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SCOTTISH WRITERS, AMERICAN STUDENTS: A VIEW FROM VIRGINIA

David Latané

When I was training as a Romanticist, major Scottish writers were in my remit: Burns, Scott, Hogg, Ferrier, and the *Blackwood's* gang. However, even at the graduate level, American courses used anthologies, and of the Scottish writers the then-standard anthology of the Romantic period included only Sir Walter Scott, who was introduced as one “versed not only in British but in European history as a whole.”¹

American textbooks are little better now. Looking over the most recent edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, I was surprised to find that Scottish writers after 1900 had more or less disappeared: only Carol Ann Duffy could be found. I queried the editors, and received an informative reply explaining that “pressures from our instructors for the inclusion of more prose fiction, less poetry, and for the expansion of the anthology’s global reach” meant no room for Scottish writing. From that point of view, Scotland was but one among the “eighty-eight or more nations and territories where English is an official language.”² It is ironic that this turn from “English” to anglophone literature should cause Scottish writing to disappear during what is arguably its richest period.

My awareness of this truth came about by accident. In 1994, a VCU colleague started a summer-abroad program, the *Glasgow Artists and Writers Workshops*, in cooperation with the Glasgow School of Art, and I piggybacked along to teach a short course in Scottish Literature. Until 2010 we took about thirty students to Glasgow in alternate summers, for 4-5 weeks. They visited not only tourist sites but also the major Glasgow

¹ David Perkins, ed., *English Romantic Writers* (New York: Harcourt, 1967), 375.

² Jahan Ramazani to the author, email, 29 March 2013.

and Edinburgh galleries, Ian Hamilton Finlay's "Stonypath," went for a working stay at Hospitalfield House in Arbroath, met regular hours in class and studio, and also got the chance to meet Scottish writers. We were lucky enough to be able to invite writers such as Stewart Conn, A. L. Kennedy, Robert Crawford, W. N. Herbert, Kathleen Jamie, and John Burnside to give readings and to talk with students. The more I read, listened and learned, the more convinced I became that the literature of Scotland is enjoying one of its finest moments, and that the national question, particularly after the failure of the devolution referendum in 1979, has been a key factor. My courses have gradually moved away from being surveys starting with Burns, and focus now on the contemporary.

Before they come on the summer course, in part because of textbooks such as the *Norton Anthology*, Scottish literature as such is almost unknown to my students, but it intrigues and challenges them. How I present it has been inflected by my being a *Virginian*—that is, someone who was raised with the sense of belonging to a place with a distinctive history and culture, rather than simply a resident of a state. In 2015 this is an increasingly rare thing, and it marks me by age (62) and local origin (from a rural county). The population of Virginia has more than doubled since 1950, and it now has a high percentage (over 35%) of citizens born in another state, and about 12% who are foreign born.³ This makes for an intriguing comparison with the *nation* of Scotland, where the question of "Scotland" for its writers and artists is always and inescapably on the table. Scotland and Virginia are intertwined. Glasgow owes much of its development on the eighteenth-century to the tobacco trade, commemorated in Virginia Street in the Merchant City. Like Scotland, Virginia has a lowland (called tidewater) / highland divide—profound enough that in 1863 a portion of the Virginia highlands became a separate state.⁴ But thinking of oneself as a "Scottish" or as a "Virginia" writer are very different things.

For my English 560 course, "Recent Scottish Poetry and Prose," in the fall semester 2013, I began the syllabus:

³ <https://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/acsbr10-07.pdf>. [For comparison, since 1939, the population of Scotland has grown by less than 4%, and in 2011, 83% of those living in Scotland had been born there, and only 6.5% born outside the U.K. Ed.]

⁴ Virginia's former US Senator, Jim Webb, published a bestselling book, *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America* (New York: Broadway, 2005).

Scotland is smaller than Virginia (Scotland=30,414 square miles; 5,062,011 people. Virginia=42,774 square miles; 8,186,867 people). However, its rich history, sterling intellectual heritage, linguistic diversity, and the impact of the Scottish diaspora make it an interesting case for studying the intersection of imaginative writing and nationality.

Scottish writers have, since the publication of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* in 1981, produced a body of literature that is remarkable for both breadth and depth. This course will look closely at a number of works produced over the last few decades to discern how they relate to both contemporary writing, to topics such as gender, the postcolonial, postmodern, etc., and as Scotland heads towards an independence referendum in 2014, we will consider recent Scottish poetry and prose in the light of "Scotland"—the nation, the imaginary, the languages.

