

LITERATURE  
AND DIVERSITY

*Border-crossing:  
New Scottish Writing*

by **Willy Maley**





My task in this thistle-stop tour of new Scottish writing reminds me of one of Jean Cocteau's jokes. Talking of a chameleon, Cocteau said: "Its master put it down on a tartan rug and it died of over-exertion". I know the feeling. Providing a brief account of the state of play in a small nation big on books, tall on tales, uppity in attitude, is akin to the proverbial apprentice being sent for a tin of tartan paint. There's nothing worn under the first coat. Of course, good writing speaks for itself, and Scottish writers are not by nature timorous beasties. "A shy wean gets nae toffee", as my far-from-shy big sister used to say. Either Scotland is enjoying a Golden Age of Letters, or it's got a brass neck like a tuba. I once heard a London literary agent remark that what she loved about Scottish writers was that they had opinions, not just about their own work, the work of their peers, or writing in general, but about politics, history, government, the world. Scotland is a seedbed for storytelling of the highest order, but it's also a breeding-ground for writers who take themselves, their craft, and the world they inhabit seriously. They can badger, barrack and buttonhole with the best. Small country, big conversation.

I'm also minded of the "Summarise Proust" contest, which featured in an episode of the BBC comedy series *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. The summary was to be conducted in twenty seconds, first in bathing costume, and then in evening dress. My own brief in this overview is no less ridiculous, and the reader may envisage me sporting a top hat and trunks by the end of it. So there are two images for you, Cocteau's chameleon and Proust on helium.

What is the deal with Scotland? Why does this small country have such an internationally renowned literature? Some say it's a kind of compensation or consolation for the lack of a fully-fledged state. Imagination stands in for the reality of a nation, storytelling substitutes for sovereignty. So, for Scottish writers, working across forms and genres is second nature. They're border-crossers by design: challenging, experimental, provocative. For Nations, like notions, exist only in the mind till they're put down on paper. Correspondingly, Nations have borders but imaginations know no bounds. A small country with a big culture, the only backgrounds that ultimately matter for writers in Scotland are literary. This cheeky wee country has given birth to big broth of a book culture because of the space given over to imagination, the right to roam.

All Scottish literature is travel writing. Golden, distilled, mature, it travels well and widely. Even when the accent is as strong as a single malt – no ice please, we're cold enough without it – there's no need for inoculation. Yet for a pint-sized country, we don't do things by halves. From James Kelman to Jackie Kay, from Alasdair Gray to Janice Galloway, from Irvine Welsh to Louise Welsh, Scotland produces pungent, pioneering literature that likes to tell home truths rather than merely praise native virtues, which is why it sometimes appears to have a morbid fixation. But no matter how bleak the setting or bitter the language it's always lit up by flashes of savage wit. It's not all grim up north, though, and the work of Ronald Frame and Candia McWilliam betrays a quieter sensibility equally intrinsic to the landscape.



Scottish writers are worldly, even when they're unworldly, most worldly when offering up other worlds. The supernatural features prominently, from James Hogg onwards. The door into the dark is always ajar. Alison Kennedy wrote in the *New Yorker* after the film of *Trainspotting* was released, explaining why Scottish writers walk on the wild side. Of course, Muriel Spark is as dangerous and devious as Irvine Welsh. *The Driver's Seat* makes *Trainspotting* look like an innocent pastime. The only anorak in Spark says *Don't Look Now*. Scottish writers do dark stuff like it was going out of fashion, and make it fashionable again. Tartan Noir is a case in point. Black is the new tartan.

Is this a dagger I see before me? If so it's the dagger of crime fiction. Crime pays and plays well in Scotland. In Christopher Brookmyre, Quintin Jardine, Denise Mina, Ian Rankin, and Louise Welsh, Scotland is producing some of the most cutting-edge writing in a cutthroat market. Ian Rankin, one of the most popular and prolific of Scottish writers, marched out of the Kingdom of Fife to rule over the Republic of Letters.

