

Saltire Series No. 10

**Notes Towards  
a National  
Literature**

by

Kirsty Gunn





## 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.

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# Notes Towards a National Literature

Kirsty Gunn

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## **About Kirsty Gunn**

Kirsty Gunn is a novelist and short story writer who created and directs the writing programme at the University of Dundee. She is published in a number of territories around the world and the recipient of a range of awards and international literary honours.

## **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.’



Between the Scottish Referendum in September 2014 and the UK General Election in early summer 2015 my stravaiging thoughts, that have taken me from the Highlands where I live, to Dundee where I teach, to London where I also live and to New Zealand where I was born, have come home to rest in the land of fiction. “A writer’s country is a place within his own brain” Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal, describing, exactly, my thoughts about art and nationalism, literature and belonging, creativity and reality. “A writer has no passport except her own imagination” I wrote myself, in response to an invitation to be part of *The Conversation*, an online discussion around independence and identity that took place last year.

So why talk about a national literature? A set of prescriptions (proscriptions?) that might define what it is to be Scottish, or not, or Scottish enough, or truly Scottish? Surely the very idea would have any self-respecting artist heading for the hills. This isn’t what I signed up for when I decided to be a writer! A writer, after all, is someone who, as James Kelman so

1. The Conversation is a news analysis and comment site aimed at bringing academic writing to a mainstream audience. Steven Vass is its Scotland Editor.

memorably put it in his acceptance speech for the 1994 Booker prize, “has a responsibility to no one or anything other than the empty page in front of him. ”We don’t want to be “Scottish” or “not Scottish” do we, in particular? We just want to write our books?

That’s what I thought – and yet, sentence by sentence, our creative and cultural atmosphere is changing and those of us involved or interested in the arts for whom party politics have never been a priority in our intellectual lives must learn to pay attention to issues of nationhood that are being articulated in public and private as part of a national discourse about Scottish identity. We have a ruling party actually called the Scottish National Party, after all, and they have a whole host of institutions and outposts and advisory bodies that are hell bent on defining exactly just what Scotland is and should be. They’ve decided that’s their job. Creative Scotland, supposedly independent of party remits, nevertheless, as is the case with all cultural institutions, is affected by central policy and, decision upon decision, grant upon grant, recommendation upon recommendation, has already created an awards structure that favours a certain sensibility and social aim. This in itself has



brought changes to the way we frame ourselves, culturally, to each other, to Britain and to the world.

In Creative Scotland's recent *Literature and Publishing Sector Review* we read of "a strategy rooted in, and of, Scotland's people and places" as a primary aim. An interesting idea, for sure, and a worthy one – but that it may come before notions of intellectual and artistic priority? Before philosophical enquiry and open debate and the sheer, apolitical idea of "art for arts' sake"?

From the earlier document from which the *Review* extends, we have:

"We want to support work which will make a real difference to the quality of cultural life in Scotland" and "projects should benefit artists and creative people, and/or arts, screen and creative organisations from Scotland by helping them to sustain themselves and their work, to help them thrive, and to bring benefit to the people in Scotland."

That word "benefit" is key, as is the phrase, introducing the document, by Jenny Niven, head of Literature at Creative

Scotland, about “widening the reach and impact of all our work by connecting with more parts of society.” Because yes, of course, benefit is good, connecting is good... But to make these first and foremost objectives for our writers? To enable only those working on a literary project that might “make literature in Scotland more central to the nation”?

Arts bodies and politicians have always had a certain amount of influence in writers’ lives, of course – the market itself and the desire of publishers to exploit market trends has the same effect – and, indeed, influence, or patronage as it was once called, has been around as long as literature has. But in Scotland we have always associated ourselves with a tradition that bucks those trends and encourages writers who want to go their own way, who ignore social and political pressures and find their own kind of readership that, more than was ever the case in England, quickly extends and colonises the other sort. “Outsider writing” as they may call it in other places has always been on the inside here. More of that later, but for now it may be enough to note how the tradition of valuing individual literary trajectories – be they wayward and erratic and potentially destabilising – has always predominated in Scottish cultural and intellectual life, giving us

the sort of multitextured and disparate range of work across a relatively small geographical area that one would be hard pressed to match elsewhere in the English-speaking world.

