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Scotland Emergent PART FOUR: Damned but defiant

In the final part of his series on the foundations of Scottish literature, Alan Riach takes us from tales of Merlin and King Arthur to the Agricola of Tacitus

The poem, *The Gododdin* (dated to anywhere between the 7th and 11th centuries and in manuscript from the 13th century) gives us what seems to be the earliest reference to King Arthur. *The Vita Merlini Caledonii* (c.1150) by Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1100-55) tells the story of the mad prophet Lailoken and his meetings with Kentigern or Mungo, patron saint of Glasgow. Lailoken is Myrddin. Myrddin is identified with Merlin and thus connected to the Arthurian legends. Things get hazy very quickly.

The essential book here is Tim Clarkson's *Scotland's Merlin: A Medieval Legend and Its Dark Origins* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2016). Although there are numerous Scottish locations with Arthurian references (Dunadd in Argyll, Iona, Ben Arthur in the Trossachs, Edinburgh's Arthur's Seat and the Roman Fort at Trimontium, Melrose), the stories themselves, linked in different cycles to Cornwall, Wales and Scotland, like the composite character of Merlin, evade any singular definition. Yet Merlin or Myrddin is firmly present in the lore of the Scottish Borders and his grave is said to be where the Powsail burn runs into the river Tweed at Drumelzier, near Peebles. In 1889, John Veitch published *Merlin and Other Poems*, which delves into the wizard-poet's wanderings in the Borders and his meetings with St Kentigern or Mungo – in other words, his moving between the pagan world of the forest and the world of early Christian settlement. It's a similar moment to that in which Ossian meets St Patrick. What slips between verifiable history and uncertainty is characteristic of this early period of Scottish literature. Merlin is legendary but something in his story was surely actual. His myth is founded in some kind of reality.

The uncertain territory between history and fabulation is the provenance of the Arthurian stories. One of the most enjoyable navigations of this territory is Alastair Moffat's *Arthur and the Lost Kingdoms* (1999), which considers the relation between the Welsh, Scots and Gaelic-speaking peoples especially between the Antonine Wall and Hadrian's Wall in the period around the retreat of the Romans from the Borders. Moffat has little hard factual historical evidence to rely on but speculates provocatively on the meanings of place names, the significance of geographical terrain and its relation to the human economy, and the

ideological significance of nationalities in Britain as they were beginning to find forms. He argues that Arthur's base of operations was in fact in the Scottish Borders, along with more famous sites in Wales and Cornwall, and ventures to infer that the original location of what we think of as Camelot was Roxburgh.

More than half a millennium later we might seem to be on more secure ground, but the same debatable lands between fact and fiction are our context. On the night of 18 March 1286, King Alexander III left Edinburgh and set off on horseback to Kinghorn in Fife, to spend the night with his wife Queen Yolande, whose birthday was the following day. Separated from his guides, he came off his horse and his body was found at the foot of a steep rocky bank on the way. This left Scotland vulnerable, without the assurance of certain succession. Factions were growing around rival claimants to the throne, John Balliol and Robert Bruce and others, and King Edward I of England was invited to adjudicate these claims. When he claimed legal authority as overlord, and then asserted his own hereditary right to the throne of Scotland, opposition to his authority began to lead to the Wars of Independence.

Economically, Scotland had been prospering until, after the death of Alexander III, the resistance to King Edward I of England led to civil strife. This context is the basis for one of the earliest verses written in Older Scots, recorded in 1424 in Andrew of Wyntoun's *Oryginale Cronykil of Scotland*. It's a lament for Scotland after Alexander's death, but it's also an invocation of what prosperity might mean and why it was longed for:

Quhen Alexander our kynge was dede

That Scotlande led in lauche and le,

Away was sons of alle and brede,

Off wyne and wax, of gamyn and gle.

Our golde was changit in to lede.

Christ, borne in virgynyte,

Succoure Scotlande, and remede,

That stude is in perplexite.

On the same night that Alexander III set off from Edinburgh, in the village of Earlstoun (or Ercildoune), Thomas Rhymer (c.1220-98), whose name probably signified his job (like Baker or Carter), had been summoned to dine with the Earl. On being asked what he thought the morning would bring, he prophesied that the worst tempest Scotland had ever known was coming the next day. When news of the King's death arrived, Thomas's reputation as a prophet was confirmed. His reputation as a poet apparently remained high for centuries and as another of Alastair Moffat's books, *The Borders: A History of the Borders from Earliest Times* (2007) tells us, there are good grounds for considering him "the forerunner of Henryson and Dunbar".

There is certainly a direct line from Thomas through the songs and poems of the Scottish Borders to Walter Scott's collection of ballads, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-03), and from there to Nigel Tranter (1909-2000), whose novel *True Thomas* (1981) offers a realistic explanation for Thomas's mysterious disappearance and whose narrative is peppered with poems and prophecies. The long poem *Sir Tristrem*, often ascribed to Thomas, was revised and reprinted by Scott in the early 19th century, as was the traditional ballad of "Thomas the Rhymer" (ostensibly a poem about the poem's author).

With more than six hundred years between these poems and Scott and nearly two hundred between Scott and Tranter, the authenticity of such stories and their authors becomes – what shall we say? – at least, uncertain. On the one hand, "Thomas the Rhymer" is a traditional ballad of the otherworld, in which Thomas, lying on a grassy bank, encounters the Queen of Elfland and rides off with her into a twilight zone, the Celtic land of the ever-young, and returns after seven years, which seem like no time at all to him. The ballad is full of mysterious suggestions of wondrousness and difficulty, sexual implication and insight, the cost of bloodshed and the virtues of love. When Thomas returns to his human world, he has acquired the gift of prophecy. So much for the ballad, whose events we cannot date or verify – but Thomas was a real man and verses of his prophecies survive from the early 1400s which refer to his adventures in a first-person narrative that names actual places such as Huntlie Bank and Eildon, near Melrose.

What are we to make of all this?

Perhaps we should simply acknowledge the fact of ambiguities in this world, and that there are things we cannot see.

When Hugh MacDiarmid edited *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* (1940), the first anthology of Scottish poetry to emphatically include translations from Gaelic and Latin, he wrote in the introduction that he agreed with the speculation of Dr Agnes Mure Mackenzie that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was probably written by one Hucheone of the Awle Royale, Sir Hugh of Eglinton, who died in 1381. This may have been the “Sir Hugh of Eglinton” to whom William Dunbar refers in his “Lament for the Makars”. Andrew of Wyntoun also refers to “Huchown of the Awle Ryale” (or “the Palace Royal”) as the author of stories of the Arthurian adventures of Sir Gawain. Now, the Gawain poet has never been identified but the language of that poem is a form of Middle English connected to speech forms in Cheshire and the reference in it to the wilderness of the Wirral clearly indicates locations in what is now Cheshire and Derbyshire. Folk tradition places the Green Knight’s chapel in the Peak District.

There are further intricacies but the main thing here is that there’s an important distinction between the southern literary tradition embodied by Chaucer, which runs its magnificent and grandiloquent course through Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, all the way to Derek Walcott and on, and the northern alliterative tradition, of which Gawain is a part, which breathes a different air.

The key point here is not to claim the Gawain-poet as “English” or “Scottish” but to understand that the Gawain poem takes part in this northern tradition, and therefore relates to contemporary and later Scots-language poems in different parts of Scotland.

The onset of the north European winter invites us to encounter the metaphysics of spring, a hard-won renewal that comes at a cost. Its universal significance is the assertion of human value in the face of mortality. If there is a central symbol of hope in Scottish literature in this act of defiance in the face of innumerable odds or inevitable defeat, it may be found in the force that drives Gawain on his inexplicably successful quest. It may be found in the image of the defiant small band of fighting men decimated by a greater military might or overwhelmed by an imperial ethos, and this can be linked to the hunters and fighters of Gaelic antiquity, the Fianna, and later to the small band of Caledonians led by Calgacus at the battle of Mons Graupius in the Grampians, described by Tacitus (55-120 AD) in the *Agricola* (97-98 AD), and later again to the closing sentences of the Declaration of Arbroath (1320).

The Christian formulation of this symbolic confrontation, of course, is the story of David and Goliath.

Neil Ross, editor of the 1939 edition of *Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore*, quotes Kuno Meyer: “The Fian were ‘often men expelled from their clan (éclaind); or landless men (dithir); sons of kings who quarrelled with their fathers; men proscribed; or men who seized this means to avenge some private wrong by taking the law into their own hands.’ The singular number is Fian, a warrior band, and the plural Fianna means a number of such bands.”

It’s a familiar image. Think of the lonely band of warriors in the classic Japanese film, Akira Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai* (1954) or its Hollywood version, *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), or the damned but determined outlaws in Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969). Such renegades, highly trained in martial skill, were to become the material of legend and song, and their outlaw status has an affinity with the sense of opposition you feel in *The Gododdin* and the opposition to imperial Roman militarism voiced by Calgacus in the *Agricola*. There are many other examples but the *Agricola* is a lastingly resonant work. Here is my own free version of Calgacus’s speech:

We are the last men on earth, the last of the free. We have been shielded till now by the distance and remoteness of the place where we live, on the edge of what is unknown, to them. But today the border is revealed to us like a line made by a sword drawn on the earth. Beyond us is nothing, waves and rocks on one side, Romans on the other. They are the thieves and spoilers of the world. They ruin the land with their plunder and they ransack the ships of the sea. They look upon wealth and feel only greed. They look upon poverty and feel nothing but lust for power. East and West have not satisfied them. Their grasp is all the world and they are strange, for they will attack the poor as violently as the rich. Robbery, slaughter and rape, these liars name Empire. They make a desert, and they call it Peace.

Many of the poems I’ve been talking about over these four essays on “Scotland Emergent” can be found in the excellent anthology, *The Triumph Tree: Scotland’s Earliest Poetry AD*

550-1350 (edited by Thomas Owen Clancy, 1998). Edwin Morgan's review of this book is also worth reading in the Times Literary Supplement (12 March 1999).

The violence of war, the priorities of peace, the pathos of the struggle, the different languages and customs of human behaviour, all come into the spectrum of the earliest stories and songs that characterise what we now call Scottish literature. Perhaps the same may be said of any literature, in other languages, but what's singular here is the encounter of the languages and the geography itself, the terrain, the archipelagic identity of Scotland. That creates something essential to what Scotland is now and could be, connected to all the world, but not like anywhere else.

That impulse to violence and that longing for peace, that pathos and indeed the glory of the human engagement in these struggles are exemplified in the literatures in Gaelic, Norse, Latin, Old Welsh and northern alliterative Old English and Scots. These languages are all part of what Scottish literature begins with, and from which it arises. Of them all, the Gaelic tradition is the longest and continues with us into the 21st century, and we'll be coming back to that.