Presbyterianism, 'Scottish Literature,' and John Galt's Annals of the Parish

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Scholars of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writing have the advantage (or disadvantage) over those of us who work on later literature that in their period pretty much anything that was printed and published, and a great deal that was not, was considered to be “literature.” If a particular genre, such as theology or religious poetry, no longer appears among the texts republished in anthologies or taught to students, we can reasonably attribute this to some more modern criterion, preconception or prejudice being anachronistically applied to the surviving corpus. On the other hand, when we examine canon formation in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, we must keep in mind that this period sees a radical narrowing of what falls into the category of “literature” and the “literary,” and that this narrowing accompanies and enables the canonisation of “national” literary traditions in place of the trans-national “Republic of Letters” to which many early modern writers felt their primary loyalty.

When we keep this in mind, I would tentatively suggest, we discover in this period the forging of a “Scottish literature” in opposition not, as Crawford Gribben has argued, to Calvinist theological ideas—what happens to them in this period is another story—but to the Kirk as a rival national institution. To put that another way: over the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a Scottish literary tradition is constituted as “national” (and thus as “literary” in the narrower sense) in its self-differentiation not from the literature of another nation (England), but from another institution with a rival claim to represent the same nation, namely the established church.

This story might fall into two stages. When Allan Ramsay embarked on his multifaceted literary project in the 1720s, to publish poetry, to import and sell (and lend) the work of Pope, or to open a theatre was
necessarily to adopt a posture of antagonism towards the church as an institution, suspicious as it was at this point of secular art. Ramsay set about constructing a national literature out of all the types of writing for which the church had no use: popular song, a recovered tradition of poetry from the Stuart court, the drama, and a written form of vernacular Scots. This was a distinctively Scottish project, but Ramsay’s position vis-à-vis the Kirk is comparable to the permanent opposition of Pope and his friends to a similarly philistine Hanoverian court in contemporary London. Then from mid-century, aspects of Ramsay’s project were picked up and sophisticated by writers sponsored in one way or another by the Moderate party in the church itself. John Home’s Douglas, Macpherson’s prose poetry, and the published work of Robert Burns all take popular ballads and songs as their starting point and transform them into “polite” literature, to create a body of work that, one might argue, retrospectively configures its sources as a “national tradition” of imaginative literature for a readership of the middling sort.

By doing this the Moderates in effect sought to create a secularised version of Scottish nationality in order to undermine or counter that inherited from the Reformation by the Popular party. A “free” society, such as eighteenth-century Britain considered itself to be, requires a conception of the nation distinct from the idea of the state. For the Popular party, this was the national community constituted by the church, the other kingdom of the Two Kingdoms theology of Andrew Melville and the Covenants. In defining the Scottish nation instead in terms of a literary tradition (with, crucially, the “literary” narrowed to the secular, sentimental and sublime), the Moderates sought to release the church from this burden of nationality to allow it to move much closer to the British state. This was not a battle of theological ideas, but an attempted realignment of institutional relationships. Not all secular imaginative literature could be recruited for this task, of course: at this point the novel remained beyond the pale, and so the work of Smollett and Mackenzie played no role in the Moderate project. The novel’s moment was yet to come.

The second stage of the story I am sketching begins with Burns. The Kilmarnock Poems of 1786 addresses a national readership of the sort constructed by Ramsay and the Moderates, defined by its polite tastes in secular literature. But in its centrepiece, “The Cotter’s Saturday Night,” Burns stages a raid on the Kirk, appropriating the signifiers of presbyterian piety (Bible reading, psalm singing, iconoclasm) and relocating them in the private family home. Rather than standing apart
from the church and providing an alternative conception of nationality represented by a literary tradition, here the secular poet reconceptualises Presbyterianism as “national tradition” instead of a set of social practices (church courts, poor relief, parish schools), folding the national religion into the literary tradition as the source of sentimental and sublime effects. It helps that the cotters, the class represented here, had more or less disappeared by 1786: Burns can ascribe to them the values that his middle-class readers would like to think were their own, naturalised and nationalised by their projection onto a vanished peasantry. The first stanza openly admits that this is what the poem is doing: addressing one of his professional-class patrons, the Ayr lawyer Robert Aiken, Burns promises him a picture of “What A[iken] in a Cottage would have been,” not what the people who lived in cottages were actually like.

