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# *Scottish Fantasy Today*<sup>1</sup>

## *Margaret Elphinstone*

The question that arises, when one is asked to talk about Scottish fantasy today, is whether this simply means fantasy texts that come out of Scotland, or whether there is currently a genre that might be labelled 'Scottish fantasy' which is significantly different from fantasy that comes from anywhere else. The unique status of Scottish fantasy has been a well-established tenet of Scottish literature and criticism, but the dominant genre at the end of the twentieth century is contemporary, urban and realistic. Can we still assert that there is a distinctively Scottish fantasy genre, which is neither retrospective nor nostalgic, but which uses traditional elements to produce texts relevant to the modern world? I have a vested interest in saying yes, a claim I'll now attempt to substantiate.

Gregory Smith suggested, back in 1919, that Scottish fantasy had unique features, and set up the model of the Caledonian anti-syzygy that has been extended, re-designed, and deconstructed ever since.<sup>2</sup> I gave a paper in 1991 in which I looked at fantasy texts by women in the light of Gregory Smith's model and concluded that they did indeed set up an ironic juxtaposition between the real and the fantastic.<sup>3</sup> I later rejected Smith's model for what seemed to me a more anarchic and less hierarchical pluralism. Probably the only recent critic bold enough to assert that Scottish fantasy is categorically different from, say, English fantasy is Colin Manlove, in his introduction to *An Anthology of Scottish Fantasy Literature* (1996). Interestingly, he is less definite on this point in *Scottish Fantasy Literature: A Critical Survey* (1994), which considers the ambiguity of the adjective 'Scottish' in relation to identifying motifs found in fantasy texts. Today I am inclined to revisit the Caledonian anti-syzygy, very cautiously, and see if it still has anything to offer when reading contemporary texts. I also intend to test some of Manlove's assertions against new texts coming out of Scotland.

Manlove emphasises the relationship between fantasy fiction and a living tradition of folk and fairy tale, which he asserts has survived more strongly in modern Scotland than it has done in England. Smith, in a similar argument, cited a strongly surviving ballad tradition as a major influence on Scottish fantasy writing. Both critics also consider fantasy a method of delineating a psychological state, and the citation of Hogg and

Stevenson in this context has become a critical cliché in the study of Scottish literature. In reading fantasy as an image of a psychic state, we are also indebted to a mode of thought probably first expressed by the Muirs, both Edwin and Willa, in a variety of genres, in which fantasy is understood as an image of the subconscious or dream world, a fragmented reflection of lost wholeness. A psychoanalytical model, in which fantasy becomes an image of a psychic state that cannot be apprehended through rational or conscious discourse, complements the connection between modern fantasy and the supernatural in folk tradition. Both strategies alert the reader to the use of archetypal or traditional motifs, even in the most contemporary of settings.

These strategies for reading present-day Scottish fantasy can, I suggest, be taken a step further than either the early-twentieth-century critics or Manlove have done. Smith and Manlove both draw attention to the way that Scottish fantasy locates the supernatural in the heart of contemporary realism. The implication is that fantasy subverts the assumptions of that world. I think it does more: in a post-structuralist world, it destabilises contemporary notions of what is 'real', drawing upon past traditions, dreams, subconscious hopes and fears about the supernatural and giving them a validity which is at least equal to, and often stronger than, the rational laws that supposedly govern the external world. My reading of Scottish fantasy suggests to me not so much a binary opposition (real/fantastic) as a demolishing of the *boundary* that divides the real from the supernatural. Therefore, I still have to take issue with the notion of anti-syzygy. In this re-location, the borderlands become central, the liminal place where action takes place, and, in the text, where the plot can start to happen.