Christopher Brookmyre graduated from the University of Glasgow with an MA in English Literature and Theatre Studies in 1989. He has since become one of Scotland's most celebrated young writers. An accomplished journalist and playwright as well as a popular and prolific novelist, Christopher is one of the most exciting and original fictional voices to have emerged in recent years. His first novel *Quite Ugly One Morning* (Little, Brown, 1996) went on to win the Critics' First Blood award for the best first crime novel of the year, while *Boiling a Frog* (Little, Brown, 2000) won the Sherlock Award for Best Comic Detective. The adaptation of his debut novel starring eminent actor James Nesbitt as Jack Parlabane, and a touring production of *Boiling a Frog* by the 7:84 Theatre Company, shows the reach and resonance of Brookmyre's work, which also includes novels such as *One Fine Day In The Middle Of The Night* (Little, Brown, 1999) and *A Big Boy Did It And Ran Away* (Abacus, 2001). His latest novels, *Attack Of The Unsinkable Rubber Ducks* (Abacus, 2007) and *A Tale Etched In Blood And Hard Black Pencil* (Little, Brown, 2007) brought him The Spirit Of Scotland Award for writing in 2007.

Crime writing is just one genre in which Scots excel. Since Walter Scott, historical fiction is another, with James Robertson a leading figure. His *Joseph Knight (4th Estate, 2003)* is a brilliant example of new Scottish writing coming to terms with its (often unacknowledged) imperial past. By contrast, his internationally acclaimed Booker long listed novel *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (Hamish Hamilton, 2006), explores a more modern day Scotland, but one which is still prey to the ghosts and habits of mind of the past.

Representations of national identity and class have altered dramatically since John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973). McGrath is a crucial figure in understanding the links between art and politics, but new possibilities have opened up for previously marginalised groups – women, youth, and ethnic minorities – to intervene in struggles and debates. Politics continues to play a central part in Scottish writing. Whether it is Janice Galloway confronting issues of sexuality, gender and psychology or Irvine Welsh's representations of disaffected youth and the communities in which they exist, new ground has been broken that reflects the shifting strata of political mobilisations.



All this has a resonance in the democratic intellect. In education, the tradition of the democratic intellect and the useful myth of the lad (and lass) o' pairts means a version of the American Dream, a Caledonia Dreaming, holds sway. The different origins and development of English studies in England and Scotland is instructive. In England the rise of literary criticism was bound up in an affirmation of English nationalism through a culture of polite letters and classical learning whereas in Scotland the study of literature, tied to philosophy and rhetoric, was firmly embedded in the European intellectual tradition.

This year, I taught a new course on the fiction of an oil-rich dirt-poor country still reeling from colonisation – no, not this one. The course was on the Nigerian Novel. I could have put a Scottish writer on the syllabus though. Jackie Kay's Nigerian father would have qualified her. Kay is one of a growing number of black and Asian writers coming to the fore in Scotland. Her work exemplifies the variety and vibrancy, the dynamism and diversity, of new Scottish writing. Kay's *The Adoption Papers* (Bloodaxe, 1991) ought to stand sentry over any efforts to set up a citizenship test for Scottish authors. Virginia Woolf insisted that as a woman she had no country, and most writers learn to adopt, adapt and be adept when it comes to the claims of communities and nations. They fly by those nets, as James Joyce put it.

And yet as readers and critics we like to place writers, to pin them down, to see schools and movements, individuals and identities, where we should see only works of art. Still, there is a sense that in forging fictions which are always different from and often far ahead of political realities, writers are nevertheless engaged in nation building, as well as notion building. So, with that hyperactive chameleon and that breathless costume change in mind, let me run through some of what's new in Scotland that I think should be at the forefront of our minds when we think of Scottish literature today.

