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THE VIEW FROM ELSEWHERE: A RESPONSE

Andrew Hook

I'm struck by the fact that two of the contributors to this symposium refer (in their titles) to the "Indyref." Last year's independence referendum was a massively important moment in Scotland's history. Was Scotland about to break away from the rest of the United Kingdom? Was the Union of 1707, which in no more than two generations had done much to transform a small, insignificant, poverty-stricken country into a literary, intellectual and industrial powerhouse—a model of Progress and Improvement—about to be cast aside? To describe such an event as the "Indyref" seems to me to be in danger of diminishing its importance, reducing it to the level of some kind of cosy, easy-going computer game.

From my perspective the independence referendum was no kind of game. Let me explain my position. With an English father and a Scottish mother I was born and brought up in Wick, a town in the far north of Scotland only a few miles south of John o' Groats, the traditional northern extremity of the United Kingdom. Accustomed to thinking of towns such as Inverness and Aberdeen as being in the "south," I was nonetheless familiar with England. Summer holidays were regularly spent visiting my father's family in deepest Gloucestershire. On one occasion at least we visited Land's End in Cornwall, the southern extremity of the UK.

I have no recollection of considering myself either Scottish or English. Had I been asked, I strongly suspect I'd have described myself as British. On the other hand I have to admit that as a sixth-year pupil in Daniel Stewart's College in Edinburgh in 1949 I stood (and won) as a Scottish National Party candidate in a mock general election. But that indeed was a game—and I suspect I won merely because I was the most entertaining candidate. The situation was very different a few years later. On national service in the British army I found a Scottish identity being

thrust upon me: I was just another “jock.” I admit I was taken aback—I had just never seen myself as any kind of national stereotype. Was I simply wrong?

In the many years between then and now, most of the time I was perfectly happy with being at once Scottish and British. As a graduate student at Princeton my Scottish background seemed to stand me in good stead so I was happy from time to time to play the Scottish card. But in the four decades of my teaching career in the English Departments of Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Glasgow universities, I remained as I say—if I ever thought about it at all—at once British and Scottish. However with the recent growth of Scottish political nationalism my perspective did begin to change.

My research at Princeton had focused on the Scottish contribution to the developing cultural and intellectual life of pre- and post-revolutionary America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As an undergraduate studying English Literature at Edinburgh in the early 1950s I had made only limited contact with Scottish literature. I learned quite a lot about the so-called ‘Scottish Chaucerians’—Dunbar, Henryson, and Gavin Douglas—partly because my second-year tutor was an American who happened to be a Henryson scholar. Then Burns, Scott and more recent Scottish writers might occasionally feature in lectures or classes, but of course there was nothing at all in the way of a formal course in Scottish literature. So such expertise on the literary and intellectual life of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Scotland as I developed, all resulted from my research at Princeton into the cultural life of colonial and post-colonial America in that nation-forming period.

The result was that over the years I have found myself at once inside and outside the group of scholars dedicated to full-time study of Scottish literature. (That of course is why the editors invited me to write this piece.) Meanwhile several of that group’s leading figures became close friends: Cairns Craig, Robert Crawford, Alan Riach. And they still are—sometimes joking that in the end I will see the light and share their view of the link between cultural and political nationalism. That today is what strikes me as the key issue. I don’t doubt that the great majority of scholars and students of Scottish literature and history, of Scottish culture in general, are happy to endorse such a link. Equally I agree there is no doubt that throughout the referendum campaign Scottish writers, artists, actors—the Scottish artistic community in general—were strongly in favour of voting Yes to independence. Nonetheless not everyone was convinced. In terms of cultural nationalism I’m perfectly prepared to put

my hand up. While recognising that Scotland's population is less than one tenth of that of the UK as a whole, I broadly support all efforts to ensure that Scottish culture in all its forms gets at least its fair share of the national cake. But I see no reason why that should mean I must support the Scottish National Party and choose to abandon the United Kingdom. That is why I find the widely accepted—and largely uncritical— current conflation of political and cultural nationalism deeply disturbing.

