

# Scottish Literature, Devolution, and the Fetish of Representation

By Scott Hames

In October 2013 I received a flurry of messages informing me that James Kelman had changed his position on Scottish independence. (Big news in my world.) Speaking at the Radical Book Fair in Edinburgh, Kelman was quoted as follows:

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I cannot accept nationalism and I am not a Scottish Nationalist. But once that is said, I favour a 'yes or no' decision on independence and **I shall vote 'yes' to independence.**<sup>1</sup>

The apparent U-turn is nothing to fret about. If you've studied Kelman's political writing the surprise here is that he ever seriously entertained 'going to the ballot'. Kelman is more of an anarchist than a socialist, and believes in direct action. The hero of his best-known novel, *How late it was, how late*, rejects the assistance of a lawyer who advises him to sue after being blinded by the police. Sammy—partly a re-writing of Milton's Samson—holds out for a personally authenticated struggle with his enemies, and refuses both lawyering and compensation as degraded, apersonal mechanisms of justice rooted in abstract equivalence. He insists on the contrary that his struggle is 'just personal' (1994, p.232).<sup>2</sup> For Kelman there can be no order of the 'just' which infringes that of the 'personal'; representative bodies such as trade unions and parliaments fail the test.

But misreadings of Kelman's politics are not what interest me here. This anecdote

typifies a general tendency to locate (and often confine) the politics of contemporary Scottish writers within the relatively narrow horizons of the constitutional debate they are credited with re-energising. The trope of ‘representation’ is central to what is misleading and even mystificatory in this pattern.

My point in brief: the key Scottish novels of the past few decades largely reject the politics of ‘representation’ enshrined in parliamentary democracy, yet they are continually presented as the models and cultural guarantors of Scottish devolution understood as the (incomplete) recovery of national agency and identity via representation. But it is equally possible to understand devolution as a highly conservative state process, one that openly figures ‘cultural representation’ as the containment and deferral of democratic empowerment. We should be wary of the limiting and distorting effects—both critically and politically—of reading Scottish literature by the terms of a self-congratulatory circuit of ‘representation’ (by which formally innovative literary novels act as catalysts to a political process held to delimit ‘the political’ in Scottish writing; most often by fixating on the display and recuperation of ‘identity’).



‘In the absence of elected political authority’, wrote Christopher Whyte in 1998, ‘the task of representing the nation has been repeatedly devolved to its writers’.<sup>3</sup> This is a commonplace and arguably dominant reading of recent Scottish writing. Presenting literature and politics as part of a single representative project, the cover of a 1999 issue of *Edinburgh Review* declares ‘There’s been a parliament of novels for years. This parliament of politicians is years behind’.<sup>4</sup> It’s an uplifting story, but it is misleading about both the literature and the politics at issue. There is only space here to make three points about it (and without reference to a number of writers, apart from Kelman, who would complicate the picture).

## **1. The Writing**

Thematically, the key Scottish novels of the past three decades set little store by ‘representation’ on the parliamentary template. The formal innovations regarded as distinctive to Scottish literary fiction of this period—notably the prominence and authority of vernacular language, and the erosion of the normative status of

Standard English narration—are broadly arraigned ‘against’ representation of the second-order vehicular kind, in which one voice becomes the authorised token for thousands of others. In his study of popular sovereignty Edmund S. Morgan observes that ‘the way in which any group of subjects was first persuaded to pretend that one of them could substitute for all of them is not altogether clear’.<sup>5</sup> In *The Concept of Representation* Hannah F. Pitkin observes that ‘we speak of representation in connection with authority or rights or normative consequences only where the action is to be ascribed to someone other than the one who acts’.<sup>6</sup> This is more or less the antithesis of Kelman’s ethical project. While Kelman should not be treated as ‘representative’ of recent Scottish writing, his are the most influential politics of form in the body of writing at issue.

## 2. The Politics

The state process of devolution is, right from the early 1970s, highly interested in the idea of cultural representation—but for highly cynical reasons. A condensed history will bear this out: alarmed by the emergence of the SNP as a credible electoral force, in 1969 Harold Wilson appointed a Royal Commission on the Constitution. Its report in 1973 (the Kilbrandon Report) set the process of devolution into deliberately retarded motion, and clearly envisions the problem at issue as one of form and affect: ‘the question for us is whether in [Scotland and Wales] the existence of national feeling gives rise to a need for change in political institutions’.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, an entire chapter of Kilbrandon is devoted to the nature, strength and implications of ‘National Feeling’. The Commission is continually exercised by whether votes for the SNP reflect a desire for constitutional change, or mere recognition of nationhood:

While Scottish nationalism provides no evidence that the Scottish people as a whole wish to be separated from the rest of the United Kingdom, the nature and strength of the support it has attracted over the years suggest that a substantial body of people in Scotland would be likely to take a favourable view of a change to a system of government which did more than the present system to recognise their separate Scottish identity. (*Royal Commission*, I, pp.107-8)

Devolution is thus conceived as the management of ‘national feeling’ and its channelling into territorial forms of identitarian ‘expression’, leaving the structures of government—ironically, the traditional basis of a-cultural, ‘civic’ Scottish political identity—unchallenged and unchanged. In the minds of its

architects devolution is not about ‘the relationship between government and the people at large’—that is to say, democracy—but about enregistering sub-national difference within UK government structures, so neutralising its potential threat to those structures.

