

# ANGLICA

An International Journal of English Studies

Special Issue: Scotland

29/3 2020

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## *Namiętność* in a Caledonian Metropolis: Scottish Urban Fiction and Its Cultures

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### Abstract

The “city novel” was an essentially 19<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenon. By the time Scottish writers had belatedly addressed themselves to this genre, the *Bildungsroman* model of urban fiction (the transplanted “Young Man from the Provinces”) had given way to modernism and to a realism more magical than literal. This article discusses fictions which reflect Scotland’s ethnic mix and multiple identities, i.e. the country’s accommodation (or otherwise) of Irish, Jewish, Polish and Asian incomers: Patrick MacGill’s *The Rat-Pit* (1915), J. David Simons’s *The Liberation of Celia Kahn* (2011/2014), Suhayl Saadi’s *The Burning Mirror* (2001), and Fred Urquhart’s *Jezebel’s Dust* (1951).

**Keywords:** Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen, Fife, feminism, culture clash, class

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### 1. Scottish Interest in Polish Culture

This article is concerned partly with historical Scottish-Polish connections. It may be helpful, at the outset, to offer a few examples from the neglected but rich field of contemporary Scottish interest in Polish literature and in the other arts of the country, notably: the Edinburgh-born journalist and historian Neal Ascherson with his encyclopaedic knowledge of the centuries of Polish history, displayed in his book *The Struggles for Poland*, as well as his reportage of Polish politics during the 1980s, from the rise of *Solidarność* and Jaruzelski’s imposition of martial law; the artist and impresario Richard Demarco and his long commitment to bringing the Polish avant-garde in the visual and performing arts to Edinburgh; the late composer and pianist Ronald Stevenson who wrote on Paderewski, stressing the Pole’s activity as both composer and pianist, and who made a transcription for piano of themes from Paderewski’s opera *Manru*. More recently, Derrick McClure and David Malcolm have been translating much Polish poetry into the Scots language. A substantial book of essays could be devoted to the Scottish reception of Polish culture.

## 2. Literal and Magical Realism: The Imagined City

The present focus is on Scottish urban fiction, itself a vast subject, and even here there is a Polish dimension, as implied by the title of this paper. *Namiętność* is a Polish word meaning *passion*. Scotland was a latecomer to the “big city” novel, which was essentially a 19<sup>th</sup>-century creation, a reflection of the growth of large European conurbations, of the flight of ambitious young men – usually men – from small towns and villages in search of fortune and/or congenial employment unavailable to them in their native backwaters. The critic Lionel Trilling sees this as a “backbone” of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel – a kind of subgenre that he calls “the Young Man from the Provinces,” and he enumerates examples such as Rastignac in Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot* – Rastignac who is determined to conquer Paris, and Pip in Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, bound for London and the life of a “gentleman” (Trilling 74). I myself would add the darker and more complex Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*).

Trilling sees this subgenre of the Young Man from the Provinces as having its roots in two seemingly opposed phenomena: on the one hand, the solid realities of social class and social mobility, what I would call the more “literal” side of literary realism; and on the other hand, what Trilling calls “the thread of legendary romance, even of downright magic” (74). Yes, there can be something of the fairy tale about the Young Man’s progress, from say Dick Whittington, the poor country lad with his resourceful feline friend, and his transformation into Lord Mayor of London; or Hans Christian Andersen’s seemingly *magical* transformation of an ugly duckling into a swan, reflecting his own *literal* passage from small-town Odense to hitting the big time in Copenhagen.

The *literal* and the *magical*: the two ends of a spectrum on which the big city novel can be placed, though a single novel can veer constantly from the literal to the magical, from the magical to the literal. The literal and the magical are not always mutually exclusive. The magic is often black magic: the dream city of the romantic provincial aspirant can become the nightmare city, the city of dreadful night. There is an abundance of that in both Dickens and Dostoevsky. This will blend with the *literal* realism of the slums, the plight of the proletariat, or *lumpenproletariat*.

