

## **The media and literature in contemporary Scotland: challenges and opportunities**

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This article explores the relationship between literature and the media in the Scottish milieu. The emphasis, as far as the former is concerned, is firmly on the novel, though some comment is made on drama. The analysis moves on to consider not only problematic aspects of the current situation but also the difficulties which may lie ahead, given the uncertain nature of Scotland's constitutional future.

### **General Background**

The devolution settlement, under which a Scottish parliament has been elected every four years since 1999, is wide ranging, with Holyrood having legislative power over the Scottish legal system, criminal justice, local government, education and social policy. Indeed there is very little that is not devolved, outside of defence, foreign affairs and the social security system.<sup>1</sup> Criticism has tended to focus on the financial arrangements and on the few anomalies which exist. The Scottish government, although it was given the right to vary the standard rate of income tax by three pence in the pound up or down – a power which has never been used – derives its revenue from a block grant made by Westminster, £30 billion in the current financial year.<sup>2</sup> It might be argued that with Holyrood's real income increasing substantially in its first twelve years, the system can encourage an irresponsible attitude to public expenditure when there is no need to seek a mandate from the electorate to pay directly for the services provided, and every incentive to keep spending, since Westminster will provide. Post -2011 that situation has changed, and the Scottish government's funds have been decreasing in real terms, as a consequence of the austerity programme embarked on by the Westminster government. The current SNP administration is committed to a referendum on independence, which would inevitably mean fiscal responsibility, but, even without independence, there are proposals currently being enshrined in law, as a consequence of recommendations made by the Calman Commission, which will mean that Holyrood will be responsible for raising a substantial percentage of income tax, and will find its block grant diminished accordingly.<sup>3</sup>

As far as anomalies are concerned, there is a very important one that is relevant in the cultural field. The former Scottish Arts Council (SAC) and other bodies, including national museums and galleries and the former Scottish Screen, are/were responsible to Holyrood, but broadcasting policy is not devolved. So, decisions about the allocation of wavelengths, and the

provision of services, including those such as Radio Scotland which are only available north of the border, remain the responsibility of the BBC and the regulatory body, Ofcom, both pan-UK organisations, albeit with Scottish advisory committees. A further anomaly arises with the Gaelic television service, BBC Alba, which is financed by the BBC and the Scottish government. Press policy is not devolved either: it is for the relevant UK government department to decide whether, for example, mergers or acquisitions should go ahead. Publications operating in Scotland, however, do have to abide by Scots law on such matters as libel and contempt of court where practice is significantly different from that found in England.<sup>4</sup>

Culture, or rather public support for it, is firmly devolved. Indeed, to judge from the speech made by Alex Salmond, the First Minister, at the new session of the Holyrood parliament after the SNP was returned as a majority government, Scottish writing is never far from his mind. In that speech he referred to Grassic Gibbon, MacDiarmid and MacCaig, not to forget Robert Burns (Salmond 2011). And the minority administration which Mr Salmond headed before May 2011 was active on the literature front. In 2010 a Working Party set up by that government reported, and suggested – unsurprisingly – that more of the arts budget should be spent on literature (only 5% of the then SAC's expenditure went in that direction), that the profile of literature should be raised, perhaps by the establishment of an Academy, that library procurement policy should support Scottish writing and that there should be a compulsory question on Scottish literature in the Higher English school examination, something which the Association for Scottish Literary Studies had long lobbied for.. On Burns Night, 2012, the government announced that it would implement this last recommendation. The Working Party also made comments on the role of the media, about which more will be said later (Scottish Government 2010a).

In the same year a Ministerial Working Group on the Scots Language also reported and argued that support was urgently needed to ensure that the Scots language in its various forms continued to thrive. (Scottish Government 2010b). Continuing on this trajectory, in August 2011 the government proposed that a non-compulsory subject of Scottish Studies, comprising history, language, culture and literature, should be introduced in Scottish schools.

