

**Timothy C. Baker, *Contemporary Scottish Gothic: Mourning, Authenticity, and Tradition*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014. Pp. 232. £60. ISBN 9781137457196.**

Research on contemporary Gothic is a Janus-headed enterprise, looking ahead to the most recent cultural production and, simultaneously, behind to that past that haunts it. As Timothy C. Baker reminds us, ‘Gothic is the spectre of the past continually intruding on the present’ (10), and Scottish Gothic is no exception. Central to Baker’s analysis is the notion of mourning, which, convincingly, he connects to the concept of nation. Following Marc Redfield’s theorisation, Baker claims that ‘[n]ation and novel both foreground the process of mourning and resist it’ (21). In doing so, Scottish Gothic is defined as the ambivalent space where textuality both underpins and erodes a discourse of authenticity and (national) identity.

Throughout the book’s five chapters Baker faces the difficult task of attempting to define – and yet interrogate – the elusive category of Scottish Gothic, his intention being not to offer a prescriptive reading of what may be exclusively defined as Scottish Gothic, but investigate ‘several non-exclusive criteria for inclusion’ (15). Such broad thematic lines include the recurrent tropes of the ‘found manuscript’, ‘fantastic islands’, ‘metamorphosis’, and ‘northern communities’.

Preceding these is a chapter dedicated to Scott ‘as a haunting force’ (25) on James Robertson’s *The Fanatic* and *The Testament of Gideon Mack*. Underpinning Scott’s paradigmatic role within Scottish Gothic, this chapter reminds us of the ambiguous function played by the historical past in his novels: ‘the past and present, the artificial and the authentic, and the active and passive are in constant dialogue’ (30). From the spectral traces of Scott identifiable throughout Robertson’s fiction emerges a sense in which ‘[b]oth [the self and the nation] are ... formed through the experience of being haunted’ (39).

Such textual haunting is amplified in the palimpsestual structure of many Scottish Gothic novels, and particularly those that engage with the motif of the found manuscript, which, in turn, also looks back to archetypal texts such as James Hogg’s *Justified Sinner*. In these contemporary self-reflexive narratives – as in the original by Hogg – ‘the discovery of such a manuscript does not provide solutions, but rather highlights the impossibility of definite interpretation’ (56). Such is the case of Louise Welsh’s *The Cutting Room*, where a sinister past is evoked in the form of a visual manuscript – a photographic portfolio of sadistic pornography – and A.L. Kennedy’s *So I Am Glad*, where the disruptive appearance of the ghost of Cyrano de Bergerac in modern-day Glasgow supports the view that ‘identity can only be known in relation to its textual manifestation’ (86). Even then, however, such knowledge is inevitably fragmented, as ‘texts can do no more, or less, than haunt’ (87).

The peripheral quality of the ways in which Gothic addresses knowledge of the self and the past allows Baker to link the trope of the found manuscript to the locus of much Scottish Gothic writing, the haunted island, for, as Baker suggests, ‘the manuscript can be seen as fundamentally insular’, and ‘[i]slands, like texts, must be considered as a web of relation to other worlds’ (90, 91). The exploration of the island as inherently liminal space brings about a very useful reading of texts as diverse as J.M. Barrie’s *Mary Rose*, Alice Thompson’s *Burnt Island* and Louise Welsh’s *Naming The Bones*.

The thematic focus on the natural world bleeds into Chapter 4, dedicated to the complex – and relatively unexplored – relationship between the human and animal worlds. Understandably, such comparison leads to an interrogation of preconceived ideas about the human condition and the hierarchical structure of an anthropocentric view of the world, as ‘the natural world invites a reconsideration of the very categories of self and other’ (117). While drawing on texts from the past – Scott’s *Redgauntlet* and Hogg’s ‘The Pongos: A Letter from South Africa’ – this chapter focuses, more specifically, on Iain Banks’s *The*

*Wasp Factory*, Elspeth Barker's *O Caledonia*, and John Burnside's *The Locust Room and Glister*.

By way of conclusion to the study, Baker turns to the significance of northern landscapes. Noting how 'the North is used to foreground the instability of place, nation, and ultimately genre', Baker argues that 'with an isolated and unhomely North, it is possible ... to articulate the interwoven tensions between life and death, past and present, and the individual community' (148, 152) in works such as Sarah Moss's *Cold Earth* and John Burnside's *A Summer of Drowning*.

It is a shame that, with few exclusions, *Contemporary Scottish Gothic* does not pay attention to genres other than fiction, as, undoubtedly, poetry and drama deserve more critical interest. This is, however, an understandable limitation justified by the already comprehensive scope of Baker's work, which constitutes an insightful and important addition to both Gothic and Scottish studies.

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