Ireland came late to the city novel with James Joyce’s *Ulysses* of 1922. For Joyce, Dublin was the Hibernian Metropolis. I would claim Glasgow as the Caledonian Metropolis, though my Scottish examples will not be confined to Glasgow. Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark* of 1981, however, comes almost sixty years after *Ulysses*; it is the much later example of a Scottish urban novel with a vast and complex canvas.<sup>1</sup> There is a famous passage in *Lanark* where the book self-consciously heralds its own innovatory quality, as in this conversation between two of the characters:

“Glasgow is a magnificent city,” said McAlpin. “Why do we hardly ever notice that?” “Because nobody imagines living here,” said Thaw. “[...] think of Florence, Paris, London, New York. Nobody visiting them for the first time is a stranger because he’s already visited them in paintings, novels, history books and films. But if a city hasn’t been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively. What is Glasgow to most of us? A house, the place where we work, a football park or golf course, some pubs and connecting streets. That’s all. No, I’m wrong, there’s also the cinema and library. And when our imagination needs exercise we use these to visit London, Paris, Rome under the Caesars, the American West at the turn of the century, anywhere but here and now. Imaginatively Glasgow exists as a music hall song and a few bad novels. That’s all we’ve given to the world outside. It’s all we’ve given to ourselves.” (243)

“A few bad novels” – thus does *Lanark* dismiss earlier attempts at literary representation of the Caledonian metropolis. *Lanark* itself displays now *literal* realism and then *magical* realism. It is two novels in one: the tale of Duncan Thaw, working-class intellectual and struggling artist, a student at Glasgow School of Art, and beset with sexual frustration – that is the *Bildungsroman* pattern from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with our ambitious young man, though he is not a provincial this time but a city boy from the beginning. His story is towards the *literal* end of our spectrum, though with “magical” touches. The other story is that of the character Lanark, who gives the whole book its title, and this is the definitely *magical* side of the novel, an evocation of a surreal dystopia, a city of dreadful nightmare, the *black* magic in abundance.

An “imagined” city, as cited so explicitly in *Lanark*, may differ vastly from the city as it actually exists. This is emphasised comically and absurdly in a French novel of 1884, *À rebours*, translated into English as *Against Nature*, by Joris-Karl Huysmans. This novel has been called the Bible of the decadents of the 1890s and it notoriously influenced Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Its central character is Des Esseintes, an extreme aesthete who spends much of his time cooped up in his Parisian home, enjoying the arts, preferring this to going outside into the real world, into the crowded streets. For him, culture is more important than nature. One of his pursuits is reading the novels of Charles Dickens and this reveals for him the imagined city of London. As someone who rarely travels, he has of course never visited London, but he decides to do so at last, inspired by Dickens. So he makes his way towards the Gare St Lazare train station, ticket in hand, then thinks: if he experiences the *real* London, the *literal* London, that will destroy for him the city as evoked in Dickens’s novels. He decides not to undertake the journey after all, turns on his heels, and heads back home to his collection of magical artistic artefacts (Huysmans 132–143).

Since the publication of Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark*, many Scottish urban novels have appeared, for example from James Kelman and his authentic take on working-class life in Glasgow, and Irvine Welsh with his self-consciously supposed revelation of Edinburgh as more gritty than respectable. Given such a field, selection is

mandatory, and it has been two Polish novels of the 1890s which have helped me bring my topic into focus. These are Bolesław Prus's *Lalka*, which I have read in English translation as *The Doll*, and Władysław Reymont's *Ziemia obiecana*, or in English *The Promised Land*, though I read that in French translation, there being no recent English one in existence. *The Doll* is set in Warsaw and *The Promised Land* in Łódź. Two very different cities: Warsaw with a long history stretching back through the centuries; Łódź originally a small village at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but by the end a vast conurbation of textile mills and a workforce drawn from its rural origins. What the two books have in common, though, is their panoramic representation of diverse social classes, generations, races, ethnicities, religions, ideologies. The protagonist of *The Doll* is a nouveau riche, a wealthy businessman who is still an outsider, so he is still someone who wants to conquer the city and move into a higher class – a vain ambition, as it turns out. The three main characters in Reymont's book are a Pole, a member of the gentry turned ambitious industrialist, a German, and a Jew. Insofar as the two books display a "literal" realism, their readers can follow the action together with the maps of their cities, as the names of streets are specified. As you read, you can do a virtual tour of Warsaw and Łódź. This is "literal" realism as topographical realism. It is the solidity of these novels – their rich canvas of diverse characters and diverse locations – which have influenced the present choice of their late 20<sup>th</sup>-century and 21<sup>st</sup>-century Scottish counterparts.

