



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity
Partner Network



Article

How to Cite: Hames, S 2017 Narrating Devolution: Politics and/as Scottish Fiction. *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 5(2): 2, pp. 1–25, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.20>

Published: 10 March 2017

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, which is a journal of the *Open Library of Humanities*.

Copyright:

© 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

The Open Library of Humanities is an open access non-profit publisher of scholarly articles and monographs.

ARTICLE

Narrating Devolution: Politics and/as Scottish Fiction

Scott Hames

University of Stirling, GB

scott.hames@stir.ac.uk

This article explores the tensions between the competing cultural and political narratives of devolution, anchored around James Robertson's state-of-the-nation novel *And the Land Lay Still* (2010). The article emerges from the two-year research project 'Narrating Scottish Devolution', and includes excerpts from workshops held on this topic at the Stirling Centre for Scottish Studies, alongside archival work on the internal debates of the Royal Commission on the Constitution (1969–73). The article unpicks competing teleologies of government de-centralisation and the recovery of Scottish cultural agency, ending with a call to begin the thorny task of narrativising devolution in political and historical terms.

Keywords: Scottish Literature; Devolution; James Robertson; historical novel; UK politics

It is 1983, shortly after Thatcher's landslide re-election, and the Scottish Left have gathered to squabble and lick their wounds.

There was tension in the air: identity politics versus class consciousness. The one policy that offered some prospect of common ground, devolution, was once again being squeezed from all sides. Nobody loved it, and nobody had much of a good word to say for it. (Robertson 2010, 532)

The quotation is from *And the Land Lay Still*, James Robertson's panoramic novel of post-war Scotland, and probably the most ambitious historical fiction to emerge from Britain this century. Robertson's task is to spread the paltry saga of Scottish devolution onto a vivid social canvas, stretching the narrow 'common ground' of

constitutional debate to the full dimensions of the modern nation. The resulting tome attempts to weave every corner, faction and identity of the country into an intelligible Story of Scotland, one that makes political and emotional sense of quietly transformative times. This is a highly diffuse and murky tale, and Robertson's task is made all the more difficult because he cannot count on his readership – even his Scottish readership – recognising the basic timeline and *dramatis personae*. The book employs several complex framing devices, but even the factual grist of the main narrative will seem obscure to readers unschooled in recent Scottish history. This makes a high degree of political exposition necessary, such that *And the Land Lay Still* often feels less like a novel 'about' history than one 'doing' history: producing as it goes the story it seems to be recounting. For the majority of the book Robertson is not dramatising or re-telling events already familiar to the reader, but introducing and explaining them for the first time. In this respect, the novel carries within itself the problem of national historical recovery it sets out to represent. It is a hugely informative and justly popular book, bringing the unloved and largely untold story of devolution to a much larger audience. But Robertson's historical ambition has its novelistic trade-off, and the book's on-the-fly explication requires that characters and happenings arrive oversaturated with representative significance. In one early scene, the central character could almost be speaking for a reader under-convinced by this approach, glancing at his surroundings and observing that he 'had never come across such enthusiasm for political debate, especially when it revolved around questions of national identity and self-determination' (Robertson 2010, 64).

This occasionally stilted inter-meshing of Scottish politics and fiction has much to do with our own historical moment. As several articles in this issue of *C21 Literature* suggest, recent Scottish fiction and its critical reception are strongly conditioned by ongoing constitutional debate (see Hames 2012, Hames 2013). In accounting for links between Scottish literary and political developments of the past few decades, the scholar – like the historical novelist – faces a range of interpretive challenges and ambiguities. But they also encounter an established literary-critical discourse tending to draw strong and clear connections across the same doubtful

terrain, lines guided by the paradigm of 'cultural devolution'. This article condenses the findings of a two-year research project exploring the emergence and legacy of this paradigm.¹

'If Scotland voted for *political* devolution in 1997', argues Cairns Craig,

it had much earlier declared *cultural* devolution, both in the radical voices of new Scottish writing – from James Kelman to Matthew Fitt, from Janice Galloway to Ali Smith – and in the rewriting of Scottish cultural history that produced, in the 1980s and 1990s, a new sense of the richness and the autonomy of Scotland's past cultural achievements. (Craig 2003, 39)

On the cover of a 1999 issue of *Edinburgh Review*, the novelist Duncan McLean declares 'There's been a parliament of novels for years. This parliament of politicians is years behind'. This narrative of antecedence is now a commonplace in Scottish literary criticism, though it is often unclear whether the primacy of culture is a matter of causation, displacement or surrogacy – culture driving politics, culture instead of politics, or culture *as* politics. Drawing on interdisciplinary workshop events, archival research and interviews with writers, scholars and politicians, the 'Narrating Scottish Devolution' project examined the interplay between literary and constitutional debates (concerning representation, legitimacy, 'identity') since the late 1960s, and explored how Scottish devolution came to be managed and valorised as a cultural project.

¹ The 'Narrating Scottish Devolution: Literature, Politics and the Culturalist Paradigm' workshop was supported by a British Academy/Leverhulme Small Research Grant, and the work of several dozen contributors from a range of disciplines (2014–16). A podcast derived from workshop recordings and interviews (entitled 'Nobody's Dream: Stories of Scottish Devolution') appeared on the *Guardian* website on 26 February 2016, and is now archived on the Stirling Centre for Scottish Studies blog: <https://stirlingcentrescottishstudies.wordpress.com/2016/02/26/nobodys-dream-stories-of-scottishdevolution/>. My thanks to all the participants and observers who took part; needless to say this article is a very brief and selective account of our discussions.

