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## Introduction: A Glorious Phantom: Insurrections in Scottish Literature

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**INTRODUCTION:  
A GLORIOUS PHANTOM?  
INSURRECTION IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE**

*Tony Jarrells*

This SSL special symposium looks very broadly at Scotland's insurrectionary past and at how it has been recorded and remembered in the culture. The 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year of the Peterloo Massacre in England, when yeoman cavalry charged a group of unarmed protesters in St. Peter's Field, Manchester, was marked by edited volumes, special sessions, a major conference in Manchester, a film by the celebrated English director, Mike Leigh, and a related book by Jacqueline Riding.<sup>1</sup> Writing about Riding's book for *The Guardian*, John Barrell praised her focus on stories "spoken from below," including in this case the role that women from Lancashire played in the Peterloo protests, and complained about how "working-class history has taken an increasingly minor role in the approved version of 'our island story.'"<sup>2</sup>

A similar complaint was registered by James Kelman, in his play *Hardie and Baird: The Last Days* (1978), about the insurrection in Scotland in April, 1820, a year after Peterloo. John Baird and Andrew Hardie, Kelman's protagonists, were the leaders of a band of radicals who fought against and were captured by a troop of cavalry at the so-called "Battle of Bonnymuir." At the start of the play, Kelman has one of the actors, speaking not in character and without costume, explain that "neither the two men nor the Scottish Insurrection in general are ever referred to

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<sup>1</sup> *Peterloo*, a film by Mike Leigh (Film4, 2018; US release April 2019); Jacqueline Riding, *Peterloo: The Story of the Manchester Massacre*, with an introduction by Mike Leigh (London: Head of Zeus, 2019). For a recent discussion of cross-influence between Scottish and English protest, see Gerard Carruthers, "Responses to Peterloo in Scotland, 1819-1822," in Michael Demson and Regina Hewitt, eds, *Commemorating Peterloo: Violence, Resilience and Claim-making during the Romantic Era* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 120-39.

<sup>2</sup> John Barrell, "Peterloo: the need for working-class history," *The Guardian*, 2 January, 2019: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/02/peterloo-manchester-massacre-jacqueline-riding-1819-protest-bloody-suppression>.

officially, while within our educational system this part of history, like so many others connected with the Radical movement, remains almost entirely neglected.”<sup>3</sup> Kelman’s play, which imagines the last days of the two radical leaders, imprisoned first in Edinburgh and later in Stirling Castle while awaiting execution, contrasts an official version of a constitution that “remains without fear of contradiction, the best, the wisest, and the freest, that the sun ever saw,” with a view spoken of from below by a radical whose time serving in the British army was what singled him out to lead the largely unsuccessful, west-of-Scotland uprising in the first place. “The British soldier,” says Baird to his friend, Hardie, “for the past twenty year we’ve been destroying liberty wherever we find it, right across Europe.” “Ye wouldni credit it,” he continues, “wherever we find freedom we fucking destroy it.” Percy Shelley, in his poem commemorating the events in England in 1819, called this “liberticide.”

To compare the commemorations of Peterloo with those of the Insurrection, or the Radical War, of 1820, is perhaps to glimpse the difference between protest—what those who gathered in St. Peter’s Field were there to do—and insurrection, which by definition involves, at least from the perspective of the government, not just public expression of dissent, but armed resistance to government authority and a purpose of overthrowing it. How much an event or movement is righteous protest or dangerous insurrection is often contested. Frequently, debate will have been cut short by the preemptive military response of the authorities, with contemporary countervoices repressed by draconian retribution. As the Lord President who in Kelman’s play presides over the trial at which Hardie and Baird are convicted for the crime of armed insurrection authoritatively states, “There can surely be no question of the great and abominable crimes undoubtedly intended by the radicals.”

But the portraits we get of Hardie and Baird, delivered in Kelman’s characteristically sparse prose, show them to be more confused about the events they took part in than diabolical in their designs. These are men, at least one of them still God-fearing, who appear to have been tricked into violence by the very government they once fought for and in the name of a constitution whose enshrined rights they had hoped to claim for the lower classes of Scotland. Of course, the supposed crimes perpetrated or planned by radicals against the state and especially against property have long been used as reasons to silence criticism of the established order. Indeed, they continue even today to frustrate and confuse those who might otherwise be sympathetic to and understanding of the genuine need for reform.

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<sup>3</sup> James Kelman, *Hardie and Baird: The Last Days* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1991).

