

## REVIEW: REPRESENTING SCOTLAND

*Gavin Miller*

Alan Riach, **Representing Scotland in Literature, Popular Culture and Iconography: The Masks of the Modern Nation**, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 304 pp., hb, £60.00, ISBN 1 4039 4591 8.

The frontispiece of Alan Riach's **Representing Scotland** is startling: it shows the cover of a 1998 comic book (or 'graphic novel') entitled **Batman: the Scottish Connection**. The Caped Crusader is battling with a claymore-wielding, and equally masked, tartan-clad bad guy. This startling interpolation is indicative of Riach's intentions, for **Representing Scotland** boldly expands the domain of Scottish literary studies: Riach draws in such areas as African literature, global cinema, British television, and comic books. His aim is to show 'the ways some of the icons and characteristic aspects of Scotland [...] have been deployed, developed, and transformed'; and to do so he will consider 'works of Scottish literature and Scottish cultural production both in their own right and in their inter-action with non-Scottish works' (p.xviii).

**Representing Scotland** is a book in three parts: a historical exploration of the forces that gave rise to Scottish Literature (focusing firstly on Shakespeare, and then on the transition from Enlightenment to Romantic literature); a series of case studies of nineteenth-century Scottish literature (Scott, Stevenson, and Conan Doyle); and an examination of Scottish culture in the twentieth century from the Scottish Renaissance to post-war popular culture (including James Bond, television series such as 'Edge of Darkness', and, of course, comics).

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The first part of the book, entitled 'The World of Things Undone,' consists of an introduction and two chapters – 'Shakespeare and Scotland', and 'Foundational Texts of Modern Scottish Literature'. 'Shakespeare and Scotland' considers – amongst other things – early representations of the Scot in **Henry V** and **Henry IV** part one, ideas of nationhood in **Cymbeline**, and possible references to Scotland in **The Tempest**. The chapter concludes with a section on Shakespeare's inspiration for two twentieth-century Scottish poets, Norman MacCaig and Edwin Morgan. The next chapter, 'Foundational Texts of Modern Scottish Literature', is (more or less) a study of the transition in Scotland from Enlightenment to Romantic culture. Riach sees this historical moment as formative for Scottish culture, and concludes that there are four defining characteristics to Scottish culture in the 'foundational' era (and presumably beyond): the overlap between orality and literacy, the presence of three linguistic streams (English, Scots, Gaelic), the relationship with England, and the beginning of a global consciousness (through exploration, imperialism, and the like).

Part Two – 'Lost Worlds and Distant Drums' – considers the work of Scott, Stevenson, and Conan Doyle, across three chapters. The emphasis in these chapters is on the tension between a rational modernised world, and what is excluded from it as primitive, childish, or savage. There is little, though, in the readings of Scott, Stevenson, and Conan Doyle that is particularly revelatory. What is refreshing is Riach's willingness to expand his readings beyond the narrow genealogical limits of previous studies (where Scottish literature had to be produced by more-or-less 'ethnically' Scottish Scots). Wilson Harris, for example, who was born in British Guyana, and latterly resident in London, comes under consideration because his 1972 novel **Black Marsden** is set in Edinburgh. Similarly, the Nigerian (or, more precisely, Yoruban) author Amos Tutuola's **The Palm-Wine Drinkard** (1952) also enters the scene because Riach sees it as fruitfully intertextual with Conan Doyle's **The Lost World** (1912) (and also Stevenson's **Kidnapped** (1886)).

