Journal of
Irish and Scottish Studies

Articles

After Union: Literature, Theory and Four Nations Historiography

Author: Cairns Craig

1 4 9 5

ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

After Union: Literature, Theory and Four Nations Historiography

Cairns Craig

I

Colin Kidd claims, in his introduction to *Literature & Union: Scottish Texts, British Contexts* (2018),[1] that his aim is to 'is to effect a rapprochement between a new British-orientated Scottish historiography and an essentialist-nationalist tradition of Scottish literary criticism' (*L&U*, 13). It is a 'rapprochement' in which, however, only one party has to give ground, since Scottish history is cordially lauded for its ability to engage sympathetically with the past –

> Historians try to attune themselves to the alien otherness of the past, and aim to recover the values of our ancestors on their own terms. To assume that Scots of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries thought about the Union or nationhood like Scots of the late twentieth or early twenty-first centuries is to be imprisoned in the mental categories of the latter. (*L&U,* 16)

– while Scottish literary critics, on the other hand, are accused not only of being 'imprisoned' in the categories of a present which they impose on the past but in a set of present categories that are themselves the leftovers of an earlier phase of cultural 'navel gazing' (*L&U*, 18). That earlier phase is dated to the generation of nationalist *littérateurs* led by Hugh MacDiarmid to which Kidd believes contemporary Scottish literary culture to be umbilically tied:

> Since the inter-war era, generations of Scottish literary intellectuals have, under the inspiration of the poet and critic Christopher Murray Grieve (1892–1978), better known by his pen name Hugh MacDiarmid, rejoiced in essentialism, a rigidly binary set of values and a zero-sum approach to questions of union, Anglicization, assimilation, cultural integrity, and Anglo-Scottish hybridity. (*L&U*, 3)

---

[1] Gerard Caruthers and Colin Kidd (eds), *Literature and Union: Scottish Texts, British Contexts* (Oxford, 2018), hereafter cited in the text as *L&U*.

The openness of Scottish historians to multiple narratives within the frame of the British Isles and to the consequent awareness of interacting and, indeed, interbreeding cultures, is to be contrasted with the closed and myopic nature of the world of Scottish literary intellectuals. MacDiarmid is not only 'the principal authority in Scottish criticism' but one whose 'influence also persists in the political sphere' (*L&U*, 4). As a consequence, the analyses of contemporary Scottish literary critics continue to replicate MacDiarmid's 'literary essentialism', which assumes that there 'is a direct one-to-one correspondence between a nation and its literature, each understood as a singular entity' (*L&U*, 3).

Kidd may have found support for such views in the writings of some recent Scottish literary critics who have attacked what they see as the 'essentialism' of their predecessors. It is argued that 'essentialism' shackles Scottish literary studies by applying to it a 'national paradigm', or situating it in a purely national context, in which (as Gavin Miller and Eleanor Bell put it) a work is read in terms of its 'Scottishness, rather than in terms of its literary and aesthetic qualities'.[2] But challenges to 'essentialism' have been fundamental to Scottish literary studies since long before any of the critics of recent times identified it as a problem. Indeed, 'essentialism' was precisely the flaw attributed to early accounts of the Scottish literary tradition, such as John Speirs's *The Scots Literary Tradition: An Essay in Criticism* (1940) or Kurt Wittig's *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (1958),[3] against which almost all later critics of Scottish literature rebelled. If essentialism has been the presiding problem of Scottish literary studies, it is a problem that almost every literary critic in Scotland in the second half of the twentieth century has sought to unmask and oppose. Of course, they may have failed, both individually and collectively, but no one can possibly imagine that 'essentialism' is the preferred view of most modern Scottish literary critics. Resistance to 'essentialism' has been the opening move of almost all literary criticism in Scotland since the 1960s.

Indeed, Kidd's co-editor, Gerard Carruthers was one of the authors of

---

[2] Gavin Miller and Eleanor Bell, 'Introduction', *Scotland in Theory* (Amsterdam, 2004), 11.

[3] See, for instance, Edwin Morgan's review of Wittig in *The Scottish Historical Review*, Vol. 8, No. 126 (Oct. 1959), 159: 'The search for such intangibles as national literary characteristics is always very tempting, especially as regards a country that feels itself insecure or unfulfilled, but however carefully done it results in a slight measure of falsification, since some of the evidence is rejected, some of it is over-emphasised, and things tend to be looked at for the sake of some selected abstract qualities rather than in their own individuality'.

the introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Beyond Scotland: New Contexts for Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature*, which suggested that Scottish Literature 'as a discrete area for academic study' could be traced to G. Gregory Smith's *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* of 1919, but that Smith's work deformed the discipline he was founding by its 'essentialist' effort to present Scottish literature as determined by its own internal contradictions rather than by its external relations. Smith characterised Scottish literature as an unpredictable zig-zagging between cumulative realism – 'It is the Dutch style – interiors, country folk and town "bodies", farmyard and alehouse; everywhere a direct and convincing familiarity'[4] – and an entirely antithetical 'mood' which he described as 'the airier pleasures to be found in the confusion of the senses, in the fun of things thrown topsy-turvy, in the horns of elfland and the voices of the mountains'.[5] This focus on Scottish literature's 'internal oppositions' has, according to the editors of *Beyond Scotland*, occluded the extent to which these are issues not of Scottish provenance but offshoots of British developments – in particular, Matthew Arnold's efforts to 'carve out an "English" literary and racial identity from "Celtic" and "Roman" elements'.[6] What this British context of key elements in the debate about the nature of Scottish literature reveals is, according to Carruthers, that the notion of Scottish literature, as inherited from Smith and MacDiarmid, has been shaped by a series of false oppositions – 'indigenous versus imported, nationalism versus internationalism, essentialism versus cosmopolitanism'[7] – which have profoundly warped our understanding of Scottish literature. The 'real' nature of Scottish literature will only come into view when it is placed in a different context:

> Throughout Scotland's long experience of the vagaries of European and global religious contention, war, trade, emigration and immigration, Scots themselves have shown a greater gift for interdependence than independence – a value that eludes and obviates the kinds of false opposition created out of a yearning for wholeness that we located at the heart of Scotland's critical self-consciousness. Interdependence is not the opposite of independence, but in fact reveals the folly of recourse to the latter term in the cultural domain. Independence is little

---

[4] G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (London, 1919), 6.

[5] Ibid., 19.

[6] Gerard Caruthers, David Goldie, and Alastair Renfrew, *Beyond Scotland: New Contexts for Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature* (Amsterdam, 2004), 12.

[7] Ibid., 13.

more than an illusion or an aspiration that has been projected onto the cultural sphere through its persistent lack in the political sphere.[8]

Kidd and Caruthers' 'British contexts' for 'Scottish texts' is intended to fulfil this reorientation of Scottish literary studies in terms of 'interdepedence' rather than 'independence'.

Being no supporter of what I dubbed, in the 1980s, as 'MacDiarmidism' – the assumption that MacDiarmid had somehow defined, once and for all, how we should understand Scottish culture – I am, nonetheless, unconvinced by this argument. It only works by ignoring the fact that MacDiarmid was not only a Scottish nationalist – as Kidd notes, one of the founders, in 1927, of the National Party of Scotland – but an internationally-oriented Marxist. As a Marxist, MacDiarmid set Scotland in the context of a global capitalism in which the British Empire had been the dominant force and, against that, the vision of a different kind of world economy which could be brought about by the international solidarity of the proletariat. A Scottish essentialist is, in Kidd's sense, one for whom, 'If a unitary Scottish culture is adulterated with draughts of Englishness or some other foreign tincture, then it is at best a diluted version of what it might be, or worse a poisonous brew dangerous for Scots to consume' (*L&U*, 3). Nothing could be further from MacDiarmid's view of Scotland: 'Some other foreign tincture' is precisely what MacDiarmid was in search of. For the editors of *Beyond Scotland*, Hugh MacDiarmid 'not only embraced the self-contradiction of the "Caledonian antisyzygy", but sought to make it the basis of a revived national art':[9] a revived national art was, however, for MacDiarmid, very far from bounded by Scottish 'essentialism'. MacDiarmid's masterpiece of the 1920s, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), includes translations from Russian, Belgian, German and French poets as well as a long quotation in the original Italian from Dante. It is through a gesture to the then recent work of T. S. Eliot that the poem berates the ways in which Burns has been misappropriated by Burns Clubs –

> I'm haverin', Rabbie, but ye understaun'
> It gets my dander up to see your star
> A bauble in Babel, banged like a sixpence
> 'Twixt Burbank's Baedeker and Bleistein's cigar.

---

[8] Ibid., 14–15..
[9] Ibid., 11.

The reference is to Eliot's 'Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar' from *Poems* (1920), a volume which confirmed Eliot as the most radically innovative of contemporary poets. This – along with London-based journals such as A. R. Orage's *The New Age* – is the context of MacDiarmid's development of the 'Scottish Renaissance' of the 1920s. If it is true (and I doubt if it is) that there has been 'an assumption – at least among literary scholars – that identity is indivisible' (*L&U*, 15), it is not a view that can be traced to MacDiarmid. The Drunk Man's 'identity' is precisely the refusal of traditional and stereotypical – perhaps even 'essentialist' – versions of Scottishness in favour of a Scotland open to European modernism and in dialogue with the arts in other parts of the continent:

> (I kent a Terrier in a sham fecht aince,
> Wha louped a dyke and landed on a thistle.
> He'd naething on ava aneth his kilt
> Schönberg has nae notation for his whistle.) . . .

> (Gin you're surprised a village drunk
> Foreign references s'uld fool in,
> You ha'ena the respect you s'ud
> For oor guid Scottish schoolin'.[10]

Scottish drunks, Scottish 'Terriers' – 'territorial solders' – and Scottish poets speak the language of European innovation, not the language of Scottish essentialism, and in a key passage the Drunk Man tries to synthesise the literary genius of the emergent literatures of West and East, American and Russian, in the figures of Melville and Dostoevsky:

> '*Melville, sea-compelling man,*
> *Before whose wand Leviathan*
> *Rose hoary-white upon the Deep,*'
> *What thou hast sown I fain 'ud reap*
> *O' knowledge 'yont the human mind*
> *In keepin' wi' oor Scottish kind,*
> *And, thanks to thee, may aiblins reach*
> *To what this Russian has to teach,*

---

[10] Michael Grieve and W. R. Aitken (eds), *Hugh MacDiarmid: Complete Poems 1920–1976* (London, 1978), 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle', I, 97.