Competing Narratives

There is no strong ideological pulse beating through devolution, no political theology hovering above the pragmatic fudging of institutional reform. This makes the meaning of devolution both conveniently flexible and somewhat unstable, both as a policy and as an object of knowledge. Perhaps appropriately for an enterprise involving the deliberate erosion of central authority, devolution is always susceptible to being commandeered and re-defined, bent to stronger narrative impulses than those of its tinkering architects.

One key factor motivating this study, and manifest throughout our discussions, was the clear divergence of 'cultural' and social-scientific stories of devolution. For many literary critics, cultural devolution in the 1980s was the forerunner of democratic renewal. In the words of Robert Crawford, 'devolution and a reassertion of Scottish nationhood were imagined by poets and writers long before being enacted by politicians' (Crawford 2000, 307). Political historians and sociologists tend to offer a different set of explanations, centred on electoral politics, economic factors and largely invisible processes of UK institutional reform (Bogdanor 2001, Mitchell 2012, Devine 2016). With few exceptions, the first school pays as little attention to the 1973 Kilbrandon Report as the latter does to Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981). Perhaps appropriately, the first serious attempt to integrate these stories comes not from academic history but Robertson's fact-soaked novel.

But it is not only writers and literary critics who account for devolution in cultural terms. On being appointed the first culture minister of the new Scottish Executive in 1999, Sam Galbraith – a Labour MSP and a confirmed Unionist – told Ian Brown and other senior Arts figures that 'in his view, the artists had made devolution possible'.² In this story there tends to be a clear separation, both temporal and structural, between the agency of 'culture' and the activities of political parties and wider 'civic'

² My thanks to Ian Brown for corroborating this well-travelled anecdote. For further details see Brown 2012 and Brown 2013. Brown adds 'Worth noting here that the claim is made by two very experienced and hard-nosed politicians, not artists claiming to be unacknowledged legislators!'

bodies such as the Scottish Constitutional Convention. The writers and artists acted first and 'off their own bat', it suggests, while the politicians played catch-up within their own perimeter. In fact, this separation is a bit of a mirage. Many of the priorities associated with 'cultural devolution' – including the recovery and institutional recognition of Scottish national identity – were vitally present in the most dry and technocratic 1970s debates conducted within Whitehall. The bureaucrats devising various schemes for devolution clearly understood that the policy was driven by electoral expediency, but they were also highly curious – and concerned – about its 'cultural' dimension and implications.

Over-Determinations

But let us begin in the province of literary history, where Cairns Craig is the key figure in the construction of the culturalist narrative. Alex Thomson traces the tendency to read 'the political process of devolution as the manifestation of more profound upheavals at the level of national self-consciousness' back to its earliest appearance in

Craig's foreword to the Determinations series he edited for Polygon: 'the 1980s proved to be one of the most productive and creative decades in Scotland this century – as though the energy that had failed to be harnessed by the politicians flowed into other channels'. The first three books of the Determinations series were published in 1989, making the foreword evidence of the cultural phenomenon on which it claims to reflect. (Thomson 2007)

Whether circular or not, we should notice that the culturalist narrative includes ample room for historical contingency and the unexpected twist. In a 2014 essay Craig observes that 'in 1990 no political party in Scotland was in favour of the Parliament that actually came into existence in 1999' (Craig 2014, 1).³

³ This version of Craig's essay is yet to be published; he kindly sent me a draft in the summer of 2014. The main thrust of his argument is repeated in the shorter piece Craig 2014a.

Despite, after the decisive referendum of 1997, the oft-quoted appeal to the fact that the parliament was the 'settled will of the Scottish people', there had been, in fact, no Scottish political consensus on devolution. It happened, if not quite by chance, then through a series of apparently accidental and certainly unpredictable intersections of trains of events running in often contradictory directions. (ibid.)

We begin to sense the challenge of imposing a narrative teleology on these developments, key episodes having been driven (quite nakedly) by short-term electoral calculation. Thus, Craig argues, an historical account centred on political parties and positioning will take us only so far. After a précis of the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly (from 1980) and its successor the Scottish Constitutional Convention (from 1989), and the emergence of a pro-devolution consensus in Scotland during the Major government, Craig draws a clear and even provocative conclusion:

It was not politics that was the cause of this huge shift in public opinion and political intention: if it had been, the politicians in favour of a 'yes' vote [in the 1997 referendum on devolution] would not have waited so nervously for the outcome, fearful of a repeat of the inconclusive vote of 1979. Something more profound was the cause of the enormous shift in Scottish sentiment that brought about the devolved parliament between 1979 and 1997 and that cause, I want to suggest, was the transformation in Scotland's *national* self-perception brought about by a profound reorientation in the value of its culture. Between 1979 and 1997 Scotland underwent a cultural revolution and it was that cultural revolution, rather than the decisions of the political parties, that was the effective cause of the political outcome in the 1997 referendum. (Craig 2014, 5)

