Independent Thinking: Scotland's Inscription of Separation: Response by Caroline McCracken-Flesher

By Caroline McCracken-Flesher

The personal, we know, is always political. Since the 1970s, we have learned to respect cultural difference expressed in individuals, and to stand alert to its political import. Thus in recent years, Scottish authors have been newly understood as authoring Scotland, or at least expressing it. The nation is inscribed by its authors, and authors, it seems, inevitably inscribe their Scottishness. Consequently, Scottish literature has become viewed as a locus for politics. In his recent book *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence*, Scott Hames tracks the shift in the years following the 1979 failure of the first devolution campaign.[1] To Murray Pittock, literature has enacted 'a form of cultural autonomy in the absence of its political equivalent'.[2] In 1992, Pat Kane argued that '[c]ultural autonomy has been a crucial substratum for political autonomy'.[3] The 2013 white paper for independence projects an active role for 'creative communities' that 'provide new insights and drive forward new ideas'.[4] With that heritage and backing, we might presume, in the moment of Scotland's independence decision, her authors will be to the fore in the arguments of the present and the imagination of the future.

And here lies the question for our panel: in the moment of the independence vote, what are Scots writing? Schooled beyond false consciousness by Cairns Craig and Tom Nairn, sophisticated and postmodern, how do today's Scots inscribe separation?[5] For surely they must. But as Wickman, Hames and Oliver point out, as enacted through literature a crux for Scotland turns out to be a challenge to theory.

Hames posits the problem as it emerged in the run up to the successful campaign

for a Scottish parliament of 1997. Inscription, literary representation, he argues, does not equal or even betoken political representation: publishing may be always political, but is not inherently a form of action. Political representation itself accomplishes only deferral through a sequence of fictions predicated on carefully maintained notions of unified thought and regulated behavior. Worse, these fictions maintain in the context of all politics—those of union, devolution or even independence. Politics, James Kelman has argued, resists the personal with its possibility for unregulated action. And here Hames points to the writing, rather than our presumptions about it: though coopted and deployed as culture in lieu of politics, 'the key Scottish novels of the past three decades set little store by "representation" of the kind enshrined in parliamentary democracy', he notes. Their formal innovations actually work against easy notions of representation, whether political, cultural or literary.

Matthew Wickman pursues this disconnect between literary and political representation into the moment of the independence vote. On the eve of the ballot, 'yes' and 'no' campaigns contend over the corpus of Robert Burns. Avoiding living writers they read past literature as present politics and attempt to enlist the dead author as an ally. Alex Salmond goes so far as to invoke the bard's 'private writings', while the 'no' campaign insists on his voice as of the public, and paradoxically too personally inclusive for separatism. These overwrought efforts on the one hand signal the cooptation and reduction Hames fears. At the same time, as Wickman observes, they expose a problem in the politicization of literature, and thus a potential. In Burns's poem 'To a Mouse', and indeed in every poet and person, identities are both multiplied and fractured—merely representative, we might say. With 'union', in person or in politics impossible, independence is inevitable and yet cannot be accomplished. With no coherent subjectivity, and self-preservation depending on sympathy, perhaps we are not the measure of all we survey and thus what 'we' survey we cannot represent in literature or for politics. In and through her authors, 'Scotland is a radical unknown'. And we could add, yesterday, today, and even tomorrow.

Susan Oliver at first glance offers a more secure alternative. MacDiarmid retreated to his raised beach; Grassic Gibbon haunts the Mearns. In much Scottish literature the land sustains and marks the unproblematically Scottish. We might think, here, of Walter Scott's topographical fugues in *The Lady of the Lake*, or the nation's ecosystemic claim on J. K. Rowling. But if the land itself is

inscribed, over time it shifts and surges unpredictably according to its accumulated detritus of words and meanings. Can it then offer a stable place or static geography against which problems of identity can be reduced? The Green Party thinks so, for 'environment is the basis upon which every society is formed'.[6] However as Oliver points out, growth springs from decay. To extend her observation, consuming and composting, shooting out spores from the random accretion of inscriptions and moments, replete with the bodies of Burns or of Bannockburn, 'the land' (a term I wish we had time to unpack) is a site for potential, for Scotland as something else. Feeding on inscriptions by generations of authors Scotland, our speakers imply, will always be bursting its bounds.

And that, surely, is the point. The moment of the independence vote foregrounds desires for representation, duration and consistency; authorship underpins these but as resistance, renewal and multifarious difference. If authors have provided the cultural substrata for politics, even dead poets prove surprisingly lively and unpredictable. A politician who would sup with Robert Burns better bring a long spoon—or a shallow glass!

