

## Keeping Scotland British, and Britain English.

For many years now the British establishment has identified an area of conflict as ‘anti-Englishness’ and portrayed as ‘anti-English’ numbers of people from Scotland, Ireland and Wales. A few years before he died the charge was laid against Alasdair Gray. This followed publication of an anthology of essays by 27 Scottish authors on the subject of independence. The majority in favour of independence was overwhelming. I am not sure whether this has been noticed in the public arena: the collection has rarely if ever been reviewed. One Scottish presenter I heard on BBC Radio Scotland believed strongly that the journalist who first ‘broke the story’ of Gray’s ‘anti-Englishness’ was a credit to contemporary journalism and to be praised for his fearless exposé of the artist. This extraordinary comment helped settle in place a dreadul lie. Other than that there has been no media attention to the diverse ideas raised by 27 of Scotland’s more widely known writers. It appears that the charge of ‘anti-Englishness’ is the only review coverage the anthology is to receive within the mainstream media.

My experience of this area of ‘conflict’ begins from the reaction to my early short stories published as a collection forty years ago. These feature male and female characters who use the majority language of their own place and culture. Many of my stories were set outside Scotland but their central characters were working-class Scottish and I used language accordingly. This was not to establish any political or theoretical position. I wanted my stories to succeed; it was necessary that I used language freely. I was surprised by some of the hostility I received. Paranoia was not a risk. Depending on their use of language other Scottish writers were also ‘punished’. I was much luckier

than others for whom punishment included limited publication, limited distribution; exclusion from all major bookshops, from libraries, schools and places of further education; being chastised for 'bad English', ridiculed by mainstream journalists; dismissed and barely reviewed inside Scotland (never beyond).

Marginalisation is a central feature of the Scottish literary tradition. The marginalisation occurs throughout Britain and Ireland, including Scotland itself. This has applied especially to the work of writers whose 'Scottishness', and particularly, 'working-class Scottishness' is not concealed by their use of language. The phrase 'use of language' is interchangeable with 'abuse of the English language'. I realised early that a campaign was in operation to keep Scotland British, and Britain English. This was part of a wider campaign to keep the English language 'English'. The stress lay on 'Englishness'. Englishness was interchangeable with Britishness, or presumed to be. Yet this 'Englishness' was in itself exclusive; it did not apply to the working class and 'accented regions'. People from Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cumbria, Northumbria, Devon, Cornwall or within a square mile of the Bow Bells of London appeared as marginalised as the rest of us. This point is crucial. It is not a 'national question'.

Scottish writers who conform to the establishment's cultural expectations, in other words those who assimilate and offer no challenge on the fundamental issues find their place within the establishment. Their work is reviewed in the popular media. They are rewarded with personal attention, appearances on radio and television, and awarded little commissions now and again. These writers are said to use English properly and are welcomed, given a home in British literature. They visit schools and encourage young people to read and write. They are invited abroad to a variety of overseas literary festivals and events, funded by the British Council.

What is sold as 'British literature' is an enlarged version of what we already know as English literature. This enlarged, or 'greater English' literary tradition includes the literatures of Scotland, Wales and 'accented England', which is occasionally described as 'regional England'. In this context working-class London is a region. These are perceived as 'branches' or 'strains' of the 'greater English' tradition', the 'High English' tradition. Unless backed into a corner - and perhaps not even then - the British literary establishment will not allow that the literary traditions of Scotland and Wales are distinctive and pluralistic, and that they exist in their own right, as separate and as singular as the American, English, Irish, Nigerian or Jamaican literary traditions. These may well be English-language based literary traditions but each makes use of its own linguistic indigeneity, drawing from the language, culture, tradition and heritage of these diverse communities; the ones that have not yet been obliterated by the effects of British imperialism.

The British Council makes its position clear, and states the priority: "to develop a wider knowledge of the English language". There is no mention of the languages of Scotland, Wales, Man, Ireland, and indigenous England itself.

Gàidhlig (Scots Gàidhlig) is a fair example. Only a small minority communicate in the language; for British State authorities it hardly counts at all. "Since Scotland is a divided country . . ." as Somhairle Mac Gill-eain tells us "without its own government, dominated by capitalists, whether their names are Scottish or foreign, the state of Gàidhlig could not be anything other than wretched." Gàidhlig language and culture have been oppressed, suppressed and repressed. No attempt is made to explain its current state. It is pushed as a sort of phenomenon. We come to see it as inevitable decline, the natural termination of a worthy but obsolete intellectual model. We recognise further that Gàidhlig is a waste of crucial resources; only 'kept alive' through political expediency, the manifestation of a benign and wholesomely

generous British State authority. That it might occupy a fundamental part of contemporary culture is dismissed as ludicrous.

Beyond specialist media channels Gàidhlig culture is ignored or treated as a loveable anachronism. Nevertheless the British State nowadays recognises Gàidhlig as a language. This was not always the case and other languages are still denied that status; stigmatized as dialects and vernaculars, dismissed as non-standard, sub-standard forms of English. These may be acknowledged as the means by which particular communities can speak amongst themselves but are regarded as unsuitable for wider useage. Welcome to non- Gàidhlig 'venacular Scotland'. We are a people without a language, aside from what we have begged, borrowed or stolen from the language that is English. Thank God for linguistic imperialism. But for that our verbal beseechings for alms, hand-outs and subsidies would have been so much gobbledygook to the British State authorities. Our non-standard and sub-standard forms of English cannot sell a product or convey an instruction, and are incapable of genuine intellectual discourse: incapable of nourishing a literature.

