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## Introduction: The Ghost at the Feast: Religion in Scottish Literary Criticism

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**INTRODUCTION**  
**THE GHOST AT THE FEAST: RELIGION**  
**& SCOTTISH LITERARY CRITICISM**

*Patrick Scott*

*“Scotland will be reborn the day the last minister is  
strangled with the last copy of the Sunday Post.”*

--Tom Nairn, 1968<sup>1</sup>

For some 250 years before Nairn’s quip, that is, since 1707, Scottish national identity, both in Scotland and elsewhere, seemed to inhere proudly in three distinctive national institutions: Scottish law, the Scottish universities, and the established Church of Scotland. All three, but especially the third, had evoked dissent and protest as serving the interests of those in power, but all three survived and remained prominent in the public discourse.

When I taught at Edinburgh, in the years immediately after Nairn’s quip, all three national institutions were still more or less taken for granted, and the three were still closely intertwined. Judges of the Court of Session sat as assessors on the University Court (in U.S. terms the board of trustees). The most distinctively Scottish of political offices in the Westminster government was Lord Advocate. When I was summoned for jury duty in the Sheriff’s court (then temporarily sitting in the Kirk’s Assembly Hall, so entered through New College), I found that professors, lawyers and ministers of religion were all among the privileged classes exempt from summons (the others being peers of the realm, convicts, lighthouse-keepers and lunatics), and I heard witnesses sworn to tell the truth “As you shall answer to God on the great Day of Judgment.” Absent a Scottish parliament, the General Assembly’s annual debate on Church and Nation was one of the major political forums within Scotland, and respectfully reported in Scottish newspapers. Successive divinity professors and New College principals had been elected Moderator. The University Chaplain was of course Church of Scotland, and the university diary listed the opening of the General Assembly as a “Holiday in all Faculties (except Social Science).”

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Nairn, “Three dreams of Scottish nationalism,” in Karl Miller, ed., *Memoirs of a Modern Scotland* (London: Faber, 1970), 34-54 (50).

Over the past half century, much has changed, but even at the time Nairn's scorn was neither solitary nor unprecedented, especially in literary circles. In his 2006 essay, "The Literary Cultures of the Scottish Reformation," Crawford Gribben argued that twentieth century Scottish literary studies was dominated by a critical consensus stigmatizing the Scottish Reformation as an anti-aesthetic tyranny.<sup>2</sup> Where previously Scotland and Scottishness had been regularly identified as "Protestant," "authentic" Scottish literature has, since Muir and MacDiarmid, repeatedly been defined in opposition to the Scottish Calvinism that had long set the doctrinal standard not only for the established church but also for many dissenting or secession bodies. Finding the modern literary consensus historically untenable, Gribben explored the negative critical impact of this anti-theological bias, linking it for instance to the continuing neglect of writing by early modern Scottish women, and suggesting that antipathy towards theological concerns has deflected or distorted critical response to a wide range of significant Scottish writing.

Gribben's challenge focused chiefly on Scottish writing of the late 16th and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the focus also of the essay-collection he has since co-edited.<sup>3</sup> Yet his basic argument, that critics have been uncomfortable with Scottish literature's relation to Calvinist beliefs, surely applies to many periods. After reading Gribben, you find confirmatory instances all over the place. Browsing Moray McLaren's *Stevenson and Edinburgh* recently, I was struck by McLaren's comment that Edinburgh people in Stevenson's youth

were profoundly influenced by Calvinism. Calvinism is to some of us a fundamentally detestable philosophy—the father of all determinism....<sup>4</sup>

Or, thirty years later, on the left, in writing of the Clearances, Hamish Henderson condemned not only the Kirk's "sanctimonious Calvinist mullahs," but their theology, "the peculiar psychology of Scots Calvinism."<sup>5</sup> On the right, Hugh Trevor-Roper credited Enlightenment to Scottish thinkers who "escaped the intellectual prison-house of the Kirk."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Crawford Gribben, "The Literary Cultures of the Scottish Reformation," *Review of English Studies*, 57 (2006), 64-82.

<sup>3</sup> David G. Mullan and Crawford Gribben, eds, *Literature and the Scottish Reformation* [*St Andrews Studies in Reformation History*] (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Moray McLaren, *Stevenson and Edinburgh* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1950), 38.

<sup>5</sup> Hamish Henderson, "The women of the glen: some thoughts on Highland history," *The Celtic Consciousness*, ed. Robert O'Driscoll, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1982), 255-267 (262).

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Invention of Scotland* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), ch. 4.

This almost-ritual dismissal recurs in current political discourse: Rory Scothorne recently described 21<sup>st</sup> century Scottish culture as experiencing “a profound thaw” from “the centuries-old grip of cringe, Calvin and constitutional ca’canny.”<sup>7</sup> Like MacDiarmid or Muir before them, each of these writers could undoubtedly expand and explain particular throw-away comments. Good writing, and especially good talking, rests on such shorthand. As I understand it, Gribben’s point was not that Calvinists were beyond criticism, but that shorthand dismissal has often preempted fuller critical engagement.

