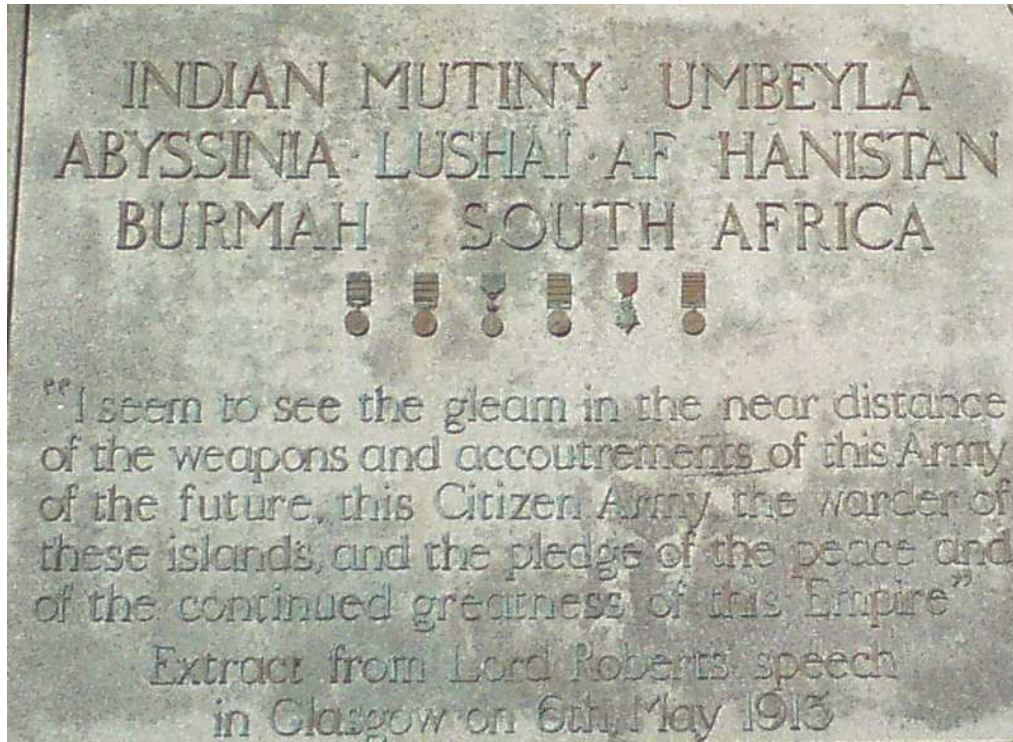


Complicity, Resistance and Distance: Iraq, Afghanistan and the new imperialism in contemporary Scottish Literature.



Plinth inscription on south-facing side of statue of Field Marshall Frederick Roberts, 1st Earl Roberts of Kandahar, Pretoria and Waterford (1832-1914), in Kelvingrove Park, Glasgow.

'But you don't talk about death.
You only ever say you have knowledge of the working of bombs.'
A L Kennedy, *Day*

Stewarty You seen what happens when a bullet that size hits somebody?

Writer Well . . . no . . . I haven't

Stewarty So how the fuck are you gonny explain it tay folk, then?

Gregory Burke, PUB IV, *Black Watch*

Various scholars from across the disciplinary spectrum have described the 21st century US/UK sponsored invasion and (continuing) occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan as evidence of a new (or 'refurbished') imperialism at work in the contemporary world system. For some¹ this crisis has borne all the signals of the renovation of older, territorially wrought forms of imperial domination, proof of a 'colonial present' that requires all possible forms of

¹ See for example, Neil Lazarus and Priyamvada Gopal, 'Editorial' and 'Introduction' to special issue of *New Formations* 59: *After Iraq: Reframing Postcolonial Studies*, 2006.

resistance in world culture as well as in political organisation. Despite its significant registration across the genres in 21st century Scottish Literature this ongoing conflict – almost a decade old - has registered relatively little response in Scottish cultural critique. This is extraordinary, given the proliferation of postcolonial analysis in Scottish cultural theory, in Scottish History and also in twentieth century Scottish war literature, on the complex history of complicity and resistance to British imperialism. Yet in the slipstream of the belated Scottish recognition of the violence of its imperialist past, Scots are once again dropping bombs on foreign territory in the name of a civilising venture. The response of Scottish creative writers to these wars has been – as we might expect - forcibly to condemn them. What is the affiliated role and responsibility of the Scottish literary critic here? Is this question related in any way to recent internationalising injunctions that seek to shape debate about the global provenance and compass of the field?

