

Scottish literature has had a lengthy and vigorous relationship with the Gothic mode. The mode's key conventions were initiated by the publication in 1764 of the first self-proclaimed 'Gothic story',  
by the English novelist, antiquarian and politician Horace Walpole. Following on from the great early Gothic

particular the myths and fabrications on which national identity is so often based.

Ian Duncan develops this idea when referring to early Scottish Gothic in his chapter 'Walter Scott, James Hogg and Scottish Gothic' (2001)<sup>3</sup>. He argues that

The thematic core of Scottish Gothic consists of an association between the national and the uncanny or supernatural. To put it schematically: Scottish Gothic represents (with greater historical and anthropological specificity than in England) the uncanny recursion of an ancestral identity alienated from modern life.<sup>4</sup>

He acknowledges that this return of the historic repressed is a feature of other traditions (such as in England), but simultaneously claims that it is more acutely present and more specifically pertinent in Scottish manifestations of the mode. Certainly, what should be highlighted in terms of the 'original' Gothic of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century - that which he specifically discusses in this chapter - is that the incursive past in Scottish texts is not represented by a foreign other (as in , and , for example), but by the other within, usually the Highlander, marked out as dangerously different via language (Gaelic), religion (Roman Catholic) and politics (Jacobite).

Meanwhile, in his introduction to the 2001 collection of short fiction , Alan Bissett highlights precisely the same concern:

Gothic [...] has always acted as a way of re-examining the past, and the past is the place where Scotland, a country obsessed with re-examining itself, can view itself whole, vibrant, mythic. When myth becomes channelled through the splintered prism of the present, however [...] what emerges can only be something distorted and halfway monstrous. And while the Gothic has often been the conduit for collective fantasies and nightmares, there is something/someone/some body that haunts the fringes of the Scottish imagination ... perhaps the whisper of history, pain, feudalism, legend, all or none of these things, but undoubtedly Scotland's is a fiction haunted by itself, one in a perpetual state of Gothicism.<sup>5</sup>

Any nation that predicates its identity on an affirming common history is on a potentially dangerous trajectory. However, via the co-ordinates of the Gothic, if this body of texts problematise the past as myth then they are capable of

highlighting the distortions that past produces in the present - they reveal national myths as Gothic forgeries (forgery being a recurring concept in the mode). Is this the quality that makes 'Scottish Gothic' a pertinent label?

Something closely related to this treatment of history, which again appears commonly in Gothic texts of Scottish origin, is the motif of the journey North. Yet this also is a recurrent motif in the Gothic more generally. Classic examples include Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). The west in Ireland serves a similar purpose (cf. James Joyce's 'The Dead'). What is peculiarly Scottish about the motif in this context is that the North is the Highlands - Gaelic-speaking, primitive, often supernatural and certainly other.

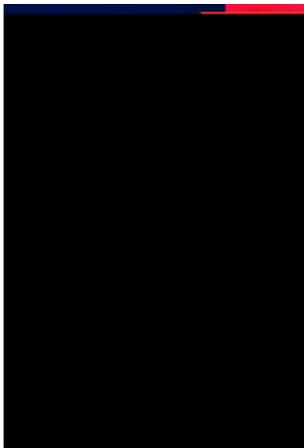
I'd like to discuss what for me is the pre-eminent example of Scottish Gothic, in keeping with the definitions above: J.M. Barrie's wonderful and disturbing novella [The Children in the Wood](#) (1932). It may come as some surprise to those not familiar with Barrie's whole canon that the author largely famous for Kailyard tales of couthy rural Scotland and for *When a Girl Comes Out* (1904) penned one of the most unnerving and tenacious examples of Gothic fiction ever to come from Scotland.

Barrie's novella focuses on a remote Highland glen, and specifically at a time in mid-winter when it becomes 'locked' with snow. For a short period no one can get in or out. This is when 'the strangers' are said to visit. Our narrator is the Reverend Adam Yestreen, and the story takes the form of the diary he has promised to keep to record the 'locked' period in the glen for the benefit of the summer-only visitors he refers to vaguely as 'the English'. His diary becomes a self-revelatory dramatic monologue. The events that ensue involve ambiguous ghosts, vampires and - worst of all for the minister - Roman Catholic Jacobites.

In line with Ian Duncan's fastidious definition of Scottish Gothic, the haunting ancestral identity is both geographically and historically specific: from the North, and from the time before Protestantism began to dominate (pre-nineteenth century). Rev. Yestreen is partly a Lowlander and comes to the glen from the south. This makes him ostensibly, like the English, capable of rationality and impatient with superstition. However, he is also half-Highland, and begins to have his doubts about the origins of the attractive and sensual visitor Miss Julie Logan.

This text may convincingly be labelled 'Scottish Gothic' in that the Gothic elements are uniquely Scottish - the Highland/Lowland divide, the relationship

with its southern neighbour as represented in the tale by 'the English', the acute sectarian prejudices and so on. Yestreen is Scotland, replete with all its unities and divisions. Yet he is persistently, possibly even eternally, haunted by Scotland past, the Scotland of Highland history, Jacobitism, superstition and Catholicism. The past is in his name, 'Yestreen' - yesterday evening, implying an inescapable concern with what has gone before. Julie Logan, whether actual or psychological, represents this past and is significantly given her name by a type of rock that sits on the mountainside around the glen: 'there are Logan stones, I am told, throughout the world, and they are rocking stones. It is said they may be seen rocking in the wind, and yet hold on for centuries.' This threat to coherency of identity is perpetual.



Despite being published in 1932, in many ways

is not a text of the 1930s but rather Barrie's farewell love letter to nineteenth century fiction in the vein of Stevenson and Hogg. To encounter the continued validity and vigour of Scottish Gothic, one need only look as far as the other articles in this edition. In a wider British context, Scotland is still the Northern Gothic periphery. In BBC 3's brilliant recent series [The League of Gentlemen](#), which follows the lives and loves of three housemates who just happen to be a vampire, a werewolf and a ghost in turn, George is transformed by a werewolf attack that takes place in rural Scotland, almost certainly the Highlands given the references to Nessie. This confirms the premise of Neil Marshall's 2002 horror film [The Wolfman](#), where the residents of a small Highland village near Fort William are revealed to be werewolves, attempting to entrap and feed on a group of soldiers from the South. In all these texts, the journey North is a journey back in time, to a more primitive location where conventional rules do not apply. Again, we see the urbane present menaced by primitive, ancestral forces.

The fact that this is such a prevalent concern in contemporary Scottish texts in the Gothic mode might again provide evidence for a national Gothic tradition - the journey north features in the identifiably Gothic work of David Mackenzie in film (for example [The Wicker Man](#) (2002)), and in fiction in the work of Iain Banks, John Burnside, Christopher Whyte, Muriel Spark, Alan Warner, John Herdman and Alice Thompson, amongst others. Although Scotland still represents the Gothic North in terms of Britain as a whole, within this imagined community

its own northern periphery serves the purpose well.

Dr Macdonald is currently working on a monograph on Scottish Gothic.

<sup>1</sup> David Punter, 'Heartlands; Contemporary Scottish Gothic'. \_\_\_\_\_.  
Volume 1 Issue 1 (August 1999), pp.101 - 118

<sup>2</sup> Punter, p.101 and p.102

<sup>3</sup> Ian Duncan. 'Walter Scott, James Hogg and Scottish Gothic'. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001)

<sup>4</sup> Duncan, p.70

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