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The SSL Symposium, 2015

CULTURAL NATIONALISM IN SCOTTISH LITERARY STUDIES: THE VIEW FROM ELSEWHERE

Tony Jarrells

The Scottish Independence Referendum of September 2014 generated a mass of debate both before and after 55.3% of voters answered “No” to the question: “Should Scotland be an independent country?” The question has not disappeared, however, especially given the results of the UK general elections held in May 2015, in which the Scottish National Party won an astonishing 56 of 59 seats in Scotland and, perhaps, opened the door for yet another of what former SNP First Minister of Scotland, Alex Salmond, called a “once in a generation opportunity.” Indeed, the ardent No campaigner, George Galloway, recently predicted that Scotland would be independent in five years.

Within the larger debate about independence, the role that Scotland’s writers and “creatives” play in large-scale political developments also has been brought to the fore, although not as forcefully as some hoped. Readers of the Scottish and English press could be forgiven for thinking that there was near unanimous support among Scotland’s writers for the Yes campaign: A *Guardian* issue from July 2014 featured essays on independence by Val McDermid, Irvine Welsh, Janice Galloway, and others; the pro-independence National Collective counts Alasdair Gray and Liz Lochhead among its members; and when J.K. Rowling revealed that she donated £1 million to the Better Together campaign the response in newspapers and across social media was swift, personal, and in many cases malicious (Rowling was called a “Tory,” for instance). Given the vibrancy of contemporary Scottish writing, it is hardly surprising that the likes of Gray, Welsh, Kathleen Jamie, or A.L. Kennedy would be asked to weigh in on such a major issue. But it might be said, as well, that literature in Scotland has always had to be political. Murray Pittock has

argued that the growing confidence through the 1980s and early 1990s of Scottish cultural distinctiveness preceded, and perhaps made inevitable, the political developments that followed. And twentieth- and twenty-first-century Scottish writers, from Cunningham Graham, Compton Mackenzie, and Hugh MacDiarmid on up to the present, have played recurrent roles in successive independence movements. In an interview recently published in *The Grind*, novelist James Robertson suggested that Scotland's writers paved the way for the Referendum, claiming that "culture comes first" and that "the political changes are going on because there are cultural and other shifts going on."¹ A contributor to the symposium below, David Latané, puts things the other way around, arguing that the "national question...supercharges cultural production." Whichever way one figures the line of influence here the relationship between politics and culture is still explicit. For Latané, the "supercharge" resulting from the Referendum debate has led to a shift in the classroom, away from older writers such as Robert Burns and Walter Scott and towards a greater focus on contemporary literature.

Yet it is not just contemporary writers who have been enlisted in the cause, for or against, independence. Burns and Scott, too, were made to take sides. Surely Burns would be a Yes, yes? The great national bard of Scotland, singer of "Scots, wha hae wi' Wallace bled," should be counted on to support Independence, many said – though not everyone agreed. Even Sir Walter's vote was up for grabs, with Salmond explaining, "I'd like to think he might have moved toward a 'Yes.'" Commentators were quick to correct Salmond's lack of knowledge about the Great Unknown and to remind him that Scott was a steady Unionist who invented a Scottish tradition that fit quite snugly within a greater idea of Britishness. Yet it seems fair to say, as well, that the Scotland invented in Scott's work remains open to other possible futures than those suggested in the compromises with which many of his novels conclude. As Caroline McCracken-Flesher argues, "precisely because his influence is both admitted and resisted Scott is in fact a site of contestation producing the nation today."²

An alternative position, one that does not distinguish between canonical and contemporary authors, holds that in the present age

¹ Andrew McAinsh, Interview with James Robertson. *The Grind*, 05/04/14

<http://thegrindjournal.weebly.com/james-robertson.html>.

² Caroline McCracken-Flesher, *Possible Scotlands: Walter Scott and the Story of Tomorrow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

literature may not play much of a role at all in shaping or guiding political action – that what separates our moment from, say, Scott’s, is precisely the fact that people no longer look to poets or novelists to imagine the spaces (local, national, global) and social relations in and through which they live out their lives. For novelist Alan Warner, for instance, the Referendum was to be a kind of test case for whether or not literature in Scotland maintains a truly popular character. “A no vote will create a profound and strange schism between the voters of Scotland and its literature,” he wrote in the *Guardian*:

It will be the death knell for the whole Scottish literature “project” – a crushing denial of an identity that writers have been meticulously accumulating, trying to maintain and refine. With a no vote, a savage division will suddenly exist between the values of most of our writing – past and present – and the majority of our people.³

It is interesting to compare Warner’s concerns here with earlier commentaries on literature’s popular character, such as Georg Lukács’ classic *The Historical Novel* (in which Scott’s fiction is shown to be exemplary of such a character). But the alarm sounded in Warner’s piece contrasts with a number of the views of scholars included in this issue’s symposium, several of whom explain that the Independence issue itself, and not any particular way the vote goes, has had an invigorating effect on the study of Scottish literature, especially for students outside Scotland: in the United Arab Emirates, in Italy, and in North America.

