

Saltire Series No. 2

**THE ARTIST
AND
NATIONALITY**

By

Meaghan Delahunt





About the Saltire Society

We are;

- An apolitical membership organisation open to all
- An international supporter and patron of the arts and cultural heritage of Scotland
- A champion of free speech on the issues that matter to the cultural life of every Scot
- A promoter of the best of what we are culturally, now and in the future
- A catalyst to ensure new ideas are considered and the best of them are made real

We believe we have an important and unique role to play, as an independent advocate and celebrant of all that is good and important about our cultural lives and achievements. The Society has played a crucial role over the last seventy five years, in recognising our cultural achievements. And while times have changed the need for that independent voice remains.

Saltire Series
No. 2

The Artist
and
Nationality
by
Meaghan Delahunt

2013
Published by

SALTIRE
SOCIETY
SCOTLAND



COMANN
CRANN
NA H-ALBA

Editorial Note

In the Saltire Series we have invited individuals to spark fresh thinking, ignite debate and challenge our orthodoxies, through the publication of short commissioned essays. The Editorial note from a pamphlet produced in 1942 is still a strong expression of the proposition.

‘They will express the considered judgements of their own authors, to whom complete freedom has been given; and are not to be taken as representing the policy of the Saltire Society, whose objective is to promote that free and informed discussion without which no sound policy for Scotland’s future can be shaped.’

If you wish to comment on or discuss this pamphlet.

Please visit:

<http://www.saltiresociety.org.uk/discuss-and-debate/>

About Meaghan Delahunt

Meaghan Delahunt is a novelist and short story writer. Her work has been widely translated and her stories anthologised and broadcast on BBC Radio 4. In 1997 she won the *Flamingo/HQ* National Short Story Prize in Australia. Awards for her novels *In the Blue House* (Bloomsbury,2001), *The Red Book* (Granta, 2008) and *To the Island* (Granta, 2011) include a regional Commonwealth Prize, a Saltire First Book Prize and a nomination for the Orange Prize. She taught Creative Writing at the University of St Andrews from 2005-2013 and now teaches at the University of Stirling. Born in Melbourne, Meaghan Delahunt has lived in Edinburgh since 1992.

THE ARTIST AND NATIONALITY

By Meaghan Delahunt

It's late January and snowing in Edinburgh. I love snow in the way of someone who can never take it for granted. My reaction to it is that of a child: I want to run around in it and play; I want my footprints to be the first; I want a snowflake to land on my tongue.

I sit quiet in the back seat of the taxi, looking out at the white streets. Eventually I say to the driver: This snow. It's a miracle.

It's a *what*? He takes the measure of me in the mirror.

A miracle.

How long've ye been here? His tone is world-weary, implying one Scottish winter too many.

Twenty years, I say.

He laughs. He's not expecting this. And it's still a miracle?

I grew up in Australia.

He laughs again, delighted, because like any Edinburgh taxi driver I've ever come across, he has family in Australia.

In this exchange, I see myself as the taxi driver sees me. By my accent, *not from here*, but then, after our discussion of two decades of Edinburgh weather, the trams, City Council

scandals and whether Scotland will ever be independent, he sees that I'm not exactly *from there*, any more either.

In fact, I'm a local, with family on the other side of the world, just like him.

*

I am not a refugee, a displaced person, an asylum seeker or an economic migrant. I came to Scotland almost in passing. When we arrived in early 1992, my Scottish partner had been away for ten years. It was about time he saw his family again. We thought it would be something temporary, that we'd live and work here for a while and then go somewhere else. After six months, we put down a thousand quid each to buy a one-bedroom flat in the street where we'd been renting. After three years, we did indeed go away for a while – to live in Greece and Australia, and then, to our surprise, we came back. It's something of a shock, to wake up two decades down the track, to find we're still here. I've now lived longer in our wee Edinburgh flat than I ever did in the family home in Melbourne. The place I thought was temporary has actually been my home.

I'm Irish-Australian. My paternal grandparents went to Australia in 1923. My father was born either a few weeks or a few months, after, I'm never sure. In any case, he was conceived in Ireland and born in Australia. I wonder what it must have been like for my grandmother, that long journey by ship from Newry, long months at sea, heavily pregnant, to go to a place on the other side of the world, a place she could only imagine and to make a new life from nothing. To escape the politics and the poverty of the homeland. This is an Australian story and everyone there has a version of it. Often the contemporary stories from Asia, Africa or the Middle East involve people-smuggling,

