

Ilka Schwittlinsky

“Scotland’s a Sense of Change”

History and the Land
in Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s *A Scots Quair*
and James Robertson’s *And the Land Lay Still*

Sigrid Rieuwerts, Rainer Emig, Sally L. K. Garden (General Eds.)

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1 Introduction

In Scotland, the question of nationhood has dominated the second decade of the twenty-first century. The events surrounding the 2014 Independence Referendum and the 2016 Brexit Referendum have shown how vital this question is to the Scottish people and how contentiously it is discussed. What is at stake is Scotland's place in the world – whether it should remain part of the United Kingdom or seek independence and re-enter the European Union as a sovereign country. For the last three hundred years, since the Union of the Parliaments in 1707, Scotland has been a stateless nation. Where before it was a nation-state in its own right, it became part of the United Kingdom. While the Scottish nation did not cease to exist during this period, Scotland did give up its own institutions and thereby its independence. The Union of Parliaments certainly had positive effects for Scotland, but it has not been without contentions.

After the Scottish Parliament was dissolved in the Union of the Parliaments of 1707, the government of Scotland was subsumed into the government of Great Britain and moved to London. For almost two centuries, this new status quo in administrative and governmental matters was hardly questioned, until in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century a Scottish home rule movement with ties to the Liberal Party was founded. The association was modelled on the Irish Home Rule League under Charles Stewart Parnell and campaigned for Scottish home rule with enough success that a home rule bill was introduced in Parliament by William Cowan, the Liberal MP for Aberdeenshire Eastern, in 1913 during the tenure of Prime Minister H.H. Asquith. The bill reached a first reading in the House of Commons, but was not pursued further due to the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. The war, in fact, rallied the majority of Scots to the cause of the United Kingdom in a way which made pursuing home rule appear treasonous.

In the inter-war years, there was an attempt to revive the idea of a Scottish nation, but the effort foundered when the Second World War broke out, which once again brought the British people together to fight a common foe. In the aftermath of the war, the 1950s were characterized by the creation of the British welfare state, which led to immediate improvements for Scotland and for the moment silenced calls for more independence. The movement towards home rule was accelerated, however, in the decades which followed by the rise and early successes of the Scottish National Party (SNP), which demanded all-out independence for Scotland. Under pressure from the SNP's success in the 1970s, the Labour party espoused the cause of home rule, now referred to as devolution. A first Devolution Referendum was held in 1979, which saw a majority of those who had gone to the polls vote yes; unfortunately, this majority did not represent a majority of the entire electorate, as had been specified in the run-up to the referendum, so devolution was not granted. On the heels of the failed referendum, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister and managed, through her harsh economic policies, to do what Scottish parties had failed to achieve during the

previous decades: convince a majority of Scots that the status quo was no longer acceptable and that Scotland needed more powers within the United Kingdom.

It took until the end of the 1990s, however, until Labour under Tony Blair won an election in the United Kingdom and delivered on its campaign promise of devolution for Scotland. A referendum in 1997 was finally successful in bringing about devolution and the Scottish Parliament, which had been adjourned in 1707, was reconvened in 1999. Since 2007, Scotland has been governed by the SNP. During its first term in office, the SNP formed a minority government, but it managed to expand its voter base in the 2011 election and has held a majority of seats in Parliament ever since. From its first term in office, the SNP promoted the cause of Scottish independence and arranged a referendum for 2014, which was only narrowly defeated. Talk of Scottish independence did not subside afterwards, however, as one of the reasons for many Scots to vote against independence was continued membership in the European Union, which the United Kingdom officially left on January 1, 2021, after a transition period of almost a year in length.

The political process towards devolution was accompanied in all its stages by a movement on the cultural scene, which robustly made the case for Scotland as a nation in its own right. Two periods in particular stand out as moments in which culture and specifically literature were of exceeding importance to the promotion of Scotland's unique identity: the 1920s to 1930s and the 1980s to 1990s. In the 1920s and 1930s, the so-called Scottish Literary Renaissance promoted Scottish difference from English culture by highlighting Scotland's languages, its history and culture. In the 1980s and 1990s, literature picked up the pieces of Scotland's shattered self-confidence after the failed referendum and provided a medium for a survey of the current situation in Scotland, visions of what it might be and more general discussions of Scottish questions as well as Scottish identity. These processes, already wide-spread in literature and therefore familiar to Scots, gained entry to the political sphere in 2007 when First Minister Alex Salmond opened the so-called National Conversation, which laid the groundwork for the 2014 independence referendum, and asked the Scottish people to "reflect, not just on what kind of country we are, but on the kind of country we could be, the kind of country we should be" (*Your Scotland* 2009, i).

Due to literature's prominent role in promoting Scottish identity and supporting Scotland's political development in the twentieth century, this thesis will look at Scotland's changing self-image over the course of the twentieth century through the lens of literature. In order to make visible such a long process, it is necessary to choose texts which not only overtly deal with questions of nationhood, but which offer a broader view of Scotland and Scottish history, in other words, not mere historical novels but panoramic novels. Two texts exemplify not only the tendency of Scottish literature to overtly deal with the state of the Scottish nation and questions of Scottish identity, but also meet the criteria for a panoramic novel of covering a longer period of time as well as a wider spectrum of Scottish life: Lewis Grassie Gibbon's trilogy *A Scots Quair* (1932-34) and James Robertson's novel *And the Land Lay Still* (2010). They form the basis of the discussion in this thesis.