Scottish Short Stories

By Carl MacDougall

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‘But some poems’, she continues, ‘are huge and some short stories are restless, just about contained. Some stories push at their own edges, trying to escape themselves.’[1] Later she admits the collection she’s reviewing fits into a tradition that moves through contemporaries and ‘back to the epic tales of old Ireland, a mode that shifted from the heroic into the mock-heroic in the work of Joyce and Flann O’Brien.’

These suggestions indicate the ways stories are almost always more than the sum of their parts and can carry a collective consciousness that informs us about ourselves. In many ways, they help structure the way we see ourselves and support our national identity.

Scottish short stories come from a tradition where stories were told to entertain and inform. They carried fear, risk, menace and warnings; they established boundaries and ensured continuity, especially informing young women on the dangers of men and young men on the dangers of women. And even though they could be dour and a wee bit thrawn, they were used to enhance what were seen as traditional Scottish values of acceptance and neighbourliness, and while danger was usually on the other side of the hill, they carried life in all its variances with our twin identities of voice and place.

It’s worth remembering that these social priorities arose in the predominately rural society that existed in Scotland for millennia before cities arrived, and in many cases these priorities prevailed in cities through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the aftermath of the Union, Scots had to adjust to changes in their everyday life, and though Scotland retained independent control of its religious, legal and educational institutions, English trends dominated as the country was re-interpreted as North Britain. The eventual suppression of the Jacobite Rebellions

in 1746, expanding markets and the burgeoning industrial revolution further threatened the Scots way of life, which resulted in a movement to explore and preserve the things that made Scotland unique.

For Robert Burns this meant language and, latterly, the preservation of the folk song tradition. Walter Scott took over where Burns left off, gathering songs, and in doing so created the Border ballad myth. Scotland's great folk song repository has always been Aberdeenshire and Scott uses texts which are identifiably Aberdonian.[2]

With the displacement of our native population and the social and economic difficulties that followed,[3] preserving the native traditions became more important. By the middle of the nineteenth century this movement had gathered ground and though Scottish literature had been diverted into the Kailyard culvert, rather than stultifying research the Burns impersonations that largely dominated publications like the Whistle-Binkie[4] anthologies appear to have prompted others to 'record, preserve and stimulate interest'.[5]

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Following James Duncan's death, from December 1907 till June 1911 Greig wrote weekly articles for the *Buchan Observer.* The idea was to stimulate local interest and the 600 song texts he gathered brought the Greig-Duncan collection to more than 3500 songs, the biggest of its kind in Scotland.

Yet in his retiring presidential address to the Buchan Field Club, Greig was aware that, 'A crisis has come to the history of our folk songs. The attention of the cultured world has been drawn to them […] the wildings are being dressed and decked for good society.'[7]

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When Hamish Henderson and the American folklorist Ken Goldstein began collecting in Aberdeenshire in 1951 there were other intrusions to contend with: mass circulation newspapers, cinema, radio and the burgeoning medium of television. Yet the success of their collections led Hamish to the berry fields of Blairgowrie where he described collecting songs in the travelling communities as 'like holding a tin can under the Niagara Falls.'[8]

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Travellers did more than carry songs. They told stories as extravagant as a man who changes sex, has children then goes back to his wife.[9] This is where you'll find Jack, the archetypical hero who does more than climb a beanstalk. His exploits, wit and trickery are found in every corner of the English-speaking world. The spoken Scottish versions are alive with rich linguistic skills and see our landscapes differently, bringing a perspective only those who have quite literally inhabited it could know.[10]

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Alan Riach[11] uses Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Storyteller' to both guide us and illuminate the relationship between oral and print based cultures. Alan uses what he calls three epic novels to illustrate the relevance of Benjamin's theory to Scottish literature: *A Scots Quair* by Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Lanark* by Alasdair Gray, and James Robertson's *And The Land Lay Still* – highly literate, written novels that self-consciously include, embed and play with the idea of storytelling, emphasising what "stories" are and marking the similarities between the novel, the story and the connections between storytelling and the epic stories, songs and ballads of Scotland and Ireland.

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To hear a storyteller tell or even a writer read a story means the listener or reader shares companionship with the teller or writer, whereas the reader of a novel is more isolated than any other reader: 'In this solitude of his, the reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously … he is ready to make it completely his own, to devour it.'

The storyteller, and, by implication, the short story writer, is present and is literally telling the story. Though, as Riach suggests, the printed book circulates and bears the handprint of the author. This is especially evident in Scottish writing, where the author's voice, and/or the voices of his or her characters, is often the most dominant feature.

