

DNB TO NEW DNB: GOOD NEWS FOR DEAD SCOTTISH WRITERS, ESPECIALLY WOMEN

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George Smith (1824-1901), the man responsible for initiating the monumental **Dictionary of National Biography**, was of Scottish stock. His father hailed from Elgin, and founded a publishing firm in London in 1816, in partnership with Alexander Elder, a man from Banff. Smith's son George had little education that was not self-administered, and at fourteen he went into the family business, Smith & Elder.

In due course George made the firm a powerhouse of nineteenth-century literature and thought, publishing Darwin, Ruskin, Charlotte Bronte, Thackeray, Matthew Arnold, George Eliot and many more, and running the **Cornhill Magazine**. But his ambition was boundless: he would test the possible limits of man's intellectual achievement in his time. In 1882 he contemplated 'a new and final enterprise', a 'cyclopedia of universal biography'. His future editor Leslie Stephen successfully argued that a Dictionary of National Biography was the most that was at all practicable, and it began in 1882. Smith was prepared to go to vast expense for the sake of an idea.

The original **DNB** was published in quarterly volumes from A to Z from 1884 to 1900, that system allowing no room for second thoughts on possible subjects from earlier in the alphabet, although a list of these was accumulated, and a final volume of the omissions projected. There was a small team of dedicated contributors along with the editors, working on names contributed both by themselves and by members of the public after

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open advertisements. It was an astonishing achievement. In the twentieth century the series jerkily continued, with volumes of the recently dead every ten or even five years. Here the entries tended to be more, longer and fuller, thus further unbalancing the equilibrium of the original concept. For all that, it remains a major asset to all researchers: for all its inevitable faults and omissions, its unevenness of coverage, its timid avoidance of women where possible, in contributors as well as subjects. Leslie Stephen and his assistant and successor Sidney Lee produced an extraordinary work within the limits of its time: Colin Matthew, the editor of the **New DNB**, describes the original as 'open, fair, liberal, accurate and quirky'¹. When in 1992 he was appointed to edit its successor, he endeavoured to preserve the good qualities of the old but to make up as far as possible for its deficiencies. I might add that, in line with tradition, he too was born and educated in Scotland.

He decided to discard completely no subject which had appeared in the original, however much a name or reputation had faded: the life could if necessary be rewritten in very few words. So he began with about 32 million words and about 37,000 characters. To supplement these, questionnaires were sent to universities and learned societies, with requests for new names, and for willingness to contribute short lives. Matthew again: 'A **DNB** article is a biographical memoir with a distinctive grammar and format. It is not a biography, and in many cases makes full-scale biography redundant'². Matthew's advantage over his predecessors in the age of computers needs no underlining. The new enterprise will add some 15,000 lives, and it will be published both on paper and in electronic form at a length of about 50 million words. (But then there are other possibilities: the computers mean we could have a Scottish Dictionary, a Scottish Writers Dictionary, a Scottish Women's Dictionary: the possibilities are fantastic.) This clear programme underlines the fact that the project marries ambition to practicality: no one on the team can delay to seek perfection, but the team as a whole must do the best it can in a fixed time. 'Perfectionism defeats itself', says editor Colin Matthew, 'I favoured getting the job done'³.

All very interesting in its way, I hear notional readers of **Scottish Affairs** remark, but what has it to do with Scottish affairs? I'm coming to that, not

¹H C G Matthew, 'The New Dictionary of National Biography', Reprinted from *History Today* (September 1993) p 11.

²H C G Matthew, 'Leslie Stephen and the New Dictionary of National Biography', *Leslie Stephen Lecture, delivered 25 October 1995*, p 12.

³H C G Matthew, 1995, p 24.

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that huge question but my particular small segment of it, as an academic heavily involved in late nineteenth and twentieth-century Scottish literature. The **New DNB** has a clear structure: the Editor, twelve Consultant Editors, and Associate Editors, each of the latter responsible for about 200 subjects. And there is an efficient and helpful team of Research Editors in-house in Oxford. Four of the Associate Editors are responsible for Scottish writers, the first three being R. D. S. Jack (1500-1660), Murray Pittock (1661-1779) and Ian Campbell (1780-1869). For many years I had been concerned to learn more about Scottish writers currently non-available, and where appropriate and possible to try to help them into print. In 1996 I timidly accepted the task of Associate Editor in charge of Scottish writers 1870-2000, undertaking decisions about which old entries must shrink or grow, and which of them needed to be rewritten, which merely revised. Also proposing new subjects, nominating prospective contributors, and assessing the work when finished. What, you might well ask, tempted me to undertake it? Not the dreaded Research Assessment Exercise every four years, which pushes university academics toward regular, moderate-sized publications. Personally, I dislike and resent this exercise, so that the scale of the **New DNB** project, which does not plan publication until 2004, rather appealed to me. Not the money, certainly, which is symbolically respectful rather than munificent. Certainly not the inevitable huge piles of forms. No: to me there was one huge implicit bribe, which was in fact an explicit requirement of the appointment.

