Introduction: Spatial Humanities and Scottish Studies

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INTRODUCTION:
SPATIAL HUMANITIES AND SCOTTISH STUDIES

Eric Gidal and Michael Gavin

A symposium dedicated to spatial humanities and Scottish literary studies ought to begin by acknowledging that both Scottish literature and Scottish studies are intrinsically spatial. By this we mean that both writers and scholars of Scottish literature have long been centrally concerned with questions of place: the texture of Scotland as a nation is inextricable from the topology of its landscapes, the history of its transformations, and the struggles over its representations. One might even claim that the spatial humanities began during the Scottish Enlightenment, when geography, history, and belles lettres joined through the communication networks of correspondence, surveys, education, and print to invent and imagine the modern nation of Scotland within British and increasingly global frames of reference.¹ Spatial patterns of migration, improvement, and industrialization not only shaped Scottish literature and culture, but provided the impetus for new systems of symbolic representation.² What we now think of as Scottish studies began as a profound intellectual investment in the meaning of Scotland as a space where poetry, history, nature, agriculture, and industry collided with special force.³ Insofar as

we understand the term “spatial humanities” broadly to include all
humanistic study that explores the cultural production of space, Scottish
studies has long been at the forefront of the field.

Organizing a corpus of literature around geographical boundaries is,
in some respects, commensurable with classic divisions between nations
and periods. As Denis Wood puts it, “maps blossom in the springtime of
the state.”\(^4\) Phrases like “nineteenth-century British literature” posit
cultural identities defined in the contours of historical spaces. Structuring
history this way does not “ground” the literature in space or place so
much as show how culture and space produce each other in dynamic
simultaneity.\(^5\) In this important sense, all national literary histories
contribute to the lineage of “spatial humanities.” In the case of Scottish
literature and history, this contribution takes on particular dynamics given
the numerous divisions of language, religion, class, and social
organization that fall within the boundaries of Scotland, past and present.
Scotland remained divided longer than England: the physical and cultural
gaps that separated the Highlands from the Lowlands offer only the
simplest and most obvious point of division. What we call “Scottish
literature” contains works written in Gaelic, Scots, Latin, Norse, and
English whose parameters stretch well beyond Scotland’s territorial
boundaries: Gaelic bridges Scotland and Ireland; Norse extends from
Scandinavia; and English, of course, is the language that both unites and
divides Scotland with its southern neighbor.\(^6\) These internal divisions are
reflected on a larger scale by the Scottish diaspora in America, Canada,
Australia, and New Zealand, as well as across all areas of the British
Empire.\(^7\) Even within the boundaries of Scotland itself, Edinburgh

\(^4\) Denis Wood, *Rethinking the Power of Maps* (New York: Guilford Press, 2010),
15. Benedict Anderson long ago noted the centrality of geographical instruments
such as the census and the map in forming national identities in *Imagined
Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London:
Verso 1983). Ted Underwood recounts the institutionalization of historical
periods as the defining paradigm of literary studies in *Why Literary Periods
Mattered: Historical Contrast and the Prestige of English Studies* (Stanford


\(^6\) Gerard Carruthers presses on these divisions as constitutive of Scottish literature

\(^7\) Scottish diasporic literature has become, in many ways, its own area of study.
See, for example, Douglas Mack, *Scottish Fiction and the British Empire*
(Edinburgh University Press, 2006); Cairns Craig, *Intending Scotland,*
emerged over the course of the modern era as a major cosmopolitan city, a site, as Murray Pittock and Craig Lamont suggest in their contribution to our symposium, of heterogenous commercial and information exchange, while Glasgow, “the Second City of the Empire,” became an entrepôt and, later, a hub of industry. Understanding Scotland not as a provincial region that sits on the periphery of London’s metropolitan center, but as an internally divided site of mobility and interconnection, suggests that Scottish literature is best approached as an Atlantic archipelagic and imperial corpus, rather than simply as the discourse of one of four nations. In short, Scottish literature is global literature.

If this re-framing makes sense—if indeed Scotland is best understood through a global lens—it raises a host of issues surrounding “Scotland” as


a spatial category for organizing texts. For us, the most pressing among these involves the history of Scotland’s environment. A geography of Scottish literature should account for changes to regional ecologies and their representations as a multi-causal and complex set of developments, while also attending to related disciplines (cartography, statistics, data visualization, earth sciences) that were themselves developed in Scotland over the past three centuries. Earth and water become primary objects of study that exist in dialectical relation with the printed works that have described, influenced, and in a very real sense produced the land- and seascape of Scotland is known. Such analysis must move up and down among different scales, accounting both for microhistories (of particular authors, societies, popular traditions) and the archipelagic connections that together comprised “Scotland” as such within global environmental and economic systems. These connections are

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conventionally figured as networks or partnerships. As Richard Sher has shown, the “London-Edinburgh axis” provided an important branch to the information network that stretched over Britain during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but Scotland was constituted differently at different periods of its history. Early modern courtly connections between Scotland and France, the “auld alliance,” were crucial to the formation of its nobility and continued to influence cultural and philosophical developments through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Scotland’s place near the center of the British Empire extended its reach across the globe.

