

## Modern Scottish Fiction: Telling Stories in Order to Live

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Scottish fiction has been lauded in recent years for its formal and linguistic inventiveness, its diversity, and the sense it gives of an increasingly self-confident culture edging closer to a distinctive expression of national self-determination. This, though, is a relatively recent phenomenon: the result of only thirty years or so of experiment and development. For much of the second-half of the twentieth-century, in the years before the political and social changes brought about by the Thatcher governments' assault on the post-war settlement and the consequent destabilisation of the United Kingdom's constitutional arrangements, Scottish fiction, like Scottish culture more generally, was arguably much less ambitious, less focused, and less self-assured. Like a set of disconnected stories in search of a theme, Scottish fiction might be said, in the years following 1945, to have suffered a deep and disorientating crisis of confidence.

The Scottish Literary Renaissance movement that had gained prominence in the decade before the Second World War had brought with it an expansive sense of the possibilities open to a self-assured, assertive national literature. Although it had sometimes fallen far short of the political and aesthetic aspirations of its remarkable animateur, the poet Hugh MacDiarmid, the Renaissance had created the conditions for a literature confident in the lyrical and expressive power of Scots dialect and aware of its potential to grasp and bend the nation's sometimes intractable histories into shapes that asserted national distinctiveness and commonality of purpose. Novels such as Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Scots Quair* trilogy (*Sunset Song* 1932, *Cloud Howe* 1933, and *Grey Granite* 1934), Eric Linklater's *Magnus Merriman* (1934), George Blake's *The Shipbuilders* (1935), James Barke's *The Land of the Leal* (1939), and Neil Gunn's *The Silver Darlings* (1941) dwelt on issues of decline, particularly the decay of rural community and the debilitating effects of industrial growth followed by slump, but all were written out of a sense of the interconnectedness of the Scottish historical and cultural experience and were confident of their place in an emergent national culture. Each might be described as a 'state of the nation' novel, and although none are particularly optimistic about that state, all take for granted the place of fiction in analysing and beginning the work of fixing it. Like the writers of the pre-independence Irish Revival, many Scottish writers considered themselves to be, if not quite unacknowledged legislators, at least powerful, vocal representatives of a nation denied conventional forms of social and political self-expression by its prevailing constitutional situation.

This aspirational quality of what has been called 'national epic' that characterised much pre-war writing was largely absent in the fiction that followed the war.<sup>1</sup> The writers who dominated the period wrote rarely about Scotland directly, and when they did they seemed more preoccupied with fragmentation rather than integration, with lives lived at a distance from a

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Gifford, Sarah Dunnigan, and Alan MacGillivray (eds), *Scottish Literature in English and Scots* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) p. 836.

binding sense of national distinctiveness and purpose. One of the United Kingdom's most popular mid-century writers, for example, Alistair MacLean, chose to set all but one of his thrillers outside of his native Scotland, preferring to explore the dilemmas of national loyalty and homosocial relations in the wider British experiences of World War and Cold War. Muriel Spark similarly set only one novel in her native Scotland, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) - a disarmingly humorous and slyly devastating assault on Scottish Presbyterian respectability - but for the most part played out her elaborate fictional games against African, English, European, and American backgrounds. There could be said to be little that is characteristically Scottish in her work, influenced as it is by contemporary European movements such as the *nouveau roman*, were it not for the fact that she was frequently aware in her writing that the circumstances of her formation were everywhere implicit in the alienated conditions of her fiction. Spark called the Edinburgh in which she grew up, a 'place that I, a constitutional exile, am essentially exiled from.' She added, 'it was Edinburgh that bred within me the conditions of exile; and what have I been doing since then but moving from exile into exile?'<sup>2</sup> Growing up a racial Jew and a woman in a city that was the home of John Knox and the historic capital of a now stateless nation, Spark was primed in childhood to understand the effects of de-centredness and disconnection: a reassuring sense of familiarity co-existing with a uneasy feeling of not quite belonging that would give her fiction its characteristically uncanny charm, blending the familiar and homely with the unsettling and alien.

