REVIEW ESSAY

Scotland’s Literary History: Is There One?


‘Scotland is indefinable; it has no unity except on the map.’

*R. L. Stevenson*

Colin Donati’s introduction to Carla Sassi’s important new work on Scottish literary history poignantly observes that, ‘typically, nations do not tend to question why their literature ‘matters,’” and he poses the question: ‘why need Scotland be any different?’ By way of offering some background on the subject, he continues by pointing out that from the early twentieth century, a ‘corpus of Scottish literature’ has been deemed to be non-existent. Its languages of Scots and Gaelic came to be considered ‘corrupt’ and of little relevance; and in the end, it was generally perceived by critics that Scottish literature had been ‘subsumed’ by a larger ‘British tradition.’ Ultimately, Donati does not accept such simplistic or dismissive explanations, and he notes that Sassi’s work rightly speaks to a multiplicity of literatures. The three
works under review eloquently demonstrate that the literary history of Scotland is both complex and important.

Ultimately, the authors and editors of the volumes reviewed here do not so much ask whether a Scottish literary tradition, or ‘corpus,’ existed/exists but rather seek to show why it is difficult to locate, why it is important to Scotland and to the larger literary and historical world, and why it is at once so multi-layered and challenging. Each of the texts addresses the ways in which Scottish literature has provided cultural ‘bridges’ to the literatures and traditions of other countries and to specific groups of writers, and finally, each work approaches possible reasons for the apparent shortage of women writers represented in Scotland’s literary history.

Sassi begins by establishing a theoretical context for Scotland’s literary history by suggesting a combination of concepts that are rooted in theories of nationhood and post-colonialism, and she offers that the very nature of literature is often closely tied to perceptions of nation, identity and cultural trauma.¹ In Scotland’s case, the application of such concepts might seem problematic: Scotland has not been an independent nation for some three-hundred years; its autonomy waned at a time when other nations were ‘defining themselves in “organic terms”’; and due to ‘linguistic, religious, and ethnic fractures’ a unitary view of the country’s people and cultures is difficult at best. For Sassi, it is precisely these factors that make the identification of a national literature in Scotland difficult, and yet also go a long way towards defining it: overwhelmingly, the issues noted tend to create ‘a lack of confidence’ that is most often evidenced in regions which have been subject to colonization and/or marginalization by a dominant, imperial centre (p.3). While it has been argued by some that Scotland was neither a colony nor ‘marginalized,’ Sassi provides a thoughtful and useful historical analysis that suggests the multiple ways in which Scotland’s past both reflects and contradicts these labels. Importantly noted by Sassi is that though a marginalized, fractured national and cultural status
can dampen collective confidence, it can also stimulate creative energy as the ensuing chapters attest.

Having laid the theoretical premises on which her arguments rest, Sassi begins her discussion of Scotland’s literary history by focusing on pre-union poets. She intuitively titles the chapter: ‘Scotlands of the past,’ recognizing that, retrospectively, a number of images and ideas of the country come to mind: Scotland is at once the legendary land of Picts, Angles, and Irish-Scots; it is the ‘community’ that fought for its independence under the leadership of Wallace and Robert Bruce; it is made up of the voices of persons from several very different places who sang of events, distant homelands, and popular characters and who contributed over time to a rich ballad tradition. And Scotland is the carefully re-constructed medieval realm imagined by Sir Walter Scott. A key to understanding the existence of so many views of ancient Scotland is that all have been, in part, ‘imagined’ over time, meaning that while each view is to some degree derived from past history, as a whole, they are the many layers of a much refashioned and reinvented past.

In her exploration of medieval texts, Sassi includes familiar works such as the Goddodin of Northern British origins; Icelandic and Viking sagas which lent a distinctive Norse culture to the north and west of Scotland; the Celtic Duan Albanach; and Barbour’s The Bruce. All of these works from vastly different times and locales seem to create an old literary tradition; but it is this very diversity which makes the study of early Scottish literature difficult to modern scholars since it is rooted in such wide ranging cultures and, thus, eludes any distinct identification of a single cultural centre.

