Reading Scotland's Borders through the Environment

By Julia Ditter

The fluidity of the Anglo-Scottish border – which is frequently defined through its surrounding landscape – and its resistance to conventional and rigid understandings of national borders make it an especially viable vantage point to explore borders beyond crisis regions and develop alternative understandings and theorisations of (national) borders. In this article, I will explore the imaginative potential offered by the literary and cultural imaginary of the Scottish Borders from a twenty-first-century perspective and put it in dialogue with critical debates in border studies and ecocriticism. I will illustrate theoretical debates by drawing on works of Scottish literature that negotiate borders through the environment in diverse but interrelated ways. Scotland's national border may be seen to inform Scottish literary responses to borders more widely where the figure of the border is most commonly understood to be dynamic, moving, dispersed across society and connected to environmental discourses.

Understanding the connections between borders and the environment is not only a matter of politics but of the imagination. According to Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe, theories and practices of border crossing 'are fast revealing borders as zones of instability in which ethical, political, cultural and national questions are negotiated' (2007, 9). Literary texts have the potential to explore these questions creatively through imaginative border crossings and the creation of textual zones of instability. Acknowledging the critical value of aesthetic negotiations of borders, Brambilla argues for an integration between border theory, which concerns the metaphorical and conceptual meanings of borders, and border studies, which focuses on localised social experiences. By combining politics and aesthetics, such integration allows for a more comprehensive understanding of bordering processes between experience, representation and theory (2015, 3). Following from the same impetus, Mireille Rosello and Stephen Wolfe develop a methodology of border aesthetics which posits that 'aesthetics is essential whenever we need to recognize and appreciate the criteria that define borders' (2017, 4–5). Examining border narratives and their aesthetic

configurations, they argue, 'will help us recognize new borders and new narratives' and acknowledge in what ways 'border fictions change dominant conceptualizations of who inhabits and can speak for the border' (13). An integration of these approaches with current ecocritical theories may reveal how border narratives and their conceptualisations of power and ethics may correlate with the environment, which has the ability to underwrite and reinforce, or contest and subvert, the representation of the border. Ecocritical approaches take into account the multiple interdependencies between bordering processes and environmental concerns, outlining the affordances of literature in the negotiation of this connection. Examining the correlation between borders and the environment through literature may provide an alternative pathway to approach these questions through narratives that prompt a questioning of the basic premises and paradigms underlying our current understanding of borders and 'nature'.

What is it that makes Scottish literature a particularly fruitful territory to explore the concept of borders in relation to the environment? For one, the unique affordances for alternative imaginations of borders in Scotland demonstrate how an examination of Scottish literary negotiations of borders may contribute to wider scholarly debates. Robert Crawford convincingly outlines how the idea of the border as a dynamic zone rather than an inflexible line, concurrent with current understandings of the border in critical border studies, not only originated in Scotland but also serves as a crucial cultural model that can be transferred to other contexts (1992, 185). The adaptability of Scottish modes of thinking about borders is similarly discussed by Claire Lamont and Michael Rossington through the history of the shifting geographical border zone of the debatable lands between England and Scotland from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. As they demonstrate, since the Romantic era the term 'debatable land' has increasingly moved away from a geographical and more literal understanding of the debatable lands as disputed border territory to a legal, historical and cartographical point of view. In doing so, the term has acquired metaphorical potential in its literary representations from the eighteenth century onwards (2007, 1). On this basis, the debatable land and its particular vision of the national border as porous and dynamic is increasingly transformed into a broader metaphor that could be applied to other cultural and social contexts while at the same time retaining its particular geographical significance (2007, 4). As a result, the cultural imaginary of the Anglo-Scottish border region

allows for an understanding of borders as flexible and fluid constructs that function in ways beyond the national.

Despite its fluidity, the figure of the border remains an ongoing presence in the Scottish literary imagination, and, especially due to the absence of immediate conflict, may provide us with alternative ways of thinking about borders today. The interest in border studies most often lies in examinations of borderscapes characterised by violence and conflict. Scotland's borders do not fall into this categorisation today: their material effects are more abstract, dispersed and elusive, and even though they display similar histories of violence and destruction, these histories do not hold the same urgency today as borders in which precarious lives are immediately endangered. As Lamont and Rossington point out, Anglo-American theorisations of borders have been focused on conflict areas in Britain, imperial borders, and the border experiences of the United States (2007, 5).Complementing the focus of border studies by European views more generally, Carla Sassi explains how the focus of European theorisations has similarly been on the most divisive borders and suggests how a reading of borders beyond such crisis regions might offer a more thorough understanding of bordering processes (2009, 146). If European thought has been incapable of theorising a liminal aesthetics to foster political transformations akin to what American/Chicanx thought has achieved (2009, 145), Scottish literature from the nineteenth century onwards offers a vantage point for such alternative theorisations. This may serve as a framework to understand and rethink the present crises from a new perspective.

