

12-15-2017

The Crème de la Crème: Old Favourites, New-Fangled Works, and Other Fictions

Willy Maley
University of Glasgow

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



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Maley, Willy (2017) "The Crème de la Crème: Old Favourites, New-Fangled Works, and Other Fictions," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 43: Iss. 2, 179–184.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol43/iss2/2>

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 digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

**THE CRÈME DE LA CRÈME?
OLD FAVOURITES, NEW-FANGLED WORKS,
AND OTHER FICTIONS**

Willy Maley

Miss Jean Brodie undermines her own authority and proves herself an undiscerning judge when she declares that in her eyes “all my pupils are the crème de la crème.”¹ Everyone is someone’s favourite, but to bundle people or books together willy nilly without discrimination—in the positive sense—suggests absence of nuance at the very least, if not an ego-driven tendency to see all your geese as swans so that you can feather your own nest.

So, *Scotland’s Favourite Book*, eh? Never mind, “What is it?” Ask rather, “Who decides?” Who’s on the panel of judges? Clearly if it is writers or readers that do the deciding, then that is a different matter from a coterie of critics adjudicating on authors and thus influencing audiences. I’ve been involved in major public list-making—or list-mongering—on three occasions in the past fifteen years. I exclude from this list those annual requests for favourite books commissioned by reviews editors as summer or Christmas reading. I first entered the lists in 2005 when I was asked to choose the *100 Best Scottish Books* for a project led by the Scottish Book Trust.² That enterprise was, like all such lists, aimed at prompting media interest and promoting reading by spreading the word about some new and neglected works of literature. It was more about public engagement and education than any objective assessment of quality, so it was quirky and deliberately designed to provoke and prompt debate, which it did.

For that 2005 foray into favourites I had a notable precedent in the shape of Edwin Morgan’s *Twentieth Century Scottish Classics*, published thirty years ago in response to contemporary lists by Anthony Burgess and Margaret Drabble.³ Morgan was a writer of enormously versatility, though

¹ Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (London: Macmillan, 1961; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 8.

² Willy Maley and Brian Donaldson, eds., *The List Guide to the 100 Best Scottish Books of All Time* (Edinburgh: The List/Orange/Scottish Book Trust, 2005).

³ See Edwin Morgan, *Twentieth Century Scottish Classics* (Edinburgh: Book Trust Scotland, 1987); and see also Anthony Burgess, *99 Novels: The Best in English*

known primarily as a poet. He was also a professor at the University of Glasgow when Book Trust Scotland, the forerunner of the Scottish Book Trust, commissioned his *Classics*. I learned from Morgan's choices, particularly his eye for the contemporary—how long does it take to turn a good book into a “classic?”

I learned too from another quite different enterprise, further from home but closer to the time of my own commission, a project in 2002 entitled *Africa's 100 Best Books of the 20th Century*.⁴ Like Morgan's list, this attempt to capture the classics of a continent was clearly a work of cultural and political celebration as well as an exercise in critical judgment. The aims of that African list—supported by a wide alliance of universities, booksellers, libraries, publishers and writers' associations—could apply to other compilations of best books:

to celebrate the achievements of African writers over the last century; to stimulate debate, discussion, reading, criticism and analysis of African writing; to foster the publication and development of new titles and those that are currently out of print; to encourage translation of different texts; to promote the sale and exchange of books continent-wide and throughout the world and above all to increase awareness and knowledge of books and writing by African authors.

Scotland is a smaller canvas, but I was just as inspired by the breadth and inclusiveness of that African list as I was by the characteristic openness to new and diverse voices expressed by Morgan in his selection. Exercising my own judgment in 2005 for the *100 Best Scottish Books*, I decided to be both inclusive and up-to-date. *The Cutting Room* (2002) by Louise Welsh made the cut, as did Anne Donovan's *Buddha Da* (2003). This was a list that caught books on the crest of a new wave. More controversially, I included three “outsiders” among the runners and riders, books with strong Scottish connections that weren't Scottish in any obvious sense: Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (published in Scotland); George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (written in Scotland); and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (set in Scotland). That drew a lot of fire, and I like to think that when the publishers upped my fee they did so in the belief, entirely false, that my feelings were hurt by the feedback on these three little indulgences. Another indulgence in the eyes of some

Since 1939: A Personal Choice (London: Allison & Busby, 1984), and Margaret Drabble, *Twentieth Century Classics* (London: Book Trust, in association with the British Council, 1986).