Manlove rightly suggests that Scottish fantasy tends to locate the workings of the supernatural, or irrational, at the heart of the world we inhabit, rather than to construct a parallel world, which is the predominant theme in most English (and, I think, American) fantasy. Where there is a parallel world, Scottish texts often link it to a realistic dimension by using dual or multiple narratives (Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* and Iain Banks's *The Bridge* are obvious examples), but this is by no means a uniquely Scottish device. The disruptive element in much Scottish fantasy (and here Manlove aligns it with a European tradition) is that it is not a reflection of our own world, but an alarming dislocation of where we assume our world to be. The metaphor of location is very relevant here, as—and this is a fundamental aspect of Manlove's thesis—

the location of the fantastic in the real world is often tied in with a precise topography of the Scottish landscape. I think this *is* a peculiarly Scottish feature; nowhere else do I find, in the middle of reading fantasy, that I have to follow it, literally, on the map. The fantastic is not located in a different dimension; as readers we experience it as part of a seamless whole, which is the reality the text presents. Fantasy, as a reflection both of the individual subconscious and a collective past tradition, is central to how *this* world operates. That's frightening because it cannot be consciously apprehended or controlled. Reading good Scottish fantasy is a sinister, disorientating experience because it overthrows the comfortable post-Enlightenment rationale which allows us to make a difference between the dream and the reality, and to think that we escape from the dream and become rational beings again when we wake up or stop reading.

My remit today is to consider how Scottish fantasy is developing, in the context of this conference title 'The Shape of Texts to Come'. Maybe I was picked for the job because I have written texts that speculate about possible futures. Outside fiction, however, I must admit to having no idea what anyone, except myself, is planning to write next, and even in my own case I can't be categorical. This is why new fiction is exciting: writers do not and should not try to conform to academic speculation. I believe the only reliable approach to possible development is to look at what young writers are attempting in Scottish fantasy now. Instead of indulging in prediction, therefore, I shall look at an actual story from a real writer of the next generation and use it to test the characteristics of Scottish fantasy I've discussed: 1) the use of folk tradition in a contemporary setting; 2) a way of exploring the psyche, using dream images or archetypes; 3) a means of breaking down the boundaries that apparently separate the real from the supernatural or illusory, which 4) destabilises what we think of as the 'real' external world. This is not to say that all current Scottish fantasy necessarily fits all these criteria, but to assert that there is a continuum in the Scottish tradition that does do so. It may not be the most acclaimed form of Scottish writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but it is still a vital part of the tradition.

'The Wall' is a short story by Rebecca Leach, to be published shortly as the first-prize-winner in *The Pushkin Prizes in Scotland*, the anthology of the selected entries for a literary prize for second- and third-year pupils in Scottish secondary schools.<sup>4</sup> This is an extraordinary story

from a very young writer. She takes images that are ordinary objects in realistic terms but which also occur as highly charged motifs in folk-tale and literary tradition and makes them change shape and meaning with a skill rendered unobtrusive by a deceptively simple style. This is how the story begins:

Tom held his breath and looked over the edge of the wall. He let it go and watched as it climbed the air like a Chinese dragon. Down below on the grass and rocks, a weasel was eating the remains of a fieldmouse. Tom had seen it killed by a hawk that morning when the sun rose over the grey hills. It was discarded for a larger prey soon after it was caught.

Among the trees something was moving. A shadow without anything to block the sun. A dense darkness that could be seen even though there was no sunlight to block it up ... The darkness crept up to the wall but fluttered back when it got to within a few metres of it as if warded off by some invisible force.

The wall had been there forever. Since the glaciers shaped the land. Or maybe it was a glacier, caught in time and frozen in a ribbon, which gradually turned to stone and moss.

We have here some typical motifs of Scottish fantasy writing. First of all, we are in Scotland. These are Scottish hills, with grass and rocks, and the precise detail of a weasel eating a fieldmouse that had been previously killed by a hawk. Our narrator is a sharp observer with a precise knowledge of what she describes. But even as the landscape is revealed to us, it keeps turning into something else. The inexplicable is an integral part of the world we are shown. The fieldmouse, the natural victim of a natural cycle, foreshadows the helpless victim of the plot which is still to unfold. What happens to the girl who appears later isn't different in kind from what has already been happening, always, in the natural world.

