

Scottish Literature
and
the question of
IDENTITY

Calum Colvin, 'Twa Dogs' (2000)



The scars of history

- XIV century: Edward I vs William Wallace
- 1314 Robert the Bruce vs Edward II in the Battle of Bannockburn
- 1513 Scots defeated in the Battle of Flodden
- 1603 Union of Crowns under James VI of Scotland (James I of England)
- 1560 Protestant Reform (John Knox): adoption of the English version of the Bible
- 1707 Union of Parliaments and Hanoverian Succession
- 1715 and 1745-46: Jacobite rebellions
- Repression of Highland culture and Gaelic tradition. Highland Clearances. Diaspora to cities or abroad

Within a tradition vs between traditions

- Negative assessment of idea of a protean identity resulting from 1707 Union: “failure of Scottish culture” paradigm following the end of the Scottish nation-state
- T. S. Eliot and Edwin Muir: “dissociation of sensibility”; theory of the “two languages” and lack of an organic tradition. e. g. Walter Scott’s support of the Union
- Important change with Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance (1920s-1930s)

- *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926): metamorphic prismatic Thistle; pastiche techniques; Joycean polyglot delight
- Rehabilitation of the hybrid and contradictory. Different cultures and languages meet in the poem – vs parochialism
- Yet resurgence of Scottish nationalism in the 50s (Henderson's folk-song revival), 60s (I. C. Smith's, E. Morgan's poetry) and 70s (McGrath's drama denouncing the status of Scotland as internal colony): cultural revivalism vs awareness of national decline in economy

- Parallel tendency from 1970s: alternative sense of *Scottishness* – “in between” cultures and not “within” a culture
- Use of English is no longer the main problem since it has been appropriated and deconstructed from within
- Triumph of the cosmopolitan view vs organic whole: dialogue (generally) prevailing on hostility and image of a heterogeneous culture

The Contemporary Scottish Novel

■ 1945-1980

- Overall pessimism and irony about romanticised images of Scotland
- 1960s-1970s: realism as predominant mode. Fiction of Archie Hind, Alan Sharp and William McIlvanney – condition of “hard man” vs society

1980-

- A more positive vision of Scotland (post 1979 paradox: referendum failure and Thatcherism), working in new genres, exploiting its multilingualism (revival of vernacular voice)
- Fictional innovation with Glasgow writers such as A. Gray, I. Banks and James Kelman
- A new way to handle the relationship between the urban and the rural – integration between them, inclusive variety of *Scotlands*
- Rediscovering Scottish older traditions and classics (magic realism and supernatural mode) combined with post-modern modalities

- Realism married to fantasy: a “romance repeatedly undercut by irony; austere realism jostling with fantasy” (no longer a paradox)
- Post-1979 bleak realism added to the Gothic traditions of the Scottish novel celebrating the supernatural and the magic (play of different ontological levels)
- From the “Doomsday scenario” of Thatcherite Britain to the new confidence gained after 1999: increasing acceptance of a complex and multiple identity