This is the culturalist case at its strongest (perhaps slightly needled by revisionist commentary from critics including Alex Thomson and myself), and it features strongly in *And the Land Lay Still*. One passing irony is that 'cultural revolution' should figure as the inspiration of a reformist political project 'of a strikingly conservative character',

in the words of Vernon Bogdanor, whose core purpose is to 'renegotiate the terms of the Union so as to make them more palatable to Scottish opinion in the conditions of the late twentieth century' (Bogdanor 2001, 119). But this is to view devolution from the centre, as an exercise in containment – even appeasement – rather than peripheral empowerment. Devolution looks very different viewed from Whitehall as compared to the literary pubs of Edinburgh, one key reason Scottish writers and cultural activists have been able to narrate the process in their own image, on terms that arguably inflate their political influence beyond the urban cognoscenti.⁴

Indeed, other scholarly voices point to Scotland's effective disempowerment as devolution's mobilizing leitmotif. Turning to the economic and political climate of Thatcherism, historian Catriona Macdonald is sceptical about the explanatory force of the culturalist paradigm. Interviewed at our 2015 workshop event, Macdonald insisted

I would totally disagree with the idea that any artist – named, unnamed, or imaginary – generated what was necessary to ground the Scottish Parliament. I think if you ask a majority of Scots, that would not be something that they would remotely bring to the table. That's not to say that art was not important, but it was not *determining*. The riches of cultural discussion and debate about that period are to be found in looking at how it nurtured or emphasised certain aspects of a cultural re-awakening that's more broadly conceived. But far more profound was the economic dislocation of the previous twenty years. The post-Thatcher period in Scotland, a period when unemployment was skyrocketing, when former icons of Scotland's proud industrial past were eroding, were getting closed down, when things we had told ourselves, about who we were as a nation, suddenly were counting for nowt when it came to the British state . . . the narrative of Empire, the narrative of the welfare state, the narrative of Scotland as part of a British settlement in which Scottishness was

⁴ Three key journals of this movement – *Radical Scotland*, *Cencrastus* and *New Edinburgh Review* – were published within yards of each other at the University of Edinburgh.

valued – all of those things at once came into question. Did culture determine that? No it didn't; but cultural commentators, artists, movie-makers, musicians, all had a part to play. (Recording, Workshop 2)

But what part was that, and does it continue today? We return to the most prominent and successful effort to construct a literary narrative of devolution.

And the Land Lay Still

Robertson's *And the Land Lay Still* is the most fully realised attempt to make a cohesive national story of the period and forces of devolution. Having been politically active in the 1980s, notably through the pro-devolution magazine *Radical Scotland* (1983–91) – thinly disguised in the novel as *Root & Branch* – Robertson naturally began with events and debates he had experienced first-hand. But on beginning to revisit this period he encountered a historical problem:

What I found very quickly was that I couldn't tell the story of the devolution years, if you like – the period of 1979 to 97 – simply by locating the story in that period. What I had to do was go further back, and what I eventually found was that I had to go right back to the 1950s, because the story I was trying to tell, and the story that I think *is* the story of how we got from where we were to where we are, is this contest between Scottishness and Britishness. It seems to me that 1950 [. . .] is when Scotland was most tied into the British project and to the British state [. . .] All of that begins to disintegrate, for lots and lots of reasons, from the 1960s onwards. And because there is a modernised sense of Scottishness taking shape at the same time, that gives people somewhere to go when they can no longer feel at home within that sense of Britishness. And that's what I was trying to capture in *And the Land Lay Still*, the narrative of which runs from 1950 to about 2008. (Recording, Workshop 1)

The deep backstory here is suggestive, and matches the dominant strand of 'cultural devolution' focused on the retrieval and recovery of the Scottish past. To correlate the everyday lives of characters with key dates and events in the national story,

however, poses a great difficulty to the historical novelist. Robertson needs a cast of relatable characters whose emotional lives are deeply entwined with macro-political developments – developments not even his Scottish readers can be assumed to recognise. This necessitates occasional ‘info-dumping’ as one reviewer has it (White 2015), and an abundance of symbolic minor characters whose intimate lives are tightly yoked to political events:

Sir Malcolm Eddelstane, after a prolonged argument with Lady Patricia, succumbed to her advice and stood down prior to the 1964 General Election. The Profumo affair, the general disarray of Macmillan’s government and a wider change of mood in the country, she said, signalled not only that the Conservatives were due for a spell in opposition but also that a more modern type of candidate would increasingly be required to counter the appeal of Labour. Sir Malcolm was only fifty-five, but looked much older, and was definitely on the traditional wing of the party. ‘Choose the time and manner of your departure,’ Lady Patricia said. (Robertson 2010, 426)

The departure, here, is from the conventions of novelistic realism. We are very far from lived experience or natural speech, and encounter characters like the Eddelstanes largely as historical ciphers. Later an alcoholic ex-spy, whose career in the security services involved infiltrating fringe ‘tartan terror’ groups of the 1970s, briskly telescopes developments from 1974–2007. There is little sense of human memory or recollection:

When I think about it now it’s clear enough. Those months between the two General Elections that year [1974], that was when the whole direction of Scottish politics for the next three decades was laid down. The SNP won seven Westminster seats in the February poll and came second to Labour in thirty-four more. Bound to loosen the bowels a bit, eh, if you were a Labour MP? So the party machine clanked into reaction. Wilson told the Scottish leadership they were going to have go down the devolution road, like it or not, in order to shunt the Nats into the ditch. Result? Five years of bluster

and barter, a failed referendum, eighteen years of Tory rape and pillage, ten years of Labour-led devolution and, at the end-up, a Nationalist government in Edinburgh. (Robertson 2010, 319)