As Kelman's play suggests, the Scottish Insurrection, armed and radical though its participants may have been, is also an important episode in a working-class history that calls out to be remembered. As Baird concludes near the end of the play, "they've never gave us nothing wiott it being wrested from them, never. We've aye had to fight." And although it failed in its execution and its aims, the "radical challenge in 1820" was, in T.M. Devine's words, "much more serious than anything government had to face in England in these troubled years after the end of the Napoleonic Wars."<sup>4</sup>

This issue's symposium on insurrection in Scottish literature takes its inspiration from the bicentenary of the Radical War of 1820, and it marks also the 700th anniversary of the Declaration of Arbroath, signed and dated 500 years earlier, on 6 April 1320. And while one of the contributors to the symposium, John Gardner, does in fact write about the events of 1820, in a piece on the critical debate regarding the role of spies and informers in the events leading up to the Insurrection, the symposium's more general aim is to look at the literary impact of insurrection across a variety of periods. So, for instance, Padma Rangarajan looks at John Galt's 1823 novel, *Ringan Gilhaize*, about the Covenanting Wars of the 1670s and 1680s, and traces its "roundabout critique of insurrectionary logic" back, not immediately to the conflicts and actions of 1820, which involved men from Galt's native region of the west of Scotland, but to the Revolutionary debates of the 1790s, debates which, for writers such as E.P. Thompson, constitute the very beginnings of working-class consciousness.<sup>5</sup> And Alexander Dick turns to "the year of the sheep," an "anti-improvement insurrection" that took place in 1792 and that Dick links to the Clearances more generally and to more recent critiques of both colonial capitalism and the environmental degradation that so often accompanied it. Carol McGuirk also turns to the end of the eighteenth century (and to the beginning of the nineteenth), finding in the poetry and songs of Robert Burns a shift in the context of rebellion, from a focus on the king, as in the Jacobite Uprisings earlier in the eighteenth century, to one on the people themselves. James Hunter's contribution, excerpted from his recent book, *Insurrection: Scotland's Famine Winter*, highlights a series of actions in Caithness following the potato blight of 1846. These actions aimed to block shipments and seize grain carts in order to avoid famine, but they were labelled "insurrectionary" in the press. And Paul Malgrati brings the symposium into the twentieth century with a reading of Joe Corrie's *In*

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<sup>4</sup> T.M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation, 1700-2000* (London: Penguin, 2000), 229.

<sup>5</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), especially the Preface and chapter 5.

*Time o' Strife*, a play set in a Scottish mining village in Fife during the UK-wide General Strike of 1926.

In his afterword to the symposium, "A Wrong-Resenting People: Writing Insurrectionary Scotland," the historian Christopher Whatley touches on each of the events discussed by the contributors and weaves these into a fascinating and wide-ranging discussion of Scotland's insurrectionary past, one that includes not only the Radical War of 1820 and the Declaration of Arbroath, but also the Reformation, the armed uprisings of the Covenanters, the several Jacobite insurgencies of the early eighteenth century, the "insurrection of the Maids" in 1872, and the Women's suffrage movement of the early twentieth century. Whatley's overview of insurrection in Scotland highlights something quite the opposite of what Christopher Smout famously described as the "uninflammable" character of the Scottish people. In addition, in its attention to ballads and poems that either were written about or repurposed in the interests of insurrection, Whatley's piece reminds us that the poets and singers who wrote about the events of their day were in many cases not just the recorders of insurrection but also active participants in the unfolding scenes. John Galt, whom Whatley has written about before, was not one of these armed insurrectionaries—far from it. But his work, too, engages Scotland's insurrectionary history, from the violent, seventeenth-century past to the radical transformations of his own day, in complicated ways. Drawing on popular memory and on the peculiarities of regional characters who can often seem confused by the merits of progress, Galt's fictionalized portrait of the west of Scotland offers a subtle comment on that mixed blessing we now call "modernity."

Obviously, the survey of insurrection in Scottish literature in this symposium is far from comprehensive, though Whatley's afterword does offer a more sweeping view of what might be covered in an extended discussion. The symposium essays do not include contributions tracing literary response to the sedition trials that took place in Scotland in the 1790s, to the Scottish Chartist movement in the 1830s, or to Red Clydeside. And with a different choice of authors or works, it would be possible to give different perspectives on the literary treatment of the Covenanters or the literary legacy from the Jacobite Risings of 1715 and 1745, especially in light of the still-growing body of historical scholarship on Jacobitism. Nonetheless, the essays here raise a variety of issues about Scottish insurrectionary history and offer new possibilities for attending to the neglect that marks the starting point for Kelman's dramatic retelling of the last days of Andrew Hardie and John Baird.

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