What now though? With all these rules about what does and doesn't constitute "real difference"? What now, when, for the last half a dozen years at least, the number of writers applying for funding from the Creative Scotland Bursaries Panel (compared to applications from those other disciplines against which they must compete that, to use the jargon, "have wider impact") has shrunk to just a scattering and those that are successful rarely awarded for literary projects alone? What, too, might we hope for the support of range and variety in our literature when the number of grants allocated to our practising, established writers is now practically non-existent – as though, just because a writer may have a publishing record she or he is somehow no longer in need of financial support? What future altogether for that highly idiosyncratic literature when we find that supporting the writing of a novel is only feasible if the writing of that novel can be shown somehow to have community benefit, some kind of knock-on advantage to others that can be instantly measured? When we find that the application process for funding in itself might be regarded as a sort of unofficial politicising of literature –

rewarding only those for whom certain bureaucratically-styled admin-friendly terminology is second-speak?

I write about these kinds of parameters, not just from consideration of the *Literature and Publishing Sector Review* and its inferences, but from experience as a writer in the midst of this brave new world. Neither I nor any of the many, many writers I know – of all kinds – even attempt to apply to Creative Scotland for financial assistance any more. And sitting on a Creative Scotland Bursaries Panel recently as Literature Representative I was shocked to see only one name in the applications list with any kind of established literary CV. Shocked, too, to realise that funding would be only available to the writers with – to use wording from Creative Scotland again – “strategic” aims. Literature, it seems to me, our national literature, has never been in such peril.

“Benefit”, “strategic”, wording such as “the literature and publishing sector ought also to be alert to the opportunity presented via the Scottish Government International Partnership Framework and Innovation and Investment hubs” and “championing the ways in which literature and publishing

positively impact culture and society in the Scottish context...” If one listens to the cadence, attends to the selection of vocabulary in statements such as these, it is clear that Creative Scotland’s outline document overall is setting ground-rules for a certain kind of thinking, one that naturalises, in its very language, a controlling sort of bureaucratised agenda for books and poems and stories. It tends toward a particular kind of “National Literature”, this, and pretty alienating, the kinds of lines that are being drawn around cultural expression – especially for the artist who is not in thrall to capturing big audiences or is not interested in creating for him- or herself an educational and social role that has been shaped and primed by media and political rhetoric and fashionable trends.

Not that political agendas and readers hungry for new material are anything new – and not that they’ve ever prevented the outpouring of great literature from our finest writers. Scottish literature has always been fabulously right slap-bang in the middle of our society – with its glorious mash-up of the high and the low, the ornate and plain, of Scots and Gaelic and English all tongue-tied up together in a delicious messy synthesis of a language that takes us from castles to kitchens, and makes of the

fields and paddocks a place of courtly verse and of the slums of the city the stuff of existentialism and poetry. All this published activity, though, while it may have been hugely popular, much of it, in its time, and springing directly from the experience of its writers or the places where they live – according to Creative Scotland guidelines even – was never governed by an agenda of “Scottishness”. James Kelman’s *The Bus Conductor Hines* may be framed exactly by his social and economic position within the economy of 1980s Glasgow, but his story is universal. The novel is great literature because it is great literature – original and innovatively put together, infinitely creative and thoughtful in scale, surprising and tender and empathetic – not because it’s Scottish.

Of course, if this kind of writing manages to capture Scottish hearts and minds – as well as fulfilling the remit of great art – then, good. That’s what we want for all our books, isn’t it? But just as lesser-known art projects and literary activities aren’t created in the first place to please large crowds, writers with large crowds in attendance shouldn’t have to write-to-order either, according to some outside agenda – whether economic or political. They can, of course, and mostly they do, but just

because those authors have high-vis profiles and massive book deals doesn't mean they should feel forced to think about how "literature and publishing positively impact culture and society in the Scottish context" any more than the rest of us. Again it's that "empty page" James Kelman spoke about that's important. It's what we all started off with. And yes, all of us are influenced by who we are and where we've come from when we sit down before it, but that's nothing like the kind of self-consciousness that attends the fabrication of a CV and ideas of what makes our projects "strategic" and "Scottish" when filling out a grant application or trying to show how our work might be considered "best" – as in Creative Scotland's mission statement that "seeks to expand the footprint of the best of Scottish literature in the rest of the UK and abroad."

The idea of a National Literature, then, would be, rather, something we would want to think *towards*, not from. And just as all literary writing starts, primarily, not with the idea of "best" but with an act of imagination and just as that imaginative act then takes shape and finds momentum on paper and computer screens and gathers to it a particular character and mark and stain that we come to recognise as distinctive... So a literature of

Scotland might come to define itself *after* the event of its making. This is the very opposite of putting a national identity first before the story, before the poem, before the very idea. It is, rather, a concept that allows the work, first and foremost, to be itself – that it would be stamped with an identity second, much later in the process, long after its making. To do things the other way around – so that the forming of a piece of work, that “output” of “creative industry” as the jargon has it with its sinister capitalist-oriented persuasion, must always come fit from conception with a certain set of cultural ideas – is to turn writers into versions of politicians.