As well as dealing as best I could with old **DNB** subjects, I was to be allowed to nominate up to fifty new subjects in my chosen field. And the Editor was as it were already on my side, having specified that he would encourage especially the selection of women, of 'non-metropolitan figures of note', and of twentieth-century subjects. (It is perhaps not surprising to note that some 3% of the original subjects were women.) At this point I would remind the reader of my sub-title: 'Good news for dead Scottish writers.' I quickly came to appreciate how important it was, for honesty, sanity and literary judgment, that both the **DNB** and the **New DNB** dealt only with the departed. Any alternative is unthinkable, and at best would surely suffer from smothering and meaningless politeness. The search for good contributors, already difficult, as I shall demonstrate, would be rendered virtually impossible. As it is, my most macabre duty to date has been attempting to discover in some cases whether or not a minor or not currently celebrated writer who would surely now be a great age is in fact departed.

An undertaking on this scale, in all imaginable subject areas, is not likely to be attempted, repeated or outdone, at least in our lifetimes, so whatever qualms I had were firmly suppressed, and I set to work. The first task was the

perusal of all the old **DNB** entries in my field, strictly, 'Scottish and some Northern English literature, since 1870'. (This was glossed as writers born in 1830 and later). These consisted of '25 (1 female included)'. And the subjects! I was not surprised, but I was outraged. With few exceptions, metropolitan ignorance of Scottish writing has been endemic in this century, and my strong impression is that the editors of the twentieth-century supplements were blandly oblivious for the most part of Scottish letters. Some of the obvious male names were there, of course, Barrie, Buchan, Cronin, Grieve, Lang, Linklater – along with some very much less known – Alexander Anderson, Thomas Edward Brown (Manx poet), Thomas Davidson, William Minto, Alfred Nutt, Sir John Skelton If any of these latter needed rewriting as opposed to revision or heavy pruning, I suspected it would not be easy to find willing contributors. The '1 female' was Mary MacKellar, 'Gaelic poet and translator'. To my shame, Gaelic being the biggest of many lacunae in my knowledge, I had never heard of her, but then I discovered she did not appear in most modern reference books either. Derick Thomson's fine **Companion to Gaelic Scotland**, even, gives her dates, and the laconic full entry: 'From Lochaber. Gaelic writer.' So my one female writer looked like being severely pruned. But oddly enough, she had originally been allotted fewer words than any of the men, so I was unable to reduce her much further. Gradually I dealt with the list I had been sent, and turned to my fifty 'new' subjects. But because of previous omissions, there were now a great many obvious suspects, and fifty seemed a much smaller number than I had thought.

Where were novelists like Neil Gunn, James Leslie Mitchell ('Lewis Grassie Gibbon') and 'Fionn MacColla'? Great poetic individuals such as Sydney Goodsir Smith and Robert Garioch, let alone Violet Jacob, Nan Shepherd or Willa Muir? Where was that unhappy poet John Davidson? Or Robert Bontine Cunninghame Graham, or James Thomson 'BV'? Where were Edward Gaitens, G. S. Fraser, Douglas Young, Ian Macpherson, Alex Scott or Alex Trocchi, John MacDougall Hay, novelist, and his son, George Campbell Hay, Gaelic poet, picking names at random? A few of my best known candidates turned out to have found themselves on other lists, their 'Scottishness' ignored, with other Associate Editors, but thankfully in. That was fine by me: it left some room for other names. (But I sighed for the time I had spent contemplating contributors for these subjects). But most were not on other lists. And even in Scottish terms the old prejudice against 'non-metropolitan figures of note' often held true. My draft list continued to grow alarmingly.

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And of course I have hardly mentioned the women as yet. I had been encouraged to select more, and I needed little encouragement. Many Scottish women writers are currently beginning to experience rediscovery, often by contemporary young Scottish women. The biggest monument to this so far is the large **History of Scottish Women Writers**, edited by Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan, and published in 1997. The fourth volume of **The History of Scottish Literature** (1987) contented itself with a chapter on Muriel Spark and Joy Hendry's chapter 'Twentieth-century Women's Writing: The Nest of Singing Birds', and the otherwise excellent **The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies**, edited by Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson (1993), had chapters on Spark and Galloway, plus the space allotted to Carol Anderson, 'Listening to the Women Talk', in which she could do what she could with all the rest. She did well, but it was an outrageous brief. In contrast, Gifford and McMillan and their contributors found so many potential subjects that several names had sometimes to be treated in a single chapter. Just before she died Jessie Kesson was proud to learn that she was to be one of the few living writers to achieve a chapter to herself. And there are a couple at least of critical books on Scottish women writers in the pipeline.