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The first-person narrative is the dominant feature of Scottish writing, an essential part of what I would argue is Scotland's most important literary form and one which other forms, poems, plays and novels, embody in different ways. Scottish poetry can be seen in terms of individuals, but the Scottish storytelling tradition and the role of the voice within that tradition is a seamless source of excellence

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The latter was especially damaging. Local authorities still sponsored writers' residencies, but the damage was done with the magazines that existed, leaving an assumption that Scottish short stories were a thing of the past and if any writers existed they could publish their own work.

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What struck me about these early stories that arrived out of the blue, indeed the most obvious point, is their maturity. These are confident voices, opening to a variety of influences beyond the Scottish Renaissance – Beckett is in there, as is Hemingway, Steinbeck and perhaps most obviously James Joyce. The language is English, the language the writers were taught in, and their concerns are both national and individual.

Contributors were paid standard fees, but I received no money, either as an editor or contributor, and Ceri Williams laid out the magazine as part of his regular work with the Arts in Fife. Ceri's role was vital. We wanted the magazine to look and be different and included work by Fife artists, the occasional Bud Neill cartoon and anything quirky that came along. Ceri liked white space and we tried to give our contributions space to breathe.

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But where are their voices? Where are the people who danced in George Square? Have the fat bullies who kicked food around the Square the evening after the Referendum result won? Where are the voices of protest against the status quo? We have plenty descriptions of urban poverty, of intellectual poverty, of poverty induced by crippling want that is often induced by alcohol or drugs. We know what these things are like, but where are the radicals who do more than point these things out and whine about their condition? We still have folk telling us what's good for us. We need to tell ourselves what's good for us and to act on it. For all of this and much more the short story is the perfect vehicle. Scottish stories now take on the world's confusions stretching from politics of gender through politics of war and landing back home with the politics of domesticity.

Thirty years ago, as a Scottish short story writer working in Scotland I found it difficult to find more than ten stories in a single volume, covering more than two centuries. With nothing but my reading to back me up, I came up with *The Devil and The Giro.* Canongate's Stephanie Woolf Murray encouraged the collection and the Canongate Classics editor Rory Watson was especially helpful. Word soon got out and writers made suggestions, often by sending a little something of their own, but in suggesting possible inclusions, Alison Kennedy was especially helpful. All in all it amounted to around two years' work.

I submitted the stories in batches and was not at all surprised when the publisher drew the drawbridge up at six hundred pages. This meant some stories had to be returned, which also meant I became the editor rather than editor and contributor.

Stephanie wanted a second volume. We agreed it would concentrate on women's stories, I submitted a proposal which was verbally accepted but abandoned when the firm was sold.

Looking at the collection now, the most obvious feature – apart from those already mentioned, such as the importance of the first-person singular – is that using work from writers' groups and the oral tradition is the ways writers open their stories. Most early paragraphs, like Eona MacNicol's 'The Small Herdsman', mention place: 'I found the children rough in Chachanree, even the girls.' Edward Gaitens's 'The Sailing Ship' suggests it: 'Mrs Regan yelled at her son: "Get up ye lazy pig! Rise up an look for work an' don't shame me before the neebors!"' James Hogg begins with a shepherd on the lands of Meggat-dale, Robert McLellan has three grocers' shops in Kirkfieldbank, Alan Spence finds the swing doors of the steamie had windows and Lewis Grassic Gibbon tells us the Galts were thick in the land around Seggett. And the voices fits their locations perfectly.

And, of course, this is where the everyday meets the fantastic, where the Devil is real and culpable or where the inexplicable affects us all. This is where the working class have a voice.

Every once in a while, the working class are rediscovered. Scottish short story writers were there when *Sunset Song* appeared in 1932, and again nine years later when Edward Gaitens's *Growing Up and Other Stories* threw a factual shadow over *No Mean City.* These stories are written from the inside with an authenticity that replaces observation with experience, another feature of Scottish short story writing.

Today Scottish short story writers belong to the world. They take on international concerns such as sexuality, gender identity, climate and so on, but where do they begin? Our problem is what it's always been: writers are writing but they have nowhere to publish. American and Irish writers have regular magazine outlets, often funded by grants. The Thatcher cuts I mentioned earlier were especially vicious and their legacy remains. We need a magazine culture and sympathetic editors.

