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## Wee Malkies Abroad: Scottish Literature Seen from the United Arab Emirates

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**WEE MALKIES ABROAD:  
SCOTTISH LITERATURE SEEN FROM  
THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES**

*Manfred Malzahn*

As I approached the gate for my KLM flight from Amsterdam to Aberdeen on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014, it was easy enough to tell many passengers who were going to be on the same plane as I, from those who were travelling to other destinations. Not only did familiar accents thicken around me, in anticipation of the return to an environment where Braid Aiberdonian or Buchan Speak was not only likely to be recognised as such, but even to be understood. Likewise, the frequency of kilts, Glengarry bonnets and foot-long feathers on show increased to an extent that made me wonder when and where I had last been among such a conspicuous display of Scottishness.

Here was a bunch of stragglers from the Tartan Army with their impedimenta, on their way back home from a football match in Germany, where the Scots had played the role of gallant losers in a 2-1 victory for the World Cup holders. The Scottish contingent had no doubt been as welcome in that capacity inside and around Dortmund stadium as they seemed to be at Schiphol airport. They had added colour to the proceedings, they had created a bit of excitement by giving the favourites a good run for their money, but ultimately, they had been unable to capsize the boat that they rocked so palpably and valiantly.

I was back in the United Arab Emirates by the time the result of the September 18<sup>th</sup> vote was declared, and I could not help comparing post-referendum comments I now read and heard in the UAE, to responses that the abovementioned football score had drawn from the German press and public that lauded the vanquished. To plenty of people worldwide, a Yes victory in Scotland would presumably have been as big an upset as an away win for a visiting Scotland side in a competitive match played on German soil. In many quarters, a result of this kind would have somewhat

diminished the goodwill felt towards those whom fate has so obviously decreed to be forever brave, forever quaint, and forever robbed.

Such a loss of sympathy would in all likelihood have happened in the Emirates, too. During the run-up to September 18th, English-language newspapers in the UAE had featured quite a range of different and differentiated views on Scottish independence, as expressed e.g. by Alan Massie and Neal Ascherson. The September 15<sup>th</sup> issue of *Gulf News*, however, then took a firm and simple stand in an editorial that began with this sentence: “The Scottish people have a great responsibility to preserve the United Kingdom and vote against independence, while preserving their autonomy and heritage within the greater whole.” While it is unlikely that this exhortation had any influence on the result of the referendum, it can be taken to reflect the attitude that prevailed among the UAE’s native as well as expat population.

The general sigh of relief heard around the region after the referendum was nonetheless mixed with a fair amount of fellow-feeling. On September 19th, *Gulf News* columnist Fawaz Turki, describing himself as “a typical diaspora Palestinian” resident in the USA who had relatives in Scotland, explained why the perceived emotion behind much of the Yes support should strike a chord with a person like him, saying “it is a sentiment cut from the same cloth out of which his own national sensibility is woven.” Should the fishnet-pattern *keffiyeh*, therefore, be considered a Middle Eastern variant of the tartan, most widely and readily accepted when seen as emblematic of a lost cause?

From a Gulf country’s point of view, anything that seems likely to add to the current lack of geopolitical equilibrium is bound to look undesirable. From a UAE perspective in particular, the concepts of union and unity may seem to embody incontestable values, and the existence of the United Arab Emirates living proof. Skilfully negotiated and carefully maintained, the federation of seven emirates established in 1971 would find it difficult to countenance any breakaway plans of even its smallest member, let alone its second largest. Hence, in spite of the colonial past and in spite of respect for the tenacity of the perennial underdog, the inclination lies more towards the Union Jack than towards the Saltire.

At least the name of Scotland has recently had more than the usual number of mentions, in this country as elsewhere. But if Scottish literature enters our curriculum, it still needs to come through the back door. We teach a fairly traditional EngLit/AmLit canon, circumscribed for the most part by the content of weighty Norton anthologies. Not too many Scottish authors there, and if so, not too distinctly marked as such.