drowning or attack by pirates in the Timor Sea. These stories involve months or even years languishing in terrible conditions in ‘asylum centres’ waiting to see if they will be deported. To be an Australian, if you are not Aboriginal, is to be from somewhere else. Nationality comes hyphenated. ‘Australia is an immigrant nation,’ Australian critic and editor Ivor Indyk wrote in 1998. ‘Its character is essentially international.’ Irish-Australian, Lebanese-Australian, Greek-Australian, Vietnamese-Australian and so on. This is how Australians, if they are not Indigenous, proclaim nationality. The fact that we are immigrants, each new wave sedimented over the next and all sedimented over the fact of Aboriginal dispossession means that we can easily forget the origins of our country. As each wave of immigrants settles in the new land and makes good, if you like, they too forget that they are from somewhere else and that life in ‘the lucky country’ has been built at someone else’s expense. Black people’s expense. It’s a form of Australian cultural amnesia – to believe that you’ve always been there. It’s not uncommon to hear established post-war migrants complain about the newly arrived or Aboriginal people. I was fortunate – my father and mother never lost sight of the fact that they were from somewhere else and cultivated in us an awareness of what it must be like to be the woman on the boat, the child refugee, the man who lands with only the clothes on his back. I grew up with a keen sense from my parents and my religious background, that these people are not *other*. A heartbeat ago, in fact, these people were *us*.

I’ve never thought of myself as a migrant or an expatriate writer – although, technically speaking, I’m both. A recent book on Australian writers in Britain notes: ‘Expatriate is a contentious word. To early-twentieth century Australians...an expat – was often thought of as a British traveller in the mode of Somerset Maugham’s stories, living in luxury in the ‘near’ or ‘far’ east, wearing a pith helmet and lording it over the natives.

The word carries older connotations of having been banished from one's country or exiled.' Indeed, Barry Humphries in a glossary of monologues and sketches published in 1981 defined the word 'expatriate' as 'traitor'. This was very much how an earlier generation of Australian writers and artists who had made their home 'overseas' were viewed in Australia at the time.

Unlike many migrants, I have the good fortune of neither being banished nor exiled from my home country. But for an older generation of Australian artists, this wasn't the case. Germaine Greer, Clive James, Robert Hughes for example, were self-styled 'expats' and voluntary exiles. They *had* to leave the Australian version of white-bread, colonial, picket fence 'Little England' to become who they were. It amuses me that they left the simulacrum for the real thing, that they 'found' themselves, discovered their voices at the *centre* of the fading British Empire of the 50s and 60s. I'm definitely not in that category of 'expat' and most Australian-born artists of my generation aren't either. This is because the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual Australia we grew up in is culturally fascinating and challenging. Peter Porter once noted 'that if he had been making his decision about where to live in 1981, instead of 1951, he would not have moved to Britain'. An artist doesn't have to leave to make her name. I certainly didn't come to Scotland for personal gain or to make my mark. I simply ended up here and tried to make a life and continue to do so. Artists living away from Australia now rarely attract derision (although Germaine, for complex reasons, always does). But the 'tall poppy' syndrome is alive and well. A version of the Scots 'I kent yer faither.' Of cutting those perceived as arrogant down to size. Most Australians, like most Scots, are alert to any sign of pretension. Earlier generations of artists who left Australia were

seen as ‘up themselves’: there was an anxiety that perhaps they thought they were ‘better’ or more ‘cosmopolitan’ for having been away. The debate has shifted now. Indeed, instead of ‘expatriates’ there is talk by cultural commentators of an Australian artistic ‘diaspora’.

Germaine Greer writes: ‘diaspora is the true human environment and homeland a murderous delusion.’ Writers as diverse as Bruce Chatwin, Rebecca Solnit and Ruth Padel have explored ideas of migration or nomadism as a central fact of being human. We wander and then we settle for a time. We must take the long view of this notion – as happening over generations or millennia – to fully appreciate its import. We must learn to take the long view of the present. We are always changing, on the move, as individuals and societies. Whether we accept this or not. At some point in the past we all came from somewhere else. Many many centuries before recorded time, Homo Sapiens stood up in Africa and walked. And kept on walking.

I have no truck with patriotism and have never understood the idea of ‘feeling proud’ of your country in the abstract. It’s in the concrete that a nation reveals itself. I felt ‘proud’ when Prime Minister Rudd formally apologized to the Aboriginal people of Australia. I felt ‘proud’ when the Scottish government released Al Megrahi on compassionate grounds. Perhaps we can feel proud of living in a beautiful country. But, rather, I think we should feel grateful. And from an Australian perspective, to think of the human and ecological cost of ‘settling’ or ‘colonising’ a beautiful place. I like to think of myself as an internationalist, but I’m also fully aware how grandiose, how hyperbolic this sounds. I’m aware that internationalism, that idea of community with others, of compassion for and connection with our fellow humans from Tahrir Square to Tibet, from Syria to Alice Springs,

has somehow been hijacked by globalisation. To declare oneself an internationalist or ‘world citizen’ these days conjures up an advertisement: an image of a world consumer worshipping at the shrine of an Apple store, smart phone aloft. In place of true connection we are sold connection at a price.

Perhaps closest to how I *feel* as opposed to *think* about the question of my (dual) nationality is this: I feel *complicated*. A year ago it would have been less complicated. But I write this in the wake of my mother’s death. The house I grew up in has been sold and, after twenty years, we’ve just sold our Edinburgh flat. There is movement and upheaval all round and mostly I feel at a loss. The upheaval at a psychic level has been sudden and tsunami-like; hitting me when I got back to Scotland after the funeral. I know I’m not alone in these feelings. That in fact it’s common after the death of a parent – especially the last surviving parent. A friend told me that after the death of his mother he had a strong, unaccountable pull to Renfrewshire, to his family home, that he had never felt before. When I asked what he thought this was all about he said, quite simply: ‘ Going back to the womb.’

