



ISSN 1754-1514

The Bottle Imp

Issue 7, May 2010

Towards an Overview of Scottish Children's Literature from 1823 to 2010
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Behind Charlotte Square in the New Town of Edinburgh you may come across an ornate Gothic monument commemorating the novelist Catherine Sinclair who died in 1864. An inscription added in 1900 declares:

"She was a friend of all children and through her book 'Holiday House' speaks to them still."¹

Holiday House – a Book for the Young,² published in 1839, makes a notable starting point for a survey of Scottish children's literature. Previously there had been nothing quite like it in its portrayal of juvenile behaviour. The particular milieu, lightly sketched, is bourgeois Edinburgh and its rural environs; the main protagonists are a brother and sister, perhaps 5 or 6 years old, and its episodic narrative deals with their alarming reactions to the adult world. While it has a moralising framework and mortality latterly intrudes, the book's life lies in the anarchic, exploratory efforts of Harry and Laura, who are, quite simply, not safe to be left. Beguilingly articulate, they are the innocents from Hell. Adult attempts to discipline them veer between vicious beatings from their nursery-maid, and saintly tolerance on the part of their long-suffering guardians.

Along with Walter Scott's first series of *Tales of A Grandfather* (1828), *Holiday House* makes a rare direct bid for the imaginations of its young readers. Of Scott, John Buchan records that when six-year-old Johnnie Lockhart first encountered his grandfather's *Tales* "he was properly excited by it all and set out to dirk his young brother with a pair of scissors."³ This is very much the same world as *Holiday House*. Mischievously for the purposes of this brief overview we shall garland the forgotten Miss Sinclair as Scotland's first children's laureate.

"I wish everybody who writes a book was obliged to swallow it," said Harry. "It is such a waste of time reading, when we might be amusing ourselves."

Since Margaret Meek produced her seminal collection of essays *The Cool Web* in 1977,⁴ the field of children's literature, from infant board books to teenage crossover fiction, has grown its own formal critical apparatus. Internationally there is now an immense volume of scholarly theorising by and for literary critics, teachers and librarians on issues such as: aesthetic quality and canonicity; genres and categories; interactions between author and reader; enjoyment and instruction; developmental and reading ages; gender, ethnicity, postcolonial, feminist and other ideologies; and not least the motives and economics of the book trades and professional authors. A recent and readable survey of this sometimes rebarbative material is to be found in the Open University's *Children's Literature: Approaches and Territories*.⁵

Interestingly, despite the fact that landmark fictions by Scottish authors are key to many theoretical discussions, works for example by Scott, Sinclair, Ballantyne, Macdonald, Stevenson, Lang, Grahame and Barrie, there seems to have been virtually no acknowledgement in standard reference texts⁶ of the existence of a tradition of Scottish writing for young people, a tradition that stretches over some 180 years. Exceptions are Stuart Hannabuss's short survey in 1996⁷ and two recent groundbreaking reviews of Scottish publishing policies for children's books and comics by Jane Potter and Joseph McAleer.⁸

Seen in the light of these studies it has to be acknowledged that the phrase Scottish children's literature appears to be highly problematical. What evaluations are implied in the term 'literature'? What are the possible relationships between adult writers and young readers? Is there in fact a corpus of texts which can be identified as distinctively 'Scottish'?

In 1997 some teacher members of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies addressed these complex issues in *Teaching Scottish Literature*⁹ and subsequently in 2003 used the criteria which they had developed to produce *Treasure Islands* as a guide to fiction for young readers aged 10–14.¹⁰ This proposed a rationale for using and enjoying 'Scottish' works, and offered short critical accounts of 160 texts, later supplemented online by a further 40 items which took the survey up to 2005. One limitation of this selection was that it did not attempt to deal with writing for the very young, comic

books and graphic and videogame narratives. It was not moreover a direct survey of readers' own favourites.