As scholars and literary historians remind us, many writers do see themselves that way, of course, and have from the beginning. “Shelley called them ‘unacknowledged legislators’” says playwright and scholar Professor Ian Brown of Queen Margaret University now at Kingston University. “Fletcher of Saltoun said something about ballads and laws, and ballads being more important for shaping society and social attitudes. Writers are surely versions of politicians as they seek to express and explore how folk feel and experience their polities.” And yet, this view, while it might continue to have a hold over our idea of “the



writer”, pertains in truth to only a certain faction of the literary community. For every novelist who has society and its good as a central theme, we’ll find a poet who doesn’t. For every storyteller holding a mirror up to nature there’s another – to quote Katherine Mansfield writing about how she wrote stories taking a sentence and watching where it might take you, “as far as it will go... to end up hatless and absurd in Piccadilly” – who has no interest in mimesis at all. And how might that kind of writer fit those descriptions being put about everywhere, from Holyrood to Westminster, as to what constitutes “Scottish” this or that? Who might not ever feel – or want to feel – that one can ever be “Scottish” enough? She can’t. She wouldn’t. She won’t.

Even so, Brown’s remark might well attend the number of poets and writers today round Scotland who all seem keen indeed to talk politics, having fully gone down the nationalist route, fiercely and proudly voting “Yes” and clamouring for a new cultural order that in some kind of way that might allow for – what? A different kind of experience for those engaged with the fashioning of literature? As though the quality of an artist’s experience may be positively guaranteed to have certain outcomes and results providing a certain political climate pre-

vails? At the time of the Referendum and today, in public forums and in the UK-wide media, these writers call for a country that can be independent of Unionist sensibilities, set free of the shackles of “English Literature” and allowed new rights of expression that might be proclaimed without any feelings of inferiority or being “other”.

“Scottishness is seen as something ‘other’ but not often in a good way by the London literary centre” writes the author and Stirling University writing lecturer Meaghan Delahunt in a pamphlet for this series, *The Artist and Nationality*. Scottishness, in her mind is “not exotic enough. Too close (to London) for comfort and therefore uncomfortable. It seems that the very qualities which sell books from outposts of the British 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.” She goes on, “*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... It is to see Scotland as a province rather than a country, contributing to a dubious ‘British’ – and for

this read ‘English’ – literature.” In describing this view, Delahunt is also describing herself as representative of a kind of sensibility that holds fast to an idea of a new kind of nation, and of a kind of literature that might go with that. “What I would say is that artists who live and work outside the ‘centre’...are forced to *think* about their nationality” she says.

Certainly this kind of view is most popular in Scotland right now; Nationalist thinking is, well, national. Yet, of all those writers in Scotland who voted “Yes” – and as Delahunt suggests and as it seems, from the conversations and articles in the press and in the proliferation of blogs and websites such as Bella Caledonia and so on, that there are a great number of them – how many aren’t published by London publishers or want to be? How many don’t want a readership that’s within the British and international English-speaking canon as well as the Scottish one? The metropolis – that “centre”, wherever it may be – has always exerted a powerful attraction for writers. Edinburgh took Robert Burns and James Hogg away from their rural contexts and drew them deep into the world of New Town drawing rooms just as New York and London attract Scottish writers now away from their places of work to play on a larger stage. All artists are

hungry for reception – wherever that may be – and of course, all writers want a readership that stretches far beyond these shores, no matter how regional the setting for their work, or, for that matter, how proudly nationalist their books or they themselves might seem to be. Being a nationalist then, to want those things, is to be an internationalist anyway, isn't it, in the end? And an internationalist accords no privileging of some “centre”. An internationalist *is* the centre.