The alienated condition that Spark describes is one that was common also in the writing of those who chose to stay in Scotland and write about the country in their fiction. Much of the Scottish writing of the long post-war period is, as Liam McIlvanney has noted, dominated 'by the figure of the failed artist': characterised by a suspicion that Scotland is a nation actively hostile to the creative imagination and haunted by a sense that authentic culture happens elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> This is manifested most clearly in the number of works in the years following the war that set up the genre expectations of *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* only to frustrate them. Archie Hind's *The Dear Green Place* (1966) portrays an aspiring young writer crushed by his inability to reconcile the worlds of the east-end Glasgow slaughterhouse in which he works and the west-end literary salons that represent for him the tantalising outposts of global culture. Gordon Williams's *From Scenes Like These* (1968) signals its theme by taking its title from Robert Burns's 'The Cottar's Saturday Night': 'From scenes like these auld Scotia's grandeur springs / That makes her lov'd at home, rever'd abroad'. But the novel shows with a grim relish how inappropriate such ideas of grandeur, love, and reverence are to modern Scotland, illustrated by the brutalization of its young hero Dunky Logan. Logan is an impressionable adolescent whose early idealism, fostered among other things by his youthful reading of Robert Louis Stevenson and John Dos Passos, is crushed and turned to self-loathing by his exposure to an adult

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<sup>2</sup> Muriel Spark, 'What Images Return', in *Memoirs of a Modern Scotland*, ed. by Karl Miller (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 151.

<sup>3</sup> Liam McIlvanney, 'The Politics of Narrative in the Post-War Scottish Novel', in *On Modern British Fiction*, ed. by Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 182.

world characterised by its cruel carelessness and violent misogyny. His attempts at self-improvement are ridiculed by family members resentful of education and intellectual ambition, who ‘*wanted* you to be as thick and dim as they were’. ‘You started off trying to be different, trying not to turn out like all the others’, Logan muses at the novel’s end, but ‘you ended up worse than them. You ended up knowing you were a disgrace, full of all the things you hated in other people.’<sup>4</sup>

This sense of the failure of sensibility and education in the face of a relentless, alienating industrial culture is found in a range of works, from J. F. Hendry’s *Fernie Brae: A Scottish Childhood* (1947) to George Friel’s *Mr Alfred MA* (1972), in which sensitive, educated individuals – in the case of these novels, a university student and a teacher – are defeated by what seem to them the unbridgeable schisms of a Scottish psyche divided along lines of class, religion, gender, and language. Their protagonists aspire to swim in the currents of European culture but find themselves foundering on the rocks of homegrown cynicism and ignorance, bereft of aesthetic confidence and a supportive national culture. A character insists to David Macrae, the Stephen-Dedalus-like hero of Hendry’s *Fernie Brae*, that Scotland “‘must recover a sense of nationhood, [...] like Ireland’. David replies “‘I think we must first recover a sense of identity,’ before adding that, ‘until we know who we are, there’s little use in finding out what we are.’”<sup>5</sup>

Joan Didion famously suggested that ‘We tell ourselves stories in order to live’. The context in which she writes this, in *The White Album*, is of a broken sub-culture, of a moment of social optimism and bold experiment fragmenting, in the California of the late 1960s, into a frightening social and personal instability. This, Didion informs us through both form and content, is a culture that has lost a meaningful sense of its own plot: a culture she can only understand through ‘flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no “meaning” beyond their temporary arrangement’, certain of which ‘did not fit into any narrative I knew’.<sup>6</sup> Scotland, it hardly needs saying, is not California. But a similar sense of dislocation resulting from the failure of a minority culture can be seen in the Scottish writing of the long post-war period. The paradox of the works mentioned above, among many others, is that while each is, like Didion’s essay, an achieved, powerful work of literature in its own right, all posit the impossibility of a satisfactory Scottish narrative practice under prevailing conditions. The stories that many Scottish writers told themselves in the mid century were of failure, decline, and paralysis: of a people who had become separated from their history, had lost confidence in their language, had been denatured and class-riven by a now failing industrialization, and who stood islanded from the currents of global culture. This sense of dislocation, of the failure to be able to tell ourselves convincing stories in order to live, was reinforced by influential critical commentaries, such as those of

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon Williams, *From Scenes Like These* [1968] (London: Allison & Busby, 1980), 222 & 255.

<sup>5</sup> J. F. Hendry, *Fernie Brae: A Scottish Childhood* [1947] (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1987), 166.

