The SSL Symposium, 2014: Creative Writing, the Academy, and the Scottish Literary Canon: Introduction

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INTRODUCTION: CREATIVE WRITERS, THE ACADEMY, AND THE SCOTTISH CANON

In most literary fields, the canon is still regarded as the product of complex, centuries-long growth, perhaps overripe for scholarly revisionism, but not significantly affected by the pronouncements of current poets and novelists. Scottish literature has always been different, because of the MacDiarmid legacy.

When Studies in Scottish Literature was founded, its editorial board consisted of one poet (MacDiarmid himself), and three scholars (A.L. Strout, David Daiches, and Kurt Wittig), the last two both in different ways MacDiarmid admirers. In its first volumes, SSL printed strongly-worded essays about the nature of the field from two practicing poets, Tom Scott and Sydney Goodsir Smith. Scott argued that most traditional scholarly research on Scottish authors was “almost entirely worthless”:

our own time is paramount not only to the literature of our own time, but also in relation to the literature of the past. It does not matter so much whether Dunbar did or did not write a certain poem; it does matter whether the poem was worth writing ....1

Goodsr Smith pilloried a succession of statements by academic writers as being “pretty silly,” “just how the doctors speak who never travel by bus or take a drink in a pub.”

Can any country match such continued belittling of its own literature by its own literary pundits—in the face of the recurrent appearance of artists, some of them geniuses, to prove them asses?2

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2 Sydney Goodsir Smith, “Trahison de Clercs, or the Anti-Scottish Lobby in Scottish Letters,” Studies in Scottish Literature, 2: 2 (October 1964), 71-86 (pp. 76-77), noting also (p. 77) that Maurice Lindsay “never travels by bus.”
MacDiarmid as critic, as much as MacDiarmid’s poetry, influenced the emerging teaching and critical canon of the 1950s and 1960s, especially through his dismissal of Scots writing from the period between Burns and his own early work. The most influential Scottish literature anthologies from the 1940s to the 1960s were edited by poets (Maurice Lindsay, Norman MacCaig, Douglas Young, George Bruce), and the first separate department of Scottish literature was headed by a poet, Alexander Scott.

Historically, perhaps, Scottish writers have always had at least as much influence as Scottish scholars on how Scottish readers would view the literary past. For the general reader in 18th century Scotland, Allan Ramsay’s *Ever Green* and Hamilton of Gilbertfield’s Wallace, not Thomas Ruddiman, shaped or filtered the medieval Scottish tradition. Burns, and Scott, and Hogg were arguably more effective in rescuing Scottish song than antiquarians like Percy or Ritson or Buchan. Even if Blair’s rhetoric lectures dominated academic teaching for nearly a century (certainly in America), his sole attempt to shape the Scottish canon, championing Ossian, gave respectability to Macpherson’s success, rather than causing it. Robert Louis Stevenson surely got Burns right in a way that Professor J.C. Shairp or Professor John Veitch did not.

For much of the twentieth century, both critical trends and publication options in Scottish literature kept the border porous, or the distinction vague, between general-reader essays, book reviews and academic criticism. Interventions in Scottish literary debate, and comments on contemporary writing, were more likely to appear in *Voice of Scotland, Saltire Review, Akros, or Lines Review*, the *Scotsman* or the *Herald*, in literary reviews and little magazines, than in scholarly journals; parallel kinds of critical debate were published on one side of the Atlantic in *Scrutiny*, the *New Statesman*, or *Encounter*, and on the other in *Kenyon Review, Sewanee Review* or the *Partisan Review*. The era of the New Criticism coincided with a remarkable amount of serious literary journalism, in a way that affected publication choices for critics as well as creative writers. David Daiches’s prodigious range of published writing rivalled in many ways the generic eclecticism of MacDiarmid himself. Despite Daiches’s own track record as a scholar, New Criticism called into question precisely the kind of professional scholarship that might at other times have demarcated a literary career from an academic one.

