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Alasdair Gray (1934-2019)

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ALASDAIR GRAY (1934-2019)

The achievements of Alasdair Gray, both as writer and artist, have drawn multiple tributes in the months since his death in December last year.¹ There can be few readers of *SSL* who do not know at least his major novels, or who do not immediately recognize one of his paintings or book designs. Beyond *Lanark* itself, and *Poor Things*, which brought him recognition in the U.S., most readers will have favourite books or stories or essays that they urge on friends, colleagues, or students. Far fewer readers, even of *SSL*, fully realize the range and longevity of his career, or the scale, variety, and even the sheer quantity of his work.

Over the past decade, Alasdair Gray himself assembled much of the material needed for fuller appreciation, in a series of long-projected retrospective collections. Some sense of his ranging interests in the great names and quirky sidepaths of the literary tradition had already been clear from the sidenotes and “Index of Plagiarisms” in *Lanark*, from his *Short* [173 page] *Survey* of Scottish literature (2001), and from the 640 pages of *The Book of Prefaces* (2000), especially in the introductory commentaries, though the volume is heavily Anglocentric and ends in 1920.² The main run of Gray’s retrospective self-editing started in 2010, with his remarkable illustrated autobiography, *A Life in Pictures*, which also

¹ See, e.g., Ali Smith, “Alasdair Gray: a modern William Blake who revitalised Scottish writing,” *Guardian*, December 29, 2019; Richard Lea, *ibid.*; *The Herald* [Glasgow], December 29, 2019; *Scotsman*, 29 December, 2019; Geoff Dyer, *Financial Times*, January 6, 2010; Julia Carmel, *New York Times*, January 10, 2020; James Purdon, “He invented modern Glasgow,” *Apollo, the International Art Magazine*, January 17, 2020; Rodge Glass, *Paris Review*, 22 January 2020. Cf. also Andrew Tickell, “I have my doubts about Alasdair Gray tributes,” *The National*, January 5, 2020.

² Alasdair Gray, *A Short Survey of Classic Scottish Writing* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001); Alasdair Gray, *The Book of Prefaces, A Short History of Literate Thought in Words by Great Writers Of Four Nations [England, Ireland, the United States, Scotland] From The 7th to The 20th Century* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2000).

constitutes a catalogue of many of his paintings, including the great murals in Greenhead Church of Scotland, Bridgeton (destroyed when the church was demolished for roadwidening) and portraits from his years as Glasgow Recorder for the People's Palace.³ The same year saw a limited edition of his collected verse.⁴ Two years later, he followed these with the 933-page collection of his short stories.⁵ Two years later, as he turned 80, he rounded out the series with *Of Me and Others*, his 471-page collection of prose pieces, with explanatory comments.⁶ One can imagine, and indeed he projected, other collections, of plays, television and radio work, for instance. Time will presumably bring a formal *catalogue raisonné* of the art, at least a selected edition of his letters, on-line finding lists for archives, and a full descriptive bibliography.⁷ Gray's own annotations to his work will themselves need annotation. As Bruce Charlton's checklists made clear twenty years ago, there is a huge amount of (often overlapping) archival material still unedited, but Gray has provided plenty of material to be going on with.⁸

A formal obituary is therefore hardly needed here, but it seems right that *Studies in Scottish Literature* should include at least some tribute, not only because of Gray's achievement, but because of his relationship with the journal and the journal's longtime editor.

Ross Roy's friendship for Alasdair Gray, and his respect for his writing and art, dated back many years, certainly before *Lanark*. In the seventies Ross was regularly in Glasgow, and they may have met through Hamish Whyte of the Mitchell and Mariscat Press, or Joe Fisher, also at the Mitchell. When *Lanark* was published, I was teaching a seminar on the Scottish novel, and when I got hold of a copy, I went over to tell Ross that

³ Alasdair Gray, *A Life in Pictures* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2010). Cf. also, more briefly and without the pictures, Alasdair Gray, "Alasdair Gray's Personal Curriculum Vitae," in Phil Moores, ed., *Alasdair Gray: Critical Appreciations and a Bibliography* (Boston Spa and London: the British Library, 2002), 31-44.

⁴ Alasdair Gray, *Collected Verses* (Uig, Lewis: Two Ravens Press, 2010), and see *Late Verses* (New York: Antibookclub, 2019).

⁵ Alasdair Gray, *Every Short Story, 1951-2012* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012).

⁶ Alasdair Gray, *Of Me and Others: for Morag, Mora, Andrew, Bert, Katriona, Tracy, Maff, Jim, Libby and Alexandra in Scotland, England, and the U.S.A.* (Glasgow: Cargo Publishing, 2014).

⁷ There seems to be no up-to-date comprehensive bibliography of Gray's work, but see David Ree's Colophon Press Bibliography Series No 1 (1991), which is limited to first edition, and Moores's 2002 bibliography (189-220), which is the fullest generally available, though disclaiming completeness on periodical publication.

