

Editorial: Internationalism Now?

A recent collection of essays exploring new contexts for twentieth-century Scottish literature invites a thorough re-thinking of the place of critical ‘internationalism’. The editors of *Beyond Scotland* argue that the founding paradigms of Scottish Literature as ‘a discrete area for academic study and critical attention’ established Scottishness ‘as a site of internalised contradiction’.

While this conception has, when used discriminately, been a productive conceptual tool, it has also constrained Scottish criticism in its insistence on the idea of a tradition defined by its *internal* oppositions. [...] In his desire to “aye be whaur extremes meet”, MacDiarmid did not anticipate that the place of intersection might be as likely to occur on the periphery as at the centre.¹

In the most important and straightforward sense, this journal will be ‘international’ in attending to literary intersections of this kind: views of Scottish writers from critics outside Scotland, articles on trans-national influences and audiences, comparative studies, reviews of translations, translations of criticism, and so on.

In a more elusive sense, as the editors of *Beyond Scotland* point out, the very inwardness of Scottish Literature’s ‘first principles’ signals its enmargagement to non-Scottish political and cultural contexts. Gerry Carruthers, David Goldie and Alastair Renfrew argue that Scottish criticism’s fixation with the ‘largely personal drama’ surrounding MacDiarmid and Muir’s competing versions of the *inner* cultural logic of Scottishness – generative self-contradiction versus fatal fracture – has largely obscured the fact that ‘the formulation for “native” Scottish literature [...] was derived from a convoluted sense of “British” cultural concerns’ (p. 13). What is more, Muir and MacDiarmid’s common interest in ‘various types of return to a lost originary cultural moment [...] implies their typicality, not as Scots, but as Britons and indeed Europeans’ (*ibid*). Recognising this shared heritage has far-reaching implications for Scottish criticism:

The terms in which their argument has been “developed” – indigenous versus imported, nationalism versus internationalism, essentialism versus cosmopolitanism – are little more than a series of false oppositions, produced by the initial premise from which they are consciously or unconsciously derived. The terms in which the twentieth-century debate on Scottish literature has been conducted occupy the two sides of an increasingly devalued coin. (*ibid*)

What role for ‘internationalism’ in this depreciating trajectory, twinned as it is with a nativistic literary nationalism undergoing a thorough critical revision, ‘as the need to disaggregate political from cultural nationalism has become apparent’ (*ibid*, p. 14)?

¹ Gerard Carruthers, David Goldie and Alistair Renfrew (eds.), introducing *Beyond Scotland: New Contexts for Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature* (Amsterdam & NY: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 11-15 (p. 11); emphasis added.

Firstly, and as exciting as these debates are, it is well to emphasise that this journal is not exclusively or even mainly interested in reading Scottish literature in terms of what Laurence Nicoll once called ‘the cultural nationalist paradigm’²: the persistent sense, as Gavin Miller and Eleanor Bell have it in *Scotland in Theory*, that ‘literature from Scotland must firstly be explained in terms of its Scottishness, rather than in terms of its literary or aesthetic qualities’.³ In his *Modern Scottish Poetry* Christopher Whyte rejects, on similar grounds, ‘the illusion that the primary function of poetic texts lies in identity building, and that they are capable of resolving identity issues’.⁴ This is not to say, of course, that issues surrounding cultural identity are uninteresting or unimportant, or that a critical moratorium should be declared on the question of ‘Scottishness’. Rather, there is no compelling *literary* reason why identity issues should be the primary critical consideration when encountering a new poem or play or novel by a Scottish writer.

Secondly, and as the title of *Beyond Scotland* implies, extrinsic or ‘heterocentric’ views of Scottish culture are likely to become more, not less relevant to debate in this field. This journal may have an important contribution to make in the critical ‘revaluation’ of Scottish literary debate, be it coined in post-colonial/post-nationalist currency, or otherwise.

It is worth, finally, acknowledging the dangers of conceiving ‘internationalism’ as a critical space which somehow by-passes or transcends the thorny cultural issues outlined above. In a provocative essay in *Beyond Scotland*, Cairns Craig warns against what we might call ‘bad internationalism’:

To imply that it is only through the ideas of Russian or American intellectuals that one can grasp the real nature of the Scottish condition is to continue Scotland’s submission to cultural imperialism rather than fulfil its “post-colonial” identity, reproducing the inferiorism by which Scotland is always the *object* of an understanding that can only come from outside Scotland itself, never a *subject* capable of understanding itself.⁵

This journal does not aspire to enclose the terms of ‘internal’ Scottish literary debate within an envelope of ‘wider currents’ in some hollow gesture of eclecticism, or with a view to providing some kind of others-see-us antidote to cultural myopia. In fact, it does not propose to ‘grasp the real nature of the Scottish condition’ at all; only to explore ‘Scottish literature’ in international and comparative contexts neglected by most cultural-nationalist discourse.

Why is Irvine Welsh so popular in Latin America? How is Scottish literature taught and perceived in Italy? What readings of canonical Scottish writers are made possible by contemporary critical theory? What does it tell us that James Kelman is regarded by his Norwegian translator as the inheritor of Knut Hamsun, and by the critic Graeme Macdonald as a child of Zola?

Previously, there has not been an institutional place for these kinds of questions to be asked, which did not implicitly direct them toward a funnel of political culturalisms centred on national tradition. We hope the *International Journal of Scottish Literature* provides just such a critical space.

² Laurence Nicoll, “‘This Is Not a Nationalist Position’: James Kelman’s Existential Voice”, *Edinburgh Review*, 103 (2000), pp. 79-84 (p. 79).

³ Eleanor Bell and Gavin Miller (eds.), introducing *Scotland in Theory: Reflections on Culture and Literature* (Amsterdam & NY: Rodopi, 2004), pp. 11-15 (p. 11).

⁴ Christopher Whyte, *Modern Scottish Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 8.

⁵ Cairns Craig, ‘Scotland and Hybridity’, in *Beyond Scotland*, pp. 229-253 (p. 241).