

LITERARY
EXCHANGES

*Scotland, Europe
and World Literature*

by **Stuart Kelly**





“Goethe was the first to say: ‘National literature no longer means much these days, we are entering the era of *Weltliteratur* – world literature – and it is up to each of us to hasten this development’. This is, so to speak, Goethe’s testament. Another testament betrayed.”¹ *Milan Kundera*

Introduction

In the 16th century, to anyone in Continental Europe, the most famous writer from the British Isles was not Shakespeare, or Spenser, or Francis Bacon; but the Scottish Latinist George Buchanan, author of such works as the neo-Senecan drama *Jephtha* and the “republican accented” treatise on tyranny, *De Iure Regni apud Scotos Dialogus*. In the 19th century, Sir Walter Scott began his literary career by translating Goethe and Schiller, and at the end of his career had influenced writers in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Austria, Romania, Poland, the Ukraine, Russia, the United States and Cuba. It was the French writer André Gide who first realised the complexity of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* by Scott’s contemporary James Hogg, and the writings of Stevenson, Conan-Doyle and Buchan were an inspiration to Jorge Luis Borges, Vargas Llosa, Ngugi wa’Thiongo, Michael Chabon and Michel Houellebecq. As Kundera stresses, the history of literature is an international history.

But Scotland is something of an anomaly. It participates in the supranational conversation that constitutes literature under conditions that are idiosyncratic and exceptional. We talk about a “national literature” – and there are several volumes which describe it, notably Robert Crawford’s *Scotland’s Books* (Penguin, 2007 – by far the best); Roderick Watson’s *The Literature Of Scotland* (2 vols., Palgrave Macmillan, 1984, revised 2007); *The Edinburgh History Of Scottish Literature* (3 vols., Edinburgh University Press, 2006); *Alba Literaria: A History Of Scottish Literature*, edited by Marco Fazzini (Amos Edizioni, 2005) and Carl MacDougall’s *Writing Scotland* (Polygon, 2004).

But in what way is Scotland a nation? Since it has no seat at the United Nations nor within the European Parliament, it cannot at present be easily described. It is not a colonised entity (like the disputed regions of Tibet or Chechnya); nor an autonomous or semi-autonomous region (having fewer legislative powers, for example, than the average Swiss canton); it is not a linguistically homogenous territory (like Quebec or the Basque Region).² Scotland became part of Great Britain in 1707 with the Union of the Parliaments (following the 1603 Union of Crowns). Yet, as Michael Fry has observed, there were many viable small countries in 1707 that were latterly incorporated (the City State of Venice, the Electorate of the Palatinate of the Rhineland, the Kingdom of Savoy) and that did not retain a lasting nationalist aspiration.³ Scotland is, clearly, “different” and to a great extent its difference has been sustained by its literature.⁴



Scotland's Modernism

Scotland has a vexed relationship to the worldwide artistic movement that we call "Modernism". The conditions which gave rise to Modernism were, of course, replicated in Scotland: dissatisfaction with the aesthetics of the previous generation, in particular in their inadequacy to cope with the new reality of the 1914-18 War; a rise in mass readership; the decentring effects of Marxist dialectics, Freudian psychoanalysis, Saussurian linguistics and Einstein's relativity; the emergence of new media such as film and radio. In some localised cases – such as George Douglas Brown's *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901) – there was a deliberate attempt to move away from the perceived sentimentality of the predominant "Kailyard" school. It remains the case, however, that whereas Modernism gave rise to a global resurgence in the novel – in the work of Woolf, Joyce, Proust, Mann, Bassani, Faulkner, Bely, Musil, Broch, Kafka, Hamsun, Alfau and Gombrowicz – Scotland did not respond to Modernism novelistically. Even such important works as Neil Gunn's *The Silver Darlings* (1941) and Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *A Scots Quair* trilogy (1932-4) remain securely within the naturalist tradition. This is of key importance to the contemporary situation of Scottish literature.

Scotland's Modernism was dominated by the figure of Hugh MacDiarmid (1892-1978, born Christopher Murray Grieve). He was identified as the centre of a new literary-political movement by the French scholar Denis Saurat, in an article entitled "Le Groupe de la Renaissance Écossaise", published in 1924 in the *Revue Anglo-Américaine*; although the term had previously been used by MacDiarmid himself, and was possibly taken from the work of Patrick Geddes (1854-1932), the botanist, urban-planner, friend of Rabindranath Tagore and ancestor of the Situationist International. MacDiarmid was a nationalist, a communist, a cultural agitator and above all a poet. It is impossible, and unprofitable, to try to contain his poetics within a single definition.