<sup>6</sup> Joan Didion, *The White Album* [1979] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 11 & 13

Cairns Craig which have suggested that Scotland had become, by its atypical constitutional nature and its troubled cultural history, effectively 'unrelatable, un-narratable'.<sup>7</sup> As Craig's work has amply demonstrated, the problem facing many contemporary and near-contemporary Scottish writers is one of narration, and specifically of telling ourselves new stories to live by and thus assisting in the process of narrating a more self-confident nation into being. Of course, not all fiction produced and consumed in Scotland sees itself as 'national' in this way and so resists being read through this matrix – some notable Scottish fiction writers such as Spark, Allan Massie, Candia McWilliam, William Boyd, Ali Smith, and James Meek have either left Scottish issues at the margins of their work, to be traced by implication, or have ignored them entirely.

But what is often seen as a new wave of Scottish fiction writing, initiated by and developing from Alasdair Gray and James Kelman in the early 1980s, appears to have taken on the challenge identified by Craig and to be experimenting with new ways of narrating Scotland that are not as reductive and defeatist as the work of their predecessors and which chime more convincingly with the changes in class and gender relations, the attitudes towards traditional culture and the place of the Scots language, and the more self-confident Scottish political and cultural nationalism that has emerged since the failed devolution referendum of 1979 and which has culminated in the referendum on Scottish independence in 2014.

In the first instance, this aspiration was voiced by Gray in the motto 'work as if you live in the early days of a better nation', adapted from the Canadian writer Dennis Lee and used by Gray in several works, including the frontispiece to his *Unlikely Stories, Mostly* (1983). His landmark novel, *Lanark: a Life in Four Books* (1982) can be seen as the first serious attempt to imagine and narrate this better nation into being. In one way *Lanark* is a conventional anti-*Künstlerroman* in the distinctive Scottish style associated with Hendry, Hind, and Friel, dealing, in two of its books, with the (plainly partially-autobiographical) struggle and ultimate failure of a would-be artist, Duncan Thaw. Thaw shares the difficulties common to the heroes of these other works in attempting to plot a route to adulthood and aesthetic fulfillment through the flux and disintegrative forces generated by a polarised mid-century Scotland. He identifies, in addition, a particular impediment to artistic practice in what he sees as the cultural and topographical illegibility of the city, Glasgow, and the nation, Scotland, in which he grows up. Hendry had described 'the inarticulate map of the fighting city' that was Glasgow, and Gray's Thaw amplifies this view, in positing an unarticulated city and nation awaiting an art that will allow its inhabitants to see themselves in their environment properly and whole, free of the cultural cringe that makes them believe that life there is not worthy of a confident artistic representation.<sup>8</sup>

'Glasgow is a magnificent city,' said McAlpin. 'Why do we hardly ever notice that?' 'Because nobody imagines living here,' said Thaw. [. . .] 'think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Nobody visiting them for

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<sup>7</sup> Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Nation and Narration* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 21.

<sup>8</sup> Fernie Bray, 190.

the first time is a stranger because he's already visited them in paintings, novels, history books and films. But if a city hasn't been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively. What is Glasgow to most of us? A house, the place we work, a football park or golf course, some pubs and connecting streets. That's all. No, I'm wrong, there's also the cinema and library. And when our imagination needs exercise we use these to visit London, Paris, Rome under the Caesars, the American West at the turn of the century, anywhere but here and now. Imaginatively Glasgow exists as a music-hall song and a few bad novels. That's all we've given to the world outside. It's all we've given to ourselves.<sup>9</sup>

*Lanark* addresses and attempts to remedy this problem only indirectly. The two books that constitute the Thaw narrative, are written for the most part in the manner of a realist novel and end in the frustration of Thaw's artistic aims and his suicide. It is in the other two books and in the structure of the novel (in which Book 3 comes before Books 1, 2, and 4 and the epilogue occurs four chapters before the end) that Gray makes the most serious attempt to rework the Scottish environment imaginatively, creating a phantasmagorical parallel world in which Glasgow is transformed into Unthank, and Thaw into an analogous individual, the eponymous Lanark. Gray constructs an imaginative world reminiscent of Kafka in its atmosphere of brooding, irrational threat and of Borges or Calvino in its senses of fictional philosophical play and fabulation, exploiting metafictional and typographical tricks, self-drawn illustrations, and inventive elaborations such as an index of the work's real and imaginary plagiarisms. In theme the novel is apocalyptic, and offers little sense of social or political amelioration but in form it is an eye-opening introduction to the rich possibilities of rehabilitating and re-inhabiting a familiar place by means of the imagination.

