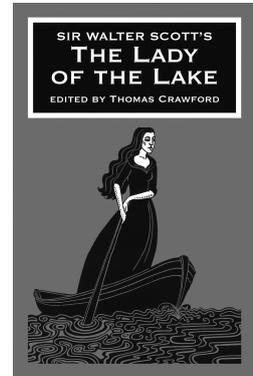


## Reputations, Walter Scott and the ASLS

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Walter Scott was once the dominant author in Britain and Europe, and Scottish literature rode the wave of popularity and relevance with him (into the age of mass publication). The two hundredth anniversary of the publication of *The Lady of the Lake* offers a chance to reflect on the ways in which Sir Walter Scott's reputation has in several respects faded over the last century. It may be tedious to consider whether its nadir was – or arose from – F. R. Leavis's famous relegation of Scott to a footnote in *The Great Tradition*; by the mid-twentieth century he had anyway become for modernist critics a token of that-to-be-resisted. What is certain is that his work, and especially his poetry, has not been at the centre of the study of literature in English in recent years. And yet this is the writer of whom Martin Esslin once made to me a startling claim.



Esslin was, we know, given to sweeping perspectives which might often oversimplify: his *The Theatre of the Absurd* is now seen, after all, to have significant flaws, even though it was in its time a powerfully influential and horizon-expanding book. He was, however, of that mid-twentieth-century generation of scholars of Central European upbringing, wide horizons and multilingual capacity beyond all but a very few. And when I asked him in 1977 what he thought of Scott, he said he was simply the greatest artist of the nineteenth century. I was taken aback and suggested he might mean he was the greatest novelist. 'No,' said Martin with the assurance of one who had read most European literatures in their original language and knew (or at least believed sincerely) that he had a panoramic view of the arts, 'I mean the greatest artist in any art form'. One might (or rather certainly would) want to nuance Martin's dictum somewhat and row back a little from its grandeur, but Esslin was setting Scott in rather special company even as late as the 1970s. Yet, it would be fair to say there has been some neglect of this great and internationally highly significant artist in recent decades.

Perhaps we now find Scott a little difficult, but as Stuart Kelly observed on being interviewed about his recent volume *Scott-land*, Joyce is also difficult and that is seen not as a warning-off but as an invitation. And in fact one can celebrate a developing and strengthening revival in interest in and critical understanding of the value of Scott and his writing. Next year sees the publication in June of the *Edinburgh Companion to Sir Walter Scott* in the widely-welcomed *Edinburgh Companions to Scottish Literature* series, the international Scott conference on July 5-9, 'Walter Scott: Sheriff and Outlaw' at the University of Wyoming, and the completion of Edinburgh University Press's superb Edinburgh edition of the Waverley novels. This year's attractively produced edition of *The Lady of the Lake* marks its bicentenary and is published by the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, the ASLS.

The ASLS is itself celebrating an anniversary, its fortieth. It is, as witness the vibrant Scottish strand within ESSE's Turin conference, part of a newly re-focused and sophisticated recognition of the importance of Scottish literature as sometimes an aspect of English literature and sometimes (especially when dealing with literature in Gaelic, Latin or Scots) a distinct discipline. Yet, when it is distinct, it is still surely the closest sibling EngLit has. Indeed, so close is the relationship that the invention of English literature as a study is generally recognised as dating from the appointment of Hugh Blair to the Chair of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres (now the Regius Chair of Rhetoric and English Literature) at Edinburgh University in 1756. It is matter for another article as to why the foundation of the study of English literature would be of such great interest to Scots of the Enlightenment, but there it is. Since we are talking anniversaries, the chair's 260<sup>th</sup> birthday approaches. And it does so in a context where literature in Scotland is in rude health from the popular writing of McCall Smith and Rowling to the current wave of poets, novelists and playwrights, including Jackie Kay, Irvine Welsh, James Kelman, Liz Lochhead, Ali Smith, David Harrower – and the list goes on. And Carol Ann Duffy recently became the first Scottish poet to be Poet Laureate.

