

## Social Diversity and the New Literary Order

### *Preface*

*Media outlets hostile to the work of a writer either don't review it or send it to individuals they suspect might resent, dislike or hate it. This is classic undermining and has happened to me a few times. The question is why they bother in the first place. The root of that is a compliment. Your work annoys them. It happens to far greater figures than myself. A friend from foreign shores said to me on one occasion, You're uppity Jim, that's the trouble, you aren't grateful.*

*There are elements other than the literary. I prefer not to make a secret of where I stand politically. The idea that Jeremy Corbyn or Tony Benn was ever left wing is fair enough for those who believe popcorn is a meal in itself.*

*Mainstream politics are a joke but never funny, and sometimes dangerous. Better to leave the company, retain the sanity and make use of it. This reminds me of when Tom Leonard got annoyed at somebody, keeping it to himself as much as possible - and now I'm paraphrasing - See you ya bastard, when I get hame, I'm goni write a poem about you.*

*Eventually I did something similar, I wrote a satire, a spoof essay, which I entitled Social Diversity and the New Literary Order. This was about thirty years ago. Once I finished the piece I could not think of any place to send it, and so filed it away. When a new literary-political journal in Scotland was starting up in the 1990s the editors requested a contribution so I sent it to them. Back it came. They said they were seeking something political. Fair enough.*

*It later occurred to me that they hadn't realized it was a spoof, they thought I was being serious. Ach well, fuck it, as they say in the better Scotshire qualities. My original intention was to publish it under a pseudonym, by someone of an Irish background, long assimilated but*

*still attempting "to pass", disguising his own origins by adopting some upstanding Scot-Brit-Proddy appellation, such as*

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(NB "Fergus Strachan" is the pen-name of Professor Brendan O'Reilly, currently joint Shell-BP and British Council-funded professor at the Ankara-based Anglo-US Institute for the Implementation of Linguistic and Cultural Policy.)

## Social Diversity and the New Literary Order

Equality is the very essence of democracy and as it applies in the greater society so too must it apply within our artistic and cultural communities. None should expect favour as of right, whether God-given, ideological or otherwise. These are fundamental principles. Who would gainsay them? We have not yet reached a stage where the sanctity of individual human life is itself called into question, where in order to be adjudged worthy of imagined existence a character must eke out a life on the inner city streets, afflicted by HIV syndrome. We have no personal axes to grind at the perpetual aggrandisement of those bereft of economic opportunity, an increasing minority of whom, in an urban setting, are forced to resort to crime, drugs and drunkenness that they may the better cope with the exigencies of the new millennium.

Every area of Scotland's culture exists to be celebrated. Whether that area is a recent cultural phenomenon or as tried and tested as the Standing Stones of Orkney is of little significance to us. It is doubtless amusing to some of our more radical 'voices' when they hear a few timid souls call for 'the great Morningside novel' or 'the great Kelvinside epic poem'. Yet however fanciful we might find the idea, at base the concept is legitimate, given that the citizens of both these urban environments are deemed unworthy of aesthetic consideration by our fashionable 'realists' since, it would appear, they do not experience social deprivation. Yet even were this the case, surely no true Scots man nor woman ever was ashamed of any aspect of our society. None among us would set store by the 'tartan and haggis' ethic these days but that is a far cry from advocating its exclusion from the cultural arena. It is proper for any society that its various communities are imaginatively represented by its artistic practitioners. It is also proper that the artefacts produced by its creative people are available for general consumption, both at home and overseas. But a healthy market is diverse in nature and the producers of these artefacts should not remain uncognisant of what is, arguably, undeniable.

Presently, the imaginative manifestation of one area of Scottish society, that of the urban under-classes, is being accorded much literary attention. It is no small source of local pride that, for some of these writings, this value is placed from beyond our borders. At the same time it would be unwise if we as a nation – and we are a nation, whether within or without the United Kingdom is of little consequence to all but the politically pedantic – were disinclined to adopt a self-critical approach. It is never an act of disloyalty to pose the awkward

question when and where that question requires to be posed, no matter that those to whom it is posed are our own compatriots. Self-appraisal is the signal of intellectual maturity.

It is to the credit of many of our home-based literary critics that they subject their own field of endeavour to the most stringent scrutiny with great relish and enthusiasm. Indeed the view is now being expressed that our contemporary literature is perhaps in a less healthy state than conventional wisdom would have us believe, given the occasional clamour from excitable foreign sources. They argue that there is nothing *inherently* wrong with much if not most of the 'school of urban realism'; and clearly questions of this form belong to another context. Their concern is that the current preoccupation with this one community is in danger of presenting an imbalanced picture not only of our national literature but of the larger Scottish culture. This branch of our literature (for it is certainly that), initially Glasgow-based, has spread eastwards and further north. Nowadays one confronts it as a matter of course in most every contemporary literary magazine or anthology one cares to peruse. We have a fair sprinkling of it within the libraries of certain of our more up-to-date, not to say fashionable, senior schools, as well as those of our broadly-based universities and higher-education colleges. It is fitting that this should be so. The danger would arise from a disproportionate time being spent on its perusal; our students have these days a demanding academic syllabus.

