

# Introduction: Scottish Literature at the MLA: 2013, 2014

**By Matthew Wickman**

I recently completed a four-year term on the executive committee of the Scottish Literature Discussion Group sponsored by the Modern Language Association. The MLA website lists nearly 30,000 members in 100 countries, and 137 discussion groups or, in larger conglomerates (e.g., ‘The Victorian Period’; ‘Comparative Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature’), divisions.<sup>1</sup> The Scottish Literature Discussion Group came into existence in 2000 and its executive committee has enjoyed the leadership of outstanding scholars within and outwith Scotland. As evidence, one need only point to those who preceded and succeeded me as chair of this committee: Caroline McCracken-Flesher and Susan Oliver.

One of the primary responsibilities of the Scottish Literature Discussion Group is to organize a panel at the annual MLA Conference. This isn’t an easy task as the range of potential panels is seemingly boundless. Scholarly work in the humanities tends to be eclectic, often driven by fortuitous discoveries in the archives and representative not only of its subject matter but also of the subjectivity—the unique conception and taste—of the scholar who mediates it. And as readers of *The Bottle Imp* will surely appreciate, the field of Scottish literature is no exception. But perhaps because of the sheer size of the MLA Conference, and because of the conference’s reputation as the world’s foremost assembly of literary scholars (a reputation partly sustained, doubtlessly, by the conference’s other role as the initial interview location for those on the academic job market), MLA often features panels on the state of the field across a variety of disciplines. And during my last two years on the discussion group executive committee, and in the MLA spirit, our group (including Donna Heddle, Evan Gottlieb and Corey Andrews as well as Caroline, Susan and myself) decided to design panels that would address the state of the field in Scottish studies. And so, we crafted the theme of ‘Scottish Studies after Cultural Studies’ for the January 2013 conference, situating Scottish literature relative to a larger constellation of fields. And for this year’s conference, the impending independence referendum

presented an ideal occasion to reflect on the relationship of literature to politics, long a subject of significance—and controversy—in Scotland. That explains the title of this year's panel: 'Independent Thinking: Scotland's Inscription of Separation'.

We were fortunate to assemble a strong contingent of speakers for each panel; the only dubious selection is my inclusion in both, but I will explain below. For the 2013 panel, Carla Sassi is a recognised authority on postcolonial and cultural Scottish studies, and Juliet Shields had recently published a very fine book on Anglo-Scottish identity. Gerard Carruthers and Liam McIlvanney had asked me to write the essay on the emergence of Scottish studies for their *Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature*, so I had already been thinking about Scottish literature relative to cultural studies. And few scholars in recent years have made as broad and energetic a contribution to Scottish literary studies as Caroline McCracken-Flesher. For the 2014 panel on independence, two people seemed like obvious choices—Scott Hames, who has become one of the most prominent commentators and convenors of discussion on this issue, and Susan Oliver, whose work in environmental studies makes her an expert in an area of economic and ontological importance to a prospectively independent Scotland (or, indeed, to any future Scotland whatsoever). McCracken-Flesher again seemed like an ideal choice as respondent, partly because of the excellent 2007 volume she had edited, *Culture, Nation, and the New Scottish Parliament*. But we wanted one other speaker. First, we invited two outstanding Scottish academics; each considered the invitation but declined because of scheduling conflicts. We also invited a creative writer, and this person too declined the invitation on those same grounds. So I played the part of substitute on this year's panel, a cipher holding the place of speakers we tried, and failed, to get.

As to the contents of the essays in this issue, I will refer interested readers to McCracken-Flesher's essays, which, as responses to the panels, summarise the papers and provide a perspective onto the larger subjects that unite them. But let me add here that it was truly a pleasure to be involved with these panels at the planning and delivery stages. One thing this issue cannot reproduce is the vigorous discussion that ensued during these sessions, a tribute to the excellent quality of the papers presented by my peers. Special thanks are due to Gwen Enstam, both for bringing the last two years of Scottish Literature's presence at MLA to readers of *The Bottle Imp* and for being, with Duncan Jones, such a major

part of that presence through outstanding work over the past ten years at the Scottish Writing Exhibition. That exhibition has become a staple and, for many scholars (including many outwith the field Scottish Literature), a perennial favourite of the MLA Book Exhibit.

## References & Further Information

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mla.org/about>. Accessed 14 February 2014.

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