Gribben’s article is worth renewed consideration because of its wider implications, for how we treat or evade the religious beliefs of authors past or present, Calvinist or otherwise, both in the classroom and in scholarship. Scholars may debate when (and where) Scottish Calvinism lost political leverage and cultural clout, but most current critical practice prioritizes other questions. So do most students. Within Scotland, a recent Social Attitudes Survey found only one in six Scots saying they belonged to the Church of Scotland, and three out of four younger adults (18-34) saying that they had no religion.<sup>8</sup> Even in this part of the United States, in a heavily Baptist state, one in four 2016 freshmen at the state university checked the box as atheist, agnostic or “none,” and fewer than half checked off any protestant Christian affiliation.<sup>9</sup> Even if the mismatch on religious belief between U.S. student and faculty is sometimes overstated, faculty numbers would be lower.<sup>10</sup> Faculty differ in how comfortable they are ventriloquizing beliefs they do not share, students are often wary, and in a state university even well-intentioned classroom discussion of religious topics can be easily misunderstood. Those who teach in explicitly evangelical, Catholic, or other church-affiliated colleges and schools face their own hurdles, in explaining and critiquing canonical literary works that espouse a different theology or seem in some way anti- or post-religious.

In scholarship, for the most part, religion-and-literature has found its home, not in literature departments, but in religious studies, which has its

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<sup>7</sup> Rory Scothorne, “20 years on: against the Devocrats,” *Conter*, July 4, 2019: <https://www.conter.co.uk/blog/2019/7/3/20-years-on-against-the-devocracy>.

<sup>8</sup> See *Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2017*: <http://www.scotcen.org.uk/news-media/press-releases/2017/july/scots-with-no-religion-at-record-level/>. For comparison, weekly circulation of *The Sunday Post* fell from almost 3 million in 1969 to 127,000 in 2017.

<sup>9</sup> *CIRP Freshman Survey Profile Report: University of South Carolina-Columbia*: [https://www.sc.edu/about/offices\\_and\\_divisions/institutional\\_research\\_assessment\\_and\\_analytics/oiraa\\_data\\_warehouse/assessment\\_warehouse/index.php](https://www.sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/institutional_research_assessment_and_analytics/oiraa_data_warehouse/assessment_warehouse/index.php) (p. 29).

<sup>10</sup> Neil Grossman and Solon Simmons, “The Religiosity of American College and University Professors,” *Sociology of Religion*, 70 (2009): 101-129.

own network of conferences and journals. Articles on religious texts in literature journals, including *SSL*, have usually been primarily historical or biographical, not from the religion-and-literature tradition; we would expect that differentiation to continue, in the journal as in literary scholarship more broadly. The distinction has never, however, been hard drawn or easy to maintain, and several of the contributions to this symposium draw on both approaches and to some degree several endorse a religious viewpoint. All, however, I think, avoid the *odium theologicum*, recognizing that all *SSL* readers will not start from the same premises. Almost all, in fact, recognize a multiplicity of religious perspective and experience even in the authors or texts they discuss.

The symposium is far from complete in itself. Professor Gribben's original article focused on the Reformation and 17<sup>th</sup> century periods, where Calvinism was clearly central. All the contributions here deal with authors after 1700, and half focus on texts from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Professor Gribben was arguing for a fuller reappraisal of literary Calvinism, while the symposium includes essays on a Scottish Episcopalian and three Scottish Catholic writers. The symposium fails to meet one part of Professor Gribben's challenge, that anti-Calvinist bias has excluded women writers from the Scottish canon; while three of nine contributors are women, only one of the texts discussed is by a woman writer. Though Fionn Mac Colla writes about a Gaelic-speaking community, there's nothing here on a Gaelic text or writer. Generically, all but one of the contributions focus on poetry or fiction, and arguably Scottish religious expression equally includes sermons, polemic, psalms and hymns, letters and diaries. There's no attempt here to rehabilitate Stevenson as religious writer, nothing on John Davidson and the Evangelical Union, and there's no contribution on writing from the Secession or Free churches, the Sandemanians, Italian or Polish Catholic communities, the Plymouth Brethren, early Scottish Jewish novelists or Glasgow Yiddish theatre, Conan Doyle and Scottish spiritualism, nor Scottish writers from other world religions. I can imagine edgier contributions critiquing the way many writers only see religion in the rear-view mirror, as part of history or childhood, and more ironic contributions reappraising the 19<sup>th</sup> century presumption that all great writing has a religious or spiritual message.

Such incompletenesses acknowledged, however, I am grateful to the contributors here for taking up Crawford Gribben's challenge and bringing renewed critical attention to the religious themes or substrate in a wide variety of Scottish writing. I am grateful also for Professor Gribben's tolerance of the way his argument has here been extended and his willingness to provide a response to the symposium.