Adding to the difficulties is that in the medieval period, the original languages of Scotland were abandoned in favour of the non-native Latin and English tongues adopted by kings, clerics and poets for use in religious and court literatures. Clearly, the adoption of other languages is not unique to Scotland; but as Sassi points out, ‘[i]t was the successive inferiorisation of the native languages which was damaging,
and not at all a ‘natural’ consequence of the infusion of them’ (p. 37). On one hand, the existence of a multiplicity of languages created certain regional and cultural boundaries within Scotland, a situation which is antithetical to any effort intent on finding the unity necessary to define tradition, a corpus of literature, or a semblance of nationhood. On the other hand, the noted diversity in culture and language made it possible to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps within and outwith Scotland through continual reinventions and relocations of cultural centres.

Along with the linguistic and cultural challenges of the period, Sassi points to a number of historical events in the medieval and early modern periods that signaled fractures in the cultural consciousness and contributed to ambiguities in Scotland’s literary and national perception of itself: settlement by Normans and English, disputes over the north-south border, conflicts with England, the ‘auld alliance’ with France, the Union of the Crowns in 1603, and the politico-religious upheavals from Reformation in 1560 through Restoration in 1689 all contributed toward social, political and ideological fractures in Scotland that led to an elusive ‘Scottish identity.’ Sassi is careful to caution against seeing Scottish notions of identity in overly simplistic ways or as being too closely related to its resistance against English domination; nonetheless, she offers that these issues added to the difficulties experienced by the literati of the periods as well as for scholars later studying Scotland’s literature, as each group struggled to find a cultural and literary nucleus for Scotland. From the medieval period onward, then, four general characteristics emerged which confused (and continue to confuse) any substantive definition for the literatures and ‘Scottishness’ of the country: the corpus lacks a definitive ‘centre’; the search for unifying strands of tradition is made difficult by language and events; the country and the literatures are easily marginalized; and over time minor(ity) writers, specifically women and non-English speakers, are further relegated to the periphery as the majority struggles to define itself.
Sassi’s following two chapters span the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and trace a series of intellectual negotiations and cultural fractures stimulated by the Union of the Parliaments in 1707, marking the point at which Scotland lost its political autonomy. A succession of politico-religious conflicts in the eighteenth century, many of which were tied to fluctuating and sometimes frictional dynamics between England and Scotland, created additional rifts along regional and ideological lines. Britain’s emerging imperialism coupled with accelerated internal migration and emigration to foreign destinations signaled the establishment of new cultural centres as far away as North America and New Zealand. As well, the introduction to new cultures as different from Britain as China, India and Africa prompted Scotland to think once again about its identity and literary history. The long period also witnessed the emergence of the Scottish Enlightenment. While the philosophical and scientific accomplishments of Enlightenment luminaries such as David Hume, Robert Sibbald and Adam Smith, the architectural and artistic domains of William, John, and Robert Adam, and important medical advances along with the 1726 establishment of a medical school in Edinburgh, might have given Scotland a degree of confidence at home, other events, criticisms and misadventures, such as the failed Darien Scheme, leant to distinct insecurities in the way Scotland viewed itself in an expanding world.

