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Introduction: *If Scotland ... Conjecturing 2014*

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Introduction:

If Scotland... Conjecturing 2014

Scott Hames and Adrian Hunter

What sweeter way to spend a lifetime than drinking to the memory of a glorious future that never happened.

David Greig, 24 September 2014¹

This number of the *Journal of Scottish Thought* collects papers presented at the 'If Scotland: Posting 2014' conference held at the University of Stirling a few weeks prior to the referendum on Scottish independence (23–24 August 2014).

The aim of the conference was straightforward enough: to explore how the 'historic' debates of 2014 might be recollected and understood a few decades later. It was, admittedly, an exercise in clairvoyance in what was already a season of conjecture. But our hope was that by thrusting the what-iffery of 2014 into an artificially solid historical frame – imagining ourselves looking back from either a new independent state or a refashioned UK – we might better grasp the uniquely contingent moment we were living through. How would the future historicise us? How would it regard the arguments we had chosen to make and our reasons for making them? Once the apparent fluidity of events and possibilities had re-condensed, would our doubts and hopes seem risible or right-minded?

Recalling how the event was advertised, our aims sound both open-ended and over-thought – a puzzling combination not unlike the debate itself:

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What will be the history of now?

[published on *Bella Caledonia* blog, 17 August 2014]

After years of looking forward, we grow weary of possible tomorrows. With history about to pick a side – and as both sides try to make history – fevered minds turn to the politics of the past-in-prospect. Meaning:

¹ David Greig, 'Back to Work', front-step.co.uk, 24 September 2014, <http://www.front-step.co.uk/2014/09/24/back-to-work/>, accessed 1 October 2014.

the result on September 19 will profoundly colour the meaning and memory of everything leading up to it. On the cusp of that verdict, our current moment seems emptied of its own 'live' significance, awaiting the roar of impending retrospect. In the words of a James Kelman story, 'not too long from now tonight will be that last time' – a time we inhabit but cannot know.

History as a living and made reality is at its most liquid, but in a few weeks the facts will freeze textbook solid. Explanation will quickly usurp speculation. And so the indyref imaginary begins to pivot, worrying forward to dream back. See Martin Kettle's wistful invitation to 'Remember 2014, the last golden summer of the old Britain', projecting us into a surreal and scrappy post-Yes reality, then puzzling out the complexity (and ultimate nullity) of post-British wrangling from a jaded 2024.²

Alongside musings of the future-past, consider the empirical mania of what Andrew Tickell (playing hipster correspondent for *The Drouth*) fittingly deems 'archival fever', whereby no indyref campaigning experience 'is adequately authenticated without having been documented', curated, catalogued.³

What of this impulse to collect and record everything? Simply a nod to what is self-evidently historic about what's unfolding – whatever it might soon mean – with the occasional dash of I-was-there self-regard? As with the rash of DIY polls (confirmation-bias bonanza), there is a powerful thirst to make your own evidence – owing much to a bristling mistrust of those taking the measurements and writing the first draft of this history. So capture ALL the facts (and spin) for later scrutiny: some clear-eyed scholar of the future will be equipped to see and evaluate everything, finally coming to vindicate our own view here and now. There is something lively and brittle in the public memory this weather, beginning to wonder seriously how this – and we – might eventually come to look.

So go on, take a speculative selfie. Imagine that we're looking back on the hectic present from a few decades into the future. How do we

² Martin Kettle, 'Remember 2014, the last golden summer of the old Britain', 31 July 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/30/scottish-independence-2014-last-golden-summer-old-britain>, accessed 1 October 2014.

³ Andrew Tickell, 'In the Hipster's Den: The Playful Politics of Indyref', *The Drouth* 47 (Winter 2013/14): 5-9.

look here in 2014 – prescient? Foolish? Admirably sober? Het up about nothing?

On August 23–24 the *If Scotland: Posting 2014* conference will explore just this premise, asking how the indyref will be remembered, historicised and understood a few decades from now – whatever the result. What will our children find puzzling, appalling, banal about what we're gripped by today? Who and what will future historians be chortling at?