Histories of Scottish institutions, letters, and culture, then, have always engaged with what we might want to call “spatial humanities.” However, as a term of art, the phrase has a more specific application. The spatial humanities are a subset of “digital humanities” that uses geographic information systems (GIS) to study cultural data. What is GIS software? As a commercial product, digital maps are very familiar. They represent cartographic space through an interactive medium that layers various kinds of data on top of one another. In a similar way, applications of GIS for historical research employ the artificial objectivity of a geodetic model as “ground truth” upon which to stage the political and cultural contests waged to define that space.

According to David J. Presner and David Shepard, “Rather than presenting a global view with pretensions to objectivity, The Valley of the Shadow acts as a rudimentary form of what we have come to call a ‘thick map,’ a map that exposes a variety of sources that can be bought together to tell any number of smaller stories.” “Mapping the Geospatial Turn,” in A New Companion to Digital Humanities, ed. Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth (John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 206. Such pretensions to objectivity were targeted for critique in an influential collection of essays, Ground Truth: The Social Implications of Geographic Information Systems, ed. John Pickles (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995). This critique has largely been absorbed by the
Bodenhamer, one of the spatial humanities’ most vocal proponents, “this convergence of technologies has the potential to revolutionize the role of space and place in the humanities by allowing us to move far beyond the static map, to shift from two dimensions to multidimensional representations, to develop interactive systems, and to explore space and place dynamically—in effect, to create virtual worlds embodying what we know about space and place.”\textsuperscript{16} For some scholars, these virtual worlds take the form of multimodal geospatial databases, called “deep maps” or “thick maps,” that combine different forms of evidence within a single geographic frame: GIS datasets can include texts, images, and even video and audio files to create archives that reflect complex histories of spaces.\textsuperscript{17} Phil Ethington’s “ghost map” of Los Angeles layers centuries of records over the region we now think of as “Southern California” to show how political, agricultural, and economic forces gave shape to the land.\textsuperscript{18} In The Valley of the Shadow project, spearheaded by Edward L. Ayers, newspapers, letters, and diaries from the American Civil War are gathered and georeferenced to their locations on the border of the Confederacy.\textsuperscript{19} These and similar archives share the ambition of building geospatially organized datasets of historical records, allowing scholars and students to identify new lines of geographical inquiry. Once the archives are complete, they can be analyzed using statistical methods

\textsuperscript{17} In this context, the terms “deep map” and “thick map” are largely synonymous. See Bodenhamer, Corrigan, and Harris, Deep Maps and Spatial Narratives; and Todd Presner, David Shepard, and Yoh Kawano, Hypercities: Thick Mapping in the Digital Humanities (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).
\textsuperscript{19} Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War, University of Virginia Library (http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/govdoc/popcensus.html).
borrowed from geography, a practice Ian N. Gregory, Paul S. Ell, and Alistair Geddes call “historical GIS.”

Even when we understand “spatial humanities” as a discrete set of methods and tools, the connection to Scottish literature and histories is profound. Sir John Sinclair’s massive twenty-one volume Statistical Account of Scotland (1791-99), a parish-by-parish census of natural, political, and cultural geography, may be taken as an early foray into Scottish spatial humanities, a “deep map” of Scotland meant to collate natural history, ecclesiastical divisions, political structures, agricultural and industrial productions, and antiquarian inquiries. His contemporary William Playfair’s Commercial, Political, and Parliamentary Atlas (1786) developed innovative systems of data visualization capable of synthesizing and communicating patterns across large quantities of information and displaying them as spatial relations. Alexander Deans and Nigel Leask’s report on the Curious Travelers project underscores how Thomas Pennant laid important groundwork for both Playfair and Sinclair as he utilized complex information networks among his correspondents and collaborators in a “trans-peripheral” construction of Scotland in his published tours of 1769 and 1772 as well as his subsequent map, published in 1777. Christopher Donaldson’s report on the Deep Map of the English Lake District recasts Walter Scott’s novels as a reflexive and elusive version of these earlier projects, aligning literature and location even as they also underscore the provisional and uncertain status of empirical inquiry in the reading and writing of place.

These genealogies are important, for they remind us that the challenge of identifying points of commensurability across historical spatial systems has been at the root of Scottish studies from at least the eighteenth century. They also suggest that imaginative and innovative projects like Sinclair’s and Playfair’s may well be considered part of a “spatial turn” in late Enlightenment thought. They were attempts to untangle “the dense coil of memory, artifact, and experience that exists in a particular space,” to again borrow David Bodenhamer’s words. Like the digital “deep maps” of historical GIS, they were also experiments in


21 Bodenhamer, “Narrating Space and Place,” in Deep Maps and Spatial Narratives, 10.
the mobile and distributive media of an increasingly hyperconnected terrain. Approaching Scottish literature through the range of methodologies enabled by GIS and other digital tools allows us to explore the idiosyncratic logics involved in eighteenth-century translations of localized knowledge.

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