But we are still only at the beginning. Even those women who succeeded, comparatively, in their time had been allowed to fade, genteelly or not, from the patriarchal Scottish literary mind that presided over generations of English Literature teaching, notably my own. It is possible to argue that wastage is an inevitable element in the history of literature, that survival is itself a kind of Darwinian proof of worth. Writers have always surfaced, flourished and for the most part sunk without trace. I do not subscribe to the notion that it is necessarily the best that survive. It would be lovely but self-deluding to believe in the survival of literature by textual selection. But survival is of course often a matter of accident. Time and again for the hopeful writer there is a series of hurdles, such as being accepted for publication in the first place. Some have a better chance than others: many nineteenth-century women writers, for example, succeeded by using male pseudonyms, as 'Currer Bell' (Charlotte Bronte) did with that excellent publisher George Smith. Other hurdles include selection for reviewing by, usually, fairly Establishment appointees; reviewing by ditto critics, and so on. I think it is really desirable that some reassessment be made of writers male or female, but particularly female, who in their time cleared any such hurdles. So where was I to start?

Well, in recent years Catherine Carswell, Nan Shepherd, Willa Muir and Violet Jacob have been to some extent recognised as important figures, but the same can hardly be said of such as Dot Allan, Mary Findlater, Jane

Findlater, Helen Cruickshank, Marion Angus, 'Lorna Moon', Olive Fraser, Rachel Annand Taylor ... The simple difficulty of getting hold of texts has slowed any process of rediscovery. My growing list so quickly outnumbered my given fifty that I began to realise the extent of my temerity, and my responsibility.

I should say here that I am not suggesting with breathless nationalist and/or feminist fervour that each of my geese is a major author, or even an Annie S. Swan. But I do want to stress the importance of all the names, major or minor. In most cases it is too soon to attempt to make that last assessment with impunity. It will go on being too soon until they have a chance to be re-considered, re-read. This is what the series of Canongate Classics has been successfully facilitating for a number of years now, drawing on the discoveries of its editors, other publishers, individual devotees. But there is a long way to go before the editors survey the field and cry enough!

What is more, English Studies these days tends to acknowledge the importance of the field against or within which any major figure is considered. Literature is no longer a matter of a series of inspired and isolated Dead White European Males, each to be considered in majestic isolation. Acknowledging this is one of the many virtues of books such as Tom Leonard's **Radical Renfrew**. Among matters of real and pressing interest are the cultural milieux of our authors, education, locale, social class, relations with other writers: of G. S. Fraser and Jessie Kesson, for example, it can be said they knew of and respected one another and lived not too far apart geographically, but between them, in terms of education, class, breadth of experience and intellectual support, a great gulf is surely fixed. Again, were the lives of some of our writers transformed by war, for example, or resistance, or conscientious objection to it? Eric Linklater is an example of one who remained centrally concerned with his war experience for the rest of his life. Did conscientious objection damage literary reputations – or careers? Norman MacCaig, for example, was clear that his own time in prison was what prevented his promotion to headmaster. Did our Scottish writers leave Scotland, like Stevenson, Norman Douglas or Bruce Marshall, or stay there by preference, like Gunn and Linklater, or even in one beloved place, like George Mackay Brown in Orkney – or stay perforce and with stoic courage, like longterm invalid William Soutar?

As if these factors for a policy of generous inclusion were not sufficiently pressing, I discovered, or became more fully conscious of, another problem, one that an Associate Editor of twentieth-century material uniquely experiences. In our time new kinds of writing have been established, writing for film, television and radio. There is the question of how much an

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individual author was influenced by radio, for example. I first faced this when writing the life of Jessie Kesson. Many Scottish writers were regular contributors to radio, in the thirties, before she began to write. They include Edwin and Willa Muir, Eric Linklater, Compton MacKenzie, C. M. Grieve, Joe Corrie, Donald and Catherine Carswell, Ann Scott-Moncrieff, John R. Allan and Ian Macpherson. And Neil Gunn, her favourite writer, was virtually a radio institution. This must have been, in her circumstances, a major source of imaginative and intellectual stimulation, which it is impossible to measure or recover. But more importantly, there is the work that all these, Kesson herself, and many more contributed, from the forties to the sixties. How can we assess any writer who does much work for film, radio or television, when the possibility of re-experiencing it, or even of reading scripts, is hardly an option? To stick to my area of relative expertise, the history of Scottish writing for radio in its so-called 'golden age' needs to find a way to be told.

