

5-1-2017

## Global Horizons: Scottish Literature and the World Literary System

Erik Jaccard

*University of Washington*

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Jaccard, Erik (2017) "Global Horizons: Scottish Literature and the World Literary System," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 43: Iss. 1, 31–36.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol43/iss1/6>

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 [dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu).

## GLOBAL HORIZONS: SCOTTISH LITERATURE AND THE WORLD LITERARY SYSTEM

*Erik Jaccard*

As others have noted, the field of Scottish literary studies often seems deviled by historical contradictions. In Matthew Wickman's account, throughout the twentieth century the discipline oscillated between anti-historical and counter-historical poles, from the essentialized Scottish character of G. Gregory Smith's Caledonian Antisyzygy through Edwin Muir's influential dismissal of a supposedly dissociated and destabilized Scotland to the subversive, dialogic, and "outer-historical" Scotland of the post-1980s era.<sup>1</sup> For better or worse, Scottish literature remains undeniably bound to modern history as a critical horizon.

This historical horizon creates significant repercussions for the cultural politics of literary periodization. Most obviously, organizing Scottish literature by historical categories derived from Anglo-British Literature enables a reading of Scottish culture as peculiarly absent from large swathes of modern British cultural history.<sup>2</sup> Not only has this historical disfigurement displaced the immediacy of Scottish culture such that it often appears to be elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> but it has also invited overly limiting arguments about the neurotic abnormality of Scotland's vexed relationship to modernity.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, naming certain eras of Scottish cultural history as

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Wickman, "The Emergence of Scottish Studies," in *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature*, ed. by Gerard Carruthers and Liam McIlvanney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 248-260.

<sup>2</sup> These most often include, but are not limited to, the entire seventeenth century, the period between 1830-1880, and the immediate postwar period from 1945-1980.

<sup>3</sup> The paradigmatic literary representation of this phenomenon occurs in Alasdair Gray's *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981), when the young Duncan Thaw describes Glasgow as a place emptied of all imaginative life.

<sup>4</sup> Variants of this argument pepper twentieth century treatments of Scottish literary history. It is most often seen to originate with T.S. Eliot's riposte to G. Gregory Smith in "Was There a Scottish Literature" (1919), to receive perhaps its most pessimistic rendering in Edwin Muir's *Scott and Scotland: the Predicament of the*

active and others as fallow continues to generate confusion as to the relationship between Scottish culture and politics, particularly in conjunction with the post-1979 push for devolution.<sup>5</sup>

Revisionist scholarship since the 1980s has undoubtedly done much to address these issues, yet problems linger around how, and to what effect, such revisions address Scottish literature's relationship to history. One of the most important vocations of this scholarship has been the 'filling in' of Scottish cultural history with forgotten or marginalized voices. In one sense, this has led to a more robust Scottish presence within established Anglo-British period categories. Alternately, those charged with investigating Scotland's theoretical-critical dimensions—Cairns Craig and Michael Gardiner, for example—have located Scottish culture relative to a deeper counter-Enlightenment strain of epistemological critique which seems to invalidate the idea of periodization altogether by framing Scottish literature as both counter-historical and counter-disciplinary.<sup>6</sup>

This approach risks not so much the displacement of history as its culturalization, where Scottish literature comes to figure as an idealized cultural effect of history or disciplinarity. Even if we see this bounded relationship as expressing a dialectical approach to nation and culture—as Craig and Gardner do—it is too often the case that the dialectic in play is in the first instance drawn to, and expressive of, Scottish historical origins. In *Questioning Scotland* (2004), Eleanor Bell argues, rightfully, it seems to me, that this closed feedback loop between Scottish history and Scottish culture leads to introversion in the field, if not in the literature itself.<sup>7</sup> It

*Scottish Writer* (London: Routledge, 1936), and then to see various permutations in, e.g., the work of John Speirs, *The Scots Literary Tradition* (London: Faber, 1940); Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1958); David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961); David Daiches, *The Paradox of Scottish Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964); Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (London: NLB, 1977; esp. the discussion of Kailyard); Allan Massie, "Introduction," in *Scott and Scotland*, by Edwin Muir (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1982), v-xvi; and Alan Bold, *Modern Scottish Literature* (London: Longman, 1983), 1-11.

