

Bloodyminded in Bloody Scotland

By Lin Anderson



Crime fiction from Scotland is “firing on all cylinders”. That’s what Ian Rankin said when launching the first [Bloody Scotland International Crime Writing Festival](#) in 2012. He also said “Scandinavia doesn’t have better crime writers than Scotland, it just has better PR”, which was the reason Alex Gray and I had set up Bloody Scotland. This year, ticket sales were up by forty-two per cent, confirming what we knew already, that ‘Tartan Noir’ is an international best-selling brand.

In an interview prior to his appearance at Bloody Scotland 2013, Arne Dahl said there are many different voices in crime fiction coming out of Scotland, yet to him they are all identifiably Scottish.

I had reason to ponder why this was so in some detail when asked to give a keynote speech at GUTTENHEIM University in Germany on Scottish Crime Writing just prior to the first festival. My research for this paper was an eye opener, even for me, a current Scottish crime writer. From my experience, writers outside the genre prefer not to be termed ‘a Scottish writer’, seeing this as in some way restrictive, yet for the crime writer to be thus named is an international gift.

The demand for the Scottish brand continues to grow. Being associated with the brand is a big plus point for a fledgling Scottish crime writer. From Rankin to Brookmyre, from Mina to McDermid, from McIlvanny to Malcolm Mackay (the most recent winner of Best Scottish Crime Book of the Year) and the multitude of other writers in between — Arne Dahl says they are all recognisably Scottish.

Why is this?

Ian Rankin has mentioned on numerous occasions that he didn’t read classic English crime writers before his foray into Rebus, but feasted on Alistair Gray, Muriel Spark, William McIlvanney, James Kelman, Alasdair Gray, some John Buchan, and Alistair MacLean. I found this list mirrored my own, with the addition of Robert Louis Stevenson. Ian also said that his first novel, *Knots and*

Crosses was a retelling of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* where Rebus might have been the murderer, which apparently no one noticed, much to his chagrin.

RLS was featured in a discussion at Bloody Scotland this year under the title of 'The Split Detective', featuring two authorities on Stevenson, Alanna Knight and David Ashton (also an authority on the McLevy novels which were published prior to Sherlock Holmes).

Having mentioned Sherlock Holmes, which I love, I have to say that, although written by a Scot, these novels sit better next to Agatha Christie. They feature a clever upper class person solving a crime, because a lower class stupid policeman can't, a feature of the golden age of English crime writing.

The contemporary Scottish crime novel, on the other hand, owes much to [William McIlvanney's *Laidlaw*](#). When *Laidlaw* was published, McIlvanney, a winner of a string of literary awards, was surprised by the reactions of some of his former admirers. McIlvanney recalls a tale of meeting his former English teacher in a pub. McIlvanney has often recounted how the teacher ticked him off for producing something "as worthless as a detective story".¹ McIlvanney goes on to say, "The old assumed automatic distinction between detective stories and 'literature' tends to serve as a way for people whose reading habits have petrified to protect themselves from having to think afresh".²

So what makes McIlvanney, and *Laidlaw*, the godfather of Tartan Noir? Ask most contemporary crime writers who influenced them the most, and it won't be Agatha Christie, but McIlvanney. Through *Laidlaw*, McIlvanney, for me, articulated two things. First a question: 'Who is the true monster among us?' which takes us back to Stevenson and *Jekyll and Hyde*. The second is that he gave voice to an erudite and educated man, an urban philosopher, who just happened to be a policeman.

Scottish crime writing must also in some part reflect the Scottish psyche. Reading through a current list of authors and their books, including *Laidlaw*, the word 'thrawn' comes to mind. When Scots (and their protagonists) are told what to think and do, they often do the opposite. The second aspect is a distinct lack of deference to 'the establishment'. When questioned on the social and political aspects of his novels, McIlvanney says, "One of the things I love about the history of Scottish culture is that a continuing thread runs through it, one of equality that

says: You will be judged as a person by the nature of your humanity, not by the quality of your name or the status you appear to have achieved.”³

I recognise too, the celebration of a mongrel nation. McIlvanney said prior to devolution that “Scottishness is not some pedigree lineage. It’s a mongrel tradition. If the new Scotland is not about Pakistani Scots, Irish Scots, German Scots, and whatever they are — it’s not worth having at all.”⁴

Tony Black, another contemporary Scottish crime writer sums this up beautifully. Born in Australia, raised in Scotland, Ireland, and Germany, his father’s family Lithuanian, Black says of himself, “I’m this complete mongrel, but I’m 100 percent Scottish.”⁵

The current crop of Scottish crime writers and their protagonists (not all of them detectives) continue to marry a rich seam of imaginative storytelling, with strong personal, social and political comment. From McIlvanny to the newest winner of the Scottish Crime Book of the Year award, Malcolm Mackay, Scottish crime fiction, according to Magnus Linklater at the recent awards ceremony at Bloody Scotland, “has entered its golden era.”

Crime fiction has become a dominant force in Scottish literary life. It sells most books, is borrowed most frequently from libraries, is internationally renowned. Despite the breadth of its church, the diversity of sub-genres, styles, settings, themes, politics, aesthetics and voices, it has a recognisable quality, a shared concern. It defies convention, it challenges assumptions. Despite this, the literary world often looks down on it, lumping it all together dismissively under genre fiction. That probably ensures that those who are thrawn, read even more of it.

At the opening event, “Why Bloody Scotland” in 2012, featuring Alex Gray, myself and Ian Rankin, a member of the audience mentioned this in passing. Ian pronounced himself unconcerned, because, since the literary establishment hadn’t wanted us, we’d just gone away and formed our own gang. Thrawn indeed.

References & Further Information

¹ Len Wanner, *The Crime Interviews Volume III*, Kindle Edition, location 115.

² *Ibid.*, location 121.

³ *Ibid.*, Volume II Kindle Edition, location 174.

⁴ *Ibid.*, location 196.

⁵ *Ibid.*, location 666.

(c) *The Bottle Imp*