

I grew up in a fairly bookish household in Kilmarnock, so Scottish literature was part of my furniture from an early age. This being Ayrshire, Robert Burns was inescapable. The park I played in as a kid had a jaggy sandstone space-rocket called the Burns Monument at its centre. Every town in the district had its Burns connection. We were taken to

it. No Burns. No Scott. No MacDiarmid. No Spark.

No surprise, then, that my research topic, when I embarked on postgraduate study, wasn't Scottish. After graduating from Glasgow, I went to Oxford to start a D. Phil on the Irish Literary Revival. I then found myself getting interested in the twentieth-century Belfast poet, John Hewitt. Through Hewitt I discovered Ulster-Scots poetry and the work of the rhyming weavers of Antrim and Down, on whom Hewitt had written his 1951 MA thesis at Queen's University Belfast. The weaver poets were Presbyterian radicals and heavily indebted to Robert Burns, and so I soon found myself settling on Burns and Presbyterianism as my research topic. The result was a D. Phil thesis on *The Poetry of Robert Burns in its Religious Context*, which, after considerable revision and additions, became [\*Burns the Radical: Poetry and Politics in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland\*](#) (Tuckwell, 2002).

Studying Scottish literature at Oxford was a curious experience. I was lucky to have a very acute and conscientious supervisor in the Irish poet Bernard O'Donoghue. But what I remember most about my time at Oxford is the excitement surrounding Irish Studies. Roy Foster had just arrived as the Carroll Professor of Irish History. Seamus Heaney was the Professor of Poetry. Tom Paulin was living in the city, and would shortly be appointed to a lectureship at Hertford. Among the English faculty, John Kelly, Terry Eagleton and Bernard O'Donoghue marshaled an eager phalanx of Irish graduate students working on Yeats and Joyce and Beckett. The Irish President, Mary Robinson, and the Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds, both visited Oxford during my time there. The contrast with Scottish Studies was rather marked. The whole experience brought home to me the need for Scottish Studies to have an institutional presence outside Scotland. It also showed me the potential significance of comparative Irish-Scottish Studies.

After Oxford, I spent ten happy years at the University of Aberdeen, teaching Scottish (and sometimes Irish) literature alongside colleagues like Isobel Murray, George Watson, David Hewitt, Patrick Crotty, Ali Lumsden and Shane Murphy. I also benefited from the lively research culture generated by Aberdeen's [\*Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies\*](#), under the directorship, first, of Tom Devine, and latterly of Cairns Craig. Out of this came a collection of essays I co-edited with Ray Ryan, *Ireland and Scotland: Culture and Society, 1700-2000* (Four Courts, 2005). More recently, I have tried to extend my Irish-

Scottish interests in the direction of fiction. My first novel, *All the Colours of the Town* (Faber, 2009), is a political thriller that moves between Glasgow and Belfast to explore the contemporary ramifications of the Irish Troubles.

Earlier this year, I moved to New Zealand to take up a post as the inaugural Stuart Professor of Scottish Studies at the University of Otago. It's been very enjoyable and also challenging to teach Smollett and Scott and Spark to students who have no background in Scottish Studies. I have also enjoyed discovering Scottish connections and affiliations in the work of canonical New Zealand writers. My current research focuses on the work of James K. Baxter (1926-72). The closest thing New Zealand possesses to a National Bard, Baxter was a passionate, lifelong Burnsian, having been introduced to the works of Burns by his pacifist father. He knew *Tam o' Shanter* by heart from the age of six, and alludes to Burns's masterpiece throughout his oeuvre. His great poem, *Henley Pub*, for example, is a darker version of *Tam o' Shanter*.

Burns features not simply as an influence, but as the subject of Baxter's writing (in the novel *Horse*), as the addressee of Baxter's poetry (in *Letter to Robert Burns*), even as the speaker of Baxter's poetry (in *A Small Ode on Mixed Flattening*). In the mid-1960s, Baxter wrote a collection of essays and talks entitled *The Man on the Horse* (1967), whose title essay is a masterful exposition of the symbolism of *Tam o' Shanter*. Burns is an abiding preoccupation, a central element in Baxter's imaginative mythology. For Baxter, Burns is talisman, bardic precursor, poetic exemplar, and the embodiment of a kind of tribal wisdom and vitality that Baxter sees as crucial to the healthy functioning of modern Western society.

James K. Baxter also spent two years of his life as the [Robert Burns Fellow](#) at the University of Otago. The Burns Fellowship is the University's writer-in-residence programme, and its title illustrates the surprising ubiquity of Robert Burns in the public life of Dunedin. The city's central square – or rather Octagon – is dominated by a statue of Burns. There is a Robert Burns Hotel. There is a Burns Street. There is a suburb called Mosgiel (as well as one called Abbotsford). The University's main Arts building is called the Burns Building. And indeed, the city was co-founded by Burns's nephew, the Revd. Thomas Burns, a Free Kirk minister from Monkton in Ayrshire.

All this makes it very easy to feel at home, despite being 12,000 miles away from

Scotland. I m also conscious that New Zealand has a long tradition of teaching and research in Scottish literature, most recently with Marshall Walker and Alan Riach at the University of Waikato. Further back there was Ian A. Gordon, Tditiog