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# Was there ever a 'British' Literature?

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I am a Scotsman and proud of it.  
Never call me British. I'll tell you why.  
It's too near brutish, having only  
The difference between U and I.  
Scant difference, you think? Yet  
Hell-deep and Heavenhigh!

– *Hugh MacDiarmid*

T.S. Eliot, in a famous review of 1919, asked 'Is there a Scottish Literature?' and concluded that there had been once but there was no longer. This was part of a strategic politico-literary move to oust Matthew Arnold from his central place as arbiter of taste in English letters and instate Eliot himself as critic-magus. His individual talent would realign the Tradition and coalesce American and English literature in English-language writing. Scottish literature had been a valid contributor along the way, but had no contemporary currency. According to Eliot, Burns was the last example of a decadent tradition.

It's well-known how Eliot, more English than the English, heading from Missouri to High Anglicanism, followed a different path from Ezra Pound, who abandoned America for London, abandoned London for European high culture and abandoned the botched civilisations of the west for the Classics of ancient China. In retrospect, Pound's ever-expanding intellectual career looks more like one of cultural inclusiveness and accommodation, rather than anything narrowing, even if the last *Cantos* are desperately moving in their lyrical self-portrait of loneliness and exhaustion. But compare Eliot and William Carlos Williams. In his autobiography, Williams called Eliot's betrothal to Anglocentric letters the great betrayal. Not too strong a term for Williams, a poet who had to rediscover and redescribe 'the American grain' – a distinctive tradition in American literature, a vernacular voice local to that place. When Eliot disparaged the contemporary viability of Scottish literature, he was only echoing what had been said a hundred years before him about American literature itself. Was there any? Robert Creeley once told me that even at Black Mountain, in the 1950s, as distinguished a writer as George Barker could ask him the same question.

In this light, consider the violent argument between Edwin Muir and Hugh MacDiarmid in 1936. Lewis Grassie Gibbon and MacDiarmid were



commissioning editors of a series of books about contentious issues in Scotland: Edwin Muir was invited to write about Walter Scott and Scotland, but he turned in a book which effectively attacked the achievement of writers who had worked in the Scots language. What he said was that the great Irish writers – Joyce and Yeats pre-eminently – had won international acclaim and achieved great literary worth through writing in English and this was the way forward for Scottish writers too. More than that. He said it was the *only* way forward for Scottish writers. He wrote that ‘Scotland can only create a national literature by writing in English.’ He asserted that the chief requirement for a national literature was a homogeneous national language and that Scots was no use for that. Only English would do. In this Muir was merely echoing Eliot, who in the 1919 *Athenaeum* essay had written: ‘The basis for one literature is one language.’ By which he meant his own brand of the English language. There was no place for Scots in this dispensation.

Let’s sample it. What happens to a MacDiarmid lyric in Scots if you translate it into English? There’s a poem MacDiarmid published in the 1920s which derives from the German poet, Stefan George. It catches the sense of the relation between spirit and form brilliantly and memorably. And that relation between spirit and form is an inherent quality in language itself. The poem seems to be about something you can’t grasp or understand or comprehend, something that changes its shape between one breath and another and might seem to disappear, perhaps at the moment of death. Yet at the end, MacDiarmid identifies this quality as the thing that gives you courage and the wild and eager kiss that is always burning into your soul, something painful, inspiring and vital. Maybe this is what we’re trying to indicate in literary studies, most essentially, what art might possess and remind us of, something otherwise ineffable, unsayable, but you recognise it instantly.

‘You Know Not Who I Am’  
*After the German of Stefan George*

Ye kenna wha I am – but this is fac’.  
I ha’ena yet by ony word or ac’  
Made mysel’ human ... an’ sune I maun tak’  
Anither guise to ony I’ve yet ta’en.  
I’ll cheenge: an’ yet my ain true sel’ I’ll hain,  
Tine only what ye ken as me. I’ vain,  
Ye’ll seek to haud me, an’ ye needna murn,  
For to a form ye canna ken I’ll turn  
’Twixt ae braith an’ the neist: an when I’m gane  
Ye’ll ha’e o’ me what ye ha’e haen o’ a’  
My kindred since licht on earth ‘good da’ –  
*The braith that gies ye courage, an’ the fain  
Wild kiss that aye into yer saul maun burn.*