The major cultural agency in the country now is Creative Scotland, an organisation which has had a long and difficult birth since it was proposed by the Labour /Liberal administration of 2003-07. Creative Scotland was launched in 2010 and brings together the SAC, which funded a wide range of cultural activity, and Scottish Screen, which was a body concerned with film exhibition, production and distribution. The merger was promoted as a logical one, for film is as much a major art form as theatre or opera. Film, it will be observed, also constitutes a very important part of broadcast output but broadcasting policy, as was noted above, is not – as yet – a matter for the Scottish government. Creative Scotland disburses funds derived from the

National Lottery to support film production, currently £3m per year, which it anticipates will increase. However – a further anomaly – the British Film Institute takes the view that it still has responsibilities north of the border.<sup>5</sup>

### **The media situation**

The indigenous Scottish press is substantial. The four main cities have titles based in them. Glasgow with *The Herald*, the *Sunday Herald*, the *Evening Times*, the *Daily Record* and the *Sunday Mail*, might claim to be the leading Scottish newspaper centre, but the capital boasts three titles – *The Scotsman*, the *Evening News* and *Scotland on Sunday*. Meanwhile Aberdeen has the *Press and Journal* and the *Evening Express* and Dundee, *The Courier*, the *Evening Telegraph* and the *Sunday Post*. Several of these titles regard themselves as national papers but they perform best in their immediate hinterlands which, in the case of the *Press and Journal* and *The Courier* may be a strength, since their editorial mix is heavily localised. Titles like *The Herald* and *The Scotsman*, however, and their Sunday stablemates, since they seek not only to cover the entire country but Britain and the world as well, have set themselves a much more expensive task.

The Scottish titles do not have it their own way, but face very serious competition from English papers, many of which are editionised for the Scottish market. The striking feature of the post-devolution situation is that not only have Scottish titles been losing circulation – a feature common to the press throughout the Western world – but they have also been losing market share to English titles. In the mid-1970s Scottish produced dailies had a 64% market share and Sundays a 66% share. By mid-2011 these shares had declined to 44% and 55% respectively, and were continuing their downward trend.<sup>6</sup>

It might have been expected that devolution would have given a fillip to indigenous papers but this has not proven to be the case at all. English titles inevitably have greater journalistic resources when it comes to covering the world but, even if they do editionise – with politics and culture in the upmarket titles and sport and crime in the downmarket ones – they should in theory have difficulty in appealing to more than a minority of Scottish readers. As the figures just quoted demonstrate, on a weekday that is no longer the case, and it would be a foolish individual who claimed that in a few years' time the Sunday market will not be similarly divided. The combination of loss of market share and absolute loss of sales is a potentially lethal one. It can be argued that the owners of the Scottish press – a mixture of indigenous, English-based and American companies – have underinvested in their titles, and that is why thousands of readers are abandoning them, but it remains a puzzle, and one with serious consequences for the public sphere in Scotland.

Despite the fact that press policy is not devolved, the Scottish parliament has begun to take an interest. In 2009 a proposal from local

authorities to remove public service announcements from local papers – which are in the main published weekly – was approved by the Scottish government as a legitimate revenue-saving device. However there was immediate protest from newspaper companies and a number of MSPs became anxious about the effect of the loss of revenue on these titles. The upshot was that the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee held a series of hearings, then issued a report which expressed serious concern about the future viability of these titles, and by extension the Scottish press as a whole (Scottish Parliament 2010). Before the committee's final report appeared the Holyrood government had told the local authorities that they would not be allowed to proceed with the shift of public service announcements online. It is a reasonable assumption, that, notwithstanding the actual legal position, MSPs will continue to be concerned about the health of the Scottish press, since, if it is further weakened, there can only be a limited public debate about the issues of the day; and when it comes to individual MSPs having their activities reported to their constituents, the local press is invaluable.

Scotland has the highest level of television viewing in the UK, according to Ofcom, 31.5 hours per head per week, a distinction shared with Wales, and the lowest level of radio listening, 21.8 hours per head per week (Ofcom 2011:8). However it has the lowest level of broadband uptake in the UK, a situation which has given Ofcom much thought and cannot be totally explained, according to the regulator, by varying income levels (Ofcom 2011:32).

As far as broadcast provision is concerned, Scotland is in a similar situation to Wales and Northern Ireland. The dominant broadcaster is the BBC: its national radio services are available to Scottish listeners, as are its main television services, BBC1 and BBC2, although on both of these there is significant opt-out programming, more on the former, where it amounts to around 10% of output, than on the latter. ITV/Channel 3 is represented in Scotland by Scottish Television, the bulk of whose programming is derived from ITV nationally. Channels 4 and 5 are also available, as is a wide range of niche channels, BBC and non-BBC. The Corporation is responsible for two stand-alone radio services, Radio Scotland and Radio nan Gàidheal. There is no BBC local radio in Scotland; the funds which might have been used to establish a group of stations on the English model were devoted to the establishment of the stand-alone Radio Scotland which came on air in 1978, followed by the pan-Scotland Gaelic station in 1985. Commercial local radio is firmly established, and most of the stations are now owned by the German Bauer company, while small community stations are also to be found. The commercial stations depend on advertising revenue, while the community stations obtain funds from a variety of sources, often in a hand-to-mouth fashion.

