Introduction: Scottish Radicals and BOSLIT Redux – Scottish Literature at the 2023 MLA Convention

By John Corbett

This special supplement of *The Bottle Imp* continues the now established tradition of presenting revised papers presented at events related to Scottish Literature at the annual MLA convention. The 2023 MLA convention took place in January, partly in San Francisco, and partly online. Some of the presenters featured in this supplement took the opportunity to visit 'Frisco, while others interacted virtually. Two events specifically related to Scottish Literature took place at the 2023 convention: the 'official' Scottish Literature Forum panel, on the theme of radicalism in Scottish literature, and a round table, expertly organised by Carla Sassi, Convener of the International Association for the Study of Scottish Literatures (IASSL). The latter marked the welcome revival of the Bibliography of Scottish Literature (BOSLIT), and featured contributions reflecting on its past, speculating on its future, and focusing on particular translations and issues in the translation of Scottish texts. This supplement contains a selection from both events.

The two papers on the theme of radicalism address Scottish work from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; both papers are marked by the engagement of the political with the personal. Florence Boos revisits the verse of nineteenth-century working-class poet Elizabeth Campbell, whose poems in the 1860s, published as pamphlets, countered the prevailing patriotism and took a critical approach to British involvement in the Crimean War. Her later verse was published in book form, and Boos speculates that the editing silently softened some of the harder edges of her radicalism, and smoothed over the rough edges that had suggested a proletarian authenticity to her earlier writing. Boos observes that such dilution of radical authenticity was the fate of numerous working-class writers in the nineteenth century whose verse migrated from publication in

pamphlets to wider circulation in edited books.

Turning to the twentieth century, Joan Garden Cooper argues that Jackie Kay's memoir, *Red Dust Road*, represents a point of connection between contemporary radicalism and the spirit that animated Scottish authors since Walter Scott's account of the violent dispersal of the mass demonstrations in Manchester in 1819, which came to be known as 'Peterloo'. A child of mixed race, adopted by politically engaged, leftist parents, and subjected to verbal abuse in her teenage years by her student peers, Jackie Kay should be a textbook case of radicalism-by-numbers. However, Joan Garden Cooper shows how the details of Kay's personal history and her emotional responses to the situations and events in her life challenge the idea that there are easy political solutions to complex human problems, a point also acknowledged in the novels of Walter Scott.

The next set of papers was prompted by a round table on translation and Scottish literature that marked the revival of the Bibliography of Scottish Literature (BOSLIT), until recently mothballed by the National Library of Scotland for technical reasons. A Glasgow University team led by Kirsteen McCue has benefited from Royal Society of Edinburgh funding to address the technical issues and resume the project. Regrettably absent from the round table herself, Professor McCue happily takes the opportunity, with Lorna Hughes, to update *Bottle Imp* readers about the reasons for restarting the project, its current status, and prospects for the future. BOSLIT's past achievements and some of the issues for literary studies that the resource raises are represented by papers by two of the stalwart researchers of its NLS phase: Tom Hubbard and Zsuzsanna Varga. Both touch on the theoretical and practical concerns that arise from the compilation of a database and library catalogue of translations from the literatures of Scotland into other languages. Tom Hubbard takes the case of Robert Louis Stevenson to illustrate the linguistic, aesthetic and cultural aspects of the act of translation. Zsuzsanna Varga raises an important concern about the status of the languages involved in the translation process. Two of the main languages of Scottish literature, Latin and subsequently English, are what Varga calls 'circulating languages' in that they have a transnational communicative function. Latin was the learned and literary language of mediaeval Europe; English has subsequently risen to prominence as a global language. But this was not always or even recently the case – in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Scottish writers would have been translated into other languages via 'circulating'

intermediary languages, usually French. Scotland's other two main literary languages, Gaelic and Scots, are 'non-circulating' in Varga's terms: as languages confined to regions or a single nation, they are less accessible to many translators, and less likely to travel. Translators of Gaelic into, say, Italian, French and Arabic, too, will most likely have recourse to English intermediary texts.

The final two papers are non-BOSLIT related case studies of translation. Ellen Beard shares a practitioner's perspective on rendering eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry into English, reminding us that translations of 'non-circulating' languages can be for the benefit of Scottish as well as international readers. Finally, John Corbett and Li Li discuss some of the challenges arising from the translation, in the 1980s, of a text arguably in a 'non-circulating' language, Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song*, into Mandarin Chinese.

All of the papers, from both the panel on radical literature and the round table on translation, address the international dimension of Scottish literature. The poetry of Elizabeth Campbell, which was published in Scotland in pamphlets and locally circulated books, was shaped by her traumatic experience of world events, particularly the Crimean War. The poetry, fiction and memoirs of Jackie Kay emerges from her personal history as a mixed-race child, and her complex and troubled engagement with her Nigerian father. While BOSLIT addresses translations from Gaelic into English for a readership that includes many Scots, its primary function is to monitor, and, increasingly to stimulate, the international impact of the literatures of Scotland. As Tom Hubbard observes, the catalogue opens up multiple opportunities for further research into the ways in which Scottish literature is mediated across languages and cultures. The revival of BOSLIT is a welcome initiative that will offer fundamental support to new generations of scholars and translator

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