For sure Scottish Literature makes a fine showing – all over Britain and all over the world. Its range and rich matter has populated global publishing houses and colonised prize lists and review pages for the last thirty years or more – with the so-called recent Scottish renaissance so fully absorbed into the international literary mainstream that the very description barely draws mention. So why then is Scotland still “a maimed culture” according to one writer, quoted in a Kathleen Jamie poem entitled “Aye!” that was published in the *Guardian* around the time of the Referendum? Why is there “a hidden war that rages inside our minds”, as Alan Warner wrote in the same paper, referring to the Scottish writer's relationship to what he views as a mainstream Tory agenda emanating from the South? Why are

we looking at “the fragility of Scottish culture” as argued by author of *Caledonian Dreaming: The Quest for a Different Scotland*, Gerry Hassan, in the *Scottish Review*? By the sound of it, despite all the ballasting of economic and cultural/political incentives which give, according to that *Literature and Publishing Sector Review* again, “opportunities for us all to collaborate, connect and co-ordinate”, you’d think Scotland’s letters need all the help they can get.

Let me turn now to the novel – that nation of fiction, the country that I call “home” – as a way of thinking about Scotland and identity. And let me consider the place of Scottish writing in the world, and the place in literature of Scottish novels, in particular, and what writer and critic David Manderson, in an essay on Scottish Literature in his and Eleanor Yule’s timely and engaging study *The Glass Half Full*, describes as that “sensitivity of the mind – able to speak out in a special way, a powerful and uncompromising manner that can sometimes change things...a special blend of pessimism, darkness, stubbornness, moral questioning and fatalism that can be one of the most implacable enemies of tyranny and a tyrant itself.”

I fail to understand why so many of my contemporaries who are novelists and literary critics hold the view that somehow literature north of the border isn't fully recognised within the historical canon. And I simply don't agree with Meaghan Delahunt's statement that it's even worse than that, and that "contemporary Scottish literature, taking its place alongside contemporary English literature, has been more troublesome." Neither do I believe that political independence might create and provide certain artistic freedoms, or that the power and might of "English Literature" has shadowed us all and cowered us into feeling second best. After all, that adjective "English" pertains only to a shared language that is expressed throughout Britain and around the world – and only the most one-sided political extremist would not concede that Scottish novels have always been an exciting and integral part of that shared culture.

Despite all the talk emanating from Holyrood about the importance of establishing a national literature that can be exported and shown off and sold to the world (as if that's something new!) we have to allow that the textures and preoccupations of a Scottish sensibility have been seeping naturally and fruitfully into the English-speaking consciousness

from as far back as those great anonymous songs and Border Ballads of early medieval times right up to the present. And that sensibility reaches far, sparking and taking life in new forms of the genre that are being published now, revivifying in American and Canadian and New Zealand and Australian novels and being reborn as film and theatre and artwork. By now, in fact, its influence may be so taken for granted that Scottish writers don't even need to set their stories in Scotland any more. Alan Warner's last novel took place in a London suburb, Louise Welsh's latest trilogy in a London of the future. A recent novel published by the relatively remote Highland house, *Sandstone*, is set in the far north of Canada and though its readership may not be international, the extent of its ambitions is. To go the other extreme, there's Irvine Welsh who for a long time has left the Edinburgh of *Trainspotting* behind to put his – are they novels, or brands? – books, then, in clubs and bars much further afield where his readers are. Ali Smith, one of Scotland's and Britain's most loved literary figures, has never just written stories that are set in Scotland – because stories are what she's interested in, not nations and nation-speak. Even the Dutch-born, and usually described as such, although his upbringing was in Australia Michel Faber, who never leaves Scotland and so therefore must

surely count as one of those “real” Scots – the kind who get to vote in referendums, I mean, and will stay put, unlike so many other Scottish writers who like to range about the place and write from anywhere – sets his novels all over the world as well as on the A9, the lovely road that runs north from Inverness that is featured in his sci-fi classic *Under the Skin* that became the Hollywood film released all round the world. Scotland’s novels are everywhere. Just as England’s novels are. And America’s. Literature is global – just as writers want it to be – and Scotland plays its part in that game as robustly as any other.

There’s always an argument, of course, for establishing a centre of literary activity outside an international hub like London that will match up to the sheer volume of activity, the amount of talent and skill sets, that inevitably will be represented by, to quote Alex Salmond’s description of his new workplace, the “Dark Star” of the metropolis – but it’s a tough one. Facts are facts – and big cities, whether London or New York or Tokyo will always draw off talent that’s regarded as useful for cultural propagation and have the larger resources to do so. James Kelman himself who had long been published by the distinguished independent, Polygon, established back in the 1970s by students and scholars



from the University of Edinburgh, defected in the 1980s to London publishing – first Secker and Warburg, now the mighty Penguin Random House. They could do more for him, those big houses. Though his situation may have changed now, and, for reasons not necessary to go into here, Kelman’s publishing home is back in Scotland, there are few writers who will turn down a chance to have the financial backing of a London house. They can pay more. They always will.