Closer than only ither Scot,
Closer to me than my ain thocht,
Closer than my ain braith to me . . .[11]

If a Russian – 'This Christ o' the neist thoosand years' – is closer to MacDiarmid than any Scottish writer, in what sense can he be seen as resistant to anything but past elements of an essential Scottish tradition? Scotland has to be remade not out of Scottish 'essentialism' but out of an international engagement with many modern literatures. If, sometimes, these are invoked to counteract the 'draughts of Englishness' which Scottish culture has had to imbibe in such large measures, MacDiarmid is nonetheless prepared to invoke the major figures of English literature – such as Coleridge or Blake – when they give voice to a sufficiently appropriate insight. Thus 'The Seamless Garment', which appeared in *First Hymn to Lenin and Other Poems* in 1931, starts with an epigraph from Samuel Taylor Coleridge –

Whene'er the mist which stands 'twixt God and thee
Defecates to a pure transparency.[12]

As Christopher Ricks notes in his edition of Eliot's early poems, 'defecate' is a word used by Eliot several times and in Coleridge's use is equivalent to 'purification of the mind from whatever is gross or low' (*OED*, 2).[13] The lines were quoted by Arnold in his essay 'On Translating Homer'[14] and its use by MacDiarmid reveals how little of 'essential Scottishness' defines the context of a poem which invokes both Lenin and Rilke as equivalent figures in the development of modern European culture:

Lenin was like that wi' working' class life,
　　At hame wi't a'.
Hi fause movements couldna been fewer,
　　The best weaver Earth ever saw.
A' he'd to dae wi' moved intact,
　　Clean, clear, and exact.

---

[11] MacDiarmid, 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle', *Complete Poems*, I, 139, ll. 1812ff.
[12] MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, Vol. I, 311.
[13] Christopher Ricks, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909–1917* (London, 1996), 237.
[14] Matthew Arnold, *On Translating Homer* (London, 1905), 11.

> A poet like Rilke did the same
>   In a different sphere,
> Made a single reality – a' a'e oo' –
>   O' his love and pity and fear;
> A seamless garment o' music and thought
> But you're ower thrang wi' puirer to tak' tent o't.[15]

The poem is addressed to the workers of Scotland but its range of reference is not defined by Scottish boundaries. If there is an 'essential' Scottishness it is one which can only be grasped by a journey through European and, indeed, world literature. MacDiarmid's vast poem dedicated to James Joyce – *In Memoriam James Joyce* (1955), subtitled 'A Vision of World Language' (1955) – underlines that his poetry is not to be bounded by Scotland: what MacDiarmid rejects is a Eurocentric – and, therefore, and even more determinedly, an Anglocentric – conception of what counts as valuable in world culture:

> (For unlike you, Joyce, I am more concerned
> With the East than the West and the poetry I seek
> Must be the work of one who has always known
> That the Tarim valley is of more importance
> Than Jordan or the Rhine in world history).[16]

II

For Kidd, the difference between Scottish literary criticism and modern Scottish historiography is that there 'has been no serious attempt to introduce the insights of the new British history into Scottish literary scholarship' (*L&U*, 21). The 'new British history' to which he refers is the 'four nations' version of the history of 'these islands' and their imperial territories originally proposed by J. G. A. Pocock in 1975,[17] and at least partially fulfilled in 1989 by Hugh Kearney's *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations*.[18] Pocock takes his beginning from a comment of A. J. P. Taylor's in his volume of the *Oxford History of England* that the term 'Britain' has no meaning:

---

[15] MacDiarmid, *Complete Poems*, I, 312.

[16] Hugh MacDiarmid, *In Memoriam James Joyce* (Glasgow, 1955), 70.

[17] John Pocock, 'The Limits and Divisions of British History: In Search of an Unknown Subject', *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Dec. 1975), 601–21.

[18] Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: A History of Four Nations* (Cambridge, 1989).

> It is, he says, the name of a Roman province, which never included the whole of modern Scotland, and was foisted upon the English by the inhabitants of the northern kingdom [Scotland] as part of the parliamentary union of 1707. Moreover, he continues, the term 'Great Britain' – which properly denotes not more than the Anglo-Scottish Union – is nonidentical with the term 'United Kingdom', since the latter's scope included the whole of Ireland from 1801 and the dark and bloody rump of that island from 1922.[19]

Pocock, however, wants to resist such Anglocentric starting points in order to give new meaning to 'British' history in the context of Britain's then recent entry into the European Economic Community – enacted by Ted Heath's Conservative government in 1973 and cemented by a referendum held under Harold Wilson's Labour government in 1975 – and the possible 'Europeanisation' of British history that this reorientation might involve. Such a Europeanisation, Pocock suggests, would be a betrayal of the 'new Britains' of the Commonwealth – especially Canada, Australia and New Zealand, countries whose individual histories would make no sense except in the context of the expansion and application of British values in their new territories. A truly 'British' history would be a history of the Atlantic archipelago (a geographically neutral term for what once might have been described, to the offence of some in that territory, as the 'British Isles') but also of the oceanic expansion of the peoples of the archipelago to North America, Africa, signifcant parts of Asia and the South Pacific. Nonetheless, Pocock finds it impossible to avoid the judgment that 'the pattern of "British history" is one of the steadily increasing dominance of England as a political and cultural entity',[20] as a result of which 'there are extremely powerful and valid professional and historical reasons pressing us towards the continuation of the Anglocentric perspective.'[21] For Pocock, neither Ireland nor Scotland has the historiographic resources to resist their incorporation into this Anglocentric narrative, so if there is to be a 'British' history it must come from those at a greater distance from the English centre and, in particular, from the Australasia where he himself grew up as a New Zealander. 'I would be suspicious of myself', he writes, 'if I thought I were sounding any kind

---

[19] Pocock, 'The Limits and Divisions of British History', 601.

[20] Ibid., 610.

[21] Ibid., 613.

of patriotic trumpet',[22] but he nevertheless thinks the 'settler' societies are best placed to develop 'British' history as one capable of acknowledging the diversity rather than the anglocentricity of British experience:

> I have tried to present the projection of 'British history' – for lack of a better word, since it necessarily includes Irish – which treats our derivation by placing it in a context of inherent diversity, replacing the image of a monolithic 'parent society' with that of an expanding zone of cultural conflict and creation.[23]

Pocock's version of 'four nations history' hardly resounds with the optimism of Kidd's insistence that, in recent years,

> the subject of Britishness has come to the forefront of historical concerns. In particular, historians of political thought have drawn attention to the richness of early modern Scottish engagement with ideas of Britishness and union. The Union of 1707, it transpires, was a much more sophisticated affair – arguably much more principled indeed, a matter of preserving the Revolution principles of 1688–9 – than a simple transaction whereby its corrupt elite was bought and sold for English gold. Early modernists have also been alert to the phenomenon of concentric loyalties; a British political allegiance did not diminish an emotional identification with Scotland.   (*L&U*, 17)

The notion of 'concentric loyalties' does not square (if I may be allowed that pun) with the asymmetry of the Union. Given England's increasing preponderance in terms of population, its gravitational pull would produce anything but 'concentric' orbits to the 'Britishness' of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, something increasingly evident in the latter territory as its version of 'Britishness' has diverged radically from the values of mainland Britain. Indeed, a recent attempt to apply 'four nations' historiography to the modern period[24] points out that the 'four nations' account of British history has only really worked for the seventeenth century, in the period of the building of the English constitutional framework. Thereafter Welsh,

---

[22] Ibid., 617.

[23] Ibid., 620.

[24] Naomi Lloyd-Jones and Margaret M. Scull (eds), *Four Nations Approaches to Modern 'British' History: A (Dis)United Kingdom?* (Basingstoke, 2018).

Irish and Scottish histories are necessarily subservient elements to the major narrative of that English political history. This would accord with Kidd's own argument in his first book, *Subverting Scotland's Past*,[25] even though, in *Literature and Union*, he implies that a 'British' history can be uncomplicatedly discerned in the modern period. Many contemporary historians have not seen the emergence of 'four nations' history in this unifying perspective. As Naomi-Lloyd and Margaret Scull summarise the arguments,

> It could be suggested that the field was ultimately tracing the origins of institutions, structures and concepts that would come to be understood as 'English', such as the state, parliament and constitution. Keith M. Brown, for instance, has warned that this 'risks taking us back to a more sophisticated version of old-fashioned anglocentric constitutional history.' Nicholas Canny, one of its foremost critics, has remarked that 'much of what appears as "new British history" is nothing but "old English history" in "Three-Kingdoms" clothing.' Ironically, with state formation its 'unifying problematic', the New British History could thereby stand accused of perpetuating the very practice Pocock denounced. If Ian McBride's chapter . . . is correct and Pocock's project comprised 'a more subversive agenda' that entailed 'provincialising England', then the New British History could be said to have done the opposite: recentralising England and further peripheralising its neighbours.[26]

'Four nations' history may allow Welsh, Scottish or Irish historians to place their own national history alongside English history but it does not mean that 'British' history has ceased to be English, just as the Scottish backgrounds of a Tony Blair or David Cameron did not prevent them presenting themselves as mainstream Anglo-British politicians. Kidd's belief that 'the subject of Britishness has come to the forefront of historical concerns' may be true (at least of his own work),[27] but it is a 'Britishness' which is not necessarily identical with the Britishness projected by 'early modern Scottish engagement with ideas of Britishness and union'.

---

[25] Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity*, *c. 1689–1830* (Cambridge, 1993).

[26] Lloyd-Jones and Scull (eds), *Four Nations Approaches to Modern 'British' History*, 7.

[27] See his *Union and Unionisms: Political Thought in Scotland 1500–2000* (Cambrdige, 2008), which suggests the Union of 1707 was the outcome of Scottish debates about the virtues of union in the previous three centuries.

