Scottish Affairs, no. 38, winter 2002

REVIEW: THE SEA-BIRD AND THE CRANE

Tom Hubbard

Susanne Hagemann (ed.), 2000, **Terranglian Territories: Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on the Literature of Region and Nation**. Frankfurt, Bern, New York: Peter Lang, ISBN 3-631-34640-9, 681 pages, £33

Canada, the American South, the Caribbean, Scotland: there's no shortage of material there for a volume such as this. Of its nature we would expect the book to be variously faceted and focused. One instinctively welcomes the phenomenon that Jamaica Kincaid, Eudora Welty, Malcolm Lowry, Marion Angus and Lewis Grassic Gibbon are all discussed within one set of covers. It may be that, between such writers of apparently disparate cultures, potentially provocative comparisons are not maximised; despite the plenary session which is transcribed at the end of the book one often has the feeling that individual scholars are doing their own individual bit, scattering the small change of predictable academic pieties. That is probably inevitable in a publication of this kind. However, if it doesn't sufficiently explore Terranglia, this collection usefully maps it: an honourable task for any book.

Is Terranglia simply Anglosaxophonia writ somewhat larger and more politically correct? Actually, the collection comes alive when it challenges the reader to negotiate unexpected ways of getting around Europe, and if in the process that were to lead to a repositioning of Scottish – and for that matter Irish – works, the book's catalytic role would be amply vindicated. Edna Longley welcomes the continental European interest in Irish studies, as this should in turn encourage Irish studies to become more European, 'less influenced by the historical hang-ups that Anglo-American criticism wearily perpetuates'. In Scotland, we are still only at the beginning of that process,

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having for too long boxed Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Muir as 'Scotlit', and for the most part failed to jolt literary studies towards the reference points indicated by workers in other art forms, such myriad-minded MacDiarmidians as Ronald Stevenson and Richard Demarco. The MacDiarmid scholar Alan Riach has done more than most to rectify the situation, introducing music and the visual arts to his Scottish studies programmes at his former university base in New Zealand. His essay on 'On a Raised Beach' is creative, integrative criticism of the highest order, with deeply relevant analogies from Beethoven and Mahler; he goes one imaginative step further by printing, as an appendix, the score of Francis George Scott's setting of 'The Sauchs in the Reuch Heuch Hauch'.

The book's editor is particularly good on the language dimension, and in Germany she is well-placed to understand the 'multicultural ragout' that increasingly characterises western Europe in the wake of Turkish and North African *Gastarbeiter* and Balkan refugees. On a recent research visit to Switzerland, I learned that an already complex linguistic situation is further enriched by the offspring of incomers from ex-Yugoslavia and points south and east. These kids are mixing their indigenous registers with the varieties of Swiss-German spoken in Basel, Zürich and other urban centres. Eventually, creative literature will be written in these new European languages.

One of the oldest European languages, Scots, receives attention of a nature all too rare in domestic discourse. I was intrigued by Dr Hagemann's account of one Klaus Groth, who translated Burns into Low German during the nineteenth century, transposing the Ayrshire settings to Holstein. Burns helped Groth feel confident about Low German literary identity as against the presumed superiority of High German. One might add that the Burns versions of August Corrodi (1826-1885) have played their part in enhancing the status of Swiss-German (Schwytzertütsch). Certainly, a language culture need not cringingly rely on international reception in order to be validated and, in any case, translation by itself does not replace a kailyard-parochialism with a sophisticated Europeanism; nevertheless, such dialogues should be welcomed as the necessary beginning of a process still to be undertaken.

As long as they are indeed dialogues. The Burns examples remind us that Scotland's impact on mainland Europe has often been behind-the-scenes, blessedly free of wha's-like-us trumpeting. However, mainland Europe's interest in Scotland has not been sufficiently reciprocated. We expect the

Hungarians to respond to us, but where is the Scottish response to Hungary? Names such as Edwin Morgan stand out in their (apparent) rarity. Accordingly, all the more welcome is J. Derrick McClure's discussion of William Soutar's translations, and in particular his Scots version of a poem by the great Hungarian modernist Endre Ady (1877-1919) who, incidentally, has also been turned into Scots by Sydney Goodsir Smith: my thanks to John Manson for bringing that to my attention. MacDiarmid remarked, in all (justifiable) seriousness, that one couldn't claim to be an expert in modern poetry if one knew nothing of the likes of Ady. McClure is interesting on more general questions of translation, as extrapolated from his analysis of Soutar's practice; there are gradations in what may happen between source, intermediary and target languages – the end-product may be a rendering, a paraphrase, or an adaptation of the original; a vigorous Scots verse may be a vast improvement on the pallid English crib. I have long felt that 'translation' is a misnomer for the traffic between poetries, preferring Tom Scott's 'transcreation'.