In this context, the ASLS aims to promote the study, teaching and writing of Scottish literature, and to further the study of the languages of Scotland. It is a cultural engine and critical resource for the understanding of literature, questioning canonical assumptions (such as Leavis's). Increasingly its work belongs in and constructively troubles studies in areas like Romanticism, the Novel, and other literatures in English. It does so by a wide range of activities including several publications of deep interest to the scholar of literature in English. In its Annual Volumes series it publishes works which have either been neglected or merit fresh presentation to a modern audience and critical anthologies of both creative and non-fiction writing. This series has included important texts until recently out of print including a selection of the plays produced by the Glasgow Unity Theatre Company in the 1940s and an edition of James Bridie's plays. Papers on literary criticism and cultural studies, along with in-depth reviews of Scottish books, are published biannually in the *Scottish Literary Review*, an internationally peer-reviewed journal, the leader in its field (see below). Short articles, features and news appear in the ASLS newsletter *ScotLit* and linguistic studies in *Scottish Language*. *New Writing Scotland* is an annual anthology, containing new poetry, drama, short fiction and creative prose in Scots, English and Gaelic.

All of these publications are free to members for a very low annual subscription. In addition, the ASLS offers free online resources including the peer-reviewed *International Journal of Scottish Literature* and the e-zine *The Bottle Imp*, and has archived and made available online existing issues of the currently suspended journal the *International Journal of Scottish Theatre*. The newly refurbished ASLS website also contains a substantial and growing body of downloadable essays, articles, papers and classroom notes – see [www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/](http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/).

*The Lady of the Lake* is an example of the way in which – beyond specialist publications – volumes of wider scholarly and literary interest are available for purchase to members and the wider public. The Association produces collections of essays in its Occasional Papers series. The fourteenth and most recent of these is *Crossing the Highland Line: Cross-Currents in Eighteenth-Century Scottish Writing*, edited by Christopher MacLachlan while the preceding

volume is *A Flame in the Mearns – Lewis Grassie Gibbon: a Centenary Celebration*, edited by Margery Palmer McCulloch and Sarah Dunnigan.

Meanwhile the ASLS holds annual conferences on Scottish writers and literary topics in such diverse locations as Glasgow, Kirkwall, Edinburgh, Dumfries and Skye. Other annual conferences address Scottish language issues, and the place of Scottish literature and language in the classroom. Its schools conferences are suitable for Continuous Professional Development and attract teachers from across Scotland. The diversity of the work of the ASLS reflects on the one hand the diversity of output and activity bodied forth by Scott. It is also one of the powerhouses of the current revival of interest and deepening understanding of the value of the study of Scottish literature, not least for the specialist in other traditions who will find in it rich material for reflection and, more importantly, enjoyment.

### **SCOTTISH LITERARY REVIEW**

After experiencing such a successful ESSE conference generally, but especially in relation to the way Scottish literary studies and their connections with continental Europe were woven into the programme from late medieval/renaissance topics to contemporary ones, the editors of *Scottish Literary Review* would like to express our continuing interest in receiving submissions to the journal from European scholars, either on specifically Scottish topics or on comparative studies of Scottish and other European literatures.

*Scottish Literary Review* (formerly *Scottish Studies Review*) is the leading international print journal for Scottish literary studies and is listed in the MLA International Bibliography. It is committed to approaching Scottish literature in an expansive way through exploration of its various social, cultural, historical and philosophical contexts, as well as through its interaction with expressive media such as theatre and film. The editors are interested in comparative work with literatures from beyond Scotland, and in encouraging debate on issues of contemporary significance to literary studies – something we hope will be assisted by our recent expanded reviews coverage in the autumn issue as well as by responses to individual articles published in the journal.

Articles for consideration should be up to 7,000 words in length (including endnotes) and should be sent to either editor at the address given in the journal, with two paper copies and one electronic file. The format is that of the MHRA Style book (a short Style Sheet is also available on the Association for Scottish Literary Studies Website at [www.asls.org.uk](http://www.asls.org.uk)). All submissions are peer-reviewed, and a response should be expected within three months.

As editors, we look forward to hearing from new and former contributors and to continuing and expanding our international coverage of Scottish literary studies in continental Europe.

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