Inhalt / Contents

Klaus Stolz
Things Will Never Be the Same Again: Scotland and the Union before and after the Independence Referendum 2

Jan Eichhorn
Scottish Identity in Numbers: The Independence Referendum – Facts and Figures 9

Andrew Wells
Interview with Historian Ewen Cameron: Scotland’s Identities, Politics, and Future 13

Katrin Berndt
Plotting Independence? Scottish Writing, Politics, and the Referendum 17

Georg Gill and Amrou Motawa
Engaging with the Referendum – A Young Generation Knocking on the Door with Poetry 22

Magi Gibson
Two Poems 24

Klaus Stolz
Interview with Scottish Writer James Robertson: Literature, Politics and the Scottish Question 26

Dietmar Böhnke
Snapshots of a Nation in Flux – James Robertson’s And the Land Lay Still (2010) 30

Sigrid Rieuwerts
Scott’s Waverley (1814), or ’Tis Two Hundred Years Since 34

Eberhard Bort
Scottish Folk Music and National Identity: ‘Sing as if you live in the early days of a better nation’ 38

Sigrid Rieuwerts
Scotland’s Languages – Scots and Modern Languages 43

Rob Dunbar
Scotland’s Languages – Gaelic Language Policy in Scotland 47

Hartwig Pautz
The Delusional City – Glasgow as a “Second City” 49

Lars Eckstein
Some Reflections on the Social Diagnostics of Music in a Viral Age 53

Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier
Happy Birthday, Queen of Crime! Zum 125. Geburtstag von Agatha Christie 55
Snapshots of a Nation in Flux –
James Robertson’s And the Land Lay Still (2010)

Dietmar Böhnke


It has become something of a truism to say that Scottish politics and literature are inextricably intertwined, and in particular that the cultural and literary revival of the last three or four decades helped to bring about the political changes which led to the Independence Referendum in 2014. If we believe this to be the case, it must be surprising to find that there are very few ‘political’ or ‘state-of-the-nation’ novels in contemporary Scottish literature, at least in the stricter sense of these terms. Alasdair Gray’s Lanark (1981), often seen as one of the starting points of the literary ‘Renaissance’, can certainly lay claim to such an epithet, but there have been conspicuously few followers in terms of breadth of vision and social treatment. This may have been one of the reasons behind James Robertson’s decision to attempt exactly such a massive panoramic novel dealing with the last sixty years of Scottish political, social and cultural development (cf. also our interview with the author in this issue). When it was published in 2010 under the title And the Land Lay Still, it ran to 670 pages and was immediately hailed as a significant achievement and a worthy successor to Lanark or to Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s earlier masterpiece A Scots Quair (1932-34), which similarly looked at the broad social developments during the first decades of the twentieth century. In the same year, Robertson’s novel won both the Saltire Society’s and the Scottish Arts Council’s Book of the Year Award. For readers looking to understand Scottish society and culture in the run-up to and aftermath of the Referendum, there could hardly be a better introduction than this book. The following contribution will therefore briefly present the contents and structure of the novel and assess it critically in the context of Robertson’s work and contemporary Scottish literature more generally.

James Robertson (b. 1958) is certainly qualified for the task of writing a political novel about Scotland during the past half-century. Not only does his own lifetime neatly coincide with that time span, he has also earned himself a name as one of the most accomplished, interesting and versatile writers in Scotland today, leading to his appointment as the first writer-in-residence at Holyrood, the newly built Scottish Parliament, in November 2004. He published his first novel The Fanatic in 2000, thus coming to wider prominence in the first year of both the Scottish Parliament and the new millennium with a book steeped in Scottish history – the Covenanting movement of the later seventeenth century, to be precise – and exuding a strong Edinburgh sense of place. This was followed by Joseph Knight in 2003, another historical novel, which tackled both the aftermath of the Battle of Culloden in 1746 and Scotland’s conveniently forgotten involvement in the history of slavery. The Testament of Gideon Mack, which was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2006, exhibits close affinities with the supernatural and Gothic strands in Scottish literature as evidenced in Burns, Hogg and Stevenson and revisits the religious theme in a contemporary setting. His latest novel is The Professor of Truth (2013), an indirect take on one of the most controversial political and legal events of the recent Scottish past, the Lockerbie bombing and its fallout, including the release of the only convicted suspect, Abdelbaset al-Megrahi, by the Scottish Government in 2009. In addition, he has worked in a variety of other genres, including short stories, poetry, children’s books, translation (from French, Gaelic and Spanish) and essays, as well as setting up two publishing outlets, Kettillonia primarily for new poetry and Itchy Coo for children’s books in Scots. Robertson studied history at the University of Edinburgh, where he also finished a PhD on Walter Scott. His interest and expertise in (Scottish) history pervades Robertson’s work, not only in the obviously historical novels The Fanatic and Joseph Knight but also in his other books, notably And the Land Lay Still. This novel was partly made possible by a generous grant from the arts funding body Creative Scot-
Scotland today.

