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ARTICLE

Introduction

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Kate Turner and Jane Stedman introduce this special issue of *C21 Scottish Fiction: Where are we now?* They provide an overview of the conference of the same title held on the 2nd of September 2014 at the University of Manchester, UK, as well as the theoretical and political arguments and events that contextualise the articles' engagement with twenty-first century Scottish fiction across this issue.

Keywords: Scottish, C21 literature; Independence referendum; contemporary fiction; Scottish politics

C21 Scottish Fiction: Where are we now? originates from a conference of the same title that we held on the 2nd of September 2014 at the University of Manchester, UK. We wanted to organise an event that would enable new dialogues within the varied and exciting critical and creative work being carried out in Scottish fiction during the twenty-first century. There were also timely, contextual reasons for holding the conference. In 2014, with the referendum on Scottish independence approaching, we felt it appropriate to organise a space for debate and discussion at a point of heightened focus on ideas surrounding nationality, locality, and politics in Scotland. Questions about the role of the wider national and political contexts within our interpretations of Scottish writing therefore formed part of the discussions at the conference. Panellists also explored topics including, but not limited to, gender and Scottish fiction, gothic writing from Scotland, the Scottish historical novel, Gaelic fiction, and cosmopolitanism. These discussions continued to develop at a symposium on contemporary Scottish women's fiction, organised by Fiona McCulloch, Carole Jones, and Sarah Dunnigan, and held at the University of Edinburgh on the 10 September 2015. Similar debates were taking place within other projects, such as

the 'Narrating Devolution' workshops held at the Stirling Centre for Scottish Studies, as discussed by Scott Hames in the opening article of this special issue. The articles presented here expand upon many of the themes discussed at the *C21 Scottish Fiction* conference held in 2014 and we hope that they add to the thriving critical work on Scottish fiction and its wider contemporary contexts that continue to develop across the twenty-first century.

The first decade and a half of the twenty-first century has been a time of enormous political change in Scotland, with the turn of the millennium a mere nine months after the opening of the devolved Scottish Parliament, the ascent of the SNP to form a majority government in 2011, and the subsequent 2014 independence referendum. These developments on the national political stage have particular significance for the shape and critical reception of Scotland's cultural output, given that Scottish writers have so often been framed as Shelleyan 'unacknowledged legislators' engaged in the construction of 'a kind of substitute or virtual polity' (McIlvanney 2002, 186), a project whose import has been heightened and enlivened by Scotland's political situation. The inauguration of the Parliament at Holyrood shifted the terms of this critical paradigm, and while writers are still very much engaged in imagining the nation in the twenty-first century,¹ there has been an energising diversification of critical debate within this period, as the cultural nationalist paradigm is enriched and ruptured by new voices and critical cross-currents.

Indeed, recent twenty-first century scholarship on writing from Scotland has been positioned amongst various uncertainties about Scottish, and indeed British, nationality and statehood. As the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence approached, writer and campaigner for a 'Yes' vote to independence, Alan Bissett wrote that Scotland was going 'through a period of distortion before assuming a new form' (2014). This is certainly indicative of our thinking that the category of 'Scottishness' has been radically unstable in recent years and, indeed, that this ambiguity forms one of the most significant points for analysis of writing from

¹ See, for example, the work of the National Collective, who took 'Imagine a Better Scotland' as their slogan during the referendum campaign: <http://nationalcollective.com>.

Scotland at the present moment. If the prospect of independence suggested, at least for Bissett, the possibility of Scotland taking a new form, then its failure to materialise in September 2014 undoubtedly furthered the uncertainty underpinning ideas of Scottishness and the role of the Arts in Scotland. Indeed, Bissett wrote that the 'No' vote prompted 'a new ambivalence about what the Scottish arts are for' (2015). We suggest that this ambivalence extends not only to the question of the role, political or otherwise, of the arts from Scotland but also to the question of what exactly counts as 'the Scottish Arts' and to how that uncertain category of contemporary Scottishness can or should feature within our analysis of writing from or about Scotland.

