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British Literature: the Career of a Concept

Abstract

British Literature is an unfamiliar concept in literary studies. English Literature and Scottish Literature are the customary terms of art, expressive, it seems, of the distinctive national cultures from which these literatures emerge. Indeed, English Literature, rather than British Literature also does service as an umbrella for all Anglophone literatures. However, the idea of British Literature has a longer history. In the eighteenth century there was a keen sense among literary antiquaries and philologists that the sister languages of English and Scots had produced a striking corpus of medieval Anglo-Scottish literature. In the nineteenth century 'British Literature' entered the currency of criticism. However, the coming of the Scots literary renaissance in the inter-War era killed off this usage. In more recent decades, with the growing recognition that the UK is a multi-national state a new appreciation of 'British Literature' – associated with cultural pluralism and the expansion of the English canon – has emerged.

'British literature': the very formulation carries an aura of unfamiliarity and strangeness. It does not trip off the tongue in quite the same way as 'Scottish literature', or 'English literature', though the latter term is baggy and capacious, and is sometimes understood to contain 'Scottish literature' and, by extension, what we might imagine to be the matter of British literature. Nevertheless, as we know from everyday experience, the terminology of place, ethnicity and identity in 'these islands' is far from straightforward. Scots are, of course, much more keenly attuned than their fellow Britons south of the border to the problem of disentangling England from Great Britain; but the people of Northern Ireland are still more alert to the distinctions between Great Britain and the United Kingdom which escape many Scots. To complicate matters further, the epicentre of Britishness – certainly

of ostentatious Union flag-waving Britishness – lies beyond the island of Great Britain itself, in the Protestant parts of Northern Ireland, an area known to students of Scottish literature as the zone of a lively literature in Scots, not least in the era of Burns and immediately after.[1] The fact that Ulster Scots literature has only recently been rediscovered is part of a wider recovery of Britishness in both history and literature in recent decades. This process owes much to the pioneering work of the expatriate New Zealand historian John Pocock in the 1970s,[2] and achieved wider appreciation in the 1990s with the publication of Linda Colley's much-reprinted historical best-seller, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (1992).[3] As a result, Britishness and the relations of the four nations of what used to be called 'the British Isles', has risen up the historical agenda,[4] and also begun to engage scholars in adjacent disciplines, including literature.[5] Nevertheless, 'British literature' still seems a less digestible concept than 'British history', or what – since Pocock's influential articles – historians now refer to as 'the new British history'.[6] Yet a kind of 'new British literature' has emerged at the fringes of 'English literature', 'Scottish literature' and 'Irish literature' – or, more properly, in the hedgerows located at the bounds of these established fields.[7] Moreover, recent developments still beg the question of whether the 'new British literature' of recent decades – from the Scots poetry of Ulster to a devolved English literature – exhausts what was meant in the past by 'British literature'.

Although 'British literature' was not a term in common currency for most of the twentieth century, it was in circulation during the nineteenth century, and the idea of British literature – if not always in so many words[8] – was a feature of eighteenth-century literary and linguistic scholarship. Moreover, Scottish poets and pamphleteers of the eighteenth century made a significant contribution to the canon of British identity. One thinks immediately of John Arbuthnot (1667–1735) and his iconic creation, John Bull;[9] or of the patriotic sea-song, 'Rule, Britannia!', whose lyrics were the work of the Anglo-Scottish poet James Thomson (1700–48) from the masque *Alfred* (1740) – about the Saxon King Alfred the Great – co-authored with another Scot, David Mallet (c.1705–65), with music by the English composer Thomas Arne (1710–78).[10] And just how should we parse Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820), an early nineteenth-century Scot's novelistic rendering of medieval English ethnogenesis?[11] Indeed, how far did Scott's account of the twelfth-century reconciliation of Saxon and Norman stocks allude –

however obliquely – to the post-1707 fusion of the Scots and English in a new British nation? British literature, it transpires, is right in front of our noses, though sometimes we fail to recognise it as such and misconstrue it as conforming to present-day paradigms.

One of the biggest obstacles to seeing the past on its own terms is imprisonment within twentieth-century categories, not least the constricting binary alternatives of England/Scotland or core/periphery, which we inherit directly from the discipline of Scottish cultural studies, and at one remove from its own origins in the inter-war Scottish literary renaissance. But when the historical imagination is given free rein, we find that 'British literature' had a significance for past centuries which was lost for much of the twentieth century, and is only now being re-excavated.

