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# Guilt, not Gaelic

Scottish writing has finally shaken off its inferiority complex – but can it thrive on confidence, rather than cringing? asks *Colin Waters*

As it stepped into the 21st century, Scottish literature found itself almost fashionable. The notorious “Scottish cringe”, the Scots’ passion for doing themselves down, subsided in the face of both critical and commercial success. As a confirming benediction, in 2004 Unesco appointed Edinburgh the world’s first City of Literature – ahead, crucially, of London.

As the 300th anniversary of the Acts of Union approaches, talk is suddenly of independence. Many link the upsurge in national confidence, not just in literature, with devolution in 1999. Polls suggest that a small majority are in favour of independence, but how seriously should we take them? A comparison with the last time Scottish nationalism was poised to secure its goals is instructive. In the 1970s, writers were heavily involved in the march towards the first, and ultimately failed, vote on devolution. In magazines and smoke-suffused pubs, playwrights, folk singers and in particular poets – such as Sydney Goodsir Smith, George Campbell Hay and Hugh MacDiarmid – played a great part in motivating and defining the movement as nationalist politicians.

Today, no equivalent scene exists behind the poll figures. The verbal (and sometimes physical) spats that marked the culture wars of three decades ago are absent. The warhorses of Scottish literature, led by Alasdair Gray, continue to support and write about independence, but younger writers are as likely to be exercised by the nationhood of Palestinians as they are by the nationhood of Scots. As one young writer put it to me, there are “bigger fish to fry” – he mentioned globalisation, the environment and Iraq – than the issue of Scottish identity, which seems small, even petty, in comparison.

This shift in attitudes is mirrored in Scottish novelists’ growing tendency to set novels outside their motherland. Recent notable Scottish novels have taken place in Spain (*The Worms Can Carry Me to Heaven*), Russia (*The People’s Act of Love*), America (*Restless*), Germany (*The Bullet Trick*, *Clara*), Botswana (*The No 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency*) and England (*The Accidental*). All this begs the heretical question – is Scotland still an interesting place to write about? Even James Kelman, the very model of the modern

Scottish novelist, has set his last two novels abroad, in South America (*Translated Accounts*) and the States (*You Have to Be Careful in the Land of the Free*).

Scotland may now be too small for some of the stories its novelists want to tell (though this geographical petiteness may explain the success of Scottish crime writing – or “Tartan Noir”, to give it its media tag: Edinburgh, for example, is a city of such compact dimensions you often discover the most diverse people have the sort of unexpected connections that fuel all the best mysteries). This geographical adventurousness reflects a larger literary opening-up. Where recently it was seen as urban, working class, gritty, male and written in the vernacular, Scottish literature is now as likely to be identified with Ali Smith or Jackie Kay as it is with Kelman. Writers’ choice of language – English, Gaelic or the various vernaculars – was once a political decision; in the 1970s and 1980s, authors wrote in Scots as it was allowed no other public space. Today, the question is less fraught – interestingly, it is the English novel that is now coming to terms with the use of vernacular, as seen in recent books by Helen Walsh, Niall Griffiths and Will Self.

But don’t break out the bunting just yet. Almost no major – or indeed minor – Scottish writers are signed to a Scottish publisher. Canongate remains the model of an independent Scottish publisher operating in a global market, but problems persist in the industry at large. Given the scarcity of jobs, most graduates of Scotland’s publishing courses have to move to London or find alternative employment.

More troublingly, this decade has lacked what the 1980s and the 1990s had in the shape of Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark* and Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting*: a spectacular fictional debut that sets new directions for years to come. Scots’ confidence in their identity and place in the world is good for the nation’s soul – but is it good for Scottish writing?

Guilt, not Gaelic, has ever been Scotland’s second language. The country’s abandonment of shame, as well as other traditional and political concerns, robs its native literature of the stock used to thicken many a Scotch fictional broth. What is needed now is not necessarily a renewal of the Union, but of those themes that successive



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generations of Scottish writers have addressed and re-addressed to such great effect. Should Scots miss their opportunity at this May's parliamentary elections, the failure should provoke enough shame to produce at least one or two new masterpieces. ❀

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