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INTERVIEW

An Interview with James Robertson

John Corbett
University of Macau



*The ESSE 12 conference in Košice was enlivened by the presence of Scottish writer James Robertson. Dr Robertson read from his work on the opening day, and stayed to participate in several sessions, amongst them a panel organised by Professor Carla Sassi and Dr Jessica Aliaga Lavrijsen, on the ways terrorism has been framed and reframed in novels and on-screen. Robertson is a poet, publisher, writer, editor and translator, a cultural activist who was prominent in the 'Yes' campaign for Scottish independence – but he is best known as a prize-winning novelist. His novels are *The Fanatic* (2000), *Joseph Knight* (2003, winner of both the Saltire and Scottish Arts Council Book of the Year awards), *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (2006, longlisted for the Man Booker Prize), *And the Land Lay Still* (2010, winner of the Saltire Book of the Year award) and *The Professor of Truth* (2013). His latest novel was inspired by the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 on 21st December 1998. This atrocity resulted in the deaths of all 243 passengers and 16 crew, as well as 11 inhabitants of the Scottish town of Lockerbie. He has translated several children's books into Scots, including works by A.A. Milne, Roald Dahl, Alexander McCall Smith and Julia Donaldson. Robertson has held writer-in-residence posts, at Brownsbank Cottage (former home of the poet Hugh MacDiarmid) from 1993 to*

1995, at the Scottish Parliament (2004), Edinburgh Napier University (2010-11), and is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow. His most recent book, published in November 2014, is 365, a collection of 365-word stories written every day during 2013. He lives in rural Angus, near Dundee.

John Corbett: I know you resist the label of historical novelist, but if you look at the books you've written, going back to *The Fanatic* and more recently *And the Land Lay Still* and *The Professor of Truth*, the thing that unites them, as you said on the opening day of the conference, is the way the past haunts the present. The interaction between past and present is the abiding concern in all of your novels.

James Robertson: I think that is probably the overarching theme that I keep going back to: the passage of time, its effect on individuals and wider communities, and, as you say, the relationship between past and present, which is a two-way relationship. I'm very clear about that: yes, the past haunts the present but the present also has an impact upon the past. We think of the past as being static, as being over, and therefore whatever else happens, the past is the past – it can have an influence on the present, but the present can't influence the past. But at the level of both individual and social perceptions of the past, of course, every time you go back and look at the past, it shifts, because you bring new ways of looking at it. And in Scottish terms that is very evident if you look at my novel *Joseph Knight*, for example, which is a fiction that is based on a true story of a slave brought to Scotland in the 18th century who then wins his freedom through the legal system.

JC: Can you tell me more about how you came to that story?

JR: Well, after I had written my first novel, a friend who lived in Dundee came up to me one day with a photocopy of a page from a history of Dundee and said, 'This might be of interest to you as subject matter for your next novel.' And it was just a paragraph, really, that mentioned the name 'Joseph Knight' and said that this man was the first slave to win his freedom in Scotland and he married a Dundee girl, or something to that effect. And I thought this was interesting because, as somebody who, as a student, both as an undergraduate and a postgraduate, had studied history and, as a postgraduate who had studied 18th century Scottish history, I was completely ignorant of this man's name and I had never heard of the case of Joseph Knight versus John Wedderburn. So that piqued my curiosity and then I began to research it, and I discovered this whole forgotten, or neglected, story from the Scottish 18th century. And what was really interesting about that was once I had gone back and looked at that, it made me rethink entirely my understanding of mid-late 18th century Scotland, because I had never really appreciated that the Scots were as engaged with the slave trade and in the running of plantations in the West Indies as everybody else, not just in the rest of the British Isles but in Europe. And in fact the Scots were particularly engaged in the plantations in Jamaica. So that's why I say that suddenly the past takes on a new shape.

JC: But the novel's partly the imaginative recovery of the past – it blends the context of the past and also your imaginative engagement with it as a novelist. It's not a historical textbook.

JR: No it's not, no. And as I was exploring this, I used this trope of a fictional detective who's discovering this stuff and reconstructing it in the early 19th century. So it was interesting for me to play with that concept of the passage of time and the rediscovering of the past, and then that having an impact on how you think about yourself. And if you think about a novel like *And the Land Lay Still*, which is dealing with the last 60 years of social, cultural and political change in Scotland, it's the same thing – when you look back and you get a new perspective on the past, then I think that gives you a different sense of who you are as an individual or a community or society. Once you've clarified the story you're trying to tell, you bring it back to the present.