Leila Aboulela, born in Khartoum to an Egyptian mother and Sudanese father, moved to Scotland with her husband in 1990. Her debut novel, *The Translator* (Polygon, 1999), was longlisted for the Impac and Orange prizes. *The Museum*, one of the sparkling gems in her collection of short stories, *Coloured Lights* (Polygon, 2001), earned Aboulela the Caine Prize for African Writing. Her second novel, *Minaret* (Bloomsbury, 2005), was long-listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction. Aboulela is just one example of a writer from furth of Forth (i.e. beyond the Forth) who has made her home in Scotland and drawn on her adopted country for sustenance and inspiration. Scotland and Sudan are not as far apart as they would seem. Aboulela plays hopscotch with the world map, refusing to be boxed in by borders. That's very Scottish, and very Sudanese. So is the fact that Aboulela sees her religion as more important than her national identity. The hijab is more than a headscarf, and Aboulela is more than Scottish, but she's indicative of an openness in Scotland to writers who come from outside but bring with them yearnings and insights that touch a nerve in their home-from-home.



Raman Mundair is another daring and worldly writer who flits across genres and forms like they were dancefloor tiles. Born in India, raised in Manchester, through her residence and residencies in Scotland, from Glasgow to Shetland, she has staked her claim to Scotland's heart, a heart as tender and troubled as her poetry, prose and playwriting. In her stunning, sensual and subtle collection, *Lovers, Liars, Conjurors and Thieves* (Peepal Press, 2003), Mundair dances with words, dares and double-dares, ram-raids the reader's heart, then does a runner. Later, her lines return like lost lambs in the night, but with the cry of wolves not far behind. A shape-shifter, voice-thrower and stealer of breath, she shows that even in a place as cold as this northern outpost language can bubble and brim over.

Suhayl Saadi has been called a cross between Salman Rushdie and Irvine Welsh, but he's more than that. Saadi puts more crosses into the box than football legend Jinky Johnstone. If the stunning collection of short stories, *The Burning Mirror* (Polygon, 2001), shortlisted for the Saltire Society Scottish First Book of the Year Award, announced the arrival of a new voice with verve and volume, then Saadi's debut novel *Psychoraag* (Black and White, 2004), shortlisted for the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the 2005 National Literary Award (Pakistan), is a book that bends and blows the mind, blending different ways of speaking and seeing with consummate ease. Saadi is also an editor, mover and shaker on the Scottish scene. He has taken his Afghan-Pakistani-Yorkshire-Glasgow inheritance and sampled and synthesized it in a style that relies on harmony and discord in equal measure. As a practising doctor he chose medicine over music, but it's the muse that owns Saadi's soul, and Scotland has a stake there too.

Luke Sutherland is a Londoner and an Orcadian. Like Kay, he was adopted, and like her too he has forced a small country that can be small-minded to listen up and adapt to new voices that shake old certainties. Sutherland's debut novel, *Jelly Roll* (Anchor, 1998), shortlisted for the Whitbread First Novel Award, is as powerful as it is playful, the kind of writing that wears its politics up its sleeve and pulls it down as streams of coloured hankies: magical, musical, mellifluous. It would be tempting to be glib – and worse – and call Sutherland a Caledonian Caliban, learning to curse, but he's more like a puckish Prospero, ducking rather than drowning his books in a watery and windswept place.

The multi-talented Maud Sulter, a Glaswegian of Scots and Ghanaian descent, has made her mark in poetry, playwriting and visual art. Her collection *As A Blackwoman* (Akira Press, 1985), includes the passionate and poignant poem "If Leaving You", which contains the lines "our blackness/a bond/before speech/or encounter", which is both a celebration of the kind of meeting a world city like Edinburgh can stage, and a recognition of the different connections and complicities forged and uncoupled in such contexts. Sulter once lamented the "disheartening thing that in a country that claims to have such a radical, rebellious nature as Scotland, there is such a hesitation to take on board other people's voices". She has helped loosen those mind-forged manacles and introduced a vital new perspective. Red Clydeside and the dear green place have another bond to mull over, another bridge to cross.