Reading Scottish literature in the terms of this containment logic tends to *release/lock* Scottish cultural production into reified postures of ‘representation’ which leave uncontested the *constitution* of representative power.<sup>8</sup> (And to declare out of bounds the sort of questions Kelman is raising in the first quote from the Radical Book Fair; what arrangements and whose authority are we affirming by ‘going to the ballot’?) On this view the purpose of devolution is to re-legitimise rather than reform the inherited Westminster system—‘a policy of a strikingly conservative character’, notes Vernon Bogdanor, concerned chiefly to ‘renegotiate the terms of the Union so as to make them more palatable to Scottish opinion in the conditions of the late twentieth century’. Such was the view from Whitehall.

But as the leading expert on Scottish constitutional reform observes, representation was also fetishised from another direction, within the priorities of the democratic campaign for self-government led by the notables and worthies of ‘civic Scotland’ (the so-called ‘selectorate’). James Mitchell notes that:

the emphasis amongst campaigners for devolution was to ensure that the Scottish Parliament would be a truly new representative institution, reflecting Scottish opinion to a greater degree than the Westminster system permitted, in order to ensure that Scotland did not suffer the imposition of policies it did not vote for again. [...] It was as if the creative energies of [the new parliament’s] supporters concentrated on questions of representation. All would be well so long as the new institution embodying Scottish interests was representative.<sup>10</sup>

Devolved institutions, in overtly ‘recognising’ the existence of national feeling, would assimilate it to the sphere of ‘representation’—that is, the sphere of empty democratic spectacle evoked, for Kelman, by ‘going to the ballot’. As a representative project, devolution effects the channelled release of ‘national feeling’ away from political agency and toward neutralised ‘identity’.

### **3. The Writing About The Politics**

Precisely this fixation with representation is the target of Kelman’s satirical essay

'Let the Wind Blow High Let the Wind Blow Low', written in the aftermath of the 1992 general election, when the re-elected Major government restated its firm opposition to devolution despite the fact, in Kelman's words, that 'parties advocating Home Rule or independence had won the support of 75 per cent of the electorate and 85 per cent of the seats in Scotland'.<sup>11</sup> Kelman is scathing about efforts to resolve such a blatant injustice from within the horizon of parliamentary representation, and mocks the 'pragmatism' counselled by the cross-party Constitutional Convention:

The current debate on self determination has degenerated into one of these Bipartisan Issues that crop up every now and again on matters of National Importance, such as wars and acts of god. 'Pure' politics are forced to the sidelines. It becomes bad form to discuss one's differences. Unity is the watchword. It isn't a time for awkward questions. Those who persist are shown up as perverse, slightly bammy, crackpots—or occasionally as unpatriotic. What we discuss is what we are allowed to discuss.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, the 'debate' on self-determination requires its own negation. Kelman's mordant parody of the gentlemanly constitutionalism of the official campaign highlights the shared emptiness of electoral 'solidarity' and the display of cultural 'identity':

Under the first-past-the-post system it is inevitable that Labour holds the overall majority [of Scottish seats] and that the opposition parties as a whole have a mandate. The Scottish people have given the opposition parties this mandate for years. And in exchange for accepting the mandate the combined opposition parties, spearheaded by Labour, have always demanded solidarity. And here [the Labour party] are demanding solidarity once again. We don't know the precise form their demand will take. It seems the combined leadership is 'waiting to see'. When this period of interregnum is at an end the People of Scotland will be instructed on the terms of solidarity required of them. We shall be advised of the proper way forward and that we must support this proper way forward at all costs. We shall be asked to retain our collective strength in a unified cross-party struggle, yielding not to easy options, nor to undignified posturing, nor to rash action, nor to impolite hectoring, nor to self righteous tubthumping; propriety will become the mark of the movement. When we march forward we shall march solidly, not breaking ranks; we shall comb our hair and wear smart leather shoes, dress in suits and shirts and ties—formal highland attire will not be frowned upon—this includes females and those from an ethnic background, for this way forward will unite everybody regardless of gender, race, creed or culture and will be led by a multifarious but patriotic group of notables: various party leaders, media personalities and constitutional experts; S.T.U.C. full-timers, representatives from the different religions—priests, ministers, mullahs, rabbis etc.—all striding arm-in-arm with bright-new-dawns glistening on our rubicund faces. We shall march on Westminster itself, the entire voting population of Scotland, and when we arrive we shall demand of U.K. ruling authority that they pay heed to our unified cry for self determination. Our demand shall be carried by our appointed representatives, appointed by and from the patriotic group of notables. With a dignity appropriate to the major historical moment of uniquely National Import our appointed representatives will accept an invitation to enter a smallish chamber inside the halls of Westminster. This invitation will have been extended by an assistant to an Under-Secretary of the Home Office Junior Minister-Without-Portfolio. But negotiation must begin from somewhere. Two members of Her Majesty's constabulary (bobby division) will step gravely aside, making way for this our All-Scotland representation. ('Let the Wind', p.90)