For of course, the Scotland invented in Scott’s fiction (and elsewhere) has had an impact that reaches well beyond the borders of Scotland or England or Britain. Scott’s novels, along with Burns’s poetry, made Scotland both imaginable and relatable to many around the world, including, famously, other writers – in the U.S. (Cooper), France (Balzac), Russia (Tolstoy), and India (Chatterjee) – and, more indirectly, people all over the world who may or may not have read Scott but whose streets and monuments, ships and trains, have taken their names from his work. As Ann Rigney’s study of *The Afterlives of Walter Scott* impressively details:

There are towns called Waverly spread across the globe: in Victoria, Australia; in Nova Scotia; near the border of South Africa with Swaziland, and in no less than twenty-two states in

³ “Scottish Writers on the Referendum–Independence Day?,” *The Guardian*, 19th July 2014: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/19/scottish-referendum-independence-uk-how-writers-vote>.

the USA. There are districts called Waverley in Dunedin, Melbourne, Johannesburg, Pretoria, Bloemfontein, Cape Town, Belmont (Massachusetts), and Baltimore (Maryland). There are streets called Waverly in Auckland, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Palo Alto, Dublin, Glasgow, Southport, and Nottingham; and although Calcutta / Kolkota has been re-named, it still has a “Waverley Lane” in the downtown area dating back to pre-independence times.⁴

Many such places, linked – however tenuously – by their connection to the Waverley novels, are sites where students and teachers continue to read, study, and discuss Scottish literature, from *The Antiquary* to “Alba Einstein,” *Tam o’ Shanter* to *Trainspotting*. And as a number of the contributors in the symposium suggest, the Referendum debate has heightened such interest and deepened the connections between Scotland and other regions and nations, whether those fighting for their own independence (Catalonia, Quebec), or others struggling for autonomy in a new global economic order (Ukraine, Greece).

It is to these connections, and in general to what we are calling “the view from elsewhere,” that our post-Referendum symposium turns for its topic. We invited contributions from colleagues who work and teach outside Scotland and asked them to address such questions as: what ideas of Scotland, and what aspects of Scottish literature, seem most significant from an international vantage point? What do students or colleagues in other literary fields know about Scotland and Scottish literature? Is the pull of a luminescent national heritage still strong, even among those without significant ethnic inheritance? Where those in Britain, on both sides of the border, perhaps still often see difference from EngLit, do outsiders seek difference for Scottish literature not so much through comparison with Englishness as with e.g. American culture, or Irish culture, or Italian culture, or New Zealand culture? Are students elsewhere still mired in *Braveheart* and *Brigadoon*; or are the Scottish antiszygy or Kurt Wittig’s invocations of the Scottish supernatural still viewed as magic keys opening up a national culture? How might the current or historical national or sectional politics of elsewhere color responses to the Referendum itself, and how does this unavoidably comparative or international context affect how, living elsewhere, one writes about or teaches or understands Scottish writers and works?

⁴ Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.

Contributors to the symposium teach in Italy, the UAE, Germany, Virginia, Oregon, and Glasgow; their views from elsewhere encompass classic and contemporary Scottish literature, political movements, especially from the 1970s onwards, questions of identity and its relation to nation and language, and a number of striking international connections that have been opened up by reflecting upon Scottish independence with students and colleagues.

Such connections, it should be noted, were one of the hoped-for, positive goals of independence: an independent Scotland, it was said, would be free to negotiate a set of new relationships (with Europe, for instance) and to find its own place in the global economic order, a place not mediated solely by what looks to many like Britain's too-thorough embrace of American-style, neoliberal capitalism. This is perhaps one of the more curious complexities of the Referendum movement: a people seeking national status in order to better engage a global order in which the status of nations has been diminished; an idea of nation that, in its best form, eschews the worst elements of nationalism, from racism and jingoism to an inward-turning isolationism. The idea of a national movement born out of a critique of nationalism and imperialism goes back to Tom Nairn's 1977 book, *The Break-Up of Britain*. A pronounced effect of such an idea has been to give a leftist appeal to a nationalist party (the SNP) that by its very nature ought to pull right – akin, we might say, to the struggles of the freedom-loving Wallace somehow overdetermining the racist character of Mel Gibson.

The effect that this rebranded, twenty-first-century cultural nationalism might have on Scottish literary studies remains to be seen. Will a new focus on what Carla Sassi, below, calls Scotland's "national specificities" lead to a more insular-looking Scottish literature, cut off from the national or regional peculiarities of other places around the world? Or will such a focus, supercharged by the Referendum debate, be the very means for making new connections between region and nation and world? For Andrew Hook, who generously agreed to write a response to our symposium, the threat of an inward-turning, bad nationalism is quite real. He points to the dangers of "conflating culture and politics" and cites the example of American Studies – and particularly of that field's move away from notions of national exceptionalism – as a salutary one, cautioning against a "perennial focus on the national question" in Scotland. As with the political argument cited above, it is to be hoped that the nation-without-nationalism character of the Referendum debates will extend to the realm of culture,

and that Scottish literature will be invigorated not only by the current, heady political debate, centered on Scotland's national specificities, but also by the connections opened up through relating and translating these specificities into other contexts: regional, national, global. Hook's pioneering work on Scottish and American writing is itself a model of the latter, highlighting as it does those connections made visible by a view from elsewhere.

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