His earliest collections, *Sangshaw* (1925) and *Penny Wheep* (1926) were predominantly lyrical, and advocated the use of the Scots language; but in a manner more defamiliarising than couthy. His long poem, "A Drunk Man Looks At The Thistle" (1926) made overt his political and nationalistic aspirations, while continuing to explore the use of Scots in literary forms; and notably included translations, quotations or variations from Blok, Zippius, Lasker-Schüler, Rocher, Dostoyevsky, Mallarmé, Herman Melville and Dante. MacDiarmid was alert to world developments in literature, being one of the first to hail Wallace Stevens and befriending Ezra Pound. While never turning his back on Scots, later works extended this use of bricolage, and sought a synthesis of scientific and poetic discourses, most effectively in "On a Raised Beach" (from *Stony Limits*, 1934) and "In Memoriam James Joyce" (1955). He coined a memorable phrase, "the Caledonian antiszygy", meaning a peculiarly Scottish union of opposites, discrete psychologies suspended in equivalence, as a creative engine for the emerging nation. It has had an enduring legacy.



MacDiarmid inspired a generation of writers, many of them immortalised in Sandy Moffat's 1984 painting *Poets' Pub*. Sorley Maclean (1911-1996), the pre-eminent Gaelic poet of his generation, remembered the "miracle and mystery" of reading MacDiarmid. He originally shared many of MacDiarmid's Communist sympathies (though he later recanted, while MacDiarmid went on to praise the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia), and succeeded in a similar programme of modernisation in Gaelic as MacDiarmid had done in Scots. Maclean's Gaelic was not insular or "Celtic twilight", but engaged with its own circumstances as well as traditions. As he put it in his 1943 *Dàin do Eimhir*, this was a poetry that throve on "Yeats is Blok is Uilleam Ros" – "Yeats and Blok and William Ross" (1762-90, Gaelic poet).

Among the other poets were Sydney Goodsir Smith (whose novel, *Carotid Cornucopius*, (1947) was a valiant if flawed attempt at a Scottish *Ulysses*); Norman MacCaig, Robert Garioch (who translated Giuseppe Belli's sonnets into vigorous Scots); Iain Crichton Smith and the Orcadian George Mackay Brown (who derived inspiration from skaldic verse and the saga tradition).

MacDiarmid, like the dictators he admired, was fond of extravagant expulsions. Two are especially notable: Alexander Trocchi (1925-1984) and Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006). Trocchi was educated in Glasgow, and left for Paris on graduation. He was denounced by MacDiarmid at the 1962 Edinburgh Writer's Conference as "cosmopolitan scum" after Trocchi claimed that sodomy was the basis of his own writing. In Paris, he edited a magazine, *Merlin*, which published Sartre, Beckett, Henry Miller and Pablo Neruda. Working for the legendary and notorious Maurice Girodias, he also published two existentialist-nuanced novels, *Young Adam* and *Cain's Book*. He attempted to ignite an "invisible insurrection of a million minds" with his Sigma Project, was involved with Lettrism, the Situationist International and the Beat Poets, and succumbed to heroin addiction.

Ian Hamilton Finlay was a recipient of Trocchi's Sigma invitation, and was denounced by MacDiarmid (who had earlier been best man at his wedding) with the line "I wouldn't have him carve my gravestone". Finlay's career began with relatively conventional, if beautiful, works such as *The Dancers Inherit The Party* (1960) and *Glasgow Beasts, An A Burd* (1961). He became interested in Concrete Poetry, and in his magazine, *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse*, created one of the first UK platforms for the work of the Black Mountain School, the de Campos brothers, Eugen Gomringer, Ernst Jandl and Pedro Xisto. Finlay had already remarked that he felt "an absolute need to turn from the rhythmic to the static", and his greatest creation was a postmodern neoclassical garden of texts, growths, revolutions and dead-headings, Little Sparta. It was the site of a neo-Situationist confrontation with local authorities over tax rates, and its deployment of imagery derived from the French Revolution and Nazi Germany led the French critic Catherine Millet (who later published her paean to the jouissance of random sex-acts) to denounce Finlay as a supporter of the regimes whose icons



he transformed. Finlay is now acclaimed as the most significant artist of the 20th century in Scotland; but Little Sparta itself inadvertently raises the question of the Scottish artist's situation: it can only be seen in Scotland, but draws on a world beyond it.

