



John Patrick Pazdziora, ed., *Christianity in Scottish Literature*, Association of Scottish Literary Studies Occasional Papers no. 25 (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2023), pp. xxxiv + 306, ISBN 978-1908980373. £19.95

One should not generally judge a book by its cover; and yet, in the case of *Christianity in Scottish Literature*, there is some merit in doing so. The book's cover art is from contemporary stained glass by Emma Butler-Cole Aiken, mosaic-like in a resplendent array of coloured light, at its heart the white dove of the Holy Spirit. For this is, indeed, a colourful array, and editor John Pazdziora's Introduction includes a romp through its theme with many of the favourites we might expect; Miss Jean Brodie, Dr Hyde, Jeanie Deans, and others, including Hugh MacDiarmid's line 'God through the wrong end of a telescope', which Pazdziora evokes with theological astuteness alongside Tillich's 'threat of nonbeing' (p. xxvi).

As a collection of occasional papers from a 2016 (pre-pandemic) conference, the anthology is bound to be eclectic, and from the diachronic line-up there are some major omissions: there are no essays on Burns or James Hogg; Gaelic literature – such as the work of Sorley MacLean – is also not included. Yet this is perhaps the book's real charm – it makes me want to read more of its sometimes lesser-known authors. Each essay is another rather fascinating fragment of the stained-glass window.

Beginning with the eighth-century *Vita Sancti Columbae*, Duncan Sneddon opens the collection by diving into an enchanted world where the saint can make white stones from the River Ness float, and Sneddon speculates on the text as 'instruction manual' so that bodily relics or objects blessed by the saint can be used efficaciously in his absence. It reads almost as fantasy – and yet Sneddon's scholarship pulls the reader back into the sense of hagiographic narrative as tied to historical characters. From there, hagiographic narratives are also taken up in the thirteenth century when Claire Harrill looks at the *Vita* and *Miracula* of St Margaret of Scotland. Harrill offers no easy resolution, save that of historical contextualisation, to the challenge St Margaret poses for feminist readings; we can embrace Margaret as a (posthumous and hagiographic) military leader, but how are we to engage with her proud reputation as a saintly mother who resorts violently and excessively to corporal punishment? It is good that Harrill neither minimises nor resolves the problem, leaving us with perhaps enough of a victory for one day, that

‘Medieval femininity does not necessitate passivity or abjuration of the world’ (p. 32).

Moving into liturgical concerns, David Jasper brings to light a connection between late medieval poetry and liturgy in Scotland. For all the discontinuities of the Reformation, Jasper uncovers a ‘hidden gem’ in the 1637 *Scottish Book of Common Prayer*, arguing for it as an agent of continuity. Although its use was of limited duration, it serves, Jasper argues, as a source of inspiration not only for later Scottish Episcopalian liturgy but also for High Anglicanism more generally. He demonstrates a rich, mutual cross-fertilisation between liturgy and poetry, with excerpts from Dunbar, Henryson and David Lyndsay.

Ian Brown’s contribution, next, is to tease out some of the subtleties which mitigate a common perception of the early Reformed church as a source of totally repressive opposition to theatre. As a church and social historian, Brown presents the nuances in attitudes to the theatre, including the similarities in pre- and post-Reformation contexts; attitudes to different types of theatre; and the ways the church negotiated with and even co-opted the theatre. The result is a glimpse into a period of cultural vibrancy where stereotypes of the Kirk do little to aid our appreciation.

J. Walter McGinty’s celebration of eccentrics in Tobias Smollett’s novels offers a consideration of how these characters might offer a safe mouthpiece for the author to voice perhaps dangerously incisive criticisms of the church in the eighteenth century. McGinty is careful in his scholarship, fully aware that Cadwallader, Lismahago and Tabitha (his three ‘eccentrics’) are only characters presented to us for our own evaluation. However, McGinty also turns to Smollett’s non-fiction and finds corroborating evidence there; such that Smollett can be convincingly read as a ‘whimsical witness of the religious issues of his time’ (p. 83), with decidedly radical overtones within the humour.

Barbara Bell examines the life and work of Robert Davidson, a nineteenth-century dissenting Borders ‘peasant poet’. Bell comfortably establishes Davidson and his work in the contexts of history, social class, religion, and literature, both Scots and English. Through readings of his Scots and English poetry, Bell is able to bring out his sense of social justice, wry humour, and indignation at religious abuses – and yet also, movingly, his deep sense of faith, morality and philosophical acceptance:

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When stern misfortune bends her bow;
And aims her shafts at me or you,
 We'll shun what's low an' mean;
Amidst the stour we'll catch content,
And scorn each peevish, poor complaint,
 That ne'er can serve a preen.¹

In a similar time and place, J. H. Alexander brings to light something of an unexpected curio, in the form of Walter Scott's *Religious Discourses*; essentially, the published copy of sermons which Scott wrote for a discouraged clerical friend to pass off as his own. Is there a note of irony in the contemporary review which Alexander quotes?

Sir Walter has explained and defended the doctrines of Scripture with a calm and unruffled seriousness [... not] to confound either the language or sentiment of poetry with that intended to convey instruction t[o] persons of ordinary understanding.²

The interplay between the sermons' content and Scott's novels, along with the rather farcical story of how they were first written and then published, makes for an entertaining read.

