

## Occasional Paper: Now That's What I Call a Scottish Canon!

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Lists of the greatest, essential or best-loved Scottish books have enjoyed a widespread popularity in recent years. *The Herald*, for instance, is currently asking its readers to nominate 'Your 100 Best Scottish Novels' in order to 'compile the definitive list of the 100 most important Scottish novels of all time'.<sup>[1]</sup> In 2005, the *Scotsman* published a list of '20 Scottish Books Everyone Should Read',<sup>[2]</sup> in 2006 Radio Scotland asked its listeners for 'The Nation's Favourite Scottish Poem',<sup>[3]</sup> in 2005 the Scottish Book Trust and the *List* magazine published a booklet on the *100 Best Scottish Books of All Time*,<sup>[4]</sup> and as part of the 2012 Aye Write! book festival, the 'Scotland's Bookshelf' project celebrated 'two of the best books published each decade across the past century' to mark the Mitchell Library's 100th anniversary.<sup>[5]</sup>

Rosemary Goring's introduction to the 'Scotland's Bookshelf' booklet illustrates several of the tensions inherent to list-making of this kind. Although many of these initiatives ask readers to choose their favourite Scottish book (often from a pre-selected 'long-list') – seeking to 'take a reading' of popular taste – they usually also claim to present a definite and binding selection: 'The sampler is intended [...] to provide, in effect, a shorthand guide to some of the most influential books from that period that should sit on everyone's bookshelf, whether that shelf is real or simply in one's head' (p. 7). In specifying which books should or 'must' be read, it is clear these lists are not merely barometers of popularity, but express a claim for evaluative authority. They tell readers which books are the best, or most representatively and influentially Scottish, and so constitute a standard of literary and cultural value as normative. Although Goring admits that there is 'no right or wrong top twenty best books' and that the selection could also have been a very different one, she claims that the panel of Aye Write! experts know which books will eventually remain in the Scottish canon: 'The literary pinnacles we have picked out will still, we feel sure, be read and appreciated in a hundred years' time' (p. 8). Of course, such lists actively shape rather than passively reflect readers' expectations of what a Scottish canon might include. Likewise, the fact that these lists often aim to inspire readers to create their own lists only seems

contradictory, as each disagreement with the canon is also an affirmation of canon-enforcing procedures.

This tension between an ostensible democratic selection process and the postulated absoluteness of the result arises from the fact that canon formation in Scotland is an institutional process that is determined by political, and mainly nationalist, motives. As I argue in *A Scottish National Canon?*, such lists are the result of relatively recent processes of literary canon formation.[6] In the final few decades of the twentieth century, especially, a range of different institutions that mediate literature to the public at large began to shape a distinctive Scottish literary canon by publishing literary histories, anthologies, classics series, and intensifying the teaching of Scottish literature in schools and universities. Contrary to many other counter-canon and their respective movements, such as the feminist canon, these activities were less motivated by campaigns 'from below', but were institutionally driven processes that had the intention to strengthen a sense of national identity after the failed devolution referendum in 1979. In order to make up for the failure of nationalist politics, Scotland should be restored as a nation on the international cultural map. Simultaneously, academic criticism conceptualised Scottish literature as being inherently related to the nation and literature was seen as a means of preserving and advancing national identity. Cairns Craig's study of *The Modern Scottish Novel*, for instance, claims that through works by Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, Janice Galloway, A.L. Kennedy and Irvine Welsh, 'Scotland went on imagining itself as a nation and went on constituting itself as a national imagination in defiance of its attempted or apparent incorporation into a unitary British culture, a defiance which has had profound political consequences in the last decade of the twentieth century'.[7] Hence, Scottish literary criticism, as well as most other literary institutions, exhibited a keen desire to form a unique Scottish national identity through the creation of a Scottish literary canon.

Arguably, this desire was motivated by a sense of cultural inferiority. Since a literary canon is one of the preconditions of being accepted as a nation, these canon-making endeavours have been part of Scotland's strategy of positioning itself within the international literary field and of gaining distinction and accumulating cultural capital as a nation, to use Bourdieu's terminology. Pascale Casanova has pointed out how national literatures are created from political struggles between nations and how nations compete with each other for distinction through their literary canons. According to her, literatures are 'not a pure emanation of national identity; they are constructed through literary rivalries, which are always denied, and struggles, which are always international'.[8] This 'literary competition among nations' (Casanova, p. 105) serves to establish Scotland as a fully-fledged nation that has no reason to feel inferior as compared to other nations, most notably England. Thus, lists and canons claim cultural autonomy for the nation and, at the same time, function to remind the nation of its cultural achievements. Hence, Rosemary Goring,

in a *Herald* article on 'Scotland's Bookshelf', writes that 'there could have been no better exercise for reminding me what an astonishing heritage of fine books Scotland produced in the 20th and early 21st centuries. I don't want to beat a Little Scotlander drum, but whatever classics other nations have produced in the same period, Scotland can hold its head up as an equal'.<sup>[9]</sup> After devolution, the number of these lists of canonical works, and particularly the number of public polls on the subject, has even increased. It seems that after political autonomy has been largely attained, it is now necessary to consolidate what has been achieved in cultural terms and reinforce it in the minds of the general public.