Modest though it was in its ambitions, *Treasure Islands* still remains the only well informed source of advice on the range and quality of Scottish junior fiction. In identifying candidates for inclusion in the guide, the compilers concentrated mainly on writers who signalled that they were writing with young people in mind. A Scottish text was simply one which used a Scottish context, in plot, characters or setting; or was written by someone who had lived in Scotland. Thus Anne Fine and J K Rowling¹¹ were admissible on grounds of residence alone, and writers such as G A Henty, Arthur Ransome, Rosemary Sutcliff, Nina Bawden, Peter Dickinson and Michael Morpurgo, who had no Scottish background, were included on the strength of novels with Scottish ingredients. Using these admittedly generous criteria the project certainly demonstrated the existence of a significant archive of material developing between 1824 and 2005. However its main purpose was not to identify a backlist but to recommend books, whether earlier or more recent, which were likely to retain their lively appeal for young readers. Do they speak to us still? Here is an illustrative indication of some of the earlier texts analysed in the guide:

- 1824 and 1827, Sir Walter Scott, *Wandering Willie's Tale* and *The Two Drovers*: two good-sized short stories – one is a horror yarn in Scots of bogle wark in Covenanting times; the other a tale of the drove roads and a fatal culture clash, also with a supernatural ingredient.
- 1863, James Grant, *Dick Rodney*: by accident a Victorian gap year on a hazardous voyage to Cuba and Cape Town serves to make a man out of a callow Etonian.
- 1865, R M Ballantyne, *The Lighthouse*: location Arbroath, a hands-on account of the building the Bell Rock light, complicated by young romance, pressgangs and smuggling.
- 1872, George MacDonald, *The Princess and the Goblin*: a darkly shaded fantasy: a babyish but enterprising princess who is secluded in a remote castle joins with a boy miner to prevent goblins from abducting her.
- 1886, R L Stevenson, *Kidnapped*: it is 1751. David, a prim, sheltered lad, is challenged by grim experiences on the brig Covenant, and as a fugitive in the Highlands after the Appin murder.

- 1887, G A Henty, *Bonnie Prince Charlie a tale of Fontenoy and Culloden*: a young Jacobite exile and a mercenary find themselves fighting together on the continent. Their ambivalent loyalties are pointed up.

- 1888, Andrew Lang, *The Gold of Fairnielee*: a short supernatural romance of the Borders in the ill years after Flodden, drawing on the theme of the ballad Tam Linn.

- 1892 onwards, Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Great Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*: a selection of eight of the most accessible Holmes stories.

- 1901, Ian Maclaren, *Young Barbarians*: Muirton (Perth) around 1860. For Speug and his classmates, school life is a series of running battles with teachers, townfolk and rival school gangs – a sound preparation for death and glory in Imperial fields.

- 1901, J J Bell, *Wee Macgregor*: flourishing in late Victorian, working-class Glasgow, Macgregor, a pre-teenage urchin, causes hilarious domestic mischief in 24 escapades.

- 1905 onwards, Neil Munro, *Para Handy Tales*: a selection of Munro's humorous sketches dealing with the adventures of the skipper of the puffer Vital Spark and its droll crew. Good fun, almost surreal at times, occasionally satirical.

- 1911, J M Barrie, *Peter and Wendy*: a witty prose expansion of the play Peter Pan first performed in 1904.

Each of the guide's 200 brief critiques offers cautious advice on reading and interest levels. Some of the older titles such as those listed above, seem time-bound in their language and assumptions, and could therefore be off-putting today. Nevertheless they merit their place on the historical record, and may well prove attractive to adventurous readers.

Of the two hundred books reviewed in the *Treasure Islands* project:

- 9% were published before 1918
- 4% were published in the 1920s and '30s
- 7% in the 1940s and '50s
- 27% in the 1960s and '70s
- 32% in the 1980s and '90s
- 21% between 1990 and 2005
- 30% of the books were out of print.

These figures reflect only the books selected for review; and factors such as the compilers' judgements and availability of texts are clearly

operating. Though a limited sample, they do nonetheless suggest in general terms a slow, fits-and-starts, growth in the publication of imaginative writing for young readers in Scotland.