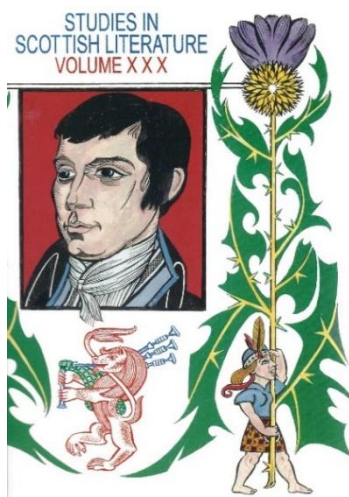
⁸ Bruce Charlton, "Checklists and Unpublished Materials by Alasdair Gray," in *The Arts of Alasdair Gray*, ed. Robert Crawford and Thom Nairn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 156-208.

this was the Great (Modern) Scottish Novel, Glasgow's answer to *Ulysses*, only to find that he knew Alasdair, that he had already read the novel, and that he was reviewing it for *World Literature Today*.⁹ *Studies in Scottish Literature* subsequently published one of the first academic recognitions of its landmark status, by Douglas Gifford:

Lanark undoubtedly will stand as one of the greatest of Scottish novels, along with Hogg's *Justified Sinner*, the best of Galt and Scott and Stevenson.... it singularly and effortlessly manages to find equal footing and fruitful comparison with the best of great surrealist and dystopian fiction throughout the world.¹⁰

In 1996, Ross persuaded Alasdair to visit South Carolina and speak at the Burns bicentenary conference. Arrangements proved complex. He and his second wife Morag had been in Connecticut visiting his son and daughter-in-law, and traveled down to Columbia by train, arriving at 3 a.m.¹¹ Visa issues meant we could only pay Alasdair, modestly, for writing an article in Scotland, not for speaking in the U.S., causing much angst as his preferred Glasgow copyshop tried to fax me marginalia-crammed pages in a format our fax machine refused to recognize.

Once he arrived, however, Ross's hospitality was lavish, and Alasdair's talk on March 31, 1996, in the old Rare Book room, was packed. The major exhibition was, of course, on Burns, but



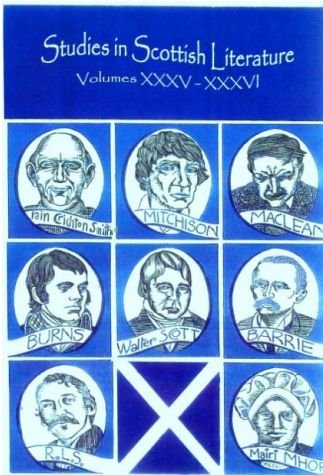
⁹ G. Ross Roy, review of *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*, by Alasdair Gray, *World Literature Today*, 56:2 (Spring 1982): 557-558.

¹⁰ Douglas Gifford, "Scottish Fiction 1980-81: The Importance of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 18 (1983): 229-234 (229), online at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol18/iss1/14>. Other SSL articles about the novel include Alan McMunnigall, "Alasdair Gray and Postmodernism," *SSL*, 33 (2004): 335-348; Cristie L. March, "Center, Margin, and Myth in *Fergus Lamont* and *Lanark*," *SSL*, 32 (2001): 37-45; Gavin Miller, "The Cult of the White Goddess in Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*," *SSL*, 33 (2004): 291-307; Scott Lyall, "Scotland's Top Ten & the Inadequacy of a National Canon: Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981)," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 43: Iss. 2 (2017): 195-196.

¹¹ Cf. Rodge Glass, *Alasdair Gray, A Secretary's Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 230.

I hurried together a small exhibition of Alasdair's work, with some 39 items dating between 1969 and 1996.¹²

His talk was published in the conference volume (*SSL* 30), and he also contributed the line illustrations inside the volume and the artwork for *SSL*'s first full-colour cover, from which, with Alasdair's permission, *SSL*'s current cover logo is taken.¹³ Quite late in production, he discovered a grammatical error in the Latin motto on the back cover and sent Ross a postcard asking that an explanatory note be added inside, though instead Ross chose to print the whole postcard.



Alasdair also contributed to Ross's final double-volume, *SSL* 35-37, sending him a short story to include, "Men in Love," and again doing the cover art, this time a characteristic grid of small portraits of selected Scottish authors. Production of the volume was so much delayed that several contributors died before it came out. Alasdair had first sent Ross a different short story, and, when he used it in *The Ends of Their Tethers* (2003), sent "Men in Love" as a substitute, though even that also appeared elsewhere first.¹⁴ The cover itself went through at least two designs, with differing portraits and arrangement. The first version had left a blank panel on

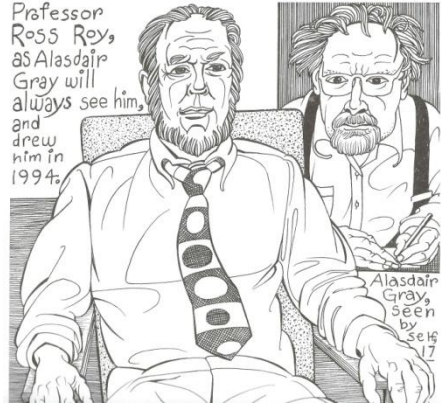
¹² Patrick Scott, *Alasdair Gray: Scottish Author & Artist* (Columbia, SC: Thomas Cooper Library, 1996), seven copies only, numbered and signed by Gray.

