Introduction: The Persistence of Scottish–Canadian Relations

By John Corbett

This special supplementary issue of *The Bottle Imp* picks up the venerable tradition of presenting polished versions of papers given at the 'official' Scottish Literature panel of the annual convention of the Modern Languages Association of America (MLA). The papers published here were delivered in January 2021, in a panel on 'The Persistence of Scottish-Canadian Literary Relations', a session genially overseen by Steve Newman of Temple University, who was concluding his year as Chair of the Executive Committee of the Scottish Literature Forum.

For those unfamiliar with the MLA Scottish Literature Forum, its Executive Committee consists of an ever-changing group of five scholars, who organise one 'official' panel on a Scottish theme at each annual MLA convention, and attempt to stimulate further 'unofficial' ones. The activities of the Forum are a means of intervening in the academic study of Scottish literature, in part by highlighting new trends in Scottish literary scholarship, reassessing familiar works, and encouraging innovative approaches. The Scottish Literature Forum has become an important conduit for networking amongst those of us working on Scottish literature in North America, Europe and beyond.

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When the Scottish Literature Forum's Executive Committee learned that the 2021 MLA convention was going to be in Toronto, with the general theme of

‘Persistence’, it was not a terrible stretch of the imagination, given the long-standing and ongoing literary exchanges between the two nations, to invite papers for a panel on the persistence of Scottish-Canadian literary relations. In the event, of course, the best-laid schemes of the Executive Committee went far agley, and the COVID-19 pandemic forced the convention online, with only one of the speakers, Paul Robichaud, actually delivering his paper from his home in Canada to a multinational audience via Zoom. But, even without the pandemic, it is worth stepping back for a moment and problematising the decision to choose this theme with respect to the three papers selected for inclusion in the panel, and which are presented in this Supplement. In a scholarly environment that currently privileges the ‘decolonising’ of national literatures, a focus on the persistence of Scottish-Canadian literary relations might well seem dated. More practically, we might easily ask what, if anything, ties together the work of writers as diverse as Jessie Kerr Lawson, Karen Solie and Alistair MacLeod?

One obvious way to respond to these issues is to view Scottish-Canadian literary relations through the lens of Transatlantic Studies. Kirsten Sandrock has recently traced the origins of Scotland’s transatlantic relations with Canada back to at least to the 1620s and the writings of colonisers, such as Sir William Alexander, on the opportunities offered to their fellow Scots by emigration to Nova Scotia.[1] More generally, in his review of ‘what we need from Transatlantic Studies’ Joseph Rezek usefully categorises the field into three distinct zones of interest which can be summed up as:

1. the eighteenth-century invention of cultural modernity, or the transatlantic post-Enlightenment project
2. the sense that the British and North American literary cultures share a common set of aesthetic and ethical values, and that these can be usefully explored together to unsettle notions of national literatures
3. the sense of the Atlantic as a conduit – a space across or over which ideas travel (back and forth) from one set of cultural centres to another set, with different national inflections.[2]

These themes are helpful but not exhaustive – as we shall see, the three papers in this Supplement touch on most of them but also add other concerns.

Juliet Shields brings into the spotlight Jessie Kerr Lawson, a once-popular, now-

forgotten *emigrée* author of Scottish-Canadian fictions – a modern, female professional who wrote copiously for both Scottish and Canadian periodicals in order to support her family. It is possible that she wrote even while she was on board a transatlantic liner, literally using the Atlantic as a conduit to shuttle between publishers. Shields acknowledges that Lawson was of her time, and her stereotyping of Black and Irish characters has not worn well. However, her self-mocking characterisation of 'leeterary women' still manages to be very funny, even while it alludes more seriously to issues of gender, domesticity, professional recognition, status and expectation in the nineteenth-century world of publishing. Part of her interest for the contemporary scholar lies in the ways that she nuanced her popular writing to please Canadian and Scottish publishers and readerships. This development of two distinctive literary styles challenges the claim that there was a shared literary culture in North America and Scotland. The raw materials of her Scottish and Canadian experiences were evidently being combined and reconfigured in different ways as she presented Scots to the Canadians (pawky, funny, resourceful) and Canadians to the Scots (exotic, other, romantic). Shields regrets the lack of ethnographic detail in Jessie Kerr Lawson's writings, but in cases such as this the burden of ethnographic interpretation passes from the literary author to the literary scholar. Shields assumes this role expertly, as she exposes significant presences and absences in Jessie Kerr Lawson's writings, showing how the periodical literature that she churned out is indicative of the overlapping but differently inflected tastes of Scottish and Canadian reading cultures of her time.