As Kathleen Jamie puts it in her poem, ‘Swifts’:

*Deserts, moonlit oceans, heat
climbing from a thousand coastal cities
are as nothing now,*

say our terse screams.

*

I left Melbourne thirty years ago and why I feel a pull to be there now that my mother is gone... unravels me. It has forced a re-think of my life here in Scotland and of the life I haven't lived in Australia. This is something I didn't expect. Many Australian expatriate writers of an earlier era felt torn between their home country and their new place of creative expression – usually England. What this meant for Australian writers, according to Jill Neville who lived in London for many years, was that 'they had to cut themselves in half to find out what the world was like,' and that they 'left behind their psyches and their atavistic selves.'

This terrible pull to be in Australia, to be near my siblings and their kids. I'm the eldest – surely I have a responsibility to them? I see that two decades have passed, somehow without me realising, somehow on the other side of the world. For my brother and sisters, as adult orphans, I want us all to be together, to give mutual support. I can't seem to reconcile time, distance, or the blithe, youthful choices I once made. My life *here* and my life *there*. The relationship with the homeland, the *motherland* as I've taken to calling it, and the relationship with the adopted country are both called to account. My nationality now brings me face-to-face with mortality. This is something all migrants face at some point, especially as they get older. *How have I spent my time and where will I end my days?* I've seen this happen to friends' parents in Australia. Ageing Greeks and Italians, wondering where those years went. Why should I have thought I'd ever be exempt?

After my mother's funeral, after the return to Scotland, I have ongoing bad dreams. The dreams are always of crumbling houses and a desire to run, to escape.

Peter Porter could write:

I know bereavingly
that after thirty years
clutching at London
I have gained nothing
but English dirt
under my fingernails

In the 1970s Porter was considering his origins and his choices after so long away from Australia. He concluded: "So in a sense, I am an immigrant saying farewell to my past and the country my family went to in the middle of the last century."

By the end of his life however, Porter had reached an accommodation with both England and Australia, identifying with both. 'Crucially,' as Bennett and Pender say in their book on Australian writers, 'the country in and for which he lives is the English Language.' They cite his poem 'Last Words' as evidence:

Unlike our bodies which decay
Words, first and last, have come to stay.

*

So. My 'homing instincts' are pointing south. For months now, these instincts have been insistent and exhausting. *Back to the womb*. I'm at some kind of crossroads, I know this. Staring down middle-age, trying to anticipate how I'll feel in another twenty years. Anticipating and trying to forestall regret. I turn to the stark consolation of poetry. I think of lines from Dorothy Hewett's 'Halfway up the Mountain':

sometimes I think what am I doing here
miles from the ocean or any landscape I recognise
the idea was to make a new start
but there are only so many new starts
in a lifetime in the end
running out of words like exile or re-location

*

In the late 1990s, when I left Australia for Scotland a second time, I was told by an Australian literary agent, ‘ Unless you come back every 18 months, unless your work deals solely with Australian content, you can no longer regard yourself as an Australian writer.’ At first I was stunned. Then I was upset. Finally, I was just plain furious. Needless to say, I parted company with that agent. Interestingly, these questions have never come up for me in Scotland. My work has attracted critical attention regardless of the content. My first novel was set in Mexico. My second novel had a Scottish character and part of the novel dealt with the sectarianism and violence of his childhood. My third novel was set in Greece. The novel I’m working on now is set in Australia. My short stories are set in Scotland, Australia, all over the place. I feel a little defensive on this score. Perhaps if I’d been born in Scotland, there would be pressure to produce something ‘identifiably’ Scottish. Perhaps not. As if the sensibility informing the work isn’t enough. An artist is always writing out of where they’ve come from or where they’ve been – either directly or obliquely, consciously or unconsciously. There is no Scottish equivalent to the contentious Miles Franklin prize in Australia which only rewards work that ‘recognises *Australian* life in all its phases.’ It is an avowedly nationalistic award. What ‘Australian life’ constitutes, of

course, is open to question. In over fifty years it has seen only 13 women winners. In recent years there have been two all-male shortlists. In general, books by men, concerning 'blokes, the bush, the past' have always got the gong. In 2012, for the first time, the judges were advised to interpret the guidelines more liberally. To consider 'Australian' life beyond geography and 'include mindset, language, history and values'.

The *über*-nationalism of the Miles Franklin prize began as a corrective to an Anglophone view of literature in Australia, and at a time when it was thought that there was no Australian literature or tradition. I can understand and applaud the sentiment behind it. Stella Miles Franklin (*My Brilliant Career*) wanted to encourage Australian writers and left a bequest for a prize in her will. But with growing cultural self-confidence these past thirty years, the terms of the prize now seem restrictive. Australia has changed. Its literature, and who writes it, has changed. Migration, emigration, loss, dispossession, transition, the urban, the black, the female, are also part of 'Australian life' and 'mindset.' There is no such thing as a single, timeless, national narrative. As John Berger reminds us: 'Never again shall a single story be told as though it were the only one.'