These strained effects raise a second difficulty for the literary historian. A book highly prized by pro-independence readers and politicians (declared 2010 Book of the Year by several leading figures in the SNP Government, including Alex Salmond (Salmond 2010)), is actually quite difficult to locate within the culturalist paradigm, in which literary nationalism operates as a form of devolutionary avant-garde. The literary chapter of that story tends to centre on the resurgence of authentic Scottish language and the realistic treatment of grim urban realities, often from a deeply subjectivised, alienated perspective in which the larger rhythms of the social body are scarcely audible.⁵ *And the Land Lay Still* has its share of introverts and traumatised loners, but its narrative architecture insists on the piecing together of personal scraps and fragments into the larger mosaic of a national story, one whose structural movements are defined by aggregative public events such as elections and referenda. In this narrative economy the significance of the personal experience or novelistic detail will derive ultimately from the connections drawn upward through them – connections revealed and determined by the over-arching totality of the national story. A key passage offers the following brisk synopsis of where devolution came from:

Here is a situation: a country that is not fully a country, a nation that does not quite believe itself to be a nation, exists within, and as a small and distant part of, a greater state. The greater state was once a very great state, with its own empire. It is no longer great, but its leaders and many of its people like to believe it is. For the people of the less-than country, the not-quite nation, there are competing, conflicting loyalties. They are confused. (Robertson 2010, 534)

⁵ E.g. Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993), A.L. Kennedy, *Looking for the Possible Dance* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993), James Kelman, *How late it was, how late* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1994).

They might be confused, in their personal fumbblings and smallness, but even their bafflement is clear and orderly from up 'here', certainly when viewed on the national scale – one not quite visible or inhabitable down at ground level. Whereas Walter Scott's historical fiction – the subject of Robertson's PhD in History – was celebrated by Lukács for 'portraying the totality of national life in its complex interaction between "above" and "below"' (Lukács 1962, 49), in this novel the very reality of the nation is constituted by perspectives available only up 'here'. Whereas in Scott (for Lukács) "'below" is seen as the material basis and artistic explanation for what happens "above"', in Robertson's epic we find the reverse: a totalised (and, to be sure, socially 'inclusive') Story of Scotland effectively brings into being the national subjects whose doings and happenings fill in the gaps between crucial by-elections.

Reflecting in the novel's closing lines on his own efforts to trace an artful unifying thread through personal, sexual and political transformation, the central character insists 'the connections will be made, and he understands that it has fallen to him to make them' (Robertson 2010, 671). But for all of the novel's preceding 670 pages the fully joined-up big picture is beyond the ken or experience of individual characters, visible only to the talking-textbook narrator who possesses 'the situation' in advance. As Robert Alan Jamieson observes in his review of the novel, its great slabs of historiography are 'sometimes offered to the reader by an authoritative, noncharacterised voice which doesn't appear to emanate from within the diegesis' (Jamieson 2010) – a technique which reverses a key agenda of devolution-era Scottish writing, namely James Kelman's crusade to abolish precisely this narrative stance and its bogus authority.⁶ Thus the political novel which arguably crowns the 'new renaissance' in Scottish fiction – both documenting and embodying the story of how Scotland re-asserted its own narrative agency – is actually quite difficult to connect to its 1980s and 1990s predecessors, certainly when we plot the development of contemporary

⁶ Needless to say, Kelman's technique and rationale remains a key influence on Scottish writers including Janice Galloway, Irvine Welsh, Alan Warner, Alan Bissett and Jenni Fagan.

Scottish fiction on stylistic or aesthetic lines (see Hames 2016). It may be that the extraordinarily diffuse and over-determined story of devolution simply cannot be told in the intensely particularised narrative style usually held to characterise modern Scottish fiction's coming to political voice.

Devolution as British

This being said, too fixed attention to the national story can obscure key aspects of devolution, which – as Robertson notes – has as much to do with Britishness as Scottishness. At our first workshop, Catriona Macdonald noted that:

It was of course a British government that delivered devolution. And here we hit on the Scottish/UK interface that, I would suggest, usually takes a backseat when it comes to cultural analyses of 1997, which are often very Scotocentric. It was what Scottish voters had *in common* with voters across the UK that delivered regime change in 1997, not the differences. And it was this regime, based in Whitehall, led by a privileged Scot, that delivered the referendum – not poems in short-lived literary journals, not touring productions of low-budget angry plays, not folk laments. Identities defined in part by economics rather than nationality were mobilized in 1997 and arguably the rest came down to psephological aberrations that saw solid Tory seats go Labour for reasons that were far removed from the ideals of the Scottish literati. Indeed, one interpretation of the 1997 referendum was that it proved the Union was actually working. It was a very British solution to an acknowledged domestic problem that, I would say, Scottish Tories of the 1950s would have had very little difficulty in appreciating. After all, the levers of power were retained in Westminster and political power remained in the hands of the usual suspects. (Recording, Workshop 2)

And yet, those Scottish Tories of the 1950s – whose party was still known as the Unionist Party – would have been horrified to think devolution could pave the way to Scottish independence.

