

## **REVIEW: SCOTTISH NOVELS AND SCOTTISH LANGUAGE**

*Christopher Harvie*

Cairns Craig (1999), **The Modern Scots Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, £14.95.

J. Derrick McClure (2000), **Language, Poetry and Nationhood**, Phantassie: Tuckwell, £14.99.

The fall of 'scientific materialism' in 1989-91 continues to reverberate, and has reached literary criticism. Hegelian-Marxist *étatisme* saw economic integration and the formation of the modern state sanctifying national canons. In the 1960s the prevailing view of the post-Scott novel was the neo-Marxist one of David Craig in **Scottish Literature and the Scottish People**, 1961, explaining its nineteenth-century marginality as the consequence of a commercial popularity which diluted the complexities of Scottish life. In this, the Scott-Galt novel was seen as attempting to reconstitute history, but its subsequent direction was either (via Carlyle) towards the British mainstream, or towards Kailyard sentimentalism and obscurity. Contrasted with this, Cairns Craig in his energetic interpretation questions the very notion of historical centrality. Surveying novels from George Douglas Brown and John Buchan, via Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Neil Gunn to Allan Massie, Muriel Spark, Alasdair Gray and James Kelman, Craig sees a void where the congealed politics of history ought to be. Adopting Alasdair MacIntyre's identification of morality with community, and applying to this Colin Kidd's theme of a 'genuine' national history suppressed by British Whiggism in the later 18th century, he identifies a tendency in the modern Scots novel to plunge through a 'thin' history to mythology via anthropology or psychology:

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or, alternatively, to proceed with action rather than reflection, in an existentialist manner.

This is good gutsy stuff: the sort of thesis that will energise countless seminars. The worrying thing is that history's marginal role is secured in Cairns Craig's account by the eviction of historians, or at least those proffering evidence which might disrupt it. Not least the present reviewer. A passage from **Scotland and Nationalism** appears early on, emphasising the ahistorical quality of my home town of Motherwell. *Nota bene*: I was not actually arguing that Motherwell was 'out of history': instead that its historical evidence had been overlaid or destroyed by a sequence of specific historical events: changing housing policies, one-party government, the failure of the steel industry. I would grant Craig his point, but insist that the 'congealed politics' element remains important, and might be ill-served by his interpretation.

I'll use Craig's handling of John Buchan as an example. When Craig uses **The Thirty-Nine Steps** in his coda to confirm his thesis, Franklin Scudder's notion of a 'subterranean' conspiratorial movement towards war becomes

the intersection of multiple international narratives, a space of interacting causalities so complex that they can be reduced to the unitary requirements of the novel only by discovering behind them the single narrative of a vast conspiracy.

Back to myth, in other words. But is this the right reading? At the Dumfriesshire inn, Hannay decodes Scudder's notebook and concludes 'The little man had told me a pack of lies'. The conspiracy revealed is not 'the malign mirror-image of history's narrative progression' but politically precise and German, to do with intercepting Anglo-French mobilisation plans. It remains so until the 'black social comedy' of the denouement at Broadstairs.

A similar imbalance applies to Craig on Buchan's **Witch Wood** (1928), where he stresses a Frazerian interpretation of the rituals of Woodilee, and underplays the 'history' of Buchan's anti-revolutionary politics, derived from Edmund Burke, which identified with the moderation of Montrose and not with the Covenanters. Moreover, one could argue that the continuity of J. G. Frazer's imagery of 'thin crusts of civilisation' above raging fires goes back not just to Carlyle on the French Revolution but to Goethe and the 18th century Hutton-Werner debate on Earth's origins. In Buchan the ritual-mythic

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is pretty consistently counterpointed by the rational-political, but this balance is scarcely apparent in Craig. One can find elsewhere similar disadvantaging of inconvenient discourses, notably the scientific, the ludic and the erotic – not least in the marginalising of Naomi Mitchison, James Kennaway and Eric Linklater.

Stasis in the cultural field might be explained by politics and economics, reflecting, after the modernisation of the eighteenth century, the nature of the Union state. The absence of a parliamentary political life does contribute to the weakness of the Scottish novel tradition, when set against the triumphs of the post-Carlyleian English 'novel of public affairs' - Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, Meredith and Wells. This was reinforced by a literary commerce, metropolitan-based and substantially Scots-run, which alternatively boosted and junked the 'Scotch novel'.

Craig makes out a powerful case. The psychological and anthropological bases of Scottish identity have consistently been under-researched - particularly the importance of psychoanalysis, Freudian as well as Jungian. But this whole area still has to be adequately analysed in biographical and monograph form before it can take the weight that Craig puts on it. As it stands, he could be accused of downplaying the critical force of another explanation, in which Scottish identity, though weak in transactional political terms, remains in dialogue with civics and with metropolitan cultural capitalism. Here the route runs from Scott and Galt via Carlyle and Ruskin to Patrick Geddes and another interpretation of George Douglas Brown: that of a community dissolving under the pressure of industrial change, the railway in particular. This crisis is civic, exemplified in the disaster of World War I. Yet civic as opposed to literary identity, is collective, multi-disciplinary and resilient: can outcrop in worship, masques, plays, murals and galleries, sport and festivals, and politics in an all-embracing, Whitmanite sense. Citing Robertson Smith, John Muir and Alexander Graham Bell as culture-bearers, Craig nods in this direction, but the ground broken by his **History of Scottish Literature** has been fertilised by an eloquent and scholarly flyting, rather than extended by the sort of experimental research techniques which civic culture requires.

Derrick McClure's **Language, Poetry and Nationhood**, by contrast, has a relatively modest aim: to show the linguistic inputs into Scots poetry since conscious revivalism began late in Victoria's reign and (more generally) to link these to the campaigns for national culture and self-government. But it

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ends in a much wider field: examining the evolution of Scots as something multi-faceted, experimental and avant-garde. Although circling round the central figure of MacDiarmid, McClure stresses the inventiveness of contemporaries and disciples, and the degree to which exploration of the peculiar registers of Scots has given access to European traditions neglected by the Anglophone mainstream. McClure's command of the vernacular makes for an elegantly-produced, knowledgeable book, and though there are some odd omissions - nothing on Hamish Henderson and the folk revival; nothing on that gallus fechter William Neill, though he appears in the acknowledgements - this will be an essential work on twentieth century Scots poetry.

In terms of production, 9 out of 10 to the Tuckwell Press, though the quest for McClure's small, elusive and pale footnote numbers had this reviewer tearing his receding hair. Craig has been less well served by Edinburgh University Press: typographical errors abound. And who or what are the Ghurkas?

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