John Patrick Pazdziora's study of 'stickit' (failed) preachers in George MacDonald's nineteenth-century novels approaches the topics of MacDonald's novelistic preachers as an essay of literature and theology. Pazdziora brings these together in a nexus where the stakes are high, in that, for MacDonald, it seems that 'The poetic imagination in Jesus's sermonic method offers the possibility of [...] encounter with the divine' (p. 129), whereas MacDonald's 'portrayals of failed preachers [...] succeed in revealing the hollowness of their character' (p. 124). The seriousness of this concern makes sense in the context Pazdziora presents, in which MacDonald's own life story is one of suffering loss as a troubled and ultimately renounced preacher himself, for a theological truth he sees as prior to religious orthodoxy. Although generating scathing criticism and

¹ "Epistle to William Bennett", in *Leaves from a Peasant's Cottage Drawer: Being Poems by Robert Davidson, Day-labourer, Morebattle, Roxburghshire* (Edinburgh: James Hogg, 1848), 121, ll. 43–48, quoted in Bell, 93.

² *Atheneum* (7 May 1828), p. 435, quoted in Alexander, 108–09.

bitingly humorous satire, MacDonald does not produce bitterness. There is true redemption of sinners in MacDonald's fictive universe – and Pazdziora shows us examples of just how beautifully MacDonald narrates these fictions of grace in a Scottish setting.

Rebecca McLean takes another Scottish nineteenth-century novelist, Margaret Oliphant, as a window into Christianity and Scottish literature. Oliphant develops the genre of 'the religious ghost story',³ and in details from Oliphant's posthumously published autobiography McLean sets the stage for a study of how Oliphant is operating as a heterodox and highly creative theological thinker in her ghost stories. McLean interrogates Oliphant's 'deathscapes' as a way in which Oliphant wrestles with multiple bereavements in a fictive theology of loving care, both for the deceased and for the living who are left behind to grieve.

Silvia Mergenthal next takes us to the Scottish (largely Presbyterian) religious attitudes of WWI soldiers in a sample of war poets. Mergenthal foregrounds this in a revisionist history of how the Great War affected religious attitudes in Scotland. She presents a case for continuity rather than rupture – of faith already waning or at least becoming 'diffusive', of values rather than strictures and doctrines – before the Great War. From here she offers a selection of poetry which either seeks to reaffirm faith, albeit of a 'diffusive' kind, or is scathing in its ironic stance to religion. Perhaps what is striking in this is how contemporary some of these lines seem in their defiance of a piety we might wrongly assume to have been then dominant in a Scotland which is too easily sentimentalised.

Dominique Delmaire takes a phenomenological approach to the twentieth-century Scottish Renaissance poets he engages with – Hugh MacDiarmid, George Bruce, Norman MacCaig and Iain Crichton Smith – in order to interrogate the situation where the Reformation is seen as having 'destroyed [Scottish] poetry's connection with God and the concomitant sense of wonder' (p. 180). Yet wonder is clearly of utmost poetic import, and even while Crichton Smith is railing against a hard Calvinism, Delmaire seeks to situate this wonder in a spiritual context. For this, he turns to Heidegger, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Duns Scotus, probing for ways to articulate this connection. One feels that the poets

³ M. R. James, "Some remarks on Ghost Stories", in *The Bookman* (December 1929), quoted in McLean, 147.

themselves might have grudgingly agreed. After all, Delmaire's Christianity here is of a phenomenological, rather than a doctrinal, turn.

Linden Bicket situates George Mackay Brown as a Catholic writer of twentieth-century Orkney, where Brown sees the poet's task as an agent of resacralising that Orkney, specifically, after a Weberian desacralisation of the everyday as wielded by the Reformation. It offers a somehow wholesome and nourishing window into Brown's work, where there are grounds for optimism if we are to view the sacred as present as much in superstition and magic as in organised religion. As happens repeatedly in this volume's refreshing departures from dogmatic expectations, this is a celebration of poetic freedom.

Mike Kugler argues for a 'post-religious incarnation' in Alan Warner's 1995 novel *Morvern Callar* (p. 225), exploring the context of Warner's fictionalised Oban/Connell area specifically in a twentieth-century Highlands where Culloden and the Clearances have left behind a denuded population. This 'incarnation' has multiple senses – the gruesome flesh of Morvern's dead boyfriend (and her own fleshly sexual adventures) but, more deeply, a literary incarnation of Christian symbolism. One leaves Kugler's godly reading of the ungodly somehow with a sense of deep, Christological compassion for the lost child, symbol of a generation, who is Morvern Callar.

James McGonigal plays word games in his conflation of the 'post-millennial' in Edwin Morgan's post-2000 poetry collections, as he perceives a poetic eschatology in how Morgan wrestles with his cancer diagnosis in the 2000s. McGonigal draws out a persistent Jesus-focus in Morgan's work, such that Morgan is a beautiful heretic, and death is transformed in an eschatology drawing on the tender mercy of Karl Rahner and the Hungarian theologian Ladislaus Boros. All this is grounded in a context of poetic and biographical detail to create a window into Morgan, the 'gallus' and thought-provoking anti-theo-poet.

The collection closes with an essay from the writer Alastair McIntosh, to mark the launch of his book *Poacher's Pilgrimage: An Island Journey* at the ASLS conference from which these papers are drawn. McIntosh's paper is an anomaly, and yet an enriching one; he is writing not as critic but as poet, reflecting on his own process and its fruits. McIntosh is both passionate and considered in his exploration of folklore, and of mentoring by the non-academic, non-literary 'ordinary' women who give him their wisdom and bless him. He is seeking a re-envisioning of faith where non-

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violence and the folkloric are honoured. It is a fitting conclusion to the collection.

The cover matter intimates that these essays offer ‘sometimes disharmonious readings of what it means to be Christian and Scottish’; this array of legitimate and rather glorious divergences gains its strength from this very diversity. The only criticism is that once or twice there are archaic Scottish words which even I, as a native Scot, couldn’t fathom – but these are not sufficient grounds for removing the charm of seeing a few excellent Scots verses in print.

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