

Introduction: 'Ways of Reading Scotland'

By Juliet Shields

As an academic discipline, literary studies has long taken 'close reading' as its central methodology, but even staunch supporters of close reading, like me, must acknowledge that it provides a relatively limited way of interacting with texts. Moreover, it relies upon a relatively limited definition of a text as a material artefact composed of words. The papers on this year's Scottish Literature panel at the Modern Language Association conference in Chicago challenged this definition of a text by exploring new ways of reading Scottish literatures, and through them, Scotland. Titled 'Ways of Reading Scotland', the panel brought together early-career scholars who discussed works in Gaelic, Scots, and English. Not only did they offer the audience exciting new readings of particular works, such as Robert Burns's 'To a Mouse' and George MacDonald's *Robert Falconer*, but they also modeled for us new ways of reading Scotland's landscapes and traditions.

Ellen Beard's paper productively challenged the very framework of the panel by reminding us that not all texts are intended to be read. Merely reading the songs of Rob Donn MacKay offers a diminished encounter with works that were intended to be experienced aurally, even for those who can read music, as well as verse. Similarly, readers of *The Bottle Imp* can't enjoy the full experience of Beard's presentation, to which her performance of one of those songs was integral. But they can at least appreciate her account of the how the preservation of Rob Donn's songs allows us to quite literally read Scotland's landscape in new ways. The Rob Donn Trail, which Beard helped to develop, uses bilingual signs to situate the bard's verses in the places that they describe, thereby giving 'voice and physical presence to the people who once populated that landscape'.

Geography also plays an important role in Rebecca Langworthy's paper on the literary haunting of Huntly, the town in which novelist George MacDonald grew up and on which the town of Rothieden in his novel *Robert Falconer* is based. Just how closely Rothieden was based on Huntly became clear when Langworthy

joined efforts with a local historian to offer a walking tour of MacDonald's Huntly. While residents of Huntly had previously been vaguely aware of their town's literary history, the tour catalyzed their interest in uncovering traces of MacDonald's personal history and fictional representations in their everyday environment. While literary tourism has l6