In addition to the BBC Radio nan Gàidheal service, there is now, as was mentioned above, a Gaelic-language television channel. Broadcasting in

Gaelic began early on BBC radio and also found a place in the Corporation's television schedules, but as a consequence of a successful campaign waged by Gaelic organisations, it has enjoyed a step change in the last twenty years (Cormack 2008: 213-226). The Thatcher government was persuaded that it should fund a Gaelic television service, to the tune of £9.5m per year, and that service began in 1993. The BBC and the then two separate ITV companies in Scotland, Grampian and Scottish, transmitted the programmes produced. Inevitably, there were scheduling problems and the pressure mounted for a new digital channel. BBC Alba went on air in 2008 and is financed jointly by the Scottish government and BBC Scotland, with £14m per year being spent in programme production (a level of expenditure which per Gaelic speaker is almost double that spent per Welsh speaker on S4C).<sup>7</sup> It broadcasts up to seven hours of material per day, much of it subtitled, and is now available on the terrestrial Freeview digital service in Scotland, as well as via satellite.

The other significant development in recent years was the establishment by the minority SNP government, shortly after it was elected in 2007, of the Scottish Broadcasting Commission, regardless of the fact that broadcasting policy is no more devolved than press policy. The Commission, headed by Blair Jenkins, a former head of news and current affairs at both BBC Scotland and STV, ranged widely, and argued in its final report that all the UK national channels should be expected to derive at least 8.6% of their output from Scottish sources, in line with the share of UK population north of the border, and that a new digital channel was required in Scotland. Such a channel, it was envisaged, would put a heavy emphasis on news and current affairs but there would be significant cultural and entertainment content too, although drama, the most expensive form of output, would be rather sparse.

The cost of the proposed channel was put at £75 million a year and the expectation was that it would be financed, not by Holyrood, but from a UK source. After the relevant minister appointed an expert panel to suggest the best way forward, it was suggested that the BBC licence fee should be topsliced to provide the money needed. Unfortunately this proposal emerged just as the UK government itself topsliced the licence fee to finance the World Service, S4C and other ventures, so the proposal does seem a non-starter, at least until the next BBC licence fee settlement, which is due to take effect after 2017. That date is beyond the likely date of the proposed referendum on independence which is expected to take place in 2014 before the end of the current Holyrood term, which was extended by a year until 2016 to avoid a clash with the next Westminster election scheduled for 2015. What this means is that, unless Holyrood finds some starter money, the digital channel, which the SBC chairman is fond of saying would be a 'no brainer' if television services were starting to develop afresh in Britain, is not going to go on air any time soon. It could be argued that unless Holyrood offers some kind of financial contribution, then the frequent declarations by all of the political parties represented there that such a channel is highly desirable ring rather hollow.

The Scots have always had a substantial appetite for 'the pictures'. Provision however is now much patchier than it was in the 1930s and 1940s: the major cities are well endowed with commercial multiplexes and art house venues, but there are other parts of Scotland where only community centres and film societies offer people the real cinema experience. In remoter areas of the country the Screen Machine, a French-built travelling cinema owned and operated by the public agency, Regional Screen Scotland, offers access to contemporary films not available in, for example, parts of mainland Ayrshire and Lanarkshire.

There is no firmly established film production industry in Scotland. Nonetheless, despite fluctuations from decade to decade, rather more films are made than was the case forty years ago, and a reasonable proportion of them relate to the host culture, rather than being simply shot in the country because, for example, Glasgow can be made to look like Pittsburgh or New York. Directors such as Peter Mullan, Andrea Arnold and Lynn Ramsay have established their careers on work that clearly talks about Scotland, whatever else they might have done subsequently. The existence of a distinctly Scottish cinema, albeit one which is precarious, has been acknowledged in a remarkable number of recent books.<sup>8</sup>

### **Dramatic writing for screen and radio**

Television and radio provide writers with significant opportunities for marketing and promotion, but they can also offer authors and publishers additional revenue when original scripts or adaptations are commissioned. In this latter regard it is instructive to look at recent BBC Scotland annual reviews. Here is what is said about drama in the 2007-8 review:

*River City* celebrated its fifth birthday in September, its enduring popularity reflected in the fact that during 2007 over half of the Scottish population (55%) tuned in to watch at some point during the year. Recently made available on the BBC iPlayer, *River City* can now be enjoyed by audiences across the UK. And, for the first time, BBC Scotland's drama department is to commission three original 60 minute dramas, for viewers in Scotland, to be produced this summer.