As this scenario gains in outlandish momentum, the absurd quality of (tactically, gradually) 'demanding' national democratic recognition via proxies of proxies of

proxies (e.g. a Constitutional Convention consisting largely of elected MPs) comes to the fore:

And if Her Majesty's Government does not listen why then our All-Scotland representation shall further remind her Majesty's Government that a mandate exists, and what's more they have it [...] And if they don't pay heed to us now then this is our very last word and we cannot vouch for our continued participation in the rules and procedures of state as laid down in 1707 by Their Forefathers in association with Our Forefathers, the then ruling authority of Scotland. And by the Gude Lord Jasus the entire voting population would just damn well carry on waiting right there on this pavement and see what Her Majesty's Government was going to do about that! ('Let the Wind', p.90)

Despite the strength of their electoral mandate, those charged with 'All-Scotland representation' are figured as utterly incapable of extra-procedural action; the height of their defiance is to 'carry on waiting until they give us an answer, that'll show them the measure of our resolve' (p.91). All the democratic energies invested in this mandate are seemingly exhausted by its self-display.

The politics of Scottish devolution might be generally understood as the containment and deferral of nationalist *agency*; the prevention of action in favour of representation and mere 'activity'. The radical vocal experiments and national-popular vernacularity of the recent Scottish novel have become a way of disguising the limits of this process, presenting 'representation' as an empowering end in itself. But the instatement of an autonomous *order of representation* (in truth, an identitarian *extension*, a new particularist branch-office, of central authority) has very little to do with self-determination as a principle or lived struggle.

As several UK Home Secretaries have said in recent years, citing Enoch Powell, 'power devolved is power retained'. In the period of devolution Scottish literature has certainly had political influence considered as a deployment of representative power; but has it really contested the ground or basis or legitimacy of representative power, in the ways several of its characters and plots would seem to demand?

## References & Further Information

This paper reproduces sections of 'On Vernacular Scottishness and its Limits: Devolution and the Spectacle of "Voice"' for *Studies in Scottish Literature*.

<sup>1</sup> James Kelman in *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence*, ed. Scott Hames (Edinburgh: Word Power, 2012), p.121.

<sup>2</sup> See Scott Hames, 'Eyeless in Glasgow: James Kelman's Existential Milton', in *Contemporary Literature*, 50.3 (2009), pp.496-527.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Whyte, 'Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Fiction', in *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 34.2 (1998): 274-85 (p. 284).

<sup>4</sup> *Edinburgh Review* 100 (1999); Duncan McLean quoted on back cover. See also Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, 2nd edn. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 307; Liam McIlvanney, 'The Politics of Narrative in the Post-War Scottish Novel' in *On Modern British Fiction*, ed. Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 181-208 (p. 183); Cairns Craig, 'Scotland: Culture After Devolution' in *Ireland (Ulster) Scotland: Concepts, Contexts, Comparisons*, eds. Edna Longley, Eamonn Hughes and Des O'Rawe (Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona, 2003), 39-49 (p.39).

<sup>5</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 39.

<sup>6</sup> Hannah F. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> *Royal Commission on the Constitution 1969-1973*. 2 vols. (London: HM Stationery Office, 1973), I, p.102.

<sup>8</sup> See Scott Hames, 'On Vernacular Scottishness and its Limits: Devolution and the Spectacle of "Voice"', in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 39.1 (2013): pp.201-222, with which this talk significantly overlaps. [<http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol39/iss1/16/>]

<sup>9</sup> Vernon Bogdanor, *Devolution in the United Kingdom*, Rev edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.119.

<sup>10</sup> James Mitchell, 'Devolution without Self-Government' in *Radical Scotland: Arguments for Self-Determination*, eds. Gerry Hassan and Rosie Ilett (Edinburgh: Luath, 2011), pp. 29-39 (p. 30).

<sup>11</sup> Tom Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700-2000* (London: Penguin, 1999), p.613.

<sup>12</sup> James Kelman, 'Let the Wind Blow High Let the Wind Blow Low' in *Some Recent Attacks: Essays Cultural and Political* (Stirling: AK Press, 1992), pp.85-91 (p.86).

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*(c) The Bottle Imp*