

What is Scottish Literature?



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A mountainous landscape, sensually presented in vivid colours, with deep seawater and freshwater lochs, long stretches of land forming bays and peninsulas around inlets; a natural and ancient world, but with a scattering of houses; a populated landscape, far from cities but occupied by people and the lives, concerns, loves and dispositions of generations. The painting on the cover is 'The Cuillins, Evening, April 1964' by John Cunningham (1926–1998). In his own English translation, the Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean (1911–1996) ends his poem 'The Cuillin' like this:

Beyond the lochs of the blood of the children of men,
beyond the frailty of plain and the labour of mountain,
beyond poverty, consumption, fever, agony,
beyond hardship, wrong, tyranny, distress,
beyond misery, despair, hatred, treachery,
beyond guilt and defilement: watchful
heroic, the Cuillin is seen
rising on the other side of sorrow.

The poem was written in 1939, at the beginning of the Second World War. Evidently, MacLean's understanding of the rise of Fascism in Europe was countered by the permanent symbolic hope represented by the mountain range of his native place. He was born on the island of Raasay, beside Skye, and grew up looking over towards these mountains, climbing them as a young man. By the twentieth century, of course, most of Scotland's population was living in the cities – Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee – and their experience was more generally urban than not. So we might begin with a recognisable image of Scotland as a place of natural beauty and symbolic authority, but we must deepen our understanding with a sense of the historical complexity of Scotland's national identity before we can begin to fully encounter the richness of Scottish literature.

'Scotland' is a word that names a particular nation, defined by geographical borders. However, in the early twenty-first century, since the union of the crowns of Scotland and England in 1603 and the union of the parliaments of Edinburgh and London in 1707, this nation exists within the political state of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with its global legacy of British imperialism. Therefore it must be imagined in two different dimensions: as part of a political state called the United Kingdom, and as a single nation of separate cultural distinction, along with other nations in the world.

For people who live within the borders of this nation, certain things will be conferred by languages, geology, climate and weather, architectural design, terrain, current cultural habits and a history of cultural production, that might be different from such things elsewhere. The languages in which most Scottish literature is written – Gaelic, Scots and English – confer their own rhythms, sounds, musical dynamics, and relations

between them confer their own character upon the priorities of expression in speech and writing. Geography creates another range of characteristics. Growing up in different cities (few are as different as Glasgow and Edinburgh) or growing up near the coast in a tidal landscape, with the sea returning the way it does, is different from growing up in a rainforest or a desert. Suburbs in New Zealand are different from suburbs in Scotland. Cities have their own characters and specific histories, antiquities and modernities.

Where did this nation begin?

Over half a millennium, from Columba's time in the sixth century, through Kenneth MacAlpin in the ninth century and Malcolm Canmore in the eleventh century, different groups of people of different languages and cultural preferences got to know more about each other and began to live together in a comity of identity. The encircling threat by sea from Norse raiders and from the south by Anglo-Saxon peoples began to confer a defined position for this multi-faceted identity.

Identity is a function of position, and position is a function of power. The key qualities informing the creation of Scotland's national identity were, first, a recognition that the nation was made up of different peoples, different languages, diversities of terrain and culture, and second, a recognition of the parameters surrounding that identity. As the American poet Charles Olson puts it:

Limits
are what any of us
is inside of

The Wars of Independence through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, led by William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, culminated in Bruce's victory over massed English forces at Bannockburn in 1314 and the Treaty of Northampton in 1328. A consciousness – evident in writing and other forms of expression – of what we might recognise today as an idea of national identity had been generated strongly by the late 1300s. John Barbour wrote a historical epic poem about Bruce in the 1370s and in the late 1400s and early 1500s, through the reigns of James III and James IV, great poetry was written by major figures such as Robert Henryson, William Dunbar, Gavin Douglas and Blind Harry (who in the 1470s wrote another epic poem of stories about Wallace). Poets and composers – including Scotland's greatest composer, Robert Carver – flourished at the magnificently cultured Renaissance court of James IV.

In 1603, King James VI of Scotland rode south to London on the death of Queen Elizabeth I of England. He united the two kingdoms and the court was now centred in London. The moment was a watershed for English literature. The English poet Edmund Spenser's long poem *The Faerie Queen* was written in a spirit of religious devotion, but formally his writing was becoming passé in an age in which theatres were being built in the capital city. Instead of an intricately patterned unity, a unifying structure envisioned by Spenser, the essential thing about the literary form of the play is the action between separate characters, the creation of others and otherness. One of the reasons for the enduring popularity of *Hamlet* is its representation of a lonely

individual at its centre. And one reason for the greatness of Shakespeare's later tragedies – especially *King Lear* – is that he lived through the demise of the Elizabethan age and experienced the rise of the Jacobean era, and saw what it might portend.

In the late 1600s, wealthy Scots put their money into a colonial venture in the Caribbean at a place called Darien near the isthmus of Panama. They had seen how the wind was blowing with England's colonial dominions and thought they might build an empire of their own. The project was disastrous and much of the financial wealth of Scotland was lost. In 1707, the Scottish parliament voted itself out of existence and sent delegates to the London parliament. It was partly an attempt to buoy up a precarious economy by joining a bigger enterprise. Scotland retained self-determination in its legal and educational systems and church identity but dissolved its political selfhood. There was resistance. The Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745 were not purely Scottish nationalist but they represented a serious threat to the economy of the newly-created United Kingdom. When Bonnie Prince Charlie's soldiers approached London, the value of the British pound dropped to sixpence. Such a threat to the Union prompted a violent response and reprisals against the Highlanders were brutal. For a time, the bagpipes, the kilt and the Gaelic language itself were intensely oppressed. If you were a Gael, you might be punished for playing music, wearing normal clothes or simply speaking your own language. So a strange thing happened: bagpipes, Highland dress and Gaelic became symbols of an oppressed culture. But since they were actually expressions of that culture, you might say that they became symbols of themselves. This helped give them a tremendously potent force in later years. One exaggeration of that is the extent to which they became clichés of Scottish identity, instantly recognisable throughout the world. Highland soldiers in kilts were known in twentieth-century World Wars as 'the ladies from Hell'. But the deepening force of these symbols, surviving as it has done through centuries of caricature, can be heard most clearly in the classical music of the Highland bagpipe, pibroch. Hugh MacDiarmid described this music brilliantly:

The bagpipes – they are screaming and they are sorrowful.
 There is a wail in their merriment and cruelty in their triumph.
 They rise and fall like a weight swung in the air at the end of a string.

He says that they are 'like a human voice' – then he corrects himself:

No! for the human voice lies!
 They are like human life that flows under the words.

The paradox was that while Highland identity was subject to colonial oppression, the long tradition began of successful Scots – including Highlanders – engaging in the developing British Empire and identifying themselves with it. In the nineteenth century Scotland was widely known as North Britain. One of the most fascinating novelists of the period was John Galt, whose detailed depiction of the commercial priorities of small-town Scotland and the pathos of the imperial aspiration are moving aspects of *Annals of the Parish* and *The Entail*. Scottish identity was internationally recognised in the images

known even today all over the world: not only bagpipes and tartan but whisky, heather, haggis, wild mountain scenery, islands and Highlands. While these images largely derive from exaggerations and caricatures of Highland, rural and pastoral life, Scotland's people in the nineteenth century were overwhelmingly moving to live in the big industrial cities of Glasgow, Dundee and the towns of the Central Belt. They brought the ideals of community and family life into new conditions of urban deprivation.