‘You Know Not Who I Am’  
*After the German of Stefan George*

You know not who I am – but this is fact  
I have not yet by any word or act  
Made myself human ... and soon I must take  
Another guise to any I’ve yet taken.  
I’ll change: and yet my own true self I’ll keep,  
Losing only what you know as me. In vain  
You’ll try to hold me, and you need not mourn,  
For to a form you cannot know I’ll turn  
Between one breath and the next: and when I’m gone  
You’ll have of me what you have had of all  
My kindred since light on earth began to dawn –  
*The breath that gives you courage, and the eager  
Wild kiss that always into your soul must burn.*

The poem works in the Scots version in a different way. It's as if the Scots poem is a painting by Bonnard or Nolde. It has a different kind of authenticity. The English is more like a black-and-white photograph. Everything's in place in the English version. There's nothing ungraspable. But the Scots is both present and somehow elusive, hard and real but also moving fast and emotionally quick. Your voice has to shift more quickly. It's a quality you could see in Van Gogh's paintings. It's not painting-by-numbers. It's not just colouring-in. It's a heightening.

When Muir declared that Scottish literature could only go forward in English, MacDiarmid was enraged. MacDiarmid's whole point was that there are different languages in Scotland, different voices – not only English but also Gaelic and Scots, voices of women as well as of men, and they all needed to find articulation in literature. He responded to Muir by editing *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* (1943; repr. Canongate, 1991), which includes poems translated not only from Gaelic but also from Latin, as well as poems in Scots and English – but nothing by Muir!

But maybe Muir had a point too. The Irish writers *do* have an international cachet – a readership, especially in English and American universities – which is usually denied the Scots writers. And this is at least partly because the language allows them to be accommodated more quickly.

But is that a good enough answer?

'All dreams of imperialism must be exorcised,' MacDiarmid wrote once. '...Including linguistic imperialism, which sums up all the rest.'

The long hand of the law continues to finger your collar.

In Michael Alexander's *A History of English Literature* (Palgrave 'Foundations' series, 2000), we read: 'Now that English is a world language, this history needs to be supplemented by accounts of other literatures in English...' So far, so open-minded. However (next paragraph), 'This volume is not a survey of present-day writing in English, but a history of English literature.' The national identity has very quickly become coterminous with the national language. Next sentence: 'The author, an Englishman resident in Scotland for over thirty years, is aware that a well-meant English embrace can seem imperial even within a devolving Britain.' Good intentions lead the way to Walter Raleigh and Ireland up against a tree. Consequences? Robert Louis Stevenson listed under 'Minor fiction': he was 'once famous' but 'his work faded'. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* 'makes a bonny film' says Professor Alexander (a friendly word embracing its own superiorism) but 'has dated' and 'disappoints adult re-reading' – which was not Henry James's opinion. *Jekyll and Hyde*, said James, is 'the most serious' tale, 'endlessly interesting, and rich in all sorts of provocation, and Mr Stevenson is to be congratulated on having touched the core of it.' And how does Hugh MacDiarmid fare in this



*History of English Literature?* Professor Alexander tells us he ‘would not want house-room in a Sassenach literary history’ – and ostensibly honouring MacDiarmid’s putative wishes, Professor Alexander gives him none.

Incidentally, the American scholar Professor Nancy Gish has an excellent essay on Stevenson in the on-line *International Journal of Scottish Literature* (no.2), which rightly sees *Jekyll and Hyde* as equally prophetic of modernism and twentieth-century concerns as Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*. But Alexander’s relegation of the Scots takes its part in a long tradition that goes back at least as far as Johnson responding to Boswell’s suggestion that he could teach the good Doctor the Scots language so that he could enjoy Allan Ramsay’s play *The Gentle Shepherd*. Johnson shook his head. ‘I won’t learn it. You shall retain your superiority by my not knowing it.’ Instead he authorised English and the Enlightenment followed his example and our education system followed theirs.

This is a choice of privilege not based on literary merit but political provenance. In Neil Corcoran’s *English Poetry since 1940*, we meet W.S. Graham and Douglas Dunn alongside numerous familiar suspects from Ireland, and the tutelary spirits are Louis MacNeice and – guess who? – Edwin Muir. But again, scarcely a mention of MacDiarmid.