It is important that each and every area of our richly diverse Scottish society is encouraged to explore itself artistically. It is equally important that we acknowledge the inherent right of each and every

area to that artistic exploration. No single social arena has a claim greater than another.

Much of our country is rural. Very many of our people earn their crust far from the madding thunder of city traffic, whether by farming the land or the seas surrounding our rugged coastline. Those areas of our contemporary Scottish society are every bit as ordinary (or extraordinary) as those pertaining to the urban under-classes; they are of equal social and cultural merit. None among us would argue that areas of society might exist that are deserving of greater value than the indigenous underprivileged. Yet in the larger literary context might we not look for the poem devoted to the Hebridean shepherd, the dramatisation of the Minch fisherman whose life is daily at risk?

There is little question that for the under classes urban existence is less than easy, often harrowingly so. Elsewhere it is equally tough, perhaps tougher. These things are relative. Clearly our newfound neighbours from overseas would not have arrived seeking sanctuary if life, formerly, had been easy. It is time to examine more closely what constitutes a healthy, not to say egalitarian, literary culture as fully reflective of the reality of Scottish life. It is not inconceivable that a more balanced approach would better enable a national literature that might reflect the deep-rooted vitality of Scottish culture as a whole.

None would recommend, reasonably, that our creative literary artists should consider extending their range of social experience. But is it not the case that all persons at liberty in this country have one contact or another with individuals of a differing social order? Who has

not stood in the queue at the local supermarket and marvelled at the breadth of its cultural diversity, reminiscent of the communal plurality of the oldtown tenement in eighteenth-century Edinburgh. Here too was the then unfashionable 'urban setting' yet did not Sir Walter succeed in exploring its every social dimension? Two hundred years on we are at a loss to find such unexceptional riches within the pages of our dour but contemporary *littérateurs*. Is it not a peculiar phenomenon? In any society in any of the world's continents we will distinguish economic difference. At the same time we will distinguish an exciting variety of other social features. Even our well-publicised homeless young people are forced to consult a doctor or dentist, perhaps visit a headmaster's study or be called in front of an examining magistrate. Must this fact of societal experience slip through unacknowledged by our new literary realists?

Neither is it a mark of disloyalty to our currently fashionable authors if we remark that a youthful friend (a very bright postgraduate student whose larger family resides in an outer-city housing-scheme) has advised us that 'people don't live that way at all, and they don't swear all the time either'. He and his young colleagues are of the opinion that a preponderance of poetry and prose fiction features the imagined lives of an indigenous under-class that exists in a form of rarefied urban limbo, what a few of our more adventurous home-grown critics have perceived as 'a cultural vacuum'. The question of language and veracity we shall hold for a later date. At present we are inclined merely to wonder if the creative products pertaining to this one particular social area are in fact truly representative even of themselves.

Yet if it is true that people do not exist if they do not exist imaginatively, then Scottish society as a whole is in danger of being rendered null and void or, at best, absent. Oddly, we do have writers who strive to operate from a broader cultural church. This more fulsome branch of our contemporary creative writings is, however, something of a literary secret. Within its pages we encounter sundry social strata; we eavesdrop on the private conversations of diplomats, men and women of the world; we journey on the tramp ships of South-East Asia, peruse the natives of exotic sub-tropical villages, the pin-striped denizens of London's Canary Wharf; we share the urban bohemia of the Parisian artist, the New York jazz musician, the Berlin cabaret performer. For our part, the mystery of literary fashion remains for ever obscure, surrounded as we are by the new literary order, our 'school of urban sameness'.

Throughout the years we have strived to maintain an open door policy to afflicted overseas communities; one thinks of the Irish, the Polish, the various Russians, the Jews, the Romanians, the Bosnians and so forth. Of course this has not been one-way traffic. Those who would argue for tighter controls may have the material argument on their side but let them visit our craggy coastal regions where innumerable ruined cottages exist to haunt the national psyche, bearing witness to the tragic but historically fated upheavals of the past three or more hundred years. Let us never forget that a minority of our own Scottish people has endured past suffering, past hardship. They too travelled the world in search of greater opportunity, for themselves and their families. In a majority of instances they earned their right to be there by working twice as hard as the majority of their

indigenous brethren (who would take issue with the Andrew Carnegies of the world?). Not only did they integrate successfully within their new-found business communities; frequently, by dint of hard-won study, they took leading positions within their respective intellectual circles, whether artistic or academic.

Every Scottish schoolchild is doubtless instructed by our generally hard-working, modern-day teachers, that for several centuries our thinkers and scholars have sojourned from Paris to Rome, from Vienna to St Petersburg and beyond. Those thinkers and scholars were skilled in many languages, and tested these skills in appropriate writings. That cosmopolitan bent of the Scottish democratic intellect – much prized – has been a primary commodity of our larger society, and may it continue to be so. On occasion those early itinerant intellectuals, our forebears, were content to publish abroad if the need arose; just as in the present day not a few of the current crop have made as their publishing base the Southern Counties of England. This has been an effect of natural constraints rather than ideologies and may be regarded as an additional source for pride.