Sassi sees a part of the literary production of the period as reflecting a sense of marginalization and loss over the retreating past that was followed by new, romanticized version of it. She also suggests that this anxiety increased as Scotland acquiesced to some of the negative criticism leveled on her writers and culture by more well-known and more widely-published English authors such as Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold. In Sassi’s estimation, the works of James MacPherson, Ian Lom, Robert Burns, and Sir Walter Scott mark a renewed re-capitulation, re-invention and re-imagining of Scottish identity; in turn, the period also signaled a decline in the older cultural and literary traditions.
These senses of loss and new renegotiations of identity did, however, stimulate creativity as the works of all the aforementioned authors make clear. Sassi argues that close readings of writers such as Scott and Ferrier reveal tensions about assimilation to a new cultural centre; but they also created strategies of resistance against it, thereby undermining the idea of cohesion that they were ultimately trying to promote (p. 62). Scott contributed immensely to an emerging idea of Scotland through his construction of the ‘invented Highland tradition of Scotland.’ While he was conservative and pro-union, his works can be seen as an attempt to preserve a sense of Scottishness, by inventing a new centre in the Highlands, as remote and safe from the rest of Britain as possible. In a similar fashion, Susan Ferrier, resisted the educated British centre by removing women from it and relocating them to an imagined periphery in which they are identified by their ‘biological roles (nature)’. Ferrier’s major work, *Marriage* (1818), recognized a double marginalization for women in Scotland. They simply were not part of the British, male literati. Through countless relocations of centre, both Scott and Ferrier experimented with new notions of boundaries, destabilization, and binary oppositions that reflected Scotland’s desire to re-establish an identity of its own.

Sassi observes that the Gaelic literature of the period reveals similar anxieties and motifs. The Gaelic diaspora and the Highland Clearances saw extreme dislocations and economic challenges for the Gaels. Like many other Gaelic authors, Iain Crichton Smith and Mary Macpherson attempted to ‘retrieve the voice of the silenced Gaels’ by writing poignantly about the disappearance of the language and traditions or by writing in the Gaelic tongue itself. Their works metaphorically created protective boundaries within which the language and culture could remain safely intact. These works further addressed the destabilization of Gaelic tradition as the exodus to industrial cities or new lands continued, and as more southern writers rewrote the Gaelic past.
Sassi notes that despite increased Scottish migration and emigration, a reciprocity of intellectual and social ideas was fostered between Scotland and other ‘colonial’ cultures that were experiencing similar challenges to their identity. New stimuli were created as Scots living or emigrating overseas reworked their sense of Scottishness and expressed their longings for home. A further result of these new conditions was an opening of doors to previously ‘disenfranchised’ members of cultural communities, again, primarily to women and non-English speaking groups. Interestingly, many of the authors Sassi notes seem to hold a fascination toward notions of colonization, displacement and marginality as Stevenson does in *The Vailima Letters* and *In the South Seas*. Sassi notes the emergence of interest toward Scotland in the work of colonial writers who turned to her experience as an earlier casualty of English colonization. Tiyo Soga of the Cape Colony, for instance, seems to have reached out to the Scots whom he supposed shared comparable attitudes and experiences of colonization. He wrote that he hoped the Highlanders of Scotland, who held similar love for their native chiefs, understood the conflict created by the loss of culture, and the problems intrinsic in new patriotism toward England.

Chapters six through eight closely examine a period from the close of the nineteenth century through the twentieth century. In the latter part of the nineteenth century British imperialism reached its apogee, and throughout the twentieth century wars (Boer, WWI & II), economic crises, and the Anglicization of Britain all affected Scotland’s literature. From the early to mid twentieth century, a new movement within Scotland emerged, commonly styled today as ‘the Scottish Renaissance.’ Sassi identifies that Hugh MacDiarmid as perhaps the most prominent figure of the movement, his primary goal being to reclaim his country’s creative autonomy from England. The movement was committed toward a definition of a national literature, and the corpus of renaissance work features a return to the Scots and Gaelic languages, a focus on the homeland through lyric glimpses
of the landscape and characters of Scotland, and an affinity for ‘Scottishness.’ The work is marked by the revival and recapitulation of Scottish symbols like the thistle, which figures in one of MacDiarmid’s most famous poems, ‘A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle’ (1926). Interestingly, few outside of Scotland are aware of the movement, and Sassi suggests one reason for this is that in their attempt to reclaim a centre and re-establish a Scottish literary tradition, the renaissance movement tended to unsettle the conventional notions of nationhood. The result was that the movement isolated itself from a wider British body of literature and relegated itself to the periphery.

