Have Scottish Studies Ever Involved Cultural Studies?

By Matthew Wickman

The simple answer to the question I pose in the title of my talk—have Scottish studies ever involved cultural studies?—is yes.[1] Explorations of race, class, gender, and sexuality inform a great deal of new work in the field, supplemented by nuanced thinking about such subjects as vernacular language, national identity, the multi-mediated legacies of major Scottish authors, the role of culture in the public sphere, and much more.[2] The three scholars comprising this panel with me have contributed in seminal ways to a broadly conceived cultural studies initiative in Scottish literature.

But at another level, the relationship between Scottish studies and cultural studies is more vexed. I say this in part because a certain discourse celebrating the subversive effects of cultural exceptionalism (the heteroclite, the subaltern, the queer, and so on) now seems almost clichéd in a discursive universe of creatures and things, of posthuman and object-oriented ontologies. This makes the putative inclusion of cultural studies in Scottish studies seem less like a sign of the latter field's progress than an uncanny reminder of its belatedness and marginality. But the relationship between cultural and Scottish studies is also rendered strange by the story of the emergence of Scottish studies. And it is that story I wish to tell and reflect on, briefly, today.

Three years ago, I was asked to contribute an essay to *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature*, a book that is slated to appear in early 2013. The topic the editors assigned me was 'the rise of Scottish studies' (more on that wording below). There were two ways, it seemed to me, to tell this story. In the first, we might start with G. Gregory Smith's 1919 attempt to unify the nation's purported 'zigzag of contradictions' under a banner he labeled the 'Caledonian Antisyzygy'. For both good and ill, Smith's Jekyll-and-Hyde vision of Scottish culture left a lasting impression. As Gerard Carruthers has shown, Smith's 'quasi-racial musings set Scottish criticism off on the path of mass-psychology, which led later

Scottish critics into absolute pessimism about the viability of Scottish literature and culture'.[3] While the poet, critic, and political activist Hugh MacDiarmid embraced Smith's notion of *concordia discors* in the 1920s, seeing it as a symbol of national energy, others who conceded Smith's central claim were far less sanguine. Indeed, Edwin Muir in the 1930s, John Speirs in the 1940s, Kurt Wittig in the 1950s, David Craig and David Daiches in the 1960s, Tom Nairn in the 1970s, and Kenneth Simpson in the 1980s all perceived Scottish culture as debilitatingly divided. In the 1980s and '90s, however, a group of scholars including Cairns Craig, Craig Beveridge, Ronald Turnbull, David McCrone, and Lindsay Paterson began arguing that Scotland's cultural fault lines made up an important part of its history, and that, in any event, national traditions inherently entail complex processes of cultural negotiation. As Craig puts it, 'nations have never been pure', and so national identities derive from 'the dialogue between alternative possibilities of the self'.[4] When these convictions began to hold sway in the '90s and early 2000s, they refashioned the image of a divisively stunted Scotland into a figure (not unlike MacDiarmid's) of galvanizing diversity.

The first way, then, to tell the story about modern Scottish studies is simply to trace the development of this dialogical paradigm. A second is to rehearse the field's gradual institutionalization. Carruthers contends that 'Scottish Literature as an academic discipline […] has really only come into being since the 1960s. G. Ross Roy […] founded its first journal, *Studies in Scottish Literature*, in 1963; the Association for Scottish Literary Studies (ASLS) was formed in Scotland in 1970; and the autonomous Department of Scottish Literature at the University of Glasgow came into being in 1971'.[5] But Scottish studies really came of age in the last decades of the twentieth century, with the surge of national consciousness in the wake of the failed devolution referendum of 1979, and with the watershed scholarship that appeared across a range of disciplines in the 1980s and '90s. Key texts here include (but are by no means limited to) Alexander Broadie's *The Tradition of Scottish Philosophy* (1990), Duncan Macmillan's *Scottish Art* (1990), John Purser's *Scotland's Music* (1992) and, in literary studies, Cairns Craig's four-volume edited set *The History of Scottish Literature* (1987), his monograph *Out of History* (1996), Robert Crawford's *Devolving English Literature* (1992), and Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan's edited collection *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* (1997). Such work formed a scholarly corollary to the oft-noted outburst of creative energy in Scottish literature, headlined by novelists like

James Kelman, Janice Galloway, and Alasdair Gray, and by poets like Crawford and Kathleen Jamie (to name only a few). The establishment of Scotland's devolved Parliament via the Scotland Act of 1998 both formalized and further underscored the nation's resurgence. And all this growth in the cultural and political sectors fueled expansion within the universities as the natural home for Scottish studies, fostering new research centers, book series, conferences, courses, and journals (most pertinently, at least in name, the *Scottish Studies Review* in 2000).