### 3. "The black country with a cold heart"

Patrick MacGill's *The Rat-Pit*, published in 1915, is an Irish as well as a Scottish novel, that very ambiguity having perhaps got in the way of it being regarded as a member of the Scottish canon. MacGill was an Irishman, from County Donegal, who like many from the working classes of that part of Ireland, sailed across the water to Scotland for employment – digging potatoes – the "tattie-hokers" they were called. *The Rat-Pit* draws on its author's own experiences in Scotland, but its main character is Norah Ryan, a pious and initially naïve young Catholic – she is a Young *Woman* from the Provinces, and it is the focus on *female* aspirants that has also determined the choice of fiction for this article.

Compared with the isolation and repression of Donegal, where proprietors and priests are in cahoots to keep the lower orders in check, Scotland seems to offer a desirable alternative. Norah's mother is a strict, old-fashioned woman who defends priestly censorship of subversive books that have been brought back from Scotland by one of the young seasonal workers.<sup>2</sup> But will Scotland prove to be a "promised land" – a *ziemia obiecana*? Norah herself becomes one of the imported workers in Scotland, but her *Bildungsroman* there, as it were, proves to be a tragic tale. She is good-looking and is seduced by Alec Morrison, a young

middle-class Scot whose politically progressive views are superficial and half-baked, and he is distinctly patronising towards the classes he professes to want to “save.” Norah becomes pregnant by him; as a good Catholic she constantly blames herself for her sin. Gravitating to the city of Glasgow, she finds accommodation in an overcrowded hostel, the “rat-pit” of the novel’s title, as rats indeed scurry about within these walls. Readers of a certain age will recall the eloquence of the Glasgow shipyard workers’ leader Jimmy Reid when in 1972 he condemned the “rat race” – the struggle to survive in a laissez-faire, ultra-competitive economy: “A rat-race is for rats,” he declared. “We’re not rats, we’re human beings” (Reid 7).

One of her friends warns Norah that urban Scotland is “the black country with the cold heart” (MacGill 192). Norah soon finds that Scotland is indeed as exploitative and unequal as rural Ireland, if not more so. The best money, it becomes clear, is to be obtained by prostitution, and there is a bitter irony in one of Norah’s few possessions: a picture of the Virgin Mary. Norah is an outsider on several fronts: as a woman in a male-dominated society; as a Catholic in a predominantly Protestant country; above all, as one of the poor in a city whose topography dramatically marks the boundaries between the social classes. Norah is living in a slum which is tantalisingly near the City Chambers, Glasgow’s *ratusz*, a building resplendent with its marble staircase, the seat of municipal power, which Meg, a friend of Norah, describes as the place “where the rich people meet and talk” (234). From their rat-pit the women can view the tower of the city’s centre of governance.

The friend Meg also speaks bitterly of their landlady – the woman who owns the rat-pit building – describing her as someone who goes to church every Sunday “with prayer books under her arm” (263) and who makes a lot of money out of the desperation of her lodgers. Meg informs Norah that this woman “lives oot in Hillhead” (263), a residential bourgeois district in the West End of the city, far from the city centre where the rat-pit is located. If one has a map of Glasgow at hand while reading MacGill’s novel, it becomes clear that in this instance geographical distance matches the sociological distance.

#### 4. “Jerusalem on the Clyde”

The district of Hillhead, this archetypal site of affluence, features in a more recent Glasgow novel. *The Liberation of Celia Kahn* was first published in 2011; its author is a Glasgow Jewish novelist called J. David Simons, who was born in the city in 1953. The City Chambers, just mentioned as Glasgow’s seat of power, also features in this novel: the big square in front of the building is the traditional site of political protest, and Simons’s book offers vivid descriptions of the demonstrations, concerning as it does the determination of the powerless to fight

back. *The Liberation of Celia Kahn* tends more towards a literal than a magical realism, with this caveat: despite its subject-matter of social struggle it is not at all a gloomy book; in fact it is often very funny, especially on the subject of sex. The magic is in the humour, in an irreverent Jewish humour, an irreverent Scottish Jewish humour that can be gloriously vulgar and filthy.