My contribution to this seminar intends to present such questions about critical distance – if this is what it is – by citing the prevalence of recent ‘war-work’ by various established and emergent Scottish writers (see list below). This work, I want to propose, can be read within the present global imperium as presenting specifically Scottish questions – in a form close to accusation – about Scottish participation and positioning in relation to past, present and future modes of British Imperialism. A fundamental question we might want to pursue: to what extent is ‘Scotland’ – however that designation is configured – recognised responsible for the prosecution of a present day imperial war and the imposition of deadly violence in foreign, sovereign states? To what degree has Scotland been engaged in wars characterised by an asymmetrical, ‘hi-tec’ precision-weaponised approach? To what extent does its proximity to contemporary US geopolitical hegemony or its resistance to the formal and structural extension of American Empire measure the terms and conditions of Scotland’s geographical, political and cultural ‘distance’? Is Scotland very much part of and partnered in ‘The New Imperialism’? An analysis of some of the most notable work in Scottish contemporary writing cannot fail to ask these questions, for the role of Scots and Scotland in international acts of imperial violence has been its preoccupation. Scotland is and is not fighting a war by proxy. Scottish culture is attempting its own intervention.

It seems clear that the shibboleth that continues to maintain the debate about postcolonialism in Scottish culture – parenthesising the contradictions of complicit involvement in British imperial enterprises – is one that remains very much in play. How, then, are we to consider Scotland’s contemporary ‘displacement’ from British Imperialism, given its recent ‘emplacement’? Literary engagements seem to be intent on the explicit acknowledgment of Scotland’s direct and brutal involvement in historical and contemporary (neo)colonial bloodshed. The fact that much of this direct involvement has been very much *at a remove* – whether in the theatre of politics, the field of battle or in the perceptions of the Scottish public - is the ironic pivot for several narratives. (Geometric metaphors are deliberate and significant, transposed into aesthetic strategies in several texts.) These wars have been indicted for their rollout of a model of warfare aligned with what anti-imperialists have denounced as disingenuous political aims; a publicly stated policy of non-colonial interventionism is promoted and contained by a prophylactic model of warfare prosecuted and ordained by what has been called ‘the armature of cartographic reason’ (Gregory 118). This has worked to promote a disembodied, decorporealised notion of what Paul Virilio and others have called the ‘clean’, objective war. It is precisely this notion that Scottish writing debunks, in a body of work that has attempted by various formal means to ‘ground’ and domesticate the effects (and by extension the political and economic) and neo-

colonial rationale for what has been in fact a bloody Western-led interventionism, an ‘unclean’ war. (In this context, Field Marshall Roberts’ words concerning the weapons of the army of the future and their importance to the British Empire’s future – venerated by their prominent position in Glasgow’s Kelvingrove Park – appear depressingly prescient.)

Bomb Power

Alison Kennedy’s *Day* (2007) exemplifies this imperial war consciousness in 21st century Scottish fiction. Through its historical focus the novel can be read as a general critique of the ‘War on Terror’. Alfie Day’s traumatic recollection of his WWII experience as a Lancaster Bomber tail gunner in the ‘Shock and Awe’ aerial bombardment of Germany explicitly connects to the material effects, moral urgencies and political controversy surrounding British participation in Iraq and Afghanistan. Alfie spends most of the narrative trying to work through the dilemma of his culpability in the deaths of thousands. Dialectically related themes of distance and proximity promulgate through the narrative’s subtle slippage between Day’s past and present recollections of his role in the violence. The central concern of the novel is the extent to which Day assumes *direct* and private responsibility for the Military’s prosecution of airborne violence on innocent civilians. Day calls this a ‘war surplus’, where the effects of targeted and (in)discriminate bombing from a distance reaches beyond the projected (and propagandised) precision of the ‘war objective’, one in which, to use Day’s words, ‘evasion will take place’. Kennedy’s novel connects to several others where Scots are involved – directly and indirectly – in witnessing (and in several cases perpetrating) the travesties of British Imperial involvement in foreign wars.

A mixture of guilt and outrage at Scottish/British involvement in US F18 and drone attacks on the Afghan Taliban inform Adam Kellas’s ruminations in James Meek’s *We Are Now Beginning Our Descent* (2008). Kellas is a Scottish reporter of the Afghan war working for a British newspaper. The novel follows his frustrations at his inability to accurately represent the war to a domestic audience. The way the war is warped and derealised in Western Media – even in places commoditised and sanitised for popular consumption – is again perceived as part of a relation between proximity and distance. As elsewhere this is projected through a Scots character’s relationships to foreign setting and his direct witness of imperial atrocity. Characteristic of the plot of such novels as Meek’s (but also of Giles Foden’s *The Last King of Scotland* (1998) or Jonathan Falla’s *Blue Poppies* (2001) & *Poor Mercy* (2005)) is the gradual realisation of the degree of involvement, recognition and affinity with the effaced ‘ordinary casualties’ of imperial and/or state violence. Kellas bemoans the difficulty of recording a war that is ‘everywhere and nowhere’ – in Afghanistan, but also by extension, in the UK. The recorded casualties record, as is very evident by now, is parsed for domestic consumption: focussed on levels of British death and heroism. The rationale for War remains relatively fuzzy; its ‘collateral expenditure’ even more so. Kellas struggles throughout with the burden and weight of accuracy in his representations.