If anything, London has enabled a localised Scottish literary culture to gain worldwide recognition, in the same way that Scottish culture has in turn allowed a certain kind of metropolitan writer to flourish – since the Highlander Neil Gunn went to Bloomsbury’s Faber & Faber for his international bestseller, *The Silver Darlings*, and John Murray from Edinburgh published Lord Byron from Aberdeen in Mayfair and later the Scottish publisher John Calder gave Britain the *nouveau roman* and Samuel Beckett. While there may persist, amongst Scottish novelists, the notion of writing in an “up here”, an “out here”, rather than an “in there” – a feeling that’s been rife since Samuel Johnson published his grandly condescending account of his journey north, and his deep held certainty that only London counted as “life” – still, there’s

been more Scottishness in the history of London publishing than many Scottish writers might like to admit. Can it really, really be the case that Scottish literature does not sit within the mainstream? And even if it features, demographically, in lower sales figures than those achieved in the overpopulated South, can it really be said Scotland's literary culture is any more disabled by its relationship to London than other regions of the British Isles?

Nationalists might argue that Scotland's voice, its speech and dialogue, songs and the patterning of thought, its *sound*, has not been heard loud enough alongside the RP and Oxbridge accents of the South. This argument is less about language, though, than class – for, apart from a few exceptions, Scots and Gaelic has generally, since 1707, been smoothed over in favour of a more anglicised, some might say aspirational, version of a means of local dialect that can speak equally well in Edinburgh and further south as in the Highlands – and in itself, is part of an old, old story that is echoed throughout the literature of all nations: The loss of a means of particular and localised expression resulting in a loss of culture. But money and power have always done a good job of obliterating traditional values in families and communities all over the world in exchange for social “advantage” and in this

Scotland is no different from anywhere else.

Indeed, if we're talking about marginalisation, I would argue that this pertains more to the literature coming out of, for example, England's South West or North East. For sure we've heard more from Glasgow than we have from Hull in recent years and if anyone's talking about a "maimed culture" I would say it should be writers from the forgotten parts of the British Isles who might want to shout loudest now. We've all a long way to go in Britain before the voices in our books sound as various and multiple as they do for Americans in theirs, versed as they are equally, those readers of a huge continent, in the soft accents of Mississippi as the jagged cadences of Manhattan and Brooklyn. And even with the smoothnesses of the classic English novel still dominating our reading. There is no doubt that the novel on the whole, in Britain, in terms of those with the big sales figures and the big prizes, is a most traditional, well smoothed thing. Scotland's literature continues to shore up exciting and intellectually provocative alternatives to that product of the status quo that yields less easily to the forces of any unusual literature coming from within its own borders.

In England, it wasn't until DH Lawrence set the standard for a new kind of regional English novel that might ring and roar with its own cultural standard that we heard a difference in the sound of a story and understood the way that paying attention to the textures of voice and dialect and district might change the way it could be made. Not even Hardy, that great representative of a specific slice of rural life, was able to shed from his narrative style a tone that shares the same conscientious qualities of other English novels of his period and before, rendering facts and details with the grave sense of responsibility to the duties of omniscient narration in grand Queen's English. Even the Brontës, those isolated Yorkshirewomen with their vivid minds and hectically imaginative approaches to structure and character, actually laid out phrases on the page that, parsed one line after another, read as traditionally as any other example of educated idioms of the age. While in Scotland, prose fiction has jumped from the outset with a strong jolt of the local and danced openly with the peculiar, playing court with every sentence to idiosyncrasy and risk.

I might add at this point that, to my mind, these features run strong in our prose because it's been underwritten by a great

musical culture that sounds, almost subconsciously, through our stories, and lends to them a lyrical, rhythmic – in the classical sense of the word – quality that is not heard elsewhere. For it's useful to bear in mind that at the time when Shakespeare gave England a mirror in which to view itself, Scotland was at the peak of developing the ballads and airs that had been sung and played for generations, fulfilling finally in the MacCrimmon compositions the ancient and complex musical history of piobaireachd and Highland bagpiping .