On network, *Waterloo Road* completed its third series, ending with an outstanding 5.5 million viewers. There has been a significant increase in drama commissions for 2008/09. Over the next 12 to 18 months BBC Scotland's drama department will work on a further six network series and three 90 minute single films. The new commissions feature stars such as Kenneth Branagh, Daniela Nardini, Annette Crosbie, Alex Kingston, Anthony Sher and Martin Shaw (*BBC Scotland Annual Review 2007- 08*, Television: 1).

*River City* is the first BBC Scotland soap and, as what is said above makes clear, it is popular, despite not having secured a UK network slot. It provides a lot of work of actors and for writers who are able to operate within the constraints of the genre. *Waterloo Road*, which is produced by the independent company, Shed, at that point was made entirely south of the border, though commissioned by BBC Scotland. It is to be transferred to a Scottish setting in 2012, and one assumes that again Scottish actors and writers will benefit. The one-off plays referred to in the review were aimed at the UK audience and were not specifically Scottish. BBC Scotland has been responsible for commissioning several adaptations of the Henning Mankel *Wallander* novels, with Kenneth Branagh in the leading role.

What is striking here is that, *River City* apart, there is no indigenous drama, but the situation on radio is different:

Radio drama stepped up a gear, with 12 new plays appearing – or due to appear – on Radio Scotland in 2008. Written by some of Scotland's leading writers, including Alexander McCall Smith, Liz Lochhead and Ian Finlay MacLeod (whose comedy drama, *Frozen*, met with wide critical acclaim), they contribute to the 74 hours of drama and readings, produced in-house across the year, for Radio Scotland and for the BBC radio networks (*BBC Scotland Annual Review 2007- 08*, Radio: 2).

Scottish novelists and dramatists were that year clearly being offered some work in radio and in the 2009-10 *Review* this statement about forthcoming drama productions was made, suggesting new developments in original drama for television were under way:

Drama development remains a priority for BBC Scotland. In 2010/11, new original drama will be commissioned to sit alongside *River City*. For network, *Single Father*, with David Tennant (for BBC One) and *Lip Service* (for BBC Three) will be broadcast later this year, as will *The Deep*, the drama set in the icy depths of the Arctic Ocean. Filming will start in Italy in spring 2010 on the dramatisation of three novels by Michael Dibdin. On radio, 12 new dramas, the majority from Scottish writers, will be commissioned for Radio Scotland and we will continue to provide dramas and speech programming for the BBC's network radio channels, including BBC Radio 4. (*BBC Scotland Annual Review 2009-10:9*).

In the light of the comments in these *Annual Reviews*, a few observations about the nature of BBC Scotland's current production can be made here. There is a growing amount of television drama being commissioned, not least, one suspects, because the Corporation has committed itself to substantially increasing the network contribution from Scotland. Much of this, as with all television in the UK today, is in series

format, with a few one-off plays. Some of the work is indigenous but most of it is not, and much of it could be produced anywhere else in the UK; it is in effect 'warehoused' to BBC Scotland. Finally, there is a great deal of crime, a feature of current television drama. Radio has rather more original plays, less crime and more adaptations; a lot of this work is heard on the UK channels, Radio 4 and Radio 3, some on Radio Scotland. Clearly this output provides work for Scottish actors and Scottish creative personnel, and there are also limited opportunities for dramatists and novelists. Overall, however, the output, particularly on television, is tenuously related to contemporary Scottish literature – and, for that matter, theatre.