⁴ Zimbabwe International Book Fair, with the African Publishers' Network, the Pan-African Booksellers Association, African writers' associations, and others (accessed 13 November 2017): http://library.columbia.edu/locations/global/virtual-libraries/african_studies/books.html.

critics was that I tried to balance genre and gender in a way that meant more women writers and more popular and contemporary works were included. This didn't please the purists for whom "literary fiction" should be the hallmark of the "best" literary art that a given culture can produce. But Scotland excels in, for example, crime and historical fiction—it practically invented those genres—and for reasons not unconnected with its own history and modes of being.

The *100 Best Scottish Books* project was an alphabetical list of titles published as a small booklet, which I co-edited with Brian Donaldson of *The List* magazine. It included short entries on all the books listed, authored by established or emerging writers. There was a public vote to decide the best of the best, with the winner—*Sunset Song*—announced at an event chaired by James Naughtie, featuring Ian Rankin, Zoe Strachan, and myself, at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in August 2005.

I believe passionately that lists should provoke, and although I would never set out to intentionally hurt the feelings of any reader or writer I'm all too aware that exclusion from such a list for an author is inevitably seen as a slight of sorts, and that for readers to view a list that contains none of the books dearest to them is also a slight, since it suggests that their favourites somehow lack merit when judged by ... who, exactly? A learned panel of experts? But surely "best" and "favourite" are different animals? My favourite book may be something that I feel emotionally connected to, perhaps from childhood, or through a particular experience or relationship. My best book may be something I can critically assess and offer a reasoned judgment on in terms of language, thought, originality, innovation, etc. The earliest uses of the word "favourite" are invariably bound up with envy and resentment. Not for nothing did Milton's Satan describe the fruit of his fall in *Paradise Lost* as "this new Favorite/ Of Heav'n, this Man of Clay" (IX, 175-6). To have another work preferred before yours is no delight.

My second experience of drawing up a list was just as fraught, and just as fruitful, as the first. In 2011, I was part of a panel tasked with selecting *Scotland's Bookshelf*, twenty books, two per decade, to mark the centenary of the Mitchell Library in Glasgow.⁵ This time I was part of a team and not the chair or editor, so I enjoyed a subordinate role, even if I did have a strong say in shaping the final lineup. In this case the controversy arose not because of some wild cards that I played, but due to the fact that one of the authors selected objected to appearing on the list. An unusual situation, but when the Mitchell Library approached the publishers to order copies of all the books and the living writers were asked to appear at an event marking the list—which was also celebrated in a short booklet edited in excellent

⁵ Rosemary Goring, *Scotland's Bookshelf: A Celebration of 100 Years of Scottish Writing* (Glasgow: Glasgow Libraries, 2012).

fashion by Rosemary Goring—one author, who shall remain nameless here, although the story is in the public domain, refused to have his or her work included, on the grounds that such lists were gimmicky and demeaning.

That disaffected writer had a point, of course, but may have missed the point too. Lists are gimmicky—of course they are. They're also easy ways of flagging up a collection of books that some readers—experts or enthusiasts—think are worth recommending to other readers. Not all of us have had the pleasure of a good schooling in Scottish literature, even those of us who have been schooled in Scotland. Sometimes our reading has come after school and outside of university syllabuses. For that reason, and in the context of a non-independent small nation located within a political union dominated by a larger neighbour, promoting Scottish books should be seen as a good in itself.

My third experience of list-making is more recent and more reasonable than the first two. In the summer of 2016, I was part of a panel assembled by BBC Scotland in partnership with The Scottish Book Trust and The Scottish Library and Information Council. Our aim was to select thirty books that would then become a top ten championed by prominent figures drawn from politics and the arts. A public vote would then decide the best. The winner, once again, was *Sunset Song*, a book that had been championed as part of the BBC's "Love to Read" campaign by Scotland's First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, who said it had opened her eyes to parts of Scotland she had not known about while growing up in Ayrshire. And that's argument enough for lists. They make us aware of worlds, both real and imaginary, that are on our doorstep but can seem a million miles away. An ideal list should cause consternation as well as soliciting nods and smiles. It should reintroduce us to familiar friends as well as making us welcome strangers to ourselves.

Which brings me to this current crop of favourites, including some well-pressed flowers picked by expert hands. When Patrick Scott and Tony Jarrells asked me to comment on the list of contributions they had been offered or had invited, I thought, "Here we go again." But this special issue of *Studies in Scottish Literature* is very different from the experiences outlined above. Described as a debate, this project comes complete with a question mark, and with the clothespins of critical care.