To take an obvious example of how our perceptions of literature are shaped by grand narratives, consider the case of literature in Scots. Since the revolution wrought in the practice and study of Scottish literature by Hugh MacDiarmid in the 1920s and 30s, it is very difficult to conceive of Lallans other than as a vehicle for nationalism. Yet, contrary to our MacDiarmid-inflected expectations, Lowland Scots has a much longer and surprising history underpinning a kind of literary unionism, for the cognate relationship of Scots and English had long provided a means of demonstrating the shared ethnic origins of the English and the Scots. After all, in medieval times the language now known as Scots was known in Scotland as 'Inglis'; and the English associations of Scots persisted long after the Union of 1707.

Indeed, although the Scots revival of the eighteenth century associated with Allan Ramsay, Robert Fergusson and Robert Burns tends to be thought of, in some quarters at least, as the manifestation of a post-Union identity crisis, it ran in parallel with a wider antiquarian project to recover a medieval literary inheritance; a British inheritance no less. Eighteenth-century literary antiquarianism was not a straightforwardly nationalist enterprise. A celebrated pioneer in the investigation of medieval British literature was the Saxonist antiquary and future Bishop of London, Edmund Gibson (1669–1748), born in Westmorland, who was part of an antiquarian circle at Queen's College Oxford. This grouping included another future bishop, William Nicolson (1655–1727), who would go on to be Bishop of Carlisle and author of the *Scots Historical Library* (1702).[12] Gibson was, in at least one sense self-consciously British, for he organised the monumental updated 1695 edition of William Camden's *Britannia*, and a further edition of the

work in 1722.[13] Moreover, Gibson's earliest work was a combined edition, which included William Drummond's *Polemo-Middinia* alongside 'Christ's Kirk on the Green', attributed to James V of Scotland.[14] The vogue for medieval ballads – on both sides of the border – was stimulated by Joseph Addison's *Spectator* no. 70, which included a celebrated discussion of 'Chevy Chase', a ballad of the border feuding between the Douglases and the Percies.[15] Later in the century, the vogue for medieval British balladry received further inspiration from the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) collected by Thomas Percy (1729–1811), a Shropshire-born scholar and another Anglican cleric, who eventually became Bishop of Dromore in the Protestant Church of Ireland. In 1778 the English literary historian Thomas Warton (1728–90) argued that the literary history of medieval and early modern Scotland merited further antiquarian research: 'a well-executed history of the Scotch poetry from the thirteenth century, would be a valuable accession to the general literary history of Britain.'[16]

North of the border Scottish writers and scholars recognised that Scots – rather than the unique expression of the spirit and identity of the Scottish nation – was part of a common British legacy from the middle ages. Indeed the promotion of medieval Scots literature was closely tied to celebrations among eighteenth-century Scottish jurists of a shared Gothic heritage of laws, institutions and liberties across Britain, certainly from the Anglo-Norman and Scoto-Norman periods of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries.[17] Others looked to even deeper connections which preceded the Norman era. Sir John Clerk of Penicuik (1676–1755) identified Scots as a dialect of the ancient language of the Belgic people of Britain.[18] Later in the century Alexander Geddes (1737–1802) would champion medieval Scots literature under the rubric of 'Scoto-Saxon'. Philologically, contended Geddes, 'all words truly Anglo-Saxon were as truly Scoto-Saxon words'. At bottom, 'the English and Scottish were originally but one language'. Geddes detected a richness, energy and harmony in Scots, which modern English – by absorbing so many 'French usages' – had lost. Geddes promoted the idea of a Scots dictionary – in his words 'a Scoto-Saxon lexicon' – as 'a desideratum in English literature'.[19]