One writer has had connections to both the MacDiarmid tradition and the latter "avant-garde" alternative, and has proved to be a dynamic inspiration to contemporary writers, both of prose and poetry: Edwin Morgan (born 1920). Morgan is widely acclaimed as the most significant poet from Scotland since MacDiarmid, and his work is similarly elusive in terms of distilling a quintessence from a similarly compendious imagination. He has written concrete poems, science-fiction poems, social realist poems (the so-called *Instamatics* and the later *Video Box* sequence), love poems, extended sonnet sequences of political import, dramatic monologues in the personae of such figures as the Loch Ness Monster, Shakespeare, a mummy, Hugh MacDiarmid, Marilyn Monroe, Byron, Jean Cocteau, a demon, his own cancerous cells and a sentient computer.

There is no collected edition of Morgan – as there is of MacDiarmid – since we are now dealing with a living author, whose own work constantly requires the critic to be fleet of foot over shifting sands. His *Collected Poems* (1949-87) does not include his *Books of Lives* (2007), his *Cathures* (2002), *Virtual and Other Realities* (1997); his *Collected Translations* (1959-96) have not caught up with his *Beowulf* (2002) or his *Sixty Poems of Attila József* (2001). His inventive closet plays – including translations from Racine, Rostand and the Gilgamesh-author; and a modern *Mystery Play, A.D. (2000)* – are yet to be issued in a single volume. There is an immense field to be mapped in Morgan's new cartographies of Scottishness.

Not least of these is his commitment to the process of translation: an early sci-fi poem, *The First Men on Mercury* imagines a meeting between humans, saying "We come in peace from the third planet" with Mercurians who reply "-Bawr stretter! Bawr. Bawr. Stretterhawl?" ending with the humans responding "Stretterworra gawl, gawl..." and the aliens concluding "- Of course, but nothing is ever the same, /now is it? You'll remember Mercury". Mercury – quicksilver – allows perfect exchange. Change and metamorphosis have been consistent themes throughout Morgan's oeuvre, encapsulated in the slogan "Change Rules". His outlook is profoundly humanistic and optimistic, and as such his influence can be seen in the work of such writers as Ali Smith and the "Informationist" poets.

Morgan has translated, among others, Mayakovsky, Montale, Weöres, Lorca, Yevtushenko, Neruda, Platen, Claudian, Heine and Michelangelo; his first published work was a translation of *Beowulf*. He has not yet been translated with such energetic curiosity.



The Prose Renaissance

In later critical literature, the publication of the novel *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981) by Alasdair Gray (born 1934) has become something of a foundation myth for contemporary Scottish writing. To quote Professor Douglas Gifford, *Lanark* “transforms not only perceptions, but the very perception of what is possible in both imagination and the writer’s craft. These changes enable not only a new faith in Scotland as being in the early days of a better country, but new awareness of the need to challenge political, gender and identity stereotypes. In short, the values and systems, private and public, moral, governmental and economic, that had borne down on post-war Scots were to be faced and challenged. In the 1980s, alongside enquiring and newly confident poetry and drama, this fiction helped to bring about a new and cautiously affirmative mood in Scottish writing and culture”.⁵ Countless younger Scottish writers have testified to the impact *Lanark* had on them. I myself remember the palpable frisson of first reading it in my sixth year at school.

Lanark is a very important book indeed; but its apotheosis as the Scottish novel of the 20th century needs to be examined: in fact, Gray’s latest novel, *Old Men in Love* (2007) is rather caustic about the accreted cultural significance of his first novel.

Certainly, neither *Lanark* nor Gray can be blamed for the frequent espousals – usually made by Scots arts bureaucrats – of a current “Golden Age” ushered in by that novel. As Allan Massie perceptively wrote in *The Spectator* (December 19th, 1998) “Talk of a cultural renaissance suggests there was an earlier death in the family. It’s hard to see when that was supposed to be”. As well as such figures as Robin Jenkins, George Friel, Jessie Kesson, Naomi Mitchison and Allan Massie himself, two figures stand out in the presupposed cultural hiatus before the 1980s: Muriel Spark (1918-2006) and William McIlvanney (born 1936).