Reading through these contributions to a Scottish journal on Scottish books, I was struck by the sense that the "national" was something of an embarrassment, or worse, bound up with bigotry and insularity, whereas the "international", or better still, the anti-nationalist, was a good in itself. This is understandable given the received history of nationalism in the twentieth century, but surely a distinction must be drawn between imperial powers that invade and occupy and a civic nationalism that opposes such

actions? I felt that contributors sometimes overstated their scepticism or suspicions in this regard, as though by implication the best art was unionist or universalist, or that the status quo was better than a struggle for independence that pulled old ghosts from the closet, as has happened with Catalonia and the phantom of Franco. As far as Scotland is concerned, I do not believe the same aura of awkwardness hangs over other national literatures, at least those produced by independent nations. Perhaps the fact that Scotland is not yet independent – and therefore not strictly speaking a nation that has taken its place as such in Europe or the world – means that the “cultural cringe” persists.⁶ Perhaps some critics are worried about being thought old-fashioned essentialists? In any case, at a time when Scottish independence is still being debated, it seems odd that the national question should be treated in such broad-brush terms. When Book Trust Scotland asked Edwin Morgan for a list of Scottish classics they did not expect an apology, but rather a celebration of Scottish literary achievements. I fear that aversion to national discourse in all its forms has picked up pace since then. I often quote the Irish poet Eavan Boland on the question of nation, as I find her take more subtle and ambiguous – indeed, more poetic – than the high-horse perspectives of many contemporaries:

What is this thing – a nation – that is so powerful it can make songs, attract sacrifice and so exclusive it drives into hiding the complex and skeptical ideas which would serve it best?⁷

I tell my students that I come to school every day not just to teach, but to learn, and I learned a lot from reading through this list—and it is much more than a list. It’s a road trip through some remarkable literary terrain. A good list is all about enlistment. It should aim to recruit readers. With this in mind I was particularly struck by the clarity and insight of Gill Plain’s advocacy of Eric Linklater’s often overlooked novel *Private Angelo*.

I was also struck by the vital contribution of Scott Lyall, with its sharp observations on list-mongering as arguably a kind of imposition and curtailment of creativity and choice, speaking for the subaltern but enacting its own exclusions. His comment that his students “had never heard of Dorothy Dunnett” should give us pause. Since Scott, Scotland has had a strong reputation as a producer of historical fiction, and Dunnett is a key figure in that tradition. If the planned adaptation of *The Lymond Chronicles* by the producers of *Poldark* goes ahead then those students will see what they have been missing.

⁶ On the cringe, see Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull, *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture: Inferiorism and the Intellectuals* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989).

⁷ Eavan Boland, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (London: Vintage, 1996), 69.

Lyll asks: “What would a truly uncurated top 30 look like?” He continues:

Sunset Song continues to appeal in the accessible vigour of its demotic lustre. Yet it is doubtful in these favourites whether we have heard the real voice of the people.

That’s true—almost too true for words. “Public” votes and “popular” choices remain bound up with vested interests, with what gets published, taught, broadcast and promoted. In that sense, universities and learned journals can act as a useful corrective to populist tendencies driven by market forces. There’s no cure for curation; no list without a panel.

Yes, the voice of the people matters a great deal, and for that reason the making of lists, as an incitement to read, to compare, to argue, and above all to debate, is still a valid activity. Lists are a genre in their own right, and a popular one, for reasons that are to do with voice and with variety, which is always the “spice ay life,” as Irvine Welsh’s Juice Terry would say, whether it’s to our taste or not. Muriel Spark, with whom I began, has her centenary in 2018, so let me end with the literary editor Nancy Hawkins reflecting on the post-war publishing scene that Spark knew so well:

I see again, in my wide-eyed midnights, my own small office which looked out into the well of a back courtyard, and was ill-lit; but it felt good to have an office to myself, a step up in the world. Here I dealt with new and aspiring writers, in other words the authors; for generally the writers published by Mackintosh & Tooley were placed into two categories: Authors and Names. The latter were the few established living authors on the firm’s list, and these Names dealt with Ann Clough whose father, though completely crazy, had nonetheless been hanged.⁸

That “nonetheless,” a slight variation on Spark’s customary “nevertheless” for sentences that blow up in your face, captures the craziness of compilations and categorizations. One person’s Author is another’s Name, and just as mere Authors can become Names, so Names can become mere Authors, if they cease to be read or taught or talked about or go out of print or pass out of living memory.

University of Glasgow

⁸ Muriel Spark, *A Far Cry from Kensington* (London: Constable and Company, 1988; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p. 79.