So we're not looking away from the real world, we're looking very hard into it. And as we watch, every ordinary thing turns into something else, or, paradoxically, reveals more of its true nature. The simile in the second sentence sets the pattern. Tom's breath 'climbs the air like a Chinese dragon'. The wall, too, the central image which gives the story its title, becomes something else as soon as the narrator begins to describe it: 'maybe it *was* a glacier, caught in time and frozen in a ribbon, which gradually turned to stone and moss'. The narrator here

sees the wall in terms of the past history of the landscape. It represents the thing that has been here ‘forever’, which, in terms of folk memory, means back to the time of the glaciers. The glaciers are still there, their effects written on the landscape, buried in folk memory, and also a hidden part of the substance of the wall. The wall now is ‘caught in time and frozen in a ribbon’. ‘Frozen in a ribbon’ suggests a whole linear history, a narrative of the past preserved and encapsulated in the wall. But a ribbon is also a cheerful form of adornment, more fun than a piece of string, for example. Maybe there are connotations here that the wall transforms the stuff that it is made of. But it still belongs to the land. The ribbon ‘gradually turned to stone and moss’. As with the fieldmouse, the weasel, and the hawk, we are invited to see objects in terms of a natural cycle.

So what is this wall? Fantasy is not allegory. The wall changes as images in a dream change, and no fixed meaning can be assigned to it. But it is clearly a boundary—that’s what walls are for. It also has the power to transform itself into other things. Moreover, the patch of ‘dense darkness’, the ‘shadow without anything to block the sun’, can come out of the forest to within a few metres of the wall, but then it can’t pass, and it has to ‘flutter’ back. The wall, then, keeps something that comes out of the wild landscape away from what lies on the other side—presumably the human world from which Tom has come when we first find him looking over the edge of the wall into the other landscape. At this point there seems to be a very clear boundary between nature/culture, wild/tame, supernatural/real, and perhaps subconscious/conscious. We seem to be set up for an anti-syzygy in a thoroughly Caledonian setting.

But that changes. The focus shifts so that we are no longer looking over the wall with Tom, but at the wall itself. The wall is where the action happens, on the borderline between the two worlds. The two join together seamlessly into a terrifying incident which is as much about Tom’s fear, guilt, and self-justification as it is about an external supernatural force. Can Rebecca Leach have read *Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* yet?

Tom was deep in his thoughts. He was looking at Katie’s Hole. He had named that particular spot Katie’s Hole after an accident some time ago. A family came—from America, Tom thought but he wasn’t sure—on holiday to the Borders. Tom hadn’t liked them much.

We have shifted to the other side of the wall, to the external social world, without any break in the narrative, and in this context we have the first reference to the central incident, 'an accident some time ago'. Only gradually do we realise the specious nature of Tom's non-involvement. The narrator, echoing Tom's *post hoc* rationale, places the incident safely in a past that is over and distances it as 'an accident', a mistake that happened to somebody else. But the wall has already told us that time doesn't make things go away. The past is still there, contained and transmuted within the wall. And things are not distanced; they all connect, as the hawk, the fieldmouse, and the weasel are connected in the first paragraph.

As the incident is gradually revealed, the irony of Tom's efforts to distance himself and to be the rational observer become apparent. Like the Editor in *Memoirs and Confessions*, he places himself as the objective outsider, and the third-person narrator makes no comment, only allows what Tom would no doubt call 'the facts' to speak for themselves:

Tom had seen her when she had her fall. It was about noon on a day, the month before the snow came. Tom watched her climb up the wall ... He watched her as she reached the top and hoisted her fat, little body on to it. She grunted and snapped a few times as if blaming the wall for all the grazes she got on her bare legs ... She was now opening the little, pink bag she had brought up with her. She pulled out lots of stones from it and started chucking them off the edge. After she had disposed of thirteen—Tom had counted—she got bored and looked for other things to do with them. She found that she could stick them in the gaps of the stone of the wall. She smirked as she continued to do so.

Tom, as the hidden observer watching the stranger in his country, appears to position himself as the objective onlooker. But the narrative indicates something rather different. Tom belongs here. He is hidden further along the wall, camouflaged within the landscape. The American girl, with her 'fat, little body' and 'little, pink bag', is the obtrusive stranger. For her, but not for Tom, the wall is inimical; it's an effort to climb it, it grazes her bare legs. Tom, on the contrary, is at home with the wall, almost part of it. The irony is that while he positions himself as the observer from the rational world, he is actually seen to be aligned with the border country the wall represents. As far as the girl's fate is concerned, *he* is the shadow without substance, the dense darkness, that we saw at the beginning. If she is the human victim, he has become diabolical.

