

Towards an Overview of Scottish Children's Literature from 1823-2010

By Jim Alison

She speaks to them still .

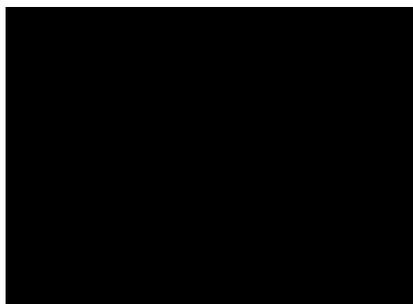
Behind Charlotte Square in the New Town of Edinburgh you may come across an ornate Gothic monument commemorating the novelist Catherine Sinclair who died in 1864. An inscription dedicated in 1909 declares

young brother with a pair of scissors.”³ This is very much the same world as . Mischievously for the purposes of this brief overview we shall garland the forgotten Miss Sinclair as Scotland’s first children’s laureate.

“I wish everybody who writes a book was obliged to swallow it,” said Harry. “It is such a waste of time reading, when we might be amusing ourselves.”

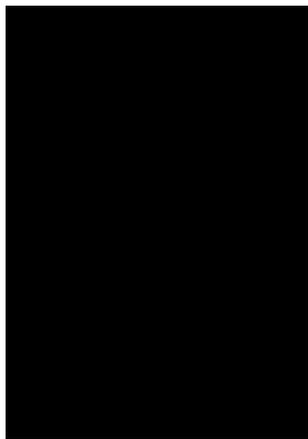
Since Margaret Meek produced her seminal collection of essays in 1977,⁴ the field of children’s literature, from infant board books to teenage crossover fiction, has grown its own formal critical apparatus. Internationally there is now an immense volume of scholarly theorising by and for literary critics, teachers and librarians on issues such as: aesthetic quality and canonicity; genres and categories; interactions between author and reader; enjoyment and instruction; developmental and reading ages; gender, ethnicity, postcolonial, feminist and other ideologies; and not least the motives and economics of the book trades and professional authors. A recent and readable survey of this sometimes rebarbative material is to be found in the Open University’s

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Interestingly, despite the fact that landmark fictions by Scottish authors are key to many theoretical discussions, works for example by Scott, Sinclair, Ballantyne, Macdonald, Stevenson, Lang, Grahame and Barrie, there seems to have been virtually no acknowledgement in standard reference texts⁶ of the existence of a tradition of Scottish writing for young people, a tradition that stretches over some 180 years. Exceptions are Stuart Hannabuss’s short survey in 1996⁷ and two recent groundbreaking reviews of Scottish publishing policies for children’s books and comics by Jane Potter and Joseph McAleer.⁸

Seen in the light of these studies it has to be acknowledged that the phrase appears to be highly problematical. What evaluations are implied in the term ‘literature’? What are the possible relationships between adult writers and young readers? Is there in fact a corpus of texts which can be identified as distinctively ‘Scottish’?



In 1997 some teacher members of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies addressed these complex issues in [redacted] ⁹ and subsequently in 2003 used the criteria which they had developed to produce [redacted] as a guide to fiction for young readers aged 10-14.¹⁰ This proposed a rationale for using and enjoying 'Scottish' works, and offered short critical accounts of 160 texts, later supplemented online by a further 40 items which took the survey up to 2005. One limitation of this selection was that it did not attempt to deal with writing for the very young, comic books and graphic and videogame narratives. It was not moreover a direct survey of readers' own favourites.

