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 did 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 long been an important industry in bigger cities, Langworthy shows how understanding the interdependence of fictional and real topographies can enhance the lived experiences of those in small communities, allowing them to participate in the recovery of past ways of life.

Finally, Ruth Kellar's paper examines Robert Burns as reader of communal spaces and traditions. She observes that unlike Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth or Percy Shelley, Burns does not project his mind onto the landscape, seeing in it a reflection of his own feelings and thoughts. Instead he exercises what Kellar describes as 'a poetics of perception' characterized by both a 'unique attentiveness' to particularities and an ability to see those particularities in relation to social spaces and traditions. Kellar illustrates this poetics of perception through a magnificent reading of 'To a Mouse' that ultimately offers Burns's reading practices as a model to which we all might aspire. Effective social or political change, she argues, requires the ability to honor singularity while also situating it within social narratives.

The papers published here join other scholarly efforts to challenge our habitual ways of reading. New technologies have been central to this effort. For instance, the digitization of texts allows us to search large bodies of work, such as the Corpus of Modern Scottish Writing, for the recurrence of a single keyword or to analyze linguistic patterns so that we can make informed guesses about the authorship of anonymous works. One of my favorite examples of the use of new technologies to provide new insights into Scottish literature and history is the Curious Travellers project, a four-year AHRC-funded research project jointly run by the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies (CAWCS) and the University of Glasgow. This project mapped the journey of renowned romantic travel writer Thomas Pennant onto an ordinance map of Scotland, providing details about each place he visited, such as its name in the eighteenth century and its sometimes quite different present-day name. Pennant's tours of Scotland inspired a bevy of other travelers to tour Scotland, and their routes can also be mapped, showing not only how Pennant influenced their routes, but also how these tours informed late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-

century representations of Scotland. This type of project, and the ways of reading that it entails, would not have been possible just twenty years ago.

Perhaps one of the most welcome ramifications of the ways of reading modelled by the papers in this issue of *The Bottle Imp* is their public engagement. While Beard's and Langworthy's essays describe projects that bring authors and their works to a broad public interested in the legacies of Scotland literary and cultural past, Kellar's offers us a model of reading that might inform our ethical or political choices. In the place of the somewhat elite practice of close-reading, these essays offer multiple ways for us all to engage with Scotland's literatures.

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