

***The Literature of Scotland* by Roderick Watson. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Second Edition. pbk £25. Volume One: *The Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*. 389pp. ISBN 0 333 66664 X. Volume Two: *The Twentieth Century*. 381pp. ISBN 0 2300 00037 1.**

First published in 1984 in a single volume, this timely second edition is now split into two books: the middle ages to the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century.

Watson's comprehensive new two-volume edition not only indicates the burgeoning of contemporary Scottish Studies, but updates and expands discussion of twentieth-century Scottish literature to focus attention on the creative vitality of the past century, and the present.

'What is "Scottish literature"?' asks Watson in his Preface, answering that he will deal with Scottish writers who have given us various '*representations*' and ideas of 'the matter of Scotland' (xii). Dealing exclusively with a national literary culture raises question of a canon: Should Scot Lit, much of it for so long excluded from or intermittently absorbed into the English Literature canon, build a canon of its own? Or, rather than seeking parity with metropolitan traditions, should the discipline steer clear of canon building and find diverse strengths in opposition to the politics of a canon? Emphasising the constructed nature of national identity, Watson acknowledges that behind his book are 'tricky questions of canon formation', viewing his project partly as an attempt to trace 'the slow growth of a Scottish canon' (xiv). This begs many questions not in Watson's remit to answer, some going beyond academia, not least the pragmatics of whether any Scottish publisher has the economic clout to match the BBC-like cultural pervasiveness of Penguin's heavily Anglocentric canon. Also, what are the ethics/politics of using individual creative

writers, notwithstanding contemporary emphasis on plurality, as organic building blocks to construct a national culture? And – highly pertinent to the expanded twentieth-century entries – should contemporary writers be listed as canonical before their life's work is done and the culture can question its final worth?

In line with the idea of canon building Watson starts by charting 'the beginnings of Scotland' (vol.1, ch.1), emphasising the geographically (Highland/Lowland) and linguistically (Gaelic, Scots, English) divided nature of the culture, then works through important figures chronologically by century from the late-medieval 'flowering' (vol.1, p.32) of the Renaissance makars. He establishes three periods as 'defining' (vol.1, p.1): Henryson and Dunbar's fifteenth century; the Enlightenment, stretching from the eighteenth to Scott's nineteenth century; and the modernist Renaissance, extending from the postcolonial 1920-30s (exemplified by MacDiarmid's seminal 'English Ascendancy in British Literature', 1931) beyond to the devolutionary 90s. The twentieth century is given precedence as the period of 'richest and most diverse literary production' (xiii) and, tellingly, the volume ends with discussion of Gaelic poetry, Watson highlighting the number of non-native Gaelic speakers, such as Meg Bateman and Christopher Whyte, who have chosen to work in this 'minority' language for artistic and/or political reasons (vol.2, p.332). This commendable emphasis on Gaelic informs both volumes and complements Watson's concern with the language in his 1995 anthology *The Poetry of Scotland*.

Time and History (Enlightenment motifs of encyclopaedism and canonicity) are structurally central. Timelines at the rear of each volume emphasise the canonical, placing Scottish literary production in the mainstream of world events and literature. Similarly, historical aperçus at the beginning of each chapter help contextualise, as well as enabling and encouraging the still-needed historicising of Scottish (cultural)

experience. The emboldening of significant names provides a reference-like quality to a book of formidable scholarship that can be easily dipped into for specific, sought-after information, yet general reader and specialist alike can read Watson's lucid prose from cover-to-cover with pleasure. Competitively priced, the volumes are sold together, which may dissuade those general buyers who might be more tempted by the twentieth-century volume; however, this combination provides an extensive and indispensable overview of the Scottish literary canon.

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