Spark and McIlvanney can appear like polar opposites; novelistic equivalents of MacDiarmid’s Caledonian antiszygy or Stevenson’s Jekyll and Hyde. Spark is a supreme ironist, whose elegantly constructed novels rest more on realisation than revelation. McIlvanney is pre-eminently a political novelist, who has defined his aesthetics as “giving a voice to all those people who only exist in parish records”.⁶ Spark’s concern is the state of the soul; McIlvanney’s the state of the bank balance. Spark uses a stiletto; McIlvanney uses a broadsword. McIlvanney departed from conventional “literary” fiction with *Laidlaw*, a Dostoyevskian novel about crimes both legal and moral, which can be seen as a precursor to the contemporary vogue for Scottish crime writing (as in the work of Ian Rankin); his latest novel, *Weekend*, rests on interlocking, petty abuses that escalate into crimes. Spark, too, had a persisting fascination with the hinterland between correctitude and goodness; with her victim-novel, *The Driver’s Seat*, her re-imagining of Lord Lucan in *Aiding And Abetting*, the conspiracies in *The Abbess Of Crewe* and, above all, in the bewitching Fascism of the titular character in *The Prime Of Miss Jean Brodie*.



Neither, however, could be seen as “modernists”: although McIlvanney deployed, particularly in his masterpiece *Docherty*, sweeping, compendious overviews in the manner of Dos Passos, and has a Hemingway-esque capacity to understand brutality; and Spark flirted with self-generative fiction in *The Comforters* and can resemble Fitzgerald in her opaque economies – neither “fits” with the predominant tradition of modernist prose writing.

And neither does Gray. *Lanark* combines an artist’s bildungsroman with a fantastical variant to that life; includes an index of plagiarisms and a meeting with the Author; plays with typesetting, chronology and ekphrasis (it is, after all, a lavishly illustrated book where we never see the artist-hero’s work). The canonisation of *Lanark* can be seen most clearly in Anthony Burgess’s comments in *Ninety-Nine Novels: The Best in English since 1939*: it is “a shattering work of fiction in the modern idiom”. Few remember the previous part of the grab-quote. “A big and original novel has at last come out of Scotland... it was time Scotland produced a shattering work of fiction in the modern idiom”. The “at last” and “it was time”, for all Burgess’s sincere admiration of *Lanark*, sound like an English public school teacher chiding a recalcitrant scholarship boy about some overdue homework.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that under any sensible taxonomy, *Lanark* is more akin to a postmodern novel than to a Modernist novel. *Lanark* was thirty years in the writing, and has absorbed a great many traditions that post-date Modernism. It used similar textualist strategies to Nabokov, Borges, Nigel Dennis, B S Johnson, Calvino and Cortazar. It had some of the “maximalism” that typified John Barth, John Irving, Michael Moorcock and Anthony Burgess. It has affinities with the magic realism of Rushdie, Grass, the early Kundera and Marquez. The “magic realist” tag seemed to fit most snugly, (and most problematically) – this is, after all, a novel where people become “dragons”, or have mouths like sores over their bodies; a corporation is selling Time itself. Very few historians of Scottish literature fail to point out that *Lanark* appeared in the same year as Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*.

But “Magic Realism”, at least in its early stages, was a politicised genre. The suppressed “exoticism” of the other deflates the imperial narrative; the marginal becomes mainstream; the only hidden place is the dream, the fantasy or the passed-down myth. If *Lanark* voiced the complaints of the subjugated in a manner similar to USSR-oppressed, Junta-controlled or English-controlled nations, then Scotland too must now be “post-colonial”. It must also be, by extension, a nation. It must also be a victim. These factors greatly influence later prose writers.

Gray went on to write *1982 Janine* (1984) – the book he thinks is his masterpiece – about a pornography obsessed and politically reactionary itinerant salesman of surveillance and security devises going through a “long night of the soul”.



It is even more typographically inventive than *Lanark*. The novel creates a link between the sadomasochistic fantasies of subjection in the narrator Jock McLeish's impotent attempts at masturbation with the "subjected" status of Scotland itself: McLeish is an anomaly brought into existence by the country's psychic malaise. This interest in sexual/political co-dependence resurfaced in *Something Leather* (1990), in rather less intense or interesting form. Gray's award-winning *Poor Things* (1992), a nest of Chinese boxes that rewrite the Frankenstein myth; and, incidentally, the novel closest to textualist and magic realist forms, countered accusations of misogyny. It is a clearly "feminist" text, with the central female character finally being allowed to counter the myth that she – and feminism – were created by two damaged men in an act of grotesque vivisection and reanimation.