While nineteenth-century Scottish literature was marked by a sometimes sinister duality, the writers of the first half of the twentieth century sought ‘a distinctive label for Scottishness.’ Sassi offers that ‘[v]ariety and heterogeneity may be attractive, but at the end of the day they are perceived as a sign of cultural inferiority’ (p. 150). All of the reinventions of a literary corpus and the multiple re-imaginings of Scotland itself continued to undermine the possibility that a national literature might be identified. Thus, in the last chapter of the text, Sassi poses the question: Will there be a Scottish Literature? She points to a tendency today to exaggerate or ‘overdefine’ Scottishness, a trend that has been furthered by recent films and literary pieces that more deeply embed and reinforce stereotypical imaginings of Scottishness. Her sense is that the real challenge is not a continued defining and redefining of Scottish literature, but rather the ‘de-defining’ of it. By this she means that the question of why literature itself matters needs to precede notions of Scottishness; in other words, Scottishness must be the unintentional consequence of a literary text rather than its goal or inspiration (p. 169).

At this juncture, the importance of Scotland’s past literature and the prospects for its future literature may seem rather negligible. To round out and complete the review essay, it is perhaps prudent to draw on two recent volumes of poetry: Dorothy McMillan and Michael Byrne’s anthology,
Modern Scottish Women Poets, published in 2003, and Katherine Gordon’s edited volume, Voices from Their Ain Countrie: The Poems of Marioun Angus and Violet Jacob, published in 2006. The collections are valuable since the former contains a wide range of Scottish women’s work from the mid nineteenth through the twentieth century, and the later because its focus is the work of two women from Northeast Scotland who figure prominently in the Scottish literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both volumes present substantial introductions which approach the issues of ‘Scottishness,’ Scottish and Gaelic ‘traditions,’ the roles and contributions of women to Scotland’s poetic corpus, and each provides a thorough historical context into which the poems can be situated.

In their selection of poems, McMillan and Byrne chose to include a wide array of Scottish women poets; selections from the larger works of ninety-seven women are included. Their sense was that too many anthologies neglected the work of women. Katherine Gordon chose only two women, Marioun Angus (1865 - 1946) and Violet Jacob (1863 - 1946). While both women’s poems were published through the 1940s, Gordon notes that their individual collections are now out of print. Her objective was to offer a more extensive collection of poetry from each of her subject women. Both anthologies present their respective poems in chronological order.

In a number of ways, Gordon’s edited collection of poems by Marion Angus and Violet Jacob reveal the ‘bridging’ and ‘centres’ and the peripheral status of Scottish women writers that Sassi discusses. Angus was from the Northeast of Scotland, and Gordon notes that she was ‘committed to the landscape, literature and people of the Northeast’ (p. 3). Her poetry, which draws on that landscape and language thus becomes a link between her own locale and the rest of Scotland; she often chose words specific to her geographic area as she does in ‘At Candlemas’ (p. 79) and ‘The Lane Kirkyaird’ (p. 82,). For a time, the poet lived with her sister in Peebles, and after her sister’s death, she
moved to central Scotland. During her time away, she continued to write of the place she knew best, creating her own link back to her roots. In a sense, her work might be said to create a ‘centre’ in the Northeast to which she returned through her poetry, and ultimately to which she removed in the last years of her life. What the reader can also see evident in Angus’s poems is the ‘imagined country’ in her work. It is at once a wild, lovely, haunted country that speaks to the romantic view she held of the region.

Angus was also interested in portraying women’s voices in her work, though at times her voices are entirely devoid of gender. The poems ‘In Ardelot’ and ‘The Tree,’ which are concerned with love and loneliness, the gender of the voice is impossible to detect. Gordon observes that Angus’s tendency toward ambiguity may derive from her fascination with the ballad tradition (p. 20), for indeed, it is so frequently difficult to discern the gender of the singer in ballads. Other of Angus’s poems do have clearly gendered voices, and interestingly critics have pointed out that in these poems, the secret is not gender so much as the secrets women keep (p. 20). Keeping Sassi’s discussion regarding the peripheral position of Scottish women poets in mind, the reader might wonder if the poet was commenting on that peripheral position or, perhaps, attempting to connect with the largely male artistic movement centered in Edinburgh. Though Angus’s work was well received during her lifetime, and though she adopted many of the features employed by the literary circle in Edinburgh, she determinedly remained an outsider to the larger national movement, and by MacDiarmid’s day, she was considered a minor poet.

Violet Jacob, too, was from Northeast Scotland though her extensive travel prompted her to build other sorts of bridges and boundaries. She spent some considerable time living in India, South Africa, and Egypt, and in this sense her work often becomes the voice of the ‘exile’ longing for home: she wrote of both the people and places she imagined at home in Scotland, but gave those at home a sense of the
landscape and people far from home (p. 25). Her poetry reflects an interest in people in the margins: labourers, servants, shepherds, and prisoners, and supernatural creatures like the kelpie. Her work embraces images of light, shadows and darkness all of which suggest a fascination with boundaries and exclusion.

Like Angus, Jacob wrote often of Scottish landscapes and used the language of the Northeast, but the voices in her work lack the ambiguity so marked in Angus’s. Jacob’s critics see her poetry as reflecting a sense of frustration at rural women’s limited roles (p. 34), and they have noted that her male voices often seem ‘pompous and self-important’ while the voices of her female characters are engaging and powerful (p. 37). While Jacob’s work received accolades during her lifetime, MacDiarmid later ‘took her to task for her lack of interest in national concerns’ (p. 37). MacDiarmid, however, would not have considered women’s issues a national concern, and once again, it is intriguing to contemplate Jacob’s perception of her position in the corpus of Scottish work being written at the time.

McMillan and Byrne also privilege issues addressed by Sassi. The women poets featured in the collection were born between the mid 1800s and 1970; some of the earlier writers are numbered among the poets of the Scottish Renaissance. Most of the women are Scottish, but some are not; those non-native to the country like Gerrie Fellows and Anna Crowe, eventually spent considerable time in Scotland or now live there. Many non-native women had at least one Scottish parent, and so were exposed to Scottish ‘tradition’ from an early age. Some of the women born in Scotland, like Kate Clancy, Helen Adam and Margaret Brown, migrated to Britain or eventually emigrated to other parts of the world; others spent lengthy periods away from their homeland, but eventually returned, as did Violet Jacob and Naomi Mitchison. The editors’ selections of such a diverse group of women poets makes clear the literary ‘bridges’ that served as the cultural and literary conduits into and out of Scotland of which Sassi speaks.
One of the major issues to note in the McMillan/Byrne collection is that several of the poets included are Gaelic writers, and the Gaelic writers see language as being central to the issue of their traditional ‘Scottishness.’ They compose in the ‘sung tradition,’ and their work embraces notions of a Gaelic community rather than individuals or gendered voices (p. xxviii). The Gaelic poems are as much concerned with traditional metre and oral performance as they are with telling a story or conveying a feeling. As such, the editors note that mere readings of the Gaelic poems, presented in both Gaelic and English cannot be fully appreciated. Nonetheless, the inclusion of Gaelic works from Stiúbhart, NicGumaraid, and Frater (to name but a few), permit a sense of the boundaries and centres created by language and genre that Sassi has so eloquently described. Moreover, because these important works have been included, the links between women writers, those writing in English and Scots and those composing in Gaelic, can be assessed, for as the editors note, public poetry has become less a male preserve (p. xlii).

Likewise, in comparing poems from different eras, the collection shows that ‘being a woman is a question of multiple experiences, not of limitations’ (p. xiiix), and thus the chronological order of the collection allows the reader to see these multiple experiences unfold and the ways in which they contribute to Scottishness, literary tradition, crossings of boundaries, and the recognition of a variety of centres. Some of the poems explore similar subjects, such as wild geese in the verse of Jacobs, Cruikshank, and Adamson, images of Ophelia in the work of MacArthur, Herd, and Blackhall, or ther are poems that explore differing aspects and views of motherhood like those from Gibson, Duffy, and Jaime. All of the poems allow us to better recognize variations in the multiple traditions of Scottish literature that Sassi has considered; as well, the collections bring into focus the women of the ‘periphery,’ and to recognize that perhaps, after all, women writers have become facets in the traditions of their own particular eras.
The situation, then, is not as bleak as it seems. In the end, Sassi has not argued that the Scottish literature of the past is unimportant because it has no centre, rather that each locus is, in itself, a centre and each centre must be understood as an individual, complex layer, with its own context and its own purpose. What Sassi has brilliantly extracted and spoken of, provides an analytical context for each period, and she shows how they are all bridged by an overarching problem of an elusive Scottish ‘identity.’ But, she has also demonstrated that the product of each period is as unique as the writers of each period; any attempt to see the literatures as one unified ‘tradition’ is to ignore the real value of each. When unity and a single centre are sought, some authors such as women and non-English speakers are relegated to the fringes of a literature dominated by the larger European literature. Even the male, Scottish writers were on the fringe as they consistently struggled to find their own voices.

The editors of the anthologies reiterate these points. They have placed their subject writers in a specific context to better understand the ways in which groups of Scottish writers re-imagined or re-constructed images of their homeland, and they expose the subtle ways in which the authors differed from one another. By their own acknowledged exclusion, the male, English-speaking authors of Scotland validated and paved the road for the re-admission of the women and Gaelic writers who contributed to the ‘corpus’ of the various literary periods and discussions of Scottish writers. This is precisely the point that Sassi makes, and it is what the editors of the anthologies have attempted with their own compilations. They have given visibility to what had become, at some points along the way, wholly invisible. By understanding the dynamics of the mainstream literatures (multiplicity emphasized), it is also possible to see the nuances and inflections fashioned by each author in response to his or her imagining of a theme, feeling or event. Sassi’s work does not suggest that we put aside our reading of Scottish texts because they have been rendered
worthless by marginalization or by critics, rather, she 
suggests, each is vastly important in its own right estab-
ishing the multiplicity of voices and genres of literature for 
Scotland. It is at once both unifying and varied.

For Sassi, then, there are a number of reasons that 
Scottish literature matters. In the first, it speaks to other 
regions and countries whose own literature has been compli-
cated, altered, or discounted as a result of the manifold 
influences upon it in conjunction with or influenced by 
 imperial expansion in and outside of Britain. There are 
many locales, geographically and politically, that fit a 
similar bill today. The discussions and presentations of 
Sassi, McMillan and Byrne, and Gordon are thus also rele-
vant to other areas of marginalization, specifically for 
women and non-English speaking (e.g. Gaelic) cultures.

Finally, it should be noted that post-colonial theory, 
with a few notable exceptions², is largely confined to studies 
that focus on post-eighteenth century eras and texts. In this 
sense, writers of earlier periods and literatures who strug-
gled to define themselves or establish a cultural identity for 
themselves, under duress of attack and/or colonial influ-
ences that were similar to Scotland, have been cast into the 
same ambiguous margins. Carla Sassi’s work suggests that 
these theories can, with caution, be opened to other periods 
as well as women’s studies and gender, linguistic, minority 
and regional studies in order to understand the ways in 
which the literary histories of peoples are shaped by a multi-
 plicity of social and ideological dynamics and factors. 
Perhaps more importantly, Sassi suggests that the future and 
literature of Scotland and other colonial areas ought not be 
limited by literary restrictions, or by political parameters.

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Notes