Still why do today's authors, when invited to occupy the space they have opened for a voice in politics, prove skittish, even anxious, reluctant to produce on demand?[7] Perhaps the difficulty lies in the presumption of 'a' story. For many twentieth-century Scots, the nation had failed to tell its story, or told the wrong one; any 'right' story was told in opposition to an English master narrative.[8]In the 1970s, having lost the political battle, Scots seemed to have won storytelling privileges. Yet in the moment of independence, which story to tell? Scottish newspapers bounce from tale to tale: we're like Catalonia; Catalonia will be ejected from the EU, so we're Denmark.[9] And once the story is told, will tomorrow's Scotland enforce narrative as mastery? To do so may be to embrace power and lose possibility, for in Scotland's literary politics, Scottishness has always required telling a *different* tale.

The opposite of a subjecting master narrative may be not a competing narrative, even the story of 'independence', but many narratives. Scotland has plenty of stories to tell. Moreover in the pens of disparate writers they should and will be independent in the fullest sense. To write, indeed, is to differ and defer. Here, we might recall Don Paterson's inverted artistic philosophy. Writers, he declares, 'are

not good at strategising, form-filling, and writing business plans: indeed they are the constituency least capable of doing so' (Hames 158). Set that against Kathleen Jamie's conclusion: 'Really I'd want a yes vote, then a bloodless coup the next morning before there were any flags or triumphalism' (117). The artistic future, in Homi Bhabha's terms, will never return as 'the same'.[10] Nor should it. Authors' inscription of separation will be enacted, it seems, in the separateness of their inscriptions. Scotland's best hope is to become not *a* story, but *storied*—whether the vote be NO … or YES.

References & Further Information

[1] Scott Hames, *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence* (Edinburgh: Word Power, 2012).

[2] Hames quotes Murray Pittock, *The Road to Independence?* (London: Reaktion, 2008), p.114.

[3] Hames quotes Pat Kane, 'Artistic Rage that Cultivates the Scottish Consensus', *Guardian* February 6 1992. Kane, of the pop duo 'Hue and Cry', lobbies for Scottish autonomy.

[4] *Scotland's Future: Your Guide to an Independent Scotland* (Edinburgh: The Scottish Government, 2013), p.309.

[5] See especially Cairns Craig *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996) and Tom Nairn, 'The Three Dreams of Scottish Nationalism', originally published in the *New Left Review*(1968), reprinted in Lindsay Paterson, ed., *A Diverse Assembly: The Debate on the Scottish Parliament* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp.31-39.

[6] Oliver cites the Scottish Green Party's online policy statement at http://www.scottishgreens.org.uk/policy/ Website unavailable January 14, 2013.

[7] In response to Hames's invitation for *Unstated*, a few offer a creative piece; most respond directly, though with less or more caution about offering political critique.

[8] Consider C. M. Grieve's [Hugh MacDiarmid's] *Albyn: Or, Scotland and the Future* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench and Trubner, 1927), Edwin Muir's *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (London: Routledge, 1936), and Cairns Craig's sophisticated consideration in *Out of History*.

[9] For instance, 'Scottish independence: Forced EU exit "unlikely"', *Scotsman* 12 May 2013, online at http://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/top-stories/scottish-independence-forced-eu-exit-unlikely-1-3221806, accessed 2 January 2014; 'Scottish independence: Catalan claim casts EU doubt', *Scotsman* 29 December 2013, online at http://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/top-stories/scottish-independence-catalan-claim-casts-eu-doubt-1-3249462, accessed 2 January 2014; 'Danish MPs see future in Nato and EU for an independent Scotland', *Courier* 1 October 2013, online at http://www.thecourier.co.uk/news/politics/danish-mps-see-future-in-nato-and-eu-for-an-independent-scotland-1.137088, accessed 2 January 2014.

[10] Homi K. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation' in Bhabha ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 291-322, see p.312.

The personal, we know, is always political. Since the 1970s, we have learned to respect cultural difference expressed in individuals, and to stand alert to its political import. Thus in recent years, Scottish authors have been newly understood as authoring Scotland, or at least expressing it. The nation is inscribed by its authors, and authors, it seems, inevitably inscribe their Scottishness. Consequently, Scottish literature has become viewed as a locus for politics. In his recent book *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence*, Scott Hames tracks the shift in the years following the 1979 failure of the first devolution campaign.[1] To Murray Pittock, literature has enacted 'a form of cultural autonomy in the absence of its political equivalent'.[2] In 1992, Pat Kane argued that '[c]ultural autonomy has been a crucial substratum for political autonomy'.[3] The 2013 white paper for independence projects an active role for 'creative communities' that 'provide new insights and drive forward new ideas'.[4] With that heritage and backing, we might presume, in the moment of Scotland's independence decision, her authors will be to the fore in the arguments of the present and the imagination of the future.

And here lies the question for our panel: in the moment of the independence vote, what are Scots writing? Schooled beyond false consciousness by Cairns Craig and Tom Nairn, sophisticated and postmodern, how do today's Scots inscribe separation?[5] For surely they must. But as Wickman, Hames and Oliver point out, as enacted through literature a crux for Scotland turns out to be a challenge to

theory.

