley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

might be cordoned off and constructed in the absence of outside influence.

The cross-pollination of creative and critical praxis also assumes an immediate significance when one considers the material realities of contemporary publishing and the relationship between some of the country's most important writers and the institutional settings within which they teach and work. Take poetry, for example. It is worth noting how many of Scotland's most recognized and lauded poets currently operate from within the University sector; an incomplete list would include John Burnside, Kathleen Jamie, Don Patterson, Robert Crawford, Alan Riach and David Kinloch. Moreover, one would be hard pressed to argue that Edwin Morgan's poetry did not benefit from the thirty-three years he spent teaching in the Department of English Literature at the University of Glasgow, and likewise Douglas Dunn at St Andrews. Whilst one could cynically view the academy's appropriation of creative writing as merely the latest cash cow, an institutional lifeline for a discipline looking to justify its existence, it is difficult to argue that universities, students and the subject of Scottish literature itself, have not all benefitted from the inclusion of creative writing within the academy.

Where this development has encountered difficulty has been with the advent of a science-based research culture in the 1990s, one which has been imposed on scholars within the humanities in the Scotland, the UK and elsewhere. The use of accountancy models and evaluation metrics to assess the significance and impact of arts research is rendered even more problematic – perhaps in useful ways—when that research takes the form of a poem, a play or a work of fiction. There is also an element of reverse discrimination, often within literature departments, whereby critics who have succeeded within the rubrics of research assessment exercises cast doubt on the legitimacy of creative outputs as both a source of knowledge and an indication of intellectual esteem. Such skepticism reflects the very real difficulty of ascertaining and evaluating a work of literature. It discloses the challenge, but also the value, of attempting to make a literary judgments, and in particular the difficulty of doing so in an original and highly nuanced way.

All of which takes us back to what is arguably the most fundamental thing which humanities scholars attempt to teach their students— to think for themselves—a skill that takes careful cultivation, watchfulness and years of practice. If the roots of such a notion take us back to the Scottish Enlightenment and to a Scottish model of higher education which foregrounds first principles and the value of philosophical thinking, then

is this not something to be celebrated and reaffirmed? Writing literature and writing about literature ought to be arenas which foster debate, and promote dissent, while striving towards a rigorous and protracted form of analysis. If the incorporation of creative writing in the academy helps to encourage such activities, then Scottish literature can only stand to benefit.

*University of Western Sydney*