It’s not that Alexander and Corcoran are bad critics, but that the political context of these books and many others, and the ideology that sustains the publishing and education industries that help produce them, are not innocent.

In our profession as university teachers of literature, the whole matter of curriculum development is normally a vexed history of vested interests, warring clans and factions, protected properties and proprieties, and personal animosities. Another familiar story perhaps is the extent to which James Joyce was excluded from the English literature curriculum until such time as it might accommodate him. A further accommodation might be noted in the shift from the distinctive category ‘Anglo-Irish Literature’ (famously, pioneeringly and valuably described by A. Norman Jeffares in the 1970s and defined in his 1982 book of that title as ‘written in English by Irish authors’) to an inclusive category called ‘Irish Literature’ that brought consideration of Anglo-Irish writing and writing in Irish Gaelic together, even when the latter could only be encountered in translation. The earliest example of this I can remember is Seamus Deane’s *A Short History of Irish Literature* (1986).

Deane’s effort to include a sense of linguistic, cultural, social and political difference in his comprehensive sense of national identity is very different from the imperial example that settles on the slippery elision of ‘English’ as language and nation.

Which bring us back to the ‘British’ question.



Seamus Heaney, who is the last writer considered fully in Alexander's book and takes a major place in Corcoran's, famously wrote a poem entitled 'An Open Letter' to the editors of *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion (Harmondsworth, 1982), who had included him. Heaney admits he was hesitant and doubtful whether he should complain, because he knew that since he published in the *London Review of Books*, the *Times Literary Supplement* and *The Listener*, and his books were published by Eliot's publisher Faber and Faber, his readership is inevitably (though not exclusively), 'British': but he insists that he must 'demur' because 'My passport's green.'

No glass of ours was ever raised  
To toast *The Queen*.

'No harm to her' he immediately qualifies, but 'from the start her reign ... would not combine / What I'd espouse.'

This gentle, friendly retreat from the flag of the book's title is a lot more deferential than the attitude summed up wittily in MacDiarmid's poem quoted at the head of this essay. To British readers, perhaps Heaney's is a more attractive, less challenging attitude. It's worth noting that MacDiarmid's poem was also occasional, prompted by the invitation to contribute to a special weekend edition of the traditionally Unionist Edinburgh-based newspaper *The Scotsman* put together for the Sir Walter Scott centennial celebrations (and was published in it, 14 August 1971, p.3).

Examples could be multiplied and ironies abound.

In the eighteenth century, writing in English, James Thomson (1700–48), in his poem *The Seasons* (1730), essentially invented the genre of landscape poetry for the British imagination. Tobias Smollett (1721–71), in the novel *Humphry Clinker* (1771), wrote of an expedition through Britain in which Scots and English people encounter each other as if for the first time as Britons. At almost exactly the same time, Boswell and Johnson were visiting the Highlands as if it was a very foreign country. They were silenced when they walked across Culloden moor. This newly-forged sense of 'British' identity is crystallised in James Thomson's anthem, 'Rule Britannia' – though it was originally written as a song to be performed in a vehemently anti-Jacobite London musical.

But can we read this work in the context of what else was going on at the time, in Scottish literature?

The vernacular Scots tradition in the eighteenth century runs from Allan Ramsay (1685–1758), who not only wrote poetry and drama but valuably anthologised earlier Scottish poetry, asserting the continuity of the tradition,



through Robert Fergusson (1750–74), a great poet of Edinburgh, to Robert Burns and Walter Scott, both men of the Enlightenment who come forward into the Romantic era. They both have characteristically mixed feelings about the French Revolution and the American Declaration of Independence, but they both support the humanitarian ideals involved. They combine Apollonian Enlightenment ideals of social order with Romantic individualism and championship of common humanity. The heroine of Scott's great novel *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818) is Jeanie Deans – a common cowherd's daughter. For Burns, Dionysiac abandon raises Tam o' Shanter above the ills of life. Whatever rich or royal folk might possess, common humanity is life's real gold.

