ISSN 1754-1514

The Bottle Imp

Issue 1, May 2007

Scotland and America

In 1781 John Witherspoon coined the word 'Americanism,' which he declared to be 'exactly similar in its formation and signification to the word Scotticism.' What could he have meant? Since Witherspoon wrote these words – when 'America' did not yet exist as a recognised separate nation – there has been no shortage of commentators to demonstrate connections between the two countries. Many have relied on a talismanic litany of names, illustrious individuals self-evidently demonstrating significance. Under the headline 'Scottish Americans. Early Emigrants' Deeds. Fame Across the Atlantic,' Scotland's daily newspaper *The Scotsman* for Friday 11 February 1927 reported a talk given to the Edinburgh Rotary Club by Mr Wilbert L. Bonney, then American Consul in Edinburgh. Mr Bonney 'gave a long and interesting list of Scots, or descendants of Scots, who have achieved fame and distinction in America.' The roll call began with eminent military men, and even-handedly enlisted colonists, Loyalists and Revolutionary patriots; 'Thus the Scot was not satisfied to fight for a cause—he wanted to fight on both sides of it.' The *Scotsman* reporter, somewhat of a literalist, parenthetically recorded '(Laughter).'

A less than serious example, perhaps; but Mr Bonney's address offers a representative view of how the relationship between Scotland and America – and more particularly, Scotland's impact on America – has until recently been construed. Perhaps 'computed' would be a more appropriate term, where impact is equated with individuals, the more familiar the name in the American pantheon of Greats, the better: Mr Bonney's list included Alexander Hamilton and John Paul Jones, John Witherspoon and John Wilson (Signers of the Declaration of Independence); Flora Macdonald; Alexander Graham Bell and James Gordon Bennett; Andrew Carnegie; and nine out of 30 US Presidents of Scots or Scots-Irish extraction (the tally would be higher now). Oh, and Washington Irving's grandfather came from Orkney. One woman, and an awful lot of men. 'A proud record, and only a catalogue of facts was necessary,' the reporter recorded, 'nothing needed to be added by way of eulogy or interpretation.'

Perhaps not. The first comprehensive collection of illustrious transatlantic Scotsmen (it included no women), George Fraser Black's *Scotland's Mark on America* of 1921, was probably Mr Bonney's source, as it has been the basis of many accounts since, in which 'evidence' substitutes for argument or analysis, continuing down to Michael Fry's confident *'Bold, Independent, Unconquer'd and Free': How the Scots Made America Safe for Liberty, Democracy and Capitalism* (2003): identify the Scottish birth or ancestry of as many famous Americans as possible, and Q.E.D: the importance of Scotland for America! The historian George Shepperson's warning in 1954 against the 'chauvinistic enthusiasm' of much of what passes for argument remains in force. More reputable kinds of Scottish-American scholarship of course exist: since Ian Graham's 1956 analysis of the impact of Scottish immigration on pre-Revolutionary North America, emigration studies have documented a complex and continuing flow of Scots to locations across America. Almost all conclude that Scots have never been a numerically large group amongst American immigrants; most have them euphemistically 'punching above their weight' to compensate.

But presence doesn't of itself demonstrate impact, or take us closer to Witherspoon's association of Americanisms with Scotticisms. Since the 1970s intellectual and cultural historians have offered different kinds of evidence of Scotland's importance for the early American Republic. Terence Martin's *The Instructed Vision: Scottish Common Sense Philosophy and the Origins of American Fiction* (1961), the first major study to put Scottish Enlightenment thought at the centre of its analysis, was followed by Douglas Sloan's influential *The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal* (1971), Andrew Hook's *Scotland and America: A Study in Cultural Relations, 1750 – 1835* (1975), and Garry Wills's flawed but important case for direct political impact, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (1978). As a student at William and Mary College in Virginia, Thomas Jefferson learned Ethics, Rhetoric and Belles Lettres from the Aberdonian William Small, who introduced him to advanced Scottish thought; Jefferson's library later contained works by Thomas Reid, Henry Home, Lord Kames and Hugh Blair, as well as the Histories of David Hume. But even library purchases, useful evidence as they are of their owner's knowledge of a body of work, don't of themselves prove the nature of the significance they held for that purchaser. Since the 1970s further work continues to show – now almost beyond dispute – that the political and philosophical thought of the Scottish Enlightenment was important to the Founders and constitutionalists of America (a useful list can be found on the STAR website: **www.star.ac.uk/Archive/Resources/Reading_List.html**).

The position was not simple. Admiration for Scottish thought did not, for many Americans, extend to admiring, or even liking, the Scots in their midst. Jefferson included a condemnation of 'Scotch and other foreign mercenaries' in an early draft of the Declaration of Independence, a phrase that Witherspoon, a patriot and president of the College of New Jersey, helped to remove from the final version. In his 1776 play, *The Patriots,* Jefferson's fellow Virginian Robert Mumford included the caricatured Scotsmen 'M'Flint,' 'M'Gripe,' and 'M'Squeeze.' During the American Revolution the dominant image of Scotland among Americans was of economic exploitation, religious fanaticism and political treachery. Flora MacDonald, Scotland's most famous heroine, was forced to return from America to South Uist by anti-Scots feeling in North Carolina (so much for the one woman). From the beginning, what Shepperson called the 'Burns supper school of Scottish-American historians' has been opposed by a sceptical, even hostile series of voices who have pointed to less savoury connections – a group we may characterise as the '"Birth of a Nation" school' – who link Scottish influence to some of the most illiberal aspects of American culture: Walter Scott's fiery cross and the Klu Klux Klan, lynch laws, robber barons and commercial rapacity.

Intellectual, economic and cultural historians have come a long way in supplying the evidence of a substantial Scottish presence in colonial and early national America. But I believe we are still far from understanding the similarities in 'formation' and 'signification' – to return to Witherspoon's terms – between American and Scottish writing. It is relatively uncontentious now that nineteenth-century Scottish and American literature 'share concerns': over proximity or distance from a metropolitan centre; a Calvinist-inflected intellectual tradition; a characteristic observational or spectating stance; self-consciousness about the construction of a usable past, and so on. But few literary scholars ask critical questions about the content and significance of apparently shared concerns. Leaving aside the obvious though non-trivial issue of what qualifies a work as Scottish or American (subject matter; birth, or residence, of author; political or ideological or religious affiliation, etc), what if, instead of 'Scotland' and 'America,' we compare Scottish and American political tracts or sermons or novels or poems or plays? It's my belief that national narratives of all kinds (and that includes monoliths like 'Scotland' and 'America') tend to make for blunt literary criticism and are founded in circular logic, each presupposing the other. Releasing ourselves from stories of progression towards or regression from independent nationhood, with their matching priorities of originality and influence, allows us to reconsider how literary history differs from History, and how its tools may reveal different kinds of connection between texts. Transatlantic literary comparisons are sadly impoverished when – as is still mainly the case – they are formulated in terms of influence, or reception. In fact, loss of confidence in the adequacy of the 'influence' story has fostered a general mistrust in comparative literary studies of texts as highly organised verbal artefacts, and the specific case of Scotland and America is no exception. On the other hand, intertextuality does not in my view take history seriously enough to offer a sufficiently robust rationale for transatlantic comparison outside the sceptical loops of postmodernism. If the history of literature is simply a modality of History, then History *as* literature (the constructivist view) retreats from the quiddity of events.

Most recent work on Scottish-American literary relations is really comparative cultural history that analyses texts in terms of context and situation, or deconstructs them to 'reveal' – itself a revealing term – the ideological predeterminations of form. To treat style as exclusively the product of ideology, or of historical determinants, neglects or undervalues the technical aspects of expression which characterise what we understand by 'the literary.' It also tends to locate 'meaning' in the superior capacities of the interpreter: choices in language, form, genre, intention all become fodder for commentary (whose own presuppositions often remain unexamined) which claims to 'uncover' the presence of context within text. Thirdly – to my mind this is perhaps the most fundamental objection – it fails to take account of the ways literary works resist grand narratives or abstractable ideas, or to register the provisionality of all judgement in relation to the playfulness that makes literature more than evidence of historical conditions or events.

In the 1820s Johann von Goethe attempted to move beyond what he regarded as the pernicious narrowness of literary analysis devoted to 'national tradition.' He coined the term *Weltliteratur* to describe how 'marvellous things' might be 'brought forth through refraction.' When Witherspoon felt the need to invent 'Americanism,' he was responding to something about how people in the struggling colonies used the English language, something for which the nearest equivalent – and therefore best comparison – was how Scots handled English. What, precisely, are we pointing to in noting that similarity? Returning to Goethe's broad vision of imaginative connectedness, we might think about Scottish-American relationships as plural and multi-dimensional, in terms of exchange and reciprocity as well as one-way movement: truths in contexts, multiple, particular, and refracted; language at once at its most precise and most evocative. In part, this constitutes a plea for a return to the unfashionable realms of rhetoric – the *techne* or nuts and bolts of language use – as tools for comparison; if this sounds unduly off-putting, let's simply say that literary critics have at their disposal specific analytic skills different from those of the documentary archivist, the cultural historian and the political scientist. When it comes to asking questions about the texture, the content, of 'like,' what actually constitutes the shared concerns and affinities we perceive between texts and differentiates them from others, there may be nothing for it but to get right into the texture of language use in particular instances.

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