In his classic novel of Anglo-Scottish reconciliation, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), where the epistolary mode heightens the reader's awareness of the prejudices of the letter-writers – only to see them dashed on the rocks of experience, Tobias Smollett deployed his leading Scots

character Lismahago as a mouthpiece for the curious patriotic boast that Scots was the near-authentic language of Old England. Lismahago asserts that 'the English language was spoken with greater propriety in Edinburgh than in London'. This is because Lismahago believes that 'what was generally called the Scottish dialect was, in fact, the true, genuine, old English, with a mixture of some French terms and idioms'. On the other hand, 'modern English, from affectation and false refinement' had thoroughly 'corrupted' the language of the English, who had lost their use of 'guttural sounds'. As a result of these changes, Lismahago – otherwise a loudly patriotic Scot – contended that 'the works of our best poets, such as Chaucer, Spenser, and even Shakespeare, were become, in many parts, unintelligible to the nations of South Britain, whereas the Scots, who retain the ancient language, understand them without the help of a glossary.'[20] Similar arguments can be found elsewhere in eighteenth-century Scots philology, not least in the work of John Callander of Craigforth (1722–89) who celebrated the fact that of these two kindred languages sprung from 'the old Saxon dialect', Lowland Scots had retained its purity to a far greater extent than English, where the language had been substantially gallicised in the post-Norman era. It was Callander's boast – echoing Lismahago's – that 'we, in Scotland, have preserved the original tongue, while it has been mangled, and almost defaced, by our southern neighbours.' The language of Scotland was, as it were, more authentically 'Saxon' than the language of England.[21]

In the early 1780s Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster (1754–1835), an MP, agrarian improver and the inventor of tartan trews, was a keen proponent of linguistic integration as a means of cementing the Union. At one level Sinclair seemed an uncomplicated champion of Anglicisation. Scots needed to weed out Scotticisms from their speech if they were to carve out careers at London: 'those whose object is to have some share in the administration of national affairs, are under the necessity of conforming to the taste, the manners, and the language of the public.' Indeed, 'whilst so striking a difference as that of language' persisted between England and Scotland 'ancient local prejudices will not be removed'. The creation of a common British community required the Scots – and indeed the inhabitants of the peripheral counties of England – to conform to a national standard of received pronunciation set in the capital and at parliament. Nevertheless, Sinclair was not simply a quisling Scot determined to root out Scottish peculiarities in

the cause of a culturally bland, materially improved Anglo-British future. According to Sinclair, Scots – or rather 'Scotch' – was 'a dialect of the Saxon or Old English, with some trifling variations.' Indeed, in some respects Scots was a truer relic of old English than modern English, as 'the principal differences at present between them, are owing to the Scotch having retained many words and phrases which have fallen into disuse among the English'. The Anglo-Scottish warfare of the later middle ages had not changed the underlying culture of Scotland. Sinclair found it striking 'that the language of England should prevail in a state, the members of which had a rooted enmity to the English name'. Indeed, in the fifteenth century 'the Scotch and English dialects, so far as we can judge by comparing the language of the writers who flourished at the time, were not so dissimilar as they are at present'. Since then English had changed more than Scots. Sinclair remarked upon 'how many words are now condemned as Scoticisms, which were formerly admired for their strength and beauty, and may still be found in the writings of Chaucer, of Spenser, of Shakespeare, and other celebrated English authors.' Was the period between the late fourteenth and the early seventeenth century, Sinclair seems to hint, a lost golden age of 'British' literature? How unfortunate then, as Sinclair notes with regret, that Scots was now seen as 'uncouth' and 'unintelligible' in the English capital, and that an 'odious distinction' persisted with regard to spoken Scots at the table, in the pulpit or in the law courts. When, Sinclair appears to suggest, did the auld Anglo-Scots language of Chaucer and Shakespeare, disqualify one for high office in London? Nevertheless, Sinclair's primary aim was to promote a refined blending of the languages – and the modulation of the Scots dialect – as an essential glue of Anglo-Scottish integration.[22]

The shared idiom of medieval Anglo-Scottish literature provided, it seemed, a test for determining authenticity. Sir David Dalrymple, Lord Hailes (1726–92), wrote to his fellow antiquary John Pinkerton (1758–1826), along these lines in 1783: 'We must always, in such inquiries, suppose that the English language was, at any given time, more perfect in England than with us; and, consequently, if we find the English language more advanced in a Scottish poem than in an English of the same era, that the Scottish is a forgery.' This was particularly true of anything attributed to the early fifteenth-century King James I of Scotland, for he was 'in education an Englishman; but his language must have been the language of

Henry V of England: language and metre more polished than in the days of Henry V cannot be his.'[23]