*

In Australia at the Sydney Writer's Festival many years ago I was listed in the programme as a 'Scottish writer.' I'm included on a Scottish literary list at my French publisher. I've always been OK with this. For a writer to be accepted anywhere is a good thing, I reason. I would never claim to be a Scottish writer but I'm happy enough to be claimed. I'm in excellent company. I can say that over twenty years I've devel-

oped and matured as a writer here, I've been supported here. I know that the Scottish cultural and political environment has affected me in ways I can't even fully articulate. Scotland is part of me now. It seems that identity is multi-woven and can't be reduced to one single thread. Scotland is part of my identity, if not part of my nationality. As a child in Australia, could I have known how my life would go? The places I'd end up?

It seems we can understand and eventually accept this uncertainty and flux over time more at the personal level than at the collective level. We can look back. We can marvel at the discontinuity in ourselves. There is no such thing as a 'singular' Scottish identity or nationality any more than there is a 'singular' Australian identity or nationality. It changes over time. This seems self-evident, but still we trip ourselves up. In particular, if we use 'race' as the basis for nationality and national identity, we are bound to trip.

*

On a visit to Orkney recently I stayed with a woman who could trace her family back several generations. Often they had inhabited the same ground for many hundreds of years. On a cold beautiful day in February we drove around Stromness and she could tell me the history of every building, every house, every stone, it seemed. Her family had moved around – South Ronaldsay, North Ronaldsay and so on. She inhabited stories from all over the islands. She could point out the places where her relatives once lived, or still lived; the barn she used to play in as a child. Her grandparents' house. The stark landscape and the standing stones, the sea and the sky, the new and the old all were freighted with memory and meaning for her. She seemed at one with the landscape; she seemed to embody it.

Nonetheless, she'd lived and worked for most of her adult life down south and had returned to Orkney only after retirement.

Did you miss it, all those years away? I asked.

Oh, yes, she said. I came back every year. I just had to. I missed my roots.

I felt a sudden stab of something when she said this. But it was only later that I could identify what I felt. It was envy, I realised, and I felt ashamed. I *envied* her this connection to the land and to the people. Such passionate attachment to a place and generations of kin! To be able to trace herself back like that. I could only stand on the sidelines and gawp in admiration. Such connection was something I could never hope to feel. As a transplanted person in Australia. As a transplanted person in Europe. After that trip, I came back to Edinburgh feeling a little uprooted, a little rootless. *Motherless*, in fact. Germaine Greer says that 'White Australians will never belong to their country.' Politically, I understand and agree with this assertion but I understand, also, that Greer's sentence is unfinished. That it could run: 'until they make reparations, until they recognise what was stolen.' Professor Marcia Langton, one of Australia's foremost Aboriginal scholars, sees this question of 'belonging' a little differently to Greer: '...Aboriginal attachment to places inherited from many generations of ancestors and shaped by kinships, descent, culture and religion does not preclude settlers from engaging with the land they love.'

Of course, it *is* possible and it should be permissible, for the outsider, the settler, the immigrant to engage with the land, to love it. To care for it and learn to respect it in the manner of the Indigenous people. In Australia, white people are

both struggling towards and resisting such care and respect in the face of an environmental disaster they helped create. Nonetheless, I take heart from Marcia Langton's point of view. It brings to mind Jackie Kay's feelings in *Red Dust Road*. Upon finding herself in Nigeria, looking for her birth-father she says: 'It is, after all possible to feel love for the land.' It brings to mind Hemingway in Africa: 'I loved this country and I felt at home and where a man feels at home outside of where he's born is where he's meant to go.'

The word 'country' is used by Aboriginal people to describe their traditional areas of land. 'Where is your country?' is their question of each other. The country is mapped out in invisible song lines and totems and histories and languages all across Australia.

Perhaps my 'country' as opposed to my 'nation' is very local and specific, yet strung across continents and time. It comprises certain spaces. Certain rooms in certain houses. The slant of light at a particular time: late afternoon in winter along the Edinburgh chimney tops. Holyrood park in late summer when the sun hits the whin and the scent of coconut lifts up. The huge disc of sun sinking over the harbor in Naxos. Rathdowne St and Canning St in Melbourne. Milton St, and the Royal Mile in Edinburgh. The Christmas scent of eucalypts in Princes Park. The way the Parthenon seems to hover at the end of Patission St in Athens; the unpaved *dromaki* leading to the house in Angidia. The back beach at Point Lonsdale. The fore-shore at Queenscliff. The places where I have strong associations and memories. The places I've been happy.