This is reflected in Kearney's attempt at constructing a 'four nations' history of these Isles, in which he was – however reluctantly – driven towards the conclusion that Britishness was, in the end, indistinguishable from the hegemonic spread of Englishness. In his introduction, Kearney stresses that the discipline of history – at least in its professional development from the late nineteenth century – was rooted in the German critical method that emphasised 'the role of "nations" in history',[28] and which saw historical development as the expression of the nation's fundamental character. In Germany, only recently unified, such a method underlined the unity of purpose that the newly incorporated nation was intended to fulfil. In Britain, 'national' history based on these principles was achieved by prioritising English history, an identification that could be traced through the sleight-of-hand by which 'English historians shifted between the use of "British" and "English" as if the two were somehow equivalent'.[29] A 'national' Anglo-British history was the necessary outcome of the 'incorporating Union' of 1707: Welsh, Scottish and, after 1801, Irish histories were simply sub-plots to the narrative of English history. Kearney, however, wanted to undo this unifying account in two ways. Firstly, he wanted to emphasise that 'episodes which are generally recognised as having been of decisive importance in the history of the various "nations" of the British Isles in fact transcended the national boundaries of a later date'.[30] Whether we are looking at ancient events such as the Roman Conquest and the Barbarian invasions or more modern events such as the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution, none could be understood except through 'something wider than a national framework', and in terms not only of 'the relations between the various Britannic societies of the period concerned' but of their relations to European developments.[31] In effect, the new 'four nations' history had to *stop* being purely about the four nations and to set them in the context of broader European narratives. Secondly, however, Kearney wanted to emphasise the extent to which, although there were four 'nations' in the Britannic story, they had shared in many of the same experiences: 'A Britannic approach . . . would emphasise how much these cultures have experiences in common'.[32] 'Four nations' history thus disentangles the histories of Wales, Ireland and Scotland from the forced unifications of English history by invoking a wider European

---

[28] Ibid., 1.

[29] Ibid., 2.

[30] Kearney, *The British Isles*, 3.

[31] Ibid., 3.

[32] Ibid., 4.

context while at the same time underscoring how much the four nations have, in fact, 'in common'. The unity rather than the diversity of the four nations is the ultimate aim of this kind of 'four nations history', just as a shared and harmonious Britishness is the outcome of Kidd's 'four nations' perspective.

But there is a darker side to Kearney's account, for he sees the origins and the ongoing dynamics of 'four nations history' as shaped by

> a conflict for supremacy between 'Celts' and 'Anglo-Saxons'. It should be made clear, however, that these terms do not refer to distinct 'races' but to broad linguistic and cultural differences. The Celtic and Germanic languages are both Indo-European . . . We should do better to see the British Isles from the fifth century onwards as an arena in which several Celtic cultures and several Germanic cultures competed with each other.[33]

It was a competition, however, in which the Anglo-Saxons succeeded in imposing their culture increasingly widely across the British Isles. In an ironic sidestepping of the history of 'nations', Kearney focuses on what he calls 'cultures' and their 'subcultures', thus, for instance, separating Wales into two different communities: 'the Welsh-speaking, Calvinist Methodist north-west and the more cosmopolitan, English-speaking south indicate the drawbacks of speaking in terms of a single Welsh nationality'.[34] One of the four nations, it seems, has disappeared from history, and the effect is not to give validity to these various cultures and subcultures but simply to chart, at each stage of 'British' history, the extent to which they have succumbed to the power that was increasingly extending its control over the whole of the British Isles. So, 'Calvinistic Methodism was particularly strong in Welsh-speaking north Wales' and it was '[p]erhaps only by being allied with a popular movement of this kind that the language survived'.[35] In the course of the eighteenth century, however, 'the situation was transformed, thanks largely to the zeal of churchmen',[36] with the result that 'although the language of Calvinistic Methodism was Welsh…there was little that was distinctively Welsh in their Sabbatarianism and their dislike of secular amusements'. In sum, 'when every allowance is made for the importance of the Welsh language in this period,

---

[33] Kearney, *British Isles,* 4–5.
[34] Ibid., 8.
[35] Ibid., 136.
[36] Ibid., 139.

the fact remains that Wales became subtly anglicised'.[37] The experience
of the gradual erosion of a Welsh-speaking sub-culture is noted, but the
experience of loss, of how it felt to those undergoing the transformations
of Anglicisation, has disappeared. A history of the British Isles as a series
of interacting cultures and subcultures turns out to be the same in its
consequences as Kidd's four nations history – an ineluctable transition to an
anglicised world which erased the culture of its Celtic contestants.

If four nations history is, as Kearney suggests, about what the four
nations have in common, one of the things that three of those nations have
in common, from MacDiarmid's perspective, is the imposition on them of
the English language, English history and English cultural priorities as the
pattern to which they have to conform. MacDiarmid reads the literary and
cultural history of 'these islands' as the product of the conflict between
an Anglo-Saxon English that has pursued an 'Ascendancy Policy' designed
to negate 'all intercourse with Irish, Welsh, and Scottish Gaelic, the Scots
vernacular, and even its own dialects'.[38] MacDiarmid asserts the values of
poetry in Scots and Gaelic – and, indeed, in Latin – as part of a 'three
nations' struggle to defend the languages of Scotland, Ireland and Wales
against the presumed dominance of Ascendancy English. At the same time,
he is quick to point out that the English have been so unaware of their own
history that they have failed to understand their own linguistic heritage and
thus the values of Engand's dialects: England 'attempted to disown its own
Anglo-Saxon sources in the same fashion, and only the gallant fight put up
by the "Saxon Nymph", Elizabeth Elstob (1683–1756), succeeded against
the most obstinate opposition in securing that place for Anglo-Saxon in
English Studies without which, today, the latter would hardly be thinkable
at all'.[39] This is not a defence of an 'essentialist' conception of Scottish
literature: it is, rather, what we might call a 'four languages' perspective –
including a defence of English itself, in its various historical and dialectal
forms – against the claims to linguistic dominance of a modern pan-British
English. According to Kidd, any such attempt at a defence of a distinctive
and separate Scottish culture is a refusal of the Union and its consequences.
He quotes from the *Claim of Right* (1988), produced by the Constitutional
Steering Group of the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly, that,

---

[37] Ibid., 138.
[38] MacDiarmid, *Golden Treasury*, xxii.
[39] Ibid.

Scottish nationhood does not rest on constitutional history alone. It is supported by a culture reaching back over centuries and bearing European comparison in depth and quality…Since the Union, the strength of that culture has fluctuated but there is no ground for any claim that, overall or even at any particular time, it has benefited from the Union. (*L&U*, 6)

Kidd's response is to point out that most of what counts as Scottish literature has been produced within the ambit of the Union, and that the Union has, therefore, whether consciously or not, been supportive of Scottish cultural achievement. What this ignores, however, is the extent to which many Scottish writers actively sought to resist Anglicization, not simply because they wanted to assert some simple, essential Scottishness but because they thought, like Allan Ramsay, that a combination of the Scots and English linguistic traditions was much richer than that of 'Ascendancy English'.

That I have exprest my Thought in my native Dialect, was not only Inclination, but the Desire of my best and wisest Friends: and most reasonable, since good Imagery, just Similes, and all Manner of ingenious Thoughts, in a well laid Design, disposed into Numbers, is Poetry. – Then good Poetry may be in any Language. – But some Nations speak rough, and their Words are confounded with a Multitude of hard Consonants, which makes the Numbers unharmonious. Besides, the Language is scanty, which makes a disagreeable Repetition of the same Words. – These are no Defects in our's, the Pronunciation is liquid and sonorous, and much fuller than the English, of which we are Masters, by being taught it in our Schools, and daily reading it; which being added to all our own native Words, of eminent Significancy, makes our Tongue by far the completest . . .[40]

Ramsay's project is not one of 'essential Scottishness' but of a hybrid Scoto-English – a project which was, of course, to be consummated in the works of Robert Burns.

Equally, Kidd ignores the modern development of English literature since its professionalization in the late nineteenth century and its extension across

---

[40] B. Martin and J. W. Oliver (eds), *Works of Allan Ramsay*, Scottish Text Society, Third Series, 19 (1945), Vol. I, xviii–xix.

the higher education field in the 1950s. In that period, Scottish literature was effectively written out of what was to count as 'English Literature': Walter Scott disappeared – he is referred to only in a footnote in F. R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1948) – and Burns is not included as a major poet of the Romantic period, a period which comes to be one the hallmarks of the greatness of English literature. The invention of the academic study of Scottish Literature as a distinct discipline in the mid-twentieth century was undertaken in order to resist the erosion of Scottish literature from 'British' English literature, with its assumption that a fundamentally English version of a unitary Eng. Lit. should be the only mode of literary appreciation across the four nations. In that context, it was indeed difficult to see how Scotland and Scottish literature had benefited from the Union, no matter how many Scottish writers had managed to make successful careers for themselves in London.

As support for his argument, Kidd cites the case of Scottish novelist A. J. Cronin, whose books sold in huge numbers – he was possibly the best-selling British novelist of the 1930s – as compared with the meagre sales of MacDiarmid's works. But who now in Eng. Lit. would give any attention to Cronin's novels? The articles that have been written on his work have almost all been in medical journals, exploring the ways in which his novel of 1937, *The Citadel*, might have influenced the public into a positive response to proposals for a National Health Service.[41] Otherwise, Cronin is remembered among Scottish Literature scholars primarily for the fact that his first success, *Hatter's Castle* (1930), was clearly based on – if not a direct imitation of – George Douglas Brown's *House with the Green Shutters* (1901). Kidd opposes Cronin to MacDiarmid and asks,

> Should questions of literary value entirely obscure issues of wider social influence and representativeness? The historian notes that the high literature of Scottish Renaissance was a minority pursuit, which had minimal political impact, as the SNP would win its first seat in a wartime by-election only in 1945 and its first seat in a general election in 1970. Quite apart from these inherent differences of disciplinary perspective, there is also the possibility that literary critics have quite

---

[41] See, for instance, Roger Jones, 'A. J. Cronin, Novelist, GP and Visionary', *British Journal of General Practice*, Vol 65, Issue 638 (September 2015), accessed 28 June 2019 at 'https://bjgp.org/content/65/638/479.

