



University  
of Glasgow

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Singing in a New World: Scotland –hopeless schizophrenic or cosmopolitan post nation?

Dr Maureen Farrell — University of Glasgow.

Let our three voiced country  
Sing in a new world  
Joining the other rivers without dogma,  
But with friendliness all around her.  
Let her new river shine on a day  
That is fresh and glittering and contemporary:  
Let it be true to itself and its origins  
Inventive, original, philosophical,  
Its institutions mirror its beauty;  
Then without shame we can esteem ourselves.

*The Beginning of a New Song* Iain Crichton Smith

The make up of the populations of the countries of the world has shifted significantly since the end of World War II. Continuous, large-scale legal and ‘illegal’ migration from poor countries, an influx of economic migrants and political refugees along with cheaper travel and the *moderation* of certain political regimes has resulted in a pluralisation of national cultures and national identities within so-called ‘nation states’. According to Stuart Hall the effect of this has been to, ‘contest the settled contours of national identity and to expose its closures to the pressures of difference, “otherness” and cultural diversity.’ (Hall, 1996) The scholar Matthew Brown, contended that there are two rival views of Scotland at the beginning of the twenty-first century. One sees the nation as:

hopelessly schizophrenic, mired in its own bedevilled tartantry and forever salvaging the present through historic erasure, the other asserting it as a cosmopolitan postnation at ease with its contradictory legacies and able to tap its inherent multiplicities for a contemporary self image. (Brown, 2007: 218)

These opposing views offer a rich opportunity for further study in these What has become obvious to me is that, at least from the 1980s to the present, the underlying forces of insistent Scottish identity-making in literature seem to be moving in the direction of synthesis rather than fragmentation. This synthesis permits multiple perspectives and a plurality of approaches through different genres and it recognises other people’s rights to perceive or imagine Scotland differently. In other words, for me there is no ‘singular’ view of Scotland in the modern world.

Scottish literature now seems to be breaking away from concern with creative ‘wholeness’ and ideals of integrated national identity, and moving towards acceptance that the Scots are

not alone in living in a fragmented and ethnically hyphenated world, which is likely to become more rather than less subject to these influences.

Within contemporary Scottish Children's Literature, fantasy continues to be a strongly represented genre, but the fantasy is now assured enough to use inter-textuality both as a self-referencing tool and as a means of self-parody. It is using some very recent examples of this genre that I want to focus my argument that Scottish identity making now seem to be moving in the direction of synthesis rather than fragmentation.

Anne Forbes' series of books *Dragonfire* (2006), *The Wings of Ruksh* (2007) *The Underground City* (2008) and *Firestar* (2009) provide the source material for this paper, and for reasons of time, I intend to focus on the second book to illustrate the points of the argument. My reason for selecting this series and *The Wings of Ruksh* in particular is that I believe they particularly fine examples of the self-assured intertextuality already evident in Scottish Literature generally. This series' ability to parody previous Scottish fantasy fiction demonstrates clearly the ironic, self-mocking allusion and sophistication that is increasingly a feature of Scottish children's fantasy fiction, and as such they can be considered fully 'postmodern' fantasy novels.

The first novel in the series introduces the MacLean family, who all know about the mysterious fairy people the MacArthurs, Arthur the dragon and a group of magicians. The plot involves the dragon being reunited with Nessie his 'lady-love' in Loch Ness and an enchantment being broken so that the magician Lord Rothlan's fortunes are restored. The book concludes with the disappearance of the Sultan's Crown. This first book introduces many of the traditional Scottish fantasy elements including shape-shifting challenging fairies who live under ground and magical worlds which can be traversed relatively easily both ways by humans and magical people. However, the interesting aspect that emerges in this writer's work is the way she combines Scottish traditional elements with Middle Eastern magical tradition and incorporates features like a powerful Ottoman Sultan of Turkey and magic carpets. *The Wings of Ruksh* takes up the unfinished element of the story concerning the Sultan's Crown and further develops links with Middle Eastern magic.

The central characters are spirited away to the court of Sulaiman the Red, the Sultan of Turkey, through magic mirrors in an Edinburgh restaurant called 'The Sultan's Crown'. The Sultan begins a quest to retrieve the missing crown and to seek revenge on those who stole it. This necessitates further use of magic mirrors, which are used to transport people

to different places and times, as well as the use of magical winged horses from Ruksh. A parallel plot concerns Prince Kalman, the thief who stole the crown, using its power to set himself up as a direct ancestor of Bonnie Prince Charlie. Prince Kalman relies on Scotland's devolved status to install himself as a high-ranking nobleman of Scotland, perhaps even King. He has set himself up as Member of Scottish Parliament (MSP) Ned Stuart, and as part of his plan he puts a spell on the Scots people so that everything has been 'branded' as Scottish. To divert attention from his machinations towards power, he sets up a spurious fishing dispute between the Scots and the French.

In this novel, Anne Forbes has demonstrated an uncanny eye for popular cultural references and has moulded them into a clever parody of Scottish fantasy fiction. For instance, the significance of mirrors is very much in line with generic features of Scottish fantasy. For example, George MacDonald was particularly fond of using mirror imagery in his fantasies. The mirrors in *this* novel also prove to be an important plot device in that characters can be physically transported by them from one location to another or from one time to another. Some of the features these mirrors exhibit have been used in recent film and television productions and also in fantasy fiction. In order to function, the magic mirrors must be used in pairs, and these pairings must be carefully calibrated, to ensure that the people using them arrive where they are supposed to. This is similar to the Stargate used in both the film *Stargate* (1994) and the television series *SG-1* (1997-2007). The mirrors in *The Wings of Ruksh* can also be used to deliberately trap characters between two mirrors. A similar device is used in the 1978 *Superman* film when the enemies of Krypton, General Zod and friends, are imprisoned in a mirror-like prism that traps their 'bodily essence'.

The author also deliberately makes use of both film imagery and filmic devices — the misty atmosphere being described as being like "old horror films." Later the author also makes use of the filmic device of 'freeze-framing' the action when a delegation are protesting the fishing dispute that has arisen and

suddenly, as though someone had pressed the pause button on a film clip, they froze in a strange, quivering tableau in front of him, cudgels raised to strike. (ibid, 140)

This very deliberate policy, I believe, is clearly meant to locate these fantasy novels within both the 'historical' Scottish fantasy genre in some of its subject matter and the fairy and magical characters it utilises, while at the same time situating them within the medium of film.

In terms of other typically Scottish fantasy elements, this novel is fully compliant. The use of doubles is explicated in the character of Prince Kalman who re-emerges in this novel in the persona of Ned Stuart, a young and charismatic MSP who has had a meteoric rise. He has been singled out as a potential First Minister in the Scottish Parliament. In this persona he pursues the notion that he is a direct descendant of Bonnie Prince Charlie. He also passes off the Sultan's Crown as the "ancient crown of the Scots" (p 34) Kalman uses the magic of the crown to put a spell on the people of Scotland such that all the stereotypical Scottish kitsch imagery becomes absolutely essential to them. The train from Scotland arrives at King's Cross station bedecked in tartan both inside and out. The menu on the train is a Scottish menu and contains the following items

'Principally haggis, mashed turnips and potatoes followed by shortbread, something called 'Black Bun' and... a drink called Irn Bru.'

'Iron Brew! What the devil's Iron Brew?'

'I asked that myself when I was in Edinburgh last week and they told me it was made from girders. No sir,' Martin gulped at the expression on Tatler's face.

'Seriously! That's what they said!' (p 53)

Here the author is also showing her awareness of the hugely successful advertising campaign run by the Barrs Company who make the soft drink Irn Bru and sell it with the tag line "Your *other* national drink. Made in Scotland—from girders." Later, Tatler, a senior English civil servant who has travelled on the train raises the issue with Edinburgh's Chief Constable describing what he has found in Edinburgh on his arrival,

'Thistles, flags, tartan streamers, banners of all the different clans—they're here, there and everywhere. Bagpipes on every street corner! For goodness sake, Archie, *Hollywood* couldn't do it any better! It's not natural! It's ...it's like *Braveheart* out there! And the people! Kilts all over the place! I ask you!' (p 53)

This is an inspired piece of writing, capitalizing on both the raised awareness of Scottish identity since the Parliament has been reconvened and also referencing a very well known part of Scotland's past when Sir Walter Scott masterminded the visit to Scotland of King George IV. At that time Scott effectively hi-jacked the Highland traditions and virtually invented the image of the Scots that has endured ever since. In providing this exaggerated picture the writer is ironically highlighting some of the worst expectations about Scotland after devolution and perhaps also commenting, by making the Scots themselves immune to the absurdity of it, that we can at times fail to see how we can caricature ourselves. Of course this is a plot device allowing Stuart/Kalman to capitalize on the overt Scottish nationalism he has fabricated using the Sultan's Crown as a means of ensuring the people's support in declaring him Scottish royalty.

This fantasy conforms to other aspects that can be identified as particular to Scottish fantasy: for example Clara plays a central role in the drama providing evidence of the importance of female agency in Scottish fantasy fiction. The novel also utilises the notion of the fragile barriers between the real world and the world of magic often seen in Scottish fantasy fiction. The implication here seems to be that characters can move between or be pulled between worlds with a single step.

In a similar 'knowing' vein, Forbes uses the fishing dispute between the French and Scottish fleets as both a distraction to the central plot and as a particularly self-mocking piece of humour. Officials have to try to come up with both an explanation for and a solution to the fishing dispute. This involves Arthur the dragon flying out to the French fleet and casting a spell. The effect of this is that the French fleet are surrounded by a heavy, thick, white, mist that "defies all the laws of meteorology" (p 197). As a result, the ships cannot find their way out of it and are sailing around in circles. To add insult to injury, the British fleet is in port. The French Defence Minister desperately calls for an analysis of the mysterious fog but the aircraft sent to take the samples can neither find the fog nor the fleet! Effectively the spell that Arthur has cast covers the French boats with 'Scotch Mist'. The humour of this for those 'in the know' is of course that the term 'Scotch Mist' refers to something that does not exist. The whole episode is a beautiful play on words, where the mist refers to actual weather conditions, but is also used here to refer to something hard to find, or something which does not exist, something imagined.

There are other aspects of this novel worthy of comment. The first concerns the use of Middle Eastern magic. Scotland's connection with Turkey is explained by the fact that in times past, Scottish fairy people and magicians went to Turkey because of the superior quality of their magic carpets. Over the years strong and friendly relationships were forged until the incident of deception regarding the Sultan's Crown. Forbes' own experience of dividing her time between Scotland and the Middle East, has obviously suggested to her that by combining the magic from these two cultures she can produce a distinctive form of fantasy. Magic carpets appear in all of the books, but new elements introduced include the Sultan's magnificent black horses from his stables at Ruksh. These exceptionally beautiful and speedy horses can, at a given command, sprout wings and fly. Like the magic carpets, these horses have the power of speech. The ability to speak is a feature of many of the animals in this fantasy series and, while this may be a relatively common feature in

modern fantasy literature, it is not a particularly common element of earlier Scottish fantasy literature.

Issues of language are also of importance within these novels. By and large in this text the language used is Standard English, with Scots only being used as part of the dialogue. On the other hand much of the book's humour resides in recognising Scots phrases and sayings used deliberately as either plot devices, as in the case of *Scotch Mist*, or making intertextual references to modern culture, as in the chapter heading "The Famous Grouse". At the same time the author also acknowledges Middle Eastern traditions by utilising Turkish sounding words of command to the horses and also for the magic words used to release the crown. Interspersed with all of this is the use of modern colloquial phrases. Archie, one of the fairies, says at one point "MacArthur," he said helplessly, "you do my head in, sometimes. You really do." (p 130) These linguistic elements are important because this author remains true to some traditional elements of Scots language while at the same time incorporating aspects of speech that contemporary young readers would both be familiar with and would use. What I find particularly interesting is the fact that none of this *jars* with the reader and I believe Forbes has been relatively successful in giving the Scots language its place while at the same time recognising that modern children's own language will have elements of contemporary culture as one of its features.

The impact of these novels should not be underestimated. In combining the Celtic, folkloric tradition with Middle Eastern magic traditions, I believe that Forbes has created what might be described as 'post' or even an 'anti-Orientalist' texts. Perhaps a more positive way to identify this is to suggest that these novels are 'fusion' rather than a 'hybrid' texts. A 'hybrid' text would be formed by combining two elements; a 'fusion' text is one where two or more things are 'blended' together to form a single entity. In other words, rather than both elements being identifiable in the new, a 'fusion' text becomes a completely new form consistent with the increasingly polyglot character of contemporary Scottish society and its manifold engagements with a globalised world. Indeed, in these novels I think we may tentatively discern stirrings of the next 'age' in Scottish Children's Literature, with the development of an optimistic new notion of 'belonging' transcending the cultural fatalism of the so-called 'clash of civilisations' hypothesis and building positively on the politics of difference. If this reading is correct then *The Wings of Ruksh* and the other novels in the series may represent a form of literary cosmopolitanism that is entirely consonant with the way Scottish society currently aspires to progress, and which

proffers the right set of circumstances for authors to develop new forms of syncretistic myth-making and storytelling across and between communities.

Scottish Children's Literature has an important role to play in both the formation and the mediation of Scottish identity: it shapes, highlights, questions and reimagines it. Moreover, what is notable about these texts—perhaps even surprising, given the widespread influence of certain characteristic polarities in standard accounts of this argument—is that they are not generally adversarial about their Scottishness. Rather, the word that comes to mind is convivial. There is a clear sense of Scottish Children's Literature being different, but also evidence of its attentiveness to the 'other'. It is open to the idea of multiple identities both within and furth of Scotland. Despite the temptation, it is a literature that has resisted simplified notions of colonialism in favour of a much more dynamic, intelligent and even humorous engagement with larger linguistic, artistic and political forces.

In this same creative spirit, Scottish Children's Literature is full of examples of novels, where identity is actively *negotiated* within the text and where identity is constantly being altered by its interactions with external and internal influences. What emerges in Scotland, is a fiction that *allows* the terms of identity to be constantly re-negotiated and which demonstrates a canny understanding of the ways in which identity can be accommodated or re-positioned within the ongoing processes of individual self-fashioning and shared socialisation. It is also a fiction that, as a rule, avoids simple binary oppositions as a narrative device.

Scottish national identity within Children's Literature is depicted as elastic or contingent. But that need not necessarily be considered a negative judgement. For many contemporary Scottish children's writers it presents itself rather as an opportunity, authorising them to explore and imagine the realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century Scotland and Scottish identity in new and unprecedented forms. The relationship of Scottish Children's Literature to Scottish identity is not the maintenance of simple and territorial cultural boundaries, but rather the opening of a gateway beyond which Scotland's children and young people are shown the imagining and re-imagining of both Scottish identity and the idea of Scotland itself.

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