This refreshing openness continues in the third part of **Representing Scotland**. Although the section begins with a routine account of the Scottish Renaissance, it is not long before boundaries between high and low culture, as well as between Scottish and global culture, are challenged. Riach considers, for example, the appeal of the 'Lobey Dosser' comic strip, which ran in the Glasgow **Evening Times** during the early 1950s; its Scottish cowboy hero ('lobby dosser', a sleeper in stairwells) he sees as a 'loving but ironic counter-appropriation of American popular culture, which lingered in the west of

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Scotland as a legacy of the Second World War' (p.167). Riach then segues into an account of Alan Sharp, the Scottish novelist who left for Hollywood to script Westerns such as **The Hired Hand** (1971) and **Ulzana's Raid** (1972), and, in due course, penned the Scoto-Western **Rob Roy** (1995). Perhaps the most original and interesting material, though, is Riach's reading of Scottish comic-book culture. He clearly enjoys comics, and provides a fascinating and informative account of the role of Scots as writers of them, and the occasional representation of Scotland in them (including in **Batman**).

There is a price that Riach has paid, though, for his willingness to extend Scottishness, and to introduce elements of popular and global culture. **Representing Scotland** is a treatise with some deficiencies. There is a notable problem in the depth and complexity of the analyses that Riach offers. No doubt, this is partly a consequence of introducing texts that are unfamiliar to readers acquainted with a conventional Scottish canon: a greater degree of straightforward description, exposition and summary is necessary. However, there are too many areas where deeper interpretation and criticism are bypassed. Riach's reading of Ian (M.) Banks is a case in point: there is too much plot summary of Banks's novels, with little argument or analysis, and little reference to existing criticism. **Complicity** (1993), for example, is summed up, and then forgotten about, in a two-sentence paragraph; more or less the same is true of **Espedair Street** (1987) and **Canal Dreams** (1989). The lengthier account (or summary) of **The Wasp Factory** (1984) is low on analysis, and lacks reference to the existing critical context.

There is also a tendency in Riach's writing to sound as if it came from an earlier generation of literary criticism, where the intuitive response of the critic was felt to be sufficient authority for his statements. When, for example, Riach makes a throwaway remark that Dunbar's language 'is leaner, with more tension, muscle, bite and signature' (p.32) than that of Chaucer, then this anachronistic discourse is uncomfortably evident. Few contemporary critics would make such a statement without cashing in their metaphors for linguistic and stylistic data.

But there is a more serious problem with **Representing Scotland**. It is very difficult to work out what this book is arguing for, and how its argument is made. This is not merely a problem across the book as a whole, but also within each part and chapter, and frequently from paragraph to paragraph.

The key term 'mask,' for example, remains largely undefined, apart from some passing reflections in the introduction. I wanted to know why a mask

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was not a stereotype, or an archetype, or a motif, or any of a number of seemingly similar established literary terms. Occasionally, Riach – as if reminded of his central metaphor – will pick out a ‘mask’ from a text under consideration, but the concept remains underdeveloped.

The method in Riach’s various transitions is also mysterious. They are structured mainly by a flow of mental associations, and rather less so by hypothesis, evidence, inference, abstraction, typification, exemplification, or other cognitive operations. For example, across two pages in his introduction, Riach goes from Burns coming first in a **Daily Record** poll of the Greatest Scots, to the **Herald**’s remark on the poll that few Scots even know all the words to ‘Auld Lang Syne’ or ‘My Love is like a red, red Rose’. Then, by some association of similarity, Riach asserts that Gershwin’s lyrics for ‘Love is here to stay’ are ‘surely Burns-derived’ (p.26) (he quotes 10 lines, containing some similar images), before returning to the singing of Burns’s ‘A Man’s a Man for a’ that’ at the opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. This is but a specimen of Riach’s method, where readings are introduced because some text or other ‘rings a bell’, and reminds the author of something else that he has read, seen, or heard.

Such strange juxtapositions could be seen as ‘constellations’, along the lines of those presented by Walter Benjamin, where a juxtaposition of images from different times and places shatters a naively linear view of time, and infuses the present with the potential of a previously ‘dead’ past. However, this is an argument that Riach would have to explicitly make for his readers. As it stands, **Representing Scotland** is a frustrating work. While it opens up new domains in Scottish culture and criticism, too many of these topics are introduced by what seems like the whim of the author.

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