

## Editorial: Translation and Scottish Literature

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Translation often touches a raw nerve, particularly when advocates of a literary tradition define that tradition on the grounds of cultural nationalism. In 'Tam O'Shanter' Robert Burns extols his native hornpipes, jigs, strathspeys and reels over the 'cotillion brent-new frae France', and elsewhere celebrates the home-grown haggis in preference to foreign fare:

Is there that owre his French ragout,  
Or olio that wad staw a sow,  
Or fricassee wad mak her spew  
Wi perfect sconner,  
Looks down wi sneering, scornfu view  
On sic a dinner?

On their part, the linguistically gifted have always had at their disposal a powerful resource that puts monolinguals on the defensive. In Malcolm Harper's anthology *The Bards of Galloway* (1889), for example, we find a telling anecdote that praises, at Burns' expense, the virtuosity of one of the featured poets, the Reverend James Muirhead, author of 'Bess of the Gawkie':

Being a proprietor and a freeholder in the Stewartry, he [Muirhead] was lampooned in an election ballad by Burns, and retorted with one of Martial's Latin epigrams, giving a free translation touching on Burns's private affairs, which the poet, it is said, felt keenly.<sup>[1]</sup>

Burns's chagrin, we may imagine, was occasioned not only by Muirhead's reference to his 'private affairs' but by the fact that the response to his ballad demonstrated his opponent's mastery of a prestigious literary form that also bespoke a superior, Classical education. The translation of 'one of Martial's Latin epigrams' served as a keenly felt put-down because it implied the common balladeer's vulgarity and lower social standing. Translation in Scottish culture,

whether resisted or enthusiastically adopted, has always involved contested ideologies, whether they be of racial origin, political affiliation, social class, linguistic validity or aesthetic value.

In the introduction to his *Poems* of 1721, Burns' predecessor, Allan Ramsay, also shows ambivalence in his negotiation of the domestic and the foreign in relation to his few Horatian adaptations, pleading that

My cheerful Friends will pardon (a very essential Qualification of a Poet) my Vanity, when in self Defence I inform the Ignorant, that many of the finest Spirits, and of the highest Quality and Distinction, eminent for Literature, and Knowledge of Mankind, from an Affability which ever accompanies great Minds, tell me, "They are pleased with what I have done; and add, That any small Knowledge of the dead or foreign Languages is nothing to my Disadvantage. King David, Homer and Virgil, say they, were more ignorant of the Scots and English Tongue, than you are of Hebrew, Greek and Latin: Pursue your own natural Manner, and be an original."<sup>[2]</sup>

The tension between the competing demands of originality and fidelity to a source text echoes James VI's admonition to his court poets to nurture their own muse before embarking on translation in his *Essays of a Prentice in the Divine Art of Poesy* (1584). Likewise, Ramsay's admission that he relied for his own adaptations on bridging texts of Latin poetry 'dress'd in British'<sup>[3]</sup> further complicates the transmission of texts between languages and national cultures.

The issues raised by these examples prefigure the recurrent concerns of the relatively young academic discipline of Translation Studies.<sup>[4]</sup> As an emergent discipline, Translation Studies has moved beyond a narrow, if worthwhile, concern with finding equivalences between languages: what, for example, would be the appropriate expression in French, German or Polish for *scunner* or *jalouse*; does *hameseik* capture the force of the Portuguese expression *saudades*? The field has broadened to look at the political and ethical implications of the complex cultural contacts that are mediated by translators and translations. What gave rise to the conditions that allowed Muirhead to use a domesticated Latin epigram as a riposte to a satirical native ballad; what historical forces give rise to Burns, ironically, asserting native traditions in forms that his predecessor, Ramsay, had adapted, in part, from Horatian odes that he, in turn, had found versified in English? How, in brief, have Scottish writers engaged with other literary 'others' and how has that engagement shaped the national literary tradition?

The mirror image of this question, of course, is how Scottish literary works have influenced other national traditions. How does translation mediate the impact that Scottish writers make – or

sometimes fail to make – abroad? What particular challenges do Scottish texts pose for translators and how do they rise (or fail to rise) to them?