Within the selection 135 authors are represented, with men and women in roughly equal numbers. There are very few women in the 19th century category but their contribution increases steadily thereafter until today female authors are in the majority. In productivity there is a range from occasional, one-or-two book authors such as J J Bell, J B S Haldane and Marion Campbell to skilled professionals who have sustained work of impressive quality over a period of years – Honor Arundel, Mollie Hunter, Allan Campbell McLean, Eleanor Lyon, Kathleen Fidler, Joan Lingard, Iona Mcgregor, Eileen Dunlop, Hugh Scott, Teresa Breslin, Elizabeth Laird and Alison Prince. Some, like Jane Duncan, Nigel Tranter, Naomi Mitchison, Eric Linklater and Jackie Kay have moved successfully between adult and younger readerships.

Since the completion of the ASLS survey in 2005 younger contemporary writers such as Cathy MacPhail, Julie Bertagna, Cathy Forde, Keith Gray, Nicola Morgan, and Gill Arbuthnott have extended their range and new talent continues to emerge, for example, in the work of J A Henderson, Cathy Cassidy and Alex Nye.

The world of Scottish children's writing is not hermetically sealed and impermeable to external forces. Its current novels show influences from adult fiction and from other literature, English and American. They are responsive to the powerful narratives of contemporary film, TV and computer games. The styles of prolific, internationally popular authors such as Jacqueline Wilson, Eoin Coiffer, Lemony Snicket and Anthony Horowitz are also making their impact. Over the years there has been dramatic shifting towards more frank dealings with sexual development, personal and social problems, violence, war and environmental issues. Structure and language have become more stripped down, informal and direct.

The characteristic preoccupations of Scottish junior fiction are, as we would expect, the universal and perennial themes of growing up, romance, family, conflict, outsiders, comedy, supernatural and horror, fantasy, adventure and sport – but these are set in distinctive Scottish contexts. Two clusters of titles will serve to illustrate the point.

Going North

One of the most popular themes is the call of the North. It can take many narrative forms

and like much else in junior fiction it carries residual echoes of Scott and Buchan: journeys north from England into Scotland, from Lowland to Highland, from urban to rural, with attendant picaresque adventures. It can entail military excursions, flight and pursuit, escape from routine, exposure to wild, elemental, mysterious territories, sometimes threatening sometimes comic.

Silverfin (2005) Charlie Higson's first contribution to the Young Bond prequels starts in Eton and climaxes violently on a remote West Highland sporting estate.

Two very different recent examples of flight into Scotland are *The Ostrich Boys* (Keith Gray 2008) and *Running on the Cracks* (Julia Donaldson 2009).

Earlier treatments have often focused on summer holiday ventures into the Highlands, with their excitements, tensions, painful self-discoveries and tentative romantic encounters – 'Scotland for Holidays', in the words of one colourful LMS railway poster of Glencoe in the 1920s. Some instances, widely diverse in setting and plot, are to be found in *We met our Cousins* (Joanna Cannan 1937), *Orders to Poach* (Olivia Fitzroy 1942), *The Hill of the Red Fox* (Allan Campbell MacLean 1955), *The Battle of Wednesday Week* (Barbara Willard 1963), *Camerons on the Train* (Jane Duncan 1963), *The Seal-Singing* (Rosemary Harris 1971), *Beadbonny Ash* (Winifred Finlay 1973), and *The Clearance* (Joan Lingard 1973).

Witchcraft

Historical themes also bulk very large in the *Treasure Islands* survey. Many of the major episodes in Scotland's history are fictionalised in one way or another, but one topic is particularly prominent – the matter of witches and witchcraft. On the one hand there are the exuberant non-historical structures of fantasy and magical adventures to be found in the work of J K Rowling (*Harry Potter* series 1997-2008) Debi Gliori (*Pure Dead Magic* etc., 2001-2007), Joan Aitken (*The Witch of Clatteringshaws* 2005) and Terry Pratchett (*The Wee Free Men* 2003) – the latter three being often hilariously entertaining. On the other hand several novelists tell of the lives of women and girls caught up directly in the vile realities of Scottish witch persecutions and religious fanaticism in the 16th and 17th centuries, or their more recent equivalents. These works include:

Escape in Darkness (Kathleen Fidler 1961), *Kate Crackernuts* (K M Briggs 1963), *The Witch's Daughter* (Nina Bawden 1966), *The Thirteenth Member* (Mollie Hunter 1971), *The Dark Shadow*

(Mary Rhind 1988), *Quest for a Maid* (Frances Mary Hendry 1988), *The Valley of Deer* (Eileen Dunlop 1989), *Shadow of the Stone* (Catherine Lucy Czerkawska 1989), *The Witch Of Lagg* (Anne Pilling 2000), *The Drowning Pond* (Cathy Forde 2005), *The Witches' Mark* (Donald Lightwood 2006), *The Witching Hour* (Elizabeth Laird 2009).

