Haunted Huntly

By Rebecca Langworthy

The depiction of the urban landscape as an uncanny or supernatural space is a clear theme in a range of Scottish writing. James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) provides a detailed depiction of Edinburgh, in the early 1700s, as a city haunted by the sinister and demonic Gil-Martin, who in one memorable scene materialises from the mist on Arthur seat, just out with the city limits. There was a collective use of cityscapes as the canvas upon which to project the supernatural and psychologically sinister by Scottish Victorian authors: a further example is Margaret Oliphant's *Tales of the Seen and Unseen*. The envelopment, or taking over, of the cityscape by the supernatural or psychological is also clearly visible in the London of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). This projection of the literary onto the city became coupled with literary tourism, with Victorian tourists seeking to emulate what was in essence the 'Scottish Pub Crawl' of Boswell and Johnstone, as described in their *Journey to the Western Isles* to the those seeking to discover the landscapes which inspired Sir Walter Scott and James Hogg. The Scottish industry of literary tourism continues today. Harry Potter tourism is big business for Scotland and literary festivals such as the Wigtown Book Festival, Bloody Scotland, and Aberdeen's Granite Noir Literature Festival are but a few examples of the events which draw literary tourists to Scotland.

Literary tourism based on the individual's psychological projection onto cityscapes is not limited to large cities like Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Inverness. It also pervades smaller rural communities in unique ways. Large cities' literary associations have been drawing visitors for some time, but smaller communities are now rediscovering their literary forebears too. Texts associated with smaller communities are increasingly returning to popular consciousness in the urban spaces in which they are set. A case study of this type of textual haunting is established through the town of Huntly's interaction with the writings of former resident George MacDonald (1824-1905).

MacDonald was a prolific novelist, writing over fifty novels during his lifetime, and rural Aberdeenshire villages appear as settings in a large number of his

works. The text that this study focuses on is *Robert Falconer* (1868). *Robert Falconer* is a coming of age tale recounting the titular Robert's early years, university education, and maturation into a responsible adult. The scenes of Robert's childhood depict him being brought up by a devoutly Calvinist Grannie in the town of 'Rotheden'. Robert is introduced rescuing a homeless schoolmate, Shergar, from the snow and hiding him in his rooms and this moral mischief-making becomes a recurrent theme for his childhood. One of the most troublesome of these is Robert's love of music and his attempts to secretly teach himself the fiddle, having found an instrument in the attic of his house. However, when his Grannie discovers this, she takes the fiddle and burns it, claiming that it will lead him to sinful ways. *Robert Falconer* is acknowledged by MacDonald's biographers to contain a wealth of autobiographical details.[1] The figure of Robert's fiddle-burning Grannie bears similarities to MacDonald's grandmother, who also allegedly burnt a fiddle due to her strongly Calvinist beliefs. Another scene where Robert and Shergar let a kite lose from their garret window holds parallels with a real-life moment shared between MacDonald and his brother. Not only is the tale biographical, but the town of Huntly is, at best, thinly veiled by MacDonald's decision to call the town Rotheden as the map of MacDonald's Huntly and the map of key sites in Rotheden show:

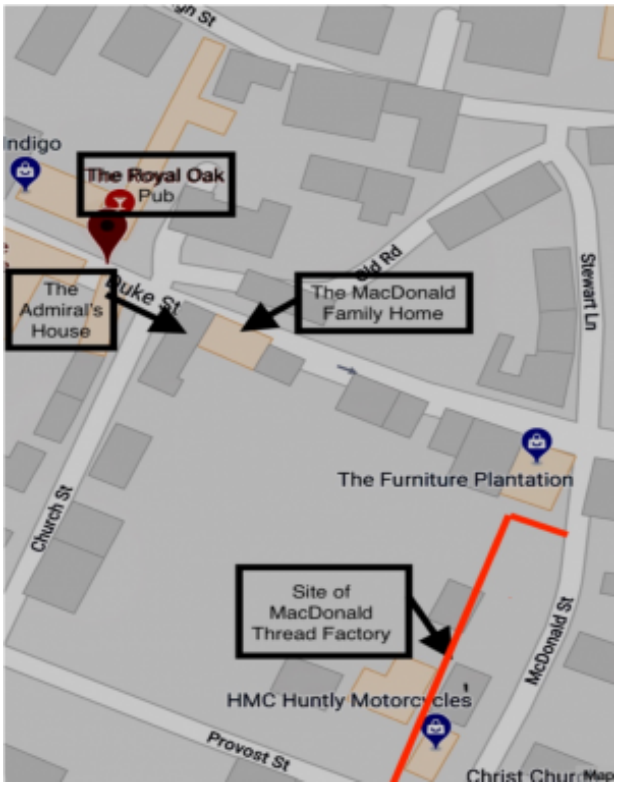

Figure 1: MacDonald's Huntly

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This paper focuses on the textual projections and hauntings encountered on one block of the town of Huntly — one which includes MacDonald's birthplace, a village pub named the Royal Oak (which is still open in the present day), and the land which MacDonald's family owned, as well as the family thread mill. The link between MacDonald and Huntly has developed into a literary haunting of the town, with many members of the community being vaguely aware of MacDonald. Those who begin to explore the connection between the town and MacDonald's literary works have discovered direct topographical parallels which function as a hybrid-overlaying of the modern town with the literary representations of Huntly.

Ingo Berensmeyer suggests that reality is saturated with fiction and that fiction extends to the literary: 'What we call "reality" is in fact saturated with fiction(s), necessary or other; and what we like to refer to as "fiction" often contains more reality than we care to admit.'[2] The influence of text on a space is not inherently physical. For example, growing up in Edinburgh, I vividly recall walking up Arthur's Seat having read *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and being deeply unsettled by the bank of mist that appeared in front of me. Now any walk up the hill includes for me an awareness of Hogg's work. The interdependence of reality and fiction in these moments changes the nature of our experience of our environment. It does not cause an immediate change to behaviour, especially when this happens in or is associated with an area, city or town which we feel is our home. It also appears that the emergence of local awareness of literary predecessors is resulting in some variant forms of literary intrusion. It is in moments of literary projection that the subconscious memory of a novel intrudes into our perceptions, not just of a semi-familiar urban space but into the parts of the urban geography with which we are most at ease: our town, our home, our garden. Unlike the fleeting encounter of the psychogeographer, this literary projection becomes part of the day-to-day lived experience of these most familiar urban spaces.

To understand how the textual representation of Huntly in *Robert Falconer* interacts with the real town, Andrew Green's three ways in which a reader will relate to literary space are useful:

- *the factual 'realities' of the space/place represented – place as it exists and /or existed in the real world*

- *the space/place as it functions within the textual narrative – place as it reproduced by the author; and*
- *the space/place as it exists or does not exist within the 'known' world of the reader – place as lived experience.*[3]

Green suggests that the place as it physically exists, the area as constructed in fiction, and the lived experience of the location form the key levels of meaning through textual interaction. It is the third of these, the lived experience of place, that is the focus of this paper. However, that experience in the case of Huntly is specifically the projection of aspects of a previously experienced text into the real world. Projection does not come from a direct textual engagement but from the vague haunting of text in the individual subconsciousness which comes to the fore in a specific location. The reader projects the text onto a space, from the premise that the literary past of a place can haunt the present interactions of a readership with that space. Literary projection in this context is the intrusion of a moment, incident, or location on our understanding of a real physical place such as the moment I experienced on Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh.

Catharina Löffler highlights the disjunction between the lived experience of a location and the access to that environment via literature: 'As opposed to psychogeographical practices, where only the practitioner himself is temporarily affected, literary psychogeography grants all readers access to psychogeographical experiences'.[4]

By focusing not upon the tourist's perspective but the literary resident, the Huntly case study offers new insight. While it is a form of psychogeography, residents of Huntly have access to a distinct type of literary experience stemming from the fact that they live in and interact with the location on a daily basis. A closer examination of the textual projection of *Robert Falconer* onto the town of Huntly will demonstrate the centrality of lived experience.

Over the past four years, I have given some talks introducing aspects of MacDonald's life and work within the Huntly community. It is through this interaction and other visits with the residents of the town that the full significance of *Robert Falconer*'s depiction of Rotheden became clear – not through my research but that of the Huntly residents. One of the significant adventures the young Robert Falconer embarks upon is attending the 'Hairst', a harvest festival:

> *The period of the hairst-play, that is, of the harvest holiday time, drew near, and over the north of Scotland thousands of half-grown hearts were beating with glad anticipation.*[5]

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The householder examined the property deeds and discovered that a naval officer had indeed owned the house at the time MacDonald lived in Huntly. They subsequently identified the box from the attic as an officer's bicorn hat box. It is significant that all of this was precipitated by the discovery of the hat box which led to a moment of textual intrusion where a familiar home became haunted by

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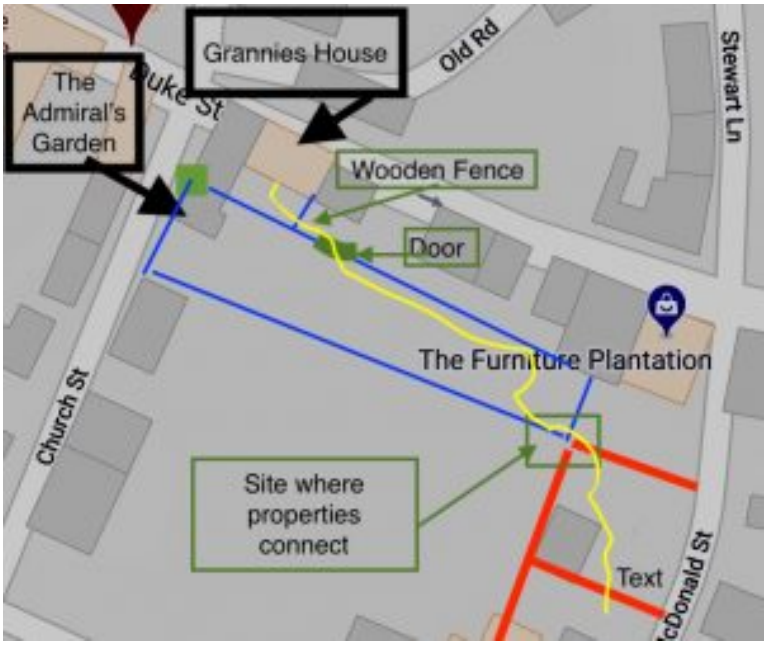

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Although I have focused on this one example of MacDonald's texts engaging with the present day topographical reality of Huntly, for its residents the implications of this sort of insight extend much further. The community's research into the historical, physical aspect of their private urban spaces continued, and the house and garden of Howglen were also examined. Interest in the house began because MacDonald titled one of his novels *Alec Forbes of Howglen*, and there is a house named Howglen in the town. The house still retains features from its construction 1860s. The Troup family (who married into the MacDonald family) had a daughter who was blind, and the house name on the gate has braille beneath it. The formal planting of the garden was also discovered to be original and was designed with box hedging to guide the family's daughter through the paths, and focuses on strongly scented plants within the borders. These physical traces of the past haunt the present space, but is only through engagement with MacDonald's text that this has come to light.

To understand how the textual representation of Huntly in *Robert Falconer* interacts with the physical town, I began examining the three ways in which a reader will relate to space as outlined by Andrew Green and have focused on the lived experience of place. That experience in the case of Huntly is specifically the projection of aspects of a previously experienced text into the real world. Projection does not come from a direct textual engagement but from the vague haunting of text upon the individual's subconsciousness which comes to the fore in specific locations. Through the reader's projection of the text onto a location, the literary past of a place can haunt the present interactions of a readership with that space. It is this slow process that develops into a topographical literary hybrid where the text intrudes into the lived experience of everyday reality.

This brief examination of the projection/intrusion and engagement with MacDonald's works within the urban setting of Huntly demonstrates how texts can alter perceptions of familiar spaces. This interaction is not the pursuit of the literary psychogeographical by visitors. It is the intrusion of the text, subconsciously carried in the mind of Huntly's residents, on their environment, leading to the discovery of new insights into both MacDonald's literary work and

the historical context of his lightly fictionalised versions of Huntly. This initial work within Huntly demonstrates the extent to which MacDonald's writings haunt the town, and in turn, how MacDonald's novels are haunted by the topography of Huntly. Recent discoveries and textual interactions form a hybrid landscape of text and space at the heart of what should be most familiar – our homes.

This study is, I hope, an initial investigation into a broader trend of research which is currently developing within Scotland. There has been a very recent spate of literary societies focusing on Scottish Victorian novelists: the J.M. Barrie Society, founded in 2017, and the Samuel Rutherford Crockett Literary Society, launched in 2018 as part of the Galloway Raiders group. These organisations are based in the author's hometowns (Kirriemuir for Barrie and Galloway for Crockett). Both societies have active membership bases in their local areas. Barrie, Crockett, and MacDonald are all associated with the Kailyard school: a literary movement often critiqued for its sentimental representations of rural Scottish life. The re-engagement of the towns with these texts provides us with new insight into the relationship between readers and their developing identities within the temporal and spatial entity which is these rural communities.

This intrusion of the text into the present lived experience of residents is somewhat gothic and uncanny. David Punter identifies the intense use of nostalgia within Scottish Gothic:

> *Throughout Gothic, whether in the mountains of Abruzzi or in the towers and keeps of medieval Britain, one can sense the fascination with the past that follows from a mingled yearning and terror for a set of simpler verities, an unquestioned legitimation. This nostalgia goes through a further twist of intensification in Scottish Gothic, for that supplanting, real or imagined, is forcibly juxtaposed by the native Scots with the destruction of a 'national way of life.' Scottish culture is seen as a territorialized, appropriated land, a place where a foreign body has been violently installed in the very heart of the country.*[8]

Punter is referring to the work of Walter Scott. However, the fascination with the past that highlights the 'destruction of a "national way of life"' rings true of what is at the heart of this new textual haunting. Understanding of a way of life is being recovered, if not restored, by the renewed interest in novels that are classified as

belonging to the Kailyard school. Small rural communities are rediscovering these novels. Their interaction with the text is very much an uncovering of the past culture and history of their communities. My case study of Huntly illustrating this engagement with the novels set in their communities leads to an engagement with the temporal topography of their landscape in addition to the spatial topography of the town. The process of recovering their communities and their knowledge of the urban environment allows the text to project beyond its pages and its historical setting onto the modern-day locations. The nostalgic recovery of the past is undoubtedly a factor in members of the Huntly community's engagement with MacDonald's texts. However, the restoration of rural communities' links with Victorian authors is a growing trend that merits scholarly attention. The most profound connections between place and text are subconscious and slowly build up over time to become a hybrid map upon a familiar location. This local interaction between text and space allows for new and unexpected aspects of the novels to come to light as those who live in these places are seeing the Victorian under-layer to their modern urban landscapes.The depiction of the urban landscape as an uncanny or supernatural space is a clear theme in a range of Scottish writing. James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) provides a detailed depiction of Edinburgh, in the early 1700s, as a city haunted by the sinister and demonic Gil-Martin, who in one memorable scene materialises from the mist on Arthur seat, just out with the city limits. There was a collective use of cityscapes as the canvas upon which to project the supernatural and psychologically sinister by Scottish Victorian authors: a further example is Margaret Oliphant's *Tales of the Seen and Unseen*. The envelopment, or taking over, of the cityscape by the supernatural or psychological is also clearly visible in the London of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). This projection of the literary onto the city became coupled with literary tourism, with Victorian tourists seeking to emulate what was in essence the 'Scottish Pub Crawl' of Boswell and Johnstone, as described in their *Journey to the Western Isles* to the those seeking to discover the landscapes which inspired Sir Walter Scott and James Hogg. The Scottish industry of literary tourism continues today. Harry Potter tourism is big business for Scotland and literary festivals such as the Wigtown Book Festival, Bloody Scotland, and Aberdeen's Granite Noir Literature Festival are but a few examples of the events which draw literary tourists to Scotland.

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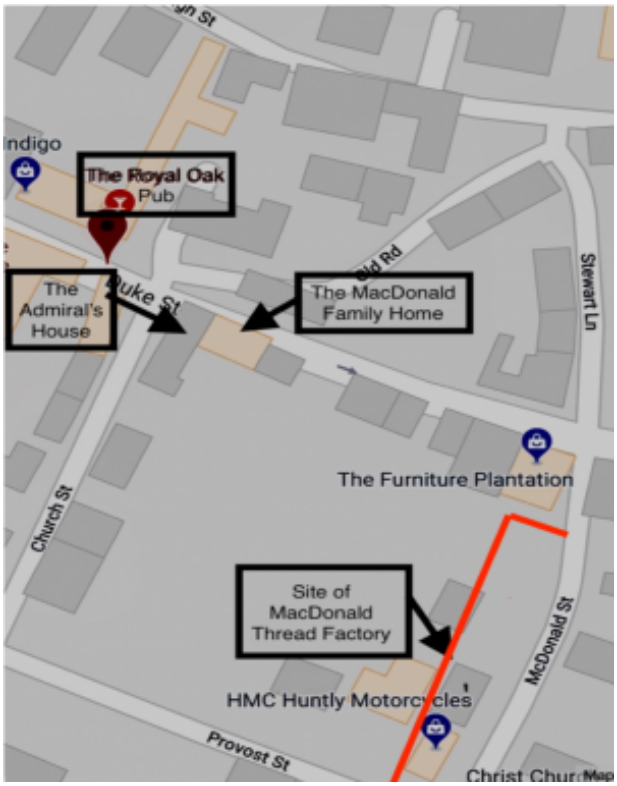

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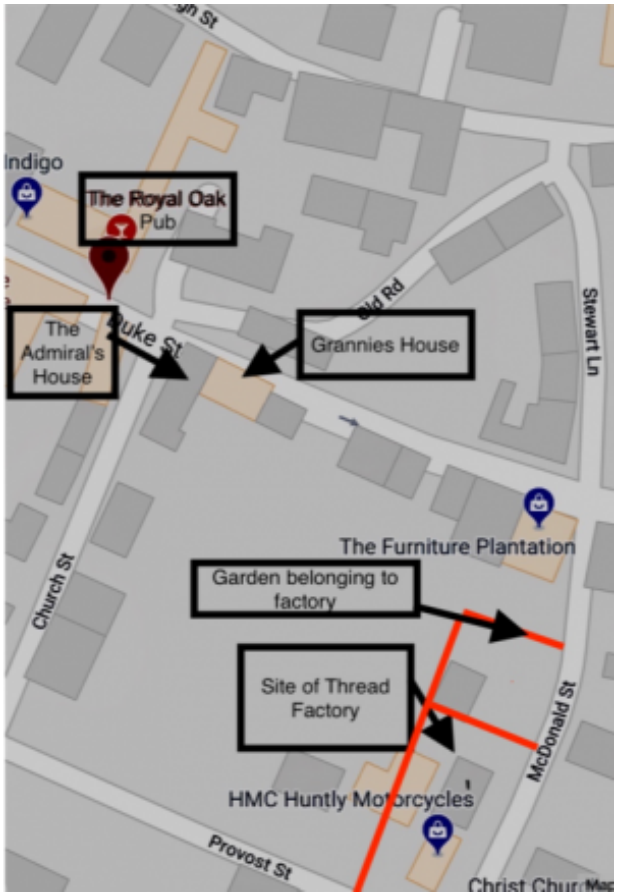

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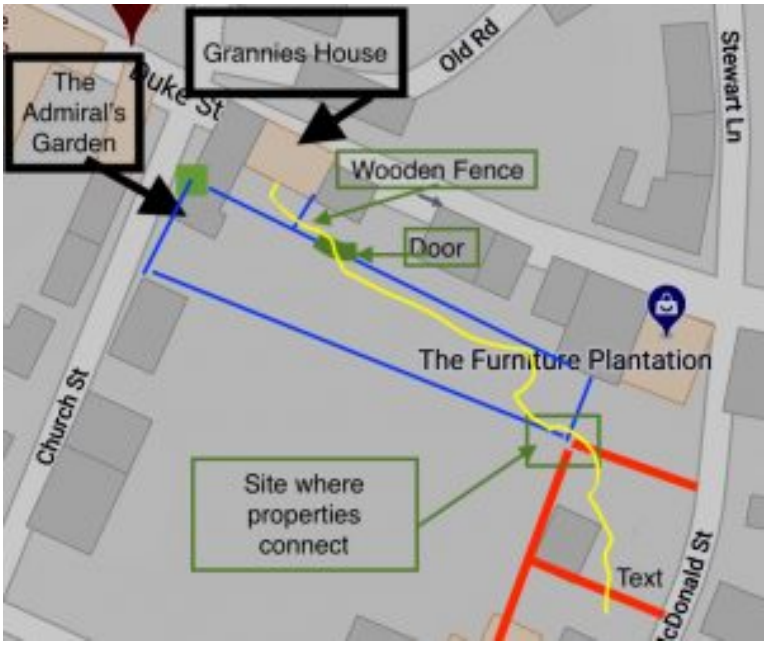

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This intrusion of the text into the present lived experience of residents is

somewhat gothic and uncanny. David Punter identifies the intense use of nostalgia within Scottish Gothic:

> *Throughout Gothic, whether in the mountains of Abruzzi or in the towers and keeps of medieval Britain, one can sense the fascination with the past that follows from a mingled yearning and terror for a set of simpler verities, an unquestioned legitimation. This nostalgia goes through a further twist of intensification in Scottish Gothic, for that supplanting, real or imagined, is forcibly juxtaposed by the native Scots with the destruction of a 'national way of life.' Scottish culture is seen as a territorialized, appropriated land, a place where a foreign body has been violently installed in the very heart of the country.*[16]

Punter is referring to the work of Walter Scott. However, the fascination with the past that highlights the 'destruction of a "national way of life"' rings true of what is at the heart of this new textual haunting. Understanding of a way of life is being recovered, if not restored, by the renewed interest in novels that are classified as belonging to the Kailyard school. Small rural communities are rediscovering these novels. Their interaction with the text is very much an uncovering of the past culture and history of their communities. My case study of Huntly illustrating this engagement with the novels set in their communities leads to an engagement with the temporal topography of their landscape in addition to the spatial topography of the town. The process of recovering their communities and their knowledge of the urban environment allows the text to project beyond its pages and its historical setting onto the modern-day locations. The nostalgic recovery of the past is undoubtedly a factor in members of the Huntly community's engagement with MacDonald's texts. However, the restoration of rural communities' links with Victorian authors is a growing trend that merits scholarly attention. The most profound connections between place and text are subconscious and slowly build up over time to become a hybrid map upon a familiar location. This local interaction between text and space allows for new and unexpected aspects of the novels to come to light as those who live in these places are seeing the Victorian under-layer to their modern urban landscapes.

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