Devolution's Backstory: Managing 'National Feeling'

If for Craig the 'effective cause' of devolution's endorsement in 1997 was cultural revolution, there is little doubt that the proximate cause was electoral. This part of the story is well-trodden ground, and vividly told in Robertson's novel: Winnie Ewing's sensational victory for the SNP in the 1967 Hamilton by-election, and growing alarm within the Labour government at the threat posed by the nationalists, rising sharply after the discovery of North Sea Oil in 1970. Both to allay and defer these pressures, Harold Wilson announced his intention to appoint a Royal Commission on the Constitution in late 1968.

The idea behind this was to give the appearance of doing something, which would avoid the need for real action for as long as the commission was deliberating. According to Wilson, the commission was designed to spend years taking minutes, but in public it gave the appearance that the government was taking the issue seriously. It was hoped that, by the time the commission reported, the SNP would have gone away. (Finlay 2004, 322)⁷

Its findings, eventually published in the 1973 Kilbrandon Report, set the process of Scottish devolution into deliberately retarded motion.

This part of the project draws on archival research into the Royal Commission and the 'cultural' dimension of devolution policy from 1967–1979. Competing narratives and histories – both of Britishness and Scottishness – are richly evident in unpublished drafts and discussions of the Royal Commission, as is a striking preoccupation with national feeling and sentiment. From an early stage of its deliberations the Royal Commission comes to understand its primary purpose as that of remedying the threat posed by sub-British nationalism, and theorises the problem as one of affect and attachment: 'the question for us is whether in [Scotland and Wales] the existence of national feeling gives rise to a need for change in political

⁷ Robertson's detailed summary of the same developments in *And the Land Lay Still* extend across more than 60 pages, and are well worth consulting as an historical primer (Robertson 2010, 278–344).

institutions' (*Royal Commission* 1973, I, 102). Indeed, an entire chapter of the final Report is devoted to the nature, strength and implications of 'National Feeling'. The Commission is continually exercised by whether votes for the SNP reflect a desire for constitutional change, or mere recognition of distinct national identity. Devolution is thus conceived as the management of 'national feeling' and its channelling into new institutional loyalties which will corral its destabilising potential. One of Robertson's fictional spymasters also conceives the threat of nationalism in emotional terms when justifying the intelligence services' heightened interest in the SNP after 1967: 'people should be aware of the dangers, the unintended consequences, of indulging their emotions. They need to be *made* aware of them' (Robertson 2010, 290). For all that, 'the government's policy is to contain Nationalism, not to persecute it' (299), and the receptacle for this containment is 'identity' itself. The Kilbrandon Report recommends devolution as 'an appropriate means of recognizing Scotland's national identity and of giving expression to its national consciousness' (*Royal Commission* 1973, I, 335) but takes great pains to emphasise its larger purpose of strengthening and preserving Britishness. Notably, the discourse around 'identity' shifts into a more romantic idiom of national community when placing the essential unity of the United Kingdom beyond question. A section on 'history and tradition' declares:

The geographical separation of the United Kingdom from the continental mainland and its achievement of world prominence as one people have had a strong unifying effect which we regard as irreversible. (*Royal Commission* 1973, I, 122)

In the White Paper which followed Kilbrandon in September 1974 the language of *patrie*, heritage and unity is likewise reserved for the defence of the UK state-nation. As the political space in which Robertson's 'modernised sense of Scottishness' will gain institutional form begins to emerge, the prevailing vision of Britishness is jarringly antique. Instead of revising British identity alongside its constitutional framework, there is a strong sense of retrenchment as pro-devolution figures seek to dispel fears of diluting UK identity and power. With devolution only politically

saleable in England as a buttressing of British unity, sovereignty and greatness – the soothing mantra ‘power devolved is power retained’ is voiced in an unbroken line from Enoch Powell to Tony Blair – the political dynamic which accompanied devolution has probably delayed the development of a post-imperial British culture.

Managing such worries took up a good deal of the Commission’s time. The minutes of a November 1972 meeting show the degree to which devising a coherent plan to recognise (and neuter) ‘national feeling’ involved extensive debate over how to accommodate cultural difference within the British national story:

It was agreed that: –

- a) In the sections in Chapters 4 and 5 on the Scottish and Welsh peoples, more emphasis should be laid on the fact that the differences described were historical and had been narrowing over time.
- b) To achieve better balance, there should be more reference to the common characteristics of the British people. . . (Royal Commission papers, National Archive, HO 221/360).

Eventually, it proved impossible to contain or accommodate the tensions perceptible beneath this smooth bureaucratic summary. The Commission would later split, with a faction led by Norman Crowther-Hunt (later appointed Devolution Adviser to the Wilson government) dissociating itself from the main Report and authoring a separate Memorandum of Dissent. (Robertson’s spymaster quips ‘Makes you proud to be British, doesn’t it? . . . Kick a ball into the long grass and when somebody finally goes to retrieve it they come back with three’ (Robertson 2010, 314)). The Dissenting report takes particular exception to the historical framing finessed above.

