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## **REVIEW: SCOTTISH FANTASY LITERATURE**

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Colin Manlove, **Scottish Fantasy: a Critical Survey**, Edinburgh: Canongate, £16.99, hb, 1994, ISBN 1898410208, 264pp.

The latest of Colin Manlove's long list of publications on fantasy literary is well-titled. The book provides a wide-ranging survey of Scottish fantasy literature, which includes chapters on the work of individual authors such as George MacDonald, James Hogg, Margaret Oliphant and Margaret Elphinstone, discussion of key texts such as **Jekyll and Hyde**, **Sartor Resartus**, **A Voyage to Arcturus** and **Lanark**, and several chapters providing a general overview. The range of material is impressive, and Manlove brings to it a knowledge of the field which ensures good coverage and intelligent deployment of comparisons. In its Scottish context it also offers a valuable contribution to our understanding of a nation's literary traditions.

As an introduction to a range of Scottish writers working within fantasy genres, including ghost stories, dystopian fiction, and children's fiction, the book has two main strengths. The close reading of texts is informative and perceptive, and Manlove is at his best in the chapters which confine themselves to one text. The chapter on **Sartor Resartus** is excellent, written with confidence and energy and developing the useful term 'metaphoric-fantastic' to describe Carlyle's unique approach. On **Jekyll and Hyde**, which he terms 'urban gothic', Manlove offers an eclectic interpretation, drawing upon the Scottish tradition of doubles, biographical details on Stevenson,

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psychological patterns and historical context. The result is a good close reading, with some astute observations on the relationship between the seen and unseen elements in the narrative. **A Voyage to Arcturus** by David Lindsay is given a chapter-length treatment, in a detailed discussion written with enthusiasm. The chapter on George MacDonald also finds Manlove on familiar grounds, providing a survey of the various forms in which MacDonald's fantasies appeared. This chapter demonstrates the book's second strength: the contrasts and connections it provides through juxtaposition. In discussing MacDonald the author suggests some interesting links with Carlyle, and, by implication, Hogg, in the way in which all three writers attempt to erode categorisation through their use of fantasy.

The book's second strength is also, however, a more ambiguous one, pointing to inevitable issues of debate. Most obviously, questions arise over the selection of material and, by implication, the definitions of fantasy that are being used. More importantly, perhaps, the book also forces us into a consideration and questioning of what might be seen as the specifically Scottish constituents of the literature it discusses. Quibbles about the selection of material are unavoidable and not necessarily helpful but here they do seem to raise wider questions about the term 'fantasy' itself. Manlove is right to see his book as an antidote to the prevalence of social realism in literary traditions, a dominance which others would agree is inappropriate to understanding Scottish writing. His general definition of fantasy, however, as 'literature which involved the supernatural', makes for some rather uneasy conjunctions. The use of 'fantasy' in **Lanark**, for instance, is of a quite different kind, directed towards much more socially and politically specific ends, than that of **Confessions of a Justified Sinner** or **Jekyll and Hyde**. Neil Gunn's dystopia, **The Green Isle of the Great Deep** offers a very different 'other world' from that found in **Peter Pan**; each adopts an alternative dimension for quite distinct purposes.

It is only towards the end of the book that Manlove's own understanding of fantasy as a genre, and his particular agenda for the study, emerge. Acknowledging throughout that different kinds of fantasy exist, and moving from a rather weak interpretation of fantastic elements in the work of the medieval 'makars' as involving 'the strong use of the imagination', to a reading of Scott and Hogg in which their use of the 'fantastical' is interwoven with other narrative styles, Manlove maintains an open and flexible definition of his topic. He writes with most conviction, however, about the ways in which MacDonald's two novels, **Phantastes** and **Lilith** draw the reader into entering 'a kind of subconscious mode of comprehension' (p.87), and it is this definition, I suspect, that structures his approach. Linking many of the texts is

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this idea of offering a new paradigm for understanding the world; a paradigm, moreover, that is essentially spiritual and metaphysical in nature. The (good) discussion of **Lanark** is likewise illuminating on Manlove's position. While recognising that critics of Gray's novel have been right to see it as a social and political commentary, he argues it should also be read as an exploration of 'acute personal discomfort'. And it is in the realms of the personal and the subconscious that Manlove is at his most animated. There is, therefore, an underlying assumption that one shares a belief evinced by writers such as Lindsay, MacDonald and Oliphant in an 'unconscious, unknown, dark principle behind being' (p.134).