She had taken a large stone and was cramming it into the wall when the wall started shaking. The bit Tom was on wasn't shaking though; it was just where the girl was sitting. It was more rippling than shaking as if it were a snake waving its middle and trying to flick something off its back. Tom looked at the base of the wall where it was shaking. There was a hole there that hadn't been there before. A black hole that looked as if it would never end. Then Tom saw Katie fall.

The wall changes its nature again—it's been a glacier and a ribbon, now it's a snake. One is reminded of the three transformations in 'Tam Lin', but the roles here are reversed.<sup>5</sup> Tom is aligned with the faerie world, where ironically we see that he belongs, but he has no love for the human girl—'The child in the family wasn't particularly nice' is his opinion. He is the cold-hearted observer who does nothing, and that turns out to be far more lethal than seduction and the demands that follow. It's the wall, which contains all past tradition and separates one kind of reality from another, that shifts its shape. As a boundary, it is seen to be alive, moving, dangerous, and untrustworthy. But Tom has no desire to escape its spell. He's back at the same place, a year later, still watching the dense darkness on the other side. And the girl—no one invites her into the story. She intrudes, she thrusts stones into the crevices of the wall; she appears to have no notion where she is or what she is doing there, and as a result the wall swallows her up. Tom watches this with an indifference that belongs not to Enlightenment rationality but to the callousness traditionally attributed to the faerie world.

But Tom is human and suffers an aftermath of guilt and self-justification, as he has to continue to exist in a world that has no knowledge of his collusion:

No-one found out what happened to her. Tom never told anyone. The police and the people from the village had searched for months but they found nothing. Tom didn't tell them because he didn't want to. He felt as if it were none of his business. There was something stopping him but he didn't know what.

This opens up the possible reading that Tom himself invented the story of the wall as an absolving metaphor for a realistic and sordid crime. There are details that support this, for example when Tom looks down 'to where a solitary bright-pink bag sat discarded, the small stones lay all around it like a memorial for its owner.' Katie has gone, and there is

Tom, alone at the scene of the crime with the incriminating evidence. What did he do with the bright pink bag? Why did the police and the villagers never find it? It's like the basket left behind by Miss Julie Logan in Barrie's story of that name. Was there really a basket there? If so, what did the narrator do with it? Or was there no basket? So is he mad? Certainly, by the end of this story, if there is a rational explanation, it has to include the assumption that Tom has gone mad:

He sat there listening for ages, for the sound of a girl hitting the rock at the end of the hole, if there was an end.

Katie's disappearance down an endless hole in the earth could either be attributed to an image arising from Tom's disordered psyche or to the magic of the wall. Either way, it's an image with a wealth of connotation from traditional tales. Not only does it recall the many Scottish stories of abduction into the underground fairy world, but also it goes further back, to the universal myths of descent into the underworld. But Tom is no Orpheus, any more than he is Tam Lin. He disassociates himself and does nothing. It's the girl, who doesn't understand Tom's country, who is absorbed into the landscape, and in the end it is Tom who is left outside, wondering. In terms of the descent into the underworld, however, the sacrificial aspect of Katie's abduction is left in no doubt at the end of the story. The narrator resists any kind of reductive closure, but she brings her images full circle, indicating that Katie's fall was part of an inevitable, timeless, cyclical process. She has become part of the blood sacrifice that makes it possible for nature to go on. Katie takes on the role of fieldmouse. Tom did not kill her, as the hawk did the fieldmouse. It is the weasel who reaps the reward of that small sacrifice, so it seems that in some oblique and sinister fashion Tom too has had his reward:

The stones that the American girl had played with, he had built up into a cairn on the crack that remained in the rock after the hole had closed up. He watched as the weasel dragged the remains of the mouse on to the pile of stones with its teeth before running off. As the sun set on the hills making them no darker than they were before, Tom saw the blood from the mouse slowly and very slightly flow down the stones and wondered whether the snow would come again next month.