*

This line is from Douglas Dunn's poem: 'English: A Scottish Essay.' A few lines later the poet says:

Yes, I think to myself. As a writer, as an artist, my true home is in words. I discuss this with a friend of mine. A dear writer friend, opposed to Independence, she says, 'the artist has no nationality.' Yes, I say. Artistically speaking, I agree. But I find I can only agree with this statement up to a point. Up to which point is the question? It brings to mind Virginia Woolf's assertion that at the level of the unconscious, all artists are androgynous. I identify with this and think it holds true. But out in the world, the terms come weighted. To say that the artist has no nationality or no gender is an ideal concept which floats free of power relations, history, politics. It seems to me that there are key points when nationality and support for a national struggle can take precedence over the artist's entitlement to this ideal concept. There are times, in other words, when an artist should take a stand.

I confess I'm struggling here. Agreeing with both notions simultaneously. And perhaps that's OK. I can agree that the 'artist has no nationality' when I'm at my desk and deeply engaged with my work. Here, in the imagination, I constantly border-cross. There are no passports, no border checks. As artists, we hold fast to the idea that the imagination *is* freedom, that we are not bound by where we come from. What matters is where we're going. And yet. And yet. In the material world, the welfare state is being dismantled and the Tory wolves are at the door. The people of Scotland did not vote for any of this. There is only one elected Conservative MP in the whole country. Politically, culturally, Scotland is a very different place from down South. The gap is widening. The national concerns are fundamentally differ-

ent. North of the Border, we are not demonising the poor. We are not demonizing immigrants. We are not anti-Europe. If I lock myself in my garret at this historical moment, claiming mandarin neutrality because I am an artist, when I believe that one of the many roles of the artist is to bear witness, I think I would be doing myself and my adopted country a disservice.

*

Nationality becomes fraught when linked to race and to jingoism. Yet I believe it is possible to be an internationalist and also put your weight behind a national struggle. As Zoe Wicomb notes: ‘You need a strategic nationalism to mobilise people against oppression. It certainly worked in South Africa, didn't it? So there are positive and necessary aspects to it. But once the immediate goal is achieved, what do you then do with the unwieldy monster?’

This is a good question. It depends upon what *kind* of nationalism we employ, and I like the idea of ‘strategic nationalism’ because nationalism is not singular. To see it as one thing – always reactionary – is reductive and a-historical. There is both a progressive and a regressive form of nationalism. Any struggle for cultural self-determination or political liberation entails some form of national struggle. We would not have Australian literature or Scottish literature in our schools or universities without some form of national, cultural struggle. There is a nationalism of the right – UKIP and the English Defence League for example – and then there is a form of nationalism, not based on race, which can lead us over the line to independence by forging a ‘common weal’: core values for people to unite around, *as a people*, regardless of ethnic background, gender, religion, but mindful of where we have ended up at this moment in history – Scotland, on the cusp of

social and political change. Such values at the very least put education, healthcare, artistic freedom, land reform and care of the poor, the elderly, the disabled at the top of the list.

Nationality often coheres around national stereotypes. But Australia is so much more diverse than a white man with a cricket bat, and Scotland, likewise, is more diverse than a white man in a kilt. In the Scottish context, misty-eyed notions of a brave pure, noble 'race': a nationalism based on maleness, bagpipes and a fine way with a claymore do little to promote the idea of multiculturalism, diversity and gender equality. We can't leave it to politicians to defend the many faces of Scotland or the fact that women and people of colour are born here, live here, work here, contribute to the society. As do immigrants. These faces and voices need to be seen and heard. The diversity of Scotland now and the hoped-for diversity of the nation in future – this hope must be cherished by those outside of political parties and mainstream media. This hope must be fostered by artists and writers who know what it means to cross borders in the imagination and in their work.

*

There is a view of the artist as an outsider. Someone who is anti-establishment, who takes risks, who does not accept the dictates of the market, who is not complacent in their practice. I ascribe to this particular view. I'm uncomfortable when artists accept knighthoods or damehoods. Uncomfortable when artists cosy up to the establishment – in whatever institution they find themselves in. An artist must have some distance from power or become compromised. This is one meaning of the artist as outsider. To keep a critical distance. The other meaning

of the outsider is ‘someone who does not belong.’ You can be an outsider in your own country for many reasons. Even when I lived in Australia, I was always an outsider to some degree. Roaming around the continent in my 20s, fomenting revolution as a communist factory worker, youth worker, itinerant agitator. I was an outsider during my stints in Sydney, Adelaide and Perth. I lived at a tilt to the mainstream. An outsider by geography, but also by politics and worldview. In Western Australia in particular I felt this most keenly. I felt alienated for most of my five years there. The outlook of the place, the racist slant of the media, the rampant individualism, the insularity. Even after I left the Party, left that communist life behind, I never, ever, forgot that I was an incomer, an ‘Eastern Stater’ – with a different viewpoint and values. In Scotland I’m an outsider, in the sense that I have come here, migrated here, but I’ve never felt alienated at the level of the imagination, culture or politics. If I had been a black Australian maybe it would have been different, because the whiteness of Scotland, of Edinburgh in particular is striking. But as a white Australian...

I must pause for a minute. Take stock.