Gray may have been audacious in his hope of making life follow art, or at least allow itself be transformed by his art, but it is some measure of the success of his ideas in the political realm that his trademark phrase, 'work as if you live in the early days of a better nation' was one of the quotations chosen to be inscribed into the Canongate Wall of the new Scottish parliament building, opened in 2004. The critical and popular success of *Lanark* and of Gray's subsequent novels and short stories might be said to have put Scotland back on the literary map, drawing wider British and global attention to a newly self-confident, experimental Scottish fiction, and it has also promoted a particular self-consciousness about narrative style and fabulation that has come to characterise much of the Scottish fiction of the late years of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Scottish fiction has long had a particular concern with fabulation especially in relation to the stability of texts and the reliability of narratives and their authors. These concerns are fundamental to classics of nineteenth-century Scottish fiction such as James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) both of which spin out their

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<sup>9</sup> Alasdair Gray, *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* [1981] (London: Granada, 1982), 243.

outlandish tales from multiple viewpoints and narrative fragments. This concern can also be found in works such as J. M. Barrie's *Sentimental Tommy* (1896) and Neil Munro's *Gilian the Dreamer* (1899) which, in their portrayals of untrustworthy young writers in the making, encourage in readers a scepticism about those who would make a career of fiction. Muriel Spark for all her own experimental, fabulating tendencies, is noticeably wary of writer figures in her novels, tending to show them as deserving of our deepest suspicions.<sup>10</sup>

But since Gray's *Lanark*, this sense of an ambivalent fascination, a mistrustful wonder with stories and those who feel compelled to tell them, has been expounded and examined more confidently by Scottish fiction writers, and, importantly, with much less of an assumption than was the case with their predecessors that the narratives they create are inimical to the Scottish contexts out of which they emerge. Gray himself extends this confident, if still ambivalent, fascination in the novels that followed *Lanark*. His 1982 *Janine* (1984) is a work that demonstrates the power of story-telling in the vitality of its narrative and typographic inventions but which also interrogates, through the obvious character flaws of its narrator, Jock McLeish, the dubious compulsions that can underlie fabulation: McLeish's elaborate, richly detailed, and frequently pornographic fantasies revealing a mind on the way to complete breakdown. Gray explores similar ambiguities in *Poor Things* (1992), this time showing the ways in which a skilled use of narrative can both enthrall and betray characters and readers: the novel's heroine, the indeterminate Bella Baxter / Dr Victoria McCandless, emerging in one account as a beguiling child-woman constructed physiologically by a Frankenstein-like surgeon and textually from fragmented gothic and romantic tropes by her husband, and in another as a confident self-authored feminist and social reformer.

Gray's depiction of Bella, in one of his illustrations, as 'Bella Caledonia' reinforces the impression given throughout the novel (and made frequently in Gray's other works) that the reader is being invited to draw political parallels, and in particular to read the work as a form of national allegory.<sup>11</sup> Viewed in this way, his experiments in narrative form can be seen as both a questioning of the conventional narratives that have shaped Scotland, and an attempt to create more compelling and complex stories according to which it can learn to live: just as Bella Baxter asserts a right to escape the narrative domination of the patriarchal influences that surround her and author her own counter-story, so too, perhaps can Scotland free itself imaginatively from the forces that have objectified it in a simplifying, regressive Caledonianism.

One writer who has followed Gray's bold formal experimentation and applied it more or less directly to the politics of contemporary Scotland is Iain Banks. He is perhaps best known outside of Scotland for his science fiction, written under the name Iain M. Banks, and in particular for the Culture Series,

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<sup>10</sup> See David Goldie, 'Muriel Spark and the Problems of Biography', in Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley (eds), *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 5-15.

<sup>11</sup> Alasdair Gray, *Poor Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), 45. See also Kirsten Stirling, *Bella Caledonia: Woman, Nation, Text* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008) 88-96.

