

Duncan Petrie

Contemporary Scottish Fictions: Film, Television and the Novel

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Reviewed by Gavin Miller

Although Duncan Petrie has published extensively on Scottish film and TV culture, his latest book broadens his repertoire, and examines Scottish narrative fiction, on screen and in print, from about 1970 to the present day.

Petrie's book begins with an excellent account of recent Scottish political history. This is helpful for those new to contemporary Scottish culture, who may not be clear on how and why Scotland in 1998 devolved its parliament from the British government in London. Such contextualization is also useful because Petrie is broadly sympathetic to Scottish national ambitions, and is addressing an audience who may only perceive nationalism in terms of, as he puts it, the "'dark gods' of tribalism and ethnic purity" (5). Petrie's rescuing of nationalism from such connotations is a model of clarity, and indeed superior to that found in many recent books that take Scottish nationalism as their primary subject. He concludes that one can legitimately discuss national cultures, so long as one remembers that each is a site of a unique dialogue and diversity, rather than something "monolithic, homogenous or sealed" (9).

Petrie's subsequent analysis is then divided into two parts: "Politics and Aesthetics," and "Themes and Traditions." To be frank, though, there seems little need for such a division in the book. The "themes" are often "political" and the "traditions" usually "aesthetic." This quibble aside, Petrie presents a series of interesting and engaging chapters on topics such as the fate of the archetypal Scottish "hard men," the regeneration and diversification of Scottish fiction after the 1980s, and specific genres such as the Scottish gothic and Scottish crime fiction.

Petrie's discussion of how the Scottish cultural franchise has broadened in recent years is particularly rewarding. There is some fascinating material here on the various hybrids in contemporary Scottish culture. Although Scottish Asians are unfortunately missing, there is some excellent discussion of the West of Scotland cowboy culture found in TV dramas such as John Byrne's 1990 series *Your Cheatin' Heart*. Indeed, some surprising connections emerge. For example, the writer Alan Sharp (known, if at all, for his existentialist novels of the 1960s) scripted the 1995 film *Rob Roy* (dir. Michael Caton-Jones), a movie which Petrie convincingly analyzes as a revenge Western set in eighteenth-century Scotland.

Petrie's facility with the analysis of film and TV is a real reward for readers. After all, these are the media through which fictional Scottishness is distributed around the world. As with *Rob Roy*, there are some curious connections. The

long-running TV detective series *Taggart* is, as Petrie points out, indebted to William McIlvanney's "Laidlaw" crime novels (much, perhaps, as the U.S. series *Hill Street Blues* resonates with Ed McBain's 87th Precinct stories). Of course, Petrie's book could not be complete without an analysis of *Trainspotting*, both as Irvine Welsh's 1993 novel and as Danny Boyle's 1996 film. He is particularly acute on the latter's status as a commodified fiction: "*Trainspotting*," Petrie concludes, "is a resolutely upbeat film, sanitising and rendering some of the novel's darker excesses more palatable for mass consumption" (103–104).

There are some failings in Petrie's book, however. His frequent references to masculinity suggest an underlying interest in how Scottish fictions have dealt with the fate of Scottish manhood, particularly as an emblem of Scotland. Even where the text seems to discuss an unrelated topic, the focus is still on manliness. The chapter "Narratives of Childhood," for example, concentrates almost entirely on how Scottish boys deal (in fiction) with their potential adult roles as "proper working-class Scottish male[s]" prone to "self-destructiveness" (168, 172). Fathers and sons are the focus of this chapter; mothers and daughters hardly appear. Similar points can be made about the chapters "A Walk on the Dark Side" (on gothic fiction) and "Urban Investigations" (on crime fiction). The recurrent topic is again masculinity. Petrie focuses, for example, on the damaged masculinity of Francis/Frances Cauldhame in Iain Banks's *The Wasp Factory*, and on the similar condition of ex-SAS man Detective Inspector John Rebus in Ian Rankin's crime novels. The accompanying analysis is strong, but also strongly directed toward the problems of the male gender.

This recurring concern with gender is suggestive—especially when two other problems with this book are taken into account. Firstly, the literary readings are often quite dependent (for example, on the work of Cairns Craig, which is frequently cited). Secondly, although this book is as much on film and TV as it is on literary fiction, there are no illustrations in it. It would be nice to see TV detective Jim Taggart's craggy features superimposed upon images of Glasgow, as well as to have the opening credits described to us by the author. It may be that the "real" book behind *Contemporary Scottish Fictions* had a lot to say about screen representations of Scottish masculinity, and less to say about contemporary literary fiction. I suspect that Petrie has had to make room for extraliterary analysis, and a wider range of themes, in order that his book be marketable (or be perceived as such). This is perhaps unfortunate: an excellent book might have emerged had the author been given greater liberty. Nonetheless, *Contemporary Scottish Fictions* is a very good book of the kind desperately needed by academics interested in Scottish literature. It will encourage the teaching of Scottish literature, and may yet give Scottish literature the same kind of appeal and ubiquity as Irish literature has in the English Lit. syllabus.