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**EDINBURGH MONUMENTS, THE LITERARY
CANON, AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM:
A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

Silvia Mergenthal

As memory landscapes go,¹ the city of Edinburgh has always been overstocked rather than under-furnished with architectural landmarks and monuments, street names, public squares, and historic sites, all of which serve to remind both its citizens and its visitors of Scotland's rich history and of the men and women who walked the streets of the Scottish capital before them. Even so, the last two decades have seen a number of new additions to Edinburgh's mnemonic topography, including three large-scale building projects dedicated to Scottish literature: the Canongate Wall of the new Scottish Parliament, the Makars' Court adjacent to the Writers' Museum, and the so-called "herms" of twelve Scottish writers erected in Edinburgh Business Park. Although monuments or commemorative plaques dedicated to authors are, like literary museums and various types of remediation such as cinematic adaptations, usually considered to be the effects of canon-formation processes rather than agents in these processes,² this paper will argue that, taken together, the Canongate Wall, Makars' Court and the Edinburgh Business Park "herms" are in fact a literary canon cast in stone, yet a canon which, perhaps paradoxically, is very much a canon in the making. In what follows, these three building projects will be discussed; the paper will conclude with a few tentative remarks on the links between memory landscapes, canon formation, and cultural nationalism.

¹ For a discussion of the term "memory landscape," see Rudy Koshar, *From Monuments to Traces. Artifacts of German Memory, 1870-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 9-10.

² Stefanie Preuss, *A Scottish National Canon? Processes of Literary Canon Formation in Scotland* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2012), 27.

The Canongate Wall

On March 11, 2009, *The Scotsman* announced that a search had been launched for a new quotation to be inscribed on one of the walls of the Scottish Parliament.³ In celebration of ten years of devolution, the new quotation was to join the original twenty-four quotations carved into this wall – a concrete blast wall 39 metres in length and 6 metres high at its highest point – for the building’s opening in October 2004. According to Holyrood’s Presiding Officer Alex Ferguson,

the Canongate Wall was always supposed to be a living wall, one that we would add to when the time was right.

And:

We are asking people to nominate a well-loved or significant piece of writing that is relevant for Scotland, perhaps something that expresses how they feel about Scotland, what it means to be Scottish, or hopes for the future.

Eventually, not one but two additional quotations were chosen from among almost 300 suggestions: they are from Norman MacCaig’s “A Man in Assynt” and from Mary Brooksbank’s “Oh Dear Me (The Jute Mill Song),” making Brooksbank, a trade union activist and member of the Communist Party, the first female writer on the wall. Another two stones in the wall remain without inscriptions, which may indicate that the wall is indeed, as Ferguson claims, “living,” that is, a work in progress.

The twenty-six quotations now embedded in the wall – in English, Scots, and Gaelic – fall into three distinct but interrelated groups: the first group, represented for instance by Brooksbank, or more famously by Burns in “A Man’s a Man for A’ That,” expresses a set of humanitarian sentiments which passers-by, in the quotation from Alasdair Gray, are invited to share: “Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation.”⁴

³ <http://www.scotsman.com/news/holyrood-s-canongate-wall-search-for-a-new-inscription-1-1029210>; see also Silvia Mergenthal, “Canongate Wall,” in Klaus Peter Müller, Bernhard Reitz and Sigrid Rieuwerts, eds., *Scotland’s Cultural Identity and Standing* (Trier: WVT, 2013), xi-xiii. For further information on the Canongate Wall and a list of inscriptions, see:

<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/visitandlearn/21012.aspx>.

⁴ [While the wall itself credits this to Gray, the Parliament web-site now describes it as “paraphrased” from a Canadian poet: Gray himself had pointed out (*Glasgow*

The second set establishes a series of references to the role of the building of which the wall is a part, the Scottish Parliament; these range from the mildly humorous (“What a lovely, lovely moon. And it’s in the constituency too”) to the admonitory (“Say but little but say it well”). Arguably, in Mrs Howden’s famous dictum from Scott’s *The Heart of Midlothian* – “When we had a king, and a chancellor, and parliament-men o’ our ain, we could aye peeble them wi’ stanes when they werena good bairns – But naeboddy’s nails can reach the length o’ Lunnon” – the humorous and the admonitory coincide.