Modest though it was in its ambitions, [redacted] still remains the only well informed source of advice on the range and quality of Scottish junior fiction. In identifying candidates for inclusion in the guide, the compilers concentrated mainly on writers who signalled that they were writing with young people in mind. A Scottish text was simply one which used a Scottish context, in plot, characters or setting; or was written by someone who had lived in Scotland. Thus Anne Fine and J K Rowling¹¹ were admissible on grounds of residence alone, and writers such as G A Henty, Arthur Ransome, Rosemary Sutcliff, Nina Bawden, Peter Dickinson and Michael Morpurgo, who had no Scottish background, were included on the strength of novels with Scottish ingredients. Using these admittedly generous criteria the project certainly demonstrated the existence of a significant archive of material developing between 1824 and 2005. However its main purpose was not to identify a backlist but to recommend books, whether earlier or more recent, which were likely to retain their lively appeal for young readers. Do they speak to us still? Here is an illustrative indication of some of the earlier texts analysed in the guide:

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- 1824 and 1827, Sir Walter Scott, [redacted] and [redacted]: two good-sized short stories—one is a horror yarn in Scots of bogle wark in Covenanting times; the other a tale of the drove roads and a fatal culture clash, also with a supernatural ingredient.

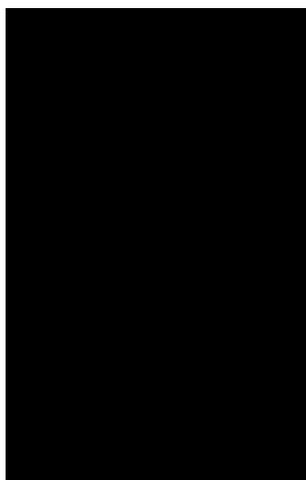
- 1863, James Grant, : by accident a Victorian gap year on a hazardous voyage to Cuba and Cape Town serves to make a man out of a callow Etonian.
- 1865, R M Ballantyne, : location Arbroath, a hands-on account of the building the Bell Rock light, complicated by young romance, pressgangs and smuggling.
- 1872, George MacDonald, : a darkly shaded

today. Nevertheless they merit their place on the historical record, and may well prove attractive to adventurous readers.

Of the two hundred books reviewed in the Treasure Islands project:

- 9% were published before 1918
- 4% were published in the 1920s and '30s
- 7% in the 1940s and '50s
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These figures reflect only the books selected for review; and factors such as the compilers' judgements and availability of texts are clearly operating. Though a limited sample, they do nonetheless suggest in general terms a slow, fits-and-starts, growth in the publication of imaginative writing for young readers in Scotland.



Within the selection 135 authors are represented, with men and women in roughly equal numbers. There are very few women in the 19th century category but their contribution increases steadily thereafter until today female authors are in the majority. In productivity there is a range from occasional, one-or-two book authors such as J J Bell, J B S Haldane and Marion Campbell to skilled professionals who have sustained work of impressive quality over a period of years—Honor Arundel , Mollie Hunter, Allan Campbell McLean, Eleanor Lyon, Kathleen Fidler, Joan Lingard, Iona Mcgregor, Eileen Dunlop, Hugh Scott, Theresa Breslin, Elizabeth Laird and Alison Prince. Some, like Jane Duncan, Nigel Tranter, Naomi Mitchison, Eric Linklater and Jackie Kay have moved successfully between adult and younger readerships.

Since the completion of the ASLS survey in 2005 younger contemporary writers such as Cathy MacPhail, Julie Bertagna, Cathy Forde, Keith Gray, Nicola Morgan, and Gill Arbuthnott have extended their range and new talent continues to emerge, for example, in the work of J A Henderson, Cathy Cassidy and Alex Nye.

The world of Scottish children's writing is not hermetically sealed and

impermeable to external forces. Its current novels show influences from adult fiction and from other literature, English and American. They are responsive to the powerful narratives of contemporary film, TV and computer games. The styles of prolific, internationally popular authors such as Jacqueline Wilson, Eoin Coiffer, Lemony Snicket and Anthony Horowitz are also making their impact. Over the years there has been dramatic shifting towards more frank dealings with sexual development, personal and social problems, violence, war and environmental issues. Structure and language have become more stripped down, informal and direct.

The characteristic preoccupations of Scottish junior fiction are, as we would expect, the universal and perennial themes of growing up, romance, family, conflict, outsiders, comedy, supernatural and horror, fantasy, adventure and sport—but these are set in distinctive Scottish contexts. Two clusters of titles will serve to illustrate the point.