JC: Yes, one of the feelings that I definitely got when I was reading *And the Land Lay Still* was that here you were trying to create a mind-set. It's an act not just of

imaginative recovery but also cultural intervention – you were saying to your readers, ‘This is not just a perspective on Scottish history, this is a positive way of thinking about Scottish history.’ Would you say that your intention was to create a perspective where people can be more inclined towards independence?

JR: Actually I’m not sure that I would. I mean, I take your point that the novel is a construct of how one can view the last 60 years, but I don’t think I expect readers to get to the end of the novel and suddenly go, ‘Ah, right, now I have a complete understanding of how we got to where we are, and so that will make me put an ‘X’ in a particular box.’ It doesn’t work like that. Certainly my project when I began to think about that novel was to explore through fiction the question of how we got from there to here in political and cultural and social terms. But I didn’t have a preconceived idea of where that would end up, and in fact the novel is quite open-ended in that it doesn’t say what the next step beyond the last page of this novel is: Scotland will become independent, or Scotland will become a socialist republic, or Scotland will decide that devolution was a bad idea – it doesn’t come to any of those conclusions, it simply says that there is a story beyond the end of this story, but we don’t know what it is.

JC: And all the stories are linked.

JR: Yes, and everything is connected, particularly in a small country like this. That’s the way the novel finishes – the character Michael sees all these connections and he realises it has fallen to him to make them. And that is true in reality as much as it is in fiction. I was thinking of this in terms of those big novels, going back not as far as the 19th century but just as far as Don DeLillo with novels like *Underworld*, and beyond that there were also Dickens, Scott to some extent, and Trollope, who all do that big panorama thing, and I wanted to see if I could do that as well.

JC: What I really like is not so much what I remembered and recognised from the 1980s and 90s, but the time just before, the 1950s and 60s episodes, when I felt you were writing yourself into the period just before you must have arrived in Edinburgh as a student. I liked the ceilidhs at the character Jean Barbour’s flat, no doubt after drinking sessions, which are full of storytellers, writers, singers, artists, politicians, and spies – did you experience that yourself or was writing the novel a vicarious entry into that world for you?

JR: Well, I moved to Edinburgh in 1976 and it was that year that the licensing laws became a little more liberal and the pubs closed at 11 o’clock, and so I came in at the tail end of all that, when you bought a carry-out¹ and went to somebody’s flat. But it’s true the gatherings that I describe, with the songs, the stories and the political discussion refer back to an earlier period, in the mid-to-late 60s and early 70s and I’m recreating a period just before my own time. But it’s interesting what you say about the 50s and 60s period, because when I first began to conceive of this novel it was my own experience in the 80s and 90s that I thought I would be writing about – a period in which I was culturally and politically quite active – but I realised that wasn’t going to be enough and I’d have to go back to a much earlier period and – like you – I really began to enjoy exploring and experiencing the time just before my own time, much more than I did writing about my own period.

JC: I find the character of Jean Barbour particularly interesting and I think she’s probably significantly named.

JR: Yes, it’s a mixture of John Barbour (the author of *The Brus* (1375), the earliest surviving long poem in Scots), whose great work begins ‘Storyss to rede ar delitabill’ – and Jean, a name associated with Burns and MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. Yes, her name is significant. And various people have come up to me and said, ‘I know who that is,’ and I reply, ‘No, you don’t.’ She isn’t any one person but the fact that so many people say they recognise her is interesting.

¹ Alcoholic beverages purchased on licensed premises to be consumed elsewhere.

JC: She's an iconic Scottish female. You said you were trying to emulate the big, panoramic novels by DeLillo and Dickens and Trollope, and you mentioned Walter Scott. We're celebrating the 200th anniversary of the publication of Scott's *Waverley* at this conference, and I wanted to ask you how conscious you are – or not – of writing out of a particularly Scottish literary tradition. *And the Land Lay Still* evokes the ballads, for example. Do you consciously draw on the tradition as a resource?

