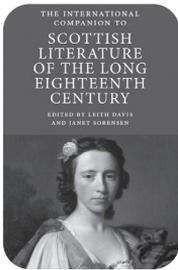


“UNPRECEDENTED, AS WELL AS UNEVEN”: REPOSITIONING EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SCOTTISH LITERATURE IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

Leith Davis, Janet Sorensen (eds.), *The International Companion to Scottish Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century*, Glasgow, Scottish Literature International, 2021



**Abstract:** Grounded in solid archival research and threaded through with energising injections of new theoretical perspectives on literary history, *The International Companion to Scottish Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century* (2021) brings a necessary resetting of the national(ist) baseline that characterises much critical discourse on the literary offshoots of the (Scottish) Enlightenment. The volume’s consistent and innovative attention to the interconnectedness of the core and the (semi)periphery, or of the national and the transnational in the multiply mediated, cross-generic, non-homogeneous bodies of literature produced across (and beyond) Scotland in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is proof of the mobilisation of a responsive and adjustable analytical *dispositif* that may generate further (re)perspectivisations in the future.

**Keywords:** Scottish Literature; World-Literature; The Long Eighteenth Century; (Trans)national.

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Upcycling conventional periodisation models that tend to bind the literature of the Scottish Enlightenment to the 1700s, *The International Companion to Scottish Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century* (2021) initiates discerning assessments of the “combined and uneven”<sup>1</sup> ways in which the socio-political, religious and cultural developments of the long eighteenth century (1650-1800) interleaved the peripheral and the dominant, the local and the global, or the parochial and the cosmopolitan. In addressing Scottish literature as world-literature, the volume edited by Leith Davis and Janet Sorensen, part of a rigorous ASL collection, continues and refines the spatiotemporal scalar adjustments that recent historical surveys like *The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture*, published by Bucknell University Press in 2016, also resort to in an attempt to relieve the literary output of this time from imputations of scarcity or sterility and to foreground, in the mid- to late eighteenth century, the interstitial layerings, rather than the strict boundaries, between “Enlightenment and Romanticism; Vernacular Revival and Anglicisation; science and literature; reason and emotion.”<sup>2</sup> Still, as Leith Davis, who signs the “Introduction” to the *International Companion*, shows, it is equally important to acknowledge the wealth of early modern Scottish literatures that circulated in diverse mediums (orally, in print, or in manuscript), in heteroglossic interference (in Gaelic, Scots,

English or Latin), even before the political union of 1707, traditionally deemed to be a “punctuating and defining moment after which a new kind of Scottish literature emerged.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, the contributors to the *International Companion* conceptualise the unevenly textured forms of literature that captured and reflected the turbulent events that both preceded and succeeded that “watershed” event (from Cromwell’s defeat of the Scots in the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, to the gradually dissipated ideal of a definitively restored Stuart line or to Scotland’s enmeshment in England’s imperial exploits) in terms of rhizomatic “through-lines” that connect – through myriad mesh knots that cut through “complex cultural fields” – celebrated, canonical, or elite literary productions with the works of unheralded, anonymous, or “unacknowledged voices in this rich era of literary history.”<sup>4</sup>

Structurally, the multiperspectival studies comprised in this volume follow the dynamic (re)alignments of different literary traditions (from the bardic poetry of the Highlands to the street balladry of the Lowlands and the recalibration of Augustan poetic forms, or from sentimental novels to travel-inflected literature and abolitionist narratives) under four thematic headings that mine the rich veins of literature created in a Scottish (trans) national context over the one century and a half that is the focus of this inquiry: the interplay of a polyphonic array of languages in shaping local, regional and national identities, the impact of remediation on the reception of different literary corpora, the affordances of generic adaptation and experimentation, and the freshly distilled ecologies of space and time in a range of Scottish literature(s).