<sup>5</sup> For a recent explanation of the debates still ongoing as to the relationship between Scottish literature and Scottish politics, see Scott Hames, "Narrating Devolution: Politics and/as Scottish Fiction," *C21: Journal of Twentieth-Century Writings*, 5.2 (March 2017), article 2: <http://c21.openlibhums.org/articles/10.16995/c21.20/>.

<sup>6</sup> See Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), 81, and Michael Gardiner, Introduction, in *Literature and Postcolonial Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 1-7.

<sup>7</sup> Eleanor Bell, *Questioning Scotland: Literature, Nationalism, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 2.

also seems clear that the problem extends to issues of periodization insofar as categories derived in this way continue to adhere to the historical, even as they claim to subvert or supersede it. Following Bell's suggestion that we widen the conceptual boundaries of Scottish literature, I want to briefly explore what the formation might look like if we opened up the nation/history dialectic to the wider field of conceptual and material relations offered by recent scholarship in cultural world systems theory.

In *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth Century Literature* (2005), Nicholas Brown reframes both modernity and modernism by tying them to a singular global capitalist paradigm defined internally by a contradiction between advanced cores and their far more populous—and far less privileged—peripheries.<sup>8</sup> Brown's reconfiguration of the global literary system allows him to flexibly juxtapose historically and geographically incommensurate literatures—in his case British modernism and independence-era African fiction—and to attend to how such fictions express and are mediated by the “uncountable eddies and swirls in historical time” produced by disparate patterns of capitalist modernization. A similar interest in World Literature's expression of combined and uneven development drives the Warwick Research Collective's recent *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World Literature* (2013).<sup>9</sup> Following the work of World System scholars such as Braudel and Wallerstein, as well as the cultural theory of Franco Moretti and Frederic Jameson, the group approaches history not an idealized imperial phenomenon but a global materialist texture to which all social and cultural phenomena are in some uneven way lashed, yet which produces specific effects dependent on time, place, and cultural particularity.

Both approaches offer a suggestively elastic method for framing literary history, bound on the one hand by “the modern world-system as a conceptual horizon” and free on the other to explore the “irreducibly specific” formal and stylistic modes which stretch across that broader field. For example, in a chapter titled “The European Literary Periphery,” the WREC reframes temporal and spatial boundaries such that ‘Scottish culture’—in particular the “Glasgow, 1984” of James Kelman's *The Busconductor Hines*—is re-periodized relative to a diverse cast of semi-peripheral texts and times, including novels from Spain (1904), Iceland

---

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Brown, *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth Century Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1-4.

<sup>9</sup> Hereafter the group will be referred to by its preferred acronym, WREC. The WREC's interdisciplinary project comprises contributions by Benita Parry, Neil Lazarus, Graeme Macdonald, Sharae Deckard, Nicholas Lawrence, Pablo Mukherjee, and Stephen Shapiro.

(1948), Slovakia (1991), and Russia (2005). In this reading what matters is not Kelman's exceptional relation to history—understood as a function of his Scottishness—but rather his exceptional ability to register the upending of material and social life in a Scotland transforming after decades of industrial decline and the incursion of post-1979 Thatcherite privatization. If there is an occasional tendency in Scottish literary criticism to limit discussions of 'the imagination' or 'the world' to a British context, the above approach grounds such abstractions by acknowledging not only the singular 'world' which binds all imaginative acts, but also the heterogenous material conditions and cultural forms through which those acts emerge. In other words, it seems to offer Scottish literature the ability to be Scottish without the troublesome assumption that Scotland can and should, in the first instance, be reduced to history as an idealized—and primarily British—political horizon. While the Brown/WREC approach is far from perfect, it nonetheless allows for a sorely needed fluidity when it comes to the categorization and periodization of Scottish literature.<sup>10</sup>

