

## Revisiting *Radical Renfrew* and the Anthologising of Scotland's Regions

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When Tom Leonard produced his anthology, *Radical Renfrew: Poetry from the French Revolution to World War I* in 1990, this was a watershed moment. It began to unpick a number of twentieth-century critical certitudes, including the supposed post-Burnsian deracination of literary Scots and the notion that Scotland, increasingly content within the new Victorian British super-state, had turned its back on many of its own cultural traditions. Ideas about the recession and evacuation of Scottish literature and culture at various periods, and most certainly including the period from the 1830s to the beginning of the twentieth century, were writ large in a nationalist tradition of Scottish criticism, which ran from G. Gregory Smith in 1919 down to David Daiches and others as late as the 1980s. Broadly speaking, this critical tradition saw Scottish literature and culture as dependent for its health upon a supposedly homogenous, distinctive, independent Scottish nation. If the implications of Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community' (aka imagined nation) from 1983 were potentially liberating, in that the agency of identity lay in the (collective) mind rather than in physical institutions, the Scottish anti-nation, imagined by the likes of Edwin Muir, was precisely the opposite (Carruthers: 4-28). It was fixated on loss of 'homogenous' language (a shared language of state business, the law, the church etc., of the people, of literature), of Parliament and Crown *all* sacrificed in the interests of sharing in the progress to be found in post-1707 industry, trade and empire. In this context 'regional' Scottish identity, literary or otherwise, was more or less dismissed.

Tom Leonard has a track-record of scepticism in the face of the idea, saluted by many living Scottish writers, that a Scottish Parliament automatically means a quickening of the pulse in Scottish culture and literature. He has been notable by his absence from a movement, including close colleagues and friends such as Alasdair Gray and James Kelman, towards political and cultural nationalism. It is not difficult to identify Leonard's interest in issues of class rather than in nation, and a revealing text of his is to be found in his poster-poem, 'Makars' Society' (Leonard, 1984: 53). Implicitly, here, Leonard critiques the classicism of twentieth-century Scots language activism and its nationalist agenda, realising

that the idea of the Scots revival led by Hugh MacDiarmid, Douglas Young and others had little time for his own particular urban, working-class, Irish-Scots, Glaswegian argot. The centralising mentality of MacDiarmid and the homologous classicism of Young (a professor of the traditional Humanities) made both rather purblind to 'regional' possibilities in Scots.

The explicitly 'national' pretensions of poetry in Scots, of course, predated the twentieth-century, but, perhaps, only briefly and not by much. In particular we must turn to Robert Burns, whose *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, were published in Kilmarnock in 1786, and in which Burns projects himself in the poem, 'The Vision', as particularly, 'Coila's' [Kyle's] bard, as explicitly opposed to any larger geo-poetical projects. The muse Coila appears to Burns and explains to him that he is a poet of locality, unlike for instance, his fellow-Scot, James Thomson (1700-48), author of *The Seasons*, a poetic sequence that is local and regional in its topographical survey, but which also succeeds in a panoramic view of the wider (British) nation. It may even have been at this stage that Burns, in fact, did have national aspirations as a poet, and that 'The Vision' was a kind of witty, extended modest topos. However, by the time the second Edinburgh-published edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* appeared in 1787, Burns was most definitely being imagined by the Edinburgh literati, by Scottish Freemasons and by others as a national (Scottish) bard. To some extent, this was to do with an Enlightenment predilection for the 'noble savage', or a 'heaven-taught ploughman' in Burns's exact case.

Scotland through the eighteenth century, in tense partnership with England, had to turn thin resources into more positive cultural capital. One of the ways it did so, it can be argued, was to produce a series of primitive, natural, sublime texts for wider consumption. The Highlands; the poems of 'Ossian'; James Beattie's poem, 'The Minstrel' (1771 and 1774); and also Robert Burns himself made for a proto-Romantic sensibility where, what Scotland had to offer England and the wider world, was unsophisticated, bardic (in a kind of Homeric-Celtic coinage) and a refreshing change from classical aesthetic prescriptions about harmony, order and polished plenitude. Leaving aside the fact that the situation was in reality nowhere near as straightforward as this, Scotland's national cultural self-image, increasingly from the late eighteenth century, was one of artlessness and closeness to unsophisticated people (whether Highlanders or Ayrshire country-folk). This imagined community helped over the next two hundred years to establish Scotland's conception of itself as 'Celtic' in identity. Down to the present day, myths about Scotland's superior

demotic constitution rely on this turn in cultural history, dating broadly from the Romantic period, albeit reading backwards to scoop up other elements of Scottish History, *inter alia*, such as The Declaration of Arbroath (1320) and the kirk democracy of Scottish Presbyterianism.

Part of the genius of Robert Burns, in fact, had been to bring poetry in Scots back to Ayrshire after a long historic absence. Scots *song* had remained more current in Burns's native county than Scots *poetry*, which by the time he was writing had stronger associations with Edinburgh and the North East, with Episcopalianism and Catholicism, and with Jacobitism or anti-Whiggishness (where west country Ayrshire was decidedly Whiggish). Writers in Scots, and, indeed, Scots poetry's anthologising, printer-revivers (for instance, James Watson, in his *Choice Collection of Serious and Comic Scots Poems*, 1706, 1709 and 1711) utilised its signature 'Habbie Simson' and 'Christ's Kirk' stanzas going back through Robert Fergusson, Allan Ramsay and Watson as part of their essentially anti-authoritarian tone and agenda. This agenda, however, was Tory in outlook; it was about restoring the Stuarts to the throne and opposing the Whiggish 'powers that be' in Edinburgh (with their puritanical Calvinism) and in London (with, as a Tory propagandist might have it, their care-less 'Whiggish' free-market mentality). Burns adopted and adapted eighteenth-century Scots poetry to attack Ayrshire Calvinism, but also as much to confirm the customs and festivities of his local Presbyterian community in a way that would have surprised most of his out-of-county Scots poetry predecessors. Following Burns, Scots poetry slowly took off in the west of Scotland (though not without its remaining Presbyterian detractors, such as Ayrshire poet, William Peebles, steadfastly writing in English and coining and attacking 'Burnomania' in 1811). The genius of Burns was to take Scots poetry, a dynastic, ideological mode (Jacobite and Tory), and retool it as a regional mode. Later on, through a series of cultural currents, this regional mode then became again something wider, which, following its reception in the Romantic world, began to look or perhaps even be 'national' in a larger but more nebulous fashion than it had been before.

'National' Scots poetry has been like many traditions, one that is changeable, broken, re-made through the centuries. The great 'Makars' of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (William Dunbar, Robert Henryson, Gavin Douglas and others) represented a 'golden' period of 'high art' in Scots, which was arguably 'national' (centred as this often was on the royal court) but not so self-consciously as Scots poetry was to become in the later eighteenth and

especially the twentieth century. To some extent, medieval Scots poetry was re-popularised, drawn upon for inspiration in the earlier eighteenth century by the likes of James Watson and Allan Ramsay, but their project was more self-consciously ideological (Tory, Jacobite as has been said above) in purpose. During the Romantic period, the earlier eighteenth-century reiteration of Scots (as a Tory Jacobite mode) was in turn changed into a more generalised, less ideological mode by Burns (albeit a sympathetic Jacobite who disliked Popular Party or 'Auld Licht' Calvinism).

Later commentators tended to assume that poetry in Scots from Dunbar to Burns represented, more or less unproblematically, a national tradition that subsequently became broken. Indeed, in recent years, Scotland's two main cities as well as the nation as a whole have had an official 'Makar' (appointed in the latter case by the Scottish parliament) – the terminology for a Scottish poet from the medieval period. The first Scottish Makar, Edwin Morgan, was not entirely comfortable with such an anachronistic term; and, as we see above, Tom Leonard bristles at the term, clearly seeing in it overly simplistic 'national' cheer-leading. In short, 'national' Scots poetry has never really existed in any absolute sense. The court poets from James I to James V, the Tory Jacobites of the early eighteenth century and the Romantics of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries all – obviously enough – had very different cultural agendas, amounting even to different 'national' identities. But also, each of these in a sense were also localised, not only in the historical moment but in terms of geo-spatial existence: Dunbar *et al* (the east of Scotland, primarily); Watson, Ramsay *et al* (the east and north east); Burns to Scott (representing a wide swathe of the central belt). It is with Burns and Scott that the wider world really developed a sense of 'national' Scots poetry, although ironically much twentieth-century Scottish criticism reads their milieu as precisely a moment of national failure, with critic and poet Edwin Muir's definition of the pair in his poem, 'Scotland 1941', precisely as 'sham bards of a sham nation' (Muir: 100).

Recovering Scottish regional poetry is a project that began with Walter Scott. His editing of the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-3), was in the first instance an antiquarian act, intended to gather together historic ballads. Material such as 'Patrick Spens' and 'The Battle of Otterburn' concerned national Scottish events, such as Scoto-Scandinavian politics and strife with England; but the collection also featured material that was local, focussing on Border reiving and affairs of love, such as 'Kinmont Willie' and 'Helen

of Kirkconnel'. In 'Thomas the Rhymer', Scott's collection also powerfully associated the Borders anew with mystical insight. His success in popularising these texts performed a function for the Scottish Borders parallel to that which is found across his original poetry and fiction dealing with the Highlands. If the idea of 'Scotland' is often seen to be most bound up with Scott's romanticisation of the Gàidhealtachd, it includes also in a Highland - Lowland binary, the south of Scotland too. However, for our purposes we ought to note more particularly that, with Scott's *Minstrelsy* we have after Burns's re-invention of Scots-poetry Ayrshire, a second powerful regionalising current in Romantic Scotland.

Indeed, Scott paved the way for subsequent 'regional' anthologies in Scotland, so that this became almost a patchwork 'national' project during the nineteenth century and beyond. These anthologies included *The Harp of Renfrewshire* (1819) edited by William Motherwell (1797-1835), a Tory cultural activist who was a great admirer of Scott. In various ways Leonard's *Radical Renfrew* represents a writing back to, even a political revisionism *a propos* Motherwell's anthology. Motherwell's *Harp of Renfrewshire*, subtitled 'A Collection of Songs and Other Poetical Pieces', was modelled to a large extent on Scott's antiquarian Borders project. The main job of broadcasting and popularising that this anthology eventually did, however, concerned such modern poets as Alexander Wilson and Robert Tannahill. Motherwell also included work by Robert Burns, Lord Byron and the Irish writer, Thomas Moore on the broad grounds, one must presume, that texts by these writers conform to the lyrical and pastoral tenor overall of his 'Renfrewshire' collection. What such promiscuous selection suggests is the calculated commercial design of *The Harp of Renfrewshire*. It also reflects *in situ* that wider pattern observed above of the transaction between regional and national anthologising (so national in fact that even Ireland's 'national songwriter' Moore might be co-opted in an expression of pan-Celtic poetic sensibility). Commercially, there was an audience for Motherwell's anthology that saw it frequently reprinted down to the 1880s, and here again we find evidence for the Celticisation, the Scottification (perhaps) of Scotland that ensued through the nineteenth century. The emphasis upon song and the 'harp' which in the British context was politically emblematic of Irish nationality and had been for many centuries was, like Moore, appropriated by the 'anthologising' Motherwell. And this Gaelic, 'bardic' idea in being transplanted to a lowland county of Scotland is typical of Motherwell's career in making distinctive national (even proto-rebellious) emblems into something altogether less threatening.

It is a current within nineteenth-century Romanticism that the prioritising of the transcendently lyrical, pastoral etc., encourages in a basic way the downplaying of political expression (something that is always in the first instance *in* time of the moment, even ephemeral or transient, in a sense). Along with this structural conservatism in post-Romantic ideas about what was important in the poetic sensibility, Motherwell was also more intentionally conservative. He was a prominent activist within the 'Burns movement', and attempted to divert working-men's interest from potentially radical politics by encouraging the Orange Order in Scotland.

In more neutral terms, Motherwell's biographical sketches in *The Harp of Renfrewshire* of Tannahill and Wilson increased their fame beyond their native Paisley. He chose a generous selection of Tannahill, whose best work was in song rather than in poetry and a single song text from Wilson, who was much more a poet than a song-writer. Rather than being explicit political editorial design, this state of affairs simply exemplifies the mainstream outlook of Motherwell. Like others of the time, he celebrated songs (as well as poetry) about universal emotions and situations (albeit that these might sometimes be historical, or historical-political etc). These he saw as more important and lasting than verse commemorating ephemeral political events; the kind of material that might be found in broadsides, chapbooks and periodical print as opposed to the more stable book-anthologies such as he was providing. This was an outlook that to some extent had been shared also by Burns who referred to 'political squibs' among his own work, many of which were not published in his lifetime. Burns considered 'Holy Willie's Prayer', a text that was written about local Ayrshire church politics in the first half of the 1780s, was of limited interest so far as his wider audience was concerned. Yet, today 'Holy Willie's Prayer' is read as a more enduringly and universally accessible text. Similarly, and in part due to Motherwell's drawing attention to Alexander Wilson, the Paisley poet's reputation deepened and spread retrospectively in Renfrewshire, Scotland and beyond following *The Harp of Renfrewshire*. Wilson had left Scotland in 1794, his activist poetry advocating reform of the constitution and his criticising of the crookedness of certain factory owners in his home-time having made his native country a place where he was likely to be prosecuted and imprisoned for his views. Through the nineteenth-century, Wilson's political expression, largely fallen into obscurity following his emigration, came back into view and was increasingly collected, edited and published, with the first full, important edition of his work appearing in 1876.

This, we might suggest, was an unintended consequence of Motherwell's hugely popular, repeatedly reprinted anthology.

Other anthologies for other regions followed Motherwell's model of collecting historical and contemporary material in the years that followed. For instance, *The Poets of Dumfriesshire* (1910) has 'ancient and modern' texts that run from the Anglo-Saxon poem on the Ruthwell Cross through 'Old Historical Ballads', Robert Burns and Charles Kirkpatrick Sharp to Victorian poets such as John Johnston, writing verse on visiting Walt Whitman. The collection even refers to Alfred Lord Tennyson reciting 'Fair Helen of Kirkconnel' to his children, and a consideration of how Tennyson's interaction with this text has influenced his 'Oriana'. Yet again we see regional anthologising in Scotland straining at the leash: Dumfriesshire is styled as being in tune with the most contemporary poetic during the later nineteenth-century. What is very apparent is the striving for the solidly mainstream, the canonical, the national and international (in slightly paradoxical ways) rather than paying much attention to, say, the popularly produced newspaper poetry of the locality.

Alongside 'regional' anthologies we might mention town or urban or perhaps 'civic' anthologies, largely a later phenomenon. In this category, for instance, we have James Knox's *Airdrie Bards: Past and Present* (1930). This was issued by the Airdrie Burns Club which accounts to some degree for the use of the Burnsian 'bards' in its title. More than this, however, the bardic indicates the reciter of 'epic' or 'big' things relating to place, in this case, Airdrie. That said, what we actually see, as with *The Harp of Renfrewshire* or *The Poets of Dumfriesshire*, is that big things relate to timeless landmarks and, indeed, the pretty, lyrical surroundings of the town. Day to day and large scale politics do not feature as much as one might anticipate. For instance, the man who might be Airdrie's most significant poet, William Yates, whose work is published in the *Glasgow Advertiser* (forerunner of the *Glasgow Herald*) and the London periodical, *Politics for the People* during the 1790s and early 1800s is represented only by the poem 'Airdrie Fair' attributed to 'William Yeats'. Old town lanes, church bells and thrushes singing in the town in November are celebrated in the texts of this anthology, but nowhere do we find Yates's outspoken views in favour of the abolition of slavery or the extension of the franchise. His 'Airdrie Fair' is a pleasant holiday poem that is certainly worth reading, but from it one might obtain the impression of an author content and comfortably centred in Airdrie's civic society rather than a man who was often out of favour with the authorities for his political activism. Yates acquired an audience

in the early twentieth century as a result of *Airdrie Bards*, but it was decades beyond this and only during the past ten years that Yates's wider and strikingly political oeuvre has been recovered from the periodical press by Ian Reid.

From the 1970s, William Donaldson pioneered the work in Scotland of extracting a hidden regional literary history, largely with regard to prose, both fiction and non-fiction. The scholarly work of disinterring poetry from the historic Scottish press has been rather slower in execution, as well as patchy. Thankfully, in recent years, another poetry anthology has joined Tom Leonard's *Radical Renfrew*, and that is Kirstie Blair's excellent *The Poets of the People's Journal* (2016). Concentrating on one Dundee publication, this latter anthology is suggestive of the regional riches that might be multiplied several times over throughout Scotland. The work of Donaldson, Leonard and Blair is enabled by a new academic attention from the latter part of the twentieth century to working-class culture and history. However, if such a focus has become (albeit slowly) natural in the study of History as a discipline, Literary Studies has been even slower to find interest in the demotic poetry of the regional press. In the context of fiction, Christopher Harvie has asked, 'But is a mute inglorious Dickens likely to lurk in the files of the *Kelso Chronicle*? And even if he does, can a genius who remained obscure out-with his locality be granted cultural significance?' (Harvie: 26). Those with a taste for canonical nineteenth-century poetry might respond, 'What about Emily Dickinson or Gerard Manley Hopkins?' These geniuses, 'mute' and 'inglorious' largely in their lifetimes are today famous, widely studied and inserted unproblematically into period literature courses. Of course, it is unlikely that writers of the ability of a Dickinson or a Hopkins could be found still unknown in the nineteenth-century press but especially post-Theory we are less interested in literary finesse and more in the historical and sociological phenomena of regional, working-class (and indeed other classed, other gendered etc) writers.

Leonard's *Radical Renfrew* is an absorbing read from all the points of view of history, politics, sociology and even the literary wit and cleverness of the writers it anthologises. The editor skilfully selects from the periodical press including *The New Paisley Repository*, from broadsides and pamphlets. But it is surprising how little of a search he has undertaken in the print press. This is not to criticise Tom Leonard, rather it ought to be raised as a point in praise of Paisley Central Library where he did much of the work for his anthology. The Paisley library collections witness a rare cultural watchfulness, about which an essay might

be written in itself. *Radical Renfrew* is able to draw upon an extensive collection of bound newspaper cuttings entitled, *Fugitive Pieces, Chiefly Local*, a crucial volume called *Songs, Poems and Poem Broadshets* and also the dozens of bound volumes the library holds under the title of *Paisley Pamphlets*. These collections of materials – ready made anthologies in themselves – have been fairly well-known to scholars, but even then the use of this material until now has barely scratched the surface. This situation of ready-completed searches perhaps skews the situation unfairly (or perhaps fairly), but it has been a surprise to me when revisiting *Radical Renfrew*, an anthology I have used in teaching and research for over twenty years, how much it relies on mining sturdy book-publications as opposed to the files of the *Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette* or the *Paisley Daily Express*. Leonard mines previous anthologies, including *Paisley Poets, With Brief Memoirs of Them and Selections from their Poems* (1890) and even *The Harp of Renfrewshire*. As I say, this is no criticism of Leonard but suggests that an even more widely sweeping exercise re Paisley and Renfrewshire might be called for than the editor of *Radical Renfrew* had time to do (in his brief period as ‘Writer in Residence’ at Paisley Central Library).

The dedication to *Radical Renfrew* is – very nicely – to ‘History and Locality’. Tom Leonard like William Donaldson before him realises that among other definitions history is made in local places that then resonate on the national stage, or indeed sometimes might not: the history of Renfrew, of Paisley, of Scotland will probably often resonate with one another, but equally this might not always be the case. To return to one example cited earlier, we might consider again the poet Alexander Wilson. Leonard’s liberal inclusion of this 1790s radical as an important and noted commentator on contemporary events in Paisley not only supplies a corrective to the *Harp of Renfrewshire’s* implicit categorisation of Wilson as merely a minor song-writer, but also restores to view a voice that in its own time was causing political waves that reached Glasgow, Edinburgh and the rest of Scotland. Not only that, but Leonard’s more amply anthologised Wilson allows us better to understand a man whose poetry and journalism would go on to make a distinct impact on the other side of the world in the early American republic. In toning down the selection of timeless pastoral writing, and in emphasising frenetic political verse of the historical moment, Leonard demonstrates – who would have thought it – that big history is made from the seemingly ephemeral moment, the seemingly deeply local incident. As well as politics, Leonard is alive to historic religious poetry in a way that the *Harp of Renfrewshire* never is,

for instance, in extracting Robert Pollok's long sub-epic poem, *The Course of Time* (1827). Leonard's volume also includes election verse or occasional poetry from the polls, and proto-suffragette poetry such as that by Jessie Russell and Marion Bernstein.

In various ways, one of the compelling intellectual influences to our project, *The People's Voice: Poetry, Song and the Franchise, 1832-1918*, has been *Radical Renfrew*. It marks a watershed moment in Scottish criticism and anthologising when historical events ('from the French Revolution to the First World War', as its sub-title says) over-rides, indeed, over-writes the post-Romantic idea of 'timelessly important' verse. We too in our online anthology, in our database of print poetry and song, and in our other activities, have but sampled as cogently as we can around important moments in the franchise. Excitingly, even as we have only scratched the surface, our compass is sure. With cultural confidence we are able to mine the press for poetry and song in a way that reveals political, literary and social history. The scholarly and intellectual predispositions of previous generations overlooked this material. We are not smug about this, but ought merely to note that like previous scholars we too inhabit our own time, our own moment. And this is a moment for looking closely at historic moments in the poetry and song of the regional press.

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