Yet teachers are free to adduce other materials in our Introduction to Literature and our range of period courses; and we have recently added a course in “Anglophone Literatures” that would provide space for a brief introduction to the Scottish literary tradition, were it not for the fact that the full course title defines its geographical scope as “outside the UK and the US”. Canada is thus potentially in, and so is Ireland, while Scotland is, at least for the time being, excluded. A Yes vote in the referendum would have justified a rethink, and possibly a rewrite of our course description and syllabus.

When students here are confronted with Scottish writing, one way of demonstrating distinctiveness is by going in at the deep end, and selecting poetry or short narrative prose in Scots. Admittedly, this poses a major challenge for learners who are often preoccupied with getting their Standard English right. But Gulf Arabs are familiar with diglossia and code-switching, and can thus appreciate what happens when, for instance, Stephen Mulrine’s “Wee Malkies” taunt a hapless housewife in the appropriate idiom. UAE students can, to hijack Butler’s book title, “register the difference” and see parallels with the difference between Standard Modern Arabic *fusha* and the language Emirati youngsters speak in the streets of Abu Dhabi, Ras Al Khaimah, or Fujairah.<sup>1</sup>

The literary use of urban Scots provides a useful access route to Scottish culture also because it bypasses the most likely stereotypes or preconceptions, though it could arguably lead into the cul-de-sac of another stereotype that John Caughie has termed Clydesideism. Here, however, is a stereotype that students who grew up the UAE are unlikely to have encountered, far less to have adopted. They may not even have come across any Kailyard representations of Scotland either, so this would leave only one set of images from the notorious triad of Scottish stereotypes to be contended with or subverted: that which is commonly labelled Tartanry, and which may well be regarded as the one most widespread throughout the non-anglophone world.

Whereas the Scotlands imagined by 21st-century Emirati students will most certainly not be replicas of *Brigadoon*, the influence of *Braveheart* still looms large and needs to be addressed. Fortunately, it is quite easy to document major differences between the average Scottish character in the Mel Gibson film, and the average Scot of today. What is more difficult, from a geographical and cultural distance, is to transmit the idea that what

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<sup>1</sup> Lance St John Butler, *Registering the Difference: Reading Literature through Register* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

the average Scot looks like may be getting ever harder to determine or to visualise, on account of Scotland's growing diversity. Some visuals might help to put this point across: footage of Ikechi Anya scoring for Scotland, for example, or of Humza Yousaf taking office as Scotland's first Muslim minister.

Not that diversity itself is in any way strange to the citizens of a country that is probably the most diverse in the world in terms of its resident population, one in which hardly any nationality represented in the UN is missing. The number of expats is several times greater than the number of UAE passport holders; but in spite of the massive migration of foreigners, the rate of permanent immigration is negligible. Expat status is *ipse facto* temporary, and full UAE citizenship well-nigh impossible to get for all but a few new arrivals; out of reach even for some whose families settled here before the Union of 1971.

One reason for the restrictive practice is surely the safeguarding of many entitlements that come with being a UAE national, as the benefits and privileges were safeguarded that accompanied citizenship status in ancient Rome: for *panem et circenses*, read villas and SUVs. At least equally important, however, is the intention to protect the Arab-Islamic identity enshrined in the UAE constitution, and to perpetuate the self-perception of the Emiratis as a quasi-homogeneous group, distinct from the hotchpotch of civilisations they have been hosting and employing.

In these circumstances, when this country and culture are trying to embrace continuity and change, tradition and modernity, diversity and homogeneity at one and the same time, a look at Scotland past and present can enhance UAE students' understanding of the reality that exists here; and I can only wish that the academic framework in which I teach will give me some more opportunities to vindicate this claim.