By privatising the presbyterian legacy in this way, and inscribing a Scottish religious identity within a “Patriot” discourse of imaginary Britishness, Burns evades “the embarrassment attaching to the presbyterian Kirk’s radical pedigree.”1 The version of Scotland evoked by “The Cotter’s Saturday Night”—pious, domestic, and British—made this poem an important point of reference for middle-class anti-revolutionary writers, especially women writers, during the long years of war with France (in the novels of Elizabeth Hamilton, for example). But it was in the politically and socially unstable post-war years that the “Cotter’s” ideology came into its own. Scott’s Old Mortality (1816) was straightforwardly anti-Covenanter and anti-revolutionary, but The Heart of Midlothian (1818) imagines the Covenanting righteousness of the Cameronian father domesticated in the moral self-possession of his daughter; a moral self-possession which can be recognised, utilised, and rewarded by the British state, represented here by the Duke of Argyll. The Heart of Midlothian offers Scott’s middle-class Scottish readers a story of the origins of their own domestic virtues blown up to the scale of national epic, but its method is essentially that of “The Cotter’s Saturday Night”: those origins are located in an imagined peasant piety safely detached from the institutions of any actual presbyterian church and the claims that such institutions might implicitly make over and against secular authority.

The de-politicization of Presbyterianism into a native version of what the Anglican church represented for Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was central to the post-war Tory agenda pursued by *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* and its associated writers. This was particularly urgent in the aftermath of the social and political unrest of 1819–20, concentrated as it was in the western lowlands which had been the Covenanters’ heartland (1790s radicalism was more widely spread across the country) and among weavers and other textile workers as a class, previously a core constituency for the Popular party in the church (in contrast to the broader social base from which the Friends of the People drew support). That the Covenanters’ cause in the later seventeenth century was “civil and religious liberty” in the modern sense remained a popular version of Scottish history in the early nineteenth century, and “a politically usable one” in the present, providing as it did “a theory of justified resistance” to the state and national elites, even if all the presbyterian churches “openly repudiated the connection” between the Covenanting past and popular protest in the present.\(^2\) The Tory mission was therefore to construct a *counter*-tradition in which the presbyterian legacy was not simply disowned or discarded (which would amount to surrendering it to the radicals) but misremembered in a different way.

John Galt’s *Annals of the Parish* (1821) is a very interesting case in point. When it turns to address his younger parishioners, Micah Balwhidder’s farewell sermon at the start of the novel does not so much repudiate the Covenanting precedent for resistance as recuperate it in different terms:

> I do not counsel passive obedience; that is a doctrine that the Church of Scotland can never abide; but the divine right of resistance, which, in the days of her trouble, she so bravely asserted against popish and prelatic usurpations, was never resorted to till the attempt was made to remove the ark of the tabernacle from her. I therefore counsel you, my young friends, no to lend your ears to those that trumpet forth their hypothetical politics, but to believe that the laws of the land are administered

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with a good intent, till in your own homes and dwellings ye feel the presence of the oppressor—then, and not till then, are ye free to gird your loins for battle—and woe to him, and woe to the land where that is come to, if the sword be sheathed till the wrong be redressed.

There is a revealing slippage here in the turn from past to present. The Covenanters were justified in active resistance because the Crown had attempted “to remove the ark of the tabernacle” from the Kirk: that is, to break the national church’s covenant with God by demanding submission to state-appointed bishops. But resistance to the state in modern Scotland would only be justified if it trespassed on “your own homes and dwellings”: when it invaded, not the rights of the Kirk, but the rights of the private family. The threshold to be defended is not that of the parish church, but of the home.

Accordingly, Annals of the Parish confers sainthood not on any minister or elder for an act of defiance of secular power, but on the middle-class widow Mrs Malcolm. Mrs Malcolm’s domestic virtues find their reward not in the promise of life everlasting but the marriage of her daughters into the British ruling class, in a type of social predestination:

So we then stepped over to Mrs Malcolm’s house, where we found that saintly woman, with Kate and Effie, and Willie, sitting peacefully at their fire-side, preparing to read their bibles for the night. When we went in, and when I saw Kate, that was so lady-like there, with the decent humility of her parent’s dwelling, I could not but think she was destined for a better station; and when I looked at the Captain, a handsome youth, I thought surely their marriage is made in Heaven (chapter 15).

The details of the story of the Malcolm family could have been borrowed from Jane Austen: Kate’s trajectory, as the impoverished girl, with a beloved sailor-brother, adopted by a fine lady and educated above her own station only to end up marrying the fine lady’s son, is the plot of Mansfield Park. But Mrs Malcolm is also nationalised by Galt: the scene above evokes “The Cotter’s Saturday Night,” not just domestic but national-domestic. However assimilated her children become to English norms, their mother speaks Scots to the end of her days. As in The Heart of Midlothian, investing national religiosity in the domestic woman disconnects it from a national history of religious insurrection, making Presbyterianism safe for Lord Liverpool and George IV.