Zoe Wicomb, a South Africa-born Glaswegian who has pioneered Creative Writing at the University of Strathclyde, is a writer, teacher, and critic of international significance, lauded by the likes of J. M. Coetzee and Toni Morrison. Inspiring in everything she does, Wicomb's first book, *You Can't Get Lost In Cape Town* (Pantheon, 1987), found her a global readership, and her subsequent books, *David's Story* (The Feminist Press, 2001), and *Playing in the Light* (Random House, 2006), have cemented her reputation as an outstanding author. The fact that she makes writers as well as writing is testimony to her tirelessness and generosity of spirit. Scotland needs writers like Zoe Wicomb more than she needs Scotland. She remains tethered to her homeland by mind and memory. In playing host to some of the world's finest writers, Scotland can't afford to get smug or complacent. It still has more to learn than to teach, and it'll learn best from the writers who've made their home here.

Look out too for Sheila Puri and Leela Soma, two writers whose work will open up new vistas in the Scottish literary landscape. The future's bright, the future's black, and red, and green. These writers complicate the picture of Scotland as a colonised rather than a colonising country, and while the treatment of race and racism in work by white Scottish writers is increasingly sophisticated – and of course several Scottish writers were raised in Africa: William Boyd, David Greig, Alexander McCall Smith – Black Scottish writing as a fresh and forceful phenomenon is changing the face of the nation.

If Black and Asian writers are an emerging force, then shyness is no more a feature of these writers than it is of their peely-wally (i.e. pallid) counterparts. In keeping with other Scottish writers, they have as many sides as stories. Jackie Kay recalls: "I was once asked to do a reading at a Celtic-Afro-Caribbean evening, and would I read for the Celts? The Caribbeans were lined up on one side and the Celts on the other, and I just thought this was so funny, because, conceivably, I could have been asked to read for either side! And the man who had asked me to read for the Celts wasn't acknowledging this, so I wrote the poem "Kail and Callalou" really for him! I don't know if he ever really got it!" Kay remembers another event at which she had an eye-opening effect: "I was at a meeting a wee while ago and this Black man came up to me and said, "Oh, are you really Scottish, because all my life I've wanted to meet a Black Scottish person!" He never knew any existed! So I said, "Yeah, yeah, I'm the real McCoy!" I think things have changed in that way".

Definitions and descriptions are the stuff of criticism, not art. Kay says: "I usually define myself as a Black Scottish poet because that seems easiest. I think all these long lists after your name, being Scottish, feminist, vegetarian, socialist, it gets a bit much! I don't think the definition in itself is so important. What you write is important, and it's through your writing that people should get a sense of who you are. Because I write directly from my own experience, people do get a sense of the multiplicity of what I am. So I don't feel I need to sing it, all the time. If someone just called me a poet that would be fine".



When we speak of a Scottish writer, the word “writer” should come first. Jackie Kay is a key figure in whom many of the strengths of contemporary Scottish writing cohere. 7:84 Theatre Company’s production of her play *Twilight Shift* (1993), depicting a gay love affair between two men in a mining community – “Brokeback Bing”, as it were – showed that radical Scottish theatre could embrace sexual as well as social realism. In its interrogation of masculinity and sexuality against the backdrop of that most masculine milieu, the pit, Kay’s play swings the pendulum towards openness and celebration, undermining, in subtle and persuasive ways, ingrained prejudices and skin-deep, straitening stereotypes.

Another immigrant community, the Irish, has developed a renewed confidence in recent years. Celtic connections are crucial and the interface between Irish and Scottish writing is exemplified in the superb anthology, *Across the Water: Irishness In Modern Scottish Writing*, edited by James McGonigal, Donny O’Rourke and Hamish Whyte (Argyll Publishing, 2000). Writers like Chris Dolan, Anne Donovan, Des Dillon, Magi Gibson, Bernard MacLavery, and Andrew O’Hagan are part of that crossing. Of course, Europe is central to the texture of Scottish writing. Polish Scot Raymond Soltyssek’s debut short story collection, *Occasional Demons* (Neil Wilson Publishing, 2001), shortlisted for the Saltire First Book of the Year Award, was as full of diamonds as demons. Soltyssek is a trained Assertive Discipline Leader, which, edgy and original as his writing is, makes him stereotypically Scottish.