The most notable platform so far was an interdisciplinary two-week block seminar for PhD students in our College of Humanities and Social Sciences that I co-taught with historian and ex-MSP Christopher Harvie, flown in directly from Scotland for the aforementioned purpose. Chris came full of ideas for exploring connections and parallels that I would never have discovered by myself, over and above the most elementary and yet somehow not so salient common property, namely, the presence and influence of oil.

One of the highlights of our seminar was the viewing of two films, and the ensuing comparative discussion of the manner in which locations, people, and ways of life are represented in either one: the Emirati feature *City of Life*, released in 2009 by Ali F. Mostafa, and Bill Forsyth's 1983

*Local Hero*. The former was chosen because of its groundbreaking status and multicultural plot; the latter, because it deals with the impact of oil production on a landscape and a way of life.

As I recall, our discussions touched on key issues regarding the construction or constructedness of national self-perceptions, the explicit or tacit demand for truthfulness or representativeness in self-representations of a “small” country or culture that are likely to be perceived outside as well as within, and the potential function of fictional narrative in a national or cultural mythology that simultaneously interprets, shapes and critiques actuality.

It is open to discussion what role the term “national” should play in such analyses. The call for papers for a 2016 special Scottish Fiction issue of *C21 Literature* asks “Is it possible to speak of a national literature with reference to writing from Scotland?” Thirty or forty years ago, such a question would most probably have grown out of ignorance; today, it grows out of well-informed critical understanding. What might look like regression thus signals immense progress: we have come a long way since the days of simple dichotomies, and we are ready for re-examining all kinds of notions, including those that have been debunked as well as those that still await debunking.

Re-enter one tired old stereotype, to round-off of these remarks with an anecdote from the time I was teaching at a university in Tunisia. There, in the spring of 1989, a group of senior students who had heard about my main area of research asked me to offer an introduction to Scottish literature as a non-credit course. This was a request I could hardly refuse, and consequently it was not long before I met the interested parties in a classroom for the first time. I asked them what they knew or what they had heard about Scotland: this was pre-*Braveheart*, so the clichés had to come from other sources. One of them, offered with a bit of hesitation, was that of the mean Scot. I asked whether anyone in their part of the world had the same reputation. Yes indeed, the answer came: those were the people of Sfax, the country’s second city. When I then asked whether anyone in the group happened to come from Sfax, seven out of ten raised their hands.

We subsequently had a great time swapping jokes and hatching plans for a twinning of Sfax and Aberdeen, which might indeed still be a good idea. Later we moved our attention west, and the students encountered the aforementioned Wee Malkies: the reading was slow, but the recognition instant. By and large, the ground was then prepared for a growing engagement with Scotland as a strange but not an alien place that has a

distinctive but not unparalleled set of regional, social, cultural and linguistic divisions, layers and contrasts. This particular view from elsewhere is programmed to zoom in past Scotland the Brave and Scotland the Quaint, to investigate Scotland the Complex and Scotland the Multicultural, in an ever more complex and multicultural world.

If late 20th and early 21st century texts are best suited to serve the purpose of triggering or strengthening Arab student interest in Scottish culture, they are by no means the only ones. Considerable mileage is to be had from the surprise effect of letting students know that, through the medium of film or television, they have long known some products of the Scottish literary imagination without being aware of the fact: *Treasure Island*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, or *Peter Pan* can be taken as seen, if not as read. Providing a Scottish context for such stories is a good exercise in defamiliarisation, and a good way to introduce other readings from Stevenson or Barrie.

The plays of James Barrie provide particularly apt material for interrogating the concept of a national literature, and the relatedness of individual authors and texts to a collective psyche with characteristic concerns or obsessions. At the far end of the historical range, the ballads furnish different instances of literature as communal property, to be discussed with a view on the question to what extent the preservation of such a heritage is an antiquarian pursuit, or to what extent it can form part of a living present. Topical issues, to be sure, on the shores of Sharjah as well as on the braes of Balvonie.

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