The first issue of *The Evergreen*[15] featured a tender piece by Leila Aboulela on a pregnant woman's cravings. The fourth and final issue was edited by and entirely featured work by women. But given that the most interesting development in Scottish literature in the last forty years has been in short fiction, where the quality, range and diversity, especially in women's writing, has been consistently interesting and challenging, and given the paucity of outlets, there should be more. Writers are not hard to find. All they need is encouragement and even the

slightest glance suggests that if writers have an outlet, or even, God help us, more than one regular outlet, they will contribute. It seems to be a challenge no funding body will meet, most especially the inheritors of those who used to fund such things. Perhaps there's a belief that writers will write anyway, but that's hardly a springboard into a national literary renaissance or a year-long celebration. Anne Enright sees the short story as either a natural form, 'close to conversation, or an art like poetry, requiring great skill and restraint'.

'But some poems', she continues, 'are huge and some short stories are restless, just about contained. Some stories push at their own edges, trying to escape themselves.'[16] Later she admits the collection she's reviewing fits into a tradition that moves through contemporaries and 'back to the epic tales of old Ireland, a mode that shifted from the heroic into the mock-heroic in the work of Joyce and Flann O'Brien.'

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But where are their voices? Where are the people who danced in George Square? Have the fat bullies who kicked food around the Square the evening after the Referendum result won? Where are the voices of protest against the status quo? We have plenty descriptions of urban poverty, of intellectual poverty, of poverty induced by crippling want that is often induced by alcohol or drugs. We know what these things are like, but where are the radicals who do more than point these things out and whine about their condition? We still have folk telling us what's good for us. We need to tell ourselves what's good for us and to act on it. For all of this and much more the short story is the perfect vehicle. Scottish stories now take on the world's confusions stretching from politics of gender through politics of war and landing back home with the politics of domesticity.

Thirty years ago, as a Scottish short story writer working in Scotland I found it difficult to find more than ten stories in a single volume, covering more than two centuries. With nothing but my reading to back me up, I came up with *The Devil and The Giro.* Canongate's Stephanie Woolf Murray encouraged the collection and the Canongate Classics editor Rory Watson was especially helpful. Word soon got out and writers made suggestions, often by sending a little something of their own, but in suggesting possible inclusions, Alison Kennedy was especially helpful. All in all it amounted to around two years' work.

I submitted the stories in batches and was not at all surprised when the publisher drew the drawbridge up at six hundred pages. This meant some stories had to be returned, which also meant I became the editor rather than editor and contributor.

Stephanie wanted a second volume. We agreed it would concentrate on women's stories, I submitted a proposal which was verbally accepted but abandoned when the firm was sold.

Looking at the collection now, the most obvious feature – apart from those already mentioned, such as the importance of the first-person singular – is that using work from writers' groups and the oral tradition is the ways writers open their stories. Most early paragraphs, like Eona MacNicol's 'The Small Herdsman', mention place: 'I found the children rough in Chachanree, even the girls.' Edward Gaitens's 'The Sailing Ship' suggests it: 'Mrs Regan yelled at her son: "Get up ye lazy pig! Rise up an look for work an' don't shame me before the neebors!"' James Hogg begins with a shepherd on the lands of Meggat-dale, Robert McLellan has three grocers' shops in Kirkfieldbank, Alan Spence finds the swing doors of the steamie had windows and Lewis Grassic Gibbon tells us the Galts were thick in the land around Seggett. And the voices fits their locations perfectly.

And, of course, this is where the everyday meets the fantastic, where the Devil is real and culpable or where the inexplicable affects us all. This is where the working class have a voice.

Every once in a while, the working class are rediscovered. Scottish short story writers were there when *Sunset Song* appeared in 1932, and again nine years later when Edward Gaitens's *Growing Up and Other Stories* threw a factual shadow over *No Mean City.* These stories are written from the inside with an authenticity that replaces observation with experience, another feature of Scottish short story writing.

Today Scottish short story writers belong to the world. They take on international concerns such as sexuality, gender identity, climate and so on, but where do they begin? Our problem is what it's always been: writers are writing but they have nowhere to publish. American and Irish writers have regular magazine outlets, often funded by grants. The Thatcher cuts I mentioned earlier were especially vicious and their legacy remains. We need a magazine culture and sympathetic editors.

The first issue of *The Evergreen*[30] featured a tender piece by Leila Aboulela on a pregnant woman's cravings. The fourth and final issue was edited by and entirely featured work by women. But given that the most interesting development in Scottish literature in the last forty years has been in short fiction, where the quality, range and diversity, especially in women's writing, has been consistently interesting and challenging, and given the paucity of outlets, there should be more. Writers are not hard to find. All they need is encouragement and even the

slightest glance suggests that if writers have an outlet, or even, God help us, more than one regular outlet, they will contribute. It seems to be a challenge no funding body will meet, most especially the inheritors of those who used to fund such things. Perhaps there's a belief that writers will write anyway, but that's hardly a springboard into a national literary renaissance or a year-long celebration.

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