Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion, ed. by Carol Margaret Davison and Monica Germanà

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Discussing Scottish literature in 1919, G. Gregory Smith alighted upon the near-unpronounceable, unspellable notion of 'Caledonian Antisyzygy' to sum up the binaries, dualities, and contradictions typically battling for dominance in the Scottish psyche. The literature of the Scottish gothic is, accordingly, replete with uncanny doublings, James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) being significant examples. By 1997, Daniel Carlin, the protagonist of James Robertson's *The Fanatic*, is complaining that 'we don't need any mair doubles, oor haill fuckin culture's littered wi them' (quoted p. 89). In her essay on 'Calvinist and Covenanter Gothic' in Carol Margaret Davison and Monica Germanà's collection of essays, *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, Alison Milbank points out that Carlin addresses this observation to his own reflection in a mirror, and of course solicits a response. The opening chapters of *Scottish Gothic* make it clear why the 'Caledonian Antisyzygy' has such traction as a concept, and especially the extent to which the gothic has served as both an agent and a metaboliser of the resulting anxieties: literature aside, the gothic, as a cultural inheritance, has occasionally been positioned in contrast to the Celtic, the latter being an eighteenth-century 'invention', or so claims Nick Groom in his insightful essay here on the genesis of Scottish gothic.

It was the publication of *Ossian* in 1760 that focused critical energy into schismatic arguments over what might constitute a Scottish literature or culture. English commentators used its fraudulent provenance as an excuse to delegitimise it, and thereby the notion of Celtic letters itself, while others claimed that Scottish culture was in fact the *authentic* legacy of the (historical) gothic spirit in the British Isles. In distinct contrast to the ersatz medieval document *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), *Ossian* arguably remains to this day a tainted quantity, treated as a base forgery, while Horace Walpole's conceit is indulged as a piece of ludic mischievousness. But, as Davison demonstrates in Chapter Three, *Ossian* was bound up with the emergence of the gothic novel in the late eighteenth century. Its impact on the work of Ann Radcliffe, especially, is enough that the Ossianic and the gothic can be regarded as an interrelated legacy – yet another uncanny doubling. Complicating things further is the contrivance by English writers such as Radcliffe of their own Scottish gothic imaginary,

owing much to William Shakespeare's presentation of Scotland in *Macbeth* as a wild hinterland of internecine barbarity and antique superstition.

Scottish writers responded with more 'authentic' (a perilous word to use in the context of many of this book's arguments) iterations of Scottish gothic, and accordingly, Sir Walter Scott and James Hogg are here afforded a chapter each, in the form of vigorous case studies by Fiona Robertson and Scott Brewster respectively. Moreover, Hogg's involvement with *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in the early nineteenth century is explored by Robert Morrison. Morrison makes a convincing case that *Maga* (as the publication was affectionately dubbed) had a transformational effect on the gothic, by dispensing with complicated, lengthy narrative in favour of psychological acuity and concise totality of effect. In America, Edgar Allan Poe extended this aesthetic, and the resulting cross-currents of transatlantic literary influence can be variously felt in Francophile Decadence, the emergence of the short story as a distinct form, and the work of writers as diverse as Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Conan Doyle. H. P. Lovecraft used the sustained intensity of atmosphere identified by Poe in the *Maga* 'tales of terror' as a central plank of his own theorising on weird fiction. And indeed, the innovations in Scottish gothic to be found in the pages of *Maga* in the early nineteenth century continue to cast a cyclopean, if under-acknowledged, shadow over the genre into the twenty-first century.

As a student, Stevenson would rummage through the nineteenth-century equivalent of bargain bins looking for old copies of *Maga* to snap up and pore over. Taking up the baton from Hogg et al., his distinctly Scottish contributions to the gothic are discussed by Roderick Wilson, who happily casts his critical net wider than just *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Thus, we are treated to productive analysis of tales such as 'Thrawn Janet' (1881), 'Olalla' (1885), and 'The Merry Men' (1882). Seeking out or revisiting the latter tale seems almost irresistible after reading Wilson's discussion of the invocation of 'a kind of existential Gothic, or indeed a Gothic existentialism, in its vision of the natural world as a whirl of energy and matter, always at risk of shipwreck in "the roaring blackness" at the edge of an abyss' (p. 148). Wilson argues that with *Jekyll and Hyde*, Stevenson's earlier Calvinist dualism develops into 'multiple indeterminacies' – perhaps an appropriate phrase to use in relation to the competing historical and cultural legacies delineated in the opening chapters of this anthology.

Sarah Dunnigan's subsequent discussion of J. M. Barrie carefully excavates a more muted gothic aesthetic at play in Barrie's works, including of course the 'ultimate Gothic

fairy tale' *Peter Pan* (1911), with its 'ambiguously celebratory desire to recover the dead and the vanished' (p. 165). After Barrie, we proceed briskly into the contemporary, to Muriel Spark, Iain Banks, and others, and through the frames of queer Scottish gothic and female Scottish gothic. Complementing Barbara A. E. Bell's earlier chapter on 'Scottish Gothic Drama', Duncan Petrie discusses 'Scottish Gothic and the Moving Image', his analysis of *The Wicker Man* (1973) also prefigured in Milbank's previous discussion of John Buchan's proto-'folk horror' masterpiece *Witch Wood* (1927).

Despite Carlin's complaint to his own reflection, then, it would seem that the 'Caledonian Antisyzygy' persists, and – as this fine anthology demonstrates – continues to manifest itself in endlessly fascinating ways in the polysemic texts of the Scottish gothic. Moreover, since many of the writers discussed in this volume have a reach far beyond the specific context of their Scottishness, it will no doubt prove invaluable to anyone seeking to acknowledge or further explore this context in their own research.

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