A powerful section of the Scottish establishment encourages acceptance of this and it makes sense to think of this power base as British; the British State in Scotlad, rather than the Scottish establishment. They would prefer a national literature that aspired to a higher sensitivity, rather like that of England, and by England here they never for one moment include accented or regional England. Higher level English is a language "made for literature", as it is for every other form of higher discourse, as it is heard within the drawing rooms of Balmoral and Windsor, the meeting rooms of Eton, Cambridge and Oxford, the back corridors or broom cupboards of Westminster; and in every last place colonized and authorized by and on behalf of the British State, within each of the home countries.

The British Council promotes the ascendancy of an English literature which derives its norms, its values, its ethical dynamic from 'Higher English' culture, and 'Higher English' here conceals the reality of the British State which is not so much a political formation but a ruling elite, whose policies and operations begin and end in class-interest. Scotland's indigenous culture is disdained. Young people are taught its inferiority; how provincial, parochial and vulgar it is; unsophisticated, anti-intellectual, generally embarrassing, and, people hate to admit this, but rather shameful. Oh Jimmy, don't give us a showing up, as one's mother might have put it. Our so-called 'language' is unable to adapt, incapable of subtlety, unfit for philosophical, political or theological discourse. Ours is a not a real literature but a vernacular branch of it that cannot travel, that can only find a home locally. Unlike the language of the 'mother-culture' which is a most subtle and sophisticated means of expression, its flexibility and adaptability a byword. All matters of the intellect may take place in Higher English, the voice of the ruling elite, aped by their servants and minions.

Scottish students finish their college and university degrees trained to that effect. It hurts them to open the pages of a book written by a "blatantly Scottish" author. What is a "blatantly Scottish" writer? I heard one called that. I cannot remember who it was. I hope it was me but I don't think it was. The "blatantly Scottish" prepares us for a full range of idiomatic phenomena, outmoded 'dialects' and general linguistic failure. This writer is too gritty, too harsh, too rough and ready; too tough, too working class, and too macho, female though she happens to be.

Young folk in Scotland and throughout Britain learn that beauty and sophistication, emotional and moral strength; courage and heroism - even boldness - are attributes that pertain to 'Higher Englishness', the non-accented, non-regional expression of the British State, the power base of the British ruling elite. No matter the country. Such attributes are not universally human

as you may have thought: these are integral qualities of the imperial authority that has colonized your culture.

The authorities feed us the fallacy that language may be isolated from those who use it. Linguistic subtleties are isolated from language-users. It is ignored or forgotten that we human beings who use language make language and continue to make it everyday of our lives; that our children create it, and create within it, on a daily basis. We are taught to be grateful to the imperial force that has bestowed upon us *their* language, *their* body of knowledge, their culture, all of which is in place *a priori*, complete and in-itself, long before you and your family and local community ever existed.

Literary artists proceed with caution! Too free a use of the linguistic body may result in its violation!

Scotland is quite dutiful really. The sense of Britishness remains strong, though not overwhelming. Many writers, and readers, are aware of their obligations to the host language and guard against the Scotticisation of English. They learn to adapt and some to assimilate. Literary art survives, and occasionally thrives. At its heart is what some academics term a 'lower-order sensibility'. This is illustrated by the 'preponderance' of lower-order experience contained within their poetry and storytelling, not to mention a similar preponderance within the creators themselves. Peasant and working classes are revealed existentially, typically through the subject's own language. Those elements are at the heart of the Scottish tradition in literature. They are grounded within our wider intellectual tradition, which includes the philosophical, the theological and the social. No other context does justice to this work.

Much of the hostility aroused by Alasdair Gray's so-called 'anti-Englishness' was not in response to a lifetime's creation but to inferences drawn from the publicity surrounding the short essay he has in the anthology mentioned. It

was a shabby affair. The outcome was predictable: the burden of proof was on Gray. his made the charade more difficult to counter. Why was it so difficult to defend this great artist? Surely certain factors should have gone without saying? Why was Gray left to prove his non-anti-Englishness? The joke was on somebody. But who?

I declare that I have known this man for 40 years and there is not an anti-English bone to be found in his entire body!

No sir, answer the question. Is this man or has this man ever been a member of . . . or fraternized or caroused with any such member of any club, party, group or formation answering to the charge of anti-Englishness?

How the fuck do I know.

Arrest that man!

How strange it must have seemed to foreign observers that not only in wider Britain but within Scotland itself people were everywhere content to attack publicly, and others obliged to defend publicly, one of their own country's greatest living artists, whose work was to be found in galleries through the country, and on book shelves throughout the world.

Why should such a situation have arisen? Did a lifetime's art count for nothing? Absolutely. Otherwise the burden of proof would have been placed on his accusers. Anti-English? Racism? What is that a joke?

Instead the artist was denounced and his reputation derogated. That was the aim.

Alasdair Gray is not only one of Scotland's greatest artists, he is the most public. Sixty years of his writings, drawings, murals and paintings are available to inspection and evaluation. It is here that Gray's humanity, his utter revulsion for all forms of racism and sectarianism, is demonstrated so clearly that nothing needs to be said, neither by him nor in defence of him. People

may dislike or take a position against his work but it cannot be ignored and disregarded. This is what we mean by 'seminal'. In Scotland the art of Alasdair Gray is seminal. Not so in 'Britain' where it may be ignored, or noticed; disregarded, or regarded; condemned, or not; praised, whatever, but always in the light of Britishness, and I am only repeating myself in stating that Britishness is at the heart of the Scottish establishment.

Unfortunately in Scotland that cloying, stultifying colonial mentality continues to dog our imagination and our very apprehension of life. How else to explain that pathetic BBC Radio Scotland presenter's praise for the journalist whose reprehensible nonsense began the affair.

If nothing else controversies such as this allow us to settle the matter of the distinctiveness of the Scottish tradition in literature, and our existence as a verifiable community of communities, whose values are there, inherent.