

## **A SCOTTISH NATIONAL CANON? PROCESS OF LITERARY CANON FORMATION IN SCOTLAND**

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*A Scottish National Canon? Processes of Literary Canon Formation in Scotland*, by Stefanie Preuss, has just been published when the debate on the Scottish canon is gaining new strength. The latest newsletter of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies started with an article by Alan Riach on the terrain of life: “the arts are maps” that both represent and interpret the world (2011: 1). In his article, titled “Why Study Scottish Literature?”, Riach asks: “What are the important things about Scottish literature you have to know about, to get a sense of the shape of the terrain, the character of the country, its national history, its music, languages, the major writers?” (2011: 3). It must be noted here that Riach’s rhetorical questions follow a long tradition of questioning titles in the field of Scottish studies. As Preuss herself contends, this abundant questioning sometimes expresses “an awareness of the difficulties of defining the subject” (2012: 235). It is true that it is a question that should be raised, especially in the case of Scotland, as the recent attempts at canonization of what has been defined as a “stateless nation” show divergent opinions; but what the exact question to be posed is and how to frame it might be a difficult and debatable issue itself.

The second article in the 2011 ASLS newsletter, “A Curriculum for Scotland” by William Hershaw, comments on the debate that the Curriculum for Excellence<sup>1</sup> has given rise to in Scotland (2011: 6-7), and illustrates that the issue of canonicity is still a very controversial one in twenty-first century Scotland, especially in view

of the fact that there is no national curriculum in Scottish schools, and that it is left to the individual teacher to choose the texts that will be studied in English classes (Preuss 2012: 80-85). In both articles mentioned, the tensions regarding Scottish culture are made evident: national identity and the literary canon are being reformulated. The main question to be answered is: how are they being reformulated?

Several international conferences, such as ESSE 2012, have devoted seminars and papers to the issue of literary canon(s) in the last few years. For example, the seminar convened by Carla Sassi and Bashabi Frazer, titled “Literary canon(s) for the Atlantic Archipelago: towards a de-centring of English Studies”, proposed a revision of the paradigm for the study of “English literature” as a constellation of social, political and cultural structures, globally connected and yet truly autonomous and authentically local. In this seminar, different positions were held, from nationalistic approaches to more internationalistic ones, showing the academia’s diversity of insights on the topic of canonicity. As we shall see, Preuss’s study provides “wide-ranging insights into the canonisation of an emergent [Scottish] literature” and explores how the different literary institutions in Scotland attempt “to construct a Scottish national canon in order to promote Scottish national identity” (2012: 384).

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However, by using the rhetorical question —“Why Study Scottish Literature?”—, Riach, like Preuss,<sup>2</sup> not only shows an awareness of the difficulty of tackling the Scottish literary canon, but also enters an intertextual relationship with other articles and books that have dealt with the Scottish canon, such as William MacNeile Dixon’s “What is Scottish Poetry?” (1910); T.S. Eliot’s “Was there a Scottish Literature?” (1919);<sup>3</sup> or more recent ones, such as Cameron Harris’s article “How Scottish Is the Scottish Curriculum? And Does It Matter?” (1997); Eleanor Bell’s *Questioning Scotland: Literature, Nationalism, Postmodernism* (2004); Carla Sassi’s *Why Scottish Literature Matters?* (2005); Allan Riach’s “What is Scottish Literature?” (2008) and “Why Study Scottish Literature?” (2011); Gordon Millar’s “Do *The Member* and *Miss Marjoribanks* Have a Place in a Canon of Scottish Literature?” (2008), etc. The number of titles in form of rhetorical questions in Scottish studies is astonishing. So, by establishing this intertextual bond, all these texts actively contribute to a certain canon formation, since, as Preuss explains in her subchapter 8.2 “Strategies of Authorial and Textual Canon Formation in Scotland”, some authors “use intertextual references to exert influence on canon politics” (2012: 300-301). Moreover, by using these (auto)referential strategies, these authors also contribute to inscribing themselves into the (academic) canon formed by previous works of the same type. Therefore, it could be argued that the question mark in those titles invites an affirmative reply,

rather than really questioning those topics. However, the relationship between all these above-mentioned titles, even if they form some sort of academic canon, is not without its problems.

Preuss's deep critical awareness of the different strategies of canon formation—described by Pierre Bourdieu as “a competition for consecration waged in an intellectual world dominated by the competition between the authorities which claim the monopoly of cultural legitimacy” (in Preuss 2012: 25)—, which include the institutional basis for evaluations of the literary canon, makes it almost impossible for me to try to write an innocent review on this book. Because, as she contends, using John Guillory's words, any judgement that a work is great “does nothing in itself to preserve that work, unless that judgement is made in certain institutional context, a setting in which it is possible to insure the reproduction of the work, its continual reintroduction to generations of readers” (Preuss 2012: 25). Therefore, my awareness of my own active role (being a non-Scottish academic working on Scottish literature and now writing a review on canon formation for an academic journal) in the (academic and non-academic) canon-formation process has been sharpened, so I cannot fall into the trap of praising this work—which is great—, but must rather focus on how it contributes, by means of the analysis of the complex and interrelated processes of canon formation, to the contemporary debate on the importance of the establishment of a Scottish canon.

The present study is well documented—more than thirty pages of extensive bibliography are included (pp. 349-381)—and combines the specific information about the Scottish context, both of historic events and of present-day political and institutional policies, as well as of the international or transnational context that influences canon formation. The analysis is clearly organised: a necessary introduction for the non-Scottish reader, followed by some theoretical pre-considerations on the canon formation of a stateless nation, leads the reader to a well-structured and exhaustive analysis of the different elements and strategies at work in canon formation: secondary education (chapter 3); higher education and academia (chapter 4); literary histories (chapter 5); literary anthologies (chapter 6); publishing industry (chapter 7) and, finally, Scottish authors and their texts (chapter 8). Furthermore, many and varied examples are used to support her thesis. There is also an exhaustive description of the different state of affairs in Scotland after the Union, and criticism of certain previous studies for lack of thoroughness or a misleading approach or a mistaken point of departure. Preuss is especially critical of those studies that ignore Scottish historical and political specificities and/or that make use of some watered-down postcolonial criticism, such as Marilyn Reizbaum's “Canonical Double Cross: Scottish and Irish Women's Writing” (1992) (Preuss 2012: 17). She likewise criticises the collections of articles

that use the term *canon* “to point out the relevance of their contents [...] without discussing the composition of the canon or canon conceptions”, such as the collection *Re-Visioning Scotland: New Readings of the Cultural Canon* (2008), edited by Lyndsay Lunan, Kirsty A. Macdonald and Carla Sassi (Preuss 2012: 18); as well as those essays with “an uncritical and unreflective normative description of canons”, such as Robert Crawford’s “Bakhtin and Scotlands” (1994) (Preuss 2012: 19). Without discrediting the above-mentioned studies—which I personally consider illuminating—it is true that the article by Preuss under consideration is unique in its aim and approach.

Besides having given me a renewed critical awareness as a non-Scottish academic studying contemporary Scottish literature (228), this book has also provided me with some insights into my role as founder of a small independent publishing house in Spain, which has published some Scottish works, with a small subsidy from Creative Scotland—the former Scottish Arts Council—<sup>4</sup> just as Alasdair Gray received a subsidy for *Lanark* as is stated in one of the many footnotes in Gray’s novel and explained by Preuss (2012: 319). Of great interest, too, is her explanation of the various formal and textual factors in the relation between the publishing industry and canon formation (in chapter 6); the political and economic factors that influence the publishing industry are analysed as well. It could be argued that Preuss’s analysis ignores the workings of the smaller publishing houses that are flourishing in Scotland nowadays—Acair, Black and White, Crooked Cat, Dionysia, Dudu Nsombra, Luath, Olida, Pilrig, Ringwood, Two Ravens, etc.—, but it is also true that their impact on the Scottish canon might be too small to be taken into consideration in her analysis, with its space and time limitations. These same limitations might also explain the absence of an important element: the aesthetic dimension of canon formation. As Preuss herself states, this might be an interesting field for future studies that could “analyse the ways in which the texts of the Scottish core canon contributed to their own canonisation” (Preuss 2012: 341).

*A Scottish National Canon?*, carefully edited and printed by Winter, fulfils its aim of critically examining the different literary institutions in Scotland, the processes of canon formation, and of explaining how these are related to national identity formation. Besides, Preuss also provides wide-ranging insights into the canonisation of contemporary works in Scotland and might open up further debates on canon formation in other countries.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>. The national curriculum for Scottish schools. See more at: <<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/index.asp>> (Anon.2012)

<sup>2</sup>. It is interesting to see that Preuss abandoned the question mark for the exclamation mark in her essay "Now That's What I Call a Scottish Canon!" (2011), perhaps falling into the same trap that she has met in others' studies: "the term canon is often used in studies on Scottish writing in order to legitimize the object of study" (Preuss 2012: 17).

<sup>3</sup>. Alan Riach was hairsplitting when he wrote an article entitled "Was there ever a British Literature?", published by the Association for Scottish Literary Studies in 2007, where he turned Eliot's question on its head to explore issues of origins and identity, language and culture, national and political allegiances.

<sup>4</sup>. Brian McCabe's *The other McCoy* was published in Spain as *El otro McCoy* in 2012.

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