

# Scottish Studies after Area Studies

**By Juliet Shields**

When cultural studies came of age in U.S. universities in the 1990s, it reinvigorated the concept of area studies, which had originated in response to cold war, decolonization, and globalization in the mid twentieth century. Whereas cultural studies describes a methodology or an aim &mdash; broadly, the critique of ideology—area studies traditionally were defined by their content. Yet cultural studies not only gave a new focus to existing area studies; it also contributed to the configuration of new areas of area studies. During the 1990s and early 2000s, a slew of area studies—including African studies, Atlantic studies, Asian studies, and American studies if we stick just to the As—were given new definition and significance by the broader concept of cultural studies. It's perhaps unnecessary to point out to this audience that, despite the existence of this panel, Scottish Studies has never flourished at American universities, although it has fared somewhat better in the UK, Canada, and Europe.

Even if I were particularly invested in making a case in this paper for the development of Scottish Studies programs in American universities, the window of opportunity for doing so has probably closed. Recent economic cutbacks have prompted the dismantling of area studies programs at many American universities, as small programs are more easily cut or redistributed than are comparatively enormous departments like History and English. Even in Scotland, where Scottish Studies might be expected to receive special protections, the field has been subject to the pressures of 'restructuring', as Willy Maley laments in his recent essay 'On the Abolition of the Scottish Department' (where the department in question is Scottish literature at Glasgow University). Maley argues that 'New marketing brands like "Global Scottish Studies" and "The Global Burns Network" can hardly compensate for departmental devolution.'<sup>1</sup> Maley understandably fears that the loss of departmental autonomy will lead to the re-marginalization of Scottish Studies in universities, and that this in turn will diminish the development not just of researchers and teachers but also of writers and artists—the creators of Scottish culture.

Given that the abolition or reabsorption of smaller areas of study seems inevitable

at many universities and colleges, I am interested here in thinking about Scottish Studies as a field that already to some extent exists without departments or even programs—in the interstices of more traditional disciplines. By exploring the relationship between area studies and cultural studies, my paper will consider what Scottish Studies as a field might learn from their fusion in the past couple of decades, and how the so-called restructuring of the university might permit or force us to reconceive and reinvigorate our field.

Despite the strategies of ideology critique offered by cultural studies, area studies programs sometimes walk a tightrope strung between the pit of parochial insularity on one side and the gulf of inflated universalism on the other. Forged in the crucible of identity politics, area studies perhaps too often offer us the opportunity to study ourselves. I say this hesitantly, as I'm well aware that these programs have enabled us to study for the first time peoples, and perspectives that had hitherto been excluded from the classroom. I realize how only recently Scottish literature and culture was considered worthy of study even at Scottish university, and I have enough of a memory of the omnipresence of the Queen's English on radio and television in the UK to see why the development of Scottish Studies programs was both important and slow, and to sympathize with Maley's dismay over the abolition of the Scottish department.

But making hitherto neglected areas of study the preserve of particular programs can also be exclusive. I will never forget my frustration during my junior year abroad on being told by a professor in the recently abolished Scottish department at Glasgow University that I couldn't enrol in a course on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scottish literature because the history and language would be too difficult for me, as an American, to understand. To be fair, I realized afterwards that his prohibition was probably motivated in part by logistical considerations: all the international students were lumped together in a contemporary Scottish literature class. The complexities of Scott's representation of the 1745 Jacobite Rebellion in *Waverley* might have been too complicated for us to handle, but presumably living in Glasgow rendered us capable of understanding the "fuck"-filled patois of James Kelman's *The Busconductor Hines*. Nonetheless, I'm convinced that this professor's dismissive remark, implying that I couldn't understand a literature or culture because I was an outsider, had much to do with my eventual publication of a book on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scottish literature.

To avoid seeming parochial and insular, and possibly also to quiet the fears of peeved parents who had wanted little Jimmy to major in engineering, area studies programs sometimes go to the other extreme, offering overinflated claims for the representativeness or significance of their objects of study. These claims to universal significance are perhaps just another form of parochialism. The interdisciplinarity promoted by cultural studies becomes a crutch in this context: although our object of study might seem limited, we say, we study it through a number of different lenses that we can then bring to bear on other subjects. It's not what we study, but how we study it, that contributes to the mission of the university and develops little Jimmy's intellectual capacity to its fullest extent.