Pinkerton was an altogether less scrupulous and reliable scholar than Hailes.[24] Moreover, Pinkerton had axes of his own to grind. In particular, he rejected the notion that late medieval literature in Scots was largely derivative of Chaucer,[25] and that prior to this Scots was as a language a mere offshoot of Northumbrian English. Rather the Scots literary tradition, Pinkerton insisted in his 'Essay on the origin of Scotish [sic] poetry', had deep indigenous roots, as far back as the Picts, who themselves had been of Scandinavian origin. Actually, Pinkerton argued, English too was of Scandinavian origin; but the Picts descended, or so he claimed, from northern Scandinavia, the ancestors of the English from southern Scandinavia. Moreover, the Picts, Pinkerton claimed, had migrated to Britain more than four or five centuries before the Saxons. Nevertheless, even Pinkerton recognised that while Scots was not, as commonly 'reputed' a mere 'dialect' of English, nevertheless he conceded that Pictish-Scots was in some measure a 'sister language' of Saxon-English.[26]

The vexed question of Scottish ethnogenesis stirred passions in the scholarly world. While it might seem obvious to us now that Scots was a Germanic cognate of English which came to Britain – including Scotland eventually – with the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century antiquaries, while recognising the Gothic origins of Scots, traced its ultimate provenance to various different sources, not only to Germany and the Low countries, but also to Scandinavia. Moreover, they also differed about when Scots or proto-Scots had arrived in Scotland. Whereas Pinkerton claimed that the supposed aboriginal inhabitants the Picts – or as he called them 'the Piks' – were a Gothic people from Scandinavia, who had brought with them to Scotland in ancient times the lineaments of what became Scots, the Galloway-born philologist Alexander Murray (1775–1813) could find little evidence of a Scandinavian impress on Scots – not even on the Buchan dialect. Medieval Scottish literature was British rather than Scoto-Scandinavian: 'Any unprejudiced person, who is acquainted with the Scandinavian dialects, with the Anglo-Saxon, and the writings of Barbour, Harry the Minstrel, James I, Gavin Douglas, etc, and above all, has attended to the English of those ages' would not perceive a Danish or Icelandic provenance for middle Scots.[27] Today scholars now recognise that Pinkerton was utterly wrong, and that Pictish was a p-Celtic

tongue like Welsh. In his own day there were several scholars – like Murray, George Chalmers (1742–1825) and the Northumbrian Joseph Ritson (1752–1803) – who disagreed with Pinkerton;[28] nevertheless there were others – some major philologists in their own right, such as John Jamieson (1759–1838), the compiler of the *Etymological Dictionary of the Scots Tongue* (1808) – who held a version of Pinkerton's thesis.[29] It is this debate on the ethnic origins of Scotland and its languages which provides much of the scholarly humour in Scott's novel *The Antiquary* (1816), where the central character, Jonathan Oldbuck, is a kind of Pinkertonian.[30]

Notwithstanding the divisions between Pinkertonians and their opponents on the Pictish question, Gothicism of the sort championed by both schools remained the standard interpretation of Anglo-Scottish history, ethnology, philology and literature throughout the nineteenth century.[31] The leading nineteenth-century historian of Scotland, John Hill Burton (1809–81), contended that 'the real history of the Scottish lowlands. . .was that of a people enjoying, at an early period, the same language and institutions as the Saxon inhabitants of England'. There had been 'no more alienation between the Scot and his Northumbrian neighbour,' Hill Burton claimed, 'than there had been between the Northumbrian and his neighbour of Mercia'. Indeed, 'there might have been nothing revolting to national feeling or independent pride, had Scotland been absorbed in the united Saxon kingdom.' The sense of a common Britishness derived from race, laws and institutions, but also from a common linguistic inheritance. The auld Scots language, in other words, was not so much a symbol of difference, as a sign – at least to nineteenth-century eyes – of a common Saxon inheritance across the lowlands of medieval Britain.[32]

The prominent literary critic David Masson (1822–1907) was heir to this strain of Gothicism. He believed it underpinned the Union. Indeed, for Masson the Union of Scotland and England, while it had finally taken place only in 1707, had been a great potentiality of medieval British history. From the Saxon era at least, reckoned Masson, Britain was destined 'to be sooner or later the seat of but one national polity and government'. The primary reasons were cultural-cum-ethnological; for the peoples of Scotland and England were remarkably similar: the populations being 'with all allowance for the Gaels in the one, and the Welsh in the other. . .essentially combinable, scions of the same stock; and speaking the same language, with only differences of dialect.' Indeed, by Masson's lights, southern Scots and

northern English shared more with one another than with their compatriots: 'the southern Scots were more akin to the northern English, than these to the southern English; the southern Scots and northern English being Angles and Danes, with a Norman infusion, while the southern English were Saxons with a Norman infusion.' The two kingdoms would eventually become one. This, so Masson reasoned, was the meaning of British history: 'The only question was as to the time, and the mode of the consolidation.' The attempt of Edward I resisted by Wallace and the Bruce dynasty was not a matter of patriotic outrage for the North British Masson; rather the 'meaning' of the Scottish War of Independence was that 'the purposes of history' would 'be better answered by postponing the union of the kingdoms until such time as it could be accomplished with something like the voluntary consent of both.'[33]

Masson's unionism extended to his literary criticism. His career as a man of letters was British in the fullest sense. Masson contributed to a range of Victorian periodicals, metropolitan and provincial, including the *British Quarterly Review*, *Macmillan's Magazine* (of which he was editor), the *Westminster Review*, the *Athenaeum*, *Fraser's Magazine*, the *North British Review*, *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* and the *Dublin University Magazine*. Moreover, he achieved academic distinction in the emerging subject of English literature in both capitals. Masson held the chair of English language and literature at University College London from 1852, until moving to Edinburgh in 1865 as Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature. Indeed, Masson – unself-consciously it seems – referred to our shared literature with England as 'British literature', and described what we now call 'Scottish literature' both as 'North British literature' and as 'Scottish literature'.[34] Masson's output as a scholar and critic was eclectically Anglo-Scottish, drawing on matter from both sides of the border. Masson's enduring renown in the field of literary scholarship stems from his work on Milton, not least his multi-volume *Life of John Milton* (1859–94). However, Masson also published works on *Drummond of Hawthornden* (1873), *Chatterton* (1874), Shakespeare, Carlyle and De Quincey; and in 1896 he was President of the Edinburgh Sir Walter Scott Club.

In his book *British Novelists and their Styles* (1859) Masson discussed the emergence during the eighteenth century of 'a North British literature' which was 'distinct from the general British literature which had London for its centre'. Burns was, of course, an important part of the story, but its

keystone was Scott. North British literature had taken its rise during the reign of George III. However, before Scott, 'literary Scotchmen' had 'exhibited their Scotticism openly, ostentatiously, and with almost plaguy loudness'. Scott produced something more modulated, or at least less obviously peripheral, a 'more metropolitan kind of Scotticism', less rural, or localised, more Edinburgh-focussed. Scott had indeed gone much further and had 'Scotticised European literature', interesting the world in this 'little land'.[35]

What did Masson mean by the term 'Scotticism'? It certainly was not limited to the definition once current in the mid-eighteenth century, and still remembered in scholarly circles, namely a formulation in Scots-English which sounds uncouth to dominant English sensibilities.[36] Rather Masson was attempting by way of the term 'Scotticism' to take the measure of Scottish Literature as a whole; its principal characteristics, its form and matter, its tone and register. Scottish identity was negative and defensive, because of Scotland's long struggle to maintain its autonomy from England and indeed because of Scotland's smallness. Despite post-1707 Scotland's 'having been so long merged in the higher unity of Great Britain', there was still a greater consciousness of nationality north of the border. This in turn had literary repercussions. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, a significant element in 'Scotticism' was a habit of emphasis. Scottish writers were more emphatic than their southern counterparts, a phenomenon which religious dissent tended to reinforce.[37]

Masson anticipated the future development of post-Scottian North British literature in an English direction. Why? Because, according to Masson, the matter of England – its culture and institutions – was richer and denser than Scotland's: 'at the time when Scotland was united to her great neighbour, she was made partaker of an intellectual accumulation and an inheritance of institutions, far richer, measured by the mode of extension, than she had to offer to that neighbour in return'. In the longer run, then, Masson surmised, Scottish writers would apply their distinctive Scottish literary inheritance to wider subjects, including those that might be said to English: 'so for the future, it may be the internal Scotticism, working on British or on still more general objects, and not the Scotticism that works only on Scottish objects of thought, that may be in demand in literature'.[38]

A similar pan-British compass was the norm for other Victorian critics, such as the prominent Dundee-based Seceding cleric, man of letters and

poet George Gilfillan (1813–78). Gilfillan did not discriminate between the English and Scottish literary traditions. He lectured on 'Modern British Literature' to the Edinburgh Philosophical Association and Watt Institution, provided enthusiastic introductions to the *Library Edition of the British Poets*, published in Edinburgh between 1853 and 1860 in forty-eight volumes by James Nichol, and participated both in the Burns Centenary Festival of 1859 and the Shakespeare Tercentenary at Dundee in 1864. Indeed, Gilfillan was not unusual in this. The Burns centenary in 1859 was celebrated across Britain as a whole, with a major event at the Crystal Palace in London; and Victorian Scots thought nothing unpatriotic in honouring Shakespeare. In nineteenth-century Scotland there was nothing unnatural, awkward or contrived about the idea of 'British Literature'.[39]

An unselfconscious appreciation of 'British Literature' seems to have survived into the twentieth century. As late as 1896 – at the centenary of Burns's death – the prominent Scottish politician and man of letters Lord Rosebery (1847–1929) invoked the memories of both Burns and Shakespeare as the 'two great natural forces in British literature' Indeed, Rosebery very deliberately deployed what he termed 'the safe adjective of British', because 'hardly any' of Burns's poetry was 'strictly English'; and he appeared to endorse the 'protest' against 'the use of the word English as including Scottish'.[40] The practice of a 'British' literary criticism which straddled both traditions continued in the work of Sir Herbert Grierson (1866–1960), who held Masson's Edinburgh chair of rhetoric and English literature. Grierson wrote primarily about John Donne and the metaphysical poets, but also made a massive contribution to Scott scholarship.[41] Things seem to have changed in the inter-War era, with the Scots Renaissance, with MacDiarmid's polemical anglophobia and, less obtrusively perhaps in the academic sphere, with the new critical insights of G. Gregory Smith (1865–1932) in his *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919). There followed a growing – though far from complete – bifurcation between English Literature and Scottish Literature which became a distinctive field of study in its own right. At the very least, however, the idea of 'British Literature' fell into abeyance for much of the twentieth century, and still has the sound of a faintly risible anachronism.

In recent decades, however, British literature has been reborn as critical practice, though only rarely named as such. It has re-emerged as a revisionist turn in what is still called 'English Literature'. Robert Crawford

has engaged in *Devolving English Literature*, and John Kerrigan has introduced readers to the *Archipelagic English* of the century between the Union of the Crowns and the Union of the Parliaments. However, the message implicit in both Crawford and Kerrigan was pluralistic: English literature was not confined to England, and was indeed British – or British and Irish, or British and imperial and, subsequently, post-colonial. The American scholar Howard Weinbrot was more unusual in reviving the term British Literature in *Britannia's Issue: the Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (1993). Weinbrot's context was not only the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707, but also the 'concordia discors' of British cultural heterogeneity between the Restoration and the early years of George III's reign: the Anglo-Saxon heritage, most obviously, and a neo-classical indebtedness to the literary models of Greco-Roman antiquity, but also Celtic influences, from Scotland, Wales and England's ancient British past, and the neglected impact of Hebraic exemplars on poetry and criticism, from Christopher Smart to Robert Lowth. Englishness, Weinbrot reminded us after the manner of Daniel Defoe's *True-born Englishman* (1701), was the mongrel culture of a land that had seen waves of immigration, Romans, Saxons and Normans in the more distant past, and then more recent arrivals, Huguenot artisans, a Dutch king and a line of Hanoverian monarchs. Weinbrot was alert to the limits – and ambiguities indeed – of English Gothicism, as well as the surprisingly subtle reconfigurations which enabled Anglo-Saxonism to segue into Celtomania and Hebraism.[42]

By contrast with Weinbrot, Crawford and Kerrigan were more precisely attuned to political developments within the UK. With the arrival of devolution – whether as vision or fact – the anglocentricity of English literature seemed problematic, if not obtuse and ill-mannered. In the case of Crawford the title of his manifesto paid homage to the campaign for Scottish devolution, which, notwithstanding the efforts of the Thatcher-Major administration to discourage this unwelcome growth, was then approaching ripeness. Crawford then followed *Devolving English Literature* with a collection which established that English Literature as a discipline had a North British provenance in the Scottish Enlightenment as rhetoric and belles-lettres.[43] Kerrigan too champions a 'devolved, interconnected' history of literature in these islands, and acknowledges that the 'current devolutionary process' has called into question the 'received picture of seventeenth-century literature'. Moreover, Kerrigan – like Crawford – acknowledges the existence

of a less anglocentric heritage of criticism. He points to the broad tastes and interests of the Oxford antiquary Thomas Warton, who edited an anthology of English and Scottish poets entitled *The Union* (1753), on the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Union of the Crowns, and whose *History of English Poetry* (1774–81) incorporated Welsh and Scottish matter; to Macaulay's invocation of the 'Literature of Great Britain' at the launch of the Edinburgh Philosophical Institution in 1846; and to the work of Masson, who gave the seventeenth century 'a Scottish accent'. While Kerrigan's primary aim was to destabilise what he calls 'Anglo-English', to open up 'an Anglo-restricted version of Eng. Lit.' and its canon, he is nevertheless keenly aware that sometimes Anglocentricity is inevitable, that sometimes the past was as anglocentric as the present, and that this fact has itself to be factored into the history of Anglophone literature in these islands. Indeed, Kerrigan argues, it would be a gross mistake to overdetermine the ethnic and nationalist pluralism of the British and Irish pasts, to import twentieth and twenty-first obsessions with devolution and autonomy, ethnicity and nationhood, back into the hierarchical and unsecularised milieu of the seventeenth century.[44]

Certainly, British literature as an idea in literary criticism is now much more selfconscious than it was in the era of Masson. It is now inextricably identified with the notion that the United Kingdom is a multi-national state that either requires either devolved governments, some kind of recasting as a quasi-federation or the break-up of its constituent nations into independent units. However, there may be other forms of British literature which escape the critics' net; forms that are perhaps less likely to escape the attention of historians.

Ultimately, of course, literature and history as disciplines seek answers to rather different kinds of question. The historian tries to recapture what was representative or influential, whereas the literary critic quests after a different kind of significance, one related – directly or indirectly – to some criterion of literary quality. Popular genre literature by Scots, from A. J. Cronin (1896–1981) via Josephine Tey (1896–1952) to Alistair MacLean (1922–87), was decidedly British in its orientation and subject matter, and drew a greater readership than the modernistic Scots language experiments of MacDiarmid and the school of Synthetic Scots makars. For a literary critic quality necessarily trumps mass readership, but the historian is not so sure how to calibrate quality in relationship to readership, dissemination and

other – less tangible – forms of cultural influence. This is not to say that one approach is better than other, but simply to raise the question that in the field of modern literary history a body of British literature might lurk in the interstices between disciplines, a kind of no-man's-land that lies between the high literary matter which interests literary scholars and the broader political and social themes which attract historians.

Notes

1 See e.g. Frank Ferguson and Andrew Holmes (eds), *Revising Robert Burns and Ulster: literature, religion and politics c. 1770–1920* (Dublin, 2009).
2 J. G. A. Pocock, 'British history: a plea for a new subject', *Journal of Modern History* 47 (1975), pp. 601–21; Pocock, 'The limits and divisions of British history: in search of the unknown subject', *American Historical Review* 87 (1982), pp. 311–36; Pocock, *The Discovery of Islands* (Cambridge, 2005).
3 Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation 1707–1837* (New Haven and London, 1992).
4 Hugh Kearney, *The British Isles: a history of four nations* (Cambridge, 1989); Keith Robbins, *Nineteenth-century Britain: Integration and Diversity* (Oxford, 1988).
5 John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics, 1603–1707* (Oxford, 2008).
6 See e.g. Glenn Burgess (ed.), *The new British history: founding a modern state 1603–1715* (London, 1999).
7 Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford, 1992).
8 Nevertheless the expression was sometimes used in the eighteenth century, e.g. James Beattie, *Scoticisms, arranged in alphabetical order, designed to correct improprieties of speech and writing* (Edinburgh and London, 1787), p. 4. I should like to thank Sean Murphy for drawing my attention to this usage.
9 John Arbuthnot, *The history of John Bull* (ed. A. W. Bower and R. A. Erickson, Oxford, 1976).
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