The majority report, we believe, has the effect of magnifying the extent of the social and cultural differences between Scotland, Wales and England. This is partly because of the way it handles in the historical section the concept of ‘nationhood’ – with Scotland and Wales thus appearing as separate nations with distinctive values and ways of life ‘struggling to be free’. In

contrast there is no matching study of the more homogenous contemporary pattern of social and cultural values and behaviour which characterise all the different parts of the United Kingdom. (*Royal Commission* 1973, II, vii)

In this respect, devolution from its earliest formulation has centred on unresolved (and perhaps unresolvable) questions of *British* identity and 'national feeling'.

Recuperating Scottish History

If contesting an integrated British historical narrative was key to these Whitehall debates of the 1970s, the question of Scotland's 'distinct values and way of life' were being explored with great energy by writers and scholars. Here the problem was blank space, rather than competing stories. During our first workshop, Cairns Craig argued that the explosion of Scottish historical writing over the past few decades represents the 'filling-in of what was a kind of emptiness in the Scottish past'. For Craig the energies which led to Holyrood originate in the recovery of national historical memory, with magazines such as *Radical Scotland* and *Cencrastus* playing a key role:

You've now got an awareness of the Scottish past that was simply not available to anyone in 1979. This, it seems to me, from my own experience, was a very deliberate political campaign, through culture, to transform the perceptions of Scottish people. The analysis which those of us involved in *Cencrastus* magazine made, in 1979, was that the Scottish people could not vote for their own parliament because they had no sense of their own history or their own culture, and they had no valuation of their own culture. [. . .] What it seems to me we were doing was providing the cultural infrastructure which would make it possible for people to exert the will that would become settled, because they would actually have a background against which to see their own actions. (Recording, Workshop 1)

As with Robertson's novel, it falls to an historically conscious elite to endow the nation with a restored sense of cultural wholeness and self-respect. No agency

without identity: but for this prior step, the recovery of national democracy – also largely a top-down affair, affirming the generous flexibility of Whitehall – would be unintelligible even to newly empowered citizens.

Literary Nationalism and its Discontents

Alongside the recovery and ‘filling-in’ of Scottish cultural identity were several literary interventions which urged caution about national tradition and pre-given modes of belonging. At the 2014 workshop, critic Eleanor Bell surveyed small experimental magazines of the 1960s including *New Saltire* and *Scottish International*. These magazines contain a range of cultural explorations which clearly anticipate the debates of the following decades, without being yoked to, or delimited by, the national question as a salient political issue (which was yet to fully emerge). *Scottish International* magazine (1968–74), for example, set its store on newness and exploration, not recovery of the past. In Bell’s words,

Scottish International promoted itself as a magazine for the development of a radical critique of culture and society, experiment being very much at the heart of it. Just as Bob Tait was giving up the magazine he wrote that ‘basically I’ve seen this magazine as a kind of exploration vehicle, getting as far as possible into the depths, some of them murky, of the society and culture within viewing range.’ [. . .] In tracing these magazines and debates, we can discern a fierce reaction to insularity at the start of the 1960s, but as we move through to *Scottish International* there’s still a very sceptical vision of cultural nationalism and the pitfalls of being too entrenched within certain forms of national identity. There’s a passionate focus on Scotland but also a deep suspicion of complacent ways of thinking about identity. (Recording, Workshop 1)

Indeed, the rise of literary nationalism in journals such as *Akros* and *Lines Review* was occasionally queried from within its own precincts. In 1971 the English-born

Edinburgh poet Alan Jackson took aim at the SNP's new cultural cachet in 'The Knitted Claymore', scolding

people wishing to recreate a defunct historical form because they are so limited that they can't relate to the world or apparently find meaning unless they consider themselves and are considered by others as *Scots*. It is a sad business that present Scottish nationalism is not just an affair of a few hundred pining descendants of Casimir Stuart or a handful of dream-crazy monarchists. [...] the concept of the sovereign state has led to the present hellish and self-destructive postures of 'defence' and continues the myths by which a few can act on behalf of many, tens of thousands of Scottish nationalists and their sympathizers. Are we too to have our frontiers and passports, our own call-up papers and definition of undesirable aliens? A new form of loyalty and so a new form of surrender? (Jackson 1971, 7–8)

Other voices rather welcomed the bracing effect of the call-up papers, or devolution's nearest equivalent. Writing in the wake of the failed 1979 referendum on a Scottish Assembly, Tom Nairn took heart from the harsh division exposed between the 'windy, sleekit, after-dinner "Patriotism"' of middle-class Scotland and the hard political choice imposed by the Scotland Act. Despite the general malaise which followed, wrote Nairn, 'a great deal of spineless self-affirmation was blown away in the result'.

People were made to line up in some sort of vague battle-order, and Scotland was made to see more clearly that the growth of *real* national consciousness is a difficult conflict, a civil war within the nation as much as a struggle between it and the metropolis. (Nairn 1979, 8)

The full rigours of a politicized assertion of Scottishness would have to wait for the debates of 2012–14, however. In 1983, Joyce McMillan felt that the 'Predicament of the Scottish Writer' – updated from Edwin Muir's 1936 diagnosis in *Scott and Scotland* – was marked by an over-developed reflex of self-assertion, noting that the Scottish cul-

tural establishment 'cherishes its hard-won consciousness of the ways in which Scottish culture has been discriminated against, and tends to demand that that consciousness never be let slip; and it is at this point that the artistic rot set in' (McMillan 1983, 69). Its ill-effects may be literary and aesthetic, but the remedy is clearly political:

The destructive obsession with the need to emphasise and preserve the 'Scottishness' of our writing far beyond what comes naturally and truthfully to writers will persist for as long as Scotland remains in a political limbo; in other words, it will last until Scotland either becomes a full nation-state, or loses its sense of nationhood altogether. (McMillan 1983, 70)

Notice that the halfway-house of devolution does not figure here. Perhaps the extended hyper-awareness of Scottish difference and marginality comes with the raising, in devolution itself, of 'political limbo' to a 'settled' constitutional position. A fully mobilized *kulturkampf* was postponed for the debate on independence itself.

