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# The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Collector of Scottish Books

Ryan Shirey

*Washington University in St Louis*

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Ryan D. Shirey  
 Neureuther Book Collection Competition  
 Graduate Category

The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Collector of Scottish Books\*  
 \*with apologies to James Hogg

“What a life mine has been. Half-educated [. . .] stuffing my head with most nonsensical trash.”

—Sir Walter Scott, *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*.

“Some countries are tidy with their past [. . .] But there are also countries which have left the past in its original condition: a huge, reeking tip of unsorted rubbish across which scavengers wander, pulling up interesting fragments which might fetch a price or come in handy. Scotland has been one of these. This is nothing to be ashamed of.”

—Neal Ascherson, *Stone Voices*.

When Sir Walter Scott, in his dejection over his economic misfortunes, wrote in 1825 of “stuffing [his] head with most nonsensical trash,” he was not referring to dirty jokes, doggerel rhymes, or gothic novels; he was referring to the history and legends of his native Scotland. He was, to put it another way, referring in essence to the vast library and collection of antiquarian curiosities that filled his “castle” of Abbotsford. The quotation above from Neal Ascherson’s 2002 journalistic travelogue/memoir echoes Scott’s description of Scotland’s past as consisting of trash or rubbish, but he adds the all-important qualification that the condition of the national story “is nothing to be ashamed of.” If there is something to this trope of Scotland’s stories as garbage, then I must be, like Scott, a garbage collector. I must also be, as Ascherson suggests, one of those scavengers picking his way through the landfill of a history that does not even belong to me. But this is not something to be ashamed of—as Liz Lochhead reminds us in her play *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, the “corbie” (the carrion crow) has long been and remains a symbol of a certain kind of Scottish historiography.

On the other hand, I could appeal to Hugh MacDiarmid, perhaps the greatest figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century Scottish literary history, and suggest some kind of proleptic coherence to this rubbish heap. As he wrote in the 1934 poem “On a Raised Beach”: “This is no heap of broken images. / Let men find the faith that builds mountains / Before they seek the faith that moves them.” (166-

68). Scotland, for MacDiarmid, would not be consigned to Eliot's "Waste Land" vision of the modern world. He was tireless in his commitment to articulating a national literary culture that was self-conscious, both innovative *and* traditional, and sustainable. We celebrate the "garbage collection" not because it will be consigned, as Trotsky might have said, to the dustbin of history, but because it holds within its fragments the possibility of a greater unity. This is the kind of coherence that I desire my book collection to have.

As an undergraduate nearly ten years ago, I studied as an exchange student in perhaps one of the bleakest of all possible English-speaking exchange locations: Aberdeen, Scotland. I am not of Scottish descent, at least to my knowledge. I did not go to Aberdeen to "find my roots." To be honest, I don't entirely remember how I chose where to study abroad. What I did find there, however, was a story—or many stories—that I had never heard before. I encountered for the first time the songs and poems of Robert Burns (unless you count "Auld Lang Syne") while studying with a young scholar named Liam McIlvanney. Liam's Kilmarnock accent brought Burns to life for me even though the language of the poems was difficult and alien. It so happens that Liam's father was the noted Scottish novelist William McIlvanney, and upon hearing this information from a fellow student, I decided to venture downtown to a proper, non-university bookstore to learn more. William McIlvanney's *The Big Man* was the first contemporary Scottish novel that I read and it remains a favorite to this day. The bare-knuckle boxer Dan Scoular, in my mind, could have taken Irvine Welsh's Begbie in a pub brawl any day.

Even as my interest in Burns led me to explore the works of Sir Walter Scott, James Hogg, and John Galt, I found that I was spending more of my pleasure-reading time with the works of Alasdair Gray, Edwin Morgan, Irvine Welsh, and Alan Warner. Where the former path led me to pursue Romanticism and Scottish literature as the major interests in my academic career, the latter led me to explore a wider range of popular Scottish writing, from the 1920s abstracted science fiction of David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* to the sophisticated postmodern (sometimes science) fiction of Iain (M.) Banks; from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's

Sherlock Holmes mysteries to the grimly realist detective fiction of Ian Rankin and Louise Welsh.

When I returned from Aberdeen, I took the first tentative steps towards a commitment to the study of literature by writing my departmental honors thesis on David Hume and James Hogg. By the time I entered graduate school I was fairly confident that whatever period I might end up in, my burgeoning passion for Scottish literature would play a large role. It has been over the past seven years that my collection has grown from the handful of books that I managed to fit in my luggage on my return flight to nearly two hundred books by Scottish writers, on Scottish literature, and on Scottish history. For example, as a Romanticist, I've been working for the last three years on trying to complete my set of Sir Walter Scott's "Waverley Novels" in the 1893 Macmillan/Black illustrated edition. I've spent a lot of time perusing used book stores and even more time searching "Ebay" just to acquire fifteen of the twenty-five volumes, but I look forward to having the whole set someday. As I near the end of my graduate career, my choice of dissertation topic—an examination of the influence of English Romanticism on the writers of the "Scottish Renaissance" of the 1920s-40s—has meant that I have dedicated a large part of my collecting effort towards the writers that I am currently studying: the poet/critic Edwin Muir and the novelists Neil M. Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon.

To have arrived at the Scottish Renaissance at this point in my career and in my collection is particularly appropriate with regard to the idea of what a collection is or might be. Writers such as Muir, Gunn, and Gibbon, like their contemporary MacDiarmid, believed in the unity that undergirded the fragmented rubbish pile of their national history and literary tradition. In their work as writers of new literature and as readers of the diverse range of Scottish literary history, they sought a suturing or at least a reconciliation of what Gregory Smith termed the "Caledonian antisyzygy" and what Ascherson calls the "St. Andrew's Fault"—the fundamental fracture at the root of Scottishness that, contra William Blake, allows contraries to coexist without progress. In so doing, they suggested that the establishment and perpetuation of a literary

tradition, like the establishment of a book collection, is an act of faith and energy, not an empirical cataloging of the past. To put it another way, the coherence of the tradition or the collection is within the reader him or herself.

Ultimately my own collection, driven both by a professional, pragmatic impulse and a deeply personal impulse as well, describes that situation for me perfectly. While the scholarship of Robert Crawford and Tom Devine are important to my scholarly work, the 1880s editions of Scott and Burns given to me by my wife as a wedding day gift are among my most cherished possessions. My notes in Gunn's *The Silver Darlings* tell me about my life as it relates to who I am as a scholar; the note in my wife's hand on the flyleaf of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Burns edition, the note that promises in Burns's own words that she will love me "Till a' the seas gang dry," tells me something much more important. What connects all these books is not just a common origin in a small country less than half the size of Missouri, it is their connection to my own story.

Having started with the idea, so pervasive in its literature and scholarship, that there is something easily figured as broken or expendable about Scottish history and culture, I want to end by suggesting that the search for meaning that this trope can suggest—the plucking of truth from the fragments of the past—is at the heart of reading and collecting itself. Scott saw his own collection and his own esoteric knowledge of Scotland's stories as valueless only when he was confronted with the real possibility that the order he had created from these materials would be lost with the foreclosure of his home. It was the thought that he might lose his collection, might lose a part of the very story of his life that caused him in his dejection to see it as the trash it could become on the auction block or estate sale. From the first time I read that journal entry, I have felt this passage to be one of the most affecting Scott ever wrote in any genre. I collect Scottish books as I like to imagine Scott did—not for mastery of someone else's story, but for the creation of my own.

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