¹³ Alasdair Gray, "On Neglect of Burns by Schools and His Disparagement by Moralists and Whitewashers With Some Critical Remarks," *SSL*, 30 (1998): 175-180: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol30/iss1/19>.

¹⁴ Alasdair Gray, "Men in Love," *SSL*, 35-36 (2007): 480-486.

the back cover for a barcode, and when Alasdair learned that was not necessary, he sent Ross two additional portraits, of himself and Ross, with instructions to replace the blank with whichever of them died before publication.

In the event, both survived long enough, but the two of them appear together in Alasdair's line-drawing for the endpapers, showing Ross in 1994, and Alasdair in 2007. The drawing of Ross is based on, or a study for, the portrait Alasdair had painted in 1994, which he included in *A Life in Pictures* and which now hangs in Hollings Library.¹⁵



Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Ross visited Scotland regularly, making the last of several last visits only in 2012, less than a year before he died.

When he was in Glasgow, he usually arranged to meet up with Alasdair “to deal with some business matters” at the Oran Mor or the Ubiquitous Chip. They discussed at least two other publishing projects that remained unfinished. One was for a Scottish Poetry Reprint, with a translation into Scots of French poems by Mary Queen of Scots; some of Alasdair's illustrations are in the Roy Collection, but the poet-translator never sent the text. The other was for a new edition of Burns's songs from *The Merry Muses of Caledonia*, to be edited by Ross, with illustrations by Alasdair; Ross's work on this in 2012 remained unfinished, and I couldn't identify illustrations for it in the files, so I assume Alasdair wisely deferred working on them.

The Roy Collection now has a much better collection of Alasdair's published work than it had in 1996, along with some correspondence, Alasdair's Christmas cards, signed posters and other ephemera. Though still not complete, it includes warmly-inscribed copies of many of Gray's works, and one in particular commemorates the relationship. This is the twentieth-anniversary edition of *Lanark*, in four separate volumes (Canongate, 2001). The next time Ross was across, with his nephew Alex and Alex's wife Annie, they met up with Alasdair and Ken Simpson for dinner at the Ubiquitous Chip on July 10, 2002, and Alasdair inscribed the slip-case and drew individual sketches of the other four dinner

¹⁵ Gray, *A Life in Pictures*, 100.

companions, one on the endpapers of each volume. When they each carried “their” volume home in triumph, the set was dispersed. With Alasdair’s death, four of the five who had dinner that night have now died. Ken yielded up his volume to the collection before his death, and Ross’s came after his death in 2013; Alex Gillon donated the other two volumes last year, reuniting the set. All this is, of course, at most, a footnote, or a footnote to a footnote, in Alasdair’s career, or Ross’s.

Now, nearly twenty years after that dinner, and nearly forty years since *Lanark* was first published, it is perhaps difficult to remember or imagine the extraordinary and immediate impact that Alasdair Gray’s novel had, in altering, shaking up, contemporary expectations of what a Scottish Novel might be like. There had been great Glasgow novels before *Lanark*, and great Scottish *bildungsromane*, Scottish novels of psychological inwardness and of selfconscious fictionality, even Scottish science fiction. Other writers had confronted urban loneliness and governmental bureaucracy, and there had been other portraits of the artist as a young man. But to enumerate *Lanark*’s antecedents, in, say, Kafka and Orwell and Joyce, is to illustrate the distance it marked for itself from other 20th-century Scottish novels. *Lanark*’s ambition and insouciance hit a nerve in its time, widening the writerly options for Gray’s contemporaries and successors, and alerting publishers and award committees outside Scotland that Scottish fiction was worth watching. It seems inevitable that many of Gray’s other published writings will at least for a time draw diminished readership; perhaps what was cheeky or winsomely transgressive in the 1980s will seem less attractive in the 2020s. *Lanark* itself is too massive and convoluted and allusive to become a set school text like *Sunset Song* or to get the wide readership of contemporary *tartan noir*. It may well be, as with William Blake, or his near contemporary W.S. Graham, that the impact of Gray’s art sustains recurrent rediscovery of his writing, not the other way round. But recurrently rediscovered it will be. *Lanark* can still dazzle. It is one of the Munros of modern Scottish fiction, a mountain of a book that at some point everyone ought to tackle, and a landmark from which other peaks and familiar landscapes are rearranged in altered perspective.

P.G.S.