The extent to which this strange and grave music underpins our literature is the subject for another essay. But suffice to say now that there's a strong argument to make for the novel in Scotland, lacking in the purity and line of the uninterrupted language that could bring about a National Theatre in London, having been primed, nevertheless, by a unique and formal tradition that continued to be heard long after the poets had been silenced, long after Proscription and Reformation. Yes, this argument may run, our language may have changed – Scots no longer spoken in learned or professional conversations and usually only heard in regional versions of the same, and, as ideas of the Union progressed, increasingly devalued as an adequate channel for

sophisticated expression – but the music of the country, already steeped deep in the national psyche, sings through the sentences and phrases of our prose. Just think about a Scottish novel – even relatively recent examples – and you can't help but hear the sound of it: Lewis Grassie Gibbon's keening minor or the futurist monotone of *Lanark*... Our fiction has always had this quality of sound as well as content. The language may not be sound out of an uninterrupted tradition, but listen – the key signature of it is.

So, returning to our theme, surely what we might think about more, when we think of the characteristics of Scottish Literature, is not whether this accent or that stands up hard enough to its generic Southern counterpart but, rather, what it might be about our fiction, as it's fiction we're considering here, that makes it so unlike that of other places; that we might celebrate all that we have achieved rather than rehearse old grievances about all the things we have missed out on. Wouldn't looking at what we've made of our history generate a more productive and creative line of enquiry than fabricating this theory or that around an imagined and ideal literary future to read about in a Creative Scotland manifesto?

In his book *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer*, addressing what he called the “Nothing” at the centre of Scotland’s literary life, a sort of vacancy in the idea of selfhood that followed the exceptional success of the Reformation in this country, Edwin Muir reminds us that much of what has since come to be spoken of as the so-called “Caledonian antiszygy”, the splitting of ourselves into two sensibilities – what he calls the “thinking” and the “feeling” self – was of our own doing. By allowing all kinds of rigours and strictures about what could and should be written, he reminds us, an entire poetic tradition was swept away here in a way that never happened in England or elsewhere.

This idea contains an outlook that has nothing to do with English imperialism or notions of a Scottish cultural cringe. Rather, it takes us somewhere that might help us understand in greater depth the kinds of books we write and the stories we imagine. For the very success of that Calvinism, in stamping out so much of who we were before it, is as much at the heart of how we write and speak as our relationship to a powerful neighbour and whether or not we are independent of Britain with a culture to match.

Indeed, it seems to me, that the loss of a national language that went back to that time – a form of what Muir calls “homogenous Scots” that bears no relation to the many versions of the languages that were created after it, parts of which we still hear spoken today – brought about a great cultural uncertainty that, in its own way, has made a particular kind of contribution to our literary lives. Part of that contribution, Professors Jane Stevenson and Peter Davidson of Aberdeen and Oxford respectively, remind us, still largely unacknowledged, is the great wealth of work created in Latin – “Up to 80 percent of the literature of that time – a fact that we in Scotland still neglect in our reading and understanding of our literary history” they say. For sure, a literature that is unexpressed, even now, for the most part, in our reflections upon ourselves as a literary nation, might be cause for further deliberation in the culture departments of the Scottish Parliament as they go about busily reviving other histories, for here is a silenced literature indeed. Would that some of the funding that goes into creating words that were never Gaelic – like “Haymarket Station” or the “Welcome” and “Petrol” signs at Tesco – be employed rather in the widescale translations of some of these texts of which most of us are still largely unaware, that



we have these be part of our literary canon and of our discussions. Because 80 percent... of all literature written in Scotland at a key period of our cultural development... That's a National Literature alright.

Muir's argument is unfortunate in leaving aside this aspect of our history; his line is with the writing that was formed in Scots and English and the effect of both upon a nation of readers and writers. Yet, despite the limitations – for we may surely add singers and musicians to the roster of those affected by linguistic proscription – when he says, “Since sometime in the 16th century Scottish literature has been a literature without a language”, he opens up, to my mind, an exciting possibility, a way of looking forward, not back, into an understanding of literature in our country. “Middle Scots survived Sir David Lyndsay for a while in the lyrics of Alexander Scott and Montgomery” Muir wrote, “but a little later Drummond of Hawthornden was already writing in pure English, and since then Scottish poetry has been written either in English, or in some local dialect, or in some form of synthetic Scots, such as Burns's, or Scott's, or Hugh McDiarmid's. Scottish prose disappeared

altogether,” he concludes, “swept away by Knox’s brilliant *History of the Reformation in Scotland* and the Authorised version of the Bible”

“Disappeared altogether”... there’s the rub – a painful idea, and upsetting to imagine: Muir galvanising a theory about the end of a certain kind of literary practice and sensibility. Yet, as the history of literature in Scotland shows – and as the title of Muir’s own book suggests – it was only a certain kind of prose that came never to be spoken or written again, that is, Scottish prose. Scottish writing in English, though... that was another literature altogether. For just as the “gloomy and intolerant fanaticism” of the Reformation cut Scottish letters off from its roots in the great 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century poetic tradition and replaced it with prose that was itself a kind of proscription about the kind of prose that may and should be written – and that, along with the strictures in dress and self-expression that, although repealed somewhat in the 1780s, continued to overshadow Highland cultural identities in particular – so was born from that cutting an artistic development that has been as exciting and fruitful as the earlier literary flowering.

