



Editorial

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# Spinning Scotland: Exploring Literary and Cultural Perspectives

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## **Editorial**

### ***“George Mackay Brown to Maw Broon: Scottish Literature in Context”***

Responding to the growing desire for collaborative research in the field of Scottish Literature, and reflecting the inclusive positivism and the outward-looking perspectives afforded by the post-devolution critical landscape, the *Spinning Scotland* Conference Committee sought to create a forum to excite discussion regarding Scottish writing and its conjunctions with Scottish culture. As its guiding paradigm the conference considered the metaphor of the fabric of the Scottish nation—the collaboration between literature, culture, language, and history—to engage with the texture of the nation’s artistic output. While some took the opportunity to demonstrate how Scottish writers have deftly interwoven legends, myths, languages, and rhetorical strategies into their poetry or narratives, other panellists choose to explore the interaction between texts and their wider cultural and socio-political contexts. In addition, other presentations explored the complex and rapidly-evolving relationship between film, television and the printed word, with one paper in particular exciting the attention of the national press.

The papers included in this issue were originally presented at the *Spinning Scotland: Exploring Literary and Cultural Perspectives Postgraduate Conference* at the University of Glasgow on Saturday 13 September 2008. The inclusive approach of the presenters and extensive range of the papers presented led to many diverse, yet at times, surprisingly concordant, themes to emerge through the course of day. The most recurrent conclusion of the ensuing panel discussions, however, was the need for further exploration of the interaction between texts and contexts, particularly with regard to Scottish writing and its relationship with international cultural and literary movements. Borne from that impetus, this special issue introduces a selection of papers which articulate the exploratory spirit of the conference.

In addition to stimulating further debate, the conference was also envisaged to celebrate the vibrancy of Scottish writing. To this end, the University of Glasgow's Department of Scottish Literature hosted a welcome reception on the evening before the conference, which included a performance by Liz Lochhead, Glasgow's Poet Laureate, while the University's Hetherington Research Club formed the venue for the post-conference gala performance. The Saturday night performances opened with thought-provoking readings from Anne Donovan and Alan Riach. Carl MacDougall followed with a bunnet-raising set while Alasdair Gray (assisted by *Spinning Scotland's* Rodge Glass) read extracts from his latest play, *Fleck*, bringing the formal proceedings of the evening to a riotous close.

As guest speaker, Carl also delivered an engaging and comprehensive plenary address to conference on various aspects of urban Scottish writing. Carl's discussion referentially illustrated the industrial landscapes and intimate human details in the work of Muirhead Bone, the Glasgow born engraver and watercolourist. The

*Spinning Scotland* website has a few examples of Bone's shipyard studies and the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery at the University of Glasgow houses a substantive collection of his varied work. Reflecting the international appeal of Bone's work, Carl's address focused on Glasgow and Scottish writers in order reveal the universalities of urban life and its representation in literature and art.

The theme of internationalism was echoed in the conference in various ways, including the links which many papers established between Scottish writers and their broader European contexts, and also by the delegates themselves, with conference attendees travelling from Japan, America and Spain to lend their support. Such interactions are essential when dealing with literature which engages with issues of community, regionality and nationality as they inevitably raise important questions about the nature of identity and identification – questions which, in twenty-first century Scotland, possess particular resonance.

The scope of the papers included in this special issue, spanning over five centuries of literary production, reflects the diversity of the conference as a whole. Their topics range from George Mackay Brown's appropriation of history to Maw Broon's use of Scots, and include reassessments of the writings of David Lyndsay, Robert Louis Stevenson, Fionn Maccolla, Irvine Welsh and Ali Smith. Nationalism and internationalism go hand in hand, and whether the writing being discussed is in the medium of English, Scots or Gaelic, all the papers in this selection successfully uncover the existence of the larger unifying forces which social stratifications and differences of language can too easily mask. Whether the specific differentiators or narratives under review are predicated by nationality, linguistic community, race, religious creed, class, gender, or sexuality, what all these papers demonstrate is the value of continued debate regarding the nature of

literary representation and the wider historical contexts in which such representations take place. With so much of the essential groundwork of Scottish literary studies already in place, it is not difficult to appreciate why researchers (such as those who have contributed to this issue) express a certain confidence regarding the integrity of Scottish Literature as a discipline; a self-assurance which empowers them to breach the boundaries between national canons and literary disciplines in search of the common ground of human experience from which all art springs.

The conference and the Saturday evening event were funded through the University of Glasgow's Graduate School of Arts and Humanities Collaborative Research Training Initiative. The Editorial Board of this special issue wish to thank the Graduate School for financing the conference and we wish to offer a special thank you to Dr. Vassiliki Kolocotroni for her invaluable advice and support. Thanks go also to Dr. Kirsteen McCue for providing the conference's initiating spark, and to Dr. Gerard Carruthers and the staff of the Department of Scottish Literature for their continued support and assistance. The Editorial Board also wish to thank the delegates, panel-chairs and organizers of the conference for generating the collaborative energy that fuels this issue. We also thank the issue's peer-reviews for their time and expertise, and finally *eSharp* for their guidance and for providing the platform from which this special issue will help to agitate further debate regarding Scottish Literature and its contexts.

Alexander J. Cuthbert & Lisa Harrison