Crossing can also mean cross-dressing and crossing gender as well as genre divides. The dear green place is now increasingly a queer green place. Gay and Lesbian writing has taken pride of place in the new Scotland. Its late flowering has been one of the signs of a nation coming of age, and some of its success stories deserve special mention. Recent anthologies include: *And Thus Will I Freely Sing* (Polygon, 1989), edited by Toni Davidson (Polygon, 1989); *The Crazy Jig* (Polygon, 1992), edited by Joanne Winning; *Footsteps And Witnesses* (Polygon, 1993), edited by Bob Cant; and *Borderline: The Mainstream Book Of Scottish Gay Writing* (Mainstream, 2001), edited by Joseph Mills. The Glasgay Festival was launched in the early 1990s, supplanting Mayfest as the place to be seen and heard, and confirming the relationship between print and public performance in establishing a diverse culture. Major Scottish authors – Jackie Kay, Edwin Morgan, Louise Welsh – have put questions of gender and sexuality at the heart of their work, and made Scotland seem roomier, raunchier, richer.

Scotland’s greats – Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, Tom Leonard, Liz Lochhead, Edwin Morgan, and Alan Spence – are still producing the goods, while a new generation makes its presence felt. Iain Banks, John Burnside, Janice Galloway, Alison Kennedy, Duncan McLean, Ali Smith, Alan Warner and Irvine Welsh need no seal of approval. And it’s not just poets, dramatists and novelists who write the nation. Peter Mullan is a gifted screenwriter who made a stunning contribution to Scottish cinema and culture with *Orphans* (Screenpress Books, 1999), a contemporary classic.



Film critic Hugh Linehan, writing in 1999 on what he saw as the trouble with recent Irish cinema, lamented the fact that “Ireland has yet to produce as compelling a metaphorical state-of-the-nation film as *Orphans* or as commercially astute a piece of zeitgeist-tapping as *Trainspotting*”. The connection between these two films is Peter Mullan, who played drug dealer Mother Superior in *Trainspotting* – so-called because of the length of his habit – and wrote and directed *Orphans*. Mullan also played the Old Veteran in *Braveheart* (1995), shot largely in Ireland, for reasons to do with tax rather than terrain. The new Scotland will want to keep its culture fully funded and promote itself as a site of ambitious work.

Meanwhile, with a National Theatre now a reality, Scottish drama continues to punch above its weight and play its part in the forging of an ever-expanding theatre of operations. Scottish theatre has travelled a long way from John McGrath’s groundbreaking *The Cheviot, The Stag, and The Black, Black Oil* to Gregory Burke’s globetrotting *Black Watch* (Faber and Faber, 2007), which took New York by storm in 2007. *Black Watch* is the name of a regiment and of a tartan, a tartan noir, if you will. It’s now the name of a play that puts Scottish theatre at the razor’s edge of drama. If the likes of Burke and David Greig are flying the flag for Scottish theatre today, they are doing so alongside major Scottish writers more familiar in other guises. In lauding our new playwrights, we mustn’t forget the fact that most Scottish writers have engaged with drama at one time or another, and three of our greatest living writers are distinguished dramatists. Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, and Edwin Morgan have yet to see their theatre work published or promoted as extensively as their fiction – though major collections of their plays are in the pipeline – but once again they illustrate the extent to which Scottish writers “stravaig” across genre boundaries with impunity and impertinence.

*Crossing the Border* is the title of a collection of essays by Edwin Morgan, and it’s a phrase that fits him well, because he is a border-crosser, a transgressor, a writer who breaches barriers in terms of language, history, and geography, from Glasgow to Saturn. Scotland’s Poet Laureate, and sometime professor of English at the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde, Morgan is a passionate and prolific poet, playwright, critic and translator. Few writers would attempt a trilogy on the life of Christ, fewer still would tackle Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus*, but Edwin Morgan must have made his pact with the devil a long time ago, because he’s continued to produce work of the highest quality across a career spanning six decades. Not in vain was his name taken for the Creative Writing Centre at the University of Glasgow. Collections like *Glasgow Sonnets* (1972) and *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984) weren’t publications – they were events. Morgan’s marvellous musings have put Glasgow on the map, and crammed the world into Glasgow.