Also in the late eighteenth century, there was a great efflorescence of Gaelic poetry, one of the most memorable poems by Duncan Ban MacIntyre (1724–1812) being 'In Praise of Ben Doran' which describes the beautiful mountain and the excitement of the hunt for deer over its slopes and through its forests. Nature in the poem is bodily exhilarating and bloody. The deer is beautiful but it is to be shot, gralloched and made ready for the pot. It is sublime but also physically realistic. A good translation is in *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry*.

Given the diversity of traditions and languages in Scottish literature, the provenance of 'English literature' and the pinching encroachments of 'British literature' seem increasingly narrowing. Imperialism is founded on ignorance of otherness, grounded on fear and assertion. In the small-town, village and rural worlds so beautifully described by Jane Austen and George Eliot, questions of nation and empire rarely seem relevant. Charles Dickens, in *Bleak House*, has Mrs Jellyby more concerned with the shortcomings of life in Borrioboola-gha than with what's happening in her own home, even when her babies are bouncing down the stairwell. Something of the poignancy of the predicament had been perfectly caught by Wordsworth in 'The Solitary Reaper' where he asks us to consider the plight of his own ignorance: 'Will no one tell me what she sings?' (A recent study by J.H. Prynne explores this problem of the circumscription of the English-language reader brilliantly.) Wordsworth's poem about his own ignorance of Scots Gaelic is a more appealing confession of inadequacy than Johnson's dismissal of Boswell's offer to teach him Scots.

But where does that leave us now, those of us still limited by our language, who would nevertheless like to read more deeply in Scottish literature and study its distinctive traditions?

With a lot of work still to do.

Scottish literature is arguably the most under-researched area of modern cultural and literary studies. The National Library of Scotland, Scottish university libraries, the Mitchell library in Glasgow – all have archive material that has never been fully explored by professional scholars.



While Irish literature is widely recognised as a valuable area of study it is still possible for people all over the world to be simply ignorant of the story of Scotland's distinctive literary history. Alongside this there is an international recognition of Scotland's icons – instantly recognisable images: tartan, kilts, bagpipes, heather, whisky and Mel Gibson in *Braveheart*.

The icons all have their history, connected with the obscurity into which our literature has fallen. That history is rooted in the nineteenth century, when two things happened to Scotland: it became instantly identifiable by these images – and it became invisible, part of a greater state, the British Empire. Scotland was not known as Scotland then but rather as 'North Britain'. Its role was one of imperial service. In the same century, the country was rapidly industrialised. Glasgow was known as the Second City of the Empire – only after London in importance. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, most Scottish people lived in the country, as they had done for centuries – a rural, agricultural economy prevailed. By the end of the century, most people lived in the industrial cities, especially Glasgow. What encouraged this rapid growth was Scotland's position in the British Empire and to grasp that you have to go back a few hundred years, first to 1603 and then to 1707, when two different events deepened and cemented a union with England that now, in the twenty-first century, looks rather crumbly. At the British Labour Party conference of 2007, the Prime Minister (a Unionist Scot) used the word 'British' or its cognates about 81 times, according to one report. It seemed a little too insistent, evidently prompted by the success of the Scottish National Party in winning the 2007 election to govern a devolved parliament in Edinburgh. There is unfinished business here.

Ask most readers who the greatest English writer of all time is and they'll probably say Shakespeare. Why? Three reasons. One is simply that he was Shakespeare – inimitable. But there are two others that allowed him to be himself. One was the theatre. He had a medium that encouraged him to write plays. The other was the political climate he lived through. That changed radically when in 1603 Queen Elizabeth I of England died and King James VI of Scotland rode south to become King James I of an abruptly United Kingdom. The Elizabethan world – you might say, the late medieval and early Renaissance world – shifted suddenly into the Jacobean – or early modern – world. In this new dispensation, Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* and *King Lear* and his later plays. They all owe something to a new sensibility that was coming to prevail in the world he knew.

After 1603, Scotland had no court but it still had its parliament. But later that century, the richest Scots invested their money in a colonial venture at Darien on the isthmus of Panama, believing they could begin their own Scottish colonial empire. This was disastrous. Through bribery and false promises,



they succumbed to persuasion, dissolved the Scottish parliament and sent the Scots representatives to London. They threw in their lot with the newly-constructed British economy. The Scottish parliament voted itself out of existence in May 1707. Robert Burns (1759–96) was to write that we had been ‘bought and sold for English gold’ and that the Scots who had approved the Union were ‘a parcel of rogues’.