> simply got things wrong, and have failed to contextualize Scottish writers with appropriate sensitivity and discrimination. (*L&U*, 16)

Literary criticism, however, is about texts which survive their original context of publication, and which therefore retain value over time, and in the era of 'modernism' many of those who are now recognised as its most important contributors had, initially, tiny audiences as compared with successful 'middlebrow' writers like Cronin. The changing nature of the audiences for literature is one of the standard explanations for the rise of experimental modernism. Kidd assumes his contrast is between Scottish insularity and an openness to a much wider British audience, but the contrast actually puts MacDiarmid on the side of Joyce, Eliot, Pound and Woolf in terms of his *literary* importance, and reveals how similar was the relationship of that international cohort of writers to mainstream literary production.

Nor are literary critics in Scotland as myopic as Kidd suggests, since many of them have been engaged in the development of the new sub-discipline of the 'history of the book' that links literary study with history, sociology and the relations between authors, agents, publishers and audiences. The aim of this sub-discipline is not to promote individual texts into the literary canon (though occasionally this might happen) but to understand the dynamics which have shaped the literary worlds of the past and which produce such phenomena as the 'soon-to-be-forgotten bestseller'.[42] The idea that 'literary critics have quite simply got things wrong' by having failed to take proper account of the difference in the size of audiences for conventional best sellers as compared with works of innovative modernism fails to recognise the fundamental shift in the relation between author and audience that produced the literary modernism the 1920s. In this context, Cronin's 'success' was precisely a consequence of his literary failure: he failed to produce works which could interestingly survive his immediate context. Of course, literary critics will sometimes get things wrong, since there can be no certainty in arts disciplines: our judgments have to be tested and retested as our contexts change. But that goes too for Scottish historians, who 'might simply have got things wrong, and have failed to contextualize Scottish writers with appropriate sensitivity and discrimination'. From a literary critical perspective this is all too evident in Kidd's account of MacDiarmid as the source of Scottish 'essentialism'.

---

[42] See, for instance, the four volume *Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2004–12)

III

One of the consequences of Scottish literary criticism's 'essentialism' is, according to Kidd, that it has given inadequate attention and inappropriate valorisation to 'Anglicization, assimilation, cultural integrity, and Anglo-Scottish hybridity' (*L&U*, 3). A glance at the standard histories of Scottish literature would put such an assertion seriously in doubt. The second volume of the four-volume Aberdeen University Press *History of Scottish Literature* (1987–8), covers the period 1660–1800 and was edited by Andrew Hook whose primary field of study is American literature: his book on *Scotland and America: A Study of Cultural Relations 1750–1835*, remains the foundational work in the field, and by no stretch of the imagination could it be described as a product of Scottish 'essentialism'. His volume of *The History of Scottish Literature* contains substantial chapters on 'James Thomson and the Anglo-Scots' (by Mary Jane Scott) and on 'James Boswell: Biography and the Union' (by Gordon Turnbull), both Thomson and Boswell being authors whom Kidd regards as neglected by Scottish literary criticism. Indeed, Mary Jane Scott's chapter on Thomson might have been designed to pre-empt Kidd's belief that Scottish literary critics ignore 'Anglo-Scottish hybridity'. Of Thomson's style, she writes:

> English as a written medium thus came more readily to Thomson than did Scots – and Latinate English particularly so. Thomson's Latinate language has always come in for harsh criticism; insensitive readers even today find it distasteful, even comical. What they rarely acknowledge is that both written and spoken Latin, as well as Latinate English, were comfortable natural idioms for the educated Scot in Thomson's day – more natural even than written Scots.[43]

She also declares that Thomson's late poem, *The Castle of Indolence* (1748), is a poem 'in the manner of Spenser' and 'an Anglo-Scottish masterpiece'.[44] Equally, *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, published in 2007, has a chapter by one of its editors, Susan Manning, which explores 'Post-Union Scotland and the Scottish Idiom of Britishness'.[45] Manning begins with

---

[43] Mary Jane Scott, 'James Thomson and the Anglo-Scots', in Andrew Hook (ed.), *The History of Scottish Literature, Volume 2, 1660–1800* (Aberdeen, 1987), 81–99, at 85.

[44] Ibid., 95.

[45] Susan Manning, 'Post-Union Scotland and the Scottish Idiom of Britishness', in Susan Manning, Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy and Murray Pittock (eds), *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature, Volume 2, Enlightenment, Britain and Empire*

James Craig's plan of Edinburgh's New Town in which 'Scottish Britishness proudly announced a public, civic identity, fostered but not circumscribed by the post-Union political state',[46] and ends with John Buchan, whose 'heroes embody the compound North British identity that escapes racial typing, narrow nationalism and single voices'.[47] Such articles underline the extent to which there is a substantial body of Scottish literary criticism that has been thoroughly engaged with the kinds of issues Kidd believes it to have ignored or rejected.

Kidd may again have been encouraged in his belief that Scottish literary criticism is defined only by a myopic essentialism by some Scottish literary critics who have argued that Scottish literary criticism has been so transfixed by 'tradition' and 'continuity over time' that it has failed to engage with new developments in the discipline of English literature: in particular, it has failed to engage with 'theory', in the period when 'theory' took on a determining role in the emergence of new forms of literary analysis. Eleanor Bell, for instance, contrasts Scottish literary studies with Irish literary studies and the latter's engagement with 'postmodernism and post-nationalism' as compared with the 'insular focus on tradition-inspired'[48] approaches in Scotland. Such views give credence to the notion that Scottish literary studies are anti-theoretical, and may therefore appear to support Kidd's view that Scottish historians, because of their 'four nations' perspective, have a more theoretically sophisticated approach to the Scottish past than the country's literary critics. However, there are in Scotland a number of major contributors to the 'four nations' account of seventeenth-century Britain, such as Willy Maley, whose *Nation, State and Empire in English Renaissance Literature: Shakespeare to Milton* (2003) precisely addresses many of the issues raised by a 'four nations' perspective on British history. Equally, Murray Pittock took a 'four nations' perspective in his British Academy Chatterton Lecture on 'Burns and British Poetry'.[49] And while theoretical debates may not have been as pronounced in Scotland as they have been Ireland – in part, of course, because Irish literature is far more marketable in North

---

(1707–1918) (Edinburgh, 2007), 45–56.

46 Ibid., 46.

47 Ibid., 56.

48 Eleanor Bell, 'The Question of Tradition' in Miller and Bell (eds), *Scotland in Theory*, 84.

49 Murray Pittock, The British Academy Chatterton Lecture, 2002, 'Robert Burns and British Poetry', https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/pba121p191.pdf, accessed 17 June 2019.

America than is Scottish literature – the issue of Scotland's relation to 'postmodernity' has been given significant attention in North America, by critics such as Jerome McGann, with his proposal that Walter Scott is the first postmodernist,[50] and, in Scotland, by scholars such as Alison Lumsden, whose book on *Walter Scott and the Limits of Language* (2010) examines Scott in the light of 'poststructuralist' theories of language. She suggests, for instance, that even the 'opening paragraph of Scott's first novel',

> signals an awareness of the problematic nature of language, the fact that words carry with them, as Derrida would put it, traces of an earlier meaning which consequently resist any purely referential function, positing, instead, clusters of pre-existing connotations that pull against any form of 'uncontaminated' discourse.[51]

None of this suggests that Scottish literary studies is a theoretical waste land, and many of the major contributions to Scottish literary criticism over the past thirty years have been seriously 'theoretical', from Penny Fielding's *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture and Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction* (1996) with its deployment of Walter Ong and Jacques Derrida to explain how the written and the oral are mutually deconstructing in Scottish writing, to Matthew Wickman's *Literature After Euclid: The Geometric Imagination in the Long Scottish Enghtenment* (2016), which demonstrates that key elements of modern theoretical discourse 'were hardwired into the Enlightenment and its legacy'.[52] Equally there have been 'new historicist' or 'new materialist' accounts of Scottish writing, such as Richard B. Sher's *The Enlightenment and the Book* (Chicago, 2007), Ian Duncan's *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton, 2007) and Nigel Leask's *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Oxford, 2010). And there have also been a substantial number of theoretically informed feminist interventions ranging from Douglas Gifford's and Dorothy McMillan's *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* (Edinburgh, 1997), Robert Irvine's *Enlightenment and Romance: Gender and Agency in Smollett and Scott* (Oxford, 2000) through Carol Anderson and Aileen Christianson's *Scottish Women's Writing: 1920s to 1960s* (East Linton, 2000) to Glenda Norquay's

---

[50] Jerome McGann, 'Walter Scott's Romantic Postmodernity' in Leith Davis, Ian Duncan and Janet Sorensen (eds), *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* (Cambridge, 2004), 113–29.

[51] Alison Lunsden, *Walter Scott and the Limits of Language* (Edinburgh, 2010), 84.

[52] Matthew Wickman, *After Euclid: The Geometric Imagination in the Long Scottish Enlightenment* (Philadelphia, 2016), 221.

Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Women's Writing (Edinburgh, 2012). Similarly, Scottish critics have adopted the language developed by postcolonial theorists and applied them to the Scottish situation. While Scotland could not, like Ireland, claim to have been the first postcolonial territory in the English-speaking Empire, the issue of whether it was or was not a cultural, if not a political, colony has resonated with many Scottish critics, most notably, perhaps, in Douglas Mack's *Scottish Fiction and the British Empire* (Edinburgh, 2006), which applies postcolonial 'subaltern' theory to Scottish writing. As Graeme MacDonald asserted as long ago as 2006, 'Any argument that Scottish culture, like that of other members of the "Celtic Fringe", is in some sense disqualified from serious consideration as a postcolonial subject has now been rendered obsolete by the emergence of a body of cross-disciplinary studies building on foundational texts of the 70s, 80s and 90s'.[53]

IV

The irony of Kidd's insistence on Scottish literary criticism's 'essentialism' and its consequent lack of theoretical sophistication is that Scottish literature has itself become, for many around the world, the exemplar of a literature which is particularly responsive to the issues raised by the various iterations of 'theory', and particularly the 'strong' versions of theory that stem from poststructuralism and deconstruction. Randall Stevenson, in 'A Postmodern Scotland?', notes that 'critics working outside Scotland' and seeking to elaborate the relevance of concepts of the postmodern 'have regularly applied them to Scottish writing'.[54] And it is on that basis that Evan Gottlieb uses Walter Scott's works in *Walter Scott and Contemporary Theory* (London, 2013) to trace the lineaments of theory as it has emerged from the apparent 'death of theory' in the early twenty-first century. Gottlieb juxtaposes Scott novels with the theoretical frameworks of Žižek, DeLanda, Bhabha, Butler, Foucault, Agamben, Habermas and Derrida precisely because Scott's works are so presciently *theoretical* – they anticipate the theories by which they can be productively interpreted by a contemporary critic. The same is true of the

---

[53] Graeme MacDonald, 'Postcolonialism and Scottish Studies', *New Formations* 59: "After Iraq" (Autumn 2006), https://www.academia.edu/28822457/Postcolonialism_and_Scottish_Studies, accessed 16/06/2019.