Gray's work is exuberant, satirical and ingenious. Above all, he thrives on and strives for Glasgow as a city available to the rest of the world through its imagined representation in works of art. As such, he was certainly influenced by Joyce's approach to Dublin, Bely's to St Petersburg and Grass's to Danzig/Gdansk. Nonetheless, he remains more aligned with Postmodernism: it is to another writer, James Kelman, to whom we should look for Scotland's Modernism in the novel.

James Kelman (born 1946) would have first come to the attention of most readers through his inclusion in the Index of Plagiarisms in *Lanark* (early work appeared through Puckerbrush Press in the USA and Molendinar Press in Glasgow; *Lanark* included a whole short story as a side-note). Polygon Press (then run by Edinburgh University) issued a collection of stories, *Not Not While The Giro* (1983) and his first novel, *The Busconductor Hines* (1984).

The subtlety in Kelman's use of language was reinforced to me while writing this essay. My computer's spell-check jibs at "busconductor" and insists on "bus conductor". It was that kind of linguistic enforcement that Kelman derailed with *The Busconductor Hines*. Although dialect, patois, slang and regional variation had been used in novels beforehand – by Hardy, by Verga, by McIlvanney – it was rarely allowed outside of inverted commas. Kelman created a third person novel with a first person narrator; an omnipotence sensitised to/by/through the individual. As such, his work can be read in purely Modernist terms. Kelman, like Woolf, Broch or Kafka (a favourite author of Kelman's) subverts the "god-like narrator" from within rather than without. Kelman does so from a position of being excluded from the perceived norm of the literary narrator; it is a political necessity rather than an aesthetic experiment. It has led Kelman into some problematic areas: how can one be the "voice" of the excluded and yet still speak to them, rather than their masters? Hines himself has little time for literature.



Kelman's career exemplifies this dilemma. His novel *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994) won the prestigious Booker Prize. The establishment it sought to unhinge supposedly sanctioned it. The media fracas afterwards, where one of the judges (Julia Neuberger) called it "a disgrace" concentrated on the impropriety of language primarily: it was a screwed-up nose rather than a critical debate.

Kelman, Gray, McIlvanney and Spark are very different authors with very different agendas: yet they all have a common theme. Their works never depict someone wholly escaping their past, be it grounded in theology, class, metaphysics, history or love. It is a pessimistic legacy that has somehow flourished, and found its own echoes outside of Scotland.

The Contemporary Scene: Poetry

The key anthology for contemporary Scottish poetry is *Dream State*, edited by Donny O'Rourke (Polygon, 1994; expanded second edition, 2002). In the introduction to the first edition, O'Rourke quotes Morgan approvingly as the guiding spirit of the volume: "I feel the present moment of Scottish history very strongly and want to acknowledge it, despite the fact that my interests extend to languages, genres and disciplines outwith Scotland or its traditions. Much modern Scottish poetry differs from poetry in the rest of the British isles by being written in Gaelic or in some form of Scots, but my point would be even if it were written in English it may be part of a hardly definable intent in the author to help build up the image of poetry which his country presents to the world".

Time and again in the best poetry of the 1980s and 1990s, the "matter of Scotland" comes to the fore. A brief survey of titles attest to this: John Burnside's "Exile's Return", Carol Ann Duffy's "Translating The English", Robert Crawford's "A Scottish Assembly", Iain Bamforth's "Calvinist Geography", David Kinloch's "Braveheart", W N Herbert's "Cabaret MacGonagall", Kathleen Jamie's "The Republic of Fife", Richard Price's "Renfrewshire In Old Photographs", Roddy Lumsden's "A Saltire".

It would be rash – and, indeed, against the spirit of the poems themselves – to attempt to identify a "Scottish gene" shared by all the poets currently writing in Scotland. If diversity is a sign of health, then it is uncontroversial to say that Scottish poetry is flourishing. Carol Ann Duffy has presented an alternative, feminised history in *The World's Wife* (1999) and *Feminine Gospels* (2002); John Burnside's poetry has become increasingly concerned with trans-human and trans-historical moments of grace (a theology related to that of Paul Tillich's idea of the numinous) in such collections as *The Light Trap* (2001) and *Gift Songs* (2007). Poets such as David Kinloch, Jackie Kay, Kathleen Jamie, Liz Lochhead and Tom Leonard have interrogated the concept of nationality through the lenses of sexuality, ecology, stereotype, class, race and exclusion.