Yet it remains an unfortunate consequence that beyond our own border there is a growing fear that the present fashion will come to be viewed by foreign clients as representational. In the wider overseas arena the Scottish people are in danger of being perceived as one homogenous mass, what the politically incorrect of our grandfathers' day would have termed (erroneously, in our opinion) 'the great unwashed'.

These are controversial matters. It is not expedient to discuss the natural influences of one's personal background in the present social climate. It may well be to the benefit of the majority that a few traditions of our old people are held to have been prejudicial; they now lie in disrepute. None would counter this, seriously, as a good thing. Yet it is scarcely the fault of individual human beings, and literary practitioners cannot be exempted, that they chance to be born in one economic, geographic or – dare we say it – linguistic setting, as opposed to any other.

Or is a writer's merit to be evaluated in relation to the circumstance of birth? Must the value we wish to place on a writer's literary output become a function of our own ideologically based opinions of the social influences experienced by that writer *a priori*? What price the sense of starry-eyed wonder of the Highland-born lad or lass endeavouring to perfect the intricacies of Latin declensions in order that he or she may gain entry to his or her chosen profession? Is such a life to be deemed an unfit subject for general literary consumption? Must the trials and tribulations of the Inverness-born chartered accountant or, for that matter, the Perth businessman, be hidden from imaginative existence?

None of us is ashamed of our own family background which, in many instances, was as down-to-earth, not to say 'workingclass', as that of any stalwart of the new literary order. Through the good offices of our parents and schoolteachers we were encouraged to keep a free and unfettered mind. By virtue of one tiny piece of ink-smudged cardboard we gained access to the wider universe: a junior ticket to our local

public library; freely given, gratefully received. No silver spoon was necessary. Like countless ill-clad boys before us, we unsparingly exploited this traditional channel of the Scottish democratic intellect. We were enabled both to comprehend and to come to love the mysteries of that vaster global culture, feasting our imaginations on the glorious exotica of humankind. Here lay riches beyond our childish dreams, beyond the stunted vision of our local parish leaders. We were granted access to an empire of untapped wealth and resources, resources of a quite startling diversity, yet a diversity that neither precluded nor negated its ultimate totality.

Here lay true equality. We experienced a multiplicity of cultural influence. We were not glued to the gin-sodden back alley of the intellect. Our boyish instincts knew no boundaries, fired by the pioneering spirit of the Martin Rattlers, the Jim Hawkineses, the Prester Johns. Yet too was the heightened sensitivity of our youthful manhood counterbalanced by the fierce but meditative passion of the young Keats or Byron, now aroused by the sonnets of William Shakespeare, becalmed by the wisdom of a John Milton. Later we came to know and respect the literary products of our own countrymen, the Henrysons, the Dunbars and others of that ilk, down to such as Burns or MacDiarmid. These were unfettered and majestic imaginations, internationalists all, yet Scottish to the very marrow of their being.

There is no political ideology being espoused from this quarter, for these are uncertain times, yet there exists an underlying danger lurking in the paucity of social experience reflected within our new

literary order. It is the evil of cultural insularity, that tarted hand-  
maiden of xenophobes the world over.

Large numbers of people of diverse racial and cultural origins have settled in Scotland, the overwhelming majority of whom have set up home in urban districts. We are by no means alone in expressing pride that they should have chosen our country as their destination, temporary or otherwise. We further propose that the cultural artefacts produced by our immigrant communities be encouraged. It would be churlish to seek otherwise. Our new neighbours will learn to create their own products. These are exotic influences and can act towards the integrated growth of the Scottish body politic. We may go further: it is our humane duty to encourage these endeavours. We look forward with interest to seeing how this will be reflected within the pages of our national literature.

Yet no matter how worthy of encouragement a particular area of our larger Scottish society appears to be, it will be deemed an error if it were so encouraged to the detriment of another; nor yet if it should undermine, and possibly exclude, one or more of its fellow cultural areas. At the same time it should be ensured that our larger society, in all its indigenous heterogeneity, is accorded an equal cultural value. Indeed the logicians among us might favour a greater cultural value, it being an obvious point that, while without the latter the former could not exist, the converse, strictly speaking, cannot apply: parts are never greater than a whole.

Contemporary Scottish literature has arrived on a plateau. Our critics and creative writers can remain at a standstill or, if they so choose, scale further imaginative peaks. It would seem to us an error were we to return to a time when the under classes did not make their presence felt within our literature. Indeed, ample inventive energy has been expended on espousing the validity of this very argument; it is nowadays accepted, freely, that the literary presence of these people is warranted. None would propose that the battle was unwarranted. It is more difficult to sustain an argument for its continuation. The old school has thrown up its hands in surrender. Our exponents of the new literary order may rest assured that the niche they have carved for themselves is not under threat.

But now is the time to move forward. Our compatriots are charged to consider the position maturely. If the creative burden is too onerous then the future of Scottish literature is itself under threat.