Hames posits the problem as it emerged in the run up to the successful campaign for a Scottish parliament of 1997. Inscription, literary representation, he argues, does not equal or even betoken political representation: publishing may be always political, but is not inherently a form of action. Political representation itself accomplishes only deferral through a sequence of fictions predicated on carefully maintained notions of unified thought and regulated behavior. Worse, these fictions maintain in the context of all politics—those of union, devolution or even independence. Politics, James Kelman has argued, resists the personal with its possibility for unregulated action. And here Hames points to the writing, rather than our presumptions about it: though coopted and deployed as culture in lieu of politics, 'the key Scottish novels of the past three decades set little store by "representation" of the kind enshrined in parliamentary democracy', he notes. Their formal innovations actually work against easy notions of representation, whether political, cultural or literary.

Matthew Wickman pursues this disconnect between literary and political representation into the moment of the independence vote. On the eve of the ballot, 'yes' and 'no' campaigns contend over the corpus of Robert Burns. Avoiding living writers they read past literature as present politics and attempt to enlist the dead author as an ally. Alex Salmond goes so far as to invoke the bard's 'private writings', while the 'no' campaign insists on his voice as of the public, and paradoxically too personally inclusive for separatism. These overwrought efforts on the one hand signal the cooptation and reduction Hames fears. At the same time, as Wickman observes, they expose a problem in the politicization of literature, and thus a potential. In Burns's poem 'To a Mouse', and indeed in every poet and person, identities are both multiplied and fractured—merely representative, we might say. With 'union', in person or in politics impossible, independence is inevitable and yet cannot be accomplished. With no coherent subjectivity, and self-preservation depending on sympathy, perhaps we are not the measure of all we survey and thus what 'we' survey we cannot represent in literature or for politics. In and through her authors, 'Scotland is a radical unknown'. And we could add, yesterday, today, and even tomorrow.

Susan Oliver at first glance offers a more secure alternative. MacDiarmid retreated to his raised beach; Grassic Gibbon haunts the Mearns. In much Scottish literature the land sustains and marks the unproblematically Scottish.

We might think, here, of Walter Scott's topographical fugues in *The Lady of the Lake*, or the nation's ecosystemic claim on J. K. Rowling. But if the land itself is inscribed, over time it shifts and surges unpredictably according to its accumulated detritus of words and meanings. Can it then offer a stable place or static geography against which problems of identity can be reduced? The Green Party thinks so, for 'environment is the basis upon which every society is formed'.[6] However as Oliver points out, growth springs from decay. To extend her observation, consuming and composting, shooting out spores from the random accretion of inscriptions and moments, replete with the bodies of Burns or of Bannockburn, 'the land' (a term I wish we had time to unpack) is a site for potential, for Scotland as something else. Feeding on inscriptions by generations of authors Scotland, our speakers imply, will always be bursting its bounds.

And that, surely, is the point. The moment of the independence vote foregrounds desires for representation, duration and consistency; authorship underpins these but as resistance, renewal and multifarious difference. If authors have provided the cultural substrata for politics, even dead poets prove surprisingly lively and unpredictable. A politician who would sup with Robert Burns better bring a long spoon—or a shallow glass!

Still why do today's authors, when invited to occupy the space they have opened for a voice in politics, prove skittish, even anxious, reluctant to produce on demand?[7] Perhaps the difficulty lies in the presumption of 'a' story. For many twentieth-century Scots, the nation had failed to tell its story, or told the wrong one; any 'right' story was told in opposition to an English master narrative.[8]In the 1970s, having lost the political battle, Scots seemed to have won storytelling privileges. Yet in the moment of independence, which story to tell? Scottish newspapers bounce from tale to tale: we're like Catalonia; Catalonia will be ejected from the EU, so we're Denmark.[9] And once the story is told, will tomorrow's Scotland enforce narrative as mastery? To do so may be to embrace power and lose possibility, for in Scotland's literary politics, Scottishness has always required telling a *different* tale.

The opposite of a subjecting master narrative may be not a competing narrative, even the story of 'independence', but many narratives. Scotland has plenty of stories to tell. Moreover in the pens of disparate writers they should and will be

independent in the fullest sense. To write, indeed, is to differ and defer. Here, we might recall Don Paterson's inverted artistic philosophy. Writers, he declares, 'are not good at strategising, form-filling, and writing business plans: indeed they are the constituency least capable of doing so' (Hames 158). Set that against Kathleen Jamie's conclusion: 'Really I'd want a yes vote, then a bloodless coup the next morning before there were any flags or triumphalism' (117). The artistic future, in Homi Bhabha's terms, will never return as 'the same'.[10] Nor should it. Authors' inscription of separation will be enacted, it seems, in the separateness of their inscriptions. Scotland's best hope is to become not *a* story, but *storied*—whether the vote be NO … or YES.

(c) The Bottle Imp