What do our international contributors make of the independence referendum and its impact? Broadly they seem to agree that it has been good for Scottish Studies in general in the sense that the central political issue—the possible dissolution of the United Kingdom—has increased outside awareness of Scottish history and culture. Evan Gottlieb is impressed by the good sense and maturity of the Scottish voters he encountered. The Yes campaign he felt was the more inspiring, but the “high degree of practicality and good-sense” he recognised in voters, could explain a more cautious No. Like him, I sometimes found people understandably reluctant to discuss an increasingly divisive topic, but like others, I also sensed a disturbing level of nationalist aggressiveness among at least a section of Yes supporters. This culminated in the disgraceful scene of protesters outside BBC headquarters in Glasgow absurdly accusing their reporters and commentators of bias in their coverage of the referendum campaign. The charge was silly, and the leaders of the Yes campaign should have said so.

Carla Sassi begins her contribution by referring to an ESSE conference in 2014 that was opened by James Robertson speaking on “Scotland's cultural specificity and quest for political independence.” Fair enough perhaps, but I am not so sure that an academic ESSE event should have been “explicitly celebrating Scotland's culture and aspirations to statehood.” (What if Catalonia or Ukraine, to which she refers, were in question?) But then what are we to make of 2014's first ever World Congress of Scottish Literatures, held in the University of Glasgow, and attended by over 250 delegates? Even more striking than its grandiose title was the opening address delivered by Michael Russell MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning in Holyrood's SNP government. After providing a comprehensively nationalistic reading of Scotland's literary culture, Mr. Russell chose to end his speech unequivocally endorsing a Yes vote in the coming referendum, describing it as “the opportunity to renew our nation and our

people.”¹ As I’ve indicated above, the speaker’s view was almost certainly shared by a majority of his audience. But that does not mean that such a political message should have been delivered in what would have been seen in the past at least, as a purely academic context.

Professor Sassi, however, shows she is not unaware of the possible dangers implicit in the simple conflating of culture and politics. In her contribution she goes on to concede that there is a problematic side to the referendum’s opening up of “a privileged threshold into the world of Scottish studies”—because “it has arguably tied Scottish cultural expressions to a specific political project and historically determined moment.” Exactly. This strikes me as a major problem with damaging implications for the here and now. Setting aside the independence issue, is Scottish art and culture necessarily and definitively always about Scotland? A few years ago the SNP government in Holyrood abolished the Scottish Arts Council and replaced it with “Creative Scotland.” As the body responsible for the public funding of the arts in Scotland, Creative Scotland has had a somewhat rocky ride. But reading its original remit, I sensed an undercurrent dangerously close to implying that Scottish artists had by definition to be preoccupied with things Scottish. In these circumstances, would it be surprising if a budding artist, writer, actor—who happened to be against independence—might choose not to make his views publicly known? The question is, just how acceptable is such a situation?

David Latané shares the view that “the question of ‘Scotland’ for its writers and artists is always and inescapably on the table.” “The national question,” he concludes, “—whether one likes it or not—clearly supercharges cultural production.” This is a view that I suspect Creative Scotland endorses, and to my mind a very similar perspective is adopted by all those who are now keen to promote Scottish Studies at all levels of Scottish education. But could it be that this perennial focus on the national question is intellectually problematic? Consider the example of American Studies. American Studies in its origins depended on the belief that there was something different—something new and special—about the American experience. “American exceptionalism,” as it was called, underpinned the study of American history, literature, government, society and culture in general. But in recent decades the practitioners of

¹ Michael Russell, MSP, Scottish government web-site (July 2, 2015): <http://news.scotland.gov.uk/Speeches-Briefings/World-Congress-of-Scottish-Literatures-e6d.aspx>