There was resistance. The Jacobite rising of 1745, led by another Scottish icon, Bonnie Prince Charlie, was not exactly Scottish nationalist but the threat it posed to the frail young economy of the United Kingdom was real. Therefore the reprisals against the Highlanders after Culloden in 1746 were severe. This created a peculiar situation in Scotland. For a time, bagpipes – that great musical instrument of war – tartan kilts, and the Gaelic language itself, were made illegal. They became symbols of their own force of cultural identity.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Walter Scott (1771–1832) wrote the first of his great series of novels, *Waverley* (1814), he gave it the subtitle *'Tis Sixty Years Since*: in other words, enough time had elapsed for people on both sides of the border not to feel violent. We could read about events rather than draw swords. When Scott orchestrated the visit of King George IV to Edinburgh, he persuaded the king to wear a kilt, thus granting royal approval to Highland clothing as characteristically Scottish ‘fancy dress’. By the late nineteenth century, all the iconic images – kilts, bagpipes and so on – became internationally known through mass media – first through postcards and paintings by artists such as Landseer (‘The Monarch of the Glen’ looks proudly independent but, in T.S. Eliot’s words, is ‘bred for the rifle’). Later came the exaggenerations of radio, film and television. Scotland became well known, but these images did not represent the industrial cities and there was no place for deeper studies of Scottish literature or any other more serious forms of artistic production.

To begin to grasp the story of Scottish literature, we need to go much further back.

Literature is predicated on love of language and stories. The intrinsic optimism of curiosity takes us further as we study the subject, but poetry and song move us because we’re sensitive to the dance of language, patterns of syllables and meaning in sound. The most complex modern novels still arise from our sense of what makes a good story – bewilderment, discovery, finding out about things, where you are, where love can be found, what are the forces at work against it.

Scotland’s literature begins with the pre-Christian Celtic stories and songs of people who moved freely between what we now call Ireland and Scotland.





Cúchulainn, normally thought of as a 'purely' Irish figure, was taught the arts of war by a woman called Scáthach at Dunsgiath, on the Isle of Skye. Deirdre and Naoise, whose love story is one of the great tragedies, spent their happiest years in Scotland. Her song of farewell ('Deirdre's Lament', which can be found on the 2-disc CD set, *Scotland's Music*, LINN CKD 008) is one of the loveliest evocations of departure, simply naming the valleys and mountains and rivers she knows she will never see again. Later, the image of the bard Ossian, son of Finn, returning to a Christianised world after the great warriors have all passed from the story, is a potent image of haunting and loss – an image that sets a character-stamp on a quality of Scottish poetry, running right through to the great modern Scottish Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean and his most powerful poem, 'Hallaig'.

Perhaps this is the first key to understanding Scottish literature generally – that it has been written pre-eminently in three languages: Gaelic, Scots and English. It is not a monolingual literature. When he said that one literature meant one language Eliot was wrong. Literature is many things. It was so in 1919 and it's even more so in a world immersed in mass media and webs. Just as the theatre let Shakespeare tell stories in plays and outdistance Spenser, new technologies make possible new ways of creation.

The Gaelic tradition has only recently become widely available in good translations. The Scots tradition has suffered because for many generations people referred to the Scots language as 'merely' a subsidiary dialect of English. It is still widely believed in Scotland – in many schools – that Scots is 'slang' or 'badly-spelled English'. This cuts people off from the full range of literature in Scots and denigrates a living language in an astonishing act of self-denial. English, however, was the language of the Enlightenment philosophers of Edinburgh in the late eighteenth century, and they deleted Scots words from their writing in the hope that it would therefore appeal more widely to a 'British' readership. When Walter Scott wrote his novels, the narrative language – the language you have to trust – was English. The characters – especially the local, eccentric, wild or comic characters, spoke Scots. Highland characters spoke an English pastiche of translated Gaelic. The political implication of this hierarchy is clear.

But in the twenty-first century there can be no excuse. Anyone who reads English has access to the rich and varied file of Scottish literature. The deeper springs can be discovered easily. Let me take a few examples.