If there were any “movement” in the contemporary Scottish poetic scene, it would have been “Informationism”, a term coined by Richard Price and applied to the work of many of the *Dream State* poets. Although, as Zadie Smith said, any literary taxonomy “is always too large a net, catching significant dolphins among so much cannable tuna”, it is nonetheless a convenient hook on which to hang many shared concerns.

Informationist strategies include a high degree of linguistic inventiveness, especially in Scots; the inclusion of “non-poetic” forms such as technical manuals, advertising slogans, tourist brochures, library catalogues and such like; the lyric possibilities of “found” texts and the suspension of radically different registers within a single poetic field. It has its roots in MacDiarmid’s scientism and antiszygy and Morgan’s ventriloquism. Robert Crawford, for example, wrote scintillating Scots poems which were then “translated” into an almost unreadable formal English: for example “auld jorrums tae reconduct / Aureat thru lingua franca” becomes “old slow, melancholy boat songs to reconduct high diction through common speech” (in “Fur thi Muse o Synthesis”). In W N Herbert’s *Bad Shaman Blues* (2005), he writes a miniature Scots epic, “Rabotnik Fergusson”, which not only uses Scots language, but is written solely in Scottish verse forms (such as Standard Habbie or Montgomerie’s “Cherrie and Slae” stanza) to conduct the reader through a purgatorial history of the misprision of Scots writers.

It is a truism that poetry is untranslatable: in the case of Scottish poets it is also true. There is an irony in the fact that as Scots as a literary language becomes self-aware, self-confident and self-generative, it also locks itself more absolutely into its own linguistic system. The creative tension between Scots and English cannot be paralleled in any other language: the relationship between Catalan and Castilian Spanish, or Provençal and French, or Sardinian and Italian do not replicate the Scots/English spectrum. As such, a poem like Robert Crawford’s “Scotland”, translated into French in the special Scottish edition of the magazine *Digraphe* is often almost not translated at all: “epitaxies of tweed” becomes “des epitaxies de tweed”. Don Paterson’s fictitious French source, “François Aussemain” may stand as a metaphor for the relationship between the Scots poet and the wider world: we fundamentally fictionalise the sense of a dialogue. Translation from a non-existent source is a peculiarly Scottish doublethink: from the Ossian poems of James MacPherson in the 1770s to Frank Kuppner’s wonderful re-imagination of the lost poems of Heraclitus.

Translation into Scots and English has, conversely, proved a profitable area. Amongst the finest examples are James Robertson’s version of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*; Don Paterson’s versions of Machado and Rilke; Robin Robertson’s forthcoming *Medea*; Donny O’Rourke and Richard Price’s double translation of Apollinaire, *Afters/Eftirs*; W N Herbert’s work with Yang Lian; Gavin Bowd’s translations of Guillevic and Houellebecq; Frank Kuppner’s variants on Fitzgerald’s translation of Omar Khayyam.



In drama too, Liz Lochhead and Edwin Morgan have pioneered translations of Racine, Molière and Rostand, and a particularly fruitful relationship has emerged between Scots translators and the Quebecois playwright, Michel Tremblay, and the Italian Nobel Prize-winner Dario Fo. The Scottish Poetry Library has been especially proactive in forging links with other small countries. In four anthologies (*At The End Of The Broken Bridge*; *How To Address The Fog*; *Lights Off Water* and *The Night Begins With A Question*) they have presented, respectively, twenty-five Hungarian, Finnish, Catalan and Austrian poets.

Mention should be made of Kenneth White, the only Scottish poet both translated into French and published in Gallimard's prestigious *Oeuvres Complètes* series. White's crypto-Romantic "geopoetics" have proved far more popular in France than in his native Scotland. Stylistically, he favours a "transparent" verse, which may indeed have contributed to his accessibility to European readers.

The Contemporary Scene: Fiction

Scottish fiction has had a far larger impact in translation than Scottish poetry, and, through the writing of popular authors such as Ian Rankin, Alexander McCall Smith and Louise Welsh has reached a vast audience. The renewed sense of vigour in prose that followed the achievements of Gray, Spark, McLlvanney and Kelman has led to an extremely diverse novelistic culture.