American students, if they have a sense of Scottish nationalism at all, generally have the Braveheart variety. I began the course above with an antidote, Alan Jackson's essay from 1971, which took up all of *Lines* 37: "The Knitted Claymore: An Essay on Culture and Nationalism." Jackson comically rejects nationalism based in the history of "Sacred pirates called 'kings'," and notes that "The men who followed the kings ... find it convenient to try and maintain the fiction of nationhood Even politicians of relative good will can't understand that all frontiers, all talk of national interest and limitations of freedoms in its name, are blasphemies against the only sacred objects which do exist on earth—the actual bodies (and what speaks through them) of individual men, women, and children."⁵ Jackson's essay demolishes the racial and chauvinistic nationalism of a "unity against" as opposed to "for."

More recent and more inclusive Scottish literary nationalism builds on the anti-nationalism of the youth solidarities of the 1960s. It provides an opportunity to imagine a place where literature and art exert influence over the course of events, in communities not bound by the past. The slogan "*Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation*," found on the covers of Alasdair Gray's works, conveys a youthful optimism; Edwin Morgan's bequest to the Scottish National Party is an example of a different kind of clout. The analytic of Robert Crawford's *A Scottish Assembly* plays with the clichés in poems such as "Alba Einstein," but constructs a credo for a diverse, "Micro-nation":

⁵ Alan Jackson, "The Knitted Claymore: An Essay on Culture and Nationalism," *Lines Review*, no. 37 (June 1971): 2-38.

Or why I came back here to choose my union
 On the side of the ayes, remaining a part
 Of this diverse assembly — Benbecula, Glasgow, Bow of Fife—
 Voting with my feet, and this hand.⁶

Students in Virginia understand the goodness of the local, and understand power kept close to home is less corrupt, but “Virginia” has no ideological valence for them. The outsized vigor and variety of Scottish writing in three languages includes a celebration of its scale. “Scotland small?” asks MacDiarmid, and Tom Buchan sings “Scotland the wee . . . nirvana of the keelie soul.”⁷ The national question—whether one likes it or not—clearly supercharges cultural production; it’s the spike in the punch, a frisson producing sparks and energy.

Students in ENGL 560 got stuck into the question of nationality, sometimes with misprision, but often thinking along lines new to me. One student on her midterm traced how the “search for a national identity” correlated with a “bold experimentation with language and narrative form” in writers such as Alasdair Gray and Janice Galloway, before concluding that to “define a Scottish national literature would inevitably be reductive.”⁸ There was a certain sympathy with A. L. Kennedy’s reply to those asking for help with their dissertations: “Best of luck and I’d advise you to avoid the whole Woman Writer area and the Scottish Writer thingy. Very dull.”⁹ Nevertheless, and without denigrating writers residing in Virginia, it was clear to us clear that, while the demographics are much the same, cultural production in Scotland is on a higher plane, in large part because of the identification with the nation and its future.

In addition to the national question, students’ increased self-placement within subaltern groupings on American campuses means that they are well primed to discuss the boundaries, privileges, and power relations of societal difference. The linguistically and culturally

⁶ “Scotland,” and “A Scottish Assembly” in Robert Crawford, *A Scottish Assembly* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), 42-43.

⁷ Tom Buchan, “Scotland the Wee,” *Lines Review*, no. 22 (Winter, 1966): 18.

⁸ Student take-home midterm response, October 2013, to this prompt: “Thinking over what we have read, come up with three things you feel are characteristic of recent Scottish writing—and exemplify each thing with examples from at least two writers. You need not argue that these characteristics are unique to Scottish writing, and you should sum up by thinking about what your list might mean for our consideration of Scottish writing as such—that is, with a national label.”

⁹ <http://www.a-l-kennedy.co.uk/alk-faq/>, 1 April 2015.

fragmented literatures of Scotland, cemented together by the category “not English,” provides for students case studies in the interaction of culture and nation, with points of contrast between large and diverse America and small and surprisingly diverse Scotland, whose literature provides an unfamiliar set of issues to illustrate the mechanisms of cultural resentments and divisions. Jackie Kay’s *Adoption Papers* hits close to home, but we’ve read it alongside reflections on growing up in the *Gàidhealtachd* by Iain Crichton Smith. The cultural code errors that result in tragedy in Scott’s “The Two Drovers” have kickstarted discussions for me that take up issues of race and gender without, in effect, seeming to do so. Precisely because the inherited sectarian prejudices depicted in Alan Spence’s “These Colours They Are Fine” or Alan Bissett’s *Pack Men* are not part of their heritage, bigotry and the workings of men in packs can be discussed with less anxiety.

While Scottish literature is not (yet) a part of the standard curriculum in the English major at VCU, my experience has been a uniformly positive one. In the best of all departments, the literature and nation of Scotland would be more central.

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