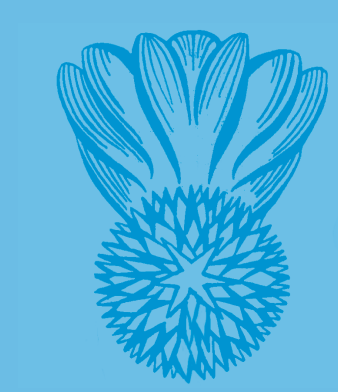


LITERATURE
AND IDENTITY

*Scotland's an
Attitude of Mind*

by **James Robertson**





What is the political and cultural identity that the Scottish Parliament represents? Over the centuries, poets, playwrights and novelists have tried to define that identity, which would seem to be obvious but always remains elusive. Liz Lochhead's play *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* opens with the chorus, La Corbie, offering a set of possible definitions:

Country: Scotland. Whit like is it?
It's a peatbog, it's a daurk forest,
It's a cauldron o' lye, a saltpan or a coal mine.
If you're gey lucky it's a bricht bere meadow or a park o' kye.
Or mibbe...it's a field o' stanes.
It's a tenement or a merchant's ha'.
It's a hure hoose or a humble cot. Princes Street or Paddy's Merkit.
It's a fistfu' o' fish or a pickle o' oatmeal.
It's a queen's banquet o' roast meats and junkets.
It depends. It depends...Ah dinna ken whit like *your* Scotland is.

It's a problem that has, naturally enough, exercised the minds of sovereigns, soldiers, diplomats, politicians, teachers, priests, property-owners, revolutionaries and football fans at least as much as writers. Over what and whom do I rule? What am I fighting/dying/killing for? What or whom do I represent? What am I trying to improve? What sense of what place am I passing on to the next generation? Does it matter at all in the larger scale and scheme of things? What is my stake in it? What is it I want to tear down, and what maintain? What am I cheering or weeping for? What is this thing called Scotland?

At one level, of course, these questions are irrelevant, as Norman MacCaig reminds us laconically in his poem "Patriot":

My only country
is six feet high
and whether I love it or not
I'll die
for its independence.

MacCaig's great friend Hugh MacDiarmid thought otherwise, and dealt all his life in ideas of what constituted Scotland. His use of a dense form of Scots in his poetry, his kilt-wearing, whisky-drinking image, his self-acknowledged Anglophobia, his bristling, thistle-like pronouncements on every subject made him easy to caricature as a certain kind of Scotsman – "a symbol of all that's perfectly hideous about Scotland", Irvine Welsh has said of him – but in fact MacDiarmid always strove to open up the multiform possibilities of his country:



It requires great love of it deeply to read
The configuration of a land,
Gradually grow conscious of fine shadings,
Of great meanings in slight symbols...
Be like Spring, like a hand in a window
Moving New and Old things carefully to and fro,
Moving a fraction of flower here,
Placing an inch of air there,
And without breaking anything.
So I have gathered unto myself
All the loose ends of Scotland,
And by naming them and accepting them,
Loving them and identifying myself with them,
Attempt to express the whole.

“Scotland”

Language is an obvious means of both national and self-identification, and certainly it is not possible to engage with Scottish literature without, at some level, engaging with issues of language. Writers who write in Gaelic or Scots do so not just because these languages are theirs, but also because to use them is to make a political or cultural statement. So, Sorley MacLean (1911–96), in his great sequence of love poems *Dàin do Eimhir*, declares to his loved one how he would proclaim her “queen of Scotland” in spite of the independent socialist republic he desires:

nan robh againn Alba shaor,
Alba co-shinte ri ar gaol,
Alba gheal bheadarrach fhaoil,
Alba àlain shona laoch;
gun bhùirdeasachd bhig chrìon bhaoith,
gun sgreamhalachd luchd na maoin',
's gun chealgaireachd oillteil chlaoin,
Alba aigeannach nan saor,
Alba 'r fala, Alba 'r gaoil...

if we had Scotland free,
Scotland equal to our love,
a white spirited generous Scotland,
a beautiful happy heroic Scotland,
without petty paltry foolish bourgeoisie,
without the loathsomeness of capitalists,
without hateful crass graft;
the mettlesome Scotland of the free,
the Scotland of our blood, the Scotland
of our love...