In the past, by contrast, BBC Scotland has adapted a wide variety of novels for television.<sup>9</sup> *Sunset Song* (1971) is often cited as an outstanding example, and it was succeeded by the other two novels in Grassie Gibbon's trilogy, *Cloud Howe* (1982) and *Grey Granite* (1983). There have been several Scott adaptations including *Redgauntlet* (1959) and *Rob Roy* (1977). Contemporary novelists have also seen their work adapted: for example, William McIlvanney's *A Gift from Nessus*, was published in 1968 and appeared twelve years later on the television screen as a one-off play. Iain Banks's *The Crow Road* was transmitted as a serial in 1996, four years after publication. STV has adapted several of Ian Rankin's Rebus novels as one-off television dramas (2000-). Nonetheless, currently such adaptations are more likely to be transmitted on Radio 4, or on Radio 3, which may also transmit versions of Scottish stage plays. Television does not turn often to contemporary Scottish writing and its audience today is unlikely to see on the screen adaptations of the work of the likes of Janice Galloway, James Kelman, A. L. Kennedy or Allan Massie, though there is a greater chance of that happening on radio. As a consequence many members of that audience may simply not be aware of what has been happening in Scottish literature. It might be argued that this is a national UK problem but in fact from time to time there are television adaptations of contemporary English novels – for example Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (BBC2, 2006), or Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (Channel 4, 2002) – if less frequently than once was the case. And it remains the case that costume drama, drawing on the novels of Dickens, Austen, the Brontes and Gaskell, shows no sign of disappearing, not least because of its saleability abroad. There is no significant Scottish component in that output: neither Scott nor Stevenson has secured the kind of permanent television niche that the English writers mentioned have attained.

The basis of original television drama remains the series/serial and the soap opera. As far as the former is concerned, inspiration might come from novels, as was the case with the BBC's *Dr Finlay's Casebook* (1962-71)[repeated by STV (1993-96)], *Hamish Macbeth* (1995-97) and *Monarch of the Glen* (2000-2005), the series produced north of the border which secured the highest ratings for BBC Scotland's drama department in recent times. There have been many original series too over the years, such as BBC Scotland's *This Man Craig* (1966-67), set in a comprehensive school, and STV's *Bookie* (1987), but again the dominant subject matter is crime, as in the

BBC's *View from Daniel Pike* (1971-73) and, most obviously and persistently, STV's *Taggart* (1983 - 2011), which morphed from serial form to self-contained dramas. The original serial that in the last three decades has attracted most critical acclaim is John Byrne's *Tutti Frutti* (1987). His follow-up serial for BBC Scotland and the network, *Your Cheatin Heart* (1990), did not achieve the same accolades. Both, however, stand out as examples of distinguished work not adapted from novels or theatre but written for television by a dramatist who had made his name on the stage. STV meantime has been the principal provider of soaps, from *High Living* (1968-71) through *Garnock Way* (1976-79) to *Take the High Road/High Road* (1980-2003). As noted above, however, the current Scottish soap, *River City* (2002-present), is a BBC Scotland production.<sup>10</sup> The single play remains an endangered species, largely because drama executives, with eyes on their CVs and the next job, appear reluctant to take a chance on work which cannot be promoted in the way a series can, and which carries real risks of failure, even if bolstered by star names of the sort mentioned in the 2009-10 BBC Scotland *Annual Review*.

The BBC has always been the dominant source of drama from Scotland. However Channel 4 has commissioned Scottish-based work, including *The Book Group* (2002-03), and in the past STV has offered challenging material, such as its adaptation of Jimmy Boyle's autobiography, *A Sense of Freedom* (1979). BBC Alba, with its limited budget, does not appear to feel able to make a significant contribution, and the proposed digital channel, though envisaged as having a much higher budget than the Gaelic one, would only be able to make a small commitment to drama. There might be some co-productions, but the examples of the highly successful *Wallander* (the original series) and *The Killing*, from Sweden and Denmark respectively, suggest that crime is the genre most likely to attract co-production funding.

There have been adaptations of contemporary novels in the Scottish cinema such as *The Big Man* (1990), *Trainspotting* (1996), *Morvern Callar* (2002) and *Young Adam* (2003). And the authors, William McIlvanney, Irvine Welsh, Alan Warner and, in the case of Alexander Trocchi, his estate – and their publishers – benefited financially, although other hands were responsible for the screenplays. Most Scottish films, however, tend to be based on original scripts, even though a number of these scripts do owe a debt to a particular strand of contemporary Scottish fiction, for example, *Ratcatcher* (1999), *Sweet Sixteen* (2002), *Red Road* (2006), and *Neds* (2010).

These last films might be described as 'miserabilist'. The term 'miserabilism' was used by Richard Collins in his book on Canadian television in 1990 to describe much Canadian TV output (Collins 1990). Collins took his cue to some degree from the novelist Margaret Atwood's extended essay on Canadian literature, *Survival* (Atwood 1972), and argued that television drama north of the forty-ninth parallel often seeks distinctiveness through de-emphasising action and happy endings, and emphasising a very un-American gloom. Collins's thesis has attracted significant dissent but anyone familiar

with the drama output of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Canadian films would have to acknowledge that there is a case to be made. Similar accusations have been leveled against Scottish writing as well as cinema.

