

'Damage Land' Revisited: Scottish Gothic in the Noughties

By Alan Bissett

Damage Land: New Scottish Gothic Fiction, a collection of twenty short stories which I edited, was released by Polygon in April 2001. It included new work by writers who were established by then, such as John Burnside, Janice Galloway, Laura Hird, Jackie Kay and Christopher Whyte, as well as up-and-coming talents, many of whose careers have blossomed in the Noughties, including Michel Faber, Maggie O Farrell, Ali Smith and James Robertson.

At the time, I was a research student at the University of Stirling, whose English Studies department was a leader in the field of Gothic. My supervisor, Professor David Punter, provided the trigger for *Damage Land* with the publication of his essay *Heart Lands: Contemporary Scottish Gothic* in 1999. I was excited by the way in which he had positioned the likes of Galloway, James Kelman, A.L. Kennedy and Irvine Welsh as investigators of psychological disturbances and breakdown. A collection of fiction seemed like the next step in making a case for these Gothic textures in contemporary Scottish literature.

The strong response from authors, and the excellence of their stories, suggested that this had been a seam long overdue for mining. Even writers who were not able to submit, including Alan Warner and Irvine Welsh, were enthused by the concept and able to see the connections to their work. Kelman scholars may be interested to know that he pointed me towards two of his stories, *O Jesus, here come the dwarfs* and *A Nightboilerman's notes* from *Lean Tales* (1985), as ones which he himself felt displayed Gothic effects. This surprised me, given Kelman's renowned opposition to genre fiction, and gave fuel to Punter's thesis.

In truth, my introductory essay to *Damage Land* is rather overcooked, with idiosyncrasies of expression and argument which even I now find irritating. I was only 24 at the time, with a prose style still in development, and the essay suffers

from having to service both the academic audience I knew would be interested in the book, and the popular one to whom the publishers hoped to sell it. I've always wished to correct the deficiencies of the introduction, while reasserting, in clearer terms, the several valid points which it has to make. The reader will hopefully forgive me for taking the opportunity to do so here, but it will be attended by a brief overview of Scottish Gothic in the decade since the book's publication.

I discussed Scottish Gothic as the distribution of an alternate series of myths which challenge the ones scribed upon a nation by empire, emerging as a damaged response from a stateless nation subsumed by a larger union. Contradictions within the Scottish character resulting from this condition — G. Gregory Smith's famous Caledonian antisyzygy¹ — make the doppelganger or divided self a central theme of the national literature. In the last ten years,

values.² In this sense, contemporary Scottish Gothic might be said to shadow the auspices of Thatcher's and Blair's free-market utopia, is a dark doppelgänger of it, if you will. This capitalist revolution has espoused humanist values of liberalism and emancipation, while creating a homogenous culture in which consumerism and the acquisition of wealth are the predominant modes of expression. Gothic, on the other hand, would find no stable self to emancipate. It points up jagged counter-narratives of terror and degeneracy, the social and psychological incohesion beneath this economic superego. It is perhaps germane to note the ways in which the recent, sharp crash has exposed the whole late-capitalist project as a collective dream, or, indeed, nightmare-in-waiting.

Dilys Rose was quick off the mark: her story 'Mazzard's Coop' in *Damage Land*, about a mining community haunted after the closure of a pit, directly examines the scarring, Gothic effects of Thatcherism on the psyche. The Noughties have witnessed, as a response perhaps to the weightless, objective fantasies produced by capitalism, narratives of subjective immersion in alcoholism or breakdown, such as Zoe Strachan's *Negative Space* (2002), Sophie Cooke's *The Glass House* (2004), A.L. Kennedy's [Paradise](#) (2004) and Kevin MacNeil's [The Stornoway Way](#) (2005). Others feature infernal, post-industrial wastelands, peopled by serial-killers, pornographers, paedophiles, or abducted women and children: Louise Welsh's *The Cutting Room* (2002), Zoe Strachan's *Spin Cycle* (2004) and John Burnside's [Glister](#) (2008). One might equally discuss these as projections of the War on Terror, a culture of paranoia created by the state, on the one hand, and terrorism, on the other, whereby the urban landscape becomes synonymous with fear, suspicion, otherness and abjection.

It is for others to analyse in more detail the extent to which these texts are Gothic, or particularly Scottish disfigurements caused by an imperialist or capitalist super-narrative. Space does not fully allow it here. My hope is that *Damage Land*, in collecting and contextualising a range of these disturbed fantasies, remains relevant to that discussion.

References & Further Information

¹ G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1919).

² Fred Botting, *Gothic: The New Critical Idiom* series (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1-2.

(c) *The Bottle Imp*