

Hames, S., (ed.), 2012, *Unstated. Writers on Scottish Independence*, Word Power Books, Edinburgh 2012, pp. 204.

What better way to begin a review of this kind of a book than to quote from the rather vast Scottish literary output concerning independence, national identity or politics in general? In his famous poem *The Coin*, included in *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984), Edwin Morgan writes:

We brushed the dirt off, held it to the light.
The obverse showed us *Scotland*, and the head of a red deer; the antler-glint had fled but the fine cut could still be felt. All right: we turned it over, read easily *One Pound*, but then the shock of Latin, like a gloss, *Respublica Scotorum*, sent across such ages as we guessed but never found at the worn edge where once the date had been and where as many fingers had gripped hard as hopes their silent race had lost or gained. The marshy scurf crept up to our machine, sucked at our boots. Yet nothing seemed ill-starred. And least of all the realm the coin contained.

This poem, as Gavin Wallace once convincingly commented, provokes many questions, while the answers are not straightforward. Nevertheless, among the various possible interpretations one could imply that there had once been an independent and republican Scotland, which probably perished in a global catastrophe (nuclear, ecological?). In the poem, mysterious but supposedly human future visitors (descendants of the survivors?) can only glimpse a tiny artifact confirming its existence – one Scottish pound (it is worth noting that the cover of the *Sonnets from Scotland* features Alasdair Gray's artistic impression of this coin). Today's reader may only half-jokingly ask here by which central bank this coin was issued, of course a reference to the ongoing debate on the feasibility of sharing a currency with the rest of the United Kingdom were Scotland to become independent. But how does Morgan's exceptional poem relate to the volume that is being reviewed? There are three possible answers to this question. First, an overwhelming majority of the authors want an independent Scottish state, and most of them could also be qualified as strongly pro-republican (it is worth remembering that Morgan himself was an avid supporter of Scottish independence and a convinced republican; he also made a bequest of almost £1 million to the Scottish National Party [SNP] in order to help it secure a "yes" vote in an independence

referendum. as the volume's editor, Scott Hames, mentions this in his useful introduction). The second answer relates to the supposedly tragic end of Morgan's *Respublica Scotorum*. In numerous contributions a palpable sense of disappointment with current state of Scottish/British and global affairs is noticeable. Consequently, many of the authors are definitely non-parochial in their opinions and they clearly relate the future stability and prosperity of an independent Scotland to global trends – hence they argue for both micro – and macro-level changes. The final answer concerns the very name of the Scottish state coined by Morgan. Its English equivalent is the *Republic of the Scots*. Therefore the Scottish people would be sovereign and solely responsible for the shape of Scottish institutions. A cynic might argue that the discussed contributions are nothing more than the personal views of individual writers. Each of them is a patriot who is particularly concerned with Scotland, but only in Norman MacCaig's well known poetic definition of this term. At the same time however, a rather more cordial reader can find in a number of them a willingness to let the people of Scotland decide what kind of independent country they would want to have. Of course, the writers do not shy away from expressing their views, concerns or even dreams related with independence, but they serve as nothing more than an invitation to a thoughtful conversation. It is therefore not surprising that a certain amount of skepticism and impatience towards the political parties' visions of an independent Scotland (varying between blossoming and failing miserably) is also evident.

Even though the above sketched common denominators of the contributions (27 of them in total plus the editor's introduction) are rather easy to observe, the reader should not harbor any doubts that each of them is an original literary work (also in the formal sense), thus reflecting the unique perspective on Scottish independence of each individual author. Certainly all of them deserve to be read and discussed. Regrettably a lack of space allows the present writer to elaborate on only a few of those texts.

The three opening contributions written by John Aberdein, Allan Armstrong and Alan Bissett are unequivocally left-leaning in their tone. For the somewhat minimalist (realist?) Aberdein the referendum is first of all a chance to preserve the achievements of British "socialism" in the shape of National Health Service, which – in his

opinion – is currently being dismantled by the Westminster coalition government. An independent Scotland would create more favourable conditions for such an objective than the current constitutional arrangements. In turn Allan Armstrong is thinking in a considerably more adventurous manner. Inspired by past generations of Scottish radicals he is proposing an “Independence-Max” which would not only wrestle Scotland from the grip of the monarchy, Westminster and the City of London, but also from European institutions, and the Scottish National Party too. Bissett’s perspective is not dissimilar. He argues for the reintroduction of the concept of the working class into the language of contemporary politics in response to the middle class steady erosion (he also notes the widespread false assumptions of middle class belonging) and for an internationalist approach to social justice. A pinch of creative anger would be also welcome. All this should lead towards a more “powerful alternative vision” of Scottish society, economy and politics, which would be worth voting for in the referendum.