David Gregory has criticised the way in which the Iraq/Afghanistan war has been conducted in ‘spaces of carefully controlled *invisibility*’, a war without (reliable) witnesses in the western mediascape; where ‘involvement and engagement saturated one theatre of operations; detachment and disengagement ruled the other’.² We might doubly indict Scottish involvement here, wedded – perhaps buried – as it seems to be within the contract

² David Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, p. 53.

of UK Statehood. If Scottish writing ultimately can be interpreted as corresponding to related issues governing Scottish and British modes of dissociation from the violent international reality of (neo)imperial conflict, then is not the association between Scotland and the UK state also exposed? As has been reinforced in arguments concerning the rollout of military-neoliberalisation, the connection between war and state is crucial.³ Furthermore, if these wars are examples of what David Harvey⁴ insists as the imposition of a new imperialism within the world system, binding the UK within US imperatives since the early 90s, Scotland in this literary work appears reduced or effaced by that contract. It has, one might argue, contracted; diminished in the assent to being further consolidated as part of a neo-colonial US/UK geography that has sought to impose a new world order for neoliberal capital.⁵ In the time since the celebrated delivery of political devolution, is it not ironic that its 'soft' forms of political autonomy have been somewhat undercut by Scotland's involvement in the 'hard power' of death and destruction overseas?

How distant, then, is Scotland from a *new* imperial complicity, as represented in Scottish culture? If the air war has been conducted in an 'abstract, de-corporealized space', as Gregory suggests, then Scottish literary space has attempted to *realise* it by presenting a contrapuntal form of engagement. In several works this comes about by the satire and revelation of disengagement: a refusal to accept responsibility for death and destruction by soldier, politician and citizen. A prominent example is the final scene in Gregory Burke's *Blackwatch* (in my view a powerful but problematic and limited play; complicit with its Imperial targets, particularly in the way it has been rapturously received) where soldiers from the (in)famous Scottish regiment stand, on an elevated platform to witness the visual 'spectacular' of the American levelling of the Iraqi city of Falluja. At a secure distance the Black Watch soldiers watch through high-powered telescopic sights, in horrified admiration. This epitomises what Paul Virilio calls a 'strategy of deception' that invests belief in a 'vertical' 'just' warfare to reinstate the principles – and structures – of Western democracy on the ground.⁶

Such a limited perspective will not do, seems to be the point made by the anti-imperialist strand of contemporary Scottish war fiction. The Scottish involvement in the active *disembodiment* of this 'war on terror' is central to understanding the actions of characters and plot progression. It influences the interpretation of narrative strategies, especially in restless shifts between focalisation and setting, revelation and action. Physical relations to place are constantly questioned; they are 'worlded' and we could say 'horizontalised' through comparative perspectives. On a plane high above the UK, for example, Kellas considers its blurred outlines: 'from here you couldn't tell it was an island;

³ See for example, the RETORT Collective's arguments about the permanent war, in *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in the New Age of War*

⁴ David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, Oxford: OUP, 2005.

⁵ As nationalist commentators like Tom Nairn have argued. Nairn contends that if Britain has now become 'a new type of colony' in line with its relations with the US, then Scotland has become 'subordinates of a subordinate state.' This is renewed opportunity he suggests, for greater political autonomy. In the current moment, Scotland, for Nairn remains suspended in a non-internationalist position, in what he terms 'self-colonisation'. Tom Nairn, 'Break-Up: Twenty-Five years on', in E. Bell & G. Miller (eds.) *Scotland in Theory: Reflections on Culture and Literature*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2004, pp. 29-30.

⁶ Paul Virilio, *Strategy of Deception*, London: Verso, 2000.

it had a scale to it, a ruffled, hazy majesty'(62). This territorial fuzziness gestures to the quasi-imperial extension of the British State's military endeavour in Afghanistan. The 'scale' of the UK is weighted towards its 'distanced' exploits as part of the coalition of the willing in the Panjshir valley. Kellas considers the pulverising shocks on the Shomali plain by F-18 pilots, who had

left the air-conditioned cabins of their aircraft carriers, flown over Pakistan into Afghanistan and tattooed the earth with bombs, then flown home for a meal and a shower. They were still doing it. Hitting was also a kind of touching. But if hitting was the only kind of touching you did, you would damage the one you touched so badly that, by the time you came to embrace them, they would recoil from you.