I have not explored the ‘Irish’ part of being Irish-Australian’ in Scotland. That particular aspect of being an outsider. How this means something very different here to what it means in Australia. Because of course, what I mean is my cultural and religious heritage – the fact that I grew up Irish-Catholic. In Scotland, it comes embedded in the particular arrangement of vowels and consonants in my name (only in Scotland have I learnt to identify names as Protestant or Catholic). In Scotland, to assert this cultural and religious heritage is a political act. I’m attuned to this in a way I would never have been had I stayed in Australia. I’m as attuned to it as my father was

when he was growing up in Melbourne in a predominantly WASP (White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant) society. Australia in the early 20th century was not kind to Irish Catholics. The only jobs on offer for people from this background were the army or the Public (Civil) service. Nowadays, in Australia, such things seem in the past. The society has changed, moved on, become more diverse. In Scotland, this change still seems a way off. Much more needs to be done. But I'm hopeful because nothing stays still.

Let me tell you a true story:

I'm in a well-heeled part of Glasgow. It's a stormy night and the train is late. I'm here to do a reading and as I walk into the room I feel a wave of hostility. It's a shock to find that it's directed at me. At first I think it's because I'm late. As the evening wears on, I see I'm mistaken. Less than a dozen or so people with their arms folded take issue with my Irish-Catholic background, whether I should be in Scotland at all and accuse me of 'taking attention' from Scottish writers.' They challenge the fact that I have won a Saltire Prize. What they mean is, of course, that only Scottish writers from a certain cultural background should get attention. Some of them have read my novel, but that's not why they're here. I feel accused of a crime I hadn't known I'd committed. I'm not what you'd call a practising Catholic, but that's beside the point. I acknowledge its influence on my world-view and in terms of social justice, I'm grateful for this influence. Of course, this was the last thing such an audience wanted to hear. Which is exactly why I said it.

*

To be honest, with my two passports and dual nationality, I've always felt blessed. I've felt free. My greatest fear is of being 'stuck', of having no escape route from a situation. Having two passports has meant that I've always had a way out. But more recently I've come to realise that always having an escape route has its downside. Such a mentality can prevent a person from truly settling in one place. In the mid-1990s after a stint in Scotland and then in Greece my partner and I went to Melbourne. I knew it was a mistake within days. At that stage, I hadn't lived in Melbourne for fourteen years. Strangely, in the place of my birth, I felt stuck. I was depressed. Every aeroplane which flew over reminded me that I wasn't on it. All I could think about was our wee flat in Edinburgh with its blue door and Holyrood Park at the end of the street. I thought of the flat – unrenovated with no central heating – and of Salisbury Crags and Arthur's Seat with a real visceral longing.

Since 1998 and returning to Scotland I've felt much more connected here. This coincides with my development as a writer and the support and encouragement I've received. And what I've come to realise, very recently, and what I'm grappling with, despite a sense of loss and bereavement, despite my current confusion, is a paradoxical sense of belonging.

*

The nationality of the artist – that accident of history – that place she was born and the cultural, linguistic, political, religious, landscape which formed her – will of course influence the artwork on a conscious or unconscious level. But the relationship between the two terms is complex. Nationality is one aspect of a person's, an artist's *identity* – that fluid, mutable term – but it is certainly not the only one.

Australian poet Judith Wright once said: ‘the true function of art and culture is to interpret us to ourselves, and to relate us to the country and the society in which we live.’

It seems to me the work of ‘interpreting us to ourselves’ is informed by our past experience and where we find ourselves now and with these experiences the artist taps into something bigger than herself – she taps into the universal. This can be overt or it can be oblique. It can be Liz Lochhead’s *Medea*. It can be Martin Creed’s *Work no.1059*, the Scotsman Steps – made with marble from all over the world. It can be Helen Garner’s *Postcards from Surfers*. It can be Lynne Ramsay’s film *Ratcatcher*. It can be David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life* – his novel of Ovid in exile, a book once seen as having little to do with Australia and now proudly claimed as a post-colonial text.

What I would say is that artists who live and work out-with the ‘centre’ of artistic production – London or New York – or what is seen in global capitalist terms as the centre – are forced to *think* about their nationality, it cannot be taken for granted. For example, English-speaking writers from Commonwealth countries, those former colonies of the old Empire, are often expected to write in a manner which conforms to an exotic stereotype. This expectation, by publishers, reviewers, readers, is often unconscious, sometimes not. In Australia, as mentioned earlier, this traditionally manifested as writing about men in an old-time rural setting. There is often a burden of carrying a *whole* view of the country, of making it palatable and relying on a nostalgic white readership to consume it. This readership is both inside the country and beyond. Such countries are ‘far’ from the centre and, according to the dictates of the centre, should reflect this in their art.