The articles in this special issue of *IJSL* address a variety of key issues in Translation Studies. They explore, with one exception, the reception of Scottish literature overseas, and the linguistic and cultural difficulties that Scottish novels and short stories pose to even the most gifted translators. One recurring theme is the difficulty translators have in finding an adequate equivalent not for individual Scottish terms, but for the endless shifting between languages and language varieties that is characteristic of Scottish texts, whether intended for a popular or 'literary' market. English, Gaelic and the different varieties of Scots (and Scottish accents) are key to characterisation and attitude in many works of fiction – their very presence in texts evokes meanings that conscientious translators must respond to and convey with skill and imagination. That several of the articles here deal with the failure of translators so to respond raises unsettling issues about the general reception of Scottish literature abroad. Olivier Demissy-Cazeilles suggests that Iain Banks' reputation as a skilled popular writer in France has suffered in part because his translators have down-played both the exaggerated, black gothic humour of his 'mainstream' novels and the dextrous code-switching that is crucial to the reader's apprehension of key and minor characters. Even when a translator responds to linguistic play, as in the translation of the 'barbarian' episodes in Banks' *The Bridge*, Demissy-Cazeilles suggests that the non-standard but ill-defined French equivalent of Banks' working-class, urban argot deracinates it, and so weakens the force of the novel.

Similarly, Beatrix Hesse laments the fact that many of the German translations of Robert Louis Stevenson's 'unco tales', particularly 'The Tale of Tod Lapraik' and 'Thrawn Janet', fail to honour the original texts' embedding of a Scots tale into an English frame. This loss, as Hesse observes, amounts to much more than the diluting of a native 'flavour' or rhythm, but also, as most critics would agree, to the omission of a crucial tension between fragile Enlightenment rationality, represented by the English frame-narrative, and the return of repressed folk beliefs, as represented by the Scots tales. Without the framing narrative and the shift in codes, Stevenson is reduced to an author of gothic terror, although, as Hesse concludes, there may remain a hint to German readers of depths in the original that are unplunged in the translation.

Jean Berton's article on Sir Walter Scott's fashioning of English, Scots and Gaelic into what Berton terms a 'linguistic clover-leaf' demonstrates that Scott's novels have suffered the same flattening of style that has afflicted Stevenson and Banks – and offers a possible solution, that would apply both to canonical writers such as Scott and their contemporary counterparts, such as Andrew Greig. After demonstrating the necessary depth of linguistic familiarity adept translators would need to acquire with the Scottish linguistic situation, Berton makes a radical proposition: he

suggests that translators of Scottish texts restrict their phonological palette when representing Scots and Gaelic to those sounds in French that might be associated with the original language or language variety. His case studies offer tantalising glimpses of possible outcomes and while it is difficult to imagine that many translators share with Berton the depth of knowledge and expertise required to accomplish such a project, his article vividly demonstrates the daunting demands that older and modern Scottish texts make on translators, and the kind of ingenuity that they might draw upon to satisfy these demands.

By way of contrast, Aniela Korzeniowska's article focuses less on language and more on the broader cultural concerns that translation can raise, a necessary step since her article depends on 'negative evidence' in its consideration of why the renowned writer, James Kelman, is *not*, so far, translated into Polish. Korzeniowska's reasoning parallels Sherlock Holmes, in his consideration of the curious incident of the dog in the night time, and she raises pertinent questions about cultural contact and the ways in which both the presence and absence of translated texts in a given society's literary 'repertoire' expose its anxieties and its intellectual and commercial constraints. She argues that Kelman meets many of the criteria that should make him a prime target for publishers of fiction in translation: he is not only a prize-winner but a controversial prize-winner; his novels address issues of oppression and alienation that are pertinent to historical and contemporary Polish society; his style is demanding but no less rewarding than that of Beckett or Kafka, with whom he is sometimes compared; and he is well-served by translations elsewhere. And yet there appears to be little appetite for Kelman in Poland. Korzeniowska draws upon her experience as a translator and scholar to speculate on the reasons why this might be so; they include a commercial timidity in recent Polish publishing, that stresses escapism and entertainment at the expense of critically-acclaimed literary fiction and – more worryingly perhaps – a tendency in the Polish readership to 'block' the uncompromising treatment of painful experiences in their past and present lives. A recurrent theme in these articles shows the authors – many of whom are published translators themselves – to have high expectations of their fellow practitioners and the publics they serve. Reading Korzeniowska's article, one is reminded of the awkward fact that James Kelman's Booker Prize in 1994 has not brought him the material rewards that a fêted novelist might be expected to enjoy. Kelman's difficulties in Poland might indeed be read as a more exaggerated version of the obstacles faced by the writer of literary fiction in Scotland who is forced to trade artistic integrity for financial security.