Compared to other area studies, however, Scottish Studies seems to have resisted the interdisciplinarity embraced by cultural studies in the 1990s. Arguably, it has even resisted cross-disciplinarity, or dialogue among scholars working within traditionally bounded disciplines. A couple of years ago at a Scottish Studies conference, a historian remarked disparagingly to me on what he perceived as the excessive numbers of papers on literature at the event, not realizing that I was part of the problem. I couldn't really fault him for his complaint, since I had been inwardly cursing the fact that every time I attend this particular conference I end up the lone literature person on a panel of historians. If 'cultural studies has been imagined as an interdisciplinary academic endeavour, aspiring to cross boundaries, transcend bourgeois forms of knowledge production, and counter the dominant liberal-utopian notion of disinterested inquiry', Scottish Studies seems to have missed out on both the negative and positive effects of this endeavour.<sup>2</sup> Stuart Hall, Graeme Turner, and others working in cultural studies have descried its failure to develop standardized methods of inquiry in which upcoming generations of teachers and researchers could be trained. At the same time, they have lauded its transformation of traditional fields of study and its exploration of forms of culture that don't fit comfortably into these traditional fields.

While Scottish Studies may have eschewed cultural studies' interdisciplinarity in the past, it may well be forced to adopt a more interdisciplinary approach in the future if the abolition of Maley's 'Scottish department' is anything to judge by. 'These days', Graeme Turner notes, 'mounting an attack on disciplinarity would be utterly redundant. In so many locations, university administrators have done that job for us—killing off the disciplinary department or school in order to

remove them as obstacles to mergers, restructures and administrative arrangements that have been the preferred strategies of neoliberal higher education funding regimes.’<sup>3</sup> In universities and colleges across the US and the UK budgetary constraints have forced the elimination or absorption of small area studies programs. At the University of Washington, where I teach, some of these departments will be consolidated into a ‘humanities program’ with a major that will allow students to construct modules incorporating courses from a variety of fields. I have mixed feelings about this, but I’ve been wondering how this new humanities program and those like it that are springing up in universities across the United States might enable us to improve upon area studies programs, and perhaps also to cultivate new approaches to studying Scotland?

The humanities program promises to avoid the parochialism common to area studies programs by encouraging students to see relations between parts and wholes or between courses and modules. One of the most successful area studies programs at the UW is Scandinavian Studies, in part because of Seattle’s history as a destination for Scandinavian settlers. While it is increasingly unlikely that students will be able to piece together an entire module in Scandinavian Studies, faculty might work together across departments to develop a module on Northern Europe that could incorporate courses on Scandinavian, German, and Scottish literature and culture. Similarly, modules on folklore, diaspora, religious conflict, and numerous other topics might enable students and faculty to bring into conversation Scottish, Irish, African, and South Asian literatures and cultures, among other fields. The difficulty lies not in imagining such interdisciplinary affiliations, of course, but in putting them into practice. I imagine faculty members under new pressures to develop courses to fit modules that bear little relation to their research interests, or else students assembling a patchy bricolage of courses that leaves them confused and dissatisfied with their educational experiences. I am genuinely unsure how the humanities major will work out in practice; but in theory, it offers new possibilities for cross-disciplinary fertilization based on the content rather than—or possibly in addition to—the methodologies of our fields of study. Small nations have thrived historically by forging alliances, and small departments and programs might benefit from following suit. At the same time, the centralization of diverse programs under the sign of ‘humanities’ might well mean the further marginalization of marginal fields like Scottish Studies.