For example, it allows us to ask how Scottish literary criticism and history might look were we to reframe critical horizons relative to a global materialist 'world' geography. Given the wide-ranging influence of the Scottish diaspora, possible configurations are virtually endless, but we might begin by extending Brown's work, pairing Scottish and African texts from across the last two hundred years. For example, if we are to see the famously fractured selves and dialogues of Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* or Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* as indicative of a particularly Scottish response to the pressures of British capitalist modernity, might we also see the psychotic alter-egos and tortured morality of Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (1925) as expressing a similar structure of feeling? Moving solidly into the twentieth century, Lewis Grassie Gibbon's explorations of myth and modernity in Aberdeenshire in *Sunset Song* might fruitfully be paired with Bessie Head's creative nonfiction account of the similarly uneven material and narrative contexts of her native Botswana in *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (1981). WREC member Graeme Macdonald has argued that George

---

<sup>10</sup> Some might argue that the approach simply replaces Scottish history with an even more abstract singular global capitalist history, therefore similarly reducing the complexity of any given text to a relatively predetermined interpretive horizon (as in vulgar Marxist readings of literature as the superstructural effect of materialist class relations). However, this is in part a danger of broad theories of literature themselves and it would probably be argued by Brown or any of the WREC members that the difference lies in the rigor with which a scholar pursues analysis and the attention she pays to the nuanced interplay of the dialectic between universal and particular.

Mackay Brown's *Greenvoe* should be seen as a work of socialist ecofiction, and its emphasis on the devastating impact of contemporary state petropolitics on rural communities dovetails with Helon Habila's narrative of environmental destruction in the Niger Delta in *Oil on Water* (2010).<sup>11</sup> The modernist poetics of Scotland's devolutionary novel *par excellence*, Alasdair Gray's *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* call attention to the intersections between state and corporate power, history, and narration in ways similar to Somalian Nuruddin Farah's *Variations on an African Dictatorship* trilogy (1979-1983). Finally, attending to emergent critical dialogue about both Scottish and African science fiction, might allow us to juxtapose Matthew Fitt's cyberpunk post-catastrophe narrative *But n Ben A Go-Go* (2000) with South African novelist Lauren Beukes' similarly inflected dystopian novel *Moxyland* (2009).

One productive benefit of this reorientation at a critical level would be continued reassessment of the relationship between Scottish fictions of devolution and postcolonial fictions of decolonization. As Gardiner has suggested, attending to the complex interrelationship between these terms illuminates how the struggles for formal and cultural decolonization foregrounded in postcolonial literatures throw into relief the residual problems and blind spots associated with Scottish intellectual and creative culture's own "[work] towards an ethical self-extrication from British imperialism" and its "attempts to recover the potential for action which is buried within devolution."<sup>12</sup> Following Brown and the WREC, I would suggest that we must think any attempts at 'ethical self-extrication' or the recovery of human agency as attempts to achieve these goals relative to the material framework—the capitalist world-system—in which any such attempts occur. Doing so helps us see the two terms as localized expressions of the singular goal, articulated artfully by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, "of reintroducing man into the world, man in his totality."<sup>13</sup> It forces us to ask, as Tom Nairn has done repeatedly over the course of his career, whether devolution or decolonization in form is the same as material decolonization in practice. Most importantly for the

---

<sup>11</sup> For more on the connections between Mackay Brown, Scotland, race, and oil in the capitalist world system, see Macdonald, "Scottish Extractions: 'Race' and Racism in Devolutionary Fiction," *Orbit Litteratum* 65.2 (2010): 79-107; and "Green Links: Ecosocialism and Contemporary Scottish Writing," *Ecology and the Literature of the British Left: The Red and the Green*, ed. by John H. Rignall, Gustav Klaus, and Valentine Cunningham (London: Routledge, 2012), 221-240.

<sup>12</sup> See Gardiner, "Literature, Theory, Politics," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, ed. by Berthold Schoene (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 45-6.

<sup>13</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 62.

current discussion, it allows us to rethink the categories by which we might understand a devolutionary literature as both expressive of a Scottish connection to history, as well as the material spaces, social relations, and attempts at resistance and self and collective assertion which drive the search for more human forms of community.

*University of Washington*