At the same time, landscape and the natural environment, similar to concerns about borders and a particular view on bordering processes, have long been seen as entrenched in Scottish identity, culture, and literature. Tracing the origins of environmental discourses in Scottish literature, Louisa Gairn outlines a decidedly Scottish ecological tradition. In her analysis of Scottish national identity, Sassi further argues that landscape has always been a 'core component' of Scottish identity that structures a post-national sense of space which is not linked so much to geopolitical borders as anchored in geology and landscape (2005, 178). Despite the optimism of Sassi's statement, the connection between landscape and identity is not unproblematic, especially regarding such issues as access, land ownership, and debates around conservation and land use. Such concerns turn many rural areas, especially in the Highlands, into contested territory structured by

multiscalar bordering processes. A conflation of the national and natural furthermore not only risks depicting the Scots as naturally and historically 'closer to nature' but, as Camille Manfredi argues, may generate exclusionary and essentialist forms of ethnoregionalism (2019, 6).

Taking these risks into consideration is crucial in the development of a more inclusive (post-national) sense of place in which territory-bound identities are continually reinvented and adapted (2019, 208). An inclusive environmental imagination nevertheless poses for Manfredi, as it does for Sassi, an alternative to nationalist readings of a bounded environment, or what border studies scholar Chiara Brambilla terms the 'modern geopolitical, territorialist imaginary' (2015, 19). Manfredi finds examples of such an alternative mode of thinking in the works of twenty-first-century Scottish artists and writers who, through acts of rethinking and reclaiming the land imaginatively, question 'the origin, destination and therefore propriety of that territory—our land, their land, everybody's or nobody's land' (2019, 7). Opening up a forum for debate which situates Scotland in relation to larger issues of planetary import, they establish understandings of environment, territory and history as ongoing processes of 'de- and re-aestheticisation, disinvention and reinvention' (9). For Susan Oliver, similar processes can be discerned in nineteenth-century Scottish literature. Here, the historical controversies around Scotland's borders afford the fostering of an environmental understanding of 'country' in which humans are part of an integrative material environment and which presents Scotland as 'a complex but connected nation, where cultural diversity can be mapped bioregionally as well as according to more conventional political, linguistic and cultural borders' (2014, 2). These alternative modes of thought, afforded by the anomalous border situation of Scotland, are grounded in the country's own environmental tradition. Though said to have its origins in the Enlightenment, this tradition has been eclipsed in ecocriticism, the foundation-myth of which has been rooted in the English Romantic project.

Creative works from the last decade have not only displayed the vital connection between borders and the environment but also highlighted the special affordances offered by the inclusion of a Scottish context for thinking through this connection. The crossing of the Anglo-Scottish border by the wolves around which the plot of the story revolves is one of the key moments in Sarah Hall's *The Wolf Border* (2015). Through this crossing the novel achieves, according to Timothy

Baker, the elimination of borders by offering 'a new form of political thinking based not on parties and policies, but on a rejection of categorisations' (Baker 2016, 264). The ability of the wolves to undercut national borders is thus a central element of *The Wolf Border*. Multiple borders overlap and merge into each other in a narrative about the reintroduction of wolves to a Lake District estate: the protagonist's movement from the US to the UK in order to oversee the reintroduction, the walls of the wolf enclosure, the borders around the estate, the territorial lines drawn by the wolves themselves, the crossing of a national border, and the embodiment of the border between civilisation and wilderness by the wolves are just some of the levels at which borders and the environment are connected and examined throughout the novel.

In depicting the difficulties of a potential reintroduction of bears into a newly independent Scotland, Mandy Haggith's *Bear Witness* (2013) offers a similar examination of multi-layered bordering effects and stresses the agency of its human and nonhuman characters. Haggith further draws on the specific political and social implications of land ownership debates in the Scottish Highlands and offers an archipelagic reframing of Scotland by focusing on allegiances across the North Sea border to Norway and to the European continent. Drawing on a similar interest in Northern geographical connections beyond national borders, Mallachy Tallack's *Sixty Degrees North* (2015) destabilises geopolitical borders by rethinking geographical and environmental allegiances and weaving together human and natural histories along the sixtieth parallel.