The central female characters of such stories are often depicted as courageous and independent spirits. A vivid exception, however, is *The Drowning Pond* in which a gang of girls in a suburban comprehensive school are tragically corrupted by dabbling in the cruelties of witch hunting.

This strong emphasis on witch narratives probably distinguishes Scottish junior fiction from that of the rest of the UK, but has parallels in some American teenage fiction.

Among other significant thematic groupings of texts which have distinctive Scottish dimensions are:

- the lives of animals (fox, wolf, deer, otter, seal, birds, dogs horses, cats);
- (wild and big) with a particular interest in monsters and fabled creatures;
- threats to climate and environment (going back as far as Eric Linklater's *The Pirates in the Deep Green Sea* (1949) and including Julie Bertagna's *Exodus* (2002);
- experiences of the big city (in Glasgow and Edinburgh) and experiences of life in remote highland and island areas;
- social deprivation, exclusion and alienation;
- traditional Gaelic and Lowland folklore.

Of the other distinctive clusters noted in *Treasure Islands* the least well represented is sport, but that has since been enhanced by the publication of Theresa Breslin's *Divided City* (2005) which tackles football, sectarian and racial conflicts in contemporary Glasgow.

Any overview of Scottish children's literature, however provisional, must be alert to the range of poetry written for a young audience over the last two centuries. There is certainly material worth exploring, starting with the wealth of timeless folk rhymes collected by Norah and William Montgomerie (*The Hogarth Book of Nursery Rhymes* 1964). The minor poets William Miller, Alexander Rodger and James Ballantyne of *Whistle Binkie* notoriety offer a few good Victorian items. Key figures are, of course, Stevenson and William Soutar but J K Annand and 'Sandy Thomas Ross' have also made memorable contributions. Additionally there are some verses by W D Cocker and

Walter Wingate which justifiably survive as popular performance pieces.

In recent years a new vitality has been injected through the work of Jackie Kay, Carol Anne Duffy and Matthew Fitt. How many other of our established poets have occasionally written for children? Does it indeed make any sense to think of poets as having any particular segment of readership in mind? Consider for example some of the playful little *jeux d'esprit* of writers such as Edwin Morgan and Iain Hamillton Finlay. The Scottish Poetry Library holds a wide range of children's materials and is active in promoting interest in poetry generally. Its website contains a valuable resource of *Frequently Used Poems* many of which have been popular in primary classroom for generations. It has also commissioned from contemporary poets a delightful thematic anthology of new poems for young people, *The Thing That Mattered Most*.¹²

Useful short collections are Anne Forsyth's *Scots Poems for Children* (2001) and the ASLS anthology *Ram Tam Toosh* (Alan Macdonald and Ian Brison, 1982).

The health of Scottish children's literature in recent years has greatly benefited from the activities of the Scottish Book Trust. Funded by the Scottish Arts Council, its priority has been to stimulate the interests of potential young readers. Its Live Literature Funding brings Scottish writers into schools and public libraries, and its running of the Royal Mail Awards for Scottish Children's books helps to engage school pupils closely in reviewing and judging the leeted books. It has also created the post of a virtual Writer in Residence residence (the first appointment being Cathy Forde).

Surprisingly however the Trust does not seem to accept any responsibility for exploring and supporting the past heritage of children's literature. Its concern appears to be only with living writers, and books currently in print. A case could therefore be made for establishing a Scottish Library of Children's Literature.