The first section, on “Language, Identity, and History,” starts with a methodical interrogation, by Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart, of the remarkable formal and thematic ambit of early modern Gaelic literature, which rather than remaining insulated in the “timelessly traditional” orality of the Gàidhealtachd, lent itself to transmediation and permeation by political and romantic topics that spanned a broader (Scottish and European) geocultural spectrum, operating as the sounding board of a “dynamic, endlessly adaptive, [...] surprisingly cosmopolitan” and “increasingly hybrid nation.”<sup>5</sup> The study authored by Corey E. Andrews similarly explores the body of poetry written in the Scots register as both epitomised and inhibited by the towering importance of Robert Burns, who capitalised on the markedly national agenda of precursors like Alexander Ross, Allan Ramsay and Robert Ferguson and developed a hegemonic discourse that largely precluded the affirmation of other, “minor” authors of Scots verse. Focusing on the articulation of national identity constructs amidst transnational networks of cultural exchange, Leith Davis’s chapter zooms in on the period between the absorption of Scotland into the Cromwellian Commonwealth and the 1707 Parliamentary Union to pinpoint the shifting temporal and spatial tropes used by writers – from Thomas Urquhart to Iain Lom MacDhomhnaill, George Mackenzie, James Philip, and James Watson – to “write Scotland” into a world marked by increasing mutability and mobility. Not least, in the chapter concluding this section, Holly Faith Nelson and Sharon Alker throw light on the post-Restoration as a period characterised by energetic efforts made by politically

conservative or insurgent Scottish printers, poets, playwrights and fiction writers to awaken the country's latent possibilities for constructing a national canon that could exist in relation to, rather than against, England's.<sup>6</sup>

Grouped under the title "Media and Mediation," the next four chapters offer intriguing perspectives on the intersections of print technologies and literary form. Emma Pink's investigation sets Allan Ramsay's multi-mediated poetic constructs of nationhood and his deployment of differently gendered and accented voices in conversation with the nostalgic "affect" of national identity" cultivated in Scottish song and balladry over the course of the eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Co-authored by Leith Davis and Jasreen Kaur Janjua, the next chapter argues that the visual and textual representations of anti-Jacobite sentiment in media campaigns waged at around the time of the 1745 Rising reworked gendered stereotypes into knots or networks of cultural memory (apud Michael Rothberg) that commingled competing or jarring figurations of usurped and (un)restored political sovereignty.<sup>8</sup> Juliet Shield's assessment of the conditions and implications of female authorship for poets writing in provincial Scotland reveals a social disparity that rendered middle-class and aristocratic writers like Anne MacVicar Grant, Elizabeth Rae Keir or Frances Scott wary of seeking print publication of their poems, whereas women from a working-class background, like Christian Milne or Anne Ross, felt impelled to publish their works as means of securing aesthetic and pecuniary validation in the public eye. Closing the section is Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart's analysis of key, critical moments in the

history of the Gàidhealtachd (the civil wars of the 1640s and the failed uprisings of the 1740s) and the ways in which the time in between saw the fashioning of a printed and more widely accessible "hegemonic canon" of Scottish Gaelic literature that included the works of Alasdair MacDhomhnaill, Dùghall Bochanan, Donnchadh Bàn Mac an t-Saoir and James Macpherson and that set the stage for an "increasingly international, [...] global Gaelosphere drawing upon, and in some ways disquietingly parallel to, the rapidly expanding global Anglosphere."<sup>9</sup>

Opening the third section of the volume, "Possibilities of Genre," is Ian Brown's demonstration that despite expectations for theatrical activity to be suppressed in Scotland during and after the Interregnum, the Restoration fostered in fact a heterogeneity of dramatic representations that by the late eighteenth century had incrementally whetted Scottish appetites for forms of amateur and professional entertainment. With its questioning of the manifold ways in which the pastoral genre was rescripted and recodified by poets like Allan Ramsay, James Macpherson, and Robert Burns, among others, to challenge and complicate ideas of civilisational progress, David Radcliffe's study sheds light on the mechanisms through which the juxtaposition or conflation of various formal parameters both captured and broadened the rift between orality and literacy or between provincialism and cosmopolitanism. Kate Louise Mathis's deft exploration of the oral tradition of poetry maintained by Gaelic women whose works were thereafter collected into printed anthologies suggests that far from being limited to domestic topics, such poems symptomatically