So, dialogism and institutionalization: these make up two grand narratives of the emergence of Scottish studies. But these narratives are partly at odds. Consider again the one about the nation's dialogical, pluralistic coming of age. While the emphasis on diversity in the current era in some ways conserves categories like nationhood, it also potentially portends its own dissolution by admitting a 'cosmopolitan' criticism that views nation-states as obsolescent and thus liquidates the nationalist paradigm altogether.[6] Originating in a kind of postmodern, Deleuzian schizophrenia (as a national body without political organs), Scottish studies concludes by undercutting the very logic of its own existence.

But this begs the question of what Scottish studies are (and here, I circle back to the second narrative of emergence, the narrative of institutionalization). The field's development—indeed, one reason why scholars employ the term Scottish studies—owes much to its historical coincidence with British cultural studies. The latter arose during the 1950s as a politically engaged method of inquiry.[7] Originally drawing heavily from Frankfurt School engagements of culture, the movement today tends less to employ Marxian vocabularies of hegemony and uneven development than from categories of affect, like ontological intensities. Whereas hegemony traditionally operates under the auspices of state institutions like schools and churches, generating normative ideals and behaviors, intensities arise more spontaneously from forces uncontrolled by the state. (Think for example of the images and information we associate with the Arab Spring, and of the power of social media.) Scott Lash describes the evolution from hegemonic power-from-above to intensified power-from-below as a move from a regime of representation to one of communication, a shift which corresponds with the difference between, on the one hand, a 'rising' and fundamentally linear field and, on the other, an 'emergent' and essentially

chaotic one.[8] The ‘rise’ of Scottish studies tells one story, the ’emergence’ of Scottish studies tells another. This transformation from the first to the second follows almost logically (and, ironically, in linear, ‘rising’ fashion) from the historical impetus of cultural studies, which Stuart Hall says originated as a partial response to the social crisis that formed after World War Two: ‘The vocation of cultural studies’, he says, ‘has been to enable people to understand what is going on, and especially to provide strategies for survival, and resources of resistance, to all those who are now—in economic, political, and cultural terms—excluded from anything that could be called access to the national culture …’.[9]

This credo applies to Scottish studies. There is, as we said above, an ’emergent’ tendency there toward cosmopolitanism, or toward a concept of ‘the world as a network of interdependencies’ created from the refuse of old nation-states.[10] And yet, if we recall the post-war history of which Hall reminds us, we are reminded that the question of national culture and the problem of ‘access’ to which Hall turns our attention ‘rose’ in Scotland during the onset of the cultural studies era not least because, as T. M. Devine observes, that ‘linchpin of the union, the British Empire, was disintegrating at remarkable speed’, providing Scots with less access not to culture per se, but to imperial markets.[11]The assertion of a cultural-nationalist identityScottish studiesthus represents, after a fashion, a residually political remnant of a cultural studies movement whose politics are increasingly virtual and diffusive.

Note two paradoxes that attach themselves to the narratives of Scottish studies relative to cultural studies. Paradox number one: ’emergent’ fields ‘rise’, meaning that cultural studies only remains cultural studies to the degree that it retains a relation to its own cultural-materialist origins, with those origins encrypting themselves with particular poignancy within present-day Scottish studies. Paradox number two: ‘rising’ fields ’emerge’, which here means that the enfranchisement of a historically-dialogical Scottish studies ultimately conduces to latter’s reconstitution as something strictly cultural, post-nationalist, and therefore unrecognizable in traditionally ‘Scottish’ terms. In the first case, Scottish studies grounds the possibility of something like cultural studies; in the second, cultural studies carries Scottish studies outside itself, to the point of the field’s virtual dissolution. In this matrix, Scottish studies is necessary to a cultural

studies that nevertheless erodes it. To an extent, then, the title of this panel announces an impossibility. There are no 'Scottish studies after cultural studies' because the latter marks the limit condition of the former: Scottish studies after cultural studies are no longer simply 'Scottish'—or rather, what the field itself means evolves beyond recognition.

We might make the case here for a broad comparativism, which is indeed where the field of Scottish studies is headed, and in many ways for the better.[12] But in conclusion, let me suggest that such comparativism need not only denote the field's spatial relation to other geographically defined territories but also a temporal relation to earlier and other modes of itself. In fact, and as I suggest in comparing two narratives of the field with each other—the first 'rising', the second 'emerging'—some of the field's most compelling narratives may be found along a temporal continuum.