The most well known text is probably Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993); a book made even more conspicuous by its stage adaptation and the later feature film. The differing priorities of textual and cinematic narrative effectively imposed a more conventional structure on Welsh's text, rendering it more causal and less disconnected. Welsh's later oeuvre has not fulfilled the promise of *Trainspotting*: nonetheless, it remains a significant work in its own right. Although Welsh drew on the legacy of Trocchi, Kelman and, to an extent, the *nostalgie de la boue* discernible in such books as *No Mean City* (1935) there are also parallels with the work of Louis-Ferdinand Céline and William Burroughs. A kind of "simultaneous evolution" can be seen in other novelists who wished to capture the specific idiolects and moral compromises of disenfranchised communities: as such Welsh is first cousin to such writers as Faiza Guène, Feridun Zaimoglu and the "McOndo" group founded by Alberto Fuguet.

Irvine Welsh was part of a rough grouping of young Scottish writers who first came to prominence through Kevin Williamson's Rebel Inc., and Duncan MacLean's Clocktower Press. Amongst the most prominent are Alan Warner (who is more interested in gothic, mytho-poetic narratives, and who aligns his own novels to those of Juan Carlos Onetti. He has also written well on Sadegh Hedayat) and MacLean himself (a perceptive commentator on Knut Hamsun). The Rebel Inc. Classics, now out of print, established the kind of critical milieu in which these writers wished to be read: transgressive, politically radicalised, non-realist but concerned with the surreal conditions of late capitalism.



Although the earlier flourishings of Scottish literature were predominantly conducted by, among and for men, there has been a tangible rise in the number of female novelists: of especial note are A L Kennedy, Janice Galloway and Ali Smith. A L Kennedy, in conversation with me, was exceptionally astute in analysing her own set of influences. On one hand, as she said “the amount of foreign literature available here is just pitiful” – hence, influence would be piecemeal and partial; on the other, she insisted that having read a book is not the same as an influence. She herself has read widely in magical realist texts, particularly from South America, but, it seems, reads in order to know what has been done in order to do things differently, rather than to construct a pedigree, genealogy or provenance for her work.

Kennedy’s writing – like Smith’s and Galloway’s – resists a critical overview. Her work tends towards the anatomisation of specific emotions or states of mind (alcoholism in *Paradise*; post-war trauma in *Day*; dissociation in *So I Am Glad*; yearning – or need – in *Everything You Need*). But this broad description belies the fundamental ambiguities in her work, and ignores the range of styles by which she examines her characters. Many critics have overlooked the wonderful humour and sly ironies of her prose: in part, this may be caused by her deft and experimental use of the free indirect style, often moving into the second person to create a strange sense of both intimacy and exclusion. Kennedy’s work is inconceivable in previous generations of writing: it’s a kind of Calvinist Irony, close and claustrophobic, redemptive and preterite, deeply moving and taut against displays of emotion.

Janice Galloway’s prose encompasses both the personal, fragmented narrative of *The Trick Is To Keep Breathing* and the historical, holistic narration of *Clara*, her novel about Clara Schumann. Certain typographical *jeux d’esprit* in her early work might suggest a comparison with Gray, but Galloway’s use of these intersected formats is actually closer to Informationist poetics: her characters are co-opted into using the words of others in their own internal monologues, in a manner equal but opposite to Kennedy’s style. In *Clara* she provides a necessary counterpoint to the “inclusive” voice of the Rebel Inc. group: her exclusions are gendered, historical, unchosen and persisting.

Ali Smith is wholeheartedly exuberant in comparison with Kennedy’s introverted and Galloway’s extroverted use of voice: she is far more ventriloquary, and more than any contemporary novelist, has applied the aesthetics of Edwin Morgan to continuous prose. Her work is theoretically aware without being theoretically beholden: as Robert Crawford has pointed out, her decision to have the right margin of her texts printed unjustified creates an unnoticed open-ness to her work. *Hotel World*, *The Accidental* and *Girl Meets Boy* all allow the reader to become the wry omniscience haunting the character’s lives; her short stories (especially *The Whole Story and Other Stories* and *Other Stories and Other Stories*) may be as much about the love of reading as those of Borges; but she concentrates on the love more than the reading.



How do these writers fit within a community of writing beyond Scottishness? Possibly best by fitting in with the other difficult-to-place writers. At a future literary event, I can easily imagine Galloway with Lucía Etxebarría; Kennedy with Elfriede Jelinek and Smith with Vincent Delecroix or Amélie Nothomb. These are all “parallel developments”: they are mutually anomalous.