Alongside the struggle for cultural autonomy, the fact that Scotland's is a rather small literature has led to the incorporation into the Scottish canon of several popular writers and works that also belong to other national traditions. Infamously, the *100 Best Scottish Books of All Time* included works by Virginia Woolf, George Orwell and Joseph Conrad, premised on various tenuous and far-fetched links to Scotland. Although these inclusions ironically mirror the incorporation of Scottish authors into the Anglocentric canon, of which cultural nationalists in Scotland have so long disapproved, appropriating these works was, in fact, not an absurd presumption, but a deliberate strategy to present Scottish national identity as multi-cultural, pluralistic and inclusive. In order to make up for a lack of unity, diversity and hybridity are often conceptualised as the inherent characteristics that define Scottish literature. According to Cairns Craig, Scottish writing exists '*between* traditions rather than within a tradition'.<sup>[10]</sup> Alastair Niven claims in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* that hybridity is 'the very nature of Scottish literature'.<sup>[11]</sup> In their postulation of diversity and hybridity, the canon-makers follow trends that are currently valued highly within the international literary field and therefore promise symbolic capital.

Ironically, these paradigms are at the same time used to exclude certain texts which do not conform with the dominant ideology of this neo-national canon. Hence, texts that cannot easily be constituted as 'national' texts in their content, theme or style, or writers whose political opinions are not in line with literary nationalism are omitted from the canon – despite its ostensible plurality. This results in a rather one-sided depiction of political views, of the oeuvre of certain authors and of the kind of genres that are considered most representative of the nation. When conservative writers like Allan Massie are excluded from the canon, when the works of Robert Burns are reduced to his Scots poetry at the cost of his English-language writings and when the realist novel is described as more or less the only literary form that can reflect the nation because of its dialogic form, then the canon is not a democratic representation of the nation, but a normative standard that conceals the true formal and political plurality of Scottish literature.

If this elision of literature and nation is not contested by disinterested readers and scholars, we run the risk of not only gaining a reduced and impoverished image of Scottish literature, but, even

more importantly, of being manipulated in forming our own critical opinions. In their claim for evaluative authority, these canons and lists codify their creators' specific norms and values, which are then equated with cultural value as such. Thus, a small elite social group defines the cultural basis of a whole nation. We therefore need a comprehensive dialogue about the criteria for inclusion into the canon and the mechanisms of canon formation in general. The debates about 'Scotland's Bookshelf' are a good start.

## NOTES

- [1] 'Your 100 Best Scottish Novels', *The Herald* Online, 27 May 2012, [www.heraldscotland.com/books-and-poetry/your-100-best-scottish-novels](http://www.heraldscotland.com/books-and-poetry/your-100-best-scottish-novels) [accessed 2 June 2012].
- [2] Emma Cowing, 'The 20 Scottish Books Everyone Should Read', *Scotsman*, 28 December 2005, [www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/books/the-20-scottish-books-everyone-should-read-1-685642](http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/books/the-20-scottish-books-everyone-should-read-1-685642) [accessed 2 June 2012].
- [3] Published in Stewart Conn (ed.), *100 Favourite Scottish Poems* (Edinburgh, 2006).
- [4] Willy Maley (ed.), *100 Best Scottish Books of All Time* (Edinburgh, 2005).
- [5] Rosemary Goring, 'Scotland's Bookshelf: An Introduction', in *Scotland's Bookshelf: A Celebration of 100 Years of Scottish Writing* (Glasgow, 2012), pp. 7-8, (p. 7).
- [6] Stefanie Preuss, *A Scottish National Canon? Processes of Literary Canon Formation in Scotland* (Heidelberg, 2012).
- [7] Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh, 1999), p. 36.
- [8] Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA, 2004), p. 36.
- [9] Rosemary Goring, 'Scotland Stands Tall on its Past Century of Books', *The Herald*, 18 February 2012, [www.heraldscotland.com/books-poetry/comment-debate/scotland-stands-tall-on-its-past-century-of-books.16744960](http://www.heraldscotland.com/books-poetry/comment-debate/scotland-stands-tall-on-its-past-century-of-books.16744960) [accessed 2 June 2012].
- [10] Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture* (Edinburgh, 1996), p. 177.
- [11] Alastair Niven, 'New Diversity, Hybridity and Scottishness', in Ian Brown (ed.), *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature, vol. 3: Modern Transformations: New Identities (from 1918)* (Edinburgh, 2007), pp. 320-331 (p. 331).