Ideally, of course, the best of radio drama that survives could be reissued on cassette or CD Rom: that would preserve not only the writing, but the fine dramatic performances regularly turned in at the time, with author and producer creatively interacting. But let us not hold our collective breath. Failing that, the question of whether the public would be willing to tackle reading radio scripts in their unique format has never been settled: very few experiments have been made. This means that the public is deprived of the chance to read any of the work, and specialist literary critics need at least to become conscious of the omissions in their study of well known writers. Such work at best languishes in the archive at Caversham where scripts which survived the BBC – particularly the new, leaner BBC – have been entombed, or in other archives in Glasgow. It was in Caversham and Glasgow that I found many of Kesson's scripts, to my great edification. But there is an obvious limit to how far I can attempt to present her radio work critically, when my readership is excluded from the reading.

The so-far near secret history of radio poses obvious major problems for relevant Associate Editors of the **New DNB**. Some 'for-radio' writers have at least for the moment vanished without trace; their history is unchronicled, despite the fact that sound broadcasting appeared as a great opportunity for Scottish writers to explore the new medium, to reach a new audience, to make the most of creative challenges, or simply to provide fees to feed the family. For some, it was a new and beguiling art form. Kesson, whom Stewart Conn has called one of the finest of for-radio writers, was always devoted to radio. She said to me at our first interview in 1985 that the word had always been to her the most important thing:

When you write a thing it's in a way private, it's between you and the anonymous reader – you're illuminating an experience for this person. ... But when you're writing even a radio play, you write it, and then it's somebody else's job to give their interpretation of it; that is the director and she gives her interpretation and then the actors give theirs. ... Next to the printed word I love radio. ... Because words mean so much to radio and words and the sound and meaning of them is *my* thing. I love radio¹.

But in a different mood in 1987 she went further:

Radio uses words at the time, gives words their full meaning, and I far prefer it to television or the theatre or anything else. I think even more than the book, I like radio better, because of the sound of the words².

The particular 'golden age' of radio may be said to end with the increased availability of television. So – do we include as producers of 'literature' writers we basically know only by repute or dim and fading memory? Every case has to be judged on its merits, but this certainly adds an extra difficulty to the selection process, and to the work of the subsequent contributors. If an Assistant Editor is old enough – and I am! – to be convinced of the merits of an Edward Boyd, a C. P. Taylor or a Jack Ronder, where does s/he look for contributors? Who has the expertise and/or the time to search out the work?

My eventual list of subjects crept up, however strictly I tried to limit it, to nearer sixty than the original fifty. I pled for mercy, and gratefully found it. The alphabetical list was full of amazing juxtapositions: internationally known novelist A. J. Cronin accompanied the particularly Scottish poet Helen Cruickshank; William Lorimer, who translated the New Testament, was alongside Helen Low ('Lorna Moon'), who wrote fiction for Scotland and filmscripts for Hollywood: poet and Renaissance student Rachel Annand Taylor unthinkably rubbed shoulders with Scotland's best known beat writer, Alexander Trocchi. At least the Scottish tradition offers variety! The next problem was having in each case to suggest a length band and an exact word limit. In many cases it was like comparing oranges and apples, almost impossibly difficult. But it was something I had to deal with on my own: I was the only person who (to some extent!) understood my own choices, and could decide relative weightings. I had to be ready to be firm with future contributors who would naturally and understandably come to wish they had more space for their subject, the more they found out. So far, I have not had

¹Isobel Murray, (ed), *Scottish Writers Talking*, 'Jessie Kesson', p 58.

²Isobel Murray, (ed), *Scottish Writers Talking*, 'Jessie Kesson', p 77.

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many tussles of this kind, but I need to touch wood here: computers have their little ways, and so to date I have seen less than half of the biographies I commissioned. And there is always one big exception to every rule: one contributor, herself a poet, produced the life of another whose work I had considered of relatively minor importance. The life convinced me so completely that I was converted to the new length.

Having settled on a word limit, I was required to suggest not one but two possible contributors in each case. A few had volunteered through the early questionnaire, but in most cases I had to rely on my own necessarily sketchy knowledge of who might know the writer, or at least the field, and who might be prepared to find out. And who could be relied on to keep to the word limit: Leslie Stephen had long ago recorded: 'My greatest worry is struggling against the insane verbosity of the average contributor.' A good contributor had to be able and willing to establish facts, including the fidgetty details of parentage, date and place of birth, and to express these sometimes in time-honoured formulae. Stephen, it is recorded, 'came to refuse all mercy to contributors who offered him vague conjecture or sentimental reflection'.