Similarly, it appears significant that ideas of uncertainty and ambiguity feature thematically in different contexts across this special issue. We would suggest that this is symptomatic of the contemporary period in which any work contextualised by Scotland must acknowledge the ambiguity that surrounds that political and cultural landscape in the twenty-first century as well as the uncertainty about how it will continue to develop. Indeed, since the 2014 vote on Scottish independence that prompted our examinations of contemporary Scottish fiction at the *C21 Scottish Fiction* conference, in 2016 a new and separate referendum led to the UK vote to leave the European Union in what has become known as 'Brexit'. This combined with Scotland voting in favour of remaining in the EU has heightened the possibility of a second referendum on Scottish independence. These political events continue to present uncertainty around ideas of Scottishness and indeed, post-Brexit, the idea of British identity has also been thrown into a similar state of distortion. It seems inevitable that themes of disorientation and uncertainty must continue to form a central feature of contemporary critical work on Scottish fiction. Indeed, this will continue to bear relevance to contemporary scholarship that is framed by nationhood in relation to the United Kingdom more broadly. We find these various encounters with ambiguity one of the most significant and exciting thematic features across the articles in this special issue.

This edition opens with Scott Hames' exploration of the tensions between the competing cultural and political narratives of devolution, anchored around James Robertson's state-of-the-nation novel *And the Land Lay Still* (2010). The article

emerges from Hames' two-year research project 'Narrating Scottish Devolution', and includes excerpts from workshops held on this topic at the Stirling Centre for Scottish Studies, alongside archival work on the internal debates of the Royal Commission on the Constitution (1969–73). Hames unpicks competing teleologies of government de-centralisation and the recovery of Scottish cultural agency, ending with a call to begin the thorny task of narrativising devolution in political and historical terms. Carole Jones' article builds on her previous work on masculinity in Scottish fiction, probing the ongoing process of moving beyond dominant paradigms of masculinity in Scottish writing. Jones explores the haunting power of masculine spectres and their return to centrality in twenty-first century Scottish fiction. The article juxtaposes Emily Mackie's novels *And this is true* (2010) and *In Search of Solace* (2014), which both remain fixated upon masculinity with Ali Smith's *There but for the* (2011), which resists the urge to re-centre masculinity despite its central male character, and offers a contrasting alternative to dominant modes of male identity. Fiona McCulloch explores the notion of 'hame' as central to Scottish understanding of identity, focusing on Anne Donovan's 'Crossover' novel *Being Emily* (2008). The article probes the novel's reconfiguration of 'hame' (home) so that this space can become a notion/nation that is able to accommodate diverse races, genders, ethnicities and sexual orientations. McCulloch reads the novel as an example of the optimistic cosmopolitan possibilities open to a new generation of Scots and Scottish writers. Anna McFarlane examines the work of the newly-minted Scots makar, Jackie Kay, charting her development as a black Scottish writer committed to the interrogation of identity categories. McFarlane focuses in particular on 'Bronze Head from Ife', a poem in Kay's most recent collection *Fiere* (2012), and elucidates the synthesis this poem offers of Kay's Nigerian and Scottish roots, invoking both Burns and Nigerian artwork to offer a form of civic nationalism that embraces difference and multiplicity. Sarah Murchison's contribution also looks to an engagement with canonical Scottish texts, exploring the intertextual resonances between James Robertson's *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (2006) and James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). Her article explores the playful

and multiple connections between the two texts, offering both elucidation of the twenty-first century text and new ways of approaching Hogg's novel and the tradition to which it belongs. The special issue ends with Zoë Strachan's examination of the haunting power of photography as a creative stimulus. She discusses the use of photographs in Janice Galloway's two autobiographies *This is Not About Me* (2008) and *All Made Up* (2011), as well as her own use of photographic inspiration for her currently untitled new novel, an extract from which closes the special issue.

While the scope of this special issue cannot hope to incorporate the breadth and diversity of Scottish fiction today, these essays suggest the exciting possibilities and developments unfolding in Scottish cultural life, and begin to map the shifting terrain on which the nation finds itself. The possibilities imagined by Scottish writers offer exciting potentialities for this time of flux and uncertainty, looking to rework the traditions and understandings of the past and to embrace the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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