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## Contemporary Scottish Literature: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism

### Citation for published version:

Jones, C 2010, 'Contemporary Scottish Literature: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism' *Scottish Literary Review* [formerly *Scottish Studies Review*], vol 2, no. 2, pp. 211-212.

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

### Document Version:

Publisher final version (usually the publisher pdf)

### Published In:

*Scottish Literary Review* [formerly *Scottish Studies Review*]

### Publisher Rights Statement:

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***Contemporary Scottish Literature: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism.***  
By Matt McGuire. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. ISBN  
9780230506701. 216pp. pbk. £14.99.

The first thing to notice on opening Matt McGuire's guide is its place in a series which more generally deals with single texts or authors, thus ranking the field of contemporary Scottish literature on a par with *Beloved* or *The Fiction of Martin Amis* in the amount of critical attention it has attracted. Interestingly, two other exceptions are the twentieth century in Irish literature and 'postcolonial literature', hence also locating the Scots in good marginal company. With this in mind it is noticeable that McGuire begins his introduction with a list of Scottish literary prize-winners, as if to prove the worthiness of his subject, and follows this by awarding the first quotation in the book to Irish writer Colm Toibín and his fulsome praise of the 'wildness' of contemporary Scottish writing, before going on to emphasise the international influences of its principal protagonists. The guide begins, then, with an assertion of centrality and a claim to the authority of marginality, with pride in the local and an embracing of the global. In this McGuire is, of course, lovingly highlighting the Scottish capacity for creative contradiction.

The organisation of the book shadows these trajectories. Beginning with 'Nation and Nationalism' McGuire quickly moves on, asserting that 'Scottish Studies has sought to both incorporate and transcend the nation as an object of philosophical enquiry'. Coursing through sections entitled 'Language', 'Gender', 'Class', 'Postcolonialism', and ending with 'Postmodernism', the guide reflects dominant moves in literary criticism of the same period, into and out of identity politics and on to the eclectic 'post-ness' of the new millennial age. McGuire proffers formidably succinct, compelling and useful introductions to each topic, and deftly works his way through the major critics, ending each chapter with discussion of a relevant and significant text, such as *Lanark*, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*, and, of course, *Trainspotting*. The chapters are navigations across patchworks of fairly long quotations and one of the frustrations of this format and its brevity is the manner in which it ostensibly disallows McGuire's own opinion. Ending the chapter on postcolonialism with Aaron Kelly's accusation that Irvine Welsh 'appropriates the suffering of others', we are left longing to know more clearly what the author thinks, such is his sophisticated clarity in guiding us through this treacherous territory.

## REVIEWS

However, this is also a strength of the format; we do, of course, have McGuire's sensibility in his mapping of the book and its commentators, but importantly the critical approaches are foregrounded so that the reader is pushed to make up her own mind on where she stands in relation to these volatile fields. This book is, after all, a showcase for the critics rather than the literature. Lengthy quotation presents a good taster of critical perspectives and of the tone and style of individual writers. Rancour, enthusiasm, bitterness, optimism, lovingly and resentfully constructed sentences are all on display here, giving a wonderful sense of the edgy vibrancy of this field, the energetic and (at times) personalising of issues which resists academic dryness. Berthold Schoene's vivid characterisation of contemporary Scottish literature can be applied to the critical field: 'After looking first at its navel, then at its underbelly, it has now set out to explore the whole of its anatomy, fetching skeletal national stereotypes from the closet to bring them under close scrutiny [...] not another vain autopsy of the scar tissue of English imperialism.'

Of course, we also owe the liveliness of this brief trip through Scottish criticism to the lucid and intelligent enthusiasm of McGuire himself. This is a timely stocktaking of Scottish literature and criticism. Though sometimes such volumes can contribute to a sense of stasis – as an exercise in definition, delimitation, declension – McGuire's guide attempts openness, to discover the limits of a putatively post-national critical discourse which 'relegates questions of national identity as merely one of a number of issues that pertain to reading Scottish literature'. However, evoking a national category while attempting to escape it is a delicate business, raising the problem that such a text will impose its own trajectory – usually one determined by powerful external critical agenda, as Cairns Craig would claim. The thematic map drawn up here should therefore not be taken as a taxonomy but an opportunity for cross-pollination of concerns; essential maybe, but not essentialist.

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