To many Scottish writers and artists, the First World War was the culmination of imperialism. Two other international events inspired many of them at this time: the Irish rising at Easter 1916 and the Russian socialist revolution of 1917. A Celtic nation asserting its independence from the British state and an assertion of aggressively idealist Communism to break down the social divisiveness of the class system were both, for many of Scotland's people, inspirational acts. MacDiarmid, who had enlisted in the British Army for the war, eager like a whole generation of young men to march into the apocalypse and be part of what seemed like Armageddon, said once that when he heard of the Irish rebellion he wished it had been possible to get out of British uniform and join the Irish fighting imperialism.

In the 1920s a literary and cultural movement heralded a political drive towards renewed political, as well as cultural, self-determination. The National Party of Scotland was formed in 1928. It was not until 1979 that a referendum was held for the population of Scotland to vote for or against devolved political power. A majority of voters were in favour of devolution but the referendum was torpedoed by London authorities in government because, it was said, not enough people had turned out to vote. In 1997 another referendum was held, in which voters in Scotland conclusively declared their preference for devolved self-determination and tax-raising powers. A new Scottish parliament was built and opened in 1999.

Robert Burns's great song, insisting that the human worth of any individual is the true measure of his or her value, and not their economic or social status – 'A Man's a Man For a' That' – was powerfully sung by Sheena Wellington on the occasion, and many press reports noted that the forceful sentiments of the song prompted irritated and uncomfortable comments from the landed gentry and the aristocracy among the assembled company. It would be wrong to underestimate the immediate effect and social relevance of Burns's words even now. This was the report in *The Australian* newspaper: 'chosen by the organisers instead of Britain's national anthem, "God Save the Queen", [Burns] hails the nobility of honest poverty and pokes fun at the titles and trappings of nobility.'

To members of Britain's nobility, the song was a slap in the face to the royal family.

'By choosing this song and rejecting the national anthem, they are flaunting a sort of separatism in a Parliament which is supposed to preserve the United Kingdom,' the Earl of Lauderdale said.

In an emotional twist, all 129 new members of the Scottish Parliament loudly joined in for the last verse, which proclaims that a day will come when 'over all the earth' men will become brothers.

Donald Dewar, Scotland's First Minister, added in an ensuing speech: 'At the heart of the song is a very Scottish conviction that honesty and simple dignity are priceless virtues, not imparted by rank or birth or privilege but part of the soul.'

Two new poems were written for the new parliament, in praise of what should and might be done with Scotland's resumed powers and renewed political purpose. The first was by Iain Crichton Smith, who praised the democratic basis of Scotland as a 'three-voiced country' in which Gaelic, Scots and English were clearly seen as co-existing national languages, reminding the people of the variousness of their identity. The second was written by Edwin Morgan, who was given the designation of National Poet (or Scots Makar, the medieval Scots term for poet), effectively Scotland's first Poet Laureate, on 16 February 2004.

In the early twenty-first century, Scotland was a devolved power within the United Kingdom, with citizens of the country entitled to British passports and subject to laws endorsed in England. On matters of international significance such as relations with the USA, the nuclear industry, the activities of the British army, international trade and economic relations, global industries, power resided in London. On some national Scottish matters, such as priorities in education and land rights, the devolved Scottish parliament proved effective in bringing about constructive change. On certain questions that might be openly debated, the people of Scotland – whether marching in public demonstrations or in the letters pages of the national press – have been more expressive than many of their political representatives. And in 2007, three hundred years after the Treaty of Union of 1707, they elected a Scottish Nationalist government to power in Edinburgh.

Hugh MacDiarmid's poem 'Scotland' describes something essential about the unfinished story of the nation that is also represented in the multi-faceted, under-researched archives of the nation's literature, and both the effort and love required to open those archives fully. This is how it begins:

It requires great love of it deeply to read
The configuration of a land,
Gradually grow conscious of fine shadings,
Of great meanings in slight symbols,
Hear at last the great voice that speaks softly,
See the swell and fall upon the flank
Of a statue carved out in a whole country's marble,
Be like Spring, like a hand in a window
Moving New and Old things carefully to and fro,
Moving a fraction of flower here,
Placing an inch of air there,
And without breaking anything.

MacDiarmid's task, as he described it in this poem, was to 'have gathered unto myself / All the loose ends of Scotland' –

And by naming them and accepting them,
Loving them and identifying myself with them,
Attempt to express the whole.

The history of Scotland and the people who have lived in Scotland informs the trajectory of a distinctive Scottish literature. Particular themes related to that history are represented in Scottish literature. For example, the union of the parliaments in 1707 precipitated a number of poems and songs which are part of a long tradition of literary work addressing the question of the national identity of Scotland, its role within the British Empire and the hostility of many of our best writers to imperialism. The era of Enlightenment and Romanticism, from around 1750 to around 1840, is distinctively complex in Scottish literature. In English literature, this era is conventionally seen as a progression from the classical precision, snap and crackle of Pope to the individualistic radicalism and grand gestures of Shelley. In Scottish literature, however, a more complex blend of these two cultural contexts is evident in, for example, Burns (certainly Romantic, but also a child of the Enlightenment) and Scott (certainly an Enlightenment writer, but also the novelist whose heroes and heroines include the Highland outlaw Rob Roy and the peasant cow-feeder's daughter Jeanie Deans). In 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel', Scott's famous declaration of loyalty to individual national identity is both one of the grandest of Romantic gestures and an assertion of comprehensive social character:

Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said,
This is my own, my native land!

O Caledonia! stern and wild,
Meet nurse for a poetic child!
Land of brown heath and shaggy wood
Land of the mountain and the flood...

A similar complexity can be understood in Scottish literature's relation to Modernism. James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound dedicated themselves to aesthetic priorities to cleave away from Victorian sentimentalism, secure hierarchies of perspective and the reliable rhythms of the iambic pentameter and, in Pound's phrase, 'Make it new!' But MacDiarmid, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Sorley MacLean and others were, in the 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s, dedicated not only to making it new but also recovering and recuperating a vast neglected history of literary practice and lived experience from Scotland's past, especially in the 'subject' languages, Scots and Gaelic. For them, to make it new was to reclaim and reinvent the ancient.

Thinking of that historical trajectory, let's take a journey through Scottish literature now, at some speed, a very fast overview of the whole story. This will leave out masses of material but if it sounds out a shape, a terrain, a statue carved out of a whole country's marble, then it might act as an overture for a more discursive and detailed engagement with individual authors and works.

An Overview of Scottish Literature

Scottish literature is one of the oldest vernacular literatures in Europe and covers an immense range of experience in history and social context, language and character. In Scottish literature you will meet some of the world's major authors and most essential writing. And you will be introduced to aspects of Scotland and Scottish life which are available nowhere else: there are authors and works here that are simply unimaginable outwith Scotland. Scottish literature has often been described in historical periods and specific cultural movements. These are the contours of a complex terrain.

1. Early Literature

The earliest works we might consider in a constellation that shines into the beginning of an identifiable tradition of Scottish literature include the stories of the great Celtic warriors and lovers such as Cuchulain, who learned the arts of war on Skye, and Deirdre who spent nine of her happiest years of life in Glen Etive and its surrounding valleys. These stories and the songs that go with them predate Christianity in Scotland, and the image of Ossian returning after long absence to a Christianised world from which his former companions, the Celtic warriors, have all departed, is one of the signal evocations of haunting and loss that underpin many depictions of the Gaelic world, all the way to the twentieth century and Sorley MacLean's poem about the cleared township of Hallaig on his native Raasay.

Norse and Icelandic sagas touch on aspects of Scotland's North Atlantic location and its surrounding islands, especially *The Orkneyinga Saga*, which had such an influence on George Mackay Brown in the twentieth century. The sagas emphasise the extent to which the northern islands, Orkney and Shetland and the Outer and Inner Hebrides in the western sea, were all for a long time identified with Scandinavian authorities rather than with the kingdom of Scotland. But the sea is an open road.

It brought Columba from Ireland, and Christian literature such as the great poem 'Altus Prosator' ('In Praise of God the Most High') attributed to him was written in Latin. There is a great deal of early work in this tradition from Iona and elsewhere, including the *Book of Kells*, created on Iona, and Adomnán's biography of Columba, one of the earliest biographies we have. It's full of great stories, like Columba's commanding the Loch Ness Monster to stop terrorising the locals, or the old white horse who walks over and gently lays its long head on Columba's shoulder on the day of his death.

Literature written in what we might call Welsh also forms part of the early hinterland, especially the sixth-century poem *The Gododdin*, an unforgettable assembly of chiaroscuro visions or glimpses of fighters in blood and defiance. The 83 fragments in the A-text scatter abstractions and concrete images together. It begins:

Courage of young men, eager to fight –
 The thick hair waves of the manes of the stallions riding –
 The young men gripping their horses' bellies with strong legs, riding –
 Each with a light shield strapped over the rump of his horse –
 Swordblades shine blue. Their clothes have gold fringes –
 I praise you. On a field all puddled and sodden with blood –
 Too young to be married, you were eaten by crows –
 Before they could bury you, Owen is lying there covered in ravens –
 In what far place was old Mark's only son hacked down?

The ethos of the poem is reminiscent of Tacitus's *Agricola* (98 AD), in which the warrior Calgacus confronts advancing Roman troops with a damned but defiant speech to his own army denouncing imperialism.

In Ruthwell, near Dumfries in the south of Scotland, stands the Ruthwell Cross, a tall stone sculpture on which fragments of the Old English poem 'The Dream of the Rood' can be discerned. This poem is a memorable evocation of the human sacrifice crystallised in the image of Christ's crucifixion, as it reads as if spoken by the cross itself, telling us what it was like to bear the weight of the body of the man who died to save humankind.

So literature in Gaelic, Norse, Latin, Welsh and Old English are all part of the linguistic mix we begin with.

2. Medieval, Renaissance and Reformation Literature

This would include the poems associated with the Wars of Independence: John Barbour's *The Bruce* and Blind Harry's *The Wallace*. These are historical fictions, stories full of adventure and anecdote based on the verisimilitude of chronicle history, mythologising the Scottish patriotic heroes in their time (not entirely unlike Mel Gibson's attempt to mythologise Wallace as *Braveheart* in the 1990s). But one of the most significant historical documents in our history is also a magnificent and lastingly influential piece of literature, the *Declaration of Arbroath* (1320). Then the three great Scots poets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – Robert Henryson, William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas – demand thorough reading. Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* is one of the great works of world literature, a proto-humanist tragedy with intensely realised characters and a pantheon of inhuman gods. Dunbar, writing at the Renaissance court of James IV (which flourished 1488–1513) was contemporary with the major composer of polyphonic choral church music Robert Carver, arguably Scotland's greatest composer. Dunbar has an enormous range of work, from the spine-chillingly humble lament for the poets he has known who have all died, to the sexually shocking vision of 'The Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins' and the discursive poem, 'The Two Married Women and the Widow'. Douglas also introduced his own descriptions of Scotland and Scotland's landscape and weather into the prefaces to his translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

The enormous play by David Lyndsay, *Ane Satire of the Thrie Estaitis* (probably first performed 1540, expanded for performances in 1552 and 1554), is a large-scale

political satire portending the Reformation and demanding political and ecclesiastical self-correction. In it, King and Church are led astray by self-indulgence and the attractions of sin, but Lyndsay insists that the answer is not only to mend their ways in the social structures of their era but also to pay attention to the complaints of the common people – John the Commonweal speaks up eloquently when he enters the scene in the second half of the play. The immense hinterland of the unrepresented people of Scotland is finding its own voice.

3. Literature of the Enlightenment and Romanticism

This is perhaps the most familiar ‘great age’ of Scottish literature, taking in the works of the Enlightenment philosophers alongside the Gaelic poets and the vernacular Scots tradition of Ramsay, Fergusson and Burns. Walter Scott might be seen as the figure who attempts to bring all these aspects into a comprehensive vision.

It’s important to note, though, that Ramsay’s attempt to reactivate a Scottish theatre tradition (which fell foul of the Church) and his anthologies of early Scottish poetry (including Henryson and Dunbar), and William Hamilton of Gilbertfield’s ‘modern’ translation of Blind Harry’s historical episodic epic *The Wallace*, were all effectively emphasising the longer traditions of Scottish literature, and were keenly appreciated by both Burns and Scott.

A related point worth noting here is that the Ossianic stories recounted by James Macpherson – which were internationally popular at the time and initiated raging debate about their validity or authenticity as translations – were in fact imaginative reconstructions of and variations from the old Celtic stories of the Ossianic heroes and lovers, now re-written in Enlightenment English for a highly literate readership. Macpherson’s work reclaimed the antiquity of Scottish Gaelic literature for an English-language readership at a time when Dr Johnson was asserting the primacy of English language and literature and the Eurocentric traditions that give weight to English literature, reaching back through Roman to Greek antiquity. What made Macpherson anathema to Johnson was the implicit claim that Scotland had an ancient civilisation and literature of its own.

It was not so much concern with antiquity but engagement with language in its immediacy and movement that vitalised the writing of Robert Burns, probably the most famous songwriter in the world. Growing up in Ayrshire in the company of people whose language was quickened and informed by a farm-world sensibility familiar with natural priorities in husbandry, sexuality, sympathy and humour, Burns was also relatively well-educated with a healthy intellectual curiosity and a vigorous appetite for discussion. He was an Enlightenment thinker but a Romantic (or at least proto-Romantic) artist, both profoundly socialised and a performative individualist. This is evident throughout his writing, not only in poems and songs but also extensively in his letters and travel-journals. It was his contemporary, the sentimental novelist Henry Mackenzie, who called him a ‘heaven-taught ploughman’, thus establishing a myth taken up by the city-sophisticates of Edinburgh and which Burns himself to

some extent endorsed. But the legend of an untutored or 'natural' genius is belied not only by the education Burns received but also the craft and wiliness of his poems; by the sophistication of his verse-letters to his friends in Ayrshire, by the subtle balances and structures of his songs and by the immense organisational skill at work in the vertiginous velocity of his narrative poem, 'Tam o' Shanter', in which a multitude of events are in action almost before they're mentioned in the text. The poem, as is well known, tells the story of an Ayrshire farmer who, after a market day spent carousing with friends, sets off home on horseback, only to pause before the old ruined church in the village of Alloway, which he sees is strangely illuminated. He goes closer. Through the glassless window he sees a dance of witches and warlocks, with the Devil himself sitting in a corner playing the bagpipes. One particularly attractive young witch (be-guiling from beyond the mortal realm) so invigorates his drunken enthusiasm that he calls out, 'Weel done' – and everything is suddenly plunged in darkness as the 'hellish legion' swarms out to try to catch and kill him. The chase is on for him to reach the bridge over the river Doon – the original 'Brig o' Doon' – because the spirits of the dead cannot cross running water (they must keep to their own local habitation). Tam makes it – just! The sexy young witch leaps ahead of the rest and clutches Tam's horse's tail, pulling it clean off before it leaps over the keystone of the bridge. The poem seems to end moralistically but in fact it engages the reader by its speed and willingness to engage in the gamesome, the drunken, the dancing, the chase, the liveliness of action. There are a multitude of different facets to Burns's achievement but the night-ride with Tam is one of the great irreverent pleasures in world literature.

Like Burns, also irreverently contemporary and unhampered by antiquarianism, in the early nineteenth century Byron was writing long narrative poems and traveling through Europe in various degrees of political engagement – characteristically a much more picaresque Scottish figure than his English Romantic contemporaries. His contemporary Walter Scott turned the course of literary history in a new direction, away from long narrative poems and towards prose fiction, with his internationally popular *Waverley Novels*. Of the two main aspects of the *Waverley Novels*, one is profoundly significant for Scottish literature, the other is of major consequence in western literary history. In a series of novels dealing with events of the Scottish past – the Jacobite rising of 1745, the Covenanters, the post-Union Porteous Riots and the question of justice in the newly United Kingdom – Scott accumulates a comprehensive vision of Scottish national identity, from the Shetland islands to his native Borders. These novels – among them *Waverley*, *Guy Mannering*, *Old Mortality*, *Rob Roy*, *The Bride of Lammermoor*, *The Heart of Midlothian*, *Redgauntlet* – are essential texts of Scottish literature. But also, major themes of racial prejudice and social justice, the rights of women, warriors and bourgeoisie, the reckless and the prudent, all feature in his internationally popular novels of medieval Romance – such as *Ivanhoe*, *The Talisman* and *The Fortunes of Nigel*.

Perhaps the most prophetic of Scott's contemporaries is James Hogg, whose *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* prefigures Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* as a foreshadowing

paradigm of the divided self more familiar in twentieth-century literature. Hogg's distinctive place in Scottish literature, however, is also specific to a period in which the fashionable popularity of printed novels and the growing science of psychological understanding is contemporaneous with a popular tradition of oral storytelling and a sensitivity to the inexplicable things in life, sometimes described in supernatural terms. If Scott brings together aspects of Enlightenment and Romanticism, Hogg brings qualities of high literary sophistication together with the complex oral arts of storytelling developed by illiterate people, to create distinctive and disturbingly ambiguous readings of the human situation that still seem deeply troubling and in touch with contemporary realities.

4. Literature of the later Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Perhaps the pre-eminent writer of the later nineteenth century is Stevenson, whose novella *Jekyll and Hyde*, short stories 'The Ebb-Tide' and 'The Beach at Falesá', children's novel *Treasure Island* and Scottish novels *Kidnapped* and *The Master of Ballantrae*, amount to a body of work defining many characteristics of his own time and of that to come. Scottish to the bone, Francophile, anti-Calvinist, international traveller, he crossed America and went into the South Pacific, breaking new ground in Scottish literature with prophetic visions of an approaching century of division and disaster. Yet the energy and delight of his writing is perennially infectious – he conveys the pleasures of childhood's energy, appetite, movement and growing strengths. At the same time, his children encounter the viciousness of adulthood – Jim Hawkins sees that Long John Silver is a murderer – and the long journey of *Kidnapped*, taking the reader across Scotland in a geographical exploration that has allowed generations of readers to follow the map to places we have never actually visited, even on our doorstep, is not only exhilarating but also uncomfortable. Friendship is at the heart of the book, but parting is its conclusion.

Stevenson's contemporaries in Scottish literature were the writers of the Kailyard and anti-Kailyard. The word means 'cabbage-patch' or vegetable garden, the implication being that in the small towns of Scotland, people grow their own and look after themselves quite happily; domestic virtues prevail in little societies presided over by minister and schoolteacher. Excessive sentimentalisation and small-mindedness go alongside anti-intellectualism and oppose recognition of the difficult questions. To some extent, the vision of Scotland presented in such writing as the stories of the minister Ian Maclaren and the poems collected in the 'Whistlebinkie' anthologies of the time was eagerly required by generations of Scots living abroad all over the world, who wanted images of Scotland that reconfirmed their sense of a happy home now left behind.

The anti-Kailyard writers included George Douglas Brown, whose novel *The House with the Green Shutters* is arguably the most devastating of all novels beside Dostoevsky. No other novel ends in such an utter and comprehensive vision of disease, disaster and death: the patriarch sees his small-town empire taken away from him and is murdered by his son, who in turn meets his violent end along with his sister and their cancer-ridden mother. J. Macdougall Hay's *Gillespie* is also an

apocalyptic vision of small-town Scotland, this time the fishing village of Tarbert, Loch Fyne. One of the great moments in the novel is the conflagration of the entire fishing fleet in the harbour. And there are the 'Dark Poets' of this era who also redress the cosy fictions of the saccharine 'Whistlebinkies'. James Young Geddes writes of industrialised Dundee with the moral outrage of Blake and the radical poetic line of his American contemporary Walt Whitman. Robert Buchanan's poems about London, Judas Iscariot, the desolate Loch Coruisk in Skye, all speak of the Godless universe of the late nineteenth-century industrial Empire. Even more poignantly, the atheist John Davidson, unable to bear the unconsoling materialism of the modern world, walked into the sea at Penzance. And James ('B.V.') Thomson, in *The City of Dreadful Night*, produced one of the key poems of the era and one of the great visionary poems of any era – hugely influential on, and some would argue, more haunting, more deeply effective than, Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Eliot himself acknowledged the significance of Davidson and Thomson for his work. Between these two extremes stands J.M. Barrie, exploring the conditions of childhood and childishness in *Peter Pan* and *Sentimental Tommy* but also going further to see the inadequacies of that 'kailyard' sentimentalism in *Tommy and Grizzel*, which sees the miserable end of the aspiration of the small-town 'Scotsman on the make' in London.

It's important to see the dynamics of the late nineteenth century providing the ground for what was to follow in the 1920s, but it had to be rediscovered. The biologist, town-planner and social visionary Patrick Geddes had heralded what he called an approaching 'Scottish Renaissance' in the 1890s but it took a while to arrive. The First World War of 1914–1918, the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916, the Russian Revolution in 1917, all blew apart the imperial certainties and authority of British monarchical rule upon which the nineteenth-century empire had been built.

When Hugh MacDiarmid (C.M. Grieve) began writing in the 1920s, it was precisely the sense of a new dispensation, an urgent need to write Scotland into the new century, that motivated him and many of his contemporaries – in music, painting, sculpture and literary and cultural criticism. This was the period MacDiarmid named 'The Scottish Literary Renaissance'. Social and political vision informed literary production in the works of Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Neil Gunn, William Soutar, Edwin Muir, James Bridie, Ewan MacColl, Joe Corrie, Ena Lamont Stewart, Naomi Mitchison, Catherine Carswell, Willa Muir and Nan Shepherd. All these writers addressed political issues directly and their poetry, fiction and drama had to find new forms in which to develop their ideas of what Scotland – and Scottish literature – might be. That imaginative revisioning involved both a sense of reawakened national identity and a sense of socialist egalitarianism.

After the Second World War, however, National Socialism was a tainted term and in the 1950s and early 1960s, the nationalist ideal was compromised by the sense that any idea of 'national destiny' was linked to the notion of 'racial identity' and therefore badly smeared with the legacies of Nazism. In the Cold War context, nevertheless, a great generation of Scottish poets emerged, all with their favoured places in Scotland, each with

a particular expertise in at least one of the languages of Scotland: to name only a few of them, Sorley MacLean (from Raasay and Skye, writing in Gaelic); George Mackay Brown (from Orkney, writing in English); from Edinburgh, Norman MacCaig (writing in English), Robert Garioch and Sydney Goodsir Smith (both writing in Scots); mainly associated with Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, Iain Crichton Smith (writing in English and Gaelic); and from Glasgow, Edwin Morgan, who was to become the first National Poet of Scotland, appointed by the Scottish Executive on 16 February 2004. And of course, until his death in 1978, MacDiarmid remained their contemporary, for many a friend and for many more a sharp and irrepressible catalyst. Many of the novelists of post-war Scotland moved away from a specifically nationalist position to an international provenance – Muriel Spark and Robin Jenkins are among the finest. But the national question remained.

5. Modern and Contemporary Literature

Since the 1980s, the ideas and ideals of MacDiarmid's 1920s Scottish Literary Renaissance began to resurface in the revised and renewed forms of a new generation. Three key texts of the 1980s suggest this recovery of the ideal of self-determination: Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, Edwin Morgan's *Sonnets from Scotland* and Liz Lochhead's play *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*.

Gray's novel comprehensively presents Scotland in its material, factual history, informed and activated by the creative imagination. Hard-headed understanding of economic realities and personal limitations go alongside exhilarating, large-scale visions of a parallel world in which the constraints of reality can be broken – though others inevitably arise. Morgan's sonnets use one the high poetic art forms of Europe to traverse Scotland's story from prehistory to post-history; real events and people, unexpected visitors and strange truths all come into the kaleidoscope as unnamed interstellar travellers look over all that Scotland has been, might have been and might yet be. Lochhead's play is not only specifically about figures from Scottish history but also, as its title insists, about how your history is conveyed to younger generations – through a children's game, or through history books? If such books are written by the victors perhaps they are best understood by the losers?

Concurrently and increasingly through the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, there was a massive quantity of first-class scholarly work published, all based in archival research, reviewing and evaluating for new generations almost all the fields of cultural production in Scotland – especially literature, art and music. This is ongoing. The resources of the National Library of Scotland are still under-explored by scholars and Scottish literature is perhaps the single most under-researched area in all literary studies. Yet contemporary writers are flourishing, in novels specifically dealing with contemporary, often domestic and social themes, in poetry not only personal and lyrical but also politically explicit, like Edwin Morgan's poem written for the opening of the Scottish Parliament, 'Open the Doors!', and in drama with the lively and as-yet undefined potential of the new National Theatre of Scotland.

Twenty-five essential Scottish writers ...

There could as easily be a hundred, of course. In other words, there are many other writers equally 'essential' but I've selected twenty-five here to start with. Cards on the table: this list seriously under-represents women, playwrights, writing in all genres in the Gaelic language and many of the anonymous poems and songs that are essential to Scottish literature, including the Ballads. It is not a list of the Major Authors in Scottish literature but a list of *some* of the essential writers I wouldn't want to be without and I could say the same about others who aren't named here. Many of them and their works have been noted in the little essays above and some are much better-known than others, so for the most part I'm only going to make slight suggestions about them in the list below.

Robert Henryson (c.1450–c.1505)

The Testament of Cresseid is Henryson's most profoundly searching extended narrative poem, but there are also *Orpheus and Eurydice* and the sequence of Aesop's *Moral Fables* which, taken together, amount to a small compendium of stories which balance and counterpoint each other. Henryson is the most sympathetic of poets, which gives him a depth of human understanding and a hard sense of the tragic aspect of life's wastefulness.

William Dunbar (c.1460–c.1520)

Writing at the Renaissance court of James IV, Dunbar's poems are linguistically dynamic and packed with razory images. All his poems bring colour, ferocity and seriousness to what they depict. There is enormous variety in Dunbar's work; there are eighty-four numbered poems in Professor Bawcutt's definitive edition, every one of which has brilliance, from the provocative perversities of 'The Dance of the Seven Deadly Sins' to the formal courtly celebration of the marriage of James IV and Margaret Tudor in 1503, 'The Thrissil and the Rose' to the courtly yet intensely personal and adult love lyric 'Sweet Rose of Virtue and of Gentleness'.

Sir David Lyndsay (c.1486–c.1555)

Lyndsay's poems, like his great play *Ane Satire of the Thrie Estaitis*, are concerned with the state of Scotland on the eve of the Reformation. 'The Dreame' spells out the riches of the nation, in its natural resources and the strength of character of its people; but the play is really astonishing. It should be firmly established in the repertoire of the National Theatre of Scotland and revived at least once every twenty years. New versions of parts of it, rewritten to apply to contemporary politicians and media figures, are easily imaginable and could be produced every five years (in any country), to help keep people entertained, engaged and above all, critical.

Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair (Alexander MacDonald) (c.1695–c.1770)

A serious student of bardic verse, a student at Glasgow University, then a teacher in the Highlands, he became an elder in the church, writing love songs, satires on local figures, nature poems, poems in praise of the Jacobite cause, and most impressively, 'The Birlinn

of Clanranald'. This describes a sea-voyage in virtuoso verse, startling in immediacy and detail. This is someone who writes about things of which he has immense experience and knowledge, in verse that bristles, zips and bounds with verbal energy. MacDiarmid's English translation in *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* is a delight.

Tobias Smollett (1721–1771)

Smollett read medicine at Glasgow University and became a ship's surgeon. His first novel, *The Adventures of Roderick Random*, included accounts of his shipboard life and displayed a sly, satirical, abundantly wry sense of humour. His last novel, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, is a picaresque account of a motley group of unreliable characters on an extended peregrination throughout Britain. Some of what were to become identified as national characteristics of Scotland are described before they developed into caricatures or clichés, and Smollett's understanding of how these evolve in the immediate context of a newly created 'United Kingdom' is deep, sensitive and, if comic, also carries a knowledge of the cost involved in limiting human character by stereotype.

Donnchadh Ban Mac an t-Saoir (Duncan Bàn MacIntyre) (1724–1812)

One of the greatest poems in the Gaelic tradition is 'Moladh Beinn Dóbhrain' ('In Praise of Ben Dorain'), the great mountain which can be seen by the roadside if you're driving from Glasgow north to Glencoe. The poet evokes an increasingly tense hunt for the deer, which is to be shot, gralloched and turned into food for the pot. This poem, therefore, has an element of the Wordsworthian sublime about it and an element of James Thomson's sense of the factual beauty of nature, but these are mixed with an unwavering sense of the complementarity of beauty and practical needs.

James Macpherson (1736–1796)

Macpherson, born in 1736, grew up in a Gaelic-speaking part of Scotland and was nine years old at the time of the Jacobite rising of 1745. As a young man, he went into the Highlands and listened to stories and songs, many of them versions of the Celtic cycles. He knew enough Gaelic to make sense of them but he wrote them up in English, with an Enlightenment readership in mind. He infiltrated the Gaelic world into an Enlightenment sense of superiority. We're accustomed to thinking of them as Irish stories but Macpherson's versions are all located in Scotland. So here's the question – what if his stories were true?

Robert Burns (1759–1796)

Burns should be read through his poems and songs, of course, but his letters and travel journals are also very revealing and his entire writing life, therefore, needs to be seen in at least three different contexts: first, that of his extraordinary biography and the locations in which it took place; second, that of his historical period, spanning the revolutions in France and America; and third, that of his connections, both literal and in terms of literary affinity, with his contemporaries, including the Scottish Enlightenment writers, the English Romantic poets and internationally poets of visionary social democracy, from Walt Whitman to Pablo Neruda.

James Hogg (1770–1835)

Hogg grew up as a cowherd and shepherd in the Borders, learning the ways of the country. As a young man, he had access to a good collection of books which stirred a literary appetite. *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* (1818) has one of the greatest first sentences of any novel, but Hogg's masterpiece is *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), recognised by André Gide in the 1920s as proto-modernist, slipping between psychological acuity and the supernaturally inexplicable, then picked up again in the 1950s as a proto-postmodernist novel, but nowadays understood as the work of a determined literary artist who comprehended deeply the overlap between the oral and the written traditions, and the ghosts who haunt the memory.

Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832)

Scott's writing career describes a deepening tragic vision. *Waverley* optimistically describes a young Englishman's encounter with Scotland at the time of the Jacobite rising of 1745, his 'wavering' in his allegiances; *The Heart of Midlothian* is one of the world's great novels, beginning with the alleged murder of a child by his mother, and ending with the very probable murder by the same child of his own father. *The Bride of Lammermoor* occupies a Samuel Beckett-like world of darkness and division, the unspeakable silences between people; while *Redgauntlet* brings to deflation the Romantic ideals that had persuaded *Waverley*. There is deep pathos, but Scott can also be extremely funny, with richly absurd characters interrupting intensely gestural moments of high drama in, for example, *A Legend of Montrose*. Scott's work invites extensive reassessment.

Susan Ferrier (1782–1854)

Ferrier's novels *Marriage* (1818), *The Inheritance* (1824) and *Destiny* (1831) were admired by Scott and evidently effected a bridge between his world to that of Jane Austen. *Marriage* sets out to be a didactic moral tome, but the complexities of temptation, exhilaration, irony and fun take over. Caricature and exaggeration are among Ferrier's weapons, following her main character, Juliana Glenfern, as she elopes with the dashing Captain Henry Douglas and travels to his Highland castle. Ferrier's two later novels continue the vein of forthright satire and ironic comment. Her humour is suggested by the bold and cheeky first line of *The Inheritance*, with its eyebrow raised over Austen's first novel: 'It is a truth, universally acknowledged, that there is no passion so deeply rooted in human nature as that of pride.'

Margaret Oliphant (1828–1897)

Oliphant wrote more than ninety novels and two hundred short stories – more than most readers could critically evaluate. Her most memorable works are the novel *Kirsteen*, the supernatural short stories and the novella *A Beleaguered City*. Many of these tales, in their subtle developments of the imagery of light and darkness, their social realism riddled with supernatural and inexplicable components, their psychological representations acute, yet infected by a sense of the ineffable pressures that might build towards violence, are developing an account of the tensions and force of sexual identity that will only find full expression in the twentieth century.

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894)

Stevenson is the prophet of the twenty-first century as his contemporaries Conrad and Wilde were prophets for the twentieth, and his global travelling gave him a knowledge of cultural relativism far ahead of his era. In the shift from the solid hierarchy of nineteenth-century realism, in which the English language offered secure authorial and narrative positions as opposed to the shifting priorities of the languages of individual characters, Stevenson, in stories like 'Thrawn Janet' and especially in the novel, *The Master of Ballantrae*, developed the idea of the unreliable narrator, pointing forward to Modernism and indeed to all that follows in late twentieth and early twenty-first century cultural relativism. In his profound exploration of the relation, tension and reciprocity between childhood and adulthood, he is one of the key writers in world literature.

Catherine Carswell (1879–1946)

Open the Door! – Carswell's major novel – follows the life of Joanna Bannerman, one of the great women in modern fiction, through a disastrous marriage and its termination to a happy resolution, while descriptions of early twentieth-century Glasgow and especially Charles Rennie Mackintosh's Glasgow School of Art give the book historical depth. Her other works include biographies of Burns, D.H. Lawrence and Boccaccio and her own biography has been written by Jan Pilditch.

Edwin Muir (1887–1959)

Muir's essay *Scott and Scotland* was at the centre of a major debate about language and literature in the mid-1930s but Muir's poetry developed its own character and significance most impressively in the 1940s and 1950s, through his experience of Cold War Europe. In poems like 'The Combat' and 'The Good Town' he created semi-abstract visions of conflict between good and evil, innocence and malevolence, in contexts of social susceptibility, showing how easily people might change for the worse in a world not too far away from that of Kafka. His novels are also worth revisiting and his critical essays from the 1920s and 1930s remain historically significant.

Willa Muir (1890–1970)

The startling novel *Imagined Corners* takes place in a small north-east Scottish town in which a young woman meets a whole range of not unexpected frustrations until the arrival of her namesake (almost her 'liberated' double) with news of life in Europe and different ways of seeing and doing things. In the end, they both head for Europe. *Mrs Grundy in Scotland* is an extended essay about sexual repression in Scotland and the memoir *Belonging* is a rich account of her life, her marriage to Edwin and their friends and acquaintances, including Hugh MacDiarmid.

Neil Gunn (1891–1973)

Neil Gunn's cycle of novels make up a comprehensive vision of Scotland. The best place to start is with *Highland River*. This begins with an epic fight between a young boy and a huge salmon, which he pursues upriver until he catches it. The novel experi-

ments with narrative juxtaposition in telling the story of brothers caught up from the Highlands into the First World War. The humanist allegorical novels *Young Art and Old Hector* and *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* might be read profitably alongside George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. Gunn's masterpiece is *The Silver Darlings*, a huge novel about a group of people cleared from their former community and making a living fishing for herring. His travel book *Off in a Boat* is a delight.

Hugh MacDiarmid (1892–1978)

Through the 1,400 pages of his *Collected Poems* (which are incomplete), the massively beguiling, labyrinthine digressions of his so-called autobiography, wildly uncontrolled at times, *Lucky Poet*, and in the intensely modernist, visionary, dense sketches and short stories of *Annals of the Five Senses*, MacDiarmid (born Christopher Murray Grieve) unquestionably emerges as one of the major authors of the twentieth century, standing beside Joyce, Pound and Yeats in terms of the magnitude of his achievement. His biography, revealed most intimately in his *New Selected Letters*, opens doors on some of the worst and best aspects of being human; at times it seems he was unforgivable, at times the gentlest, most generous of men. Start anywhere: his work is the biggest individual plenum in Scottish literature since that of Walter Scott. It's a big world. Take a big bite.

Lewis Grassic Gibbon (1901–1935)

Gibbon's greatest work is the trilogy of novels: *A Scots Quair: Sunset Song, Cloud Howe, Grey Granite*; and three short stories: 'Clay', 'Smeddum' and 'Greenen'; but he wrote a lot in the last few years of his very short life. A major writer, Gibbon (born James Leslie Mitchell) often has strong women as central characters, including a memorable portrait in his first novel, *Stained Radiance*, set mainly in London. In his best-known Scottish work, he creates a startling linguistic idiom using Scots language phrases and vocabulary familiar from his childhood in north-east Scotland, although the narratives are easy to follow for the English-language reader. He also wrote science fiction (*Gay Hunter* and *Three Go Back*).

Jessie Kesson (1916–1994)

Jessie Kesson set her novels in north-east Scotland and wrote largely from personal experience, but her work is not simply an attempt at realist autobiography. Rather, these short novels are beautifully-wrought artefacts, the prose limpid and deliquescent, the experiences described sometimes joyous and celebrative, sometimes brutal and brutalising. *The White Bird Passes* and *Another Time, Another Place* are classics of their kind.

Muriel Spark (1918–2006)

Spark described herself as a poet with her literary roots in the Border Ballads of Scotland, with their sinister humour, supernatural overtones, human relationships in intense states of unexpected and unreliable influence, and strongly-defined characters. Certainly her most famous novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, is a classic, both frighteningly serious and inescapably comic, and even in its title *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* demonstrates its allegiance. But Spark's achievement among modern novelists is generally acknowledged

as internationally significant. It would be as wrong to undervalue as to overvalue the Scottish component of her work.

Alasdair Gray (b.1934)

Gray has acknowledged the value of *The Dear Green Place*, the novel by Archie Hind (1928–2007), which, like *Lanark: A Life in Four Books* (1981), is set in Glasgow and also has at its centre the struggle of a young man to find artistic expression. *Lanark* counterpoints realist narrative with fantastical extrapolation from it in a mysterious, imagination-fuelled world which delivers its own strictures and violence. This was a breakthrough novel which asserted and convincingly demonstrated the value of the artistic imagination, without which life will always be inadequate and wanting. Gray is a major author of other novels, novellae, plays, poems and is an artist whose illustrations accompany many of his books. The most recent, unclassifiable collection (a novel? memoirs? collection of loosely-related stories?) is *Old Men in Love*.

James Kelman (b.1946)

Kelman's novels, from the very first, *The Busconductor Hines*, focus on the experience of working people (not all of them 'working class') and carry a moral force that insists that we must not evade the central matter of social injustice, economic division and the need people have for better conditions, better lives, than most of us are likely to be given. His Booker Prize winner, *How Late It Was, How Late*, is a compelling exploration of the world of a blind man, victimised and bullied, trying to find a way through experience he struggles to make sense of. It is a *tour-de-force* of the writer's art, and his later work extends his range, most searchingly in his novel about childhood, *Kieron Smith, Boy*.

Janice Galloway (b.1956)

Galloway's first novel, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, was an extended study of a woman going through and recovering from breakdown, in her interior life and her social relations. Stylistically, the book employs various typographical devices to show the unreliable text becoming increasingly unreliable but it is the compassion and strength of resolution in the character, Joy Stone, in the title, and in the writing itself and by extension in the author, that enduringly impresses. Later work builds on these strengths, often unexpectedly, as with *Clara*, a quasi-fictional, imaginative biography of Clara Schumann, which is not only bristling with feminist priorities but assured in its grasp of complex social and musical contexts.

A.L. Kennedy (b.1965)

Kennedy's collection of short stories *Night Geometry and the Garscadden Trains* has numerous wise and witty observations (often oblique) on the Scottish scene, and her novel *So I Am Glad* brings a magic-realist component to a feminist scenario in modern Glasgow. Her novel *Paradise* is a genuinely unsettling study of alcoholism, but rather than a realist text, this is almost expressionist in its development of self-delusional narrative and the attractions of rationalisation. Her novel *Day*, about a Second World War bomber tailgunner, is an astonishing work of historical reclamation and reinvention.

... eleven later twentieth-century poets ...

Robert Garioch (1909–1981)

An Edinburgh poet of masterly vernacular wit, compassion and insightful urban humour, Garioch's translations into Scots of another city poet, the Roman Giuseppe Belli, are moving, understated and evocative, especially 'The Puir Faimly', while his own 'Edinburgh Sonnets' and serious/comic poems, 'Brother Worm', 'Perfect' and 'Doctor Faust in Rose Street' are effortlessly both local and universal.

Norman MacCaig (1910–1996)

A master of tone, humour, irony and an inexhaustible resource of simile and metaphor (a thorn bush is 'an encyclopedia of angles'), MacCaig is a great love poet of the natural world – dogs, frogs, basking sharks, sparrows – and a poet exploring the limits of language, the borders of what language permits us to understand (his words, he says, are sometimes spoken only by 'a man in my position'). He is also a great elegist in the sequence, 'Poems for Angus'.

Sorley MacLean (1911–1996)

MacLean translated his own poetry, first written in Gaelic, into unforgettable English. A major poet of love and war, his long poem 'The Cuillin', his elegy for his brother Callum and his passionate denunciation of nuclear authority in 'Screapadal' should be required reading but absolutely essential is his lament for the people of the cleared township on his native island of Raasay, 'Hallaig': 'the dead have been seen alive.'

Sydney Goodsir Smith (1915–1975)

A flamboyant figure and lavish verbal profligate, Goodsir Smith was a New Zealander who adopted Edinburgh and the Scots language to produce vivid evocations of the old city and its raucous, sensitive, loving and drinking inhabitants. Rabelaisian and idealistic, his book-length sequence of love poems *Under the Eildon Tree* is a major work, gathering all the great lovers of world literature into a company where he himself finds an affinity of comic and tragic realisation.

W.S. Graham (1918–1986)

A poet who lived much of his adult life in Cornwall, Graham's intense focus on the power of language and the immense pressure of the silence that surrounds it created lasting, potent works such as 'The Nightfishing' and the magnificent epiphany describing a return to a small reservoir near his native place, Greenock, just outside Glasgow, 'Loch Thom'. Stylistically inimitable, he commented once when asked if he was still writing that he was indeed, still beginning each line with a capital letter – in other words, he never relaxed into a merely conversational idiom but always maintained a fierce sense of the poem as a work of art, a made thing. Yet each poem is alive as a fish on the line, and stronger than most in the pantheon of modern work in the English language.

Edwin Morgan (b.1920)

Morgan's breakthrough volume *The Second Life* (1968) heralded a long career in which many poems are given to voice the experiences of other things – in the very sexy 'The Apple's Song' or the hilarious and grumpy 'The Loch Ness Monster's Song'. At the heart of his work is an individual's compassion, in urban poems like 'In the Snack Bar', 'Glasgow Green', 'Trio' or 'At Central Station' but in the 1980s, Morgan developed a more national, indeed nationalist, perspective in the key volume *Sonnets from Scotland*. He has continued to write well into the twenty-first century, with confessional, celebrative and provocative autobiographical poems in *A Book of Lives* and public poems such as those collected in *Beyond the Sun*, written to accompany a list of Scotland's 'favourite paintings'. In his essays, Morgan is also a major critic of modern Scottish literature and, after MacDiarmid, modern Scotland's foremost Man of Letters.