2014 and all that

With workshop events held just before, and roughly a year after, the referendum on Scottish independence, the urgency of these political questions was a strong presence in our discussions. It was in this light that Italian critic Carla Sassi offered an 'outsider's perspective' suggesting we think twice before discounting the force of literary nationalism:

In Scotland, as much as in England – I don't see much difference here – literature has played a very central role in the construction of national identity, and literary texts and writers have here a nationally iconic status that does not necessarily characterise other European contexts. You can have a literature, but in other countries, you're not necessarily entitled to independence for that, or perhaps you're not even interested in independence. (Recording, Workshop 2)

The Polish scholar of language nationalism Tomasz Kamusella added that 'most states and nations extant at present in the world do not have and do not aspire to

spawn their own national literatures'. But in Sassi's view, the fierce contestation of Scottish literature's legitimacy and importance was itself strong evidence of its political significance: 'The degree of denial and denigration suffered by Scottish literature in the twentieth-century is in fact directly proportional, I believe, to the perceived political power of an independent national literary canon' (ibid.).

In contrast, Alex Thomson offered a sceptical view of national literary history and its critical methods, so often employed to *justify* the canon (and discipline) in ways which tend to inhibit critical enquiry:

Internally to the literary discipline there are several problems. [. . .] [Take] the circularity problem: the repeated allegorical mining of texts to explain the nation and be explained by the nation. There's the selection bias problem: that our focus on political and cultural differentiation of those Scottish texts, [in order] to tell the Scottish story, leads to our neglect of the similarity between those texts and things which are happening elsewhere. [. . .] There's a worry that one of the things we're doing is making thrawn, difficult, stubborn, problematic texts 'safe' for cultural use. In particular there's a risk that we try to redeem the negativity which is inherent to modern art's claim to have a critical stance against the world by assimilating it to a positive narrative, that narrative of cultural recovery and revival. [. . .] This [style of] literary history has very much fed into some of those myths about what makes Scotland different: it is more social democratic, all its writers are outsiders, we don't have any establishment writers, and so on. (Recording, Workshop 1)

Methodological debate within Scottish literary studies seems likely to intensify as the charged 'external' political climate continues to highlight the field's 'structural nationalism' vis-à-vis English literature (Connell 2003). In my view the opportunity to revisit the political self-constitution of 'Scottish Literature' as a subject should be welcomed, though others involved in the workshop might well disagree.

Re-problematising devolution

Leading sociologist David McCrone notes 'an influential strain of writing about the relationship between culture and politics' in modern Scotland.

Such culturalist accounts [. . .] have powerful appeal despite (or perhaps because of) their lack of systematic and rigorous evidence to back them. They are predispositions of considerable cultural power which set the frame for economic and political agendas. They may be wrong, in sociological terms, but they are powerfully wrong in setting the frame for debate. (McCrone 2009, 54–56)

Our task was not to gauge the rightness or wrongness of the culturalist narrative, but to investigate its influence and ramifications. We have already seen the varying purchase gained by this paradigm in the fields of Scottish literature and political history, yet what seems impossible to reconcile in these differing accounts of devolution has its own cultural-historical interest, and deserves further exploration (not least from British perspectives).

Looking back on the fictionalised version of the pro-devolution magazine *Radical Scotland*, Robertson's central character (and in this scene, his alter ego) modestly notes that

There were other, more visible, magazines with similar agendas that achieved much more in political terms, but Mike still feels a touch of pride when he looks at a copy of *Root & Branch*. And yet the argument that was conducted in its pages, as it was in the pages of those other journals, should not have been necessary. What was it again? It was, in the end, so convincingly won that it is hard to reconstruct it. (Robertson 2010, 537)

Here precisely is the key problem: the difficulty of reconstructing the complexity, discord and non-integration of the arguments which produced the bland consensus taken for granted today. As political scientist Paul Cairney points out, the Scottish

public may view devolved government with a mixture of 'ambivalence and disinterest', but opinion polling shows that 'anytime people identify failure in devolution, their preferred solution was *more* devolution' (Recording, Workshop 2). The non-descript hegemony of devolution as a concept masks the complexity and contingency of its emergence as a policy – a factor often acknowledged within the culturalist paradigm, whatever its sociological limitations. We who inhabit the in-between – but already protracted – age of devolution should pay fuller attention to the debates which formed it, for they cast considerable light on the cultural and political dynamics of the febrile present.