from *Consider Phlebas* (1987) to *The Hydrogen Sonata* (2012). In these books and stories Banks constructs a benevolent extra-terrestrial society, 'The Culture', which might be thought of as an extension into imaginative hyperspace of Gray's communitarian political idealism. The dilemmas of the Culture do not hinge around nationalism as such, as it is a notably heterogeneous society encompassing a range of artificial and natural species and a diversity of gender possibilities, but Banks can be said to follow Gray in the ambition of his project, reveling in the powerful ability of the literary mind to spin new worlds out of the stories it tells. Banks, like Gray, is less interested in the technology of future worlds typical of 'hard science fiction', than in their attendant ethical and political dilemmas and the opportunities they offer for liberal social reinvention and innovative wordplay (particularly in the ironic naming of state functions and apparatus). His more ostensibly reality-based novels from *The Wasp Factory* (1984) on, frequently employ bold thematic and formal experiments: for example, in juxtaposing conflicting narrative styles in *Walking on Glass* (1985), overturning genre conventions with the hyperbolic violence of *Canal Dreams* (1989), and reworking the distinctive Scottish trope of the divided, antithetical self in *Complicity* (1993). His perhaps most accomplished novel, *The Bridge* (1986), draws self-consciously on Gray's *Lanark* and focuses on an iconic Scottish structure, the Forth Rail Bridge, which features in the background of Gray's Bella Caledonia illustration for *Poor Things*. *The Bridge* brings together elements often seen in Scottish fiction, particularly the representation of the divided self – in this case, the protagonist Alexander Lennox, comatose following a car crash, and his alter ego, John Orr, who finds himself negotiating a phantasmagorical world modeled on the Forth Bridge, with a further narrating presence in the id-like Barbarian whose violent narration is, significantly, rendered phonetically in a broad Scots. The novel exploits a rich source of allusions and forking narrative paths but, like Gray's 1982 *Janine*, invites the reader to interrogate the compulsion to fabulate at the same time as she enjoys its effects: we are never wholly sure whether *The Bridge's* embedded stories are a pleasurable exhibition of Lennox's mental complexity, a way of exercising his mind and telling stories in order to stop dying, or evasive strategies to stop him confronting, and waking up to, the pain of his relationship with the ambivalent Andrea Cramond and his hedonistic complicity with the Thatcherite economic revolution.

Similar questions are posed by Irvine Welsh's *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1995) in which the narrative is split between the recollections of the comatose protagonist, Roy Strang, largely recounted in dialect Scots, and his fantasies of African adventure and exploration, told in Standard English. But in this book, which is marked by even more adventurous typographical experimentation than that found in Gray or Banks, it becomes increasingly clear that Strang's fabrications are a desperate attempt to obscure and escape a disturbing history of sexual abuse in which he has been first victim and then perpetrator – an abuse that has led to a failed suicide attempt and which will end in his murder at the hands of the woman he raped. Welsh's writing is less buoyantly nationalistic than Gray or Banks (a much-quoted rant in *Trainspotting* has his central character, Mark Renton, talk of Scotland as 'a country of failures', and Scots as 'the most wretched servile, miserable, pathetic trash that was ever shat intae creation') but it shares with them an

ambivalent fascination for spinning stories and for almost compulsive literary experiment, as if Scottish conditions demand a bolder, more radical and localised set of literary conventions than the inherited ones which posed so many problems for Hind, and Hendry, and Friel.<sup>12</sup>

For writers like Welsh, and others, such as Jeff Torrington whose *Swing Hammer Swing!* (1992) gloriously recreates the surreal wit and verbal inventiveness of Glasgow's Gorbals in the 1960s, or Des Dillon, who in *Me and ma Gal* (1995), captures the oddnesses and consolations of childhood friendship in the wastelands of industrial Lanarkshire the use of narrative fragmentation, interior monologue, and typographic experiment have a socio-political purpose in creating a fictional form adequate to a complex representation of Scottish working-class life. For others, formal experiment has allowed a broader palette from which to work, an opportunity to expand Scottish fiction's range far beyond the masculinist 'Clydesideism' that had tended to dominate Scottish writing and cinema in the 1960s and 70s.

Ali Smith's *Hotel World* (2001), *The Accidental* (2005), and *There But For The* (2011) experiment with multiple perspectives, typography, word games, and puns partly to challenge their bourgeois milieu and partly to illustrate the possibility of building unconventional networks of connection: embodying an intriguing paradox in the way they create a powerful sense of human sympathy out of fragmented, incompletely-articulated experiences. Janice Galloway, similarly, experiments with fragmented narratives and the disposition of words on the page, as well as time and perspective shifting, in order to explore the anomie of travel and the frustrations and compensations of female homosociality in *Foreign Parts* (1994) and, in *The Trick is to Keep Breathing* (1989), to construct a disjointed and disturbing, but ultimately affirmative depiction of bereavement, breakdown, and survival.