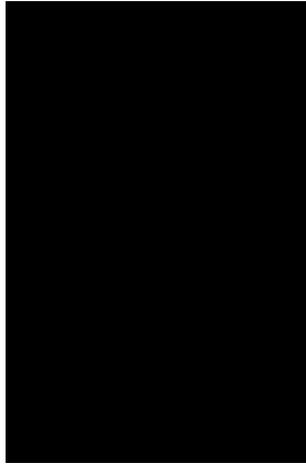
Going North

One of the most popular themes is the call of the North. It can take many narrative forms and like much else in junior fiction it carries residual echoes of Scott and Buchan: journeys north from England into Scotland, from Lowland to Highland, from urban to rural, with attendant picaresque adventures. It can entail military excursions, flight and pursuit, escape from routine, exposure to wild, elemental, mysterious territories, sometimes threatening sometimes comic.

(Winifred Finlay 1973), and

Joan Lingard 1973).

Witchcraft



Historical themes also bulk very large in the survey. Many of the major episodes in Scotland's history are fictionalised in one way or another, but one topic is particularly prominent—the matter of witches and witchcraft. On the one hand there are the exuberant non-historical structures of fantasy and magical adventures to be found in the work of J K Rowling (Harry Potter series 1997-2008) Debi Gliori (etc., 2001-2007), Joan Aitken (2005) and Terry Pratchett (2003)—the latter three being

often hilariously entertaining. On the other hand several novelists tell of the lives of women and girls caught up directly in the vile realities of Scottish witch persecutions and religious fanaticism in the 16th and 17th centuries, or their more recent equivalents. These works include:

(Kathleen Fidler 1961), (K M Briggs 1963), (Nina Bawden 1966),
(Mollie Hunter 1971), (Mary Rhind 1988),
(Frances Mary Hendry 1988), (Eileen Dunlop 1989),
(Catherine Lucy Czerkawska 1989),
(Anne Pilling 2000), (Cathy Forde 2005),
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The central female characters of such stories are often depicted as courageous and independent spirits. A vivid exception, however, is *The Drowning Pond* in which a gang of girls in a suburban comprehensive school are tragically corrupted by dabbling in the cruelties of witch hunting.

This strong emphasis on witch narratives probably distinguishes Scottish junior fiction from that of the rest of the UK, but has parallels in some American teenage fiction.

Among other significant thematic groupings of texts which have distinctive Scottish dimensions are:

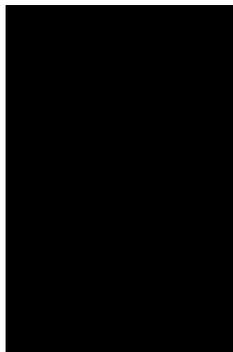
- the lives of animals (fox, wolf, deer, otter, seal, birds, dogs horses, cats)
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Useful short collections are Anne Forsyth's *Scottish Children's Literature* (2001) and the ASLS anthology *Scottish Children's Literature* (Alan Macdonald and Ian Brison, 1982).

The health of Scottish children's literature in recent years has greatly benefited from the activities of the Scottish Book Trust. Funded by the Scottish Arts Council, its priority has been to stimulate the interests of potential young readers. Its Live Literature Funding brings Scottish writers into schools and public libraries, and its running of the Royal Mail Awards for Scottish Children's books helps to engage school pupils closely in reviewing and judging the selected books. It has also created the post of a virtual Writer in Residence residence (the first appointment being Cathy Forde).

Surprisingly however the Trust does not seem to accept any responsibility for exploring and supporting the past heritage of children's literature. Its concern appears to be only with living writers, and books currently in print. A case could therefore be made for establishing a Scottish Library of Children's Literature.