For Scottish writers the very proximity to the centre is problematic. A Scottish artist cannot take her nationality for granted either. I've heard the argument that the Scots can't complain – they've been included in the canon of English Literature all along. Stevenson, Buchan, Scott et al – part of the reading lists of public schoolboys and the Scots diaspora. But contemporary Scottish literature, taking its place alongside contemporary English literature, has been more troublesome. In both the Australian context and the Scottish context, the idea that there was a national literature that could be taught in schools or universities is relatively new. The English and Anglophone professors in University departments did not think it worthwhile. When I was at school and up until the late 1970s there was no Australian politics, literature or history taught as separate subjects at my school. At Melbourne University in the late 1970s to study English literature was to study the canon according to F.R. Leavis. Today there are still only two dedicated University Chairs in Australian Literature in the whole country. In Scotland there is only one dedicated Chair of Scottish Literature. In Scotland, there was the additional burden that the language of the home and of the playground – Scots – was discouraged. I know that in this regard at least, there have been important changes.

Scottishness is seen as something 'other' but not often in a good way by the London literary centre. Not exotic enough. Too close for comfort and therefore uncomfortable. It seems that the very qualities which sell books by authors from outposts of Empire referencing exotic landscapes/flora/fauna seem different for writers who employ Scots and the demotic and write about their own rural or urban landscape. Witness the furore around James Kelman's use of the word 'fuck.' Guardian critic Robert McCrum has warned that: 'If the UK becomes fragmented, the culture will surely follow' and that 'British writing could start to look rather vulnerable.' This is to misunderstand the disunity in

‘the Kingdom’ as it stands now. The different cultural concerns and preoccupations. It is to see Scotland as a province rather than as a country, contributing to a dubious ‘British’ – and for this read ‘English’ – literature. Is this not another version of ‘imperial localism’? We can have local colour and harmless local ‘ethnic’ display – because it gives a false view of diversity in the ‘Kingdom.’ We can have local dress, a little local idiom and custom to colour things, as long as it offers no political challenge. Nothing which might upset the Queen’s horses. It was in this regard that John Buchan could support ‘“Scottish nationalism” for the sake of Britain and Empire.’ There seems a sleight of hand involved in subsuming Scottish nationality to British. As James Kelman puts it: ‘British soon becomes English and ‘Britishness’ Englishness’. Once we examine “Englishness” we discover only parts; regions and difference; old languages and old cultures; elements of old empires; class and hierarchy, power and subjection. Britain is not a country it is the name used by the ruling elite and its structures of authority to describe itself.’ The term ‘Britain’ describes a certain set of Anglo-Imperial values. Those who do not share these values will assert their difference. As George Bernard Shaw once said: ‘If you break a man’s nationality, he will think of nothing else but getting it set again.’

An artist should not feel press-ganged into contributing towards a narrow form of national literature. In this case, be it Australian, ‘British’ or Scottish. Writer and broadcaster Clive James notes two seemingly contradictory aspects of this question. ‘An artist is the incarnation of his country, wherever he may happen to hang his hat,’ he says. But then goes on to say that to claim an artist for a country is futile. He gives the example of American expatriate writer Henry James and asserts that Americans long ago recognized that James belonged to the United States ‘only in the sense that [his] country belonged to the

world.’

It is not the responsibility of the artist to present a comfortable or ‘identifiable’ picture of the nation in which they were born or in which they live and they should be free to write about whatever they see fit in whatever language they see fit. In the Scottish context this means in Gaelic, Scots or English. The responsibility of the artist is to an emotional, imaginative or political truth in the work. This may not be the same thing as the fact. Of course, Scottish artists have often been accused of not presenting Scotland in the best possible light. But we shouldn’t expect this of our artists. We have a tourist board for that.

*

I think of the American sculptor Anne Truitt. In her memoir *Daybook* she says that being in the studio, working, she felt: ‘simultaneously in jeopardy and simultaneously at home.’ For me, this sums up the artistic process. It evokes exactly how I feel at this point in my writing life, here in Scotland. *Uncertain*. ‘How I love you precisely for that inner uncertainty,’ Rosa Luxemburg wrote to a friend from prison in the early 20th century. Luxemburg ‘elevated uncertainty to a principle of revolutionary creed’ according to Jacqueline Rose. I, too, have adopted this as my creed. Uncertainty *is* revolutionary, it seems to me, because it is open, not fixed or known. We have to flow with it, sit with it, learn from it. Negotiate our fear of it. Be mindful. Be patient. To go forward and create something new without guarantees. An artist must imagine the new. An artist has to juxtapose unlikely elements, look for connections, break and re-make until she gets it right. This work takes as long as it takes. She does not expect to get it right first time. It is a process. Might it be that some of what artists face every day – uncertainty and risk,

making connections between disparate things and finding a way to negotiate fear – might these creative qualities be exactly what Scottish society needs in the transition to independence? Such qualities are also inherent in the process of migration. A situation of flux and transition demands a creative response. Scotland has traditionally seen itself as an emigrant nation. But for the country to go forward, it seems to me that it must embrace the qualities of its artists and its immigrants, to draw on these qualities as a reserve for facing the future. To go forward and create and keep an open mind as to what the end result, the new society, may look like. To *embrace* uncertainty and the creative possibilities it offers, rather than to *fear* it.