Similar experiments can be seen in recent unorthodox approaches to genre fiction, such as Frank Kuppner's idiosyncratic blend of crime fiction and personal reminiscence in *A Very Quiet Street* (1989) and *Something Very Like Murder* (1994) or Ken MacLeod's revisiting the issues of Covenanting and Scottish religious sectarianism in a science-fiction crime context in *The Night Sessions* (2008). Andrew Crumey is one of the most innovative and engaging Scottish writers to emerge out of this context in the last twenty years. His speculative fiction has a strong European and global dimension, drawing on the influence of Borges, Calvino, and Milorad Pavić in its intricate, nested narratives, non-linearity, and ludic encyclopaedism – evident, for example, in *Pfitz* (1995) and *D'Alembert's Principle* (1996) – and writers such as David Foster Wallace and Richard Powers in its inventive intertwining of science with literary and musical culture – in novels such as *Music in a Foreign Language* (1994) and *The Secret Knowledge* (2013). And there is often a Scottish dimension to this: *Mobius Dick* (2004) applies the ideas of entanglement and the many-worlds interpretation of quantum physics to create an allohistorical Scotland, conquered by the Nazis in World War Two, later subject to socialist revolution, and now home to the plans of a sinister corporation to develop a worlds-creating and potentially world-ending quantum computer. Crumey continues this intriguing reworking of the long-standing Scottish preoccupation with themes of division and the divided self in

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<sup>12</sup> Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993), 94.



*Sputnik Caledonia* (2008), a novel reminiscent of Gray's *Lanark* in the way it doubles its central character, Robbie Coyle, a Scottish boy fixated on space exploration, with Robert Coyle, trainee cosmonaut in a parallel British People's Republic, contrasting homegrown *Bildungsroman* with dystopian counterfactual history.

Crumey's concern with historical reinvention strikes a chord with much near contemporary Scottish writing – especially resonant because of Scotland's claim, through Sir Walter Scott, to be the home and experimental ground of modern historical fiction and because much of the rhetoric of modern Scottish nationalism concerns itself with the need to reclaim a distinctive Scottish history from Unionist hegemony. *Sputnik Caledonia* is allohistory but also family history, Robbie's aspirations being cultivated by his father's familial socialism, and there are many other recent Scottish novels which invite us to interpret a family, with its stifling hidden secrets and unfulfilled hopes, as a metaphor for modern Scotland – its troubled past a paralysing inhibition on present action. Such issues are implicit in Banks's *The Crow Road* (1992) and *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* (2007), and form a central part of Andrew O'Hagan's subtle exploration of the flawed patriarchal ideas underlying Scottish mid-century socialism and town planning in *Our Fathers* (1999). The idea of a flawed patrimony and its consequent damage runs all the way through Allan Massie's novels of post-war Europe, *A Question of Loyalties* (1989), *The Sins of the Father* (1991), and *Shadows of Empire* (1997) and can be found, too, in the literature of the Scottish diaspora – most notably in Alistair MacLeod's moving account, in *No Great Mischiefs* (1999), of a damaged and damaging national and familial Scottish history in contemporary Canada. It is found, too, in one of the most innovative and formally interesting recent novels of Scottish family history, Kirsty Gunn's *The Big Music* (2012). Gunn's novel follows in the recent Scottish tradition exemplified by Gray, Banks, Galloway, and Crumey, of fragmented multi-layered, multi-perspective narrative, and is constituted as an 'archive' consisting of sometimes incomplete journal entries, manuscripts, and stories relating to the family of John Callum MacKay Sutherland, one of a line of great pipers of the Grey House in a remote strath in Sutherland. Its particular innovation is to structure the story in terms not of narrative, but in the manner of the piobaireachd, 'the classical compositional form of the Highland bagpipe' that makes the Ceol Mor or Big Music which gives the book its name.<sup>13</sup> The book follows four 'movements', from the Urlar, or opening theme through development and variation, to the Cruinluath, or Crown, and its pendent Cruinluath A Mach, which recapitulates the opening theme. In this case, the book ending with a repetition of its opening paragraph: the framing of the eighty-three-year old piper, John Callum, against a landscape benignly indifferent to him, to his family, and to his music, with its repetitive refrain '*I don't mind, I don't mind, I don't mind*': a refrain that plays both on nature's carelessness and – in a meaning derived from a particular use of the word 'mind' in Scots – its absence of memory for all those who have inhabited and left their mark on it.

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<sup>13</sup> Kirsty Gunn, *The Big Music [Selected Papers]* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), xi.