The pilots had seen what they did from afar. They could not land. There had always been the distance. America reached out for thousands of miles and its sense of touch stopped three miles short. (63)

Conclusion: Domestic Violence

How is this safe and deadly distance to be overcome? How best to understand the post 9/11 colonial geography of Scotland and the Scottish people as somehow part of this willing coalition and its wilful 'hitting'? For Gregory, "ordinary people" were (and are) involved in these actions too, and in so far as so many of us assent to them, often by our silence, then we are complicit in what is done in our collective name. *The networks spiral beyond those apparatuses.*'(29)

This is the preoccupation of James Kelman's 'Man to Man'. Failure to prevent the continuation of blatant and uneven forms of violence is the subject of this recently published story. The narrator witnesses an angry man shouting at a cowed female partner in full view of a busy pub. The narrator's tortuous self-examination of his particular inability to act becomes actively malign by his eventual absconding from the scene, allowing further questions over the moral positioning of complicity in accepting and perpetuating a violence somehow enacted in our name, under our aegis and our seemingly passive – or helpless – consent. Despite all our secret wishes to the contrary, inaction somehow indicts us.

As its title suggests, 'Man to Man' satirises notional equality of confrontation; but it is also a story where apparently 'domestic' disputes are connected to – and perhaps framed within – wider examples of imperial domination. There is a problematic displacement here. A sudden segue in the narrator's train of thought frames a local crisis within international concerns. He reflects on the (lack of) reaction to the persistence of 'banal' violence:

I noticed that before about guys, how when something awful was happening they started talking. Even just the telly, Ulster or Palestine or what, Iraq. Away they go about the football. Oh aye Celtic's got a hard game on Saturday, Rangers have it easy, what about the Liverpool game. Meanwhile it is carnage. No everybody. Some watch or else don't watch. Maybe they listen.

And it goes on all roundabout. Ye cannay shut up yer ears. ('Man to Man')

In taking this unexpected 'worldly' turn, the story presents a challenge to its reader, concerning a domestic tendency to relegate such 'awful' foreign concerns to the margins of consciousness; concerns over events that go 'on all roundabout', for which, it is made clear, we are to some extent locally responsible but offer little resistance.

Kelman's story is not alone in contemporary Scottish Literature, in forging deliberate connections between Scottish (un)civil society and the international crisis zones of contemporary imperialism. The story is and is not evasive. It deliberately elevates and internationalises the problem of ignoring Britain's role in the world as an effect of the Global North's domestic of events in sites of 'foreign' conflict: the manner in which governments have managed an 'overlooking' in their domestic spheres of their militarised aggression in the world system for the past two decades. Alfie Day's traumatic recall of his airborne involvement in indiscriminate slaughter conveys a moral dilemma deliberately connected to a political conscientiousness – or lack thereof – of the inflicted casualties of a war in which Scottish participation is one of *remote attachment*. The irony, of course, inherent in that last phrase, is generated by the *closeness* of a *notionally* devolved Scotland not in any way devolved to the politics and political decisions of the new imperialism and its global rollout of a state of permanent war.

A fundamental question that may arise from such a proposal concerns the possible restructuring of the Scottish literary enterprise via a general 'worlding' of national literary outlooks under the sign of 'globalisation'. How is this new 'internationalisation' of Scottish Literature to be oriented? Have recent calls to cosmopolitanise, denationalise (or even transnationalise) Scottish literary criticism created a political vacuum in Scottish criticism; one that lags behind the anti-imperialism evident in Scottish writing? If we turn away from the violence enacted overseas in our name, then surely we have failed in our quest to reach further – at home and abroad?

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List of Contemporary Scottish 'War Texts'

A L Kennedy, *Day* (2007)
David Greig, *The American Pilot* (2005)
Giles Foden, *The Last King of Scotland* (1998)
William Boyd, *Brazzaville Beach* (1990)

James Meek, *We Are Now Beginning Our Descent* (2008)
Tom Leonard, 'On the Mass Bombing of Iraq and Kuwait, Commonly Known as "The Gulf War"', in *Reports from the Present* (1995)
Michel Faber, 'Dreams in the Dumpster, Language Down the Drain', in *Not One More Death* (Verso, 2006)
- *The Fire Gospel* (2008)
Jonathan Falla, *Blue Poppies* (2003); *Poor Mercy* (2005)
James Kelman, *Translated Accounts* (2001); *You Have To Be Careful In The Land Of The Free*