An apparent exception to the at times pessimistic mood of the articles collected here is J. Derrick McClure's characteristically vigorous celebration of Goldoni in Scots. McClure's critical and scholarly work on Scots language and literature ranges widely, but running through it all is the consistent sense that scholar and author are jointly engaged in a shared project to expand the expressive potential of Scots and in so doing enhance its cultural value. This does not make

McClure's work uncritical; on the contrary, he is quick to point out failures as well as successes in this national enterprise. However, his article, like Korzeniowska's expects the reader to share his assumption that a prime purpose of translation, done well, is to extend the repertoire and status of the native literary canon by allying it to the prestigious representatives of the canon of world literature. Unlike Korzeniowska, McClure is in the fortunate position of having a considerable corpus of translations to consider, and the different renderings of Italian comedy available to him provide ample scope for his consideration of the translation strategies employed by Victor Carin, Antonia Sansica Scott and Marjorie Greig, and Bill Findlay and Christopher Whyte. Even so, the vagaries of publishing and the commercial theatre implicitly impact on McClure's article too: stage drama is necessarily ephemeral, and the cultural impact of a play is dependent on the audience's memory, and the financial viability of revivals. The latter are made more likely if a published version of the play exists, but the market for drama texts is a small one, and so many plays fade into obscurity. To write his article, McClure had easy access to only one of the three Goldoni translations he wished to discuss; the other two are unpublished, and one of those is still unperformed. McClure and Korzeniowska, then, are linked by their acknowledgement that the role of the scholar is in part to make an intervention, to indicate gaps in the cultural repertoire and demonstrate how translated texts can begin to fill them.

The articles in this issue of *IJSL* were originally delivered as papers in a panel on Translation and Scottish Literature, co-organised by Adele D'Arcangelo and myself, at the ESSE conference in Aarhus, Denmark in 2008. Adele and I did not submit our papers for publication in this journal; had she done so, Adele's paper on James Kelman in Italian translation would have resonated with several of the other articles in the present issue. In contrast to Poland, Italy has been open to translation of Kelman's work, albeit by a smaller 'literary' press that expected modest sales. In her discussion of *How late it was, how late*, Adele also paid particular attention to the way in which the Italian translators 'synthesised' an Italian urban variety, as an experimental means of expressing Kelman's character's Scottish speech.<sup>[5]</sup> The submissions received were peer-reviewed, and the versions here have been substantially reworked by the authors before publication. I am grateful to Adele, for her considerable organisational skills, and to the reviewers and contributors for dealing promptly with my requests. I am particularly grateful to the contributors for their patience with an often dilatory editor.

## NOTES

[1] Malcolm Harper (ed.), *The Bards of Galloway* (Dalbeattie: Thomas Fraser, 1889), p. 257. [Available online at [www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk/cmsw](http://www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk/cmsw)]

[2] Allan Ramsay, *Poems* (Edinburgh: Thomas Ruddiman, 1721), p. vi.

[3] Ibid.

[4] For a concise survey of Translation Studies, see Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories*, 2nd edn. (Clevedon, Somerset: Multilingual Matters, 2001)

[5] Adele D'Arcangelo, 'Giving voice to the "inhabitant of a less significant world": James Kelman's *How Late it Was How Late* translated into Italian.' Paper delivered at the European Society for the Study of English conference, Aarhus, Denmark (23 August 2008).