James Robertson has enjoyed much success in translation, and (given his subject matter) in the Anglophone world. Robertson’s novels – *The Fanatic*, *Joseph Knight* and *The Testament of Gideon Mack* – all deal with wholly “Scottish” material (as opposed to Kennedy dealing with *Cyrano de Bergerac*; Galloway addressing Clara Schumann and Ali Smith subverting the English country house). In each case, a significant piece of Scottish history – a monstrous preacher, the slave of an exile and a swithering man haunted by local legends – is used to highlight the contemporary debates and dramas about nationality and rationality. Robertson’s writing is akin to the Italian “Wu Ming Foundation” and their novels, and has a clear resemblance to Eduardo Mendoza, Julio Llamazares and Ilija Trojanow.

Andrew Crumey is perhaps unique in that his works are more acclaimed abroad than at home (for example, he was reviewed favourably by Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times*, and has sold more foreign rights than many of the novelists lauded in his homeland). There is a clear “European” feel to Crumey’s work – whether through updating Diderot in *Pfitz*, conspiring to make minor characters in Rousseau’s *Confessions* major players in his own *Mr Mee* or imagining the Thomas Mann of an alternate universe (and writing his books) in *Mobius Dick*. Crumey – who, it should be said, studied physics and not literature – draws on Nabokov, Eco and Borges rather than McIlvanney, Spark and Kelman. He may be ripe for postmodernist criticism, but argued against it eloquently in various journalistic articles.

Some novelists are, regrettably, not yet known to the wider world, whether Anglophone or not. Two in particular that I would highlight are Frank Kuppner and Andrew Drummond. Kuppner (a poet as well as a prose writer) created a mélange of personal grief, intertextual intrigue and true crime with two books that predate W G Sebald but seem utterly in that crossing-all-genres genre (*Something Like A Murder* and *A Very Quiet Street*). Andrew Drummond has written a lovely novel about translation, its impossibility and its necessity, *Volapük*, and consistently explores the surrealism of history itself. It seems apt to end this overview with a novel about the internecine feuds over universal communication.



The Future

Scotland, as was referred to at the beginning of this essay, retained a sense of itself through cultural, rather than political, difference. The period between 1979 (when the first devolution bill was rejected) and 1997 (when it was won) was particularly fertile for Scots writers. Many commentators suggested that the achievement of political goals effectively castrated the cultural demand. Yet more books, and better books, by Scottish writers were published after the referendum, and most obviously, they did not concern themselves with solely Scottish affairs, but with a wider cultural agenda.

At the same time, it seems to this writer at least that cultural self-confidence has not yet translated into a more vibrant emerging literature. It may be that the establishment of "Creative Writing" schools has too often sought to parrot past success and to imitate "Scottish" work than to inspire new, forward-thinking, genuinely radical and outward-looking forms of writing. In this and other respects we should heed Kundera's caveat: "A nation's possessiveness toward its artists works as a small-context terrorism, reducing the whole meaning of a work to the role it plays in its homeland."⁷ Meanwhile, there are few debut astonishments. Certain cultural trends – such as the rise of the McSweeney's Group in the States and the associated genre of "hysterical realism", or the preponderance of multigenerational sagas to explore the condition of the postcolonial in Indian writing – have had little impact on contemporary Scottish writing thus far.

Astonishments might be encouraged through a more open participation in the literature of the rest of the world. We have staged a robust, sometimes fractious, sometimes revelatory process of self-exploration. The lessons we have learned in the process have universal application. Now is the time to listen to the rest of the world and to make the rest of the world at home in Scotland. After all, it was Scots (Edwin Muir and Scott-Montcrieff) who brought Kafka and Proust to a wider audience and it was, among others, Frenchmen (Denis Saurat, André Gide), a Hungarian (György Lukács) and an Argentinian (Jorge Luis Borges) that made us aware of our own hidden riches.

- 1 Milan Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts* (Faber, 2007)
- 2 Carla Sassi, *Why Scottish Literature Matters* (Saltire Society, 2005)
- 3 Michael Fry, *The Union: Scotland, England and the Treaty of 1707* (Birlinn, 2006)
- 4 Andrew Marr, *The Battle for Scotland* (Penguin, 1995)
- 5 Douglas Gifford, *From Modern to Contemporary in Scottish Fiction* in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, vol. III (Edinburgh University Press, 2006)
- 6 In interview with the author, as published in *The Daily Telegraph* (27th August 2006)
- 7 Milan Kundera, op cit