Scottish writing is dour, dark and in need of sexing up. That was the message from literary expert Jenny Brown at a special conference on the state of Scottish literature last week. Brown, a literary agent who was instrumental in winning Edinburgh's bid to become the first Unesco world city of literature title, argued that Scottish literary fiction needs to break out of its "miserabilist" mould.

"We write typically dark fiction in an age where people want feelgood novels," she told Glasgow's Aye Write! festival on Friday. "Scots are really good at feeling bad. The Scottish novel is marked out by introspection, experimental use of Scots, and a setting in areas of deprivation.

(Sunday Herald 27.2.05)

And Duncan Petrie, a distinguished analyst and celebrator of contemporary Scottish cinema, observes

One of the most striking features of Scottish cultural production of the last twenty years is an unsettling sense of nastiness permeating both literary and cinematic works (Petrie 2004: 116).

It is a theme which has been echoed by at least one senior television executive, Stuart Cosgrove of Channel 4. When taxed as to why more small screen drama is not being commissioned in Scotland, he attacked Scots writers who appear to be in love with 'the culture of poverty'.<sup>11</sup>

It would be foolish to deny that there is a miserabilist streak – which extends into television comedy such as *Rab C Nesbitt* (1988-present) – and whether literature has affected film or vice-versa, or whether there is a deep-seated Scottish pessimism affecting both, is an interesting area for discussion. But it cannot possibly be claimed that there are no alternative Scottish voices in the literary sphere. Could it really be argued that either, say, Allan Massie or Ronald Frame are miserabilist? The problem in film and television is that Scottishness has come to be rather narrowly defined, and that narrowness ill reflects the totality of what is being produced in the literary field. What can currently be sold to networks and film producers is not necessarily what could be sold if a few executives were to take some risks and look for a wider range of material.

To sum up, the Scottish writers who stand to benefit most from current media output are dramatists who are comfortable working on television series/serials, treating them either as their sole source of income, or as a

source additional to theatre work. Novelists are offered much slimmer pickings, poets scarcely any pickings at all.

### **Promoting literature**

Notwithstanding what has just been said, the media remain very important to literature in the crucial process of marketing and promotion. In this respect there is a clear broadsheet/tabloid distinction ('broadsheet' is used here in the traditional sense in relation to content than actual format; some broadsheet titles are now printed in tabloid format). The tabloids do not often carry stories about novelists or poets and they do not regularly review theatrical productions. Writers such as Ian Rankin and J. R. Rowling are an exception to that general rule, for they can be said to have achieved followings that will be well represented among tabloid readers. So stories about the latest novel from each – or film/television adaptations – can be expected to appear in tabloid pages and their publicists no doubt seek to place such stories there.

That is not an option open to A.L. Kennedy, James Kelman or Janice Galloway. They, and writers like them, depend on news stories and reviews appearing elsewhere, particularly in the four Central Belt-based broadsheet papers, all of which do have a commitment to reviewing serious literature. However it is a commitment which encompasses literature beyond Scotland, and rather more than fiction. So there is intense competition for space in these titles, space that can expand substantially during such events as the Edinburgh Book Festival. That event, however, like others of its kind, seeks to operate on an international basis. This means that Scottish fiction competes for attention, not only with Scottish non-fiction, but also with books of all kinds from beyond Scotland. And no paper can do more than offer selective reports of proceedings at busy festivals. The approach to theatre reviewing is rather better, particularly in the Central Belt dailies, for they endeavour to cover most of what is presented professionally in Scotland. That does not, indeed cannot, happen with Scottish fiction and non-fiction.

For this reason the appearance of the *Scottish Review of Books* in 2004 was a very important event for Scottish writing. This quarterly publication is available on subscription but crucially it is also distributed free with *The Herald*, which means that it reaches a far wider audience than might otherwise be the case, albeit a smaller one than would have been possible ten or twenty years ago when the paper's circulation was much higher than it is now. The *Review* concentrates on Scottish writing – though not exclusively – and it is in its pages that one can expect serious fiction, poetry and other kinds of writing to be reviewed and discussed in feature articles. Other minor journals do exist, often supported by Creative Scotland, but they do not have the circulation of the *Review*.

