

# Voices Across Borders

## Devolving English Literature in Schools

Gary Snapper gives an account of the experience of teaching Scottish and African literature in the International Baccalaureate, arguing that the teaching of literature should pay greater attention to issues of literature, culture and politics.



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### MacMolière and the Barbarians

As I write, I have ringing in my ears the witty metrics, wry anachronisms and sharp Scots dialect of Theatre Babel's production of Liz Lochhead's *Educating Agnes* (2008), her latest adaptation of a Molière play (*L'Ecole des Femmes*):

No point in shouting, pet, he's gone!  
And left wee Agnes with the Big Bad Wolf here, all alone.  
Disappointing, intit? The end of all your hopes.  
Because: It's Over. Read My Lips.  
Still so young, eh? And so full of cute tricks.  
As sleekit as anything, giving it big licks  
With treachery, and cunning and... plain badness  
That I'd never have expected from my wee Agnes. (p. 71)

Lochhead has written several Scots-inflected versions of Molière, as well as other European classics. Hers are the most recent in a long tradition of Scots Molière translations – 'MacMolières' as she calls them:

Why Molière? What is there about this particular seventeenth-century Frenchman that has made him our darling?... Critics talk about the vigour of his language, his mixture of current cliché, colloquialism, earthy talk with the high-flown. All varieties and shades of Scots, from the classical eighteenth-century language of Burns and Ferguson to the despised (oh, not by me!) modern urban varieties, have this – often vulgar, but very real and undeniable – vernacular vigour. Scottish people are very used to shifting registers... [and] Scots vocabulary is arguably still a lot more robust than 'standard English' as a medium for the translation of comic rhyme. (p.7)

Discovering these riches of contemporary Scottish literature has been a pleasure for me over the last twenty years, in particular the verse of Edwin Morgan, Jackie Kay and Liz Lochhead and the prose of James Kelman, