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**Carla Sassi, *Why Scottish Literature Matters***
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**Reviewed by Alan Riach**

Carla Sassi, Professor in the Faculty of Foreign Language and Literature at the University of Verona, concludes this important and valuable book by affirming that Scottish literature does matter: 'this is beyond doubt – but it will have to be explained in other languages and to other cultures in order to survive.' (p.182)

Why has it not been explained or explicable as comprehensively, confidently and quickly as other literatures – American, Irish, English, Australian or New Zealand literatures, say? In 1991 (second edition 1998), Oxford University Press published *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, edited by Terry Sturm, 890 pages of comprehensive accounts of eleven distinct literary genres (criticism, magazines and children's literature as well as fiction, poetry and drama, for example). And in 1998 this was complemented by *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, edited by Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie, 608 pages of over 1500 mini-essays on subjects from pre-European Maori oral forms to writing of the late 1990s. So much scholarly work has gone into the exposition of a literature whose bulk of production dates from the nineteenth century. As of 2006, Oxford have published no equivalent volumes devoted to Scottish literature, a body of work of demonstrably greater range and quantity, and concomitantly, quality, dating from pre-Christian oral forms and covering a wider range of genres, including one of the most important bodies of writing in the history of western philosophy. Why?

One answer is perhaps simply commercial: there was a market for the study of New Zealand literature in the 1990s that hadn't been developed for Scottish literature. There was already a well-developed market for Irish literature too. *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* was published in 1996. But beyond the mere commercial imperative, are there other reasons for the slow development of studying Scottish literature in Scotland and internationally?

Two reasons suggest themselves immediately: where New Zealand, American, Australian, and Irish literatures have an international currency in English (easily accommodating 'other' aspects of the national canon for an English-language readership, either by translating

them or – at least until recently – ignoring them), by contrast, the linguistic hybridity of Scottish literature has often been set forward, emphatically since the 1920s, as a positive and inescapable national *value*. This initially sets up a complexity and a challenge many readers accustomed only to English can't be bothered rising to.

Secondly there is the extra-literary consideration of Scotland's national status: a nation-state confers an imperial authority upon its own literary traditions but Scotland's self-determination has been formed, threatened, affirmed, broken, dissolved, re-configured and debated from various positions through history, so you have a series of different political considerations at different moments in time. Therefore you have a need to contextualise literature historically that counterbalances the imperial certainty that this is a literature with a great valid deep tradition, its own integrity, its own distinction, great authors and great works.

So Carla Sassi's book serves at least three important functions: it offers fresh insights as to what might be considered appropriate contexts for Scottish literature beyond those normally associated with the subject's self-definition; it records some of the wild anomalies by which Scottish literature is perceived by those who approach it from an international perspective only – as it were, 'in translation'; and it suggests a major and urgent requirement for the furtherance of Scottish literary study.

Let's take each of these in turn.

Sassi sounds a cautionary note in chapter one, reminding us that 'a literary text has a life of its own, behind and beyond its historical and geographical origin' and 'as intertextual theory has highlighted, it is located in a "relational world" – that is, for its meaning it is connected to and dependent on other literary texts, not necessarily organised into tight national / regional compartments. Ideas, words, stories, people travel all the time: no one (luckily) can prevent this, even though many have, in the course of history, refused to acknowledge and record this continuous movement of exchange and crossing.' (pp.13-14)

The truth of this is a corrective to simplistic notions of national identity and literary canonisation. In tertiary education, even in the post-theorised twenty-first century, literature is most frequently studied either in the context of geographical / political definition or by historical era. It might be argued that the author who most fully inhabits one or both of these contexts has a firmer ground and a deeper, more extensive sensibility from which to write, but there are certainly writers who transgress such defining contexts, whose work is intrinsically valuable and necessarily neglected by such enforced parameters (John Henry Mackay, for example).

However, that is not to say that such consideration negates the value of literary study conducted in the context of national history. 'Scottish literature may be regarded today [2005] as a reasonably established field of study' Sassi writes (p.14) –but how true is that? She makes the point that it was more established in 2005 than it was in the late 1980s and certainly more than it had been in decades before that but I wonder how secure that status is. Perhaps Scottish

literature will always have to be fought for. It is certainly the case that in 2006 Glasgow University is the only institution of further education which has an autonomous academic Department of Scottish Literature. It might be argued that the subject is well-catered for at other universities through being studied in Departments of English.

However, it remains shocking – indeed, absurd – that in all the Scottish universities there is only one university-established named Chair of Scottish Literature. By emphasising the 'relational' context of all literature and indeed the arts in general, Sassi may be underestimating the context of vulnerability which the study of Scottish literature continues to work within. It's a question that dogs her opening chapters. 'Where does Scotland's literary history start from?' she asks (p.20) and answers, 'The setting of a starting point…will depend, first of all on how we wish to define "Scotland" – politically or geographically, from an ethnic / cultural and / or a linguistic point of view. It will of course also depend on how we define the term "literature"…' And she offers some different senses of that word: '"high"…"low"…or…hybridised'.

Valuably, this allows her to open up for consideration literary texts of different kinds, in different languages, normally ascribed to different literary traditions, but all of which have a distinct relevance to Scotland and to literary practice: the carved symbols and inscriptions on Pictish stones, the Roman writing-tablets of Vindolanda, the characters on the 8th-century Ruthwell Cross which constitute a version of *The Dream of the Rood*, the *Gododdin* of c.600 AD, the Latin historical and religious accounts such as Adomnan's eighth-century *Life of St Columba*, the thirteenth-century Norse *Orkneyinga Saga*, and she mentions texts in French (the poems of Mary Queen of Scots) along with earlier Middle Scots vernacular poems (although she doesn't mention Henryson, Douglas or Lyndsay at all and only notes Dunbar as the author of Scotland's earliest racist poem – though there are surely earlier examples of racism in Scottish literature). Sassi notes the crucial significance of the sixteenth-century *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, and she is rightly critical of Dr Johnson's repugnantly pompous denigration of Gaelic culture.

Overall, Sassi's approach has the virtue of establishing linguistic and cultural variety as foundational to Scottish literature but it passes over many individual writers who undoubtedly make Scottish literature matter in their own individuated voices. There is little sense of the pre-Christian heroic world of Celtic myth which profoundly links Ireland and Scotland, in, for example, the story of Cuchulain's education (he was taught the arts of war in Skye by a woman named Scathach) or the story of Deirdre and Naoise (who spent their nine years of happy marriage in Scotland, before returning to Ireland to face the end of their tragedy). Nor is there any consideration of themes or ideas that might suggest connections among this heterogeneity. So, more might be said. But Sassi moves quickly to 1707 and post-Union Scottish literature.

Noting that what followed 1707 'cannot be reduced easily to the black-and-white opposition between coloniser-colonised' (p.43), she does confirm, however, that 'at least one certainty emerged, the definitive banning of Celtic culture from Britain and the beginning of the

forced anglicisation of the Highlands' (p.46). This opens the way for a discussion of the major significance in international terms of James Macpherson and the controversy over his versions of the stories associated with Ossian. His work, she says, 'can only be fully appreciated through an understanding of his predicament as a Gaelic writer adjusting to a changed political context' (p.47). The point here is that Macpherson presented Gaelic stories to an English-language Enlightenment readership. Sassi sees this in relation to Dr Johnson's assertive valorisation of English supremacy in his *Dictionary* and notes the attractiveness of *Ossian* providing figures of 'liminality' suspended 'between past and present, between cultures and languages' (p.49). By writing in English, Macpherson was read internationally, while Gaelic poets such as Alasdair MacMhaigstir Alasdair, Iain Mhic Fearchair and Donnchadh Ban Mac an t-Saoir and others 'are still largely unknown to the world'.

The Union thus, we are told, 'intensifies cross-cultural exchanges and "hybridisations"' – or to be more emphatic, makes some things fashionable and relegates others. Sassi notes Henry Mackenzie's key role in advancing Burns's reputation as Romantic poet, sublime savage or Heaven-taught bard. To some extent, this offers a valuable reminder about how reputations are made. Such dangers are perennial. There are still plenty of writers who are better-known and benefit more from specific biases in publicity and fashion than some whom good criticism should promote more widely. (Why is Douglas Dunn included in histories of modern English poetry and Hugh MacDiarmid excluded from them? There's a subject for a short thesis!) And yet, I felt slightly unsatisfied by this part of Sassi's book. Why does Macpherson matter? Because he occupies a uniquely fascinating place in the Scottish, European and more widely international history of literary reading habits, tastes and biases. That might be one answer – but does that make *Ossian* literature that matters? Why? Burns matters and would continue to matter if Mackenzie had never been born. Can we be equally confident about the literary quality of Macpherson's work? Why? Or why not?

I agree with Sassi that the Enlightenment philosophers leave something unfulfilled – the idea that civilised men of the Enlightenment could so badly misread and reduce the nature of tragedy and the energies of Scots vernacular writing delimits their achievements and registers a liability in their legacy, especially regarding education. It is salutary to read how deeply sexist their verdicts on women were and how deeply opposed they were to liberating female sexuality. There is perhaps little that is exceptional here in their view of women but there is a lot to be taken into account with regard to their fear of uncontrollable and potentially destructive energies. The long legacy of this in Scotland extended to the reception of Catherine Carswell's 1930 biography of Robert Burns, which attempted to assert the value of the voices of women which surrounded the iconic poet and saw Burns as possessed by exactly such energies – and for which she was sent a bullet in the post and told to desist!

Sassi goes on to elaborate on the international significance of Scott and Stevenson, reaching 'a huge reading public, all over the world' – 'for a long time, they stand for quintessential Scottishness' (p.62) which marks an appropriation of Highland forms of cultural identity by Lowland fabricators of 'Scottishness'. She notes, in passing, the importance of Susan Ferrier's *Marriage* (1818) as a major Scottish novel about the author's contemporary world (as opposed to Scott's historical contexts, though of course *St Ronan's Well* is a 'contemporary' Scott novel and implies a great deal about the priorities of the Jane Austen genre). *Marriage* is written in terms of the priorities of women (as opposed to those of the action-men and the witnesses of action-men in much of Scott's fiction). This is valuable but needs to be qualified by at least a nodding recognition of Scott's women – Mrs McGregor, Diana Vernon and the Bride of Lammermoor are not negligible figures, not to mention Meg Dodds, Jeanie Deans or Madge Wildfire. Scott, Ferrier and Galt are acknowledged as 'conservative writers…loyal to the Union' though again, one feels the need to qualify this. In so far as they preserved a sense of what was happening in Scotland, they preserved a sense of Scottish identity (perhaps most vividly in the women just named). Even in its most kitsch and exaggerated later forms, there is an ambiguous value in that. Swords are edged on both sides.

Again valuably, Sassi emphasises the nineteenth-century Gaelic diaspora, the poetry of Mary Macpherson, and the context in English and Anglocentric literary debate that described and stigmatised the Celt as 'other' – especially in the writing of Matthew Arnold (though she doesn't mention Renan). She has the perfect quotation from William Sharp, who, writing under his female pseudonym Fiona MacLeod, bought into the Arnoldian theory of the feminised Celt wholesale: 'As for literature, there is, for all of us, only, English literature. All else is provisional or dialectic.' (p.77) And it is keen to observe that 'The aura of nostalgic melancholia that permeates the Anglo-Scottish taste for this remote and "impervious" region [the Celtic world] partakes then of that "imperialist nostalgia" which extended to distant and different colonised territories (like Kipling's sensual India or Haggard's mysterious Africa).' (p.77)

In this light, it is hardly surprising to find Scottish writers in the thick of racial debate. Hume and Carlyle write overt racism; by contrast, Francis Hutcheson firmly subscribes to the anti-slavery movement. Sassi is perceptive about how much politicised Scottish writing of the nineteenth century occurs in a context where imperial bureaucratic and military structures are the main means for Scottish national self-expression. That is, national identity as a political force in acts and in writing is relatively rare compared to the pride taken in national identity contained within the encompassing might of the British Empire.

'Imperialism is a popular movement in nineteenth-century Scotland,' Sassi writes (p.89) and in this context, highlights the success of novels by Ian Maclaren, S.R. Crockett (both ministers) and James Barrie – which promote the values of the empire. They are important writers in any literary history of Scotland, she says, because 'they witness the ambiguous stance of a

country fully and proudly involved in the building of the Empire, and at the same, culturally subordinated to England' (p.91). Again, this is to say that these writers matter because they are evidence of cultural history, rather than intense, hypersensitive *literary* witnesses to it. One could argue the latter case with reference to Cunninghame Graham or Neil Munro, friends of Joseph Conrad, of whom the same might be said. And Cunninghame Graham and Neil Munro are more deeply perceptive, finer literary artists than Maclaren or Crockett (though Crockett could write terrific adventure stories and Barrie is a far more ironic writer than the Kailyard label allows). Sassi's point, however, is that there are other, even more neglected writers whose sympathy with colonised peoples should be taken into account. She names Archibald Maclaren's abolitionist play *The Negro Slaves* (1799) which looks fascinating though it evidently predates what she describes as the exploration of 'paths of sympathy between Scotland and other colonised countries' (p.92) encouraged by Scott and brought to its 'most radical realisation' (p.94) by Stevenson and later, Naomi Mitchison.

Chapter Six opens with a warning: 'It should be noted that the "Renaissance" [of the 1920s] has been and remains very little explored outside Scotland.'

Here's the rub. I know of various translations of MacDiarmid, Gibbon and Gunn, particularly in Germany and Italy, but it seems that there is very little widespread appreciation of the movement towards cultural assertion of national self-determination that MacDiarmid led in the 1920s, and that prompts further thought. Why is there no adequate brief translatable account of it that is widely known and generally accepted? And how great is the gulf between what readers and critics familiar with the writers, works and the movement as a whole, know of it, and the general sense of its value outwith Scotland? I have seen more copies of the Carcanet edition of MacDiarmid's books for sale in Singapore and Hong Kong than in Edinburgh or Glasgow, but does that count? Does that make Scottish literature matter more? Certainly, relatively little concentrated and systematic effort has been invested by the British cultural establishment to promote Scotland's national cultural movement of the 1920s. Indeed one might argue that some effort has been made in the opposite direction. (Consider, for comparison, the history of the international reception of the Scottish Colourist painters.)

Sassi doesn't explore these implications but she certainly raises the questions, noting that criticism of the latter half of the twentieth century has redressed the situation of undervalued women writers of the earlier period, especially Carswell, Willa Muir, Nan Shepherd, Lorna Moon and others. That critical revaluation itself, in the 1980s and 1990s, owed a great deal to the thrust of the Scottish Renaissance Movement of the 1920s. A reappraisal of that movement, Sassi tells us, 'is today very much needed' (p.106) as she links MacDiarmid's effort with the Kenyan Ngugi's work towards 'decolonising the mind'. Another question arises here. We are, as politically correct twenty-first century people, enjoined to unthinkingly despise phrases like MacDiarmid's 'the Scottish psychology' but we are warned that the measure our literature is valued by is Eliot's

‘essentialist definition of national tradition’ – which must have continuity, organicity and an ancient and uninterrupted line of development. One barrier that stops Scottish literature endorsing this conservative validation of coherence and tradition, is that, as MacDiarmid pointed out long ago, it offers in itself a rich range of alternative values, of material for comparative criticism, as it includes not only work in English but also in Gaelic and Scots. Building on this proposition, Sassi approaches the end of her book with the notion of ‘Polychromata’ (the title James Leslie Mitchell gave to a collection of his stories set in the Middle East) or ‘a prismatic view of identity’ once again quoting MacDiarmid from the 1920s, saying that it would be wrong to make the term ‘Scottish’ synonymous with any fixed forms or set of ideas. The word means many things, and certainly not merely the old bundle of hack tartan clichés. Scottish literature, she concludes, is ‘a complex, multi-layered tradition which has been neglected and marginalized for an incredibly long time.’ (p.182) This is well said, timely and as good a short answer to the book’s title as any.

Identity is a function of position, and position is a function of power. Scottish literature, like any body of writing we choose to call a literature, is complex and multi-layered, but why it has been neglected for so long remains a matter for redress, and another reason why it matters.

It is tempting to answer the question Sassi’s book poses simply by saying that Scottish literature matters because there are great writers and great books that are Scottish. And because Scotland and Literature are, in themselves, two things that matter. Why does American literature matter? Same reasons. But if you’re talking about a national canon, aren’t there also distinctive themes that you can describe? With American literature they’re well-documented: the frontier, the non-conformist *isolatos* (Huck Finn lighting out for the territories, Ishmael and Ahab, *The Catcher in the Rye*) or the American dream and its failure (*Gatsby*, Hemingway’s disillusionment) – to name a few. Are there similarly major themes distinct to Scottish literature? Consider these: egalitarianism, kinship, independence (‘Freedom!’), linguistic variety and the voices of people, ideals of community and the question of national identity – the unfinished business of ‘home’. These questions recur in ways that distinguish Scottish literature from other national literatures. To say this, no doubt, is to run the risk of being ‘essentialist’. But why not? Essentials are things you cannot do without. Scottish literature matters in the end because there are things in it that you cannot do without. Or if you do, you’ll be suffering from dullness and ignorance.

The great body of perceptive, re-evaluating, contextualising critical writing on Scottish literature, especially since the 1980s, has brought about an enormous development in the potential for expanding the pleasures, insights and difficult kinds of worth in good critical reading. Carla Sassi’s book is an important contribution to that body of work.  However, it also raises questions about Scottish literature in an international context that remain unanswered. The gauntlet comes down with a distinctly glittery clatter. Should there not be considerable back-up here with reference to international histories of British literature or, say, critical studies of modern poetry, which fail to refer to Scottish literature? The Anglo-American bias of many such works is

easily demonstrated and the limitations of the English-language purview should clearly demonstrate how much is omitted, whether by ignorance or design. Furthermore, back-up might have explored the history of translation of Scottish literature: the BOSLIT project is readily available for this: an online history and hugely valuable database of Scottish literature in translation, deeply researched by Dr Tom Hubbard, among others, and available through the National Library of Scotland at:

http://www.nls.uk/catalogues/resources/boslit/index.html

One is also aware, for example, of an international reputation accorded to MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassic Gibbon. When *Sunset Song* became a Book-of-the-month choice in the USA, an international reputation in America was immediate, and when *A Scots Quair* and MacDiarmid's *Selected Poems* were both published in Penguin's Twentieth-Century Classics series (and the latter also by New Directions in the USA), new generations of international readers were introduced to the works of these modern masters. And one is aware of translations which ensured the popularity of Neil Gunn's novels, particularly in Germany, and the work initiated by Duncan Glen and Nat Scammacca in translating Scottish poets into Italian in their 'Sicilian-Scottish' issue of *Akros* in April 1975, followed up more recently by Marco Fazzini and Carla Sassi herself. Apparently the recent French translation of *Sunset Song* was a poor seller, but predictably perhaps the French version of Alexander Trocchi's *Young Adam* sold very well, Ewan MacGregor being more bankable these days than Millet. For more on this, see Keith Dixon's essay at http://raisonsdagir.org/kd4.htm

However, it would require a very considerable and thorough endeavour of research to exhaustively assess all the work that has gone into internationalising Scottish literature and in any case, the question at the heart of this is, what does 'international' mean here? Europe? Europe and Russia? Europe and Russia and Asia?

It was the German Kurt Wittig who, in the 1950s, provided a comprehensively refreshing reading of Scottish literature at a time when it was increasingly required to see it in an international context. That requirement is even more urgent now, and Sassi is courageous and committed in her work to further the subject's international recognition. To return to the quotation from her book with which I began, it may be that even if Scottish literature is not 'explained in other languages and to other cultures' it will, on its own terms, survive – written by the wayward creatures who persist in it; but it will not be read and valued as it should be, by Scottish people, including new generations of Scottish writers, or by people wherever they are around the world, until it can be presented in such a way that demonstrates clearly and cleanly that it does matter, and why. Professor Sassi's book is not the final word on the matter, but it is illuminating in many important ways, and it helps.