responded to public concerns, from the trauma of warfare to the progressively escalating experience of migration. Underscoring the strategies through which Scottish novelists Jean Marishall, Elizabeth Hamilton and Mary Brunton repurposed the formulaic structures of sentimental fiction to both ridicule and harness its emotional appeal, JoEllen DeLucia's insightful chapter discloses the cultural labour performed by such narratives in instrumenting humour as a conduit to the enlightening tenets of common sense philosophy. Rounding off this section, Sim Innes's close reading of an anonymous poem on Ben Nevis, found in the James McLagan collection, outlines the ways in which aesthetic figurations of the Highlands could be paradoxically trapped in passeist representational moulds and receptive to modern geological notions of stadal history.

The fourth and last section, discussing "Environments of Space and Time," draws upon some of the most engaging theoretical reframings of eighteenth-century Scottish literature at the crossroads of literary history, postcolonialism, and ecocriticism, and steps firmly onto the ground of what Jeremy Chow's 2023 edited volume of studies legitimises as eighteenth-century environmental humanities.<sup>10</sup> Eric Gidal's stance on the poetry written in Gaelic, Scots or English in the eighteenth-century, a "period of rapid changes in land use, resource extraction, industrial production, urban growth, and rural depopulation,"<sup>11</sup> validates the notion that prior critical equations of nature with nation should be supplemented with re-readings of vaster environmental transformations that pit local phenomena against (or amidst) a "unified system of global mobility, resource

extraction, and ecological degradation."<sup>12</sup> Dafydd Moore's chapter adopts a deliberately presentist approach to Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian*, filtering his conclusions regarding its colossally scaled temporalities through a Gouldian perspective on the sublimities of "deep time."<sup>13</sup> In his reconsideration of Welsh author Thomas Pennant's 1769 *Tour of Scotland* and 1772 *Voyage to the Hebrides*, alongside the travelogues of Defoe, Martin Martin, Joseph Banks, and Samuel Johnson, through the lens of spatial humanities, Alex Deans suggests that, whether for Scots or foreign travellers, border crossings between the Lowlands and the Highlands tended to be associated with simultaneously progressive and regressive movement, or with the benefits of leisure tourism and "anxieties regarding the effects of modernisation."<sup>14</sup> Janet Sorensen's chapter tackles issues of mobility and the conveyance of definitions of Scottishness abroad, arguing that maritime language becomes, for the seafaring protagonists of Smollett's *The Adventures of Roderick Random*, a mode of navigating and managing an interiorised sense of outsideness and foreignness. The section ends with Michael Morris's excellently conducted analysis, through the prism of a Wallersteinian world-systems approach, of Ottobah Cugoano's decolonising, abolitionist plea in the context of Scotland's "Minority Imperialist Culture", indicating that lines of inquiry into Scotch involvement in the transatlantic slave economy and its effects remain open.

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*Eighteenth Century* brings a necessary re-setting of the national(ist) baseline that characterises much critical discourse on the literary offshoots of the (Scottish) Enlightenment. The volume's consistent and innovative attention to the interconnect- edness of the core and the (semi)periphery of or of the national and the transnational

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## NOTES

1. To borrow the title phrase of WReC, *Uneven Development. Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2015.
2. Ralph McLean, Ronnie Young, and Kenneth Simpson (eds.), "Introduction," *The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture*, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 2016, p. 15.
3. Leith Davis and Janet Sorensen (eds.), *The International Companion to Scottish Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century*, Glasgow, Scottish Literature International, 2021, p. 8.
4. *Ibidem*, pp.10-11.
5. *Ibidem*, pp. 24-25.
6. *Ibidem*, p. 73.
7. *Ibidem*, p. 97.
8. *Ibidem*, p. 119.
9. *Ibidem*, p. 168.
10. Jeremy Chow (ed.), "Introduction," *Eighteenth-Century Environmental Humanities*, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 2023, p. 2.
11. Davis and Sorensen (eds.), *The International Companion*, p. 246.
12. *Ibidem*, p. 256.
13. *Ibidem*, p. 268.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 281.