As an example, consider Cairns Craig's general preface to the important 'Determinations' book series at Polygon that launched during the cultural studies heyday of the 1990s. In that preface, Craig observes that:

> Scotland's history is often presented as punctuated by disasters which overwhelm the nation, break its continuity and produce a fragmented culture. Through the 1980s such conceptions have been challenged by a wide range of critical and analytical works that have shown just how profound the tradition of Scottish culture has been, and how dynamic the debates within it have remained—even in those periods (like the period after 1830) which cultural history usually looks upon as blanks in the nation's achievement.[13]

Craig's manifesto all but denounces Muir and those of the 'schizophrenic' school by name. However, it does not dispel the darkness of the Scottish past as much as it displaces it to the present day. But this means that narratives like Muir's not only provide the impetus for the revisionist histories that refute them but also uncannily inform the logic of their own repudiation. That is, Muir is right and wrong simultaneously: he correctly perceives a benighted motif in Scottish cultural history, he simply attaches it to the wrong moment. Hence, Craig channels Muir in dismissing him: past and present enter into a strangely, and provocatively, mimetic relationship with each other.

Duncan Macmillan framed this dynamic a little differently in his magnificent 2000

study *Scottish Art*. There, he takes aim at traditional assumptions concerning the 'fundamental incompatibility between Protestantism and painting', a canard that historically places 'visual art in Scotland at a permanent disadvantage'. The cultural allergy to artistic representation that is part of the legacy of John Knox:

> prevents the Scots from seeing that their contribution to the humanising of western culture—the philosophy of Hume, the portraits of Ramsay, the poetry of Burns, the novels of Scott, the paintings Wilkie or the town planning of Patrick Geddes, to name just a few examples—has not been achieved in spite of the Reformation, but is in fact an integral extension of their profound involvement in that event which was where this humanising process began.[14]

Deconstruction of the Presbyterian/Humanist binary has since become more prominent in Scottish studies, but the history of which Macmillan writes is less at issue here than the circuit of his reasoning: (a) Scottish culture bears Knox's burden even though (b) Scots have actually made, in concert with this legacy, a series of important contributions to the West. Sadly (c), this fact has gone largely unrecognized, but (d) not in a study like this one, not in our present era. The message is inadvertently mixed: the splendor of Scotland's history—the revisionist claim—has too long escaped our dim gaze—the defeatist line. In one sense, then, Macmillan's argument readmits the cultural desuetude it renounces; in another, however, it also makes itself a part of the history it revitalizes.

The point worth underscoring here is that it is not the content of history alone (e.g., the Knoxian legacy) that Macmillan revises, but also the form of that history. Like Craig, Macmillan crafts a narrative into which an unenlightened past figures even in its exorcism. These were the types of stories that James Hogg, Robert Louis Stevenson, and other noted Scottish writers loved, of course—and such were the stories that scholars of Scottish culture recycled during the height of the cultural studies era. By these accounts, Scottish studies has always involved cultural studies. It leads us to wonder not only what a field of Scottish studies after cultural studies would look like, but how one would conceive of such a field in the first place.

References & Further Information

[1] A longer version of this essay was published in *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature*, ed. Gerard Carruthers and Liam McIlvanney (Cambridge

University Press, 2012). Special thanks to Cambridge University Press for permission to reprint.

[2] A short list of scholars whose work falls within these categories would include Christopher Whyte, Carole Jones, Michael Gardiner, Berthold Schoene, Scott Hames, Eleanor Bell, Ann Rigney, the group of scholars at Glasgow University who helped organize the Global Burns Network, and many, many more.

[3] Carruthers and McIlvanney, *Scottish Literature*, p.13.

[4] Cairns Craig, 'Scotland and Hybridity', in *Beyond Scotland: New Contexts for Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature*, eds. Gerard Carruthers, David Goldie, and Alastair Renfrew (Rodopi, 2004: pp.229-53), p.250.

[5] Carruthers and McIlvanney, *Scottish Literature*, p.25.

[6] See, for example, Berthold Schoene, 'Cosmopolitan Scots', *Scottish Studies Review* 9:2 (2008).

[7] See Simon During, 'Introduction', *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp.1-2.

[8] For an overview of this shift, see Scott Lash, 'Power after Hegemony: Cultural Studies in Mediation', *Theory, Culture & Society* 24:3 (2007: pp.55-78). N. Katherine Hayles specifies that 'Emergence [explains how] properties or programs appear on their own, often developing in ways not anticipated by the person who created the simulation'. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p.225.

[9] 'The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities', *October* 53 (1990: 11-23), p.22.

[10] Berthold Schoene, 'Cosmopolitan Scots', in *Scottish Studies Review* 9:2 (2008) p.76.

[11] T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation: 1700-2000* (New York: Penguin, 1999), p.578; cf. Murray Pittock, *The Road to Independence? Scotland since the Sixties* (London: Reaktion, 2008), pp.15-16.

[12] I cannot enumerate examples here, but the main journals in the field (*Scottish Literary Review* and the *International Journal of Scottish Literature*) take this approach, and much of the new book-length scholarship in the field bears a comparative scope.

[13] Craig, cited in Craig Beveridge and Ronnie Turnbull, *Scotland after Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1997), p.7.

[14] Macmillan, *Scottish Art, 1460-2000* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2000), p.8.

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(c) The Bottle Imp