Indeed, it may be argued that the very stripping of the poetic, of the lyrical, from our cultural expression was the exact action that forced a particular kind of prose experiment into being, a writing that was in itself like a form of translation, creating a sense of ourselves in a language that was by necessity inventing itself as it went along, speaking back to the past while discovering new syntax and speech patterns and phrasing that might describe a new post-Reformation way of being. The self-consciousness that comes with that is a modernist one, we know, long before that term applied or had been invented, even. Certainly, the sort of synthetic language that was forged out of the disappearance of an homogenous one, flexible and self-inventing and full of innovation, and the form that was found to fit that new syntax and literary self, generated a kind of project that is truly novelistic, bearing little relation to the great 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century social histories and romances that defined the genre south of the border. In fact, so distinct was the novel that was created here, that we might conclude that the dissociation between what Muir calls “the dialogue of one” (a literature that grows up from all that has come before it, and is part of that past, seamlessly melding its Medieval with its Renaissance and then Romantic

literature to create one uninterrupted body of thought gathered from the thoughts of many) and a literature that, from sheer necessity, had to “make it new”, could be seen, in our fiction, to be redefining from scratch the very business of telling stories. Henceforth, in great works of existential angst and soul searching we come to see exactly what can be made of that “Nothing” of Muir’s. An everything. A world unto itself.

What then if we were to see this the new breed of prose, represented early in Scottish fiction’s history by work like James Hogg’s *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner* through to Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* – stories of uncertainty, ambiguity, of a split self and the beginnings of the psychological novel – as embodying to great creative effect the distinctive, reactive, forward-thinking character of our literature? One that, in a more conservative-seeming project, even, such as Scott’s *Waverley* novels, shows itself to be prescient of later developments – as those many volumes lined up one after the other are a reminder of the sheer time it takes to talk about something – and all that years before Marcel Proust set out on his great work on that very subject? One that in being catholic in

taste and protestant in sensibility is so vividly representative in a rich patois of English and Scots and dialect of a wide description of the voices and lives of people all over the country that the phrase *avant garde* need not even apply for all those differences have already been assimilated? Our literature, finally, is the embodiment of a characteristic now caught up and celebrated by the rest of the world in what we call “world literature” – written in one language about a culture that used to express itself in another?

Once again, we see how a national literature emerges, naturally and fruitfully, from its current social context to find expression according to its own rules of aesthetic and form. Once again we see, in the novel especially, language invigorated and made more expansive by responding naturally and creatively to conditions around it, allowing itself to be a number of different things as well as a vehicle for a story. This is not literature that seeks to “benefit” in order to fulfil a remit required by “the Scottish people” – though it may end up doing those things, just as many Scottish novels have moved us to think differently about ourselves and our country. Rather, this is literature that takes its time to discover what it is as it moves towards a place of its own

definition.

None of this is to say that one should ever ignore the terrible realities of a history that stopped tongues and shamed dialects. In his same treatise, Edwin Muir wrote tellingly of the way the work of Robert Burns in particular describes the effect of prohibition upon the Scottish psyche – replacing a poetry that, as he put it “experienced from within” as we see in the work of Henryson and Dunbar and the rest, with mere “reflection on experience” that, in Muir’s view, is exemplified by Burns. But still we might meditate creatively, in the literature we make now, upon the significance of a tradition that has always been mindful of the split between past and present, past and future. That Muir, alerting us to a condition that is part of our national psyche, might remind us, instead of breach, of new ways forward: Prohibition as creative practice; the development of a language that embraces all levels of society and all manner of traditions; English language and sound well woven into our prose since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Bureaucrats intent on reviving Gaelic or other so-called “pure” forms of language at the cost of regenerating this great literary tradition of cross-breeding, of the ongoing re-fertilising and grafting of different kinds of speech, might take note. RP has been heard as much as an accent in our texts since the time of Robert

Burns as any other. And those Latinate cadences, and the sound of the piobaireachd... they're all there too.