We can see what was at stake for the Blackwood’s Tories more clearly if we consider, not Annals of the Parish (published in May 1821) itself,
but a thread spun off from it, a pair of letters published the following December in the magazine, placed immediately after the final instalment of Galt’s “The Steam-Boat.”³ One, addressed “To the Author of ‘Annals of the Parish of Dalmailing’” from “an elder of the Established Church for nearly thirty years,” denounces the self-interest of both the modern Whig and modern Tory parties, and warns:

The native population of Scotland, with some trifling exceptions, consists wholly of the Whigs of the Covenant, differing as widely from the nominal and prominent Whigs of our day, as the apostle Peter differed from that smooth, cunning, and thievish priest, Doctor Judas Iscariot. ... In drawing up further Parish Annals, keep this constantly in view.

This letter, signed “A Whig of the Covenant”, is prefaced by another, validating its distinction between “the Presbyterian and Political Whigs”: “the latter have not been uniformly distinguished for any particular respect towards those hallowed prejudices and affections which enter so deeply into the genuine Scottish character,” being devoted instead to secular interests. The Presbyterian Whigs, on the other hand, “take little interest in public affairs” at the national level, but reveal “the depths and strengths of the national feelings” for inherited institutions:

the social improvements of Scotland, during the last hundred years, have been more striking than those of any other kingdom in Europe; and yet, although it is in some sort the nature of social improvements to engender a contempt for old usages and institutions, the people of Scotland hold theirs in greater veneration than perhaps any other people; and there exists at the present moment, not only a general taste for the preservation of the national customs and antiquities, but even a growing fashion to revive many peculiarities that had either been proscribed or become obsolete.

This is to conscript Presbyterianism for a Burkean conservatism by re-categorising it as “national custom,” the object of “hallowed prejudices,” a symbol of continuity in an age of change. This prefatory letter is signed “Author of ‘Annals of the Parish.’” But it is not by Galt; Alan Strout ascribes both letters to Thomas Gillespie, whose presentation to a Fife

parish by the United College, University of St Andrews, allowed him, *DNB* tells us, to “devote his leisure to literature”.

The admonitory tone of the “Whig of the Covenant” perhaps suggests that Gillespie had noticed that *Annals of the Parish* does not quite do what this conservative agenda would require of it. Nevertheless, it might be possible to read a very great deal of Scottish fiction written in and after 1820 in relation to this Tory imperative to domesticate Presbyterianism, to remove its political potential by turning it into a signifier of national identity: not only *The Heart of Midlothian*, but Scott’s novels of the Reformation, *The Monastery* and *The Abbot*; not only Lockhart’s *Adam Blair*, but also his *Valerius*; and much of the prose fiction of James Hogg. It might also be argued that this entire project was based on a miscalculation. Tartan and bagpipes were available for Scott to appropriate as signifiers of Scottish national identity because the clans as a type of social organisation had been defeated and destroyed. No such apocalypse had been visited on the presbyterian churches: the Moderates’ capture of the General Assembly, which happened around the same time, was hardly the equivalent of Culloden.

And it turned out that nineteenth-century middle-class Evangelicals were just as attached to the principles and practice of presbyterian church government as eighteenth-century weavers had been. In 1833 they launched a campaign against the sort of patronage that had given Thomas Gillespie his manse, leading to the great schism in the established church ten years later. It seems that the Tories of the 1820s did not see this coming: chapter 1 of *Annals of the Parish* begins with Balwhidder’s contested presentation to his parish by a patron, but for Galt this is an anecdote of the bad old days, like his stories of smugglers and excisemen.

It is an interesting question, beyond the scope of the present essay, over-extended in its speculations as it already is, whether the party that became the Free Church in 1843 emerged by a historical process entirely uninflected by the efforts of *Blackwood’s* to claim Presbyterianism for “national custom,” or whether they in turn folded its sentimental nationalism into their own project of ecclesiastical renewal. In the same year as *Annals of the Parish*, Thomas Chalmers, who would become that party’s leader, complained of Glasgow,

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Every thing has been permitted to run at random; and, as a fruit of the utter disregard of the principle of locality, have the city clergyman and his people almost lost sight of each other. It is the intimacy of connection between these two parties which has impressed its best and most peculiar features on the Scottish nation.\(^5\)

Justifying Presbyterianism by appeal to the “best and most peculiar features of the Scottish nation” certainly sounds more like *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* than Andrew Melville.

In the story I have outlined here, the centrality of Presbyterianism and its history to national life was, for both the eighteenth-century Moderates and the post-war Tories, the one big thing to be negotiated by constructing a national literary tradition. But their strategies in this negotiation are not necessarily continuous with one another (even if they overlap in the work of Burns), the political imperative in each case being specific to its historical moment. And neither version of “Scottish Literature” has anything to do with that projected by MacDiarmid and his allies in the mid-twentieth century, not least because their *bête noire*, “Calvinism,” is marginal to the issues at stake in the tradition-construction of this period. We give the Modernists too much honour if we accept their anachronistic oppositions even in seeking to reverse them.

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