

## SCOTLAND, SLOVENIA AND A NEW RENAISSANCE

*Paul Henderson Scott*

Since the 1960s the Slovene Centre of PEN, the international organisation of writers, has held an annual International Writers' Meeting to which other PEN centres, including the Scottish, are invited to send representatives. I have been lucky enough to have taken part in three of these meetings, and this year Laura Fiorentini came with me.

The idea behind these events is to provide an opportunity for writers from many countries to have a frank exchange of views, not only about literature, but about the current state of the world. Over this period and in this tormented region, although happily Slovenia has been largely spared the worst, this has been a brave venture. It has also been remarkably successful. These meetings are an oasis of friendly co-operation and good sense, even when they involve people from countries at war or close to it. During the whole period of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, writers from all the constituent countries have taken part. So have others from such areas of conflict as Israel and Palestine. They have shown that sensible and well-intentioned people can find common ground even in the most unpromising circumstances. These discussions are not futile because writers may be able to take back something of the spirit of the meetings and have some influence on public opinion in their own country.

Part of the secret of the success of these meetings lies in the informality and warmth of the Slovene hospitality. Also the sheer beauty of the place and the

---

*Paul Henderson Scott is a former diplomat who is President of the Saltire Society and a member of the National Council of the SNP. He has written many books on Scottish affairs, including **Andrew Fletcher and the Treaty of Union**. His autobiography **A Twentieth Century Life** will be published by Argyll in April 2002.*

*Scotland, Slovenia and a New Renaissance*

comfort of the hotel probably help to establish an appropriate atmosphere. For several years the meetings have been held in Bled, on the edge of a magnificent lake in the foot-hills of the Alps. There is a baroque church on an island and the most fairy-tale like of all fairy-tale castles on a precipitous cliff. The water of the lake is clean and transparent and this is a country which still has wild flowers and butterflies. All of this is not hopelessly remote, but on the borders of Italy and Austria. Marshall Tito showed good judgement in making his summer headquarters in a villa on the lake-side. It is now a five star hotel where the President of the Republic gives his reception for the participants in the Writers' Meeting.

One of the main literary themes this year was on the question whether history and the books of the past still have relevance for us in our rapidly changing world. This is a familiar idea in this country where the Blairite adoration of modernity has tended to suggest that the past can and should be ignored; 'modern good, heritage bad'. (David Black in his recent book about the Parliament building, **All The First Minister's Men**, suggested that this was the reason for Dewar's stubborn rejection of the obvious site on the Calton Hill.)

In the paper which I had prepared for the meeting I took the opposite line and had the feeling that I was stating the obvious. After all, you cannot hope to understand the present without some idea of how we arrived at our current ideas and institutions. Also, literature and the arts generally are not like science which builds on and replaces the achievements of the past. The new is not necessarily better. Would anyone now claim to equal Shakespeare, Mozart or Burns, or Vergil for that matter? We still find pleasure in the arts of the past and can still learn from them much that is in danger of being forgotten.

I was reinforced in my feelings about this last point by a book which I happened to be reading on the train journey from Venice to Ljubjana, J.H.Plumb's **Book of the Renaissance**. In this he discusses the qualities with Castiglione in the 16th century thought were necessary for the complete human being. Apart from a courteous and easy manner, without pedantry or excessive professionalism, they included: 'a knowledge of the classics, an acquaintance with history and philosophy, an appreciation of music, painting, architecture and sculpture'. It struck me that, if you add science and mathematics, this is the ideal at which education has aimed for centuries, but no longer.

### *Scottish Affairs*

Anyone who now advocated Castiglione's standard would probably be received with derision. The conduct and attitudes which used to be approved as good manners and proper consideration for others are now spurned as eccentric and old fashioned. Greed, self-assertion and violence are now more likely to be admired than condemned. Instead of the active, enquiring, sceptical mind, intellectual laziness is encouraged by the avoidance of difficulty and the search for the easy option. Instead of thought and analysis, we now have sound-bites and propaganda. The ideal of the Renaissance, and of the Scottish educational tradition of the Democratic Intellect, of a wide, general approach to thought and learning, is displaced by narrow specialisation. Of course, it will be said that these views are typical of an older generation who always think that the country is going to the dogs. Also, there have been gains in increased personal freedom and a higher standard of living, at least for the employed. In face, however, of the deplorable statistics of poverty in Scotland and of the high rates of illiteracy and innumeracy, there is no room for complacency.

The Renaissance of 14th century Italy was stimulated by the recovery of the intellectual and artistic values of ancient Greece. Similarly, Hugh Macdiarmid's Scottish Renaissance aimed at the restoration to Scottish poetry of the language, range, intelligence and international awareness of our own medieval poetry. It seems to me that we now need a new and more general renaissance to recover some of the moral and intellectual values of the comparatively recent past.

This need is not confined to Scotland or to Britain. It is true that the decline of standards has been fostered by UK Governments in the last twenty years, the Conservatives by their encouragement of competitiveness and greed, Labour by its obsession with modernity, and both by their submission to commercialism. In Scotland we are fortunate to have an alternative to the British parties, but the problem is now widespread throughout the world. The global economy and its voices in television and the Internet are spreading the infection like a vicious virus. The formal discussions and conversations in Bled were full of concern for precisely the same dangers as those which threaten us. Cultural and linguistic diversity are important defences against universal globalisation, uniformity and Americanisation. That is why the independence and cultural vitality of small countries like Slovenia, or Scotland, are valuable for the cultural health of the world.

### *Scotland, Slovenia and a New Renaissance*

The discussion of these issues in Bled involved consideration of the nature of nationalism. There are those who use the word in a purely negative sense to mean aggressive xenophobia or expansionism, fascism, imperialism, the suppression of national or personal freedom. This usage is very common in Continental Europe, but it is not unknown in this country, especially, oddly enough, among those who are assertively British. Confusingly, the word is also used to mean the exact opposite, the rejection of imposed uniformity or political control, the defence of national and personal liberty. This is the sense in which the word is used in Scotland. As the late Cardinal Winning said in a famous speech in Brussels in 1998, the Scottish nationalism of the SNP is not aggressive or violent, but 'mature, respectful of democracy and international in outlook'. This is also the attitude of the Slovenes. In Bled I have always found a close intellectual rapport.

This is not surprising because there are similarities between Scottish and Slovene historical experience. We have both lived next to a larger, more powerful and expansive neighbour. Slovenia was the earliest Habsburg possession and it was for centuries part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Slovenes, like the Scots, are egalitarian, unpretentious and welcoming. They share too our respect for books and education, as is evident in the support which all levels of the government give to the Writers' Meetings. Not only the president of the Republic but the mayors of both Bled and Ljubljana gave receptions for the participants.

The population of Slovenia is about 2 million, less than half of Scotland. Unlike Scotland, it does not have centuries of experience as an independent state; but it is now far ahead of Scotland in status. It declared independence on 26 June 1991, after a plebiscite in which 88.2% of the people voted for it. In May 1992 it became a member of the United Nations and negotiations for membership of the European Union are in an advanced stage. The satisfaction, optimism and self confidence which independence has created is evident in almost every conversation with a Slovene and in everything that you see around you. As in other countries, I have the impression that the psychological and cultural satisfactions of independence are even more gratifying than increased prosperity. There is no doubt that independence has done wonders for Slovenia. I have often been asked why Scotland, a larger and more highly developed country and one of the oldest nations in Europe, has not yet followed their example. I could only reply that we are in our way.

*September 2001*