If only we could allow, then, instead of political binaries and ideological certainties, a tendency towards these complexities, ambiguities, in acknowledgement of our literary story... If we could only permit this ambivalence to be part of our discourse about our literature, then we may find a way into the future with our artistic licences intact. As Meaghan Delahunt describes beautifully, this “uncertainty... being open, not fixed or known” might then lead to something deeply creative, not forced. Writing of the current political situation in Scotland she concludes, “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.”

And that phrase “without guarantees”... How lovely it is.

Because art is never at home within the pages of a cultural manifesto or a political agenda. It doesn't come with a guarantee for “benefit”. It responds, it makes, it thinks... It does its own thing “without guarantees” – and yet, as we have seen, in the case

of literature alone, how benefits may accrue.

In his recently published magisterial account of the history of the novel, *The Novel: A Biography*, Michael Schmidt takes us on a rambling journey through the genre, arguing for its first appearance as a fact-and-fiction mixing travel narrative by one John Mandeville in the 14<sup>th</sup> century – so from the outset making a case for a genre that, yes, still fulfils its obligations to a leisured bourgeois class who want to read big stories about people like or nearly like them, but also allows for its strange leaps into other places. Whether Scotland is one of these places – in the way Melville’s open sea of *Moby Dick* is, or Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*’s pages of writing are, or Zora Neale Hurston’s *Harlem* is – or whether its long history in literary experimentation is because it has always been bound to a larger European literary tradition. And whether, in turn, this in part is due to the reasons I have outlined here, may be one of Schmidt’s many themes. For his *Biography* featuring Scotland’s novels along with all those French and English and Russian and American novels that have had such impact on our English-speaking lives – is set on continually smearing the boundaries between this country and that as a way of forcing our thinking about the genre out of that dark



“stubbornness” David Manderson talks about to a more philosophically, aesthetically well-lit point of view.

“When historical elements combine with invention, readers are inclined to judge in moral, rather than artistic terms” Schmidt reminds us. In the end, it’s a representation of *form* in the novel, not its context, that interests me most and generates my interests in the future of our literature altogether. How our stories are *made*, how they can be put together to be “the songs of their own creation” – to summarise the poet Wallace Stevens – how they might express themselves as things wholly themselves and things that are vivid and compelling and true... If there’s one thing I am clear about, coming to the end of this essay about our literature and our country, it’s that the historical, the political, context never gives the aesthete nearly enough room.

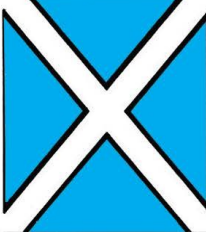
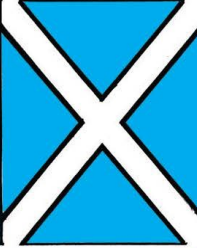
Because room and freedom and space... The space of the white page upon which to write... The space of open land upon which we may “trespass freely and fiercely” as Woolf writes... That is what matters to the artist. That literature may veer towards “increase” as the novelist of the American South Katherine Anne Porter described the effect of the work of her rebel compatriot

William Faulkner. That it may take us ever onwards, forwards, towards... And, yes, perhaps that in time our journey may come to influence other journeys, other maps... But in practice not proscription, in imagination not ideology.

And so, the talk of a National Literature – of a national everything, in fact – that we are hearing more and more comes to dominate our political agenda. “Up here” versus “down there” riddles its way through our sensibility spoiling us not with a gift of ethical, intellectual debate but only for a fight. As I write this in Dundee and think about the largely ignored hills up in Sutherland (where my last novel was set) and the way a different kind of north and south divide pertains even within this small country – it seems, that, just as Edwin Muir reminded us that “the only thing that can tell us about the novel is the novel”, we might, all of us who love books, consider how nationhood can never be nearly as interesting as society is, or as individuals are, or as stories can be. For while a political narrative will always be one sided, agenda-driven and fixed, the literary one is open always to that fierce and fearless trespass. And that has nothing to do with politicians’ agendas, or cultural reviews.

As the late Gavin Wallace, Director of Literature at the Scottish Arts Council, later Creative Scotland, put it: “The plot of a Scottish novel may be seen as coterminous with the idea of time as we experience it. It’s as though the form itself represents a transmission from the spoken to the written word.” Could there be a better way of thinking about our literature now than in these terms? That might remind us not only of regionality and variety – the music of a kind of orature, with all our music in it – but of real time’s uncertainty, vulnerability, strangeness? To write what we want to write – now. In these times. That’s where the formation of a National Literature begins.





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