So Tom is party to the sacrifice. He erects a memorial to it in a manner used since history began in the landscape to which he belongs. The

mouse's blood is spilt on the memorial, and Tom watches. Tom is left wondering at the end about the continuance of the seasons. We can read him partly as a universal figure. His name suggests this—he is Tom, in the country which produced Tam Lin, Thomas the Rhymer, and where Tom is a likely candidate for the name of the Common Man. The suggestion is that he does what has always been done here, on the wall which is the frightening, shifting boundary between the daytime and night-time worlds. On the other hand, he is a specific character who struggles with his own conscience and fears in the context of a contemporary world, where American tourists come to stay, and Tom can despise them for wearing the wrong clothes. Little girls carry bright pink bags with pebbles in them, and Tom is an ordinary boy who thinks this is pretty weak. But if we allow the realistic interpretation to predominate, Tom is an even more sinister character. In a reading which insists on excluding the supernatural, he knows what really happened to Katie, and he isn't telling. Whether you take the fantasy as metaphor or as fact, what it says in this story is that the depth of the psyche is a fairly unsettling place.

I have taken 'The Wall' as exemplary, but it is not an isolated example. We may or may not hear of Rebecca Leach again. But this conference invites us to come to the very edge of the time we know and look beyond it. When I was asked to write this paper, I thought first of late-twentieth-century Scottish fantasy texts that I admire, which have been shaped by a tradition whose roots are arguably older than the idea of a Scottish nation. I considered discussing texts by Alasdair Gray, Iain Banks, Liz Lochhead, Sian Hayton, James Meek, or Christopher Whyte. I hope to be around for a long time to come to read innovative new works by these established writers. However, there are others whose first books I look forward to with almost equal anticipation—Matthew Fitt, for example, who has written 'the first science fiction novel all in Scots', *But and Ben a Go Go*, to be published this year by Luath Press; or Zoe Strachan, whose unnerving witch-like character Leonora exercises strange powers in contemporary Glasgow (Strachan's first book will be published in 2001); or Anne Donovan, whose short story 'The Ice Horse' (to be included in her first published collection next year) startlingly fulfils every one of the criteria I suggested.<sup>6</sup> Watch this space...

I took Rebecca Leach's story as one of the many coming texts which are exemplary of a strand of Scottish writing that may be muted at present while urban realism tends to remain the dominant genre, but which is definitely alive and well. Traditional material is still being used

to construct fantasies which are by no means retrospective or sentimental but are firmly set in the contemporary world. The fantastic elements are used to explore psychic states and reiterate, as this genre has always done, that the inexplicable and the elusive remains at the heart of human experience, and that, in justice to realism, it cannot be marginalised or left out. Leach's story is ambiguous about the significance of the supernatural, and the fluidity of its images, in a manner which shows her clearly to be heir to a Scottish fantasy tradition. She is not alone. While we have writers who are producing texts like this, the Scottish fantasy tradition will continue to shape the texts that are to come.

As a fantasy writer myself, I like to imagine a person, say a hundred years from now, reading a book, and what that experience will be like for them. I'd therefore like to conclude with a short piece of Scottish fantasy which addresses the possible nature of future texts, and what it will be like to read them. This poem arrived through my door on a postcard; I don't know if it's in book form yet. It's by Tessa Ransford, and it's about the form of future texts, whereas I have been discussing content, but it too addresses the question of inheriting a tradition. Moreover, it focuses on the experience of the future *reader*, who is a mysterious figure as yet unknown to us, who responds to the past tradition that we are making now. It also empowers us as present-day readers to make our mark on the texts that are being produced now and to pass them on by claiming them as our own. This is a topic that seems to me to provide a sufficiently open ending for this paper:

One day in the future  
a child may come across a book  
and say "Imagine being able to hold  
in your hand what you read, to carry it with you and wear it out  
with your life; to pass it on  
bearing your marks, your name,  
written in ink, your signature:  
your wave-length in letters."

## Notes

1 This is a version of a paper given at The Shape of Texts to Come: The Writing of a New Scotland, a conference given by the Association of Scottish Literary Studies, Strathclyde University, May 13–14, 2000.

2 See, for example, the comment by Edward Cowan and Douglas Smith in *The*

*Polar Twins*: ‘When Gregory Smith wrote his pioneering *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919) he distinguished “two moods” inherent in the Scottish character and psyche, coining the term “Caledonian anti-syzygy” (later taken up by Hugh MacDiarmid and thenceforward grossly overused) to denote what he saw as a fundamental Scottish dualism.’