In the field of commercial publishing the gradual extinction of long established Scottish-based publishers and the willingness of large international companies to support some established Scottish writers are factors bound to influence the content and style of children's books. One trend seems to be that the use of Scots in fiction is declining. In the 200 texts reviewed in

there is only one full-length novel that risks sustaining appropriate dialogue in any form of Scots—Des Dillon's *Scottish Children's Literature* (1995). Itchy Coo's *Scottish Children's Literature* (Sheena Blackhall and Hamish MacDonald 2003) comprising two lively novellas in different dialects is, however, promising evidence of what can be achieved. Given the present circumstances of children's publishing, the enterprising work of small specialist publishers such as Itchy Coo, Floris Books (Kelpies), Barrington Stokes and Fidra Books is invaluable,¹³ whether in commissioning new materials or rescuing half forgotten but worthwhile out-of-print fiction.

This overview of Scottish Children's literature has managed only glimpses of its convoluted landscape, and it has perforce concentrated more on the texts that have been produced for the benefit of young Scots than on what they may actually

want. The last time their own views were sampled was in 1989, when the Scottish Arts Council published its report on [The Scottish Arts Council Report on the State of the Arts in Scotland](#). Given the changes that have taken place culturally and socially since then, and the radical developments now being promulgated nationally in school curricula for Literacy and English, it is surely time for another attempt at this tricky but valuable task.¹⁴

In concluding we may take some encouragement from the wise words of the redoubtable Miss Sinclair, creator of those little menaces Harry and Laura:

“But above all we never forget those who good humouredly complied with the constantly recurring petition of all young people in every generation, and in every house, — ‘Will you tell us a story?’”¹⁵

References & Further Information

¹ For an account of Catherine Sinclair by Charlotte Mitchell see the [Introduction to *Miss Sinclair*](#), Oxford University Press, 2004.

² In 1972 Hamish Hamilton published a new edition of [The Secret Garden](#) with a perceptive preface by the novelist Barbara Willard.

³ John Buchan, [The Secret Garden](#) (Cassell, 1932) p. 313.

⁴ Margaret Meek, Aidan Warlaw, Griselda Barton, eds. [The Secret Garden](#) (The Bodley Head, 1977).

⁵ Janet Maybin and Nicola J Watson, eds. [The Secret Garden](#) (Palgrave Macmillan for the Open University 2009).

⁶ These include: Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Pritchard, eds. [The Secret Garden](#) (Oxford University Press 1984) and Victor Watson, ed. [The Secret Garden](#) (Cambridge University Press 2001).

⁷ Stuart Hannabuss in Peter Hunt, ed. [The International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature](#) (Routledge 1996), pp. 688-691.

⁸ Jane Potter and Helen Williams, ‘Children’s Books’ and Joseph McAleer, ‘Magazines and Comics’ in [The Secret Garden](#) (Palgrave Macmillan for the Open University 2009).

⁹ Alan MacGillivray, ed.

(Edinburgh University Press 1997), pp. 31-53.

¹⁰ James Alison and Ronald Renton, eds.

Scottish Literary Studies 2003).

(The Association for

¹¹ In

(Floris

2007) J K Rowling in her preface reflects cannily on the alleged influences of the city operating on her Potter novels. Interestingly enough this attractively produced guidebook has nothing to say about Catherine Sinclair, her novel or her monument.

¹² Julie Johnstone, *The Thing that Mattered Most*, (The Scottish Poetry Library and Black and White Publishing 2006)

¹³ See Jane Potter and Helen Williams in 8 above, pp. 352-367.

¹⁴ The new 'outcomes and experiences' for Literacy and English courses in Scottish primary and secondary schools are to be found on the Learning and Teaching Scotland website.

¹⁵ Catherine Taylor,

(Hamish Hamilton,

edition of 1972) preface, p. xv, xvi.