Finally, and this is by far the largest group, both humanitarian sentiments and democratic institutions are, as it were, derived from, and grounded in the land; this is also emphasized by the fact that the stone slabs in which the quotations are engraved come from different parts of the country and reflect Scotland’s long and complicated geological history: Iona Marble, Kemnay Granite, Easdale Slate and so on. The latter quotations in particular meet the criteria outlined by Fergusson – “a piece of writing that is relevant for Scotland, that expresses how people feel about Scotland, what it means to be Scottish, or hopes for the future.”

Monuments create a usable past from the point of view of the present and its needs and concerns; and it is through these monuments that the present seeks reassurance about its own values by, as it were, imprinting them upon the future. In the case of the Canongate Wall, quotations appear to have been selected on the basis of their content, rather than on the basis of who their authors were, which may also be why five are anonymous while another six – including Brooksbank’s – are attributed to authors who are not predominantly known as literary figures. This content-based approach is also reflected in the material form of the quotations as, literally, graffiti: although, on the Canongate Wall, the source of a quotation *is* engraved along with the quotation itself, graffiti, by their very nature, tend to be anonymous. The focus of the Canongate

Herald, May 5, 2007) that he read the phrase “the early days of a better civilization” in Dennis Lee’s *Civil Elegies* (1972), and Gray’s first rewriting, on the cover of *Unlikely Things, Mostly* (1984), explicitly credited Lee. Gray certainly polished (and much improved) Lee’s phrasing through several iterations, and he recently revised it further, from “a better nation” to “a better world.” Cf. Harry McGrath, *Scottish Review of Books*, “The Early Days of a Better Nation,” 9:1 (2013): <http://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/index.php/back-issues/2013-03-27-15-25-26/volume-nine-issue-one/533-early-days-of-a-better-nation-harry-mcgrath>. Ed.]

Wall quotations thus appears to be – appropriately, given its location – on the role of the monument as a rhetorical topos, that is, as a civic composition which teaches individuals about their civic responsibilities, in a setting which in itself is the emblematic embodiment of power and memory.⁵

Makars’ Court

Unlike the Canongate Wall, the second new site, Makars’ Court, frequently billed as the “first evolving National Literary Monument,” focuses very much on individual authorship.⁶ This emphasis is reflected in the physical shapes of the commemorative objects, which resemble (horizontal) gravestones. In parenthesis it should be noted that one of the two stipulations for eligibility – from among “all writers born in Scotland, or who lived and worked in Scotland” – is that the “writer must be dead” (the other being that he or she must be of “sufficient literary standing to merit inclusion”); it is thus no coincidence that individual slabs in this secular graveyard without graves should have become sites of a variety of commemorative activities.

The quotations engraved on these slabs, like those on the Canongate Wall, can be divided into three groups: again, there is a number of quotations expressing humanitarian values, and another group conveying patriotic and national feelings; the third group articulates what might be called Edinburgh civic pride – a sentiment which, understandably, plays a subordinate role in the Canongate context, where there is only one quotation which refers to Edinburgh directly. In conjunction with the writer’s name and dates, these quotations serve as epitaphs which mediate between individual life and collective memory.

In its initial stage, Makars’ Court was conceived in 1997, out of a desire to broaden the remit of the Writers’ Museum, to which it is adjacent and which is dedicated to the lives and works of Burns, Scott, and Stevenson. The first twelve writers and quotations were selected by the Saltire Society and were sponsored by Lothian and Edinburgh Enterprise Ltd. in association with the City of Edinburgh Council. These

⁵ On the notion of monuments as mnemonic devices – and of “cities of collective memory” – see M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory. Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

⁶ On Makars’ Court see <http://www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/Venues/The-Writers--Museum/Makars--Court> and Moira Burgess, *The Makars Literary Tour* (Edinburgh: Scottish Literary Trust, 2003).

authors – among them Henryson, Dunbar, Fergusson, Burns, Scott, and Hugh MacDiarmid – can broadly be assembled to, or else deliberately placed themselves in, the core-canonical Makar tradition of Scottish writing. The same cannot be said for the much more heterogeneous group of around thirty writers who have arrived in Makars’ Court since 1998. Some of these authors – John Galt, perhaps, or Sydney Goodsir Smith – can certainly also be regarded as belonging to the core canon, and some of the pressure groups responsible for their inclusion have always been involved in canon-formation processes – university departments, literary societies, or museums. Other writers, however, writers sponsored by their families and friends, by regional arts bodies or, in the case of Dorothy Dunnett, by the Dorothy Dunnett Readers’ Association, would normally be relegated to the core canon’s more disputed and constantly changing peripheries or might even be considered as belonging to a negative canon or a counter-canon. If, then, as has been suggested, Makars’ Court should be regarded as a biographically-organised attempt at writing literary history, the principles which underlie this attempt are clearly contradictory; and as, like the Canongate Wall, Makars’ Court is – within the constraints imposed by the actual physical space – a work in progress, these principles may still be evolving.

It may seem odd, at first glance, that neither the Canongate nor the Makars’ Court monuments engravings include figurative representation; in the case of the Canongate Wall, this is, as has already been shown, because the engravings are mainly chosen for their content rather than for their source. As for Makars’ Court, while each slab serves as a marker of a writer’s life and as its metonymical signifier, this individual life is suspended in, and appropriated by, the ideological context of the Makars’ Court setting.

Edinburgh Business Park

With regard to both their potential open-endedness and their lack of figurative representation, the Canongate Wall and Makars’ Court differ substantially from the third new commemorative project which can be studied *in situ*, namely, the twelve bronze busts, or “herms,” of Scotland’s (20th and 21st century) “leading poets” which New Edinburgh Ltd., the development company behind Edinburgh Business Park, decided to include in its landscaping design. According to publicity material issued by NEL, they had been stimulated by the example of Slovenian architect “Josef Plečnick” (Jože Plečnik):

The rhythm set up by the lochans and the regular planning of lime trees at four-metre centres would be ideally complemented by the addition of four herms per lochan. There are three lochans in all, hence the total of 12 herms.⁷

There is no indication, in this material, of who chose the twelve poets were chosen: at any rate, the first four busts, of MacDiarmid, Liz Lochhead, Edwin Morgan, and Iain Crichton Smith, were erected in 2002, followed, in 2003, by Tom Leonard, Hamish Henderson, Douglas Dunn, and Sorley MacLean, and then in 2009, by W. S. Graham, Jackie Kay, Norman MacCaig, and Naomi Mitchison.

Whatever one may think of individual names on that list – and Ian Wall, one of the directors of NEL, is on record as saying that “others may have chosen alternative poets” – it is evident that what it does strive for is inclusiveness. At the same time – and this is another interesting departure from both the Canongate Wall and the Makars’ Court projects – there is a marked disjunction between this principle of inclusiveness, and the very conventional physical shape of the commemorative object, a shape which conveys a sense of exemplariness: twelve portrait busts set on rectangular plinths, with two tablets providing biographical information and representative quotes, respectively. Hence, aesthetically as well as in their leafy environment – where they are said to provide an inspiration to employees and visitors – the Edinburgh Business Park busts are most closely related to the busts of Italian luminaries in the Pincian Gardens in Rome: these were erected, in fits and starts depending on whoever ruled Italy at the time, from the mid-19th century onwards.

The Edinburgh Monuments in Comparative Perspective

It is, arguably, no coincidence that the business park busts reference, in their overall design and deployment, 19th and early 20th century European monuments or other commemorative architecture such as the Pincian Gardens or the work of Jože Plečnik in Habsburg Vienna and post-Habsburg Prague and Ljubljana. In fact, the closest correspondences, on a European scale, to all three projects – Canongate Wall, Makars’ Court, and the Edinburgh Business Park busts – can be found in pre-unification Italy and Germany (that is, before, respectively, 1861 and 1871), or on the territories of so-called “under-stated nations” such Hungary, Poland, or Slovenia in the decades before, or in the aftermath of, the dissolution

⁷ “Special Report: West Edinburgh,” *The Scotsman*, 5 September 2007.

of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918. The common denominator of all these monuments – in contemporary Scotland and in 19th and early 20th century continental Europe – is that they are not dedicated to individuals, events, or values outside the realm of literature, but, typically, to national poets; as is, after all, the most conspicuous monument of any in Edinburgh, the Scott Monument on Princes Streets, inaugurated in 1846.⁸

Hence, new Edinburgh monuments can be aligned more readily with other recent cultural activities in Scotland than with, for example, their contemporaries in those “under-stated nations” which gained, or regained, their independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, or in former Soviet Union satellite states like Yugoslavia: there, monuments tend to foreground historical events or leaders.⁹ Among these recent cultural activities are, to name only a few, the establishment, in 2006, of the National Theatre of Scotland company as part of the Scottish Executive’s National Cultural Strategy (first published in 2000); the (first) Year of the Homecoming of 2009, to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns; the opening of the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum in Alloway in 2011, and the restoration of Abbotsford, completed in 2013; recent editorial projects such as the Edinburgh Edition of the Waverley Novels, the Stirling/South Carolina Research Edition of the Collected Works of James Hogg, the New Edinburgh Edition of the Collected

⁸ On national poets see Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, eds., *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe. Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, IV (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2004), 11-132. See also, for the specific example of Slovenian national poets’ monuments, Marijan Dovič, “Every monument erected by a nation to its greats is erected to the nation itself”: Vodnik, Prešeren, and the Nationalization of the Carniolan Capital’s Topography,” *Neohelicon* 41 (2014): 27-41. For the Scott Monument, see Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), and Jonathan Hearn, “Big City: Civic Symbolism and Scottish Nationalism,” *Scottish Affairs*, 42 (2003): 57-82. It should be mentioned at this point that, although the Scott Monument is, of course, dedicated to Walter Scott, it also incorporates statues of 16 other Scottish authors.

⁹ See Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen, “From Socialist to Post-Socialist Cities: Narrating the Nation Through Urban Space,” *Nationalities Papers* 41 (2013): 487-514; Sanford Levinson, *Written in Stone. Public Monuments in Changing Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 16-18. For a particularly conspicuous, “in-your-face,” example of post-Soviet statuary, see the 98-metre statue of Peter the Great in Moscow, erected in 1997.

Works of Robert Louis Stevenson, and the Oxford Edition of the Works of Robert Burns; and, of course, the ongoing debate about “Scotland’s Books.”¹⁰

Again, there are prototypes for these cultural activities in much of 19th and early 20th century Europe: from a pan-European perspective, they can be regarded as instances of what Joep Leerssen has described as “the cultivation of culture.” Drawing on the seminal work of Miroslav Hroch and his “phase model” of the gestation of national movements, Leerssen situates cultural fieldwork and consciousness-raising, that is, salvage, productivity, and propagation in the cultural fields of language, discourse, material culture, and performance, at the beginning (in Hroch’s Phase A) of developing nationalist/separatist movements.¹¹ At the same time, Leerssen, unlike Hroch, suggests that Hroch’s Phase A – in which nationalist activists devote themselves to cultural activities without necessarily envisaging a nation for their group – need not necessarily lead to his Phase B, social and political activism, or on to his Phase C, the fragmentation of the nationalist movement into various (conservative, liberal, left-wing) sub-groups. Second, Leerssen argues that cultural concerns need not be restricted to the early stages of national movements but may remain on the agenda even when sovereign statehood has been established.

On the whole, and in spite of the outcome of the 2014 Referendum, Edinburgh’s new literary monuments would seem to indicate that it is Leerssen’s, rather than Hroch’s, template of cultural nationalism which should be applied to the Scottish experience. What does seem to be required, however, is a discussion of Scottish cultural phenomena which is informed by their comparatist approach to nationalisms.

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¹⁰ As in Robert Crawford, *Scotland’s Books. The Penguin History of Scottish Literature* (London: Penguin, 2007); see also Alan Riach, “Scottish Literature: An Open Canon,” *Perspectives*, 34 (2012): 21-25.

¹¹ For samples of Hroch’s and Leerssen’s work, see, respectively: Miroslav Hroch, “From National Movement to the Fully-Formed Nation. The Nation-Building Process in Europe,” *New Left Review* 197/203 (1993), 3-20; Joep Leerssen, “The Cultivation of Culture. Towards a Definition of Romantic Nationalism in Europe,” *Opleiding Europese Studies* (Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2005).