1915 was the year of publication of Patrick MacGill's *The Rat-Pit*. The first part of *The Liberation of Celia Kahn* narrates events that take place in that same year, 1915. Whereas Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* is in part set during a dystopian future, Simons's novel is set in the past, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It can reasonably be described as a historical novel, and also as a political novel. History is not used here as a picturesque background: in the Walter Scott manner, individual characters live their private lives affected by public events, and in turn these characters seek to shape public matters. The heroine of Simons's novel, Celia Kahn, is a young Glasgow Jewish woman who becomes strongly politicised. Her politics organically infuse her personality, her personality infuses her politics.

In the course of the novel, there is an explanation of the historical background of Jewish settlement in Glasgow. A good many Russian and east European Jewish people, fleeing the anti-semitic pogroms under the Russian Tsarist régime at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, boarded ships at Hamburg and landed at the Edinburgh port of Leith. From there they travelled west across Scotland and arrived in Glasgow, intending to take the ship to New York and the promised land of America. However, many families decided that they had had enough of travelling and so they made their homes in Glasgow.

A leading leitmotif in *The Liberation of Celia Kahn* is the sheer variety of Jewish attitudes in the Caledonian metropolis. The Glasgow Jews are not a homogeneous people: their differences are ideological, and as was the case in *The Rat-Pit*, generational. Parents and children differ sharply in their political and religious views: such tensions have animated much classic fiction – think of Turgenev's *Fathers and Children*. However, on occasion there can also be somewhat conspiratorial alliances between family members of different generations, e.g. Celia's Uncle Mendel is a charming, eccentric rogue who is much loved by his niece:

She thought about her Uncle Mendel. Of course, he had a partiality for a little too much *schnapps* – even she who was not very worldly in the ways of alcoholic consumption could see that. But apart from a fondness for a game of *kalookie*, she never imagined her uncle was a gambling man. Rather he was a person with strong socialist views who cooked fish wrapped in damp newspaper over his fire until it peeled succulently off the bone. He told her Old Testament stories, read her the doctrines of Karl Marx, explained to her the secret meaning of the playing cards. How diamonds represented money and springtime, clubs stood for work and summer, spades health and winter, and hearts autumn and love. “Never be low in hearts,” he would tell her as she sorted through her hand. “Especially in the autumn.” “Why

in the autumn?” “Because then the winter will be very cold.” If the Jews had an equivalent of Santa Claus, she imagined her uncle would be first in line for the part, albeit with a tendency for too much Christmas sherry. (Simons 8)

Uncle Mendel becomes a mentor to Celia, encouraging her own left-wing and progressive views as she grows from girlhood to womanhood. Here is an example of where members of different generations can actually be in accord. It follows that members of the same generation do not always agree. Celia’s dad disapproves of Mendel’s politics – he does not believe that socialism will solve the problem of anti-Semitism. Celia’s mother clashes even more strongly with her daughter; she does not think that a nice Jewish girl should become a feminist, she should find a respectable middle-class Jewish boy with money and settle down with him. Celia’s mother is intensely conservative and loyal to Britain and its Empire, Glasgow in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century being regarded as the second city of the British Empire.

A respectable middle-class Jewish boy? Celia Kahn, who lives with her family in the markedly working-class district of the Gorbals, becomes very conscious of the dimension of class. Uncle Mendel has of course prepared her for the dialectic of class struggle. As in MacGill’s *The Rat-Pit*, the Hillhead district of Glasgow is considered to be the archetypal residential site of the *haute bourgeoisie*, and as a working-class Gorbals girl Celia’s attitude to that part of the city is both suspicious and sardonic. The people there may be Jews, but they are rich Jews: again, we are reminded of the heterogeneity of Glasgow Jewry. Nevertheless, Celia does acquire a boyfriend, Jonny, from a well-off family in Hillhead. Visiting his family home there, she is amazed by the opulence; she has never seen anything like it before. Previously, however, one of her left-wing comrades had taken her to the Willow Tea Rooms in Sauchiehall Street, the famous tea-rooms designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, that Glasgow artist of European reputation. This place is also the haunt of the better-off. Celia is apprehensive as, in the words of the novel, she “put[s] out her foot, crosse[s] the threshold” (Simons 24). She crosses many thresholds as she matures, as she encounters the sheer diversity of the new experiences which Glasgow has to offer her. As the Glasgow Asian writer Suhayl Saadi puts it in one of his short stories: “Glesca wis full ae border launds, places where you could cross over” (Saadi 122).