Similarly, William Soutar (1898–1943), the Perth-born poet who spent the last thirteen years of his life a bed-bound invalid, wrote of an emotional connection between individual and country:



It isna but in wintry days
That wintry death is here:
It isna but on stany braes
That Scotland bides bare.

There is a cauld place in her breist
That simmer canna thaw;
A hameless place that is a waste
Whaur nae wild-fleurs blaw.

Wha has a thocht for Scotland's sake
Kens, what his bluid can tell,
That in his breist a stane maun brek
Or his hert be hale.

“Heritage”

MacLean's romantic, bold, passionate vision in Gaelic, and Soutar's austere one in Scots, are worlds away from that ironically delineated by Tom Buchan (1931–95) in his “Scotland the wee”:

Scotland the wee, crèche of the soul,
of thee I sing
land of the millionaire draper, whisky vomit
and the Hillman Imp
staked out with church halls, gaelic sangs
and the pan loaf

And yet all three of these visions are honest and accurate and, crucially, about the same place.

There is a telling passage in Alasdair Gray's novel *Lanark*, published in 1981, a work many regard as the book that heralded the present revival in Scottish letters. The story in *Lanark* takes place in two locations, Glasgow and the futuristic, nightmarish city of Unthank. Two characters are admiring the Glasgow skyline and have the following conversation:

“Glasgow is a magnificent city,” said McAlpin. “Why do we hardly ever notice that?” “Because nobody imagines living here,” said Thaw. McAlpin lit a cigarette and said, “If you want to explain that I'll certainly listen.”

“Then think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Nobody visiting them for the first time is a stranger because he's already visited them in paintings, novels, history books and films. But if a city hasn't been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively. What is Glasgow to most of us? A house, the place we work, a football park or golf course, some pubs and connecting streets. That's all. No, I'm wrong,



there's also the cinema and the library. And when our imagination needs exercise we use these to visit London, Paris, Rome under the Caesars, the American West at the turn of the century, anywhere but here and now. Imaginatively Glasgow exists as a music-hall song and a few bad novels. That's all we've given to the world outside. It's all we've given to ourselves."

The same apparent contradiction is true of Scotland or anywhere – that it doesn't become a real place until it is lived in imaginatively. In fact, Scotland has been a realm of imagined living more than many other places: the extensive imagination of Sir Walter Scott used Scotland so well in the 19th century that the view of the country and nation that he offered is still resonant, long after the decline of his huge popularity as an author. In his novels he portrayed Scotland as a country emerging from a past of war, lawlessness and division, particularly between Highlands and Lowlands, into a settled and united modernity. Scott wrote with regret for a vanished past, but also with great irony about heroes such as Edward Waverley ("a sneaking piece of imbecility", he called him), infatuated with all things Highland, but the irony was lost on most readers, who lapped up the adventures Scott served them as eagerly and unquestioningly as if they were Waverleys too. The intelligence of Scott's work was obscured by a mist of romance, and increasingly, and despite many imitators, his view became less and less relevant to the daily lives of the actual inhabitants of industrialised, urban Scotland. Tom Buchan's "Scotland the wee" is actually a satirical take on Scott's famously patriotic lines from "The Lay of the Last Minstrel":

O Caledonia, stern and wild,
Meet nurse for a poetic child!
Land of brown heath and shaggy wood,
Land of the mountain and the flood...

