

ENG9SL Scottish Literature

Convenors: Dr Suzanne Gilbert and Dr Scott Hames
(Autumn 2011)

It is another country. The air is sharper. ... Culture, during a time of political impotence, can become kitsch, but it can also function as continual declaration and resistance.

Ben Okri, the Nigerian Booker-prize winner, on Scotland

Scottish Literature has been described as ‘perhaps the single most under-researched area in all literary studies’. This module explores some of its main landmarks and lesser-known terrain, ranging from medieval dream poetry to the MTV aesthetic of *Trainspotting*.

We approach Scottish literature in relation to five themes, continually weighing literary and cultural pressures against one another. How ‘Scottish’ is Scottish literature? How ‘literary’ in origin are our received notions about Scottishness?

Beginning with ‘Tradition’, we trace a distinctive Scottish literature joining medieval texts to the ballads and poetry of Robert Burns and beyond, a cultural mainstay through periods of political discontinuity. George Mackay Brown’s *Beside the Ocean of Time* denies ‘history’ by dancing freely through time, envisioning the cultural past as never simply over, constantly renewed and re-animated in the present.

Our second, contrasting theme, ‘The Historical Novel’, brings us into view of the monumental Walter Scott, and a genre he invented. *The Heart of Midlothian* makes vivid drama out of a set of cultural problems and archetypes which have defined Scottish – and British – identity.

‘Linguistic difference’ shifts our attention to the medium of literature, and the vitality of markedly Scottish language in a range of poetic forms. In fiction, the language of narration and presentation of inner life emerges as a highly charged sphere of ‘textual politics’ in the influential work of James Kelman.

With ‘The Supernatural’ we turn to novels of the inexplicable, viewed in the context of a national tradition frequently haunted by folk memory, suppressed violence, and religious mania. Drawing unmistakably on Hogg’s classic *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Robertson’s *The Testament of Gideon Mack* plants its beguiling strangeness – the Devil in trainers – amid the prosaic and everyday.

Finally, ‘Realism’ allows us to contrast male and female, big-city and small-town visions of poverty and escape. Irvine Welsh and Jessie Kesson treat sordid human realities in very different ways, provoking a series of questions about the role of fantasy and exoticism in ‘unflinching’ realism, and its resonance with the austere moral vision of Calvinism.

Set Texts:

George Mackay Brown, *Beside the Ocean of Time* (Polygon/Birlinn, 2005 [1994]) ISBN 978-1904598299

James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. Peter Garside (Edinburgh University Press, 2002 [1824]) ISBN 978-0748663156

James Kelman, *The Busconductor Hines* (Polygon/Birlinn, 2007 [1984]) ISBN 978-1846970399

Jessie Kesson, *The White Bird Passes* (Black & White, 2003 [1958]) ISBN 978-1873631690

James Robertson, *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (Penguin, 2007 [2006]) ISBN 978-0141023359

Walter Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian*, ed. Claire Lamont (Oxford World's Classics, 1999 [1818]) ISBN 978-0192835673

Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (Vintage, 1994 [1993]) ISBN 978-0099465898

Module Reader – including poetry, stories, essays and select secondary reading.