JR: Well, it's presumptuous to think of yourself as part of a tradition, but I certainly reference that Scottish tradition, and I think one of the reasons why I do it is because I came to it late. Like most of us, I didn't come across it at school; Scottish literature simply didn't figure in my education, and it wasn't something I was aware of at all until I was in my 20s. And at that point I stumbled across MacDiarmid because he'd just died, and there were obituaries in the papers, and I began to think, 'What have I been missing here?' So I started with MacDiarmid and MacDiarmid was the one that opened the doors to everything else. And of course I knew some Burns, and quite a lot of Robert Louis Stevenson but I didn't think of him as belonging to a Scottish tradition. I hadn't read any Walter Scott; so it was like opening floodgates, realising that there was this massive literary culture in my own country of which I had no knowledge at all. Then I read Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Neil Gunn and the ballads and so on. So that's why when I started making an attempt at getting published, writing poems and stories, I was definitely following in that tradition, which is not always helpful because you can write in a purely imitative way but then you find your own voice and then your own way through that.

JC: Yes, and I think I know why you resist the easy label of 'historical novelist', because one of the things you are doing is extending its scope and its possibilities in many ways. But I did study Scottish Literature at university, and one of the things I really enjoyed about *Joseph Knight* was the chapter where Edinburgh lawyers are sitting around discussing, in Scots, the merits of the poetry of Robert Fergusson. And that gave me a lot of pleasure because you do it so well, it comes across as very authentic.

JR: There's the thing: I fell in love with Fergusson's poetry and then I realised when I was writing *Joseph Knight* that the action of this novel was set in Edinburgh in the early 1770s and I thought, well, I can't *not* try to find a way of getting Fergusson in there. He's only there tangentially in that he's mentioned, he's not present as a character, but I'm not going to miss the opportunity to put him in the novel, if only because somebody who reads it might think, 'Oh, I don't know Fergusson's poetry; I might just go away and read it.' But also the lines I quote in the novel and as an epigraph are relevant as well. I suppose *Joseph Knight* is the novel I'm fondest of since I felt it was a gift to me, this story; I didn't know it existed and then I found it was just such a wonderful story.

JC: Yes, but it also appears at a time when Scotland has gained enough confidence to look back at itself not so much as colonised but coloniser, and it also – curiously perhaps – presages a whole generation that engages with its colonial history and multicultural present, in the poetry, fiction and drama of, say, Jackie Kay, Suhayl Saadi and recently Louise Welsh. So it's an important book and I think it's still undervalued since it's a culturally significant book.

JR: That's interesting, yes, perhaps it is undervalued since of all my novels it's certainly the one that's sold least well, and yet I've had so many good conversations with people who've read it and really liked it and felt that it did say new and different things. And one of the things I wanted to say, not in a preachy way, was that we in Scotland pride ourselves on being democratic and egalitarian, tolerant and open-minded and so on, but maybe we haven't been tested enough in the 21st century. And some of the issues that are there in *Joseph Knight* are perhaps ones that we haven't yet had to deal with in the way that other parts of the British Isles have. And perhaps our much vaunted tolerance will be tested in ways that produce things that we don't like about ourselves very much.

JC: After reading some of the reviews, I came to *The Professor of Truth* with a set of expectations that the actual novel challenged in an interesting way. I knew that it was

based on the Lockerbie disaster, and that it took a position regarding the innocence of Abdelbaset al-Megrahi [the man tried and convicted of the bombing, a conviction subsequently challenged but never overturned]. And I was expecting it to be much more of an activist, political tract. But after the social and cultural panorama of *And the Land Lay Still*, this is much more of an intense and focused novel. And it is much more a personal story than a political story: how do you carry on when your life suddenly collapses through no fault of your own, and somebody else is responsible for it, and nobody is telling the truth about it? What really impresses me about this novel is the care with which you take the protagonist through the process of facing up to the tragedy, several decades after it has taken place. And then I began to wonder – knowing the Lockerbie case lies behind the novel – why didn't you just create a fictional catastrophe and have your protagonist respond to that?