Many Scottish writers are published in London, for example, Alasdair Gray, James Robertson and Jackie Kay. But such writers may well have been first published north of the border and like, for example, Alexander McCall Smith, may continue to be published in both Scotland and England. A Scottish writer who is firmly established on a UK basis is as – if not more – reliant on publicity and reviews in the English broadsheets as in the Scottish ones. The feature material and reviews occasioned by the publication of Galloway's latest volume of semi-autobiography, *All Made Up*, illustrate that point very well. As print publicity and reviews are important, so are those on radio and television. Just as the London broadsheets are important, so are Radio 4 and, to a lesser extent, Radio 3, which offer a range of opportunities for the discussion and review of literature.

The Scottish government Working Party on literature referred to earlier had this to say about BBC Scotland:

Literature is currently not promoted by the BBC as it once was. While the group realises it cannot influence the editorial decisions of the corporation, it believes that, since the BBC is a public service, concerns of those who think its coverage of literature could be improved must be raised. The BBC has a responsibility to represent fairly the country's artistic interests. With respect to books and authors, with which the country is awash, the group thinks that more could be done, and that what is done could be given greater prominence [...]. While there is a dedicated Radio Scotland book programme, the lively and imaginative Book Café, it goes out twice a week at lunchtime, a slot that means it will reach only a fraction of the audience it might, and is repeated on Sunday afternoon (Scottish Government 2010a: 31).

The report's authors might have added that the *Book Café*, like the Scottish broadsheets, does not confine itself to Scottish books. So, indigenous writers have to compete with those from the rest of the world for attention. (That point can be made about indigenous drama too but it is the focus of reviews and feature material, and few new plays are unnoticed. In recent times one at least, the National Theatre of Scotland production of *Black Watch*, widely produced nationally and internationally since its 2006 première, has become a phenomenon. This has moved from the arts pages to the news ones, and into the radio and television news bulletins because of its international success.)

What is odd about the Working Group's report, given that its chair was the literary editor of *The Herald*, Rosemary Goring, is how little it has to say about the press, which, it has just been argued here, is vital in promoting and marketing Scottish writing. The one relevant mention is right at the end of a sentence which follows on from what is quoted above:

The group would like to be in a position to insist upon a weekly television programme featuring new Scottish work, but it holds no sway when it comes to any form of media, be it the BBC, STV or newspapers

(Scottish Government 2010a: 32).

One is at a loss to explain the omission, particularly as it is clear that the four pan-Scottish broadsheets face a very uncertain future. If one or two were to close, or four were to merge to form two, the weekly space available for feature material and reviews would decline drastically. The Working Group failed in its responsibilities by not flagging up this issue.

### **Ongoing concerns and an uncertain future**

If writing is to continue to flourish and develop in Scotland, there need to be opportunities that enable writers of talent to make a tolerable living. If literature and the indigenous media are to flourish, there need to be resources available that ensure a robust production infrastructure across both. Political support must be sustained beyond gestures and tokenism. And a number of specific issues will require to be addressed.

The very serious problem of the decline of the broadsheet press, vital for general public debate and for its contribution to the marketing and promotion of literature, is going to have to be discussed at parliamentary level. The use of public funding to support a wider range of newspapers than would otherwise exist, which is the norm in Scandinavia but has always been anathema in Britain, will have to be seriously considered.<sup>12</sup> Meantime broadcast executives will need to be persuaded not simply, or at all, to engage in affirmative action on behalf of Scottish literature but to reflect onscreen and on radio the range of Scottish literature, past and present, which is available on the shelves of good bookshops and libraries, and thus to extend their audiences' understanding, knowledge and pleasure.

As already noted, a referendum on the constitutional status of Scotland will almost certainly be held in the next three years. The result is not predictable at this stage. The consequences of independence for writers are equally unpredictable. The government of a sovereign – or federalised – Scotland, however, might wish to be heavily supportive in the cultural sphere. And it cannot be denied that a succession of devolved governments has ensured substantial funding to date; the 2011 budget settlement for Creative Scotland was hugely more generous than what was offered to the English Arts Council. But the economic situation the world faces could well mean that there would be a shortage of funds in an independent/federalised Scotland for cultural projects, not least as a consequence of the current largesse to various groups, such as the elderly and students, which may prove difficult to curtail. Meantime, the questions of how, after a referendum vote for change, broadcasting in Scotland would be organised and financed, and what its relationship would be to the BBC, have yet to be properly examined.

