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Three Books on the Scottish Sixties

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THREE BOOKS ON THE SCOTTISH SIXTIES

Angela Bartie and Eleanor Bell, eds. *The International Writers' Conference Revisited: Edinburgh 1962*. [Glasgow]: Cargo, 2012. Pp. x + 244. £22. ISBN: 97819088851599.

Eleanor Bell and Linda Gunn, eds. *The Scottish Sixties: Reading, Rebellion, Revolution?* Scottish Cultural Review of Language and Literature Volume 20. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2013. Pp. x + 315. €67/\$94 (ebook €60/\$84). ISBN: 9789042037267.

Angela Bartie, *The Edinburgh Festivals: Culture and Society in Post-war Britain*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013. Pp. x +, 272. £70 (paperback £20). ISBN: 9780748670307.

A number of recently published books seem to consolidate conceptions of the Sixties, a period still somewhat patched together from editorialised reminiscences of its defining figures and events, as a distinct and significant epoch in modern Scottish literary history. The International Writers' Conference staged by John Calder and others during the 1962 Edinburgh Festival is preeminent amongst the epoch's "defining events," which is why Angela Bartie and Eleanor Bell's *The International Writers' Conference Revisited* is such a useful scholarly resource. A compendium of original or scantily available documents – transcripts of the five days' discussions, interviews with organisers and participants, retrospective reflections, newspaper articles, photographs –, it establishes a newly lucid picture of an event which, like the Albert Hall poetry reading three years later, has been difficult to incorporate into literary history precisely because of its cultural significance and the layers of myth it has therefore retrospectively accrued. The Edinburgh debates

emblemise some of the epoch's defining cultural trends, so this collection might also be a useful starting point in attempting to define the Scottish Sixties more broadly.

The Conference is still remembered largely for the sparring, during the third day's discussion on "Scottish Writing Today," of Hugh MacDiarmid and Alexander Trocchi, where the old-guard nationalist agenda for Scottish literature epitomised by MacDiarmid's poetics and politics confronted the anarchistic, stateless spirit captured in Trocchi's prose. This exchange indeed emerges from Bartie and Bell's transcripts as the most iconic, but it ran alongside, and converged with, discussions of a broader topical significance which might be missed by an insistent focus upon that exchange, and the Conference generally, as symbols of internecine literary or political conflict.

One such discussion concerned sexual orientation and morality. Though the frankness of the public exchanges on this subject was itself revolutionary in "Presbyterian Edinburgh" (Bartie and Bell, "Introduction," 17), the opinions on display were not uniformly progressive, rather revealing the competing forces of prohibition and permissiveness which seemed to define the early part of the decade in many countries. The Indian novelist Khushwant Singh, for example, in asserting that real love could only exist between heterosexuals, explicitly condemned what MacDiarmid seemed implicitly to prohibit to the Scottish writer during his debate with Trocchi: "Mr Trocchi seems to imagine that the burning questions in the world today are lesbianism, homosexuality and matters of that kind" (qtd. in Bartie and Bell, 70).

As for Trocchi, his grandiose remarks across three days' discussion do not suggest a concern with the future of "Scottish Writing" so much as a transnational vision of literary form which would mirror contemporary human identity as such – "man alone" – implicating Scottish writers in common with all others: "I don't give a damn if he's a Scotsman, or an American, or anything else" (qtd. in Bartie and Bell, 71). They also reveal a co-extensive concern with the validity of media like the painting and the novel, inherited from past socio-economic epochs, to realise that vision, predicting the intermedia hi-jinks of the following year's drama festival.

The 1962 Conference was important, then, not only because its timing allowed the airing of disputes over the state of Scottish literature, but also because its discussions of contemporary writing by an international cast – and those disputes themselves – engaged with artistic, cultural and social questions of international significance. Taking the Conference as an emblem of the Scottish Sixties generally, perhaps what the book reveals

is a national literary culture rejuvenating itself by casting off, or radically refiguring, national identity as an issue of primary creative concern.

Recently, in discussing the internationalist connections of Scottish Modernism, Emma Dymock and Margery Palmer McCulloch have asserted that “periods of significant literary achievement in Scotland have most often been related to an increased sense of nationhood.”¹ Eleanor Bell’s and Linda Gunn’s *The Scottish Sixties* (2013) might seem to have the task of documenting a national culture defined by a loosening sense of nationhood, or at least (as in the Modernist era) by its marriage with a new spirit of internationalism. The fifteen essays collected in *The Scottish Sixties* vividly and authoritatively map out the key events and figures through which Scotland was plugged into international artistic, cultural and social changes. There are engaging portraits of iconic individuals such as Tom McGrath (in interview with Bartie), Hamish Henderson (Corey Gibson), Ian Hamilton Finlay (Tom Normand and others) and Edwin Morgan (James McGonigal and others); and of lesser-known figures such as Margaret Tait (Duncan Petrie), D.M. Black and Kenneth Whyte (Roderick Watson).

The national boundary drawn in the title arguably carries with it the danger that an exclusive focus on Scottish writers and artists, or on things which happened in Scotland, might dull our sense of the international networks and trends which characterised that culture, but happily, many contributors seem alert to this threat. Richard Price’s chapter on literary infrastructure, for example, mentions “the danger of missing things if Scottishness is the only or initial filter” (“Some Questions about Literary Infrastructure in the 1960s,” 101). One upshot of such filtering has been the counterfactual claim that the concrete poetry movement which took hold in Scotland in the early 1960s was not taken up at the same time, with similar vigour and skill, by English writers, presses and magazines. Price does a good job of counteracting that claim, and Sylvia Bryce-Wunder’s focus on expatriate writers Trocchi and Muriel Spark is similarly pertinent.

There is another complexity to introduce, however, in that Bell and Gunn’s editorship reveals a concern not only with proving that Scotland participated in “the sixties” as a cultural phenomenon, but also with exploring various manifestations of Scottish culture across a range of

¹ “Introduction,” in *Scottish and International Modernisms: Relationships and Reconfigurations* [ASLS Occasional Papers 15], ed. Dymock and McCulloch (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2011), 1.

media during the sixties chronologically speaking. Some of these have relatively little to do with the sixties in a cultural sense – like the documentary film-making scene explored by Petrie – and some exhibit the kinds of nationalistic traits which the era’s iconic writers and artists transfigured or discarded. This is true of the Lallans poetry of Sydney Goodsir-Smith and Alexander Scott, although their TV collaborations with the photographer Alan Daiches, discussed by John Corbett, clearly reveal an engagement with the Edinburgh counterculture and with the era’s new media possibilities.

Very occasionally the text even seems to define the Scottish Sixties by opposition to sixties culture. Clearly Bell’s introduction, in pitching the text against “London-centric” coverage of the era, implies critical neglect of Scotland’s involvement in that culture, an involvement attested to by McGrath’s recollections of Glaswegian jazz and CND culture, for example (“Introduction”, 13). But there also seems a fainter sense, re-emphasised most clearly in Alistair McCleery’s account of the successful 1964 *Cain’s Book* obscenity trial, that Scottish resistance to the sixties has been equally overlooked, by a London-centric narrative equating the experiences of a small metropolitan echelon with those of the whole British state. It is interesting that the cover image – Daiches’s photograph of a “stern and pious old lady” burning a copy of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* outside Jim Haynes’s Paperback Bookshop (McCleery, “Late News from the Provinces: The Trial of *Cain’s Book*,” 140) – depicts a vehement gesture of defiance against the kind of social and sexual liberation for which the decade now stands. The picture which the book ultimately presents, as Bell notes, is of a Scotland that was “neither a hotbed of radicalism nor a cultural void,” (16), but a country, as depicted in Tom Devine’s scene-setting chapter, on a “transitional bridge between an old society ... and later modernity” (“The Sixties in Scotland: A Historical Context”, 45).

Angela Bartie traces a comparable shift in British, and especially Scottish, post-war culture in *The Edinburgh Festivals: Culture and Society in Post-War Britain* (2013), asserting, again, that “Scotland was not peripheral to the major cultural upheavals of the 1960s” (16). Her introductory chapter suggests the nature of that movement, away from an elitist sense of culture as a quasi-religious civilising force, inherited from Arnold and Eliot, towards one closer to that defined by Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (1958): as the whole of society’s “reactions to ... changes in our social, economic, and political life” (qtd. in Bartie, 7). The text then leads us chronologically through the

various 'culture wars' played out at the Festivals, with the Scottish Sixties as a fulcrum of analysis.

The following chapter reveals the extent of the Kirk's involvement in the Festival's wartime conception, in the context of an out-of-character turn to supporting theatre as a "weapon of enlightenment" (33). In 1947, this converged with the newly formed (London-based) Arts Council's belief in the spiritual power of "fine art" to imbue festival plans with an almost missionary zeal. But the fringe events established the same year in protest at the absence of Scottish theatre – discussed in Bartie's third chapter – forged a space which was "oppositional in stance and inclusive in appeal" (58), leading also to the equally-oppositional People's Festivals of the early fifties. This festive antisyzygy adumbrated the culture clashes to follow.

Chapter four covers the late-1950s-early-1960s appropriation of some of the Fringe's Rabelaisian spirit by the official Festival programme, evident in its accommodation of Peter Cook *et al.* in *Beyond the Fringe* (1960), but it is "The Year of the Happening," discussed in Bartie's next chapter, during which all of these jostling forces are seen to have collided. The "First Happening in Britain," staged on the last day of the 1963 International Drama Conference (co-organised by Calder after the success of '62) briefly featured a nude model wheeled along the McEwan Hall balcony, and came to assume hyperbolic significance as a marker of artistic and cultural revolution: endowed, like the Writers Conference, with the fuzzy edges of myth. Bartie's coverage of the happening and its aftermath is microscopically detailed, a window on the significance of the Festivals as a weather-vane for trends in British art, culture and morality at this time. The following chapter traces the mainstreaming of counter-cultural perspectives during 1964-67, reflected in the Kirk's loss of purchase over public consciousness, although the final chapter partly tracks a "backlash against permissiveness" in late-1960s Scotland (205).

Though not strictly a work of literary history, Bartie's text provides a valuable insight into the broader socio-cultural backdrop against which the literary shifts of the Scottish Sixties were played out. Again, there are authoritative descriptions of key locations and events – Jim Haynes's Paperback Bookshop, the Drama Conference, the foundation of Traverse Theatre –, but the attention paid to developments within the post-war Kirk and its interactions with Scottish society is especially useful. Such developments are likely to be less familiar to scholars of 1960s Scottish literature, but are equally significant markers of the cultural and social developments implicated in their work.

What can these books teach us about the epoch which they cumulatively evoke? Partly that the Scottish Sixties as a cultural phenomenon and as a decade should be distinguished, and that the latter should be seen as a period of conflict between forces associated with the former – which, confusingly, often originated in the 1950s, and continued to exert themselves in the 1970s – and many others, some of them antithetical in their cultural, social and ethical connotations. Also, perhaps, that as a literary cultural phenomenon, the Scottish Sixties were partly significant because they comprised a broad movement away from – or perhaps rather a radical re-evaluation of – the assigning of value to the products of Scottish literary culture according to a sense of their “Scottishness.” Perhaps the post-1960s renaissance in Scottish art and culture alluded to in Bartie’s last chapter should not simply be seen in terms of the reassertion of such a principle, but also as the legacy of the internationalist spirit of the Scottish Sixties.

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