Jessie Kerr Lawson was raised in St Monans, only a brisk sixteen-minute walk along the Fife coast from the Caiplie Caves, the setting of Karen Solie's poems about St Ethernan, discussed by Paul Robichaud. You might be forgiven for considering this the only link between the two writers. What could possibly link a nineteenth-century Scottish *emigrée*, a popular sentimental humourist, and a twenty-first-century Canadian poet who has hitherto specialised in evoking 'edgelands'? Karen Solie does not fit neatly into the Transatlantic Studies paradigm; she is too contemporary for her work to speak to the invention of post-Enlightenment modernity, and it would be vacuous to suggest that her work embodies a shared set of aesthetic and cultural values that is specific only to Scotland and Canada.

And yet the question remains why a young Canadian poet with no discernible

personal or family links to Scotland should feel so drawn to a saint's legend set in the East Neuk of Fife. Robichaud's discussion of Solie's poem sequence argues persuasively that what attracts Solie to St Ethernan is in large part the blank canvas he affords to her imagination. Solie not only fills in the blank canvas but sets it within a frame. Part of the pleasure of her sequence is in the interplay between the evocative poetry and the dry, academic, anchored and concrete discourse – the precise locational information, the direct quotes from the archaeological sources, and detailed descriptions of the topography of the East Neuk coastline and the Isle of May. Soplie conjures an imagined life from the hints and traces of what is known about her saint. We might conclude that while there may not be a shared set of distinctive aesthetic values binding Canada and Scotland there is a historical latticework of affinities, and the persistent sense of an imagined community between Scots and Canadians. The shared history supplies a framework that allows space for the imagination to flourish. And so, we can follow Robichaud in considering how a contemporary Canadian poet projects herself into the imagined space of Scottish legend.

The imagined spaces as well as the burden of a shared history haunt the fiction of Alistair MacLeod. Anne Artymiuk describes MacLeod's compelling interest in the seduction and dark melancholy of the intangible Scottish heritage of the Gaels of Cape Breton. The fragmented, displaced Gaelic community in Canada remains persistently nostalgic for a lost, 'authentic' past that renders their unfolding lives simply a pale imitation of those of their forbears. Their language fades while their songs are shortened, bastardised, and ultimately forgotten. Only their dogs remain a constant link between past and present.

For MacLeod and MacLeod's protagonists, as for Solie and indeed Jessie Kerr Lawson, the recurring questions posed to the reader are what do you do with your past, and what you do with the *stories* of your past? The question of how one takes forward the history and legends of the shared past into a divided future, at home and abroad, raises ethical, psychological, spiritual, political, and financial issues that are addressed and partially, at least, resolved through poetry and fiction. Like it or not, the stories of Canada and Scotland, Gael, and Sassenach, ancient and contemporary, are intertwined, with the Atlantic as a space that unites and separates. Canada and Scotland each have many other affinities, of course, but the Scottish-Canadian connection endures as part of our shared imaginary.

The three papers presented here, then, proved to be stimulating responses to our invitation to explore the persistence of Scottish–Canadian literary relations. Even so, there remains so much more that can be explored. Juliet Shields, in a conversation with me related to the panel, observed that any focus on Scottish–Canadian relations today must acknowledge that both nations are linguistically, culturally, ethnically, and politically heterogeneous. The relations between the two national communities and their sub-communities are uneven, often fraught. Nevertheless, there are so many enduring and relatively neglected ties that have connected Scottish and Canadian literatures since birth of the colonial enterprise in the seventeenth century – the novels of John Galt are an obvious example, amongst which is *Bogle Corbet* (1831), a tale of emigration to Canada. John Buchan sent his hero, Sir Edward Leithen, to die in the North West Territories in his final novel, *Sick Heart River* (1941). In the 1980s and 1990s, Francophone Quebec was reconfigured in a series of Scots language translations of the plays of Michel Tremblay by Martin Bowman and Bill Findlay, a critical edition of which will be published by ASLS, in a volume co-edited by Bowman and Ian Brown. The contemporary Shetlandic poet and novelist Robert Alan Jamieson turned his attention to western Canada in *McCloud Falls* (2017), set in British Columbia. There is much about the interpenetration of Canadian and Scottish literatures that remains to be said. This collection of papers can be considered a tempting aperitif.This special supplementary issue of *The Bottle Imp* picks up the venerable tradition of presenting polished versions of papers given at the 'official' Scottish Literature panel of the annual convention of the Modern Languages Association of America (MLA). The papers published here were delivered in January 2021, in a panel on 'The Persistence of Scottish-Canadian Literary Relations', a session genially overseen by Steve Newman of Temple University, who was concluding his year as Chair of the Executive Committee of the Scottish Literature Forum.

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