of the identity that is constantly moving

this is an apt comment on the novel

contemporary Scottish literature and

graphs by his famous father Angus, on

which he comments as follows in his

inaugural speech:


History is written by the survivors, but

what is that history? That's the point I

was trying to make just now. We don't

know what the story is while we're in

it, and even after we tell it we're not

sure. Because the story doesn't end. As

William Faulkner put it, "The past is

never dead. It's not even past." (645)

This is an apt comment on the novel

itself and its attempt to

make the reader

aware of the impossibility of

capturing the essence of a nation and

an identity that is constantly moving

and changing.

Looking at the photograph brings

it all back. It's like a still from a film

of other people's lives. [...] Shift-
ing, uncertain identities. When he

thinks about those shared lives, about

human existence in general, he finds

there is not much to put faith in. But

this he knows for sure: our ability to

look back on the past, our need or
desire to make sense of it, is both a

blessing and a curse; and our inability
to see into the future with any degree

of accuracy is, simultaneously, the

thing that saves us and the thing that

condemns us. (13)

Using the metaphor of photography

at the same time allows him to discuss

questions of (family) history and mem-

ory, to debate an art form that—just

like literature—records and at the same
time creatively reworks reality, and to

emphasise its fragmentary and selective

nature, the importance of framing

and perspective. Structurally, the

exhibition serves to bring most of the

novel's central characters together in

the end and resolve many of the plot-

lines, which have been subtly built up

and interwoven throughout the

novel's six parts. Each of these

parts of unequal length intro-
duces the reader to a few main

characters and a lot of subsidiary

ones, many of whom recur in

one or several of

the following sections, so that by the

end of the book a veritable panorama

of Scottish society appears, both histor-

cally (post-war to 2000s) and socially

(from working-class miner to upper-

class MP), as well as, to some extent,

geographically (focused on Edinburgh

but ranging from semi-rural mining

communities to Highland locations).

This is certainly no mean feat of liter-

dary artistry, and it is especially effective

in pointing to the interconnectedness

of the different sections of society and

of past and present in Scotland. The

construction and conclusion may seem

slightly contrived for some tastes, but

most of the characters are well-drawn

and rounded studies of individuals

which always keep up the reader's inter-
est. Overall, there is a strong emphasis

on the drama and value of the everyday

lives of common people, something

for which Scottish literature has always

been renowned (think Grassic Gibbon

or James Kelman) and which reflects

Robertson's leftist sympathies.

One of the more significant characters

of the novel—though characteristically

conspicuous for his absence in large

parts—is called Jack. He is first intro-

duced in the second part (set mainly

in the 1950s) as a survivor of the cru-

elties of the Second World War and

soon leaves his normal life and civiliza-
tion (including his wife and daughter)

behind and becomes a wanderer and

maybe a symbol for the natural and

historical character of the land, which

he continuously roams and literally be-

comes part of, thus providing one in-

terpretation of the title of the book. It

is certainly tempting to read him in a

metaphorical way as 'Jock', the generic

Scott, and to see the small stones that he

continuously collects and hands on to

the people he meets on his wanderings

as memorial objects (like in the High-

land custom of erecting cairns). In fact,

the novel starts with his voice, because

each of the parts is preceded by a few

pages of italicized narrative in the sec-

ond person, which later turns out to be

Jack's (and the land's?) thoughts.

You'd escaped because everybody else was

hell-bent on wanting everything and

you saw it wasn't going to work. Didn't

matter what your politics were after all.

Irrelevant. Didn't matter whether you

were free or independent or democratic

or oppressed, everybody wanted every-

thing and they couldn't have it. It wasn't

the age of small nations as you'd thought,

it was the age of money and waste and

garbage and pollution and destruction

and it was all going to get worse, you

could see it coming and you couldn't do

it, you couldn't keep your place in such a

world, couldn't support a wife in such a

world, couldn't bring up a child in such a

world. It was time to go. It was time to

abandon. (228)

It is difficult not to discern echoes of

Grassic Gibbon here, who is also funda-

mentally concerned with questions of

social change vs. continuity, who fre-

quently uses a second-person narrative

voice as well, and whose central char-

acter Chris Guthrie has a similarly close

relationship with the land. What distin-

guishes And the Land Lay Still from A

Scots Quair and also partly from Lanark

is its snapshot-like quality. While the

latter two have strong central charac-

ters or 'consciousnesses' that draw the
reader into their world and manage to give these equally long books a unifying narrative voice (even though it might well be split into different personae, as in Lanark), this is not the case in Robertson's novel. Apart from Jack's second-person vignettes and one (slightly surprising and not very effective) instance of a first-person narrative towards the end of the book, it is mostly told in a somewhat personalized third-person narrative voice which keeps shifting with the respective characters. Therefore, it is more like a series of portraits or a collage which can only be put together into a coherent whole by the individual reader and will result in a different picture in each case. So the emphasis is as much on fragmentation and the difficulty of obtaining a comprehensive, panoptic view of the nation — in this sense, the land does not lie still, it is constantly in flux. This is highlighted by Robertson's most experimental use of narrative voice in the third part, the section mainly focused on the "Original Mr Bond" (a secret service member from Scotland who is in fact called James Bond but for obvious reasons calls himself Peter), where everything happens in Peter's head — which is a very unreliable place because of his alcohol abuse. Dialogue stops being marked as such, save for the instances where Bond imagines mock-theatrical dialogues with fantasy interlocutors (a technique Robertson also uses in The Fanatic); even the right margin of the text starts to disintegrate in this section. While opinions certainly differ as to how effective this experimental part is — Allan Massie has singled it out for criticism, for example, — and I personally think it does not fit too well with the rest of the novel — it clearly succeeds in stressing the complications of telling a straightforward narrative of Scottish identity within the British state and highlights debates about Scottish self-loathing, identity crisis and schizophrenia; even if we do not want to invoke the time-worn and problematic notion of 'Caledonian antiszyzyg'.

At least as important as the characters themselves are the broader social and political developments they experience or become part of, arguably making the nation itself the central character of the novel, even if it can only be glimpsed through the personal stories.

Here is a situation: a country that is not fully a country, a nation that does not quite believe itself to be a nation, exists within, and as a small and distant part of, a greater state. The greater state was once a very great state, with its own empire. It is no longer great, but its leaders and many of its people like to believe it is. For the people of the less-than-country, the not-quite nation, there are competing, conflicting loyalties. They are confused. For generations a kind of balance has been maintained. There has been give and take, and, yes, there have been arguments about how much give and how much take, but now something has changed. There is a sense of injustice, of neglect, of vague or real oppression. Nobody is being shot, there are no political prisoners, there is very little censorship, but still that sense persists: this is wrong. It grows. It demands to be addressed. The situation needs to be fixed. (534)

Some of the more significant developments covered here include the aftermath of the Second World War, the growth of nationalist politics in Scotland since the war (including the stealing of the Stone of Scone in 1950 as well as the discovery of North Sea Oil and the success of the SNP in the 1970s), with a particular focus on the devolution movement around and following the Referendum in 1979 (un-surprisingly, because this coincides with Robertson's own experience as a politically active student and writer), and the fate of the political parties including the Conservatives, Labour and the SNP. Furthermore, Robertson engages with the surveillance of the Scottish nationalists by the British secret service, the period of Thatcherism and its impact in Scotland, education and the welfare state, mining and industrial cultures, deindustrialization, social problems and crime, decolonization, immigration and diversity, (political) journalism, (folk) music and storytelling, photography and art, gay culture etc. Clearly, the novel's canvas is ambiously broad and comprehensive; in many ways, this complex representation of a whole society in change is its real centre. Significantly, many of these developments are revisited in several of the storylines, so that we see them from a variety of perspectives and therefore get a more complex overall picture. "Ticking off" issues in this way also suggests, however, that there is a tendency to include as much information as possible, to the extent that parts of the book read a little like resumes of historical lectures or the press coverage on the respective phenomenon. Time and again pieces of information are thrown in that are at best marginal to characters' experiences and do not follow a narrative logic. At other points such information is included in the dialogue, which can become rather artificial in these instances. But this is the exception to the rule, since Robertson generally has a good ear for local and individual cadences of speech, not least through his virtuoso use of different varieties of Scots, something he had done in his previous novels and poetry to great effect and for which he is justly lauded.

As a whole, And the Land Lay Still succeeds admirably in painting a multifaceted picture of Scottish politics, culture and identity since the Second World War, which is eminently recognizable to a lot of Scots (as the reactions to the novel have demonstrated). It provides an intimate portrait of the nation from inside to anyone else interested, and it resonates with a lot of universal or at least Western experiences of the past sixty years. Whether all of this amounts to a pro-independence stance or even nationalist propaganda is much less certain. The debate on this has been fuelled by the emphasis on nationalist politics in the novel, by Robertson's own pro-independence stance and by the praise heaped on the novel by some high-ranking nationalist politicians including former First Minister Alex Salmond. However, the novel itself is much too ambivalent and complex for...
such a view to be tenable and emphasizes long-term developments and the vagaries of historical change rather than specific ideologies.

But what was the cause? It's easy to remember what they stood against: Thatcherism, London rule, the destruction of old industries, the assault on the Welfare State, the poll tax. But what were they for? A Scottish parliament, of course. But now they have it, what is it for? Forget smoking bans and other worthwhile legislation, what is its primary function? Maybe it's for saying, Look, listen, this is who we are. And maybe that is no insignificant thing, and the purpose of a parliament is to say it again, over and over. What can be more important, politically, than to know who you are, and to say it? (35-6)

As one character puts it in the novel: "We might just drift into it [i.e. independence] without meaning it" (80). In fact, the book seems to be much more interested in the land itself, its people, stories and songs than in any kind of clear political position — apart perhaps from generally espousing the cause of the 'common people'. In my opinion, the novel belongs with the most interesting writing of the last decades and can clearly hold its place among the giants of Scottish literature with respect to scope and comprehensiveness as well as accuracy of social description. As such, it is part of the ongoing revival in Scottish literature and culture and might perhaps help start a new wave of Scottish political novels. The government of the day, be it SNP-led or not, can certainly profit from such literary analyses and imaginings. It is to be hoped that the book will find many readers outside Scotland as well, something that is apparently complicated by its very Scottishness, according to several continental publishers who declined to have it translated. Perhaps the worldwide interest in Scotland during the run-up to the Referendum can also help attract a broader audience for its literary practitioners — there are few better ways to start understanding the complex modern nation that is Scotland than by reading a novel like James Robertson's And the Land Lay Still.

Notes
1. Fittingly, the title is taken from one of the Scots Makar Edwin Morgan's Sonnets from Scotland, "The Summons", which is reprinted as epigraph to the novel.
2. All page references in this essay refer to the paperback edition of the novel published by Penguin in 2011.
4. This term was first used by G. Gregory Smith in his study Scottish Literature: Character and Influence (1919) and subsequently adopted by Hugh MacDiarmid as one of the key terms in his concept of Scottish national identity. Since then it has been grossly overused as a concept to describe the perceived contradictory nature of the Scottish character (if such a thing exists), sometimes in relation to its position vis-a-vis British identity.