American Studies have repudiated the very idea of American exceptionalism—if it ever existed, apparently it applied only to the experience of white males. Every other category of American citizen shared the same unhappy experience of minorities everywhere. Hence American Studies has more or less disappeared into “transatlantic studies” or cultural studies more generally. Are there not at least dangers in focusing exclusively on what perhaps should be called Scottish exceptionalism? The history, say, of Scottish Enlightenment studies suggests there is. No one now would deny the importance of the Scottish Enlightenment in helping to create the world in which we still live. But it was largely scholars outside Scotland—in America and England—who drew attention to and celebrated this period of major Scottish achievement. Within Scotland the prevailing feeling was that the Enlightenment was somehow not Scottish enough—and even that it was contributing to the unacceptable Anglicization of post-Union Scottish culture. Hence its neglect. On the other hand, my research demonstrated that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Americans had no such difficulty in recognizing the scale and importance of the Scottish Enlightenment’s contribution to their own developing culture.

Finally, I find one other aspect of the suggested direction of the study of Scottish literature in the post-referendum period—reflected in at least two of the contributions to the view from elsewhere—distinctly troubling. David Latané and Manfred Malzahn both seem to suggest that it is easier to interest overseas students in contemporary Scottish writing rather than in historical figures such as Burns, Scott and Stevenson. Recognizing this, I was reminded of Willy Maley’s attack on Murray Pittock and Gerry Carruthers, in the initial SSL symposium, as representing in their accounts of the present state of Scottish Studies “the feeling of stepping back in time, to a land where Burns was the only bard in town.”² “Where,” Professor Maley asks rhetorically, “are Carol Ann Duffy, Douglas Dunn, Jackie Kay, Tom Leonard and Liz Lochhead....? Where are Janice Galloway, Alasdair Gray, A.L. Kennedy, Alan Warner and Irvine Welsh?” The trouble with this is obvious. Where in these lists are

² Willy Maley, “On the Abolition of the Scottish Department,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 38 (2012): 35-40 (p. 39); cf. Murray Pittock, “‘Setting a Stoot Hert tae a Stey Brae’: Fifty Years of the Study of Scottish Literature, 1962-2012,” *ibid.*, 6-12; Gerard Carruthers, “Rejecting Inferiorism and Superiorism: Normalizing Scottish Literary Studies in the Early Twenty-First Century,” *ibid.*, 13-19. All three essays are linked from: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol38/iss1/>.

Don Paterson, Robert Crawford, Allan Massie, Iain Banks, James Robertson, Ronald Frame, where above all—if Irvine Welsh is remarkably in—is James Kelman, remarkably out? The difficulty with any kind of exclusive focus on contemporary writing is the absence of any kind of critical consensus. Current fashions may not endure. The “Glasgow” school of contemporary novelists—McIlvanney, Gray, Kelman, Owens, Torrington—has recently often seemed to dominate the field. But for how long? Similarly postcolonialism is currently the flavour of the month in literary criticism—which explains why attempts are being made to apply that approach to the literature of a non-colony such as Scotland. Silvia Mergenthal persuasively describes three new forms of literary monuments in Edinburgh as yet another contribution to resurgent cultural nationalism. But here again the nationalist dimension, and the emphasis on recent and contemporary authors, combine to create a problem for this new “literary canon cast in stone.” Where is the monument to Edwin Muir? Or Conan Doyle? Or J.M. Barrie?

More troubling still is the suggestion that contemporary Scottish writers should be the major focus of study because they reflect a new, more diverse, multicultural Scotland. No doubt some do. But that is no reason to neglect major writers of the past. The current fashion for cultural relativism, and the critique of so many traditional art forms because of their failure to address what we see as the injustices of the past, can ultimately lead to an undermining and rejection of those universal human values that the Enlightenment endorsed. The long-term future of English Studies (and Scottish Studies), like that of the humanities in general, is far from assured. And the role of the academy itself in contributing to that uncertainty should trouble us all. My hope is that scholars and critics of Scottish literature, both at home and abroad, will remain, above all, outward-looking, unobsessed by the national question, mindful of the complex relationship between Scottish and English literature, and committed to the celebration of all that is fine in Scottish writing both old and new.

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