What futures can we project for devolution today? In one sense, the political strategy became redundant in 2011, when it failed to prevent the open challenge to the legitimacy of the United Kingdom represented by the 2014 referendum. In another, the result of that referendum – 2 million votes against Scottish independence – was a ringing endorsement of devolution and proof both of its popularity and its durability as a 'settled' constitutional position. (This point was strongly made at our 2015 workshop by legal scholar – and Unionist/Conservative campaigner – Adam Tomkins.) Having spectacularly failed to 'kill nationalism stone-dead', in the famous 1990s prophecy of George Robertson, ever-further devolution is the maximalist middling way most popular with the Scottish public (see Curtice 2014), and serves as the basis for not one but two imminent strengthenings of the Scottish Parliament (the implementation of the Scotland Act 2012 and further new powers recommended by the Smith Commission in 2014). Simultaneously beefed-up and obsolete, devolution is being asked to mean most things to most people as never before.

The need to recover (or construct) its historical meanings is accordingly urgent. Scotland has a very uncertain grasp of how it got to where it is going. The political slipperiness of devolution – both a deep-state stratagem to 'dish the Nats' through the management of national feeling, and a pathway to self-determination grounded in the recovery of cultural self-knowledge – generates a series of narrative problems for historians and citizens alike. Scholars are only beginning to grapple with the problem of narrativising devolution, even as the political process itself enters a kind

of muscular afterlife. After the 'No' vote in 2014, devolution is Scotland's indefinite future, though a rounded view of its nature, genesis and significance – both cultural and political – is yet to emerge.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- Bogdanor, V., 2001. *Devolution in the United Kingdom*, Rev edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, I., 2012. 'Arts first; politics later': Scottish Theatre as a Recurrent Crucible of Cultural Change. *Anglistik*, 23(2) (September): 95–105.
- Brown, I., 2013. Processes and interactive events: theatre and Scottish devolution. In: Blandford, S. (Ed.), *Theatre and Performance in Small Nations*. Bristol: Intellect Press, pp. 33–49.
- Connell, L., 2003. Modes of Marginality: Scottish Literature and the Uses of Post-colonial Theory. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23(1&2): 41–53. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-23-1-2-41>
- Craig, C., 2003. Scotland: Culture After Devolution. In Longley, E, Hughes, E. and O'Rawe, D. (Eds.), *Ireland (Ulster) Scotland: Concepts, Contexts, Comparisons*. Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona, pp. 39–49.
- Craig, C., 2014. The Cause of Scotland. Unpublished essay.
- Craig, C., 2014a. The Case for Culture. *Scottish Review of Books*, 10(3). Retrieved from: <http://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/index.php/back-issues/2013-03-27-15-25-27/volume-ten-issue-three/630-the-case-for-culture-cairns-craig>.
- Crawford, R., 2000. *Devolving English Literature*, 2nd edn. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Curtice, J., 2014. So Where Does Scotland Stand on More Devolution? *ScotCen* Social Research [Briefing report on findings of 2013 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey]. Retrieved from: <http://www.scotcen.org.uk/media/282285/ssa13-devo-max-briefingreport.pdf>.

- Devine, T.M., 2016. *Independence or Union: Scotland's Past and Scotland's Present*. London: Allen Lane.
- Finlay, R.J., 2004. *Modern Scotland 1914–2000*. London: Profile.
- Hames, S. (ed.). 2012. *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence*. Edinburgh: Word Power.
- Hames, S. (ed.). 2013. On Vernacular Scottishness and its Limits: Devolution and the Spectacle of 'Voice'. *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 39(1): 201–222.
- Hames, S. (ed.). 2016. The New Scottish Renaissance? In Boxall, P. and Cheyette, B. (Eds.), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 494–511.
- Jackson, A., 1971. The Knitted Claymore: An Essay on Culture and Nationalism. *Lines Review*, 37: 2–38.
- Jamieson, R.A., 2010. Review: *And the Land Lay Still*. *The Bottle Imp* 8. Retrieved from: <http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/SWE/TBI/TBIIssue8/Jamieson.html>.
- Lukács, G., 1962. *The Historical Novel*, translated by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. London: Merlin.
- McCrone, D., 2009. National Identity and Culture in a Cold Climate: The Case of Scotland. *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, 2(2): 53–65.
- McMillan, J., 1983. The Predicament of the Scottish Writer. *Chapman*, 35–6: 68–71.
- Nairn, T., 1979. After the Referendum. *New Edinburgh Review*, (Summer): 3–10.
- Recording, Workshop 1 (from 'Narrating Scottish Devolution' Workshop, 22 August 2014, University of Stirling).
- Recording, Workshop 2 (from 'Narrating Scottish Devolution' Workshop, 31 August 2015, University of Stirling).
- Robertson, J., 2010. *And the Land Lay Still*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Royal Commission on the Constitution 1969–1973*. 1973. 2 vols. London: HM Stationery Office.
- Royal Commission papers, National Archive, HO 221/360.
- Salmond, A., 2010. Books of 2010. *The Scotsman*, 12 December 2010.

Thomson, A., 2007. 'You can't get there from here': Devolution and Scottish Literary History. *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 3(Autumn/Winter). Retrieved from: <http://www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk/issue3/thomson.htm>.

White, B.T., 2015. Landscape for a decent bloke (review of *And the Land Lay Still*). Personal blog. Retrieved from: <https://singularthings.wordpress.com/tag/andthe-land-lay-still/>.

How to cite this article: Hames, S 2017 Narrating Devolution: Politics and/as Scottish Fiction. *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings*, 5(2): 2, pp.1–25, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.20>

Published: 10 March 2017

Copyright: © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-century Writings is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS 