

Modernism, Adaptive Modernism and Scottish Literature

Understanding Scotland's relationship with modernism has been a complex business. It is naturally a process of re-reading and re-contextualising the poets, novelists, musicians and artists of, roughly speaking, the interwar years, but that is easier said than done. In the nature of the mobilisation of any proper noun it also involves gently policing what "Scotland" means. In literature this has taken a number of approaches, most of which have been conducted by concentrating on texts that are explicitly concerned with Scotland, while also aligning these texts with apparent continuities in an asserted continuum of Scottish literary history. Another approach has been the book-length literary study of an individual author, again consciously identified as Scottish by upbringing and theme. Hugh MacDiarmid, as the principal theorist and poet of Scottish modernism, has been at the centre of such literary studies, with works by Catherine Kerrigan, Nancy Gish, W. N. Herbert, and Alan Riach, broadly contextualising his poetry within modernism (and not forgetting the remarkable edition of *A Drunk Man* by Kenneth Buthlay).

Consonant with a growing understanding that modernist aspirations are encoded within both the material production and the activity around the circulation of such publications, as well as the texts themselves, a book history approach has developed. Key texts including Alistair McCleery's study of *The Porpoise Press* (1988), in which Edinburgh and London literary politics are played out, and Tom Normand's *The Modern Scot* (2000), a portrait of one of the remarkable little magazines of 20th century Scotland. Finally, authors who had been seen to sit less easily within a Scottishness fank have gradually been brought back into the fold, with R. D. S. Jack's *The Road to Never Land* (1991) recovering J. M. Barrie for Scottish literature, as it were – arguably within a proto-modernist landscape. The experimental theatre that had been said to be lacking within Scotland turns out to have been one element to Barrie's successes in London at the time.

However, as can be seen by the example of Barrie and of MacDiarmid, what is generally the case is that Scottish texts which have some relationship to modernism either emerge before the classic texts of international high modernism or just after it. Neil Gunn can be valuably read in terms of Lawrence, MacDiarmid in terms of Ezra Pound, and Grassie Gibbon with Joyce and Woolf in his rear-view mirror, but the study of Modernism rightly favours the headline newsworthiness inherent in foundation originality. With this in mind Gunn, MacDiarmid and Gibbon are arguably better seen as fast, inspired and profound responders to existing modernist experiment rather than modernist innovators of the nature of their Irish, English and American predecessors.

This is recognised in studies of Modernism, where Scots, with some justice, barely figure. Don't look for the great Scottish modernist revolution in Kenner's *The Pound Era*. There are some examples of wrongful neglect: Edwin Muir, an important literary critic of emerging forms of the novel is perhaps most seen now as simply a fine Scottish poet and a key critic of Scotland's social fabric. Muir's literary theory is not mentioned in Gillies and Mahood's *Modernist Literature: An Introduction*, published by Edinburgh University Press in 2007, though other English, American and Continental contemporary literary criticism is, and neither are MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassie Gibbon although their minor Thirties contemporary Stephen Spender is included. The confidence of English self-elision is played out in Paul Poplawski's *Encyclopedia of Literary Modernism* (2003) where there is an entry for Scotland, Ireland and Wales but none for England: this is a sleight of hand modesty because many of England's authors are nevertheless treated in detail (to be fair, some of Scotland's are, too, but the identity politics may be dulling the effect). In a similar way in Brooker and Thacker's *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines* (2009) Wales and Scotland appear in a late section in the book called "Beyond the Metropolis". This section title discloses what had been hitherto unsaid: that the rest of the book had been about the cultural production of the English metropolis, the "the" understood as London (or almost – Cambridge is also briefly considered).

However, partial-sightedness aside, the now traditional version of classic Modernism surely holds largely true, and Scottish writers are not a part of that immediate story. There is no

shame in this – a literature cannot be in a process of continual excellence and Scotland's literature before and since Modernism need make no apology. The advances in medicine, telecommunications and, as it were, the sociology of myth (I'm thinking of James Frazer's *the Golden Bough*), suggests that Scottish contributions to the modern world were largely elsewhere. By the same token, to think of English creativity in the 1960s you could make a fist of an argument for poetry – it wasn't *awful* -- but you might as well start with the magnificent musical innovations of the period and cite, say, The Beatles, so can you get a sense of proportion, of breakthrough.

Nevertheless, the Scottish texts in the period, roughly speaking, from the 1920s to the 1950s, are special, as Margery McCulloch's monograph so expertly details. I'd suggest they are not best seen as Modernist but nor are they 'Modernism Lite': these are ballasted, challenging, rich works, and in that category sense very close to the texts to which they have so quickly responded. There are exceptions but they are generally not structurally playful enough, or textually self-conscious enough, to be thought of as 'Post Modernism' (but the *Annals of the Parish* and *Confessions* had been wearing that T-shirt a long time before full-scale production). Finally, with the exception perhaps of W. S. Graham and the late Neil Gunn, the Scottish texts of this period do not correspond to the simultaneous lyricising, heightening and stripping down of language that is associated with aspects of, say, Beckett: "Late Modernism."

What we arguably have in the Scottish Renaissance texts, to borrow a term from art and architecture, is a variety of Adaptive Modernism. In the Modern Renaissance this means a gathering of aesthetics which masters very quickly Modernist techniques and produces, just occasionally, wildly inventive texts from lessons learnt and developed (*Sunset Song* the prime example). Like the Modernists themselves Adaptive Modernism is still in debt to the literature of the second half of the 19th century (perhaps for Gunn, Hardy; perhaps for MacDiarmid, Dostoevsky). As for the Modernists, Christianity is still, dispiritingly, a negative force to worry away at but, unlike many of the Modernists bar William Carlos Williams, Scotland's Adaptive Modernism is less in awe of Greek and Roman classical models and, to a lesser extent, 'European' high culture (though, as McCulloch stresses, Muir is most certainly interested in the Hellenic). The role of Scotland's own literature – the border ballads, Burns and Dunbar, later on the *Carmina Gadelica*, is in play in a way that, despite MacDiarmid's ambivalence towards the Bard, is inevitably unique to Scotland in detail (Ireland's rediscovery of its own literature is more problematic) but has wider implications: this Adaptive Modernism does not assert modernity for modernity's sake; in this period there is no past-denying Scottish futurism. The Scottish writers of Adaptive Modernism, as McCulloch describes them, are variable in their notions of political power– MacDiarmid is sympathetic to both Lenin and Stalin but, as McCulloch shrewdly divines, his is a particular 'poet's view' of politics, a kind of fantasy focussed on a linguistic utopia of super-consciousness rather than bread and butter politics and social transformation (not that all poets need think this way).

In fact this is an assured and at times brilliant account of the modern Scottish Literary Renaissance, in its close criticism of poetry in particular but in its wider assimilation of social and political events. McCulloch's commentary on MacDiarmid's poetry is highly illuminating, capturing beautifully the breathtaking beauty of the early lyrics (and not just the well-known ones) and arguing convincingly for a bleaker, non-nationalist MacDiarmid emerging from within the text of *A Drunk Man*. Elsewhere McCulloch looks at familiar texts anew and introduces (to this reader) new authors altogether, a work of persuasive advocacy.

For a book about cultural exchange more could have been said about the contemporary reception of Scottish modern writers in the key journals of the day. For instance the digital archive of that *bête noire* *The Times Literary Supplement* now reveals the identity of various anonymous critics, and it turns out that the Scottish historian and novelist Agnes Mure Mackenzie, among others, appears to have had an important role in reviewing the Scottish literature of this period (she was by no means an automatic supporter). However I was especially interested to read about novelists I'm afraid I had not come across before – Lorna Moon and Dot Allan. McCulloch is tantalising here: perhaps in iffy compensation for my own failings, I would have liked to know even more about their work.

Although Tom Normand has covered this at case-study level in his work on *The Modern Scot*, and Mark Morrisson has theorised it in terms of the Poetry Bookshop, that remarkable English predecessor of The Modern Scot enterprise, there may be more to be said about the relationship between magazines, art galleries, book clubs and audiences in the Scotland of this period, if only in terms of the second wave of the Scottish Renaissance and its Glasgow focus. The Anglo-Scot Joseph Macleod, one of the few British home-grown modernists to be published by Eliot at Faber in the early 1930s (his book-length sequence is *The Ecliptic*), has recently been 'renovated' in a *Selected Poems* edited by Andrew Duncan: later known as Adam Drinan (at which point he does register on McCulloch's radar), Macleod is a fascinating figure, clumsy, bizarre and virtuosic in turns, and a significant thinker on experimental theatre. There is a more sympathetic and fuller light to be put on the baroque neo-Romantic poetry of W. S. Graham and Norman MacCaig in their early years – we should not take MacCaig's self-deprecation too seriously in his attempts to bury those fascinating first books – but perhaps the work during and after the Second World War really does need to be separated from the modernism before it, so allowing closer consideration (and so linking it better to another kind of renaissance, that of the 1960s). But these are mere ideas fired by the stimulation of this book.

Richard Price is the author of *The Fabulous Matter of Fact: The Poetics of Neil M. Gunn*, and (with David Miller) *British Poetry Magazines 1914-2000: A history and bibliography of 'little magazines'*. His poetry collections included *Lucky Day*, *Greenfields*, *Rays* and *Small World*. His novel *The Island* was published in 2010. This article first appeared as a review of *Scottish Modernism and its Contexts 1918-1959: Literature, National Identity and Cultural Exchange*. Margery Palmer McCulloch, Edinburgh University Press, 2009. 230pp. in *Scottish Literary Review*