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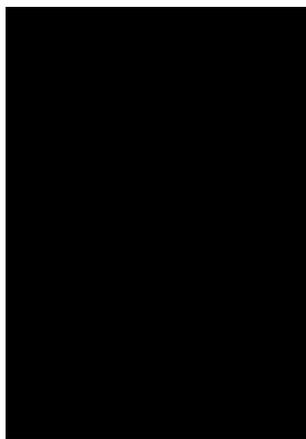
She was a friend of all children and through her book 'Holiday House' speaks to them still.¹

,² published in 1839, makes a notable starting point for a survey of Scottish children's literature. Previously there had been nothing quite like it in its portrayal of juvenile behaviour. The particular milieu, lightly sketched, is bourgeois Edinburgh



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 - 1872, George MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin*: a darkly shaded fantasy: a babyish but enterprising princess who is secluded in a remote castle joins with a boy miner to prevent goblins from abducting her.
 - 1886, R L Stevenson, *The Covenanter*: it is 1751. David, a prim, sheltered lad, is challenged by grim experiences on the brig *Covenant*, and as a fugitive in the Highlands after the Appin murder.
 - 1887, G A Henty, *The Young Jacobites*: a young Jacobite exile and a mercenary find themselves fighting together on the continent. Their ambivalent loyalties are pointed up.
 - 1888, Andrew Lang, *The Borderers*: a short supernatural romance of the Borders in the ill years after Flodden, drawing on the theme of the

ballad .

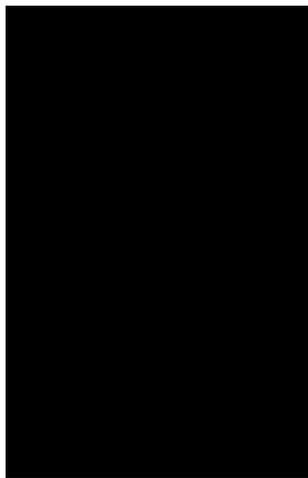
- 1892 onwards, Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskinshaws* : a selection of eight of the most accessible Holmes stories.
- 1901, Ian Maclaren, *My Boyhood in Perth* : Muirton (Perth) around 1860. For Speug and his classmates, school life is a series of running battles with teachers, townsfolk and rival school gangs—a sound preparation for death and glory in Imperial fields.
- 1901, J J Bell, *My Boyhood in Glasgow* : flourishing in late Victorian, working-class Glasgow, Macgregor, a pre-teenage urchin, causes hilarious domestic mischief in 24 escapades.
- 1905 onwards, Neil Munro, *The Skipper of the Puffer* : a selection of Munro's humorous sketches dealing with the adventures of the skipper of the puffer Vital Spark and its droll crew. Good fun, almost surreal at times, occasionally satirical.
- 1911, J M Barrie, *My Boyhood in Perth* : a witty prose expansion of the play *My Boyhood in Perth*, first performed in 1904.

Each of the guide's 200 brief critiques offers cautious advice on reading and interest levels. Some of the older titles such as those listed above, seem time-bound in their language and assumptions, and could therefore be off-putting today. Nevertheless they merit their place on the historical record, and may well prove attractive to adventurous readers.

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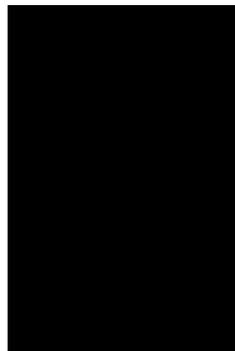
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- (wild and big) with a particular interest in monsters and fabled creatures.
- threats to climate and environment (going back as far as Eric Linklater's *The Wind in the Willows* (1949) and including Julie Bertagna's *The Boy in the Boat* (2002).
- experiences of the big city (in Glasgow and Edinburgh) and experiences of life in remote highland and island areas
- social deprivation, exclusion and alienation
- traditional Gaelic and Lowland folklore.

Of the other distinctive clusters noted in the least well represented is sport, but that has since been enhanced by the publication of Theresa Breslin's *The Football Book* (2005) which tackles football, sectarian and racial conflicts in contemporary Glasgow.

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