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Yet within universities, the role of the creative writer was by no means clear. Till 1970, when Norman MacCaig was appointed at Stirling, most Scottish writers with university posts were appointed as scholars or literary critics, not for their writing, and not always in literature departments: Douglas Young taught as a classicist, Stanley Eveling as a philosopher. Hamish Henderson was employed not as poet, but as ethnomusicologist. And the writing hardly helped their careers. At Glasgow, in Scottish Literature, Alexander Scott’s editorial and biographical work never wholly expunged the stigma of his poetry. His Glasgow colleague Edwin Morgan, in English Literature, lived long enough to see the situation change.

The change came in different ways in different places. The first appointments of creative writers qua creative writers, in the late 1960s, came at the initiative of the newly-established Scottish Arts Council’s Literature Panel, in response to creative writing hires at East Anglia and elsewhere. Edinburgh hosted Norman MacCaig (1967-69), followed by Sorley Maclean, Robert Garioch, and others, each for a two-year part-time visiting stint, mentoring student writers, but not expected to initiate formal courses nor to sponsor work that would satisfy part of an existing degree. At Glasgow, George Bruce (1971-73) was followed by Alan Spence, Alasdair Gray, and Andrew Greig. As Adrian Hunter recounts below, in 1970, soon after Philip Hobsbaum moved from Belfast to

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5 The Scottish Arts Council provided £2000 a year, which had to be matched by the host university (personal communication from Prof. John MacQueen, a member of the Literature Panel at the time); for comparison, a beginning full-time lecturer might have been paid £1100 a year. Ironically, the Scottish universities were trying to catch up with a train that hadn’t really left the station: East Anglia’s first creative writing student Ian McEwan (who completed his MA in 1970) was the only student in the program, and writing constituted just one-twelve of an otherwise standard MA; as he later told it, “I wasn’t really taught by Malcolm [Bradbury]. I saw him for just a quarter of an hour, three times a year”: see David Robinson, *In Cold Ink* (Edinburgh: Maclean Dubois, 2008), 61.

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Glasgow, he gathered a writers’ group that was outside any formal university structure.\(^7\)

Several of the contributions that follow recount the subsequent development of degree-credit for creative work, more formal teaching on the lines of the long-established creative writing workshops in U.S. universities, most notably at Iowa, and separate graduate programs in creative writing.\(^8\) All the major Scottish universities now have senior staff whose major achievements are in creative writing, and most offer courses, programs or degrees at undergraduate or graduate level or both. As the contributors evidence, at least some writers now seem able to straddle the former divide and work both in creative and traditional literary scholarship, without the credibility of either being called into question. Of course, we recognize topics not treated here, such as the development of creative writing at St. Andrews in the 1990s, led by Robert Crawford and Douglas Dunn, or the catholicity with which Alasdair Gray has not only engaged with major figures like James Hogg but brought to new attention several Scottish authors who had become rather marginal to the teaching canon, from Urquhart of Cromarty to the Carlyle of *Sartor Resartus*. Nor did I find a contributor to tackle whether the combination of a largely-Scottish teaching staff with international student recruitment has meant the enrichment, dilution, or simply the wider international influence, of contemporary Scottish writing.

The general development traced here is not unique to Scottish literature; parallel changes have occurred in many university literature departments outside Scotland. But the emergence of Creative Writing is surely one of the big shifts since the emergence of Scottish literature as a distinctive discipline, and therefore worth collective discussion.

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\(^7\) See also Gray’s obituary of Hobsbaum, in *Of Me and Others*, 373-380, which reprints the 1968 “Interview” Hobsbaum wrote for *Glasgow University Magazine*. On Hobsbaum and Willy Maley’s program at Glasgow, from 1995, and the period when Tom Leonard, James Kelman, and Gray, shared a professorship in creative writing, “like bulls entering a crowded mini-market,” see Gray, *op. cit.*, 364-372.