George Mackay Brown (1921–1996)

Orkney and its people were George Mackay Brown's home and subject, his poems exploring, with patience and bright imagery, his land and seascapes, its history and legends. He was also a fine novelist (see *Magnus*, a Brechtian retelling of the murder of the saint) and a superb short-story writer (see especially *A Calender of Love* and *A Time to Keep*). The best place to start is his compendium of poems, stories and essays, *An Orkney Tapestry*.

Iain Crichton Smith (1928–1998)

Beginning as an austere poet reacting against a world of Calvinist oppression, Crichton Smith developed a fluent, exploratory poetic style which sometimes seems careless but in fact is invigorating, risky and immediately accessible. Also a novelist and short story writer, his classic novella *Consider the Lilies* is a lucid, limpid presentation of the Highland Clearances. The darkness of depression gripped him but in the Murdo stories he developed a quizzical, comic aspect.

Liz Lochhead (b.1948)

Lochhead began to write poems exploring her own experience as a young woman in Lanarkshire in the 1960s and 1970s, developed her skills in creating personae and characters through writing dramatic monologues and original plays (see below). Her poetry is collected in *Memo for Spring*, *Dreaming Frankenstein*, *True Confessions & New Clichés*, *Bagpipe Muzak* and *The Colour of Black & White*.

Carol Ann Duffy (b.1955)

The title of Carol Ann Duffy's collection *The Other Country* indicates something of the precision of metaphor she manages to pack into tight, thoroughly-wrought poems of linguistic compression and rhetorical balance. Otherness is there in the biography, as she notes in various poems: born in Scotland, moved to England as a child, recollecting not only place and people from childhood but much more intimately a language, idiom and music foreign to the environment which mature choices and adulthood is grown

into. To conservative, conventional, Calvinist Scotland, the lesbianism openly espoused in her poetry may also seem 'other' but all we can do is recommend the American poet Adrienne Rich as a significant co-ordinate point in any reading of modern poetry, and recommend Rich's little book *Poetry and Commitment*, which begins with an extensive tribute to Hugh MacDiarmid, reminding us that real freedom fighters are good for everyone – that is, everyone who really believes in freedom.

Jackie Kay (b.1961)

Kay's first book, *The Adoption Papers*, was an autobiographical sequence in different voices, depicting her own experience of growing up in Glasgow, a black child adopted by committed socialist parents. She later would write great lesbian love poetry and go further into the autobiographical experience, exploring themes of belonging, family, local, national and ancestral identity and questions of disposition and prejudice. All of which seems almost too sensational for the subtlety of her versification and belies the continuous good humour, humanistic sympathy and sheer eloquence in all her writing. Her novel *Trumpet* is a compelling portrait of the conflicts of sexual and social self-expression in the world of jazz, where the intensity of artistic commitment in music and the priorities of domesticity are sometimes in comic, but ultimately painful, counterpoint.

... and three modern playwrights

John McGrath (1935–2002)

The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil (1973). This was a watershed production which took the story of the Highlands – through the Jacobite rising of the 1740s and the period of the Clearances, through the nineteenth century when vast tracts of depopulated land were used for stag-hunting by absentee landlords, high fee-paying guests and royalty, to the period when the discovery of oil in the North Sea meant a new wave of exploitation of Scotland's natural resources and people. Expressly socialist and deeply traditional in its carefully structured polemic, the play was toured in the Highlands of Scotland and performed to many people who would never have seen it in a city-based theatre. It also has international resonance: when I was teaching in New Zealand, after screening the play, Maori students would often come to me to point out in recognition, 'But that's our story! That's our story too!'

Liz Lochhead (b.1948)

Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off (1987) and *Medea* (2001). Lochhead began in the 1970s as a strong feminist voice, with streetwise, smart and poignantly lyrical quasi-autobiographical poems, but she also developed an expertise in dramatic monologues and the creation of memorable characters other than herself. Her brilliance as a playwright was amply confirmed in *Mary Queen of Scots* – the full title is that of a

children's game and with the characters acting the major historical figures both as adults and children in a gamesome but ultimately deadly pageant of political entrapment and encroaching power, the play asks us to consider how history is passed on to younger generations, through apparently innocent performances and lasting iconography. Lochhead has also written witty, sometimes light works for theatre, social comedies based in Glasgow, but her versions of the Greek classics, especially *Medea*, show her deep and intuitive grasp of the full sense of tragedy, addressing issues of feminism, self-destructiveness, social positioning and the extremes of passionate response.

Gregory Burke (b.1968)

The international success of *Black Watch* (2006) coincided with the political victory of the Scottish National Party in elections in Scotland, the deployment of Scottish troops in warfare in Iraq, and the dissolution of individual Scottish regiments – including the actual Black Watch itself – by the Westminster (London) government. The play's writing is brilliant and intense, catching the language, strengths, suspicions and cares of the soldiers, their acute understanding of where they are, what their best resources lie in, and whose power they are under. In performance, it's also an astonishing piece of choreographed action, depicting horrors in intense visual motion, sometimes ballet-like, to effect a Brechtian distancing from any ideas of easy commitment or simple solution. *Black Watch* is available on DVD along with a BBC documentary about historical events contemporary with the play.

All of the plays noted here raise questions about commitment, idealism, loyalty and human need within and beyond the national context.

It is another country. The air is sharper. The hills, stark in their solidity, sheer out in the lights. It is a country in which history breathes from the landscapes. My first impression of Edinburgh was of staircases which seemed to have been carved on boulders and cobbled streets which reminded me of secret courtyards in Paris and the South of France. It is a city of the imagination in which dwelled another city of frustrated yearnings... It is the only city I know where the old resides so solidly in the new, where the music of the place blasts out its ancient lore amid the living spaces of the inhabitants. Culture, during a time of political impotence, can become kitsch, but it can also function as continual declaration and resistance.

—Ben Okri

About the ASLS

Founded in 1970, the **Association for Scottish Literary Studies** is an educational charity that aims to promote the study, teaching and writing of Scottish literature, and to further the study of the languages of Scotland. To these ends, ASLS publishes works of Scottish literature which have either been neglected or which merit a fresh presentation to a modern audience, and critical anthologies of both creative and non-fiction writing. Papers on literary criticism and cultural studies, along with in-depth reviews of Scottish books, are published biannually in our journal *Scottish Literary Review*; short articles, features and news in *ScotLit*; and scholarly studies of language in *Scottish Language*.

The Bottle Imp, a free online ezine, comes out twice a year and is full of articles, opinions, and arguments waiting to happen, along with information on new developments in Scottish literature and literary criticism: www.thebottleimp.org.uk

We also publish *New Writing Scotland*, an annual anthology of new poetry, drama and short fiction in Scots, English and Gaelic which has carried early work by important contemporary writers including Iain Banks, Janice Galloway, A.L. Kennedy, Ian Rankin, and Irvine Welsh, among many others. We also produce the *Scotnotes* series of school- and college-level study guides to major Scottish writers, and our website contains a substantial and growing body of downloadable essays, articles, papers and classroom notes: www.asls.org.uk