

From Modernism to the Counterculture: a seminar on the literary significance of the Edinburgh Writers' Conference, 1962

Outline

This seminar, held on Thursday 23rd May 2019, was the culmination of three months research at IASH into the Edinburgh International Writers' Conference of 1962. The Writers' Conference was a landmark event in the history of twentieth century experimental letters, and the subject of a section in a book I am writing on the American literary movement, the Beat Generation. By bringing together experts on the event, and in mid century Scottish, British and American literature generally, I aimed to encourage a discussion of its significance in literary history – as a site where links were forged and consolidated between literary scenes in the old world and the new, geographically between English language writing in Britain and America and politically and aesthetically between the modernisms of the early century and the newer countercultural movements that had sprung up in the 1950s and 60s. The seminar was inspired by Scottish scholars Angela Bartie and Eleanor Bell's study *The International Writers' Conference Revisited: Edinburgh, 1962* (both of whom gave papers) and aimed for a new assessment of the Writers' Conference.

Taking Bartie and Bell's lead on the ideas it inspired and the conflicts it exposed in Scottish writing, we set out to consider the Edinburgh Writers' Conference as a test ground for new approaches in the 1960s avant-garde, as a PR exercise for new British writing and as evidence of shifting dynamics between a burgeoning British countercultural scene and its more established American equivalent. Papers covered a range of festival attendees – from scandalous banned Americans like William Burroughs, Henry Miller and the Scotsman Alexander Trocchi to classically modernist, nationally nostalgic poets like Hugh MacDiarmid and Edwin Morgan – and explored the Edinburgh Writers' Conference in relation to: internationalism and nationalism (the first its remit and the second a position defended by many of its speakers); to literature and censorship then and now; to the politics of innovation; and to the transatlantic exchange of artistic and political ideas from the early century to the present

Sessions

The seminar began at 10.00 with tea, coffee and a short welcome for participants. That led into a morning panel between 10.30 and 12.30, titled 'Edinburgh Interzone (Historical, Generic, Geographical)'.

In his paper, '**The Act of Writing: Alexander Trocchi and the 1962 Edinburgh Writer's Conference**', **Dr Christopher Webb (University College London)** discussed the conference as a venue for dramatic performance, using the case study of young Scottish Beat novelist Alexander Trocchi to think about this as a first moment in

literary history when writers were encouraged to explain their workings on a public platform and to joust theatrically with their contemporaries. Webb dissected Trocchi's humorous yet heated debate with the nationalist poet Hugh MacDiarmid—a debate full of memorable quips and insults—and considered this in relation to the Scottish novelist's later career as a 'cultural entrepreneur' (Trocchi's own description) rather than writer. Webb contended that Trocchi's performance at 1962 Edinburgh Writers' Conference provides a window into the evolution of modern authorship.

Next, I contributed my own essay '**Grandfathering the Counterculture: Henry Miller & William Burroughs at the International Writers' Conference**', in which I talked about the American novelist Henry Miller as guest of honor at the conference, one who was looked up to by younger countercultural authors there as both benchmark and breakthrough for a newer, freer kind of thinking. I examined Miller's performance, using that to consider his intermediary position between the modernist moment of his early career, and the counterculture that adopted him as grandfather. I also compared Miller to a fellow American in attendance, the Beat novelist William Burroughs, whose new candidness about drugs was as scandalous as Miller's about sex two decades earlier, and who himself occupied a space between wry high modernist remove and the Romanticism of the new age.

This was followed by a contribution from **Professor Alex Thomson (University of Edinburgh)** on the significance of the International Writers' Conference for constructions of twentieth-century Scottish literary history. Thomson questioned conventional readings of the event as a fault-line between an inward-looking, nationalist literary modernism and a new wave of confident outward-looking experimentation with international horizons. He approached the conference against a broader overview of the Scottish literary field; an overview arrived at through consideration of recent theoretical accounts of world literature. Through this, Thomson instigated a group discussion about the absence of women as participants and subjects of the conference's nationalist/internationalist dispute.

After a short break for lunch, we resumed proceedings with our second panel – on 'Divisions (Generational, Political, Stylistic)' at the International Writers' Conference. **Dr Stewart Smith (University of Strathclyde)** kicked things off with a reassessment of the Scottish poet, artist and publisher Ian Hamilton Finlay – a writer who didn't attend the conference, but is associated with it through his comments about and provocative behavior around it. Smith discussed Finlay as a figure between modernism and the British and American counterculture through analysis of his poetry magazine *poor.old.tired.horse*. (1962-1967), which featured new and overlooked Scottish poets alongside internationally renowned figures. He also considered what Finlay might have made of the conference had he attended. Like Thomson, Stewart Smiths was keen to complicate the notion of a clear distinction between modernism the emergent counter-culture in Scotland of the 1960s.

Next up, we had **Dr Eleanor Bell (University of Strathclyde)**, whose paper '**Walking with One Hundred Legs**' reflected on Muriel Spark's participation. Spark arrived at the International Writers' Conference at a peak moment in her career –

having published her best-selling *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* the previous year – but was treated as an outsider figure. Bell read Spark's lack of attention at the conference as indicative of a wider British disinterest in her, despite the fact that she was on the cusp of great fame in the USA. She also examined Spark's links to both Scottish literature and international experimental writing (the *nouveau roman* in particular), and suggested this international link as a reason for her reticence at the conference – her silence on key debates in Scottish literary studies at the time, despite being at there as part of the Scottish delegation. Bell's paper led to interesting discussion of the aspects in Spark's writing that may have led experimentalist attendees like Trocchi to exclude her from their discussions of the future of literature.

Finally, **Dr Calum Rodger (University of Strathclyde)** gave a paper on another Scottish writer, Edwin Morgan. Rodger's argument, **'To build rather than to divide': Edwin Morgan the *Makar***, presented Morgan as a peacemaker between old and new schools of Scottish literature in the 1960s – someone who wanted a replenishment of the poetry scene through a transition from cultural nationalism to internationalism; from opposition to sympathy; and from division (in terms of both society and the self) to engagement and complexity. Morgan was considered in contrast not only to the old school of Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance movement, but his contemporaries Alexander Trocchi and Ian Hamilton Finlay. Rodger's paper generated discussion of the civic (as opposed to visionary) role that Morgan saw for poetry and the poet, and threw up new ideas about Morgan as preemptive of a postmodern poetics of play and plurality (this, again in contrast to the radical modernism of the latter two figures).

Conclusions & Plans for Dissemination

The seminar fulfilled its remit of complicating standard readings of the Edinburgh International Writers' Conference. It generated lively debate about conflicting factions at the conference, the issues at stake and the significance of the event in a longer Scottish literary history. On the first panel, we were reminded of the clash between Scottish nationalist and internationalist writers that made the headlines during the conference, but also encouraged to see beyond the performance of these differences and consider deeper and less acknowledged exclusions to do with gender and oversimplified readings of the Scottish Renaissance. In the second panel, we heard more about gender exclusion and also a vital connection between Scottish novel writing and the French school of the *nouveau roman*. We were also privileged to hear fascinating re-readings of two Scottish poets who deserve more prominent and thought-through places within a longer avant-garde history. Finally, the seminar threw up interesting questions about the efficacy of countercultural thinking sixty years on from the Edinburgh International Writers' Conference. The group plans to propose a cluster of six essays based on papers given at the seminar for publication in the Modern Language Association's journal, the PMLA.