In the field of commercial publishing the gradual extinction of long established Scottish-based publishers and the willingness of large international companies to support some established Scottish writers are factors bound to influence the content and style of children's books. One trend seems to be that the use of Scots in fiction is declining. In the 200 texts reviewed in *Treasure Islands* there is only one full-length novel that risks sustaining appropriate dialogue in any form of Scots – Des Dillon's *Me and ma Gal* (1995). Itchy Coo's *Doubleheider*://

(Sheena Blackhall and Hamish MacDonald 2003) comprising two lively novellas in different dialects is, however, promising evidence of what can be achieved. Given the present circumstances of children's publishing, the enterprising work of small specialist publishers such as Itchy Coo, Floris Books (Kelpies), Barrington Stokes and Fidra Books is invaluable,¹⁵ whether in commissioning new materials or rescuing half forgotten but worthwhile out-of-print fiction.

This overview of Scottish Children's literature has managed only glimpses of its convoluted landscape, and it has perforce concentrated more on the texts that has been produced for the benefit of young Scots than on what they may actually want. The last time their own views were sampled was in 1989, when the Scottish Arts Council published its report on *The Reading Habit*. Given the changes that have taken place culturally and socially since then, and the radical developments now being promulgated nationally in school curricula for Literacy and English, it is surely time for another attempt at this tricky but valuable task.¹⁶

In concluding we may take some encouragement from the wise words of the redoubtable Miss Sinclair, creator of those little menaces Harry and Laura:

"But above all we never forget those who good humouredly complied with the constantly recurring petition of all young people in every generation, and in every house – 'Will you tell us a story?'"¹⁷

Notes

- 1 For an account of Catherine Sinclair by Charlotte Mitchell see the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004.
- 2 In 1972 Hamish Hamilton published a new edition of *Holiday House* with a perceptive preface by the novelist Barbara Willard.
- 3 John Buchan, *Sir Walter Scott* (Cassell, 1932) p. 313.
- 4 edited Margaret Meek, Aidan Warlaw, Griselda Barton, *The Cool Web: the Pattern of Children's Reading* (The Bodley Head, 1977).
- 5 edited Janet Maybin and Nicola J Watson, *Children's Literature: Approaches and Territories* (palgrave macmillan for the Open University 2009).
- 6 These include: edited by Humphrey Carpenter and Mari Pritchard, *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature* (Oxford University Press 1984); edited by Victor Watson, *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* (Cambridge University Press 2001).
- 7 Stuart Hannabuss, in *The International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* edited by Peter Hunt (Routledge 1996), pp. 688-691.
- 8 Jane Potter and Helen Williams, 'Children's Books' and Joseph McAleer, 'Magazines and Comics' in *The Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland*, Volume 4 edited by David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleary (Edinburgh University Press 2007) pp. 352-367 and pp.368-384 respectively.
- 9 Edited Alan MacGillivray, *Teaching Scottish Literature: Curriculum and Classroom Applications* (Edinburgh University Press 1997), pp. 31-53.
- 10 Edited James Alison and Ronald Renton, *Treasure Islands* (The Association for Scottish Literary Studies 2003).
- 11 In *Reading Round Edinburgh: A Guide to Children's Books of the City* (Floris 2007) J K Rowling in her preface reflects cannily on the alleged influences of the city operating on her Potter novels. Interestingly enough this attractively produced guidebook has nothing to say about Catherine Sinclair, her novel or her monument.
- 12 For the activities of The Scottish Poetry Library see: www.spl.org.uk
- 13 Julie Johnstone, *The Thing that Mattered Most* (The Scottish Poetry Library and Black and White Publishing 2006)
- 14 For the activities of the Scottish Book Trust see: www.scottishbooktrust.com
- 15 See Jane Potter and Helen Williams in 8 above, pp. 352-367.
- 16 The new 'outcomes and experiences' for Literacy and English courses in Scottish primary and secondary schools are to be found at: www.ltsscotland.org.uk
- 17 Catherine Taylor, *Holiday House a Book for the Young* (Hamish Hamilton, edition of 1972) preface, p. xv, xvi.



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ASLS is supported by the Scottish Arts Council



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and is published by the Association for Scottish Literary Studies www.asls.org.uk