In many respects, it could be argued that Scottish literature since Scott – from the sentimental Celtic Twilight poets and Kailyard novelists of the late 19th century, through the MacDiarmid-led Literary Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, to the "proletarian romanticism" (the late Alan Bold's phrase) of novelists like William McIlvanney and the post-industrial dirty realism of Irvine Welsh – has been a series of attempts to counter earlier depictions of Scotland and Scottish society. In recent years, poets such as Robert Crawford have tried to offer a vision that is both imaginatively challenging and yet founded in reality:

Semiconductor country, land crammed with intimate expanses,
Your cities are superlattices, heterojunctive
Graphed from the air, your cropmarked farmlands
Are epitaxies of tweed.
All night motorways carry your signal, swept
To East Kilbride or Dunfermline. A brightness off low headlands
Beams-in the dawn to Fife's interstices,
Optoelectronics of hay.

"Scotland"



In the 1980s and 1990s, partly in response to the immense sense of political failure and cultural insecurity felt around the 1979 devolution referendum, a wave of writers – far too many even to list here – began to do what those characters in Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* discuss: to use Scotland imaginatively, to reassess and repossess it imaginatively; to suggest that many Scotlands might exist within its geographical bounds. Not only were stereotypical ideas of Scotland challenged, but so were stereotypical ideas of what or who a Scottish writer might be. The most exciting thing about recent Scottish literature is its sheer diversity of voice, accent, language, ethnicity, genre, style, sexuality – and not least the much increased publication of women writers. Here, for example, is Christine de Luca, writing in Shetland dialect of change and continuity, both geological and human, in her poem “Da Fremd” (“The Outsiders”):

An still we wander, come an geng
muv'd bi forces oot a wir control
fin wirsels lodged in uncan pairts.
Da ooter layers, dey bruckle
peerie-wyes: wear doon, roond aff;
but no da inner places o da hert.

Perhaps what characterises the category “Scottish writing” more than anything these days is a refusal to be easily categorised. Which is why the appointment of Edwin Morgan as Scotland's Makar or poet laureate was so appropriate, for Morgan, over six decades, has been publishing work that has always been varied, restless, optimistic, intelligent, inquisitive and interested, as in this poem of strange discovery from his 1984 collection *Sonnets from Scotland*:

We brushed the dirt off, held it to the light.
The obverse showed us *Scotland*, and the head
of a red deer; the antler-glint had fled
but the fine cut could still be felt. All right:
we turned it over, read easily *One Pound*,
but then the shock of Latin, like a gloss,
Respublica Scotorum, sent across
such ages as we guessed but never found
at the worn edge where once the date had been
and where as many fingers had gripped hard
as hopes their silent race had lost or gained.
The marshy scurf crept up to our machine,
sucked at our boots. Yet nothing seemed ill-starred.
And least of all the realm the coin contained.

“The Coin”



Is it possible that, as with our writers, in a 21st-century, democratic and multi-voiced Scotland the best thing about our national identity is that it cannot be readily pigeon-holed? We need our history, to be aware of it and to understand it, because it is the story of who we have been and where we have come from, but we also need not to be restrained by it:

What do you mean when you speak of Scotland?

The grey defeats that are dead and gone
behind the legends each generation
savours, yet can't live on?

Inheritance of guilt that our country
has never stood where we feel she should?
A nagging threat of unfinished struggle
somehow forever lost in the blood?

Scotland's a sense of change, an endless
becoming for which there was never a kind
of wholeness or ultimate category.
Scotland's an attitude of mind.

“Speaking of Scotland”

This same idea has been expressed by many writers since Maurice Lindsay published these lines in 1964 – a date which perhaps reminds us that even our supposedly new attitudes of mind are not so new. It seems appropriate to conclude with a passage from one of the most intelligent novels to emerge from the 1980s, *The Other McCoy* by Brian McCabe:

“Scotland is a state of mind,” said McCoy.

“That’s very true,” said MacRae.

“Who said that?” asked Grogan, suddenly alert.

“You did. At least I think it was you.”

“Did I? By Christ, I’ll drink to that,” said Grogan and he poured the last of the half-bottle into their glasses.

“To Scotland as a concept,” said MacRae.

“No. A state of mind,” corrected Grogan.

“He’s right, it’s different,” said McCoy.

And they all toasted Scotland as a state of mind.