Jenni Calder also expresses republican views and stresses the importance of social justice while at the same time she is very sceptical about borders and therefore uncertain if it is wise to create new ones. Consequently, instead of a new state she would rather prefer a critical consideration of the whole of the United Kingdom, which may lead to her preferred option of a federal state “(...) acknowledging regional identities and ensuring functional representation.” In some respects Ken MacLeod’s argumentation could be interpreted as belonging to the same current of thinking. His preferred state would be a social-democratic one, but he is doubtful if it could be achieved in an independent Scotland. He shares Calder’s perspective and locates his hopes for a better future rather in an arduous grassroots renewal of the British labour movement than in the false hopes associated with the creation of a new state which, in his opinion, would undoubtedly one that is capitalist.

There are many passionate and compelling arguments used by the authors stressing the role of the sovereign, obviously equated with the Scottish people. Bob Cant, deploying a powerful symbol, calls for a “New Deal for Scotland” which would be brought by the Scots working together and would lead to, among other ends, a rebalancing of the debate on the economy from the current domination of

the supporters of the austerity, towards a more Keynesian approach. Margaret Elphinstone's apparently pessimistic text is not without its silver lining. Even though she is convinced that our world is approaching its end (in the literal sense of the word) she is optimistic enough to believe in the capabilities of the five million Scots. With independence they would finally have a chance to put into effect their original vision of a state. A state conscious of its international responsibilities, ecologically oriented, fighting inequality and always giving voice to each individual member of the community. Also Kathleen Jamie strongly believes in the merits of Scottish collectivism. Its freed energy should allow the Scottish people to dream a new nation instead of passively observing a "debate" (K. J.'s quotation marks) between the politicians. In James Kelman's contribution a certain two-step strategy related to the Scottish people is being developed. He begins with a critical examination of the SNP's policies, reserving the most scathing of his arguments for its stance on the monarchy. Such a rejection leads him to an interesting conclusion, i.e., tactical "yes" voting in a referendum, notwithstanding its interpretation as an expression of support for the Nationalists. Thanks to such a maneuver the first stage would be accomplished. After that a second stage would follow with the Scottish people (supposedly through their representatives) and not the SNP deciding about the shape of an independent Scotland. Obviously the reader should bear in mind that the Scottish people may want to go in a direction radically different from the ones proposed in the contributions.

Disillusionment with the quality of the ongoing independence debate is obviously omnipresent in *Unstated. Writers on Scottish Independence* (it was already mentioned with regard to Kathleen Jamie; the present author doubts if the lapse of time since the book's publication – December 2012 – would cause any decisive shift of opinion in this respect). Some of the authors seem to dislike its lukewarm temperature. Among them, James Robertson calls for a more emotional approach to independence and deeper personal engagement of the voters, suggesting that such a decision should not be taken as a result of petty economic calculations. The same could be said of Jo Clifford's contribution in which she is very critical of unionist scare tactics and dramatically asks the Scots: "Can we really not find just a tiny bit of courage?" Such calls are interestingly balanced by Kevin

MacNeil's calm, poetic and deeply ethical meditation on independence in which, especially part IV titled, *The Edicts of Jock Tamson* stands apart. Here the reader obtains something akin to Buddhist-inspired moral guidelines for an independent Scotland, though some of the proposals are also close to Václav Havel's understanding of politics.

The concluding remarks of this review are presented below as the answers to two questions.

If the discussed authors usually support independence, could we legitimately perceive them as nationalists in the traditional sense of this term? Definitely not. In certain contributions there are even clear demarcation lines meaning that such an assumption would go too far. If one is in need of a general category than probably *patriots* – with a strong internationalist streak – would be more adequate (though James Kelman would disagree), understood as a person who deeply cares for her or his own country, inclusive when it comes to the minorities and at the same time understanding the merits of international cooperation. Possibly the term *civic-nationalists* would also be appropriate. Therefore the authors are not anti-English, either. If a strong dislike or even anger is being expressed, it is directed at the incompetent bureaucrats and the culture of supporting institutions (prominent in the texts by Alasdair Gray, Don Paterson and, albeit to a lesser extent, Gerda Stevenson) and not towards other nations in general. It is a certain paradox, then, that the publication of the reviewed volume was supported by Creative Scotland.

What makes this book exceptional? It is probably the only book available at the moment that presents the views on independence of a rather strictly defined professional group. Of course, it is debatable to what extent this pool of individuals can be treated as a representative sample of their profession. It is also a collection of texts which are a pure joy to read from the literary point of view.

Why this book shall be widely read? Zygmunt Bauman in his *Socialism: The Active Utopia* (1976) was convincingly arguing for the necessity of utopian thinking understood as a thinking that projects the better and plausible world of the future. The reviewed volume is brimming with this type of ideas. It is often courageous, sometimes visionary and always engaging. As stated above, it is a serious and sincere invitation to a thoughtful discussion regarding not only the future of Scotland but also the future of the whole world.

We can conclude with one more mention of Edwin Morgan's poems. A coin appears also in the closing verse of *Post-Referendum* (relating to the devolution referendum of 1979 and also included in the *Sonnets from Scotland*): "A coin clattered at the end of its spin." Nowadays, in a different context, a coin is spinning again. This time independence is a possibility. But whatever happens on September 18th 2014 the life span of the reviewed volume deserves to be much longer as there is much more to it than its title suggests.

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