Anyone who has seen *Braveheart* will have encountered William Wallace and the Wars of Independence of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but how many have read the epic poems written barely a hundred years after the events, *The Wallace* by Blind Harry (1450–93) and *The Bruce* by John Barbour (c.1320–95)?



In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the poetry of Robert Henryson, William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas, and the great play of David Lyndsay, *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaits*, comprises a major body of work in Scots which anyone who can read Chaucer can enjoy. Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid* picks up the story where Chaucer leaves off and delivers some of the most devastating images and unforgettable moments in all literature – Troilus, painfully, almost recognising Cresseid through the horrible mask of her leprosy; Cresseid, poor victim of vindictive pagan gods, leaving her soul to Diana. Then William Dunbar writes magnificently of Dame Nature admonishing Scotland's king to 'do law alike to apes and unicorns' in 'The Thrissil and the Rose' – a poem for the marriage of James IV and Margaret Tudor in 1503 – and in 'The Dance of the Seven Deidly Sins' he evokes a vision as vivid and shocking today as anything computer-generated images have ever supplied. Gavin Douglas's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* was better than the original, according to Ezra Pound, because Douglas knew the sound of the sea. And Lyndsay's play, on the eve of the Reformation, is proto-Brechtian in technique and politically vital in its comprehensive social vision.

As we've noted, the English language came to dominate narrative prose in the nineteenth century while the Scots language retained its vitality in song and reported speech. This was still the prevailing condition at the end of the century, in the work of familiar writers like J.M. Barrie or Robert Louis Stevenson. The turn of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries was characterised by an opening chasm between two kinds of writing. One sentimentalised Scotland for a popular readership internationally – all those Scots in exile after the dispersal of the clans, and the Clearances that dispossessed people of their homes in the early nineteenth century and sent generations of Scots across the world. The other reacted against that and produced dark visions of industrial Scotland, nightmare city-nocturnes and representations of small-town Scotland, like George Douglas Brown's magnificent *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901) which ends in violent death for all the main characters!

But then, after the cataclysm of World War I, many Scottish writers, artists and intellectuals began to reconsider the position of Scotland and Scottish literature and culture on the world stage. Identity is a function of position and position is a function of power. How powerless this stateless nation had become! And what examples had been set by the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916 – a Celtic nation asserting its independence from the British imperialist agenda that had led to the Great War – and by the Communist revolution in Russia in 1917, a symbol, at the time, of the possibility that wage-slavery and the class system might be beaten, at last.



In the 1920s, the most vigorous and fertilising forces in Scottish literature were unleashed by the poet Hugh MacDiarmid. For the first time since Walter Scott's novels, MacDiarmid, born C.M. Grieve (1892–1978), presented a comprehensive view of all of Scotland, its varied geography, different languages, complex history, political contradictions and cultural richness. His catalysing character and astonishing poetry make him the greatest Scottish writer of the twentieth century. He was joined by the novelist Lewis Grassie Gibbon (1901–35), whose great trilogy *A Scots Quair: Sunset Song, Cloud Howe* and *Grey Granite*, and three terrific short stories, 'Clay', 'Smeddum' and 'Greenden', use the Scots language to create an idiom that runs through not only the speech of the characters but also the whole narrative as it unfolds. This was a revolutionary development in Scottish fiction and points forward to more recent work by James Kelman and Irvine Welsh, who locate their Scots voices in industrial cityscapes. Gibbon's contemporary Neil Gunn (1891–1973) also presented a comprehensive vision of Scotland in his cycles of fiction, centred in the Highlands.

After World War II, an astonishing generation of Scottish poets arose, each with their own favoured geography. Poets from the Highlands and Islands – Sorley MacLean (1911–96) from Raasay and Skye, Iain Crichton Smith (1928–98) from Lewis and George Mackay Brown (1921–96) from Orkney; poets from the cities – from Edinburgh, Norman MacCaig (1910–96), Robert Garioch (1909–81) and Sydney Goodsir Smith (1915–75); and from Glasgow, Edwin Morgan (b.1920). The work of these poets remains undervalued and under-read internationally.