JR: Why does the novel shadow Lockerbie? There are several reasons. But you're absolutely right that there's a lot in the novel about the nature of justice, and the nature of truth, but the novel ends up being about personal loss and dealing with grief. And it's not overtly political in that I don't deal with some of the big, outstanding issues around Lockerbie; it only touches on the failings of the legal system, and on the political machinations that have contributed to this being an on-going saga that has not been concluded. And the reason why these issues are not central to the novel is that they are already out there in the public domain, and I have spoken and written quite widely about them elsewhere. With the novel I wanted to write a book which you could come to without having any knowledge at all of Lockerbie, and hopefully it would be a read that was stimulating and made you think. But if you have some knowledge of Lockerbie – even not very much knowledge – then you will begin to realise that the novel runs on a parallel track with something else. And I wanted these two things to be going on, but what I didn't want was to write some kind of cod thriller about Lockerbie, which I felt would be a very insensitive way of approaching the subject. Also I wasn't going to be able to explain definitively through my fiction what really happened. I don't know the answers to what really happened, though I have a strong sense of what *might* have happened, and if I did know, I wouldn't have written a novel, I would be writing a different kind of book. But it seemed to me that because the whole Lockerbie saga has been stuck for so long with people not feeling that they're getting the whole truth, then maybe fiction can explore some of that in a way that journalism and non-fiction can't. And for 10 or 11 years, or at least since the time of the trial and the conviction of al-Megrahi and the acquittal of his co-accused, I had felt like many people that there was just something seriously wrong, with not just the conduct of the trial but the whole investigation. And I had become more and more engaged by this, and more fascinated by it and more angered by it, and I knew I had to write something about it – but what? There didn't seem to be much point in me writing yet another piece of non-fiction because there's so much out there. I became a total Lockerbie anorak in doing my research and reading around it. But I thought, 'What would happen if I take that premise, of the man who loses his family completely unexpectedly, not even through an accident but through a deliberate act of terrorism that results in the death of lots and lots of innocent people. And it hits this man full in the face, and then it goes on and on and on, for 21 years.' And I thought that was a very interesting scenario to try to get myself into and to try to deal with as sensitively as possible.

And I was very conscious that my main character, Alan Tealing, experiences a lot of things that, obviously, families of victims, not just of Lockerbie but similar atrocities, experience, and I was aware that some people would probably say that this character is simply Jim Swire [an English doctor whose daughter, Flora, died on Pan Am flight 103] in disguise. With that in mind, I deliberately didn't speak to anybody; I didn't speak to Jim Swire while I was writing the book. I waited until after it was finished before I got in touch and said, 'Look, you need to know this book is going to be published.'

JC: Can I ask what his response was?

JR: I said, 'I'm not asking you to approve it, I'm not asking you to edit it, I'm not asking you to endorse it, but would you like to read it before publication? Because people will inevitably say that this is Jim Swire.' So he read it, and if you've heard him speak on television or radio, you'll know he's a very gentle but angry person: intelligent, humane and considerate. And that's how he read the book. He liked it, he felt it was useful for him – he's got his own agenda, which I happen to agree with, but there's nothing in it that offended him. So he and I subsequently have become good friends and in fact we've shared a platform on two or three occasions, talking about the whole Lockerbie business.

JC: One of the things that comes across in the book is honesty and intensity in the way that you take the time to map out the emotional journey that the character, Alan Tealing, is going through. And as this journey happens, you realise that this is an imaginative engagement with the Lockerbie case, not a straight re-telling.

JR: Well, the first half of the book, which is Alan Tealing's conversation with the CIA 'spook', does track or shadow the real Lockerbie story. The second half of the book is completely imaginary, because I took my character, Alan Tealing, and I sent him to Australia, and I put him in a place where he then has to engage with people he doesn't expect to like, or even expect to meet. And that is where fiction is really fascinating because I had no idea when I set out what was going to happen when he met this character who was a key witness at the trial, or what was going to happen when he met this character's wife – she was a character that grew out of me needing to see what was going to happen when he got to the other side of the world. That for me is where fiction becomes a powerful tool for investigating our own human behaviour, our own prejudices, our own likes and dislikes – because I just did not know what was going to happen.

JC: And that brings us back to the title, *The Professor of Truth* – what kinds of truth are we talking about? Are we talking about factual 'truths'; are we talking about the kind of 'truths' that only fiction can really explore? And one of the nice touches is that your character, Alan Tealing, is – as Jim Swire isn't – a professor of literature. But he has lost his faith in literature, hasn't he?

JR: And he's not even a real professor, that's only a nickname. And there's a pun on 'professor' as well.

JC: So there's the irony that the novel is enacting what he has lost faith in.

