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Scotland's Top Ten & the Inadequacy of a National Canon: Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981)

Public opinion about literary favourites is often at odds with critical assessment. Confronted with a 2005 list from a vote on “Best Scottish Book of All Time,” my baffled students in a recent final year Scottish fiction class wondered “Who *are* these people!?” Even in 2005, though, five of the top ten were well-respected teaching texts. Then as now, *Sunset Song* came top, and then as now *Lanark*, *Trainspotting*, *Harry Potter 1*, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* were in the top ten. The students’ perplexity at the 2005 top ten had something to do with the inclusion of Orwell’s *1984*, and they had never heard of Dorothy Dunnett (in second place with *The Game of Kings*). The 2016 favourites list seems less unpredictable, and in the longer list the canonical and the popular sit comfortably side-by-side. Unsurprisingly, the top 30 is full of crime fiction (McIlvanney’s finest novel, *Docherty*, cedes to *Laidlaw*, the father of tartan noir).

Yet, when genre fiction tops the bestseller lists, it’s especially pleasing to see Scotland’s greatest modern novel, *Lanark*, a brilliant dissection of capitalism’s viscera, trump the first in the Rowling billionaire franchise. Gray’s novel, like *Sunset Song* and Grassie Gibbon’s work more generally, deserves to be much better known internationally: if *Ulysses* is the great modernist novel, the localist universalism of *Lanark* is the outstanding postmodern challenge to the global conformism of capitalist hyper-individualism. While Joyce uses non-realist prose styles and techniques to break the stasis of 1904 provincial Dublin life, *Lanark* goes further, transforming the real through fantasy to reimagine Glasgow. The novel’s very form challenges a philistine Knoxian Presbyterianism—a bugbear, too, of the Scottish literary revival of the early twentieth century to which *Sunset Song* made such a great contribution—which says the Scots can’t be, or shouldn’t be, creative. However, the dystopic fantasy sections are not merely a comment on the wretchedness of reality in a post-industrial environment, but a critique of the limitations of realism as a mode to understand and transform the hierarchical and rapacious nature of capitalism in a postmodern age. Gray denied being a postmodernist, but *Lanark* ingeniously utilises postmodern style to protest the iniquities of postmodernity. *Lanark*’s list of plagiarisms indicates, in ironical and self-

conscious postmodern style, the extent to which Gray has pilfered from other texts. For Fredric Jameson, postmodernism replaces true, transformative imagination with pastiche. But for Gray, it's not that the artist in the postmodern era lacks the imagination of the singular genius, but that this was always a (capitalist) myth: imagination is—or should be—communally owned and crosses national canonical borders.

In Scotland the development of a canon has always been problematic, undercut on the one hand by the subsuming of heavy hitters like Stevenson and Spark in the English-Literature-as-world-literature canon, and squeezed, on the other, by the Burnsian demos from the native flank. Many important writers are posted missing as a result. Here for instance, in a list heavy on twentieth-century novelists, numerous figures are absent who would be of the first-rank in any other canon. There's no Nan Shepherd, despite her recent publicity in the eco-work of Robert Macfarlane and on the new Royal Bank of Scotland £5 note. Shepherd's *The Quarry Wood* (1928) and *The Weatherhouse* (1930) remain undervalued forerunners to Gibbon's Scottish work in the *Quair*, and *The Quarry Wood's* Martha Ironside is surely a feisty, unacknowledged model for Chris Guthrie. Odd, too, is the absence of George Mackay Brown, a fine novelist whose *Greenvoe* (1972) depicts the destruction of island community life. While it is good to see the inclusion of Robin Jenkins's *The Cone Gatherers* in the top 30, his work, the subject of a welcome recent volume edited by Linden Bicket and Douglas Gifford, deserves greater exposure, as do the novels of George Friel, whose *Mr Alfred MA* (1972) is a minor classic or, to put it another way, a classic of "minor literature." Critics might carp, too, at other twentieth-century gaps, such as Ronald Frame, Neil Gunn, Allan Massie, Naomi Mitchison, and Eric Linklater, as well as the nineteenth-century novelist John Galt, whose *Annals of the Parish* (1821) is unjustly neglected outside, and often inside, the teaching machine.

Lists "get people talking," and Scottish literature continues to need that, but, like canons, they can be self-perpetuating: is *Sunset Song* top because it has been top previously, and does its predominance contribute to the overshadowing of work like Shepherd's? What role does the canon of school set-texts play? The curation of a long list by a panel of experts means the canonical and the popular blend and blur here in appealing ways. But what would a truly uncurated top 30 look like? *Sunset Song* continues to appeal in the accessible vigour of its demotic lustre. Yet it is doubtful in these favourites whether we have heard the real voice of the people.

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