This may account for the general absence of social and historical contexts in the book. It might also explain one of the book's most frustrating features. Again and again Manlove makes fascinating reference to the literary contexts, in terms either of publication history, literary genre or narrative characteristics, but always only in passing. This is well demonstrated in the chapter on Hogg, where Manlove stresses the variety and variability of Hogg's use of fantasy, and his strange combination of intellectualism with a closeness to Scottish folk-tradition, yet alludes only briefly to Hogg's narrative strategies. It is even more evident on **Sartor Resartus**, where he effectively dismisses his own fascinating observations on the text's attempts to break down structures and certainties, by saying 'But more to our purpose here...' (p.73). Likewise, passing references to literary context - Oliphant's relationship to the popularity of ghost stories in 1890s, and the place of Barrie and Lang in the context of Victorian children's fiction - are potentially interesting but undeveloped. Information on the publishing history of **A Voyage to Arcturus** and **The Green Isle of the Great Deep** also raises fascinating questions about the social origins and historical context of a vogue for fantasy literature, which deserve to be developed elsewhere. Finally I was disquieted by the dismissal of science-fiction as outwith the book's remit. As Manlove notes, it is not a particularly Scottish form, but the sci-fi label is much contested, even by apparent practitioners: dystopian fiction such as that of Gunn and Gray could quite easily come under this category, while **A Voyage to Arcturus**, set on 'a remote planet', almost certainly does. Margaret Elphinstone has expressed her own irritation with this reductive label (Elphinstone 1992). By omitting science-fiction Manlove loses the opportunity to give full attention to the work of Iain Banks, a writer whose cast of mind is clearly a product of his Scottish identity.

The second and more important area of debate, however, concerns the nature of Scottish fantasy itself. The introductory chapter offers some convincing, if general, observations about its characteristics. In particular, Manlove points

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to the importance of place, a fascination with underground spaces, with doppelgangers and dualities. He sees Scottish fantasy as more inward-looking, more the expression of the psyche of an individual figure, than its English counterpart, and argues that fantasy and ordinary worlds are less divided. Fantasy within Scottish writing, he suggests, strives less towards epic, is shorter and more localised. Manlove identifies Scottish features in a fascinating way, but the reader is left wondering about the origins - social, political, cultural - of these differences and also about the historical context. What Manlove terms the 'Christian supernatural', as found in the work of the mediaeval 'makars', clearly arises from a very different world view than that of Gray, Elphinstone or even Hogg.

The conclusion offers further generalisations about the identifiable features of Scottish fantasy writing: that Scottish fantasy is interested in the unconscious, that it questions the self, and that it emphasises the power of women through feminine values. This final point seems unconvincing in the context of the book as a whole - partly because so little evidence has been given of female power except in a symbolic role. Indeed, disquiet with the book's handling of gender issues could be expressed on several fronts. Chapter seven, which looks at the work of Margaret Oliphant and 'Fiona MacLeod' (the writer William Sharp) demonstrates this most clearly. While the author might argue both writers are securely placed within the Scottish tradition, 'as it is part of the nature of this fantasy to be involved with the feminine', no real definition of the feminine is given here or elsewhere in the book. It is potentially interesting to question biological gendering of authorship through Sharp's sense of himself as possessing 'dimorphic sexuality', but this is not explored in terms of the handling of gender within his work. Likewise, more might have been said about the ways in which Oliphant uses the supernatural and other devices of fantasy as a means of commenting upon gender roles - as in the excellent story, 'The Library Window' with its powerful images of exclusion. And surely the days are past when Elphinstone's work can be criticised for being woman-centred and therefore 'rather one-sided', given that the majority of texts discussed in the book either marginalise women or use them in mystificatory ways. Later, however, Manlove does recognise that women use fantasy in different ways: 'But the interest is not in fantasy and the supernatural for themselves but only as a means of expressing and exploring the human problems of identity, repression and relating in this world.' (p.240)

Manlove is on firmer ground when he suggests that we can see in Scottish fantasy a 'fundamental lack of confidence in the conscious or civil self' (p.246). If read in conjunction with his observation that many Scottish

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fantasies feature a grotesque hero, representative of a displaced person, it becomes possible to interpret departures from realism in the context of Scotland's particular political history. Another common thread, although Manlove does not refer to it in his conclusion, is the dislocation and destabilising of narrative, a desire to 'decategorise'. Again this points to a potentially disruptive feature of Scottish fantasy which has political as well as literary implications. On several occasions Manlove describes a 'jagged' quality to the writing and visions of the fantasy narratives which suggests a more specific cultural characteristic than a vague interest in the 'unconscious' or 'alienated selves' which could be attributed to so many literary movements and genres. Manlove's book in itself offers a curious testimony to the features he identifies. If his aim has been to counter the dominance of realism by erecting an alternative monolith, he has raised too many questions to succeed. But, as he frequently admits, one of the most interesting aspects of the texts discussed here is the way in which they avoid or evade easy categorisations. That Scottish fantasy as a form is in itself difficult to categorise, variable and destabilising in its effect is what, at its best, this book demonstrates.

### **REFERENCES**

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