*The Liberation of Celia Kahn* is very much a Young Woman’s lived *Bildungsroman*. Celia is not a Young Woman from the Provinces, though. Like Alasdair Gray’s Duncan Thaw she is urban bred, “a Glasgow girl from the Gorbals” (Simons 243) through and through. Belonging to Glasgow, and to the Gorbals in particular, is essential to her multiple identities as a Jew of East European ancestry, as a secular Jew who has no time for the synagogue, as a socialist and a feminist. One attitude that she does share with her elders is a scepticism about Zionism, about setting off for Palestine to work in a kibbutz although her boyfriend Jonny wants to do just that. The novel ends with more than a hint that there could be



trouble with the indigenous people of Palestine. What, Celia wonders, could she have in common with the Holy Land, as an East European Scottish Jew? Uncle Mendel is not a Zionist but the idea of the kibbutz at least interests him as potentially socialistic. Her father, though, a conservative suspicious of anything that hints of socialism, is quite content to stay in Glasgow. Referring to the famous religious tribal divide of the West of Scotland, he remarks that anti-Semitism is not a problem in Glasgow: “The Protestants and Catholics are too busy hating each other to bother with us Jews” (236). Non-Zionist Jews, we learn, regard the Gorbals as “Jerusalem on the Clyde” (166).

This again is a novel that you can read together with a map of the city. David Simons does not just cite *districts* of Glasgow – he gives us specific streets: Thistle Street and the Briggait in and near the Gorbals, Great Western Road at the posh Hillhead end. Celia and one of her comrades take a break and head up to the hilly Queen’s Park on the city’s southside. At the highest point of the park, the women delight in the view – you can see the whole city spread out to the north – Celia makes out the shipyards, the museum, the university, the many church spires. A counterpart in Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark* and his other books would be his images, as a visual artist, of a panoramic Glasgow, of a panoramic Scotland no less, with the well-known landmarks arranged before you in a single picture.

*The Liberation of Celia Kahn* is indeed, among so much else, a historical novel. Via Celia’s political participation, Simons evokes the famous Govan rent strike of 1915, when the women chase away the representatives of the landlords with such weapons as a chamber-pot full of piss. There is a demonstration against the exploiting bosses in George Square, facing the City Chambers. Celia and Uncle Mendel are among the protesters before the gathering is dispersed by the police. George Square is still the traditional site of political demonstrations, and has unofficially been renamed Freedom Square. George Square had been named after a British king.

Celia Kahn’s most intense political commitment, however, is as a feminist championing birth control, a new and controversial topic in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She goes to the Langside public library south of Queen’s Park to borrow a book by Marie Stopes, the pioneer of contraception. Now this might sound terribly earnest and worthy but David Simons’s sense of humour always kicks in when you need it. This is a serious book but never a solemn one. Celia and her comrades have a struggle on their hands – Catholic women in particular are resistant to the idea of artificial methods of birth control – but our feminist adventurers also have a lot of fun. They order a consignment of French caps – female contraceptives – which they intend to distribute to the women of Glasgow, especially the poor ones who cannot afford to have too many kids. They collect the boxes of French caps from the docks, they have been drinking and are a bit pissed. A friendly young clerk looks at the delivery note and tells the women that they will never sell French caps – berets – to the men of Glasgow; these guys prefer to wear the traditional Scottish flat bonnet. It is not clear whether the young

man is unaware what the French caps really are, or whether he does know and just wants to tease these attractive drunk women, but anyway he sets Celia and her pal into a fit of the giggles, and her pal blows the young lad a scarlet lipstick kiss. Indeed, there is a lot of sex in this novel, much *namiętność*, erotic and political.

## 5. “A mixed marriage”

Before moving on to a Scottish-Polish novel of *namiętność*, let me say a little about Suhayl Saadi, a Glasgow writer of Asian origin, born in 1961. As the Glasgow Jews became assimilated into the general population and moved out of the Gorbals and much of the Southside, the immigrants from Pakistan and the Indian subcontinent moved in, and ran the shops once owned by Jewish people. Today, we refer to people from other lands who have settled in our country as the “new Scots.” They may be Pakistani, Polish, even English. We describe today’s Scots by civic, not ethnic, criteria. Suhayl Saadi’s collection of short stories, *The Burning Mirror*, published in 2001, contains a story called “The Dancers,” which centres on a young Glasgow Asian woman called Roshani. She is at a disco in a Southside Glasgow club with her pal Zarqa, a voluptuous, highly-sexed girl who wears a lot of lipstick and is a magnet for men, including white men. This is a milieu where ecstasy tablets and large quantities of vodka are consumed. This is a tale whose undercurrent mingles Eros and Thanatos, as if the dance could develop into a *Liebestod*.