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As this prompt suggests, a degree of humour and whimsy seemed both appropriate and inevitable, and was positively encouraged by the conference organisers. We were delighted by the creativity and imagination shown by contributors to this issue, several of whom stepped well beyond their scholarly comfort-zones (and whose essays should be read accordingly). In addition to papers and presentations, of which only a selection is captured here, the conference included set-piece debates on post-Yes and post-No futures, featuring a panel comprising journalist David Torrance, novelist Kirstin Innes and constitutional scholar Aileen McHarg. Lesley Riddoch spoke at the 'post-Yes' session, pondering 2014 from a new state two decades old, where New Town avenues have been re-branded to suit the new dispensation (goodbye Charlotte Square, hello Margo's Mercat). On the 'post-No' day, novelist Ken MacLeod looked back on the flukish electoral pathway to 2014, and cherished the 'New Improvement' of an enriched and recharged Union following the decisive rejection of independence. In addition to plenary lectures from Catriona M. M. Macdonald, Michael Keating and Cairns Craig, a series of literary roundtables featured Jenni Calder, Meaghan Delahunt, Kerry Hudson, Hannah McGill, Ewan Morrison, Allan Wilson and Nicola White. Creative responses were especially memorable. In addition to Robert Crawford's deathless performance of himself as a mildly dyspeptic octogenarian – complete with vigorous mis-pronunciations of 'Foucault' – Kirsty Strang mounted a small museum exhibition of artefacts and curios from 2014. A short piece of youth theatre was specially commissioned for the event, and was superbly performed by members of BBC Scotland's 'Generation 2014' (a group of 16–18 year olds casting their first votes that September).

One evident advantage of what-iffery is its power to release thinking from the limits set by the particular political occasion (in this case, Yes v No). It is an advantage fiction has often exercised in Scottish history. As Ian Duncan argues

in his majestic study of literary Edinburgh in the early nineteenth century, *Scott's Shadow*, the novels of Sir Walter Scott as novels – ‘inauthentic fictional statements’ – were able to ‘float above partisan alignments and...invoke a national public’ in ways that other, documentary registers were not. The premise of *If Scotland...*, though more modest, likewise compelled speakers to fictionalise their arguments by means of address to unknown, future national publics.

Catriona M. M. Macdonald's paper, which opened the conference, explores the challenges presented by the referendum to the practicing historian. As an event without precedent in the British Isles, there is little to be learned from looking back. Instead, Macdonald proposes a form of ‘conjectural history’ – an exercise not lacking in Enlightenment pedigree – to examine a different set of hypotheses: not what Scotland's future will be, ‘but how a future Scotland might impact on the way we write history – our historiography’. How, for example, will future histories of the twentieth century view the Welfare State, in the event of a clear Yes or No? As the symptom of an excessive British state centralisation that was always bound to fail, or as a key element in the post-war social contract that ultimately saved the Union? And what of Thatcherism? The death-blow to the Unionist project, or closer to what, in 2014, a majority of Scots actually believed?

Robert Crawford's playful contribution relishes the freedoms of the future-past, presenting the text of an ‘oration’ delivered at Stirling in 2044 by a noted but fading poet-scholar. In halting voice, the 85-year-old Professor Crawford can just recall the campus view ‘before the demolition of the Wallace Monument’ and ‘the installation of those five celebrated and imposing equestrian statues of that most notable among modern-day Secretaries of State for Scotland, the blessed Theresa May’. His musings on post-2014 Scotland and its perverse literary fashions are interspersed with poems from his long-forgotten collection *Testament*, including verses rumoured to have been recited by ‘Professor Cairns Crag’ on the morning of his execution during the Year of Boris. The rest defies summary.

For the Gaelic community, Pàdraig MacAoidh suggests, the referendum was a welcome chance to argue over something other than the language itself, and this is reflected in the distinctive but oblique contribution Gaelic poetry made to the wider debate. When Gaelic poets did write about the vote, he recalls from 2034, ‘they tended to evoke an alternative present that wasn't actually happening’. With a characteristic conjoining of the political and the pastoral, writers such as Aonghas MacNeacail, Marcas Mac an Tuairneir, and

Liam Crouse placed ‘state of the nation’ questions against the state of the planet, with climate change, environmental degradation, and global economic influences in the forefront of their work. Not that language politics entirely vanished from view. As MacAoidh explains, the absence from Gaelic of the symbol ‘X’ meant that Gaelic speakers were effectively unable to vote in their own language – an irony not lost on the poet Daibhidh Eyre and the grassroots ‘S Dòcha / Dòchas [‘Maybe / Hope’] movement.