In 2007, at the age of 87, Edwin Morgan is the last survivor of that great generation. He was the first Poet Laureate of Glasgow, a post which he demitted when he was appointed the first National Poet of Scotland – Scotland's first Poet Laureate – on 16 June 2004. This was signal recognition of his achievement and the high regard in which he was held throughout Scotland. The Poet Laureateship of Glasgow was then given to Liz Lochhead (b.1948), whose poetry, dramatic monologues, original plays and adaptations of ancient Greek tragedies like *Medea* and classical French comedies like *Tartuffe* have won her a deep popularity, especially in the west of Scotland.

Morgan and Lochhead are writers who inhabit the city of Glasgow easefully, confidently. Morgan once wrote that Glasgow was the best of plays – you could watch it and act in it at the same time. But their work should also be considered in a political context.

In 1979, a Conservative government was voted into office against the wishes of the majority of Scottish voters. Also in 1979 there was a referendum asking Scots if they would wish for a measure of devolved power for



Scotland. This was approved by a majority of voters in Scotland, but the result was 'disqualified' by a London ruling. The 1980s and 1990s saw the people of Scotland increasingly discontent and disenfranchised. Artistic and literary response to the situation was forceful. Of many possible examples, three help sum it up. Edwin Morgan's book-length sequence *Sonnets from Scotland*, Liz Lochhead's play *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, and the novel *Lanark* by Alasdair Gray (b.1934).

Morgan's sonnet-sequence covers a vast vision of Scotland – from unimaginable prehistory ('There is no beginning...') to possible present and future scenarios, nightmarish (nuclear holocaust) or visionary (total independence with a broad canal running the length of the border), taking in unexpected visitors (George Seferis, Edgar Allan Poe) and asking readers to re-imagine what the future might be. Liz Lochhead's play takes its title from a children's game and asks us to consider how history is passed on to younger generations, how children become adults, how Mary Queen of Scots and John Knox and Queen Elizabeth of England all enact their passions and jealousies in history and again now, in the different ways we represent their stories. And Alasdair Gray's novel is a tremendous re-visioning of Glasgow, partly in very close historical detail, partly as a surreal invention and allegorical extension of its own implicit qualities. This is a long way from popular images of the 'Glasgow hard man' put forward in popular fiction like the novel *No Mean City* (1935) or the television series *Taggart*.

Partly as a result of the re-imagining of Scotland by the writers and artists, the next referendum of 1997 saw a strong assertion of the will for self-determination and the Scottish parliament in Edinburgh was resumed in 1999. In 2007, Scots voted the Scottish National Party into power in Edinburgh – in opposition to the London-based Labour Party, exactly 300 years after the Treaty of Union.

Glasgow, Alasdair Gray tells us in *Lanark*, is like lots of cities and places in the modern world: many people live in it but few actively imagine *how* to live in it. That perception is a positive charge that runs through the literature of Scotland generally: it helps us imagine how we might live. There are unknown treasures in the vaults and archives of the literature of Scotland and Glasgow, open not only to those who live here, but to anyone willing to search and read deeply.

There is an ancient theoretical model which helps to sum all this up: the X-axis and the Y-axis. Let's say the X-axis is a horizontal plane on which lots of things happen in relation to each other. The study of literature on this axis is relational or comparative. For example, you read Stevenson alongside Bram Stoker and Conan Doyle, or Lewis Grassie Gibbon beside Joyce and Proust. And that's fine. But then there's the Y-axis, which is vertical, goes deep down.



On this axis, you can link Gibbon back to Stevenson, Stevenson to Scott and Burns, Burns to Fergusson and Ramsay, and Ramsay back to Dunbar and Henryson. At any point of the Y-axis you can stop for an X-axis moment – consider Burns beside Anglo-Scot James Thomson and Gaelic Duncan Ban MacIntyre – but you have to have an emphasis on the sense of long traditions that go into the past, and come forward from it, from Stevenson forward to MacDiarmid and Edwin Morgan. There’s no reason why both shouldn’t be available. So long as a British – or any other – imperium isn’t foreclosing the choices and pleasures involved and leaves room for the loose ends and origins to be visible. After all, it was the American poet Charles Olson, deliberately evoking the graininess and rootedness of the sense of the local so profoundly possessed by William Carlos Williams, who said in the poem called ‘These Days’:

whatever you have to say, leave  
the roots on, let them  
dangle

And the dirt

just to make clear  
where they came from

So what’s the answer to the question, ‘Was there ever a British Literature?’