These particular difficulties I did not experience, but the whole question of potential contributors was fraught with difficulties. There was one outstandingly difficult case, that of Andrew Lang. Lang is currently far from the forefront of literary attention, but in his time, 1844-1912, he was justly famous on a bewildering number of fronts, and he remains an important figure. He was a scholar of myth, ritual and totemism: a man of letters, a Greek scholar, a historian, a literary critic, a poet, and the producer of all those coloured fairy books. How could one ask anyone to cover all this, and whom could one ask? I have determined not to name names in this article, but this is the exception: if I had not lit upon the scholar, historian and polymath Dr William Donaldson, I might have had to give up.

If I earlier asked myself why I should do the work of an Associate Editor, I now had to ask the even harder question of who would consent to contribute a biographical memoir, and why. Again, it was certainly not for the money: again, that is respectable but not exactly overwhelmingly tempting. Again, for university academics, it would not be something they might submit to the Research Assessment Exercise: we were rather sniffily told some time ago that entries for reference works, no matter how much work went into them, 'didnae count'. And again, it was my responsibility: especially in a small country like Scotland I could not canvass opinion on the suitability of contributors, although of course I could – and did – consult a lot of published work. Again, even a short memoir – perhaps especially a short one – could require a disproportionate amount of hard work. And just possibly having to

return to the task after many months. In my ignorance I did not allow for one of the biggest potential annoyances – I did not know that it might be quite some time before a 'life' was processed, forwarded to an Associate Editor and eventually perhaps returned with requests for alterations.

So: I was looking for knowledgeable and lively-minded people who really enjoy the research process, because even obtaining dates of birth and death, names of spouse(s) and so on, even with the special arrangements the **New DNB** made with the relevant record-holders, could take what seemed like an unconscionable time, let alone trying to ascertain the size of estates left behind. I was looking for people who shared my conviction of the worth of dependable works of reference, and who would consider it something between an honour and a responsibility to be a part of the undertaking. A sketchy knowledge of their circumstances could also be relevant: working academics not already recognised experts on a particular writer were quite likely to be snowed under with tasks already taken on: a few might even be well known in a small way for missing deadlines or generally running fairly late. I found that recent early retirees could be vulnerable, and I could be ruthless. But circumstances were not as important as my sense of their will, their appetite for the task in hand. Reader, as Charlotte Bronte might have written, I found them. Clare Loughlin, my Research Editor at Oxford, has commented on how dependable and helpful the vast majority of my fingered candidates have been to date.

There was another consideration – *amour propre*. Might some contributors even feel demeaned in some way if they were asked to undertake the life of a relatively obscure writer, who had necessarily been allowed a fairly small number of words? I hoped not, and I was not alone. Leslie Stephen had especially prized the shorter entries: 'Nobody need look at Addison or Byron or Milton in a dictionary. He can find fuller and better notices in any library'. And his assistant and successor Sidney Lee wrote: 'It is the second-rate people ... that provide the really useful reading'. But the completed reference work did not quite live up to this boast: the article on Queen Victoria, written by Lee, amounted to almost 94,000 words. The present editor had previously used the dictionary 'especially for second or third rank figures. ... It is the shorter entries which form the core of the **DNB** and which give the dictionary its charm and exceptional usefulness'¹. I am in complete agreement. To date, I am most amazed and delighted by the contributor who supplied the required number of words for a neglected 'minor' novelist in the required time, but is

¹*H C G Matthew 1993, p 11.*

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now some 40,000 words into his own independent study of the man and his work.

I hoped to finish this piece today, and send it off. But in the post a letter from my Research Editor tells me, out of the blue, that the Editor says I can have ten new entries, if I want them. If I *want* them? But it means a lot of searching out of old materials from the last selection process. As I feared, I did not keep full notes of the last stages, finally opting for one writer rather than another, and trying for some kind of balance of coverage. It will need a serious re-think. How to measure the claims of J. B. Salmond, long time editor of the **Scots Magazine**, or that recently deceased hero of Scottish literary publishing, Callum Macdonald, against those of traditional traveller Betsy Whyte, or fishwife, autobiographer and mental patient Christian Watt, or the immortal creator of Tammy Troot, Lavinia Derwent? On second thoughts, I'll post this off before I get down to such vexing questions. All will be revealed in 2004!

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