These concerns are often recognisably at the centre of the plot or theme of literary works in the twenty-first century and its background of ever-more visible connections between bordering practices and the environmental crisis. However, we can also find examples of the connection between borders and the environment in a specifically Scottish context earlier on. In Carol Ann Duffy's 'River' (1990), the Tweed is represented as a natural border that resists instrumentalisation through the nationalist paradigm. Duffy's poem is concerned with the nature of borders and the possibility of border-crossings using the imagery of a river whose "[w]ater crosses the border, translates itself, but words stumble, fall back" (2011, 99). Through the imagery of a river that crosses the border to another nation where language differs, the poem contrasts the ability of nature to 'translate itself' and permeate the border signalled with the inability of the speaker to overcome the obstacle of the language barrier. In doing so, a

communication across the border is rendered impossible. The contemplation of the river's ability to resist human bordering practices makes the speaker acutely aware of the arbitrary nature of language and, by extension, of borders.

In Willa Muir's *Imagined Corners* (1931), animals appear more fleetingly than in Hall or Haggith, but hint at a similar perspective on bordering processes from the viewpoint of the early twentieth century. The environment almost seems to encroach on the social and cultural focus of *Imagined Corners* but still the novel serves to delineate an engagement with national borders through the environment. At one point, the narrator remarks that the birds gathering on Scotland's beaches have to adhere to the restrictive social rhythms of the coastal towns because they 'after all, were not ratepayers' and '[i]t is doubtful whether they even knew that they were domiciled in Scotland' (1931, 2). Paying attention even to such seemingly small and insignificant interruptions of the creaturely not only opens up a range of new reading possibilities for novels which have not been regarded as central to environmental debates but also reveals how they engage with broader bordering processes. In highlighting the structuring of space through nonhuman agents and the ordering of space and place around the categories of human and animal, such texts illustrate and narrativise the theoretical engagements offered by animal geography, geocriticism and archipelagic perspectives for a broader audience.

These examples demonstrate an awareness of the historical geopolitical situation of Scotland and recognise the role landscape imaginaries as an alternative framework through which Scottish identity can be understood. However, there is also a sense that Scotland's environment itself fosters an unconventional understanding of bordering processes. This element appears to varying degrees in the examples mentioned here but is perhaps most striking in the works of Nan Shepherd. The special quality of light in the northern hemispheres, together with the local environment, allows characters to rethink their perspectives of the world around them, including the borders which structure those lives. The wondrous and magical maps Shepherd creates in which '*Scotland is bounded on the south by England, on the east by the rising sun, on the north by the Arory-bory-Alice, and on the west by Eternity*' (1928, 20) are rooted in an intuitive understanding of bordering processes. By situating Scotland in a larger, planetary framework, Shepherd asks for a creative and open-minded engagement with borders.

In the late nineteenth century, Robert Louis Stevenson was similarly inspired by

the local environments of Scotland. These became the settings of his travel essays, novels and short stories and were placed in dialogue with the environments he encountered on his travels to America, Europe and the Pacific. Taken together, Stevenson's works offer an archipelagic understanding of Scotland in which borders are understood through mobile environmental practice. As I have argued elsewhere, the Erraid episode in *Kidnapped,* in which the protagonist, David Balfour, finds himself stranded on a tidal islet off the coast of Mull after a shipwreck, is representative of Stevenson's engagement with national borders through the natural environment of Scotland (Ditter 2021). As soon becomes clear, it is not the natural border of the sea but a lack of environmental, geographical and linguistic knowledge that prevents David from leaving the island. His final recognition that he could have left the tidal islet at any point when the tide was low reveals even supposedly natural borders as potentially contingent and imaginative constructs.

The special affordances of Scottish literature both today and historically contribute a range of literary modes through which borders and the environment may be theorised. Arising out of a Scottish context, these modes could be applied to reframe an understanding of borders more widely and in other contexts. Scottish literary texts that are invested in exploring the correlation between borders and the environment from a multiplicity of perspectives, including those of nonhuman animals, can thus contribute to the counter-discourse to dominant anthropocentric readings of borders without reinforcing a dualistic separation of culture and nature. Literature may highlight the agency of animals and the environment more broadly not only to undermine, subvert, and reinforce human borders, but also to construct and police borders themselves. Scottish literature invites a multiperspectival approach towards borders (cp. Rumford 2012) that is crucially informed by the connections that have been drawn between bordering processes and the natural environment in Scotland. It allows a move away from the anthropocentric focus on nation-state sovereignty as the primary locus of the border and opens the border up to an investigation that takes into account its multiple effects on human and nonhuman lives. Looking at borders from multiple perspectives and recognising such borders that may not follow the dominant parameters through which we understand borders today reveals the diversity and metaphorical potential of the literary form of the border. This further encourages reading practices that focus on bordering processes more generally in order to generate a new understanding of what borders mean in Scottish literature and

beyond.

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