In these novels the concern with history is both intimate and immediate, played out as it is in a domestic context, but it is also implicitly national and imperative, expressed as an urgent need to confront and comprehend our shared past in order to place it in an enabling perspective. The compulsions they manifest are epitomised in the rhetorical question advanced by a character in Massie's *Shadows of Empire*: 'how can we commit ourselves to the future if we cannot tell and confront the truth about our past?'<sup>14</sup> This question underlies much of the work of James Robertson, too, in a series of philosophically-probing, formally-sophisticated novels that, in *The Fanatic* (2000) and *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (2006), explore the contemporary resonances of Scotland's troubled religious history, and in *And the Land Lay Still* (2010) and *The Professor of Truth* (2013), deal with the impacts of a more recent, near contemporary history – *And the Land Lay Still*, in particular collecting (its central character a photographer) the fragmentary snapshots of an occluded popular history of the last fifty years into a forensic display of Scottish identities and issues that matches in its scope and complexity the kind of national epic to which the writers of the Scottish Renaissance aspired. The aims of the kind of revaluative historical fiction Robertson practises are perhaps most clearly signaled in the epigraph from Ben Okri, that opens his *Joseph Knight* (2003):

Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings.<sup>15</sup>

The awkward, unacknowledged truth that Robertson confronts in *Joseph Knight* is the Scottish engagement with, and enrichment from, slavery at the time of the nation's greatest cultural and intellectual flowering, the Scottish Enlightenment. To emphasise the ways in which slavery has been written out of the Scottish memory, Robertson constructs his narrative - in a modernist manner reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* - out of fragments arranged around an absent centre. Joseph Knight, an actual historical slave who successfully won his freedom through an action in the Scottish courts in 1778, is for most of Robertson's narrative, represented only indirectly through his traces: in the memories and accounts of those who knew him during his slavery and his court case; in the fractured testimonies of those who came across him after his moment in the limelight; and, most symbolically, as a ghostly trace, imperfectly brushed out of the family portrait that hangs in the library of his former owner, John Wedderburn. For most of the novel Knight is an object, a source of interest only to those curious about his court case and afterlife as a free man, and in particular to an investigation agent Archibald Jamieson, hired by Wedderburn, through whom much of the novel is focalised. Knight only fully becomes a subject, discovered to us living and breathing, so to speak, when he is finally tracked down by Jamieson in the book's closing chapter. Here, for the first time, Knight is represented directly to the reader and his voice is heard in direct speech. He asks Jamieson 'And

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<sup>14</sup> Allan Massie, *Shadows of Empire* [1997] (London: Vintage, 1998), 302-3.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Okri, *Birds of Heaven* (London: Phoenix, 1996), 21.

whit is it ye want?', to which Jamieson replies, 'Naething, I want naething frae ye. I jist wanted tae see ye – and tae hear ye.'<sup>16</sup>

Jamieson might be said speaking on behalf of himself and the reader here, satisfying our mutual curiosity about Knight's mysterious disappearance but also allowing us the opportunity to redress a historical wrong - creating a narrative space in which a voice, long silenced and obscured, can now be heard directly. And the novel makes the most of this opportunity, giving us access for the first time directly to Knight's own views and opinions on the events focused on him that have become familiar to us through the accounts of others throughout the novel.

The other element worth remarking on, and something that might surprise the unprepared reader, is the fact that Knight's voice is, like Jameson's, a distinctively Scots one, employing a broad and conventionally unliterary vernacular. The novel is reminding us here not only of a historical fact that much of the discourse of the great Scottish Enlightenment was conducted in Scots (a reminder made forcefully throughout the book), but also that Scots is a wholly proper language for serious thought and for serious contemporary fiction. In other circumstances such an observation might seem unremarkable, but it is really only since the emergence of the work of James Kelman in the 1980s, that the Scottish vernacular voice, and particularly the Scottish working-class voice, has been fully recognised and valorised as a contemporary literary form.