Cairns Craig’s paper, which closed the conference, looks back from 2034 on a period of dramatic political and technological change following the ‘great collapse’ of 2022. As Scotland prepares for a second referendum on independence after the dead heat of 2014, Craig traces the key influence of the ‘fantasy physics’ of Kelvin and Clerk Maxwell in scientific and philosophical innovations of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. (The latter includes the abolition of physical ageing.) From the distance of twenty years, competing theories of energy serve as a guide to the 2014 debate, the No and Yes campaigns being characterised by ‘the difference between a physics of the dissipation of energy and a physics of its re-accumulation’. By 2034, Scotland stands revealed as the Maxwellian ‘demon’ in the capitalist world system bequeathed and justified by its Enlightenment, ‘the pathfinder for a new kind of nationalism that has reshaped the world’s political geography and liberated its peoples from the clutches of a global system that was driving us to economic and ecological ruin’.

The imaginative premise of the conference – that we are looking back on the indyref from the distance of several decades – is maintained in this opening trio of papers by Crawford, MacAoidh and Craig. (Recall that these essays were written prior to the vote and without knowledge of its outcome.) The final quartet of essays from Thomson, Wirth, Gibson and Introna are located within our own historical horizons, and examine the referendum in the light of confirmed experience, often employing a comparative or negative lens to question its immanent mythologies (and their analogues in cultural history).

In a searching essay in literary historiography, Alex Thomson queries the pro-independence consensus in a contemporary Scottish culture ‘alleged to be newly at ease with itself’. Unravelling this trope, Thomson questions the narrative of continuity linking the referendum moment with earlier phases of recuperated ‘cultural confidence’ in the 1980s and 1930s. For Thomson, ‘the redefinition of the art of the Renaissance not just as an episode in the prehistory of the contemporary, but as its very origin, risks cancelling out

its critical distance from society'. In seeking to restore this critical distance – partly through close counter-readings of a wide range of key twentieth-century novels – a very different trajectory of Scottish literary and critical history since 1918 begins to emerge, one guided by Thomson's insistence that 'the aesthetic critique of modernity depends on the differentiation between art and culture – between the normative standards and conventions of society and works which challenge and repudiate them'.

'One notable feature' of the indyref, according to Thomson, 'was the concern of both campaigns not to appeal to history'. Robert Wirth's essay pursues this theme in depth, tracing the story of a very present absence. He notes that 'both official campaigns applied a utopian and future-oriented rhetoric, while accusing each other of instrumentalising sentimental attachments to the past'. Though grappling on markedly conservative terrain – which constitutional option will best secure what remains of the welfare state – both sides showed a strong aversion to openly 'restorative' nostalgia, and largely eschewed the 'antimodern myth-making' typical of nationality politics. Logically and emotionally beholden to the goodness of the past, but hyper-sensitive to charges of atavism, both campaigns 'hoped to profit from voters' historical awareness without overtly appealing to it, or being seen to manipulate it'.

Corey Gibson looks half a century backward to probe the appeal and limits of artistic commitment in 2014. For Gibson, the pro-independence National Collective project 'inhabits a clear tension between the cultural activism of a self-appointed vanguard' and the Gramscian 'national-popular'. In this regard it reproduces several unresolved and unresolvable facets of the 1964 'folksong flying' between Hugh MacDiarmid and Hamish Henderson. In proposing a 'National Flying Festival' to replace the party conference season, National Collective aim for a crowd-sourced, dogma-busting forum for popular engagement, but seem to misread key aspects of the Scottish tradition it seeks to re-fashion. The resulting tangle speaks to a direct contradiction between quasi-Nordic democratic models and the mannered rhetorical extravagance of flying. The impossibility of combining 'measured and dispassionate debate' with 'an exultant kind of vituperative theatre' illuminates wider tensions within the cultural campaign.

The question of who 'we' are dominates Arianna Introna's incisive study of the so-called Missing Scotland – a phrase coined by Gerry Hassan to denote a segment of population (for the most part young, poor, and living in social housing) who are disconnected from politics. Introna probes the contradictions

in the progressive Yes movement's co-option of this constituency, which it treated both as a symbol of its supposed inclusiveness and compassion, and as the embodiment of a fabled 'miserablism' from which a future independent Scotland would and should be delivered.

But we begin as we began with the opening plenary address from Catriona M. M. Macdonald, located firmly in the slippery and undecided temporality of our theme, a Scottish historian pondering 'what if?' some 26 days before the vote.

Acknowledgements

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