Well, there was certainly a British Empire, and you can read a literature in the English language in a trajectory that might run from John Donne describing his lover’s body as an America, a new-found-land, through Shakespeare’s *Tempest* with its island-native Caliban and imperial magus Prospero, to the poems of Thomas Campbell, whose ‘Lines on Revisiting a Scottish River’ note the effects of industrial pollution, asking bitterly, ‘And call they this improvement?’ Campbell leads through to the novels of industrial England – Dickens for example, or Disraeli and Gaskell – to the transitional work of Joseph Conrad, coming out of the imperial, colonial, racist world of the nineteenth century and coming forward into the postcolonial world, offering a depiction of imperialism that implies its own critique. That trajectory might describe the arc of empire, but are the authors and works named most fully and deeply understood in the context of that history, or would they be more fully understood in their own national contexts too? And if we admit that, what can we say of literature in the indigenous languages of the islands of the north-west European archipelago, the Welsh novels of Kate Roberts, the Gaelic poetry of Duncan Ban MacIntyre, the Scots poems of



William Soutar, for example? How can we be fair to work that does not subscribe to the imperium of the English language?

The Welsh poet David Gwenallt Jones (1899–1968), whom people refer to simply as Gwenallt, was almost an exact contemporary of MacDiarmid and Eliot and Williams. How many readers of these poets know Gwenallt's work? Very few of his poems have ever been translated and I only know a few from *The Penguin Book of Welsh Verse*, translated by Anthony Conran. One poem, 'Rhydcymerau', is freighted with the authority of responsibility for family, people, places, a language and a culture. 'Rhydcymerau' seems to be a place-name but it also means 'the ford where the waters meet'. I don't know, but the word also has the suggestion to me of another meaning: 'the crossing-over place of the Welsh people' – the ford of the Cymru. He talks about the forestry plantations of trees and the imposition of imperial financial power onto the area and family he came from. He talks of his grandparents, an uncle and cousin, and the place where they lived. This is how the poem ends:

And by this time there's nothing there but trees.  
Impertinent roots suck dry the old soil:  
Trees where neighbourhood was,  
And a forest that was once farmland.  
Where was verse-writing and scripture is the south's  
    bastardised English.  
The fox barks where once cried lambs and children,  
And there, in the dark midst,  
Is the den of the English minotaur;  
And on the trees, as if on crosses,  
The bones of poets, deacons, ministers, and teachers of  
    Sunday School  
Bleach in the sun,  
And the rain washes them, and the winds lick them dry.

This is very different from the image of the alienated artist we're familiar with from Eliot and even Joyce. The artist is not 'refined out of existence' but bears the weight of conscious connection with his or her society, family, language and national history. And this is to do with a feeling for home or belonging. There's a very fine poet named Andrew McNeillie who has a poem called 'Cynefin *Glossed*'. Now, 'Cynefin', I'm told, means precisely that, a sense of belonging, at-homeness. And McNeillie has his own mixed loyalties – his father was a very fine novelist from Galloway in Scotland, but he moved south; and McNeillie grew up in Wales but also lived in Ireland for a long time, so his own experience leads him exactly to what this poem is asking us to consider.



*Cynefin Glossed*

What is another language? Not just words  
and rules you don't know, but concepts too  
for feelings and ideas you never knew,  
or thought, to name; like a poem that floods  
its lines with light, as in the fabled  
origin of life, escaping paraphrase.  
So living in that country always was  
mysterious and never to be equalled.

For example, tell me in a word how  
you'd express a sense of being that  
embraces belonging here and now,  
in the landscape of your birth and death,  
its light and air, and past, at once, and what  
cause you might have to give it breath?

The answer is somewhere in this spectrum. The political structure of 'British' identity does not allow for the specific, national loyalty voiced by MacDiarmid or Gwenallt. And something more than Britishness produced McNeillie's profound question about language and identity. Poets intuitively understand this. The evidence is there. But as scholars, whose business is research and recovery, teaching and conveying the information that matters, we are required to look more deeply into national traditions and areas of work that have been covered up or forgotten.

If the category of 'British' literature obscures the depths and subtleties, traditions and major themes of literatures ostensibly contained within it, we need to dismantle it thoroughly and put the pieces together again in a more responsible way. The dead always demand this of the living.



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