It might be reasonable to assume that Scottish talent in the literary – and other fields – will continue to be as well placed to succeed beyond Scotland as it currently does, regardless of constitutional arrangements. However, if a constitutional breakup were acrimonious – a very real possibility, given such tricky questions as the ownership of the remaining gas and oil reserves in the North Sea, and the existence of the nuclear submarine bases on the Clyde – might there be an English backlash, and hostility to all things Scottish? In the literary field that could damage emerging writers, and even established ones. On the other hand, it can be argued that Irish writers are very popular in the UK, despite the fact that a bloody conflict preceded independence in 1922, and that there is no possibility of such a conflict in Scotland. But Ireland went its own way almost a hundred years ago, and relations were difficult between the new state and the UK for many years.

It really is impossible to predict how the relationship between Scotland and what remained of the UK after independence might develop. If the country does opt for complete separation, it can only be hoped that the two countries become the best of neighbours, and that in the cultural sphere nothing changes very much, or rather such changes as do take place are of mutual benefit, and enrich the lives of all of us, writers, readers, listeners and viewers.

#### ENDNOTES

1. See <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/FAQs> [Accessed December 20 2011] for details of the devolution settlement.
2. For the exact figure and the figures for the previous eight years see - <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/09/17093831/12> [Accessed December 20 2011]
3. See *Serving Scotland Better: Scotland and the United Kingdom in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. <http://www.commissiononscottishdevolution.org.uk/uploads/2009-06-12-csd-final-report-2009fbookmarked.pdf>. [Accessed December 20 2011]. Discussion since the report was published has focused on whether the proposals which are being incorporated in a Westminster Act of Parliament go far enough.
4. For a discussion of the differences between the systems see McInnes, R. 2010. *Scots Law for Journalists*. Edinburgh: W.Green.
5. The website, <http://www.bfi.org.uk> [Accessed December 20 2011], declares, for example –  
  
'The BFI releases films in cinemas across the UK, bringing classic titles to a new generation of film-lovers.'

The remastered copy of *Les Enfants du Paradis* released at the end of 2011 is one such film which was screened in several Scottish cinemas. Furthermore, Scottish organisations have been able to access transitional funding from the Institute following the abolition of the UK Film Council.

6. Circulation statistics are available from the Audit Bureau of Circulations, <http://www.abc.org.uk> [Accessed December 20 2011]. For a discussion of the decline in indigenous titles see my chapter in Blain, N. and Hutchison, D. 2008. *The Media in Scotland*. Edinburgh: EUP, pp.66-69.

7. S4C's budget is just under £80m per year, while the number of Welsh speakers is around 600,000; the production budget of BBC Alba is £14m per annum and the number of Gaelic speakers around 60,000.

8. See for example, Bruce, D. 1996. *Scotland the Movie*. Edinburgh: Polygon, Martin-Jones, D. 2009. *Scotland: Global Cinema*. Edinburgh: EUP and Petrie, D. 2000. *Screening Scotland*. London: BFI.

9. See Cook, J., 'Three Ring Circus', in Blain, N. and Hutchison, D. 2008. op. cit., pp.107-122 for an extended discussion of television drama production north of the border.

10. See O'Donnell, H., 'Nae Bevvying, Nae Skiving', in Blain, N. and Hutchison, D. 2008. op. cit., pp. 123- 136 for a history of Scottish soap opera production.

11. Cosgrove argues further

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'It is a minor part of Scottish life but it has come to dominate our cultural landscape. Whether it's the literature of James Kelman, the work of Ken Currie or the kind of film Peter Mullan has been in, they are all set against this socially, culturally, emotionally deprived failed industrial backdrop.'

'I'm not trying to ban social realism. I just think we need to get it into perspective. Almost every single script that lands on my desk is caught up in this world. It is time to move on, to reconnect with those epic periods of Scottish history that preceded industrialism in order to understand that Scotland has a much longer history of success than it does of failure.'

See

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2005/feb/13/broadcasting.channel4?INTCMP=SRCH> [Accessed December 20 2011].

12. See the Swedish government website - <http://www.sweden.gov.se/sb/d/14476> [Accessed December 20 2011] - for an account of the present system. In 2009 the total public subvention was 550m kroner (c. €61m). For an extended analysis of the situation in Sweden see - [stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/tv-research/subsidies.pdf](http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/tv-research/subsidies.pdf). [Accessed December 20 2011].

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Sunday Herald 27.2.05, report on 'Aye Write' event.