[54] Randall Stevenson, 'A Postmodern Scotland?', in Carruthers, Goldie and Renfrew (eds), *Beyond Scotland*, 209–28, at 209.

ways in which Byron has come to be read as a prescient deconstructionist[55] and Robert Louis Stevenson as a prescient post-colonialist.[56]

Scottish literature and its criticism is more visible now to a huge array of international scholars than it is has ever been, and is used more regularly for the testing of new, theoretically-inspired criticism than has been the case at any point in the past. In part this is the result of institutional developments – as, for instance, in the establishment of a specific Scottish section of the Modern Language Association (MLA) in the United States, or of specific Scottish panels at the conferences of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE), as well as the success of innovations such as the International Congress of Scottish Literature, first held in Glasgow in 2014. In part, it is also because of the increasing visibility of contemporary Scottish writing in an international marketplace, a visibility which depends on its identifiable 'Scottishness', that is, its difference from rather than its implication in Englishness/Britishness. And yet, despite providing the modern world with some of its key myths – one need look no further than Jekyll and Hyde, or Peter Pan – as well as some its most enduring characters – Sherlock Holmes, for instance – Scottish literature and Scottish writers can continue to be invisible from the perspective of the discipline of English Literature. The case of Burns, as Murray Pittock has highlighted, is instructive: after 1945, Burns gradually disappears from consideration not only in the number of articles published on his works in literary journals but also from the histories of the Romantic period in English literature. Despite the fact that so many of the major Romantic poets were deeply influenced by him, Burns becomes the 'invisible' poet of British Romanticism.[57] Even the more recent developments of 'ecocriticism', in which, as James C. McKusick, emphasises, 'the poets with

---

55 See, for instance, Gillen D'Arcy Wood, review of 'Jerome McGann, *Byron and Romanticism* and Drummond Bone (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*': 'this is the textualisation of personality on the deconstructive model, where Byron is the Everyman of dis-integrated selfhood, a self orbiting always within the horizon of proper sentiment'. *Romantic Circles* (2007), https://romantic-circles.org/reviews-blog/jerome-mcgann-byron-and-romanticism-drummond-bone-ed-cambridge-companion-byron (accessed 15 August 2019).

56 See, for instance, Linda Dryden, 'Literary Affinities and the Postcolonial in Robert Louis Stevenson and Joseph Conrad', in Michael Gardiner and Graeme Macdonald (eds), *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives* (Edinburgh, 2011).

57 Murray Pittock, 'Robert Burns and British Poetry', 194: 'In the late 1930s, more articles were published on Burns (57) than on Coleridge or Blake, and he was on a par with Byron; by the 1960s, he had sunk to a quarter of Coleridge's total and half Blake's, lying altogether well adrift of the canon he had helped to define'.

the deepest "roots" are often those of working-class origin,[58] manage to overlook Burns. Priority goes instead to John Clare because he provides the continuity of an English tradition, whose 'ecological vision emerges from this commitment to his local environment, a "native place" where the "rhyming peasant" can gain an intimate knowledge of the interrelationship of all life-forms.'[59] Equally, McKusick emphasizes the ecological importance of the work of Scottish-born John Muir, whose defence of wilderness became the foundation of much preservationist activism in the United States. McKusick, however, suggests the sources of Muir's ecological vision in terms of a specifically English romanticism:

> Muir's personal library (which is now located in the Huntington Library collection) includes copies of the poetical works of Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley and Byron; it also includes five volumes of poetry and prose by Coleridge. Muir's annotations to Coleridge's *Poetical Works, Biographia Literaria, Lectures on Shakespear, Table Talk,* and *Theory of Life* reveal a remarkable degree of intellectual engagement with Coleridge's holistic conception of the natural world.[60]

What this fails to acknowledge, however, is that as important Muir's library was to him, it was not as important as the travels which provided the materials for his own writing, and that he always travelled with his copy of Burns, that most 'deep-rooted' of 'peasant poets'.

The 'writing out' of Burns and Scott from English-British literature is symptomatic of why a 'four-nations' account of British culture always, in the end, runs up against an Anglocentric version of 'British' history and 'British' literature as simply the expansion and imposition of English culture on its neighbours and peripheries. The choice is whether – like Kidd – to submit to what is presented as the inevitability of that process or whether, despite the overwhelming odds, to oppose it: MacDiarmid opposed it and so has much of Scottish literary criticism. To denigrate that opposition by suggesting that it is inward looking ('navel gazing'), or is in denial about Scotland's necessary involvement with an institutional and economic system dominated by London, is to refuse to recognise that a true 'four nations' history would assign as much

---

[58] James C. McKusick, *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (New York, 2010; 2000), x.

[59] Ibid., 80; see, equally, Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (Abingdon, 1991).

[60] Ibid., 189.

validity to those who opposed the harmonisation of the cultures of the four nations as to those who accepted it.

V

According to Kidd, 'four nations' history is built on the recognition that national identities, as argued by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983), are complex fabrications, and that national consciousnesses are artificial constructs that depend upon 'processes of imagination' (*L&U*, 16). Anderson's account of those 'imagined communities' is, however, riddled with contradictions and evasions. For instance, he begins by defining the nation as an 'imagined *political* community' but the 'political' subsequently disappears, leaving only an 'imagined community'. The transition is crucial because 'political' implies debate and opposition, whereas the nation, for Anderson, is the essential site of a sense of a communality which knows and recognises no internal opposition: the 'nation-as-imagined-community' is simply the 'nation-as-imagined-unity':

> …there is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests – above all in the form of poetry and song. Take national anthems, for example, sung on national holidays. No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verse to the same melody. The image: unisonance . . . How selfless this unisonance feels! If we are aware that others are singing these songs precisely when and as we are, we have no idea who they may be, or even where, out of earshot, they are singing. Nothing connects us but imagined sound.[61]

But this is precisely *not* what national anthems do: it is not the 'unisonance' of our relation to all our fellow travellers in *this* moment in time that they celebrate but the continuity that connects the present to the past, that *re*-connects this present moment to those past moments in which the anthem was previously sung or to which its lyrics gesture. It is not a shared present that is being celebrated but a shared past – a shared past whose ructions, conflicts and divisions can now be accepted as parts of a common narrative. That past, of course, can only be present *in* the present by virtue

---

[61] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991; 1983), 145.

of imagination, which is why Anderson's predecessor in the analysis of the nation, Ernest Gellner, so distrusted nationalisms, whose imaginings of the past were fabrications of a supposed unity of experience and purposiveness that belied the reality of territorial exploitation and class conflict. Anderson wants to distinguish his version of the nation-as-imaginary-construct from Gellner's on the basis that 'Gellner is so anxious to show that nationalism masquerades under false pretences' that 'he assimilates "invention" to "fabrication" and "falsity", rather than to "imagining" and "creation".' But Anderson's own language heads rapidly in the same direction, for he insists that 'all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined',[62] a statement whose consequence is that the word 'imagined' (like the world 'political' in his original definition) becomes redundant: 'community' is *always* imagined; the word community necessarily *means* something imagined. To stress the 'imagined' in 'imagined communities' is to imply that there are kinds of communities which are *not* imagined, or that there are some communities which are more imaginary than others: 'in world-historical terms', Anderson writes, 'bourgeoisies were the first classes to achieve solidarities on an essentially imagined basis.'[63] How is 'essentially imagined' different from just 'imagined'? The answer, it appears, was that bourgeoisies were literate enough to read novels and newspapers, for it is novels and newspapers which reinforce the 'imaginary' in our sense of our communities. The novelistic or journalistic representation of our social reality corrupts the reality it (re-)presents: 'fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations'.[64] The novel or newspaper as an imagined representation of the real is transformed into the representation of an *imaginary* reality, and it is this imaginary object which constitutes the true nature both of the modern nation and of the nationalism to which it gives rise. All nationalisms are fictions that conceal from us the truth of the reality in which we live – except, of course, that all modern communities are in this sense fictions, and such fictions, from Anderson's perspective, are inescapable. Reality has disappeared and we are left only with the fictions which, even when we know them to be fictions, cannot be wiped away to allow us to see, if not the world as it really is, then at least a less imginary one.

Kidd seems to believe that few Scottish historians or literary critics 'have

---

[62] Ibid., 6.

[63] Ibid., 77.

[64] Ibid., 36.

contemplated the implications of Anderson's work for Scotland and Britain' since 'Scottishness, so the logic of the Anderson thesis runs, is no more natural or authentic than Britishness' because '*all* forms of nationhood… are imaginative confections' (*L&U*, 16). Kidd himself, however, does not seem to have considered the full implications of Anderson's thesis, since if 'Britishness' is simply an illusion of the imagination, then the defence of 'British Contexts' for 'Scottish Texts' is simply the piling of one illusion on another. Why waste our time on disputing whether Scottish or British versions of an 'imaginative confection' that we all know to be illusory should have precedence over the other? If Scottishness and Britishness are both equally fictional there can be no basis for judging between them as the appropriate context for the interpretation and understanding of (supposedly) Scottish or, indeed, British texts.