*

Since my mother's death, the term 'motherland' has been much on my mind. It's a term I'd never used before, never considered in relation to Australia, but one that seems apt to me and the pull I've felt there since her death. To run with this idea: if the place we are born is technically our motherland and all of us, to fully become the people we must become (to fully individuate, in psychoanalytic terms) are destined to put distance between ourselves and our mothers – literally to leave the family home – what does it mean for someone who has put continents and decades between themselves and the country of her birth? Indeed, what does this 'leaving the mother', leaving the 'known', mean for any of us?

A creative tension is set up. A push-pull. In this space, anything can happen.

I once read, somewhere, that 'all artists gain traction from the negative.' This changed my attitude to the 'negative' almost

as much as this quote from an interview with artist Paula Rego: ‘all change is good because it takes away the fear of change.’ What traction am I getting from the so-called ‘negative’ in my life? Feeling far away from what family I have left? What do I make of these changes and what is there in this experience of migration and mortality which is universal? Saying that *here* is where I live, at least for the foreseeable future, not *there*? Discovering that my ‘temporary’ life is something more substantial than I thought it was? So many questions.

Might we one day find, on a national level, that in Scotland we have moved so far from the big house of Westminster that the life we thought was temporary has become permanent?

On an individual and collective level change and movement bring up all sorts of anxieties. We may not like the responsibility of independence and of fully coming to political maturity. It’s easier to stay with what we know. Or, is it? Is it really? The more we see what is happening down South – the narrow profit focus on the arts, the education system, the health system, the closing of libraries and museums – surely we know what will happen if we stay. That is a given. That is certain. Surely we know we can create something better by shutting the door. By leaving. By learning how to take risks from our immigrants and our artists.

Home is where the new words are, says Alasdair Reid. With this in mind, I will take my hyphenated nationality; I will take my uncertainty, my sense of loss, the two passports which once promised the illusion of escape, and place myself where uncertainty and the unknown can be accommodated. I will take a leap of faith into tomorrow – after all, this is what an artist does – to a place that will require all our creativity, skill, and imagination: an independent Scotland in the 21st century.

REFERENCES

1. Ivor Indyk, *Heat: Australia's International Literary Quarterly* vol 9 1998 p.5
2. Bruce Bennett and Anne Pender: *From a Distant Shore: Australian Writers in Britain 1820-2012* Monash University Press, Melbourne 2013
3. *ibid*: p.4
4. Germaine Greer: *Whitefella Jump Up: The Shortest Way to Nationhood*, Black Inc Melbourne 2003, p. 31.
5. Kathleen Jamie: *Swifts* in *The Overhaul*, Picador Press, London 2012, p.19
6. Jill Neville quoted in Bennett and Pender *ibid* p.170
7. Peter Porter: *The Castle in Sight* (1970) quoted in Bennett and Pender *ibid* p.148
8. *ibid*
9. *ibid* p.153
10. Dorothy Hewett: *Halfway up the Mountain* in *Halfway up the Mountain* Fremantle Arts Centre Press 2001, p.154
11. John Berger http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/29919.John_Berger
12. Germaine Greer quoted in Marcia Langton: *Correspondence* [http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/resources/pdf5 p.145](http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/resources/pdf5_p.145)
13. *ibid*

14. Jackie Kay: *Red Dust Road* Picador 2011
15. Ernest Hemingway: *The Green Hills of Africa* Arrow Books 2004, p.192
16. Douglas Dunn, *English: A Scottish Essay* in *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence* (ed Scott Hames) Word Power Books 2012, p. 63
17. Zoe Wicomb: Interview with Zoe Wicomb on Writing and Nation in *Journal Of Literary Studies* 18:1-2 Routledge p.191
18. Judith Wright: <http://www.poemhunter.com/judith-wright/biography>
19. Robert McCrum: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2012/jan/26/independence-scottish-literature-robert-mccrum>
20. Murray G.H. Pittock: *Celtic Identity and the British Image* Manchester University Press 2009, p.106
21. James Kelman: *The Britain is a Country Fallacy* May 19 2013 National Collective www.nationalcollective.com
22. George Bernhard Shaw in Pittock *ibid* p.104
23. Clive James in Bennett & Pender *ibid* p.4
24. Anne Truitt, *Daybook: The journey of an Artist* Penguin USA 1982
25. Jacqueline Rose: *What more could we want of Ourselves: Review of Rosa Luxemburg's Letters*. *London Review of Books*, Vol 33 No.12 10 June 2011 p. 5

With thank to Douglas Dunn and Kathleen Jamie for permission to quote from their work.

The Saltire Society
9 Fountain Close
22 High Street
Edinburgh
EH1 1TF

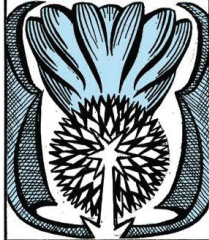
Tel: 0131 556 1836
saltire@saltiresociety.org.uk
www.saltiresociety.org.uk



Produced by



SCOTLAND
A L B A
SALTIRE
SOCIETY



£5.00

978 0 85411 111 4