The issue of voice, and particularly that of the gulf separating the Standard English expected in educational and literary contexts from everyday spoken Scots, was one that both exercised and deterred many mid-20<sup>th</sup> century writers. On the one hand were writers who expressed, or had their characters expressing, a mistrust of Scots as a language capable of communicating adequately a full range of feeling and thought. Mat Craig, the failed-writer protagonist of Hind's *The Dear Green Place*, puts this particularly forcefully, when he describes Scots, in a moment of frustration, as a

self-protective, fobbing off language which was not made to range, or explore, or express: a language cast for sneers and abuse and aggression; a language cast out of a certain set of feelings – from poverties, dust, drunkenness, tenements, endurance, hard physical labour; a reductive, cowardly, timid, sniveling language cast out of jeers and violence and diffidence.<sup>17</sup>

For others, equally anxious about language issues, the problem lay rather in the sense that there was some crucial loss of affective power and cultural nuance in having, as literary and educational culture demanded, to translate from Scots vernacular into Standard English. At a basic level, this is sometimes expressed as the repression of a natural language by one that is contextually inappropriate and therefore inauthentic. A classic example is found in Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song*, in which Chris Guthrie's education

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<sup>16</sup> James Robertson, *Joseph Knight* [2003] (London: Fourth Estate, 2004), 361.

<sup>17</sup> Archie Hind, *The Dear Green Place* [1966] (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2001), 244-5.

causes her to think of herself as two distinct beings, the 'English Chris' constructed by school and polite expectation and the natural, Scots-speaking 'Scottish Chris' of the fields and its folk – enforcing a type of self-division that has often been argued to be one of the abiding characteristics of Scottish fictional identity.<sup>18</sup> It is a case that Williams's Dunky Logan advances with adolescent simplicity and gusto:

What sounds better – 'gie your face a dicht wi' a clootie' or 'give your face a wipe with a cloth'? One was Scottish and natural and the other was a lot of toffee-nosed English shite.<sup>19</sup>

Williams's way of putting this comes near, perhaps, to James Kelman's approach to language, both in its preference for the apparent authenticity of vernacular Scots and for the pleasure it takes in challenging literary politesse with self-consciously 'bad' language. Kelman has been both celebrated and ridiculed for his extensive use of aggressive profanities, and has certainly brought significant attention to what constitutes inappropriate language in the Scottish novel since his controversial winning of the Man Booker Prize in 1994 for *How Late it Was, How Late*. Kelman's considerable achievement in a range of novels and short stories, among them *Not not while the Giro* (1983), *The Busconductor Hines* (1984), *A Chancer* (1985), *Greyhound for Breakfast* (1987), and *A Disaffection* (1989), has been to demonstrate the power of demotic Scots as a literary language – not just as a mechanism for direct speech, in the way it had tended to function previously, but as an appropriate language for narration and reflection. Kelman has described how in his early experiences of reading, people from his background,

were confined to the margins, kept in their place, stuck in the dialogue. You only ever saw them or heard them. You never got into their mind. You did find them in the narrative but from the outside, never from the inside, always they were 'the other'.<sup>20</sup>

His way of addressing this exclusion in his own fiction has been to collapse the hierarchical distinctions between an objectifying Standard English narration and the subjectivities of Scots-dialect direct speech, and employ instead a free indirect style in a dialect Scots orthography, a style that eschews the distinctions created by quotation marks and moves freely between narrator and character. Using this mode he has been able to explore a diversity of characters, from the feckless gambler Tammias in *A Chancer*, the alienated teacher Patrick Doyle in *A Disaffection*, to the alcoholic ex-convict Sammy Samuels in *How Late it Was, How Late*, from their own perspective and in a way that defers authorial judgment on them.

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<sup>18</sup> The classic exposition is in G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1919), with its description of this divided nature as the 'Caledonian Antisysygy'.

<sup>19</sup> *From Scenes Like These*, 23.

<sup>20</sup> James Kelman 'Elitism and English Literature, Speaking as a Writer', in *And the Judges Said . . .* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2002), 63.

A large number of the writers discussed in this chapter have benefitted from the example of Kelman's experimental freedom with dialect, among them Banks, Torrington, Welsh, and Roberson, as have many more significant and popular contemporary Scottish writers, such as Alan Warner and Christopher Brookmyre. Though these experiments in dialect, especially the urban dialects of Glasgow and Edinburgh, have sometimes encouraged the return of an aggressive, unempathetic masculinism, they have also broadened the vocal range of Scottish fiction, augmenting the other thematic and formal experiments of recent years discussed here - the historical revision, the challenges to patriarchal assumptions, and above all the bold approaches to fabulation and multi-layered narrative. If writers following Gray have opened up the imaginative possibilities for the telling of new stories for an emerging nation to live by, those who have followed Kelman have made it possible to tell the stories of that nation confidently in something like its own language.

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