The abolition of small areas studies programs might encourage us not only as teachers, but also as researchers, to consider our fields of study from new perspectives. In other words, it might encourage the interdisciplinarity that Scottish Studies has resisted. To think about the question of how Scottish Studies' resistance to interdisciplinarity has impacted research in the field, I've found it helpful to look at the development of other area studies through the lens of the stadial histories constructed by Enlightenment thinkers including David Hume and William Robertson. I'll take women's studies as an example to illustrate the stages through which area studies have developed. In crude terms, the stadial narrative goes like this. Back in the day, we studied men—their ideas, beliefs, actions, and creations. Then, as more women began to attend university, we discovered that women too had ideas, beliefs, actions, and creations, and we promptly fell to writing books about them (this is stage one). After we'd done this, we remembered that these women had in fact been thinking, acting, and creating alongside the men we'd always known about. We began to worry that keeping the study of men and women separate was not only an inaccurate representation of the real world, but also implied the 'specialness' (for which, read 'limitations') of women. So we began to write books about men and women together, examining the connections, similarities, and differences among their thoughts, deeds, and creations (this is stage two). Gradually, women's things became as familiar to enough of us as men's things that we could begin to write books about thoughts, deeds, and creations that didn't take as a primary consideration the sex of the people from which they sprung but that also did not discount the importance of gender as category of analysis (this is stage three). Stage three, I would suggest, has been enabled by interdisciplinarity, and has also in turn helped to develop the methodologies and principles of cultural studies.

Enlightenment stadial histories were based on the supposition that all societies move through the same stages of development, although at different rates. While some, but not all, area studies have occupied the third stage for some time, Scottish Studies seems to be just now moving from the second to the third phase of this trajectory. Back in the day, we thought that Britain was England, or at least that England was the only part of Britain worth studying. But we've discovered that there are a whole lot of interesting things to learn about Scottish literature, history, culture, and politics, and we've written books about those things. Eventually, we remembered that Scotland's relationship to England was not the only shaping factor in its history, and we've begun to explore Scotland's

connections to the literatures, cultures, and politics of France, Ireland, Wales, the United States, Canada, and the Netherlands, among other places. Many of these connections still await discovery and exploration. I'm excited about the next stage, now emerging, when we begin to study Scotland not only to understand what's Scottish about it but also because it helps us to ask and sometimes to answer the broader questions that interest us as literary critics, historians, philosophers, political scientists, or whatever we might be. This is not to say that the Scottishness of Scotland should be neglected. But I hope that, much as we do not ignore the fact that a work was written by a woman even if we are not doing a feminist reading of her text, we might interpret a Scottish text in ways that acknowledge but also transcend its Scottishness, enabling us to explore and perhaps revise the questions we ask about literature and the categories through which we study it. I am also hopeful that 'the abolition of the Scottish Department' and the creation of entities like the UW's humanities program or the University of Glasgow's School of Critical Studies might help us to do this by encouraging us, if not to belatedly embrace cultural studies, to think about our field of study from new perspectives.

I'm getting into murky waters here, so I want to close by pointing to two recent books that illustrate what I mean—books that do not feel the need to justify and defend their Scottish subject matter but that instead use that matter to open up questions that move us beyond its Scottishness. Matthew Wickman's *The Ruins of Experience* situates the culturally and politically marginal Scottish Highlands at the centre of a major late eighteenth-century epistemological shift that resulted in the devaluation of direct experience in comparison to juridical probability. Penny Fielding's *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography* similarly demonstrates eighteenth-century Scotland's centrality to modes of thinking that we might regard as constitutive of modernity by examining Scottish writers' historicization of space, or their use of the landscape to register social change rather than individual affect. These otherwise quite different studies share in common the assumption that Scottish literature and culture tells us about Scotland, and about more than Scotland. They demonstrate how the analysis of Scottish literature and culture might revise the questions we ask about literature and the categories through which we study it. This, it seems to me, is a valuable legacy of cultural studies. How to integrate this legacy into our university infrastructures and our classrooms remains an open question.

## References & Further Information

<sup>1</sup> Willy Maley, 'On the Abolition of the Scottish Department', in *Studies in Scottish Literature* 38.1 (2012), p.35. <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol38/iss1/10>

<sup>2</sup> Randall K. Cohn, Sara Regina Mitcho, and John M. Woolsey, 'Cultural Studies: Always Already Disciplinary' in *The Renewal of Cultural Studies* ed. Paul Smith (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), p.30.

<sup>3</sup> Graeme Turner, *What's Become of Cultural Studies* (London: SAGE, 2012), p.45.

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