3 See Margaret Elphinstone, ‘Contemporary Feminist Fantasy in the Scottish Literary Tradition’ in Gonda, Caroline (ed), *Tea and Leg-Irons: New Feminist Readings from Scotland* (London: Open Letters Press, 1992)

4 A copy of ‘The Wall’, by Rebecca Leach, immediately follows this essay.

5 Traditional ballad widely available in print, e.g., in Lyle, Emily (ed), *Scottish Ballads* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994), p.125.

6 Taken from a flyer picked up at the Book Fair in the Edinburgh Assembly Rooms on 12 May 2000.

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# *The Wall*

## *Rebecca Leach (age 14)*

Tom held his breath and looked over the edge of the wall. He let it go and watched as it climbed the air like a Chinese dragon. Down below on the grass and rocks a weasel was eating the remains of a fieldmouse. Tom had seen it killed by a hawk that morning when the sun rose over the grey hills. It was discarded for a larger prey soon after it was caught.

Among the trees something was moving. A shadow without anything to block the sun. A dense darkness that could be seen even though there was no sunlight to show it up. The light that came from the sun didn't penetrate into the forest. Even on a good day the sun didn't make the hills any less grey. The darkness crept up to the wall but fluttered back when it got within a few metres of it as if warded off by some invisible force.

The wall had been there forever. Since the glaciers shaped the land. Or maybe it was a glacier, caught in time and frozen in a ribbon, which gradually turned to stone and moss.

Tom was deep in his thoughts. He was looking at Katie's Hole. He had named that particular spot 'Katie's Hole' after an accident some time ago. A family came—from America Tom thought but he wasn't sure—on holiday to the Borders. Tom hadn't liked them much. They came with their flashing cameras and tanned brown faces and made a lot of fuss about not being able to find the loos.

The child in the family wasn't particularly nice. The first time Tom saw her she was whingeing to her parents about them getting her the wrong kind of sweets. Tom had seen her when she had her fall. It was about noon on a day a month before the snow came. Tom watched her climb up the wall. She had found some footholds in the side of the wall further down from where Tom sat. He watched her as she reached the top and hoisted her fat, little body onto it. She grunted and snapped a few times as if blaming the wall for all the grazes she got on her bare legs. Tom never understood it when tourists came with no warm clothing, expecting the weather to be as sunny as it showed in the holiday brochure. She was now opening the little, pink bag she had brought up with her. She pulled out lots of stones from it and started chucking them off the edge. After she had disposed of thirteen – Tom

had counted – she got bored and looked for other things to do with them. She found that she could stick them in the gaps in the stone of the wall. She smirked as she continued to do so.

She had taken a large stone and was cramming it into the wall when the wall started to shake. The bit Tom sat on wasn't shaking though, it was only where the girl was sitting. It was more rippling than shaking as if it were a snake waving its middle and trying to shake something off its back. Tom looked at the base of the wall where it was shaking. There was a hole there that hadn't been there before. A black hole that looked as if it would never end. Then Tom saw Katie fall. She was flicked off the wall as if she weighed nothing. He watched as she plunged clean through the hole. He walked along the wall—it had calmed down by then—to where a solitary, bright-pink bag sat discarded, small stones lying all around it like a memorial for its owner. He looked down at the hole. He sat there listening for ages for the sound of a girl hitting the rock at the end of the hole. If there was an end.

A year later Tom was sitting in the same place and looking down at where the hole once was. It had closed up soon after it had opened. He wondered if Katie was still falling. No-one found out what happened to her. Tom never told anyone. The police and the people from the village had searched for months but they found nothing. Tom didn't tell them because he didn't want to. He felt as if it were none of his business. There was something stopping him but he didn't know what.

The stones that the American girl had played with he had built into a cairn on the crack that remained in the rock after the hole had closed up. He watched as the weasel dragged the remains of the mouse onto the pile of stones before running off. As the sun set on the hills, making them no darker than they were before, Tom saw the blood from the mouse slowly, and very slightly, flow down the stones and wondered whether the snow would come again next month.

*The Pushkin Prizes in Scotland is a creative writing competition taking place in Secondary 1 and 2 Scottish schools specialising in the English language in Russia. Rebecca Leach won first prize in 2000. For more information, telephone 0131 229 0227 or email [j.a.smyth@virgin.net](mailto:j.a.smyth@virgin.net).*