This self-defeating outcome is, in fact, the necessary consequence of the profound contradictions in Anderson's thesis,[65] but what it points toward – though without engaging with it – are those contradictions that Jacques Derrida unveiled as the inevitable impossibility of bounding or restraining the 'context' in which any text might be read. All texts are capable of generating multiple meanings depending on the 'context' in which they are set and those contexts are beyond the control of their author or, indeed, of their historical epoch. This is why Derrida's and other versions of poststructuralist 'theory' are particularly disruptive of the discipline of history when that discipline asserts itself to be capable of discovering, uncovering or recovering the realities of the past – as, for instance, when 'four nations' historians assert their account of the seventeenth century in these isles to be more accurate than previous accounts. From a 'theoretical' perspective, such claims for the truth-value of the discipline of history are simply *rhetoric*: as Pierre Kolossowski puts it, in considering Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*, 'the world as such is only a fable. A fable is something which is told, having no existence outside of the tale…Religion, art, science, history, are so many diverse interpretations of the world, or rather, so many variants of the fable.'[66] Whatever the difference in its research contexts or in the questions it poses, 'four nations history' is not a different *kind* of history: it may present events from a different distance, or

---

[65] For a detailed discussion of Anderson's struggle to make sense of his own theory, see my essay 'Benedict Anderson's Fictional Communities' in Alisatair McCleery and Benjamin A. Brabon, *The Influence of Benedict Anderson* (Edinburgh, 2007), 21–40.

[66] Quoted in Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge, 1980), 184 from Pierre Klossowski, *Un si funeste désir* (Paris, 1963), 181.

from a different angle, as compared with other kinds of history, but it cannot overleap the problems of representation posed by Derrida to anything that is textual. Equally, it remains subject to the kind of doubts raised by works such as Hayden White's *Metahistory,* which begins from what White describes as the modern 'revolt against historical consciousness':

> the historical consciousness on which Western man has prided himself since the beginning of the nineteenth century may be little more than a theoretical basis for the ideological position from which Western civilization views its relationship not only to cultures and civilizations preceding it but also to those contemporary with it in time and contiguous with it in space. In short, it is possible to view historical consciousness as a specifically Western prejudice by which the presumed superiority of modern, industrial society can be retroactively substantiated.[67]

Kidd's 'four nations' history is still history, and is as linguistically underpinned and as ideologically motivated as any other kind of history. As John Kerrigan notes in a book which Kidd takes to be one of the few literary analyses to take 'four nations' history seriously, such history can never be 'free from the risk of falling into Anglocentrism' because dealing with texts that have 'been written in English/Inglis may in fact pull discussion more strongly toward the heartland of Anglophone literary production'.[68] 'Four nations' history is neither more 'objective' than other forms of history, nor value-neutral: in 1999, reflecting back on his original proposal for a new British history, Pocock noted the 'difficulty historians sometimes have in counting higher than two, so that they think that, of any two histories, one must be truer or more important than the other'.[69] Counting to four may be a significant achievement for some historians, but it does not produce history that is four times more true: it is still 'writing', and subject to all the dubieties from which writing cannot escape, one of the most important being 'context'. As Derrida queries, 'Is there a rigorous and scientific concept of the *context*? Does not the notion of

---

[67] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 2014; 1973), 2.

[68] John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics 1603–1707* (Oxford, 2008), 79–80.

[69] J. G. A. Pocock, 'The New British History in Atlantic Perspective: An Antipodean Commentary', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 104, No. 2 (Apr., 1999), 490–500 at 492.

context harbour, behind a certain confusion, very determined philosophical presuppositions? . . . [because] a context is never absolutely determinable.'[70] All language can be taken out of context – inserted (or, in Derrida's terms, *grafted*) into a new context in which its original meaning is displaced. Ironically, Kidd's introduction is titled 'Union and the Ironies of Displacement in Scottish Literature', though the irony of the indeterminacy of all contexts, their inevitable emplacements and displacements, seems not to have entered the discussion.

On the other hand, acknowledgment of the problems of the spoken and the written sign, and of the indeterminacy of meaning, is one of the reasons that Scottish literature has proved so amenable to theory. From the mock epistolary style of Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771) – which Kidd takes to be one of the few novels that directly address the issue of the Union – to Walter Scott's creation of surrogate narrators who offer themselves as the 'real' source of Scott's fictions, the certainty of the origin of, or the point of reception of, any linguistic communication is continually set in doubt by Scottish authors. Scott's narrators claim partiality to neither of the sides in the historical conflicts whose events they narrate, for, as Jedediah Cleishbotham asserts in *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818), 'when the prelatists and presbyterians of old time went together by the ears in this unlucky country, my ancestor (venerated be his memory) was one of the people called Quakers, and suffered severe handling from either side'.[71] By displacing his own authorial decisions to Cleishbotham, 'schoolmaster and parish-clerk of Gandercleugh', Scott evades responsibility for how he represents the conflicts of the past but thereby doubles the fictionality of his narrative: it is a historical tale told by a fictional author who has heard the story from another (fictional) character in a novel which goes out of its way to advertise rather than conceal its fictionality. Each level of the novel's narrative sets in doubt how it is to be interpreted, how it is to be contextualised and it was on the basis of such self-deconstructing narrative strategies that Jerome McGann was able to claim Walter Scott as a postmodernist. In his novels and poems, Scott is continually pointing out his own relationship to his texts, and pointing out, despite their piling up of historical detail, the ways in which they are self-consciously fictional. This 'postmodern' approach produces a meta-level commentary on the text from *within* the body of the text itself, thus disrupting the fictional frame, with its

---

[70] Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in Peggy Kamuf (trans), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (Hemel Hempstead, 1991), 84.

[71] Tony Inglis (ed.), Walter Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian* (London, 1994; 1818), 9.

assumption that we can be given access to the reality of the past. The novel treats of historical events but does so with a self-conscious awareness that history has to be narrated and that narrative is never innocent. It is a novelistic methodology which can be read as prefiguring White's *Metahistory*, with its insistence that all history-writing is governed by generic conventions – history as tragedy, comedy, irony or satire – and as such is much closer to literature and to the fictional than 'professional' historians in search of the historical 'truth' of the past would have us believe. The 'reality' offered by history is, as in Scott's novels, an illusion rhetorically constructed by 'acts of emplotment' that turn the multitudinous events of the past into a particular kind of narrative, governed not by 'truth' but by generic conventions. Such challenges by theory to the foundations of the discipline of history have, as far as one can tell, left no mark on Scottish historiography, whereas theory has left a profound imprint on Scottish literature and its criticism. The problem of the written and its relationship to contexts which may profoundly alter its possible meanings have been absolutely crucial to literary criticism in Scotland since the 1970s, but 'contexts' pose no such problems to Kidd and (most of) his contributors. For them, the British 'context' of Scottish writing is a historical reality which Scottish literary critics have ignored in order to obscure the (true and real) Britishness of Scottish writing since long before 1707. No further context – and no further question about context – is required.

VI

Why, then, has the 'reality' of this British context had such little acknowledgment by Scotland's literary critics, or, indeed, in Scottish writing? According to Kidd, it is because unionism represents the 'banal' and therefore unnoticed reality of modern Scotland:

> If we accept, as some historians do, that the Union was so taken for granted that it became an unnoticed part of the background to Scottish public life, then this might help to explain its invisibility. Something so normal, so uncontroversial, was unlikely to set pulses racing. This is what has come to be known as 'banal unionism', a union so well established as to need no defence or justification, with the result that unionism was mute and inarticulate, part of the 'wallpaper' of Scottish life. 'Banal unionism' has yet to become a term of art in Scottish literature. But was 'banal unionism' a literary as well as a political phenomenon? Is the relative marginality of the Union in Scottish literature between

the mid-eighteenth century and the mid-twentieth century a literary manifestation of 'banal unionism'?

Unionism, Kidd wants us to believe, fails to make a regular appearance in Scottish writing because it is so 'normal' as to require no explanation or dramatization: it does not appeal to the desire for 'difference' on which Scottish literature has depended:

> The study of union and its curious displacement in Scottish literature brings us close to the invisible core of Scottish culture, mundane workaday quotidian Scottishness, of the sort that lacks exoticism or the romance of difference. Behind the overt trappings of an assumed Highland identity lies an invisible and rarely trumpeted Lowland consciousness; behind Celticism, a Teutonic identity, which was the dominant form of Scottish self-consciousness throughout the nineteenth century; behind nationalist posturing, unionist realism; behind industrial working-class machismo, bourgeois norms little different from those in Middle England.

Scotland is a normal part of an undifferentiated Britishness: all its differences are 'assumed' and illusory, mere imaginations as compared with an unnoticed 'unionist realism'. If we are to follow Anderson's argument, of course, this cannot in fact be any kind of 'realism' but only a 'unionist imaginary' masquerading as the 'real'.

Kidd is forced into this notion of a 'banal unionism' because the Union appears to be so utterly invisible in Scottish literature. Perhaps, however, the question needs to be reversed – why is the Union of 1707 so important to contemporary Scottish historians? The three hundredth anniversary of the Union in 2007 was accompanied by a raft of publications about Scotland and the Union,[72] although there seemed to be almost none about England and the Union.[73] In English/British history, the Union is a footnote to the War of Spanish Succession,[74] or simply the legalisation of England's already effective

---

[72] I count over twenty in the catalogue of the National Library of Scotland in the period 2005 to 2008.

[73] Iain McLean and Alistair McMillan's *State of the Union* (Oxford 2005) and the British Academy's *Enlightening the Constitutional Debate* (2014) both discussed England's role in the Union but in the context of the Scottish constitutional crisis.

[74] See, for instance, Christopher Lee, *This Sceptred Isle: The Making of the British* (London: 2012; 1997), 295: 'As long as Scotland and England had separate Parliaments it was

control over its 'sceptered isle'.[75] The Union's importance to Scottish historians may not be because of the importance of the event itself but rather because of its narrative value: it represents an ending ('bought and sold for English gold'[76]) and a beginning to which can be attributed all the transformations of Scottish life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But is this, perhaps, entirely the wrong context in which to try to understand the Scottish people's relationship to Union? What if the Union was not invisible because it was 'banal' but invisible because it did not very much matter? After all, Scots in Scotland retained their church, their educational system, their legal framework, all the institutions that defined and shaped their day-to-day local existence. As far as Union politics were concerned, the bulk of Scots had no say until the late nineteenth century and so the politics of the United Kingdom, except in moments of possible revolutionary ferment, had far less relevance than the politics of their towns or cities or, even more importantly, of their religious communities. The Union had little impact on life *within* Scotland, because, if we follow Lindsay Paterson's argument, the nation continued to insist on, and to exist within, its own autonomous institutional traditions.[77] Perhaps Scottish historians have been so fixated with the narrative of Union that they have failed to recognise that they 'have quite simply got things wrong, and have failed to contextualize' Scottish events 'with appropriate sensitivity and discrimination' (*L&U*, 16). Appropriate 'sensitivity and discrimination' might suggest that the Union as a political event involving two nations has obscured the fact that it was, from a Scottish perspective, primarily a union between two empires: the actually existing English Empire and the phantom Scottish Empire left behind by the failure of the effort of the 'Company of Scotland' to establish a Scottish colony at Darien. Political union in 1707 was only a mask for the real aim of Scottish society, which was the establishment of a Scottish empire – a Christian Scottish Empire – an aim which was to be fulfilled in the following two centuries not only by the mass emigration of Scots to

---

always possible that the Scottish Parliament could follow, for instance, a totally different foreign policy. And at the time of the War of Spanish succession, this was important. Imagine the difficulties if Scotland chose to support a different side, particularly as it had always enjoyed a special understanding with France.'