Roshani is more reserved, more troubled than Zarqa. There has been tragedy in her family: she has not been able to overcome her intense grief for her beloved father, who had never found a congenial job, became mentally ill and committed suicide by drowning in the River Clyde. Her life has been a complex one from the beginning, as her father was a Pakistani Moslem and her mother an Irish Catholic from Belfast. “A *mixed marriage*, everybody called it, as though it had been a recipe or a cocktail. [...] It had been a romance of underdogs” (Saadi 122–123). Roshani has grown up as a Glasgow Scot with a Scottish accent, and like Celia Kahn she has multiple identities, although for Roshani this amounts to a more melancholy experience. When she feels Irish, she thinks of her Pakistani name Roshani as metamorphosed into Roisín Dhu, the Irish Gaelic for black rose (124). Black rose: the very name suggests a blend of death and sexuality.

This story, as well as others in Saadi’s collection, tends more towards the magical than the literal as it travels along my spectrum, above all perhaps in its *mélange* of diverse linguistic registers. As Catherine McInerney says in an essay on the book: “The exploration of cultural customs and values, and the mixture of Punjabi and Scots employed to tell the tales is simply unlike anything you will ever have read or heard before” (McInerney 16). Quite so.

## 6. “Nammy what?”

*Namiętność*. This is the Polish word introduced to Scottish readers by the novelist and short story writer Fred Urquhart, who lived from 1912 to 1995. He was a close observer of the sexual charges between young Scottish women and the Polish soldiers who were stationed in Scotland during World War II. It is the more remarkable that he handled this so well in his fiction because he was gay. However, a novelist is in many ways akin to a good actor; the novelist must also step out of his or her own personality in order to get into the skin of characters who are utterly unlike him or her self. Urquhart deals with these erotic Scottish-Polish exchanges in several of his fictions, above all in the novella entitled “*Namiętność – The Laundry Girl and the Pole*” of 1940 (collected in the volume *The Clouds are Big with Mercy*, 1946) and in the novel *Jezebel’s Dust* of 1951 (and most recently reprinted in 2011). The novella is set in the thinly-disguised location of Cupar in Fife, the novel in Edinburgh. In both cases, the initial and subsequent sexual encounters are treated as a comedy of manners.

Scottish fiction is at its best when it treats sex as comedy – and we have encountered a great deal of sex in these novels. Eminently quotable from the novella is this wonderful banter which takes place as the Scottish women and the Polish men are eating together in a fish and chip shop:

Every now and then Stanislaus said: “Good evening, Marguerite. Beautiful Scottish girl, I love you.” He was very proud of his last sentence. “Good?” he said after it. “Good?”

“Very good,” Meg said, taking one of his cigarettes. “Now, what about teachin’ us that in Polish?”

“In Polish?” Stanislaus grinned. “I love you. All the same, all countries.” And he put his hand on Meg’s knee, winking suggestively.

“Here, here, not so quick;” Meg cried. “You’re a fast worker. Don’t be so passionate!” “Passion...ate?” he said. “Passion ....Ah, namietnosc!”

“Nammy what?” said Meg. “Gee, I’d never be able to say that. It’ll be easier for you to learn English than for us to learn Polish.”

“I should say so!” Bell said. “It’s a wonder to me that they can understand it themselves. I see that some o’ the shops ha’e bills up already wi’ Polish written on them. It looks terrible. Like a jig-saw puzzle.”

“I think that’s what he thinks he’s doin.” Meg pulled Stanislaus’ hand onto the table. “Now, keep it there!” she said, putting her own hands on top of it. (Urquhart 1946, 20–21)

Urquhart’s Scottish women are caught between powerful attraction to the exotic men, handsome in their uniforms, with their sexy Polish accents, and a certain wariness about these lads being just a bit too eager and quick in their strategies of seduction. Even so, it is not too long before one of the girls is taught how to say “I love you” in Polish – *Kocham ciebie*.