JR: Exactly, and there's a conversation near the end of the book – and it's funny because people assume you plan these things out but this was not planned out – where Tealing goes to see the witness, a former taxi driver, and the taxi driver says, 'Books, how do you teach a book?' and Tealing makes a stab at saying what he does, but you know he doesn't quite believe it. He eventually says that he's trying to show his students through books what life is. And of course he is within a novel that is trying to do the same thing. But it's interesting what you said: after *And the Land Lay Still*, which is a big, sprawling book, I wanted say everything I needed to say in as tight a space as possible.

JC: Which brings us to 365 which is going to be your next published book – but it started off as a blog?

JR: Well, it started off just as an exercise to see if I could write a short story every day for an entire year. I don't know why I thought this was a sensible thing to attempt. It grew out of a creative writing exercise I've tried out with school students a couple of times, when they only have time to write a 400-word or 500-word or 600-word short story. So they would write the story and then I'd get them to edit it down to 300 words. And they would kick and fight against this but it's a brilliant way of teaching the discipline of self-editing and taking out all the unnecessary stuff. So that's where I got the idea: 365 days of the year, 365 words in each story – that's an interesting symmetry. So I did it for a month in January 2013, then I ran the idea past my publisher, who quite liked it. But I didn't post them on the internet that year – that would have been the really challenging thing to do but I couldn't have done anything else at all that year. So I wrote them one year, and then I've been editing them as they've been going up the following year, so they've been getting *posted* each day of this year – 2014 – a year after they were

written. And then a complete book of them is coming out in November. The stories are varied: some of them are slices of contemporary life; some are revisitings of myths and fairy tales and folk tales; political commentaries and satires and parodies; or I've retold interesting bits of local history I've come upon. I also had the idea that some of the great ballads, like 'The Wife of Usher's Well' could be retold in 365 words, so quite a few are ballads retold. So I've been revisiting the tradition that we talked about, but very much the 'traditional' tradition if you see what I mean – the tradition of storytelling and ballads and songs. It's revisiting Jean Barbour in *And the Land Lay Still*, who likes to tell stories but with a little postmodernist twist to them.

JC: You began your reading on the opening night of ESSE with your translation into Scots of the popular children's book *The Gruffalo*, by Julia Donaldson, which is published by Itchy Co, the Scots language publisher that you helped start up. And as we've said already, you've also translated *Winnie-the-Pooh* and novels by Roald Dahl and others. Have any of your own books been translated into other languages?

JR: Not many, I'd have to say. The book that has been most translated is *The Testament of Gideon Mack*, which is my most successful novel in commercial terms – it was picked for a television book club and was long-listed for the Booker Prize. It's been translated into six languages. The only other books of mine that have been translated are *The Fanatic* and *Joseph Knight*, into French.

JC: Have any of the translators come to you for guidance about the Scots expressions that appear in some of your novels?

JR: The man who translated *The Fanatic* into French got in touch, and we had a really good exchange of ideas about how to deal with the Scots, but in the end he opted not to try to find a regional equivalent, so I was helping him find the English equivalents of certain Scots expressions, so he could translate them into French. In French, the title of *Joseph Knight* became *Le nègre de Dundee* because the French publisher thought the word 'K-N-I-G-H-T' posed too much of a pronunciation difficulty for French readers, at least in the title. So they proposed a different title, and I was a wee bit worried, partly because I wondered what French readers would make of 'Dundee'. But I was assured that this would be fine because everybody knows about *la confiture de Dundee*. So 'Dundee' had some traction in a way that 'Knight' didn't!

Websites

James Robertson reads 'The News Where You Are': www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhL57cjN8xY
Kettillonia and Itchy Co publications: www.kettillonia.co.uk, www.itchy-coo.com

POETRY

John Mole



John Mole lives in Hertfordshire, UK, and for many years ran The Mandeville Press with Peter Scupham. Recent publications include The Point of Loss (Enitharmon) and an online English/Romanian selection, The Memory of Gardens, from Bucharest's Contemporary Literature Press. He has received the UK's Gregory and Cholmondeley Awards for his poetry, and The Signal Award for his verse for children. He is a jazz clarinettist and reviews books about jazz for The Times Literary Supplement. He is also resident poet for the charity Poet in the City, and can be heard reading his work on the website Poetry Archive from which a CD is available (www.poetryarchive.org).