

Seminar: The Road to Brexit: British Discourses of Europe

Lecturer: Prof. Dr. Ina Habermann

Podcast Contribution, Author: Nataša Pavković

Novel: James Robertson: *To Be Continued*. London, Hamish Hamilton 2017.

James Robertson's Highlander-Novel *To Be Continued*

Speaker 1 [male]:

“The referendum may be over, but the question it addressed is neither over nor done with. How could it be? So long as Scotland exists and England exists, that question will never be over.”

Author:

This quote from James Robertson's novel *To Be Continued* surely explains its title. Set only a couple of weeks after the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, this surreal story sheds a light on what existence might be like for middle-aged anti-heroes in post-referendum Edinburgh.

Having lost his job as a journalist for an ailing newspaper, a satirical version of *The Scotsman*, the protagonist of the novel, Douglas Findhorn Elder, is commissioned as a free-lancer to contribute to 'The Idea of Scotland': A series of articles inspired by people's taste for the celebration of national identity, perhaps all the more topical since political independence was not achieved. Befriended, in a bizarre twist, by a talking toad, Elder sets out with said toad in his coat pocket to interview 99-year-old ex-politician Rosalind Munlochy. Travelling to the Highlands, he finds himself in a place of negotiation, facing the stereotypes and images of Scottishness – and its relation to Englishness.

James Robertson, who wrote his PhD thesis on the works of the renowned classical Scottish author Sir Walter Scott, is engaged in promoting the Scottish language and can probably be seen as Scottish to the core. However, his novel is a tongue-in-cheek tilt at the romanticised Highland tradition, parodying the journey from Edinburgh to the Highlands which is a recurring motif in Scottish culture.

On their trip Elder and toad meet suitably eccentric characters with telling names: MacCrimmon is the name of a Scottish piper family, featured in 19th century romanticised images of Scotland.

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And one character is called Corryvreckan, like the dangerous whirlpool near the island of Jura that features prominently in the 1940s Highland romance *I Know Where I'm Going!* by the British filmmakers Powell and Pressburger, also known as 'The Archers'. There are also shades of *The Thirty Nine Steps*, an early 20th century adventure story that makes the most of a remote Highland setting. Putting all these ingredients of stereotypical Scottishness into a pot and stirring well, Robertson offers a heady brew that evokes both the intoxication with things Scottish and the hangover likely to follow.

One of the central characters is Rosalind Munlochy, owner of the Glentaragar estate, centenarian and most importantly a political chameleon. She can be read allegorically as the communicative Scottish memory, having lived through a century's worth of Scottish history and been an active player in multiple decades of Scottish politics. Elder's main aim in the interview is to find out how she voted in the Scottish independence referendum.

Speaker1 [male]:

"My editor (...) thinks we should portray you as a kind of mother-of-the-nation figure. How would you feel about that?"

Speaker 2 [female]:

"I would strongly object. That's a very foolish idea. I don't feel at all maternal towards the nation."

Author:

Rosalind Munlochy puts her own ever-changing and constantly developing political involvement into perspective, insisting that different times call for different measures. The only thing she's ever done, she claims, was shifting and adapting to what the changing times asked of her. This embrace of transformation is opposed to the congealed and static tradition of Scottish stereotype. In tune with this, she refuses to answer the question about her referendum vote.

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Withdrawing from contemporary politics, she leaves the discussions about a possible Scottish independence to the younger generation.

Given Robertson's gentle send-up of Scottish tradition and his simultaneous celebration of it, it comes as no surprise that the novel ends on this note of indeterminacy. Robertson appears to turn away from the independence referendum as the centre of the Scottish struggle of self-definition, focussing instead on the faultlines and complexities in Scottish society. After all, the need to forge a unified national identity arises only in conflict with an 'other' that must be opposed. In the Scottish case, this was, and continues to be, England. By the time the novel was published in late summer 2016, Elder might have asked Rosalind Munlochy what she voted in the Brexit referendum. Once again, the English decided Scotland's political course, and after the snap election that Prime Minister Theresa May called in 2017, a second Scottish independence referendum has become highly unlikely. Therefore, more or less against their will, the Scottish people have been drawn into the vortex of Brexit. Thus, for the foreseeable future, the Scottish personality will remain split, and Scotland's future will be largely decided from Westminster. If irony is the weapon of the disarmed, Robertson's absurd tale may serve a purpose. As Denis Mina said in the Guardian:

Speaker 2 [female]:

"In heartsore times, we need more books like this."