Such motifs are developed more fully by this writer ten years later. In *Jezebel's Dust*, Lily and Bessie are two working-class Edinburgh girls during the war years; they find themselves in company with the foreign sailors and soldiers stationed in the Scottish capital – free French, Norwegian and American as well as of course Polish. Lily is an uninhibited young woman, feisty and swears, eager to chase and to be chased by hunks in uniform; Bessie is more cautious. Inevitably, however, they both get caught up in their respective sexual tangles. As with the other novels discussed here, there is citation of specific streets and venues (such as cinemas and dance-halls, these supreme loci of sexual congress), and there is such a variety of cultures represented, from these overseas servicemen to the strongly stratified nature of Edinburgh society in terms of class. The comedy of culture-clash with the inevitable mutual misunderstandings, as well as the comedy of snobbery, are handled in masterly fashion. This also concerns the darker side of it all. One genteel Edinburgh lady, a Mrs Munro, opines that “You should never trust foreigners” (Urquhart 2011, 11). In this novel, xenophobic and insular attitudes are not confined to any single social class, and Bessie’s proletarian dad is vehemently against his daughter getting mixed up with visiting exotics. In our own day, Scotland is not as European-minded as it likes to think it is; there is a lot of lip-service paid to the continental cultural sophistication to which our country desperately needs to return, especially given the bigotry and philistinism of the Brexit British state. Bessie’s dad spouts an ignorance and hypocrisy that is all too common when he claims that he is “all for Internationalism,” that “it’s only by marryin’ folk from other countries that wars’ll eventually stop. The only good thing I can see about war,” he adds, “is that it lets folk see that folks from other countries are much the same as themselves. All the same, I don’t hold with the Poles” (149). The novel’s comedy metamorphoses almost inexorably into tragedy as the cultural differences threaten the Scottish-Polish erotic entwinements. There is much violence, sexual *and mortal* violence, to counterpoint the laughter. Ominously for future post-war politics, Bessie’s Polish boyfriend Dmitri (*sic*) spits out his hatred of communism and of Stalin in particular. The outspoken Lily mischievously remarks that working-class Scotsmen tend to be left-wing, including Bessie’s own dad, so she had better not introduce Dmitri to her old man.

Linguistic variety is a feature of Suhayl Saadi’s fiction, whereas the Edinburgh girls in Fred Urquhart’s *Jezebel's Dust* find themselves having to explain Scottish and even English idioms that they use casually, with an initial lack of awareness that these will confuse their Polish fancy-men. For her Dmitri’s sake, Bessie must distinguish between “dear” meaning expensive, as of a dress in a shop window, which the Polish boyfriend wants to buy for her, and “dear” as an expression of affection. Likewise, Dmitri is puzzled by the word “hen,” as used by Scots men when they address a woman in a friendly if sometimes patronising manner. Bessie’s sexy pal Lily tries to explain “hen” to Dmitri and this leads to a delicious double entendre:

“Well, it’s like this,” Lily said. “A hen lays eggs. A hen is a lady bird, like me and Bessie. The other bird is a cock.” She looked around to see that nobody was paying much attention, then she gave a low: “Cockadoodledo!”

Realisation dawned on Dmitri’s face. “Ah, you hen! Me cock!” he cried. And he leaned over Bessie, slapping his chest and saying: “Dmitri cock, yes? Dmitri veree nice cock, yes.” Bessie blushed and looked at the table [...]. (54–55)

The word “talent” also has to be explained as referring to sexually-desirable members of the opposite sex when one is out looking for “pick-ups.” More generally as regards the linguistic themes of this novel, Urquhart displays an excellent ear for working-class Edinburgh spoken Scots. That alone would account for much of the sparkle and the energy of this literary work.

## 7. “Three northern cities”

*Jezebel’s Dust*, then, is an Edinburgh novel, and thus far I have mostly discussed books set in Glasgow. That is almost inevitable, given that Scotland’s population density is greatest in Glasgow and its urban hinterland. However, that should not blind us to work set in our other two major cities, Aberdeen and Dundee. Joan Lingard’s novel *Dreams of Love and Modest Glory*, from 1995, occupies a vast historical canvas, across many countries and generations. Two young Aberdeen women, from the middle-class western part of the city, meet two handsome east European seamen whose ship is moored in the Aberdeen docks. Thus begin relationships which are conducted from the latter years of the Tsarist Russian Empire, through to the Bolshevik revolution, the establishment of the Soviet Union and beyond. When I interviewed Joan for the Scottish PEN Centre she gave me this summing-up of the novel:

The title of the book comes from a poem by Pushkin. I put two Scottish women into a complex situation, one in Russia, the other in Latvia, to point up the cultural differences. Garnet [one of the women] marries a count, Lily marries a man whose stock is more peasant than nobility. The action takes place in three northern cities – Aberdeen, Riga, St Petersburg. I contrasted Aberdeen and its attitudes with the other two cities. (Lingard 2008, 88)

## 8. Conclusion (by way of Kierkegaard in Dundee and international dancing in Fife)

It remains to offer a few contrasting observations by way of suggesting a shifting of the ground (quite literally) towards those urban centres that receive less representation in Scottish fiction than Glasgow and Edinburgh. This will help to

round off the discussion in a way that attempts to restore some balance in literary attention to other Scottish loci which have real – or imagined – international links.

Dundee has tended to feature more in poetry and song than in prose fiction, but Bill Duncan's surreal prose collection, *The Smiling School for Calvinists*, published in 2001, contains such gems as the short-short story, occupying a third of a page, about the seemingly unlikely presence in a Dundee pub of a book by the Danish existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (203). Earlier in his collection, Duncan makes wry reference to the tongue-in-cheek claim that "from the upper deck of the Number 37 [bus], the coastline of Scandinavia is visible on a fine day" (13). Denmark is east-central Scotland's next landfall to the east, and is on the same latitude, but the distance between the two nations is a watery 700 kilometres or so, thus defeating the otherwise prodigious buses of Dundee; Kierkegaard's country (via the Baltic island of Bornholm) is far nearer to coastal Poland, at a mere 200 kilometres! Bill Duncan's series of small-scale scherzi, typical of Dundee's quirkily reductive humour, may lack the textures and amplitudes of the novels discussed in this paper, but his book offers a relaxed counterpoint to their ambitious reach.

Lastly, I will unashamedly put in a plug for my own production, *Slavonic Dances*, a set of interrelated stories dealing with Scottish encounters with eastern and east-central Europe, all of them essentially comedies of manners – comedies initially, that is. The first tale, "Mrs Makarowski," has a mostly urban setting, in the town of Leven in my native Fife. Not all industrial urban centres are large cities. The story concerns a homely working-class Fife woman in the 1940s who meets a Polish soldier at a dance. She loves him dearly, but is utterly bemused by his Polishness: this is the source of both the story's comedy and its tragedy. Her life is shattered when there are revelations about his unhappy past in the country he has had to leave behind. I wrote this story before I had heard of Fred Urquhart's fiction dealing with similar material. In a way that rather points up the sheer scale of the wartime romances between Scottish women and Polish soldiers based in Scotland, and the consequences of these relationships. A cousin of my father's was one of these women – she married a gentleman from Bydgoszcz. They were a close couple but there were problems.

I introduce my book at readings by referring to my interest in both the absurdities and epiphanies of cultural exchange. In a 1926 essay on Joseph Conrad, Thomas Mann argued that the arts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century went beyond tragedy and comedy and towards the *grotesque* (Mann 106). We might be forgiven for speculating that this might be even more true for the arts (and the realities) of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The *raison d'être* of this paper has been an attempt to chart relatively unfamiliar territory in the wider field of comparative Scottish and European literary studies. I am a former editor / researcher of the Bibliography of Scottish Literature in Translation (BOSLIT), an online resource which has been dormant for some time, but which is to be hosted, in due course, at the University of Glasgow.

When it is up and running it will greatly enhance the potential for comparative Scottish and other-European literary studies. I would add that for many years I taught Scottish literature and culture at a variety of European and North American universities, in particular in France, the USA and Hungary. I am a veteran in the field. I am concerned that the scholarly dialogues should be reciprocal, in effect catering for the converse of BOSLIT; that is to say, to develop the study of Scottish reception of European (and non-European) literatures. To that end, my hope is that such processes would be encouraged by my choice of non-canonical literary works which are remarkable for their pan-European and otherwise international subject-matter and *dramatis personae*. More than ever before, relevant research programmes must make their departure from the existing comfort zones and display a genuinely pioneering spirit. Younger scholars in particular, not least those seeking neglected topics, will surely benefit from such bold innovations.

## Notes

- 1 The use of the word “canvas” here can indeed be referenced to Gray who was both a painter and a visual artist.
- 2 Here we have generational as well as ideological conflict.

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