[75] See, for instance, Jonathan Clark, *From Restoration to Reform: The British Isles 1660–1832* (London, 2014), 179: 'The Dublin and Edinburgh Parliaments were increasingly subjected to the London government, and when the Edinburgh body threatened to break free its existence was terminated in 1707.'

[76] Robert Burns, 'Such a Parcel of Rogues in a Nation'.

[77] Lindsay Paterson, *The Autonomy of Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1994).

North America, various parts of Africa, Australia and New Zealand but by Scotland's missionary zeal for converting the heathen and for establishing in those territories distinctively Scottish institutions – not only churches, schools and universities but medical schools and their associated botanic gardens, as well as newspapers and publishing companies. The Union might have been invisible but the Empire was not. As Linda Colley suggested in *Britons: The Forging of the Nation* (1992),

> For some Scots, though, it was less the job and trading opportunities that empire provided, than the *idea* of empire that proved most compelling. If Britain's primary identity were to be an imperial one, then the English were put firmly and forever in their place, reduced to a component part of a much greater whole, exactly like the Scots, and no longer the people who ran virtually the whole show. A British imperium, in other words, enabled the Scots to feel themselves peers of the English in a way still denied them in an island kingdom. The language bears this out very clearly. The English and the foreign are still to inclined today to refer to the island of Great Britain as 'England'. But at no time have they ever customarily referred to an English empire. When it existed, as in retrospect, the empire has always been emphatically British.[78]

Colley's suggestion that it was the Scots who made the Empire *British* was given a different orientation by John M. MacKenzie's suggestion that a 'four nations' account of British history should be applied to the Empire as well – that there was no single 'British' Empire but English, Scottish and even Irish and Welsh empires operating under the same flag,[79] a suggestion which was amply illustrated in 2001 by Michael Fry's *The Scottish Empire*.[80] The context of a 'four nations' Empire may explain one of the abiding mysteries of Scottish history – the country's failure to produce a nationalist politics in the era when nationalism became a driving force in European history.[81] Scotland did not

---

[78] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996; Yale UP 1992), 136.

[79] John M. MacKenzie, *Scotland and the Empire: an inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Lancaster on 13 May 1992* (Lancaster, 1995).

[80] Michael Fry, *The Scottish Empire* (Edinburgh, 2001).

[81] Kidd attributes this lack of a nineteenth-century nationalism and, therefore, a lack of a self-conscious unionism, to the power of 'banal unionism': 'Between the mid-eighteenth century and the emergence of the Scottish Question in the 1970s there was no credible, sustained or widely supported Scottish critique of the Anglo-Scottish Union, and as such no call for an articulate ideology of Anglo-Scottish

need the kind of 'resistant' nationalism that led, in Ireland, to independence in 1922, because it was the all-too-effective source of a 'projective' nationalism that sought to impose new versions of its own institutions in territories across the world. Empire was the visible context of Scotland's invisible unionism because the Union was only a means towards Scotland's imperial ambitions. The Union might be invisible in Scottish literature, but the Empire, from Smollett's *Roderick Random* to the South Sea tales of Robert Louis Stevenson or Muriel Spark's African stories, was not. Acceptance of an incorporating British union may have been the apparent decision of 1707 but it was not its real purpose – Empire was that purpose, and it is Empire, not Union, that shapes both Scottish history and Scottish literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Union was not invisible because banal but because it was insignificant in comparison with the pressing opportunities of Empire and imperial connections in Scottish cultural life.

As a result, 'four nations' history as defined by Kidd is precisely the *parochial* history of these islands: Scotland was situated, from the mid-eighteenth century to the fifth decade of the twentieth, in a multi-state history in which the most important cultural influences were not necessarily those of London but those of far more distant places of Scottish migration. The United States and Canada were, for many – perhaps even for most – Scots, as close to Scotland as England, and even Australia and New Zealand became, increasingly, part of Scotland's imagination of its place in the world.[82] Scotland's culture was reshaped not by Kidd's 'Anglicization, assimilation, cultural integrity, and Anglo-Scottish hybridity (*L&U*, 3) but by an imperial and, later, by a decidedly and decisively American context which encouraged Scots to see themselves as, like Americans, Canadians and Australians, unassimilated by Britishness. As American capital provided the infrastructure which, from the Singer Sewing Machine plant established in Clydebank in 1867, to the role of NCR in Dundee in the creation of ATMs in the 1970s, to the filming of Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* novels in a studio in Cumbernauld in the 2010s, only a Pocockian history that included the United States as well as the settler colonies could do justice to Scotland's cultural and literary relationships across the world of Scottish migration.

Kidd's version of 'four-nations' history remains fundamentally the history of assimilation by and to England, but Scotland's involvement with Empire

---

unionism', Kidd, *Union and Unionisms*, 24.

[82] See, for instance, the touring itineraries of such Scottish celebrities as Andy Stewart, the Alexander Brothers and Billy Connolly.

and its aftermath has given it a very different orbit from the 'concentric circles'
so beloved by those who can only see Scotland as nestled within the Union.
The Union was Scotland's stepping-stone to a very much broader world
with which the country has been far more involved than it has been with
the increasing banalities of Anglo-British culture. Cultural Americanization
in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries redrew the border that
distinguished Scotland from England, as Scots enthusiastically adopted and
adapted American products and American cultural artefacts. It is no accident
(as they used to say in literary histories) that one of the most important of
modern Scottish novelists, James Kelman, spent some of his teenage years in
Los Angeles as the son of Glasgow migrants, and has a brother who remained
there and is an American citizen and a military veteran.[83] Kelman insists that
his influences were 'from Russian literature, some German, some French, and
some American' but that 'there was absolutely nobody in English literature';[84]
equally, almost all the major Scottish poets of the second half of the twentieth
century developed their styles by learning not from English precursors but
from Americans – Douglas Dunn from Robert Lowell, Edwin Morgan from
William Carlos Williams and the Beats, Liz Lochhead from Sylvia Plath. They
did so because 'Americanization' gave them a way out of what had become
an increasingly defeatist 'Anglo-Scottish hybridity' ruled over by an 'English
Ascendancy' culture. 'Essential Scotland' as a literary category exists only
in the imaginations of those who are committed to British History as the
fulfilment of 'essential Englishness'.

VII

As all literary critics know, stories are constructed from a point of view that
assigns certain characters to the foreground and others to the background
of a plot. Authors can play games with these boundaries by, for instance,
killing off the character who appears, initially, to be in the foreground and
allowing one of those in the background to become central to the narrative,
or by making the narrator, who appears to be no more than an observer of
the action, instrumental in its actual development. The same – if less self-
consciously – is true of the historian, and it is therefore significant that what
is important in modern Scottish literature for Kidd are not the narratives

---

[83] See *The Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2011), *Migrating Minds*, 'A Public
Interview with James Kelman', 167–78, at 174–5.
[84] Ibid., 178.

foregrounding working-class vernacular, as exemplified by James Kelman and Anne Donovan, nor the apocalyptic science fictions of Alasdair Gray or Iain M. Banks, nor even the bestselling genre fictions of Ian Rankin or Val McDermid. In the foreground of Kidd's account of modern Scottish writing is Douglas Galbraith's *The Rising Sun* (2000), which is about the attempt to found a Scottish colony at Darien. This novel and Kidd's focus on it are part of a longstanding pattern in Scottish culture, in which Darien needs to be imaginatively revisited every time that Scotland looks as though it might threaten to gain some degree of political independence. John Prebble's *The Darien Disaster* was first published in 1968, when the SNP had begun its initial rise to public notice after the election of Winnie Ewing in the Hamilton by-election in 1967. The book was reissued by Mainstream in Edinburgh in 1978 on the eve of the first devolution referendum and issued again by Birlinn, under a slightly different title, in 2000 in the immediate aftermath of the establishment of the Scottish parliament. Galbraith's novel was published in that same year – perhaps it was intended for 1999? – and a play on Darien, entitled *Caledonia*, was produced by the National Theatre of Scotland in 2010, the year in which a minority SNP government was threatening to become a majority one. 'Darien-as-history-as-literature' is used to insist that Scotland's history is the history of a failed nation which was redeemed by the Union of 1707. Kidd's summary of the novel reinforces this particular reading of Scottish history:

> *The Rising Sun* reads in several places like a parable on nationalist delusion. Galbraith describes the Darien mania that induced otherwise canny Scots to invest in a speculative colonial project (whose failure swallows much of Scotland's limited capital resources). Moreover, he uses the Darien colony itself – Caledonia, which had its chief settlement at New Edinburgh and a defensive enclosure at Fort St Andrew – as a dark satirical microcosm of the Scotland the colonists had left behind. Soon 'Caledonia is divided'; given 'our tendency to faction', the colony becomes a 'fractured society', each segment of which was preoccupied 'with its own enemies'. In echoes of the anti-Presbyterian tradition in Scottish literature, the colony's rigid Presbyterian chaplains strive to make Caledonia a dour place of righteousness . . . (*L&U*, 34–5)

Darien is not simply a colonial failure but a 'dark satirical microcosm' of the Scotland from which the colonists had departed. Kidd lights on this particular

novel out of the all the Scottish novels of the new century because it accords
with his own conception of Scottish history as faction-ridden and regressive
in comparison with the English history which backward Scotland had the
good fortune to join. A very different view of Scotland's relation with Empire
might have been drawn from James Robertson's *Joseph Knight* (2003), but Kidd
also chooses to focus on Josephine Tey, pen-name of Jennifer M. Henderson,
who wrote a radio play about the unjust hanging of three English seamen in
Scotland in the run-up to the decision to pass the Act of Union. This event
also appears as the conclusion to *The Rising Sun*, revealing that those who were
against the Union were not representatives of the values of an ancient nation
but simply a degraded and self-destructive mob:

> On the scaffold the men died and were still. The crowd glared at the
> bodies in sulky, disappointed silence. The hangmen cut the ropes with
> a hatchet. The bodies fell and were thrown on a cart.
>
>   Only when the great sullen mass formed a procession behind the cart
> did it begin to find its voice again. Even so, the attempts at jubilation
> were never whole-hearted . . . The crowd was jaded and resentful. As it
> approached the city and was pressed together by the narrowing road it
> began to tear at itself. Insults and accusations were thrown from group
> to group. It kicked and punched and bit.[85]

The mob is the antithesis of Anderson's 'imagined community' as 'unisonance'.
The implication is clear: the 'rising sun' which had been the hope invested in
Darien will give way to the rising sun of the Union. The narrator-protagonist
escapes from faction-ridden Scotland to journey towards London, in the
company of a Jewish merchant who says,

> 'Listen, son to what an old Jew has learned about countries. I know
> it wasn't God who made countries. What are they for? I ask. No one
> could ever tell me. What sort of a thing is it that no one knows what it's
> for, I ask you? Countries? Forget about them! God grant that we never
> have one of our own to break our hearts. No one needs a country.' He
> waved his hand imperiously towards the south. 'There's always plenty
> of space in someone else's, if you make yourself amenable.'[86]

---

[85] Douglas Galbraith, *The Rising Sun* (London, 2000), 511.
[86] Ibid., 516.

Kidd's decision to highlight this novel – a good novel, but by no means among the outstanding achievements of the period – is because it fits a particular narrative of Scottish history in which Kidd has himself invested, the narrative of a blighted country redeemed by the opportunity to acquire and to contribute to the culture of its more advanced neighbour. In Hayden White's terms, history as tragedy turns into history as comic romance: what might have been a tragic ending as Scotland descended into the bankruptcy of its Darien escapade is, in fact, a new beginning, in which the Union – that *Rising Sun*, foretelling the Enlightenment to come – will pay back the nation's losses. Thereafter, its most talented individuals can, like the protagonist of Galbraith's novel, set off for the future that is London, leaving dark, delusional and fanatic Scotland behind them.

The account of the history of Scottish literary criticism in *Literature and Union* is no less dominated by delusion: 'There is a tale to be told', Gerard Carruthers tells us, 'about the solipsism of twentieth-century Scottish literary criticism' (*L&U*, 349), its curiosity being its origin in Gregory Smith's tracing, in *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*, of a 'rather manic sensibility in Scottish literature' (*L&U*, 351). By treating Gregory Smith as the origin of the discipline of Scottish literature, Carruthers ignores the discipline's long eighteenth- and nineteenth-century development, which culminates in John Hepburn Millar's compendious *A Literary History of Scotland*, published in 1903, or the generous space devoted to Scottish literature in *The Cambridge History of English Literature* (1907–21). The discipline of Scottish literature was not born in the aftermath of the First World War, in conjunction with the 'self-determination' principles of the Treaty of Versailles. It had been implicated from the very beginning of the discipline of English Literature – which Robert Crawford attributes to Adam Smith and Hugh Blair[87] – by Blair's public defence of the 'Poems of Ossian' as the expression of an early Celtic society which retained all the elements that made the works of Homer so distinctive. Carruthers suggests that a fake 'celticism', derived from Matthew Arnold's account of the English imagination, shaped the emergence of the discipline of Scottish literature: 'Arnold's mid-Victorian encouragement of Celticism lent permission for a whole raft of Scottish critics to advance a strong Celtic component in their accounts of Scottish literature' (*L&U*, 350). This, however, ignores the fact that Arnold was himself responding to Macpherson's Ossianic poetry, and to Blair's account of it, and rejecting the

---

[87] Robert Crawford, *The Scottish Invention of English Literature* (Cambridge, 1998), 7–9.

attributions of falsity to its 'celticism':

> Make the part of what is forged, modern, tawdry, spurious, in the book, as large as you please; strip Scotland, if you like of every feather of borrowed plumes which on the strength of Macpheron's *Ossian* she may have stolen from that *vetus et major Scotia*, the true home of the Ossianic poetry, Ireland . . . there will still be left in the book a residue with the very soul of the Celtic genius in it, and which has had the proud distinction of having brought this soul of the Celtic genius into contact with the genius of the nations of modern Europe.[88]

In a truly 'British' context Arnold is a latecomer and it is Blair, often accused of the Anglicisation of Scottish literature,[89] who insists on the priority of Celtic literature as the foundation on which modern English literature has to be built. 'Celticism' is no recent and delusional product of twentieth-century literary criticism: it is absolutely foundational to what 'British' meant in the aftermath of the Union of 1707. There could be no 'Britain' if there was not appropriate acknoweldgment and inclusion of the Celts. British 'contexts' might be more appropriate if this – rather than a harmonious, undifferentiated, anglicised uniformity – was acknowledged as one of the fundamental contexts of Scottish literature and its criticism.

And Gregory Smith's contribution might be better understood if it was acknowledged that the original lectures on which his book was based were delivered in Belfast in the aftermath of the Easter Rising in Dublin, and with the prospect of partition as the outcome of the negotiations over the future of Ireland. Smith's account of the nature of Scottish literature was an implicit defence of the Union and of Scotland's place in it, made in the context of the looming end of the Union after the general election vote in December 1918, which gave Sinn Féin an overwhelming majority of Irish seats at Westminster. These were seats the new MPs would not take up, planning to withdraw to Dublin to establish an independent Ireland. Gregory Smith's account of Scottish literature was delivered in Unionist-voting Ulster as a defence of Scotland's difference within English literature – even if a difference which

---

[88] Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (London, 1867), 152–3.
[89] Robert Crawford, 'England's Scotland', *Literature & Union*, 335: 'Part of this problem is explained by the "Scottish invention of English literature" as a university subject. Its pioneers, including Adam Smith and Hugh Blair, liked to champion Anglocentric values'.

was steadily being eroded – but also as an emphatic insistence on Scotland's unassertive and unthreatening distinction within the Union, one that ensured its compatibility with a Unionist future. In other words, the British and Unionist perspective which Kidd and Carruthers complain has been ignored by Scottish literary critics was the very ground on which modern Scottish literary criticism, in their account of its origins, was built. If Scottish literary criticism has been deformed by the influence of Gregory Smith, it has been deformed not by Scottish 'essentialism' but by Scoto-British Unionism.

VIII

Kidd takes James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) to be the ultimate statement of 'banal unionism', because the original action of Hogg's *Confessions* takes place 'with the momentous contemporary events that comprised the making of the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707 lurking unobtrusively in the recessive backdrop of the novel, a matter of seeming indifference' (*L&U*, 39). Despite the amount of critical attention that has been devoted to Hogg's novel in recent years, Kidd reads it as it was first read in the 1940s and 1950s after over a hundred years of neglect: it is a novel 'of Calvinist psychology and the antinomian excesses that – taken to logical extremes – it is liable to engender in the self-assured elect' (*L&U*, 38). If this were indeed the central theme of the novel, there would be no need for the same events to be presented twice, once in the Editor's account and once in Robert Wringhim's own. The point of the double narrative is precisely to set in doubt that the people of a later time can, as Kidd believes historians do, 'aim to recover the values of our ancestors on their own terms' (*L&U*, 16). Hogg's point is that Wringhim's world is simply unbelievable to the modern Editor of his text: 'Were the relation at all consistent with reason, it corresponds so minutely with traditionary facts, that it could scarcely have missed to be received as authentic; but in this day, it will not go down that a man should be daily tempted by the devil, in the semblance of a fellow-creature'.[90] Wringhim is a man trapped twice-over in narratives of someone else's devising – first in the delusions imposed on him by the Devil, whom he has inadvertently invited into his life, and then by the Editor's re-presentation of his life as one in which 'it is certainly impossible that these scenes could ever have occurred, that he describes as having himself transacted'.[91] Set in the context of the Editor's

---

[90] John Carey (ed.), James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (Oxford, 1969), 254.

[91] Ibid.

secular scepticism, Wringhim's account of himself becomes incredible. What had once been the common belief of a Christian world – the reality of Satan and his tempting of human beings to damnation – has no place 'in this day, and with the present generation'. Even when, by an apparent miracle, the text of Wringhim's confession survives, its intended meaning is devoured (like Scotland after the Union?) by a context it could not foresee.

Wringhim's narrative does not simply dramatise 'Calvinist psychology': it dramatizes the 'forging' of history, in which the 'realities' of the past become inconceivable to a later generation, who must re-read the past as an 'allegory'[92] produced by 'not only the greatest fool, but the greatest wretch, on whom was ever stamped the form of humanity'.[93] However, it is the Editor of Wringhim's text who is the 'greatest fool', because he is incapable of comprehending that what Wringhim's *Confession* leaves to the future is the knowledge that evil and the Devil are real and have not left the world, undeflected by a mere improvement in historical circumstances. The Editor, of course, is a nineteenth-century representative of the anglicising world which Kidd takes to be the true Scotland of post-Union experience. The Scotland that Hogg presents, however, both in its religious and its folk traditions and in its modern transformations, is very different: it is a Scotland deeply resistant to secular modernity's assumption of its historical superiority.

Perhaps it is symptomatic of the blindness of the discipline of history in Scotland that it has not engaged with the consequences of those strong versions of theory which have found in Hogg's novel a powerful precursor because of the ways in which it puts in doubt the communicability of the past – and, therefore, puts in doubt the foundations of the discipline of history itself. And perhaps it is symptomatic, too, that Scottish historians do not perceive in the *Confessions* an ironic image of their own versions of pre- and post-Union Scottish culture. And perhaps, in the end, the Scottish historian needs to look in the mirror of Hogg's novel and see in it the distorting reflection of those who believe that they can construct the Scottish past in their own image.

'Context', British or otherwise, is very much more disruptive of our versions of the past than *Literature & Union* would have us believe.

University of Aberdeen

---

[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.