That is exactly what happens in the case of Soutar's Ady. 'Transcreation' is especially apt in the case of a dialogue between two literary cultures which share a strong ballad tradition. Of twentieth century poets, few have drawn on their respective ballad-hoards as consummately as Soutar and Ady.

At their best, the contributors remind us of the deeply existential and – dare one say it – human concerns that underlie the specifics of region, nation, gender and so on. (Gertrud Számosi records the writer Péter Esterházy's scepticism: 'languages have writers, not regions.') The voice of Soutar's Ady is that of one parentless and childless, 'a lanely sea-bird owre a landless sea', without ease, longing 'to gie mysel' to a' mankin'. Hungarian 'identity', for Ady, was in crisis – the declining Habsburg Empire, the challenge of European (especially French) modernism, the sense that his people occupied that Danubian no-man's-land between east and west.

Ady's poetry often alludes to the ancestors of the Magyars, those Asiatic nomads who had settled on the Pannonian plain. Andreas Kelletat's essay is a moving introduction to the work of the East German, or rather East Prussian, poet and novelist Johannes Bobrowski (1917-1965), who knew intimately that part of Europe where German, Baltic, Slavic, Finno-Ugric and Jewish peoples met – and parted. This was his personal centre of a vast region which he called 'Sarmatia', stretching from the Oder to the Volga, from southern Finland and Sweden to the Black Sea. Both central to, and forgotten by, the

rest of Europe, it was a region where nomadic herdspeople and hunters had become settlers. Bobrowski's image of the crane, 'the bird of lonely marshland and lakes, circling over the primeval landscape' (Kelletat), is enharmonic with Ady's sea-bird. The Hitler years deprived Bobrowski of his homeland, but he saw the late twentieth century more generally as marking the end of sedentary life, ushering in a new nomadism, a loss of local belonging. This, suggests Kelletat, appears to have been confirmed by globalisation, although he disputes Bobrowski's prognosis that home and nation-state would become redundant concepts. Be that as it may, perhaps the most potent prop used in Tadeusz Kantor's Cricot2 Theatre (which originated in Polish-Jewish Kraków), is the suitcase.

Highland Clearances apart, Scots have not on the whole suffered such traumatic displacement, and travel has spelled opportunity; indeed, expat Scottish writers have gained insights impossible to those who have stayed at home – as contributors suggest is the case with Violet Jacob and Robin Jenkins, among other examples. Gender is undoubtedly a complicating factor. Zsuzsa Várga, discussing the Victorian novelist Margaret Oliphant, charts the progress of her eponymous heroine in **Kirsteen** (1890); Kirsteen must necessarily make the move from her patriarchal Highland home to London, where her work as a dressmaker asserts – paradoxically – both her independence and her domesticity: 'portable femininity'.

The essays all too often clank on in the manner that has one screaming: come back, belles-lettres, much is forgiven. Feminization of colonizedness, spatial-affective centers, alterity, problematizing here and foregrounding there: all part of the neo-puritan premise that art has conveniently replaced politics as the locus for righteous rationality. I warmed all the more to Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's freedom from such baggage and her utterance that 'the myth of the end of myth-making is the worst myth of all … I am for a marrying of the logical with the non-rational.' A true poet deconstructing the deconstructionists, then getting on with the job. Myth, after all, like ballad, is central to the greatest poets, as William V. Davis's focus on Edwin Muir reminds us. Bobrowski, one feels, would have identified with Muir's 'sweet and terrible labyrinth of longing', his conviction that 'art … moulds a living world out of our dead yesterdays.'

April 2001