Introduction to ‘The Scottish Fetish: Beyond the Kilt’

By Evan Gottlieb

The papers gathered here are versions of those delivered at the Modern Language Association’s conference in Austin, Texas in January 2016. As Chair of the MLA’s Scottish Literature Forum for the 2015-16 cycle, it was my responsibility — and pleasure — to moderate the Forum’s annual guaranteed session.

When my fellow Forum executives and I met in 2015 to discuss the next session’s theme, we decided to try something less serious than the politically and historically motivated themes of the past few years. With the 2014 Scottish referendum on independence firmly in the past, moreover, the time seemed right to introduce a little light-heartedness into our proceedings, while still maintaining a firm focus on issues of Scottish literature and culture. Signifiers of Scottishness are all around, we remembered; why not use our guaranteed session to highlight the power and purpose of some of them? The concept of the fetish, which draws on anthropological, psychoanalytic, and Marxist critical traditions, captures the many kinds of seductiveness (cultural, psychological, and commercial) such signifiers often embody. One in particular, however, seemed to us too obvious and well worn to merit further attention — and so to avoid a glut of papers on this single subject, we reluctantly ruled out kilts from consideration.

Our subsequent call for papers produced a flurry of proposals, from which we chose the following for their combination of historical breadth, literary interest, and cultural insight. As readers will see, Susan Oliver examines the role of disguise in novels by two of Scotland’s most famous novelists, Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson; Charles Snodgrass tracks the history of whisky’s journey to the pinnacle of the Scottish culture industry; Margaret Russett considers how Scott and some of his fellow Romantics, both at home and abroad, made Melrose Abbey into a premiere tourist destination; and Randy Schiff looks at changing connotations of the concept of freedom in a number of important medieval documents. Together, these papers offer a multi-faceted approach to the many

ways in which Scottishness has been fetishized throughout the ages. On behalf of my fellow 2015–16 Scottish Literature Forum executive members — Corey Andrews, Juliet Shields, and Rivka Swenson — I offer you these papers in the same spirit of pleasurable, intellectual inquiry with which their authors originally delivered them in person.The papers gathered here are versions of those delivered at the Modern Language Association's conference in Austin, Texas in January 2016. As Chair of the MLA's Scottish Literature Forum for the 2015-16 cycle, it was my responsibility — and pleasure — to moderate the Forum's annual guaranteed session.

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