Teaching Creative Writing is a great way to read the best before the rest. In 2007 I saw three drafts finally don their dust jackets. Nicola Barry's *Mother's Ruin* (Headline, 2007), a memoir noir about a childhood and early adulthood blighted by alcohol, is as haunting and harrowing as it is hopeful and humorous. If the bottle it took to write this book were filled with pennies Barry would be a millionaire. Jennifer McCartney's debut novel, *Afloat* (Hamish Hamilton, 2007), surfaces slowly, like a submarine, and displays a depth and resonance a more mature writer would kill her darlings for. Few writers so young can write convincingly of a lifetime of long ago lovers and "the paper frail dreams of youth". Rachel Seiffert is one of the finest writers of her generation. Her second novel, *Afterwards* (Heinemann, 2007), is the slowburn story of a woman caught between two men traumatised by the endless wars waged by the British state – Kenya and Northern Ireland in this case. While politicians posture, soldiers suffer the consequences. *Afterwards* dovetails beautifully with Alison Kennedy's *Day* (Jonathan Cape, 2007), and Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* as a complex picture of war that goes beyond pathos, patriotism and protest.

The idea for a Masters degree in Creative Writing at Glasgow came from Philip Hobsbaum, who had run writers' groups informally in London, Belfast and Glasgow for over thirty years. A list of the writers who emerged from the groups he directed reads like a who's who of contemporary literature: Alasdair Gray, Seamus Heaney; James Kelman, Liz Lochhead and Bernard MacLaverty are among the most prominent names. A raft of new writers has emerged from Glasgow University's Creative Writing programme since Philip hatched the plot and plotted the course back in 1995. These new writers include Nick Brooks, Anne Donovan, Rodge Glass, Laura Marney, Alison Miller, Will Napier, Colette Paul, Rachel Seiffert, Zoe Strachan and Louise Welsh. Around thirty books by Glasgow students have been published to date.<sup>1</sup> And how far from being parochial new Scottish writing can be is evident from the fact that one of Glasgow's students was long-listed for the Asian Man Booker Prize in 2007. Chiew-Siah Tei's debut novel, *Little Hut of Leaping Fishes* (Heinemann, 2008), will make a big splash worldwide next year, proving that Scotland really is a centre for world writing.

Glasgow's postgraduate course was taught jointly with Strathclyde from 1998 until 2002, with Margaret Elphinstone and Zoe Wicomb the tutors there. The Glasgow course wasn't the first in Scotland. St Andrews had kicked off its MA in Creative Writing in 1993, headed up by two poets, Robert Crawford and Douglas Dunn, since joined by John Burnside, Kathleen Jamie, Alison Kennedy and Don Paterson. Alan Spence, a Professor at Aberdeen, presides over creative writing there. Edinburgh has launched its own Masters in Creative Writing, with Robert Alan Jamieson, Brian McCabe and Dilys Rose. At Stirling, Rory Watson has been diligently cultivating writers for many years. So the Scottish scene is a vibrant one as far as Creative Writing and the University goes, with plenty of potential for expansion, collaboration and innovation.



Afore I go, let me say this. Strictly speaking, Philip Hobsbaum wasn't Scottish, just as some of the writers whose praises I've sung here may be deemed to be aliens or outsiders by the more narrow-minded gatekeepers with the mentality of bookkeepers rather than book-lovers. In fact, Philip saw the categorisation of literature into national blocks as a form of tribalism. But who's speaking strictly here? Not me, that's for sure. Like many writers who find themselves in Scotland, Philip found a home, and found good company, good conversation and great writing. Scotland is an open book. All are welcome. New Scots are writing the nation afresh every day. Cocteau's chameleon, worn-out from writhing on that rug, sits shivering in a shawl of tartan. It's on its tea break, or something stronger. It has its work cut out for it. John Byrne's *The Slab Boys* trilogy taught us that Scots are prone to cutting a rug. As for Proust, as a reminder that we are not only purveyors of fine writing but conveyors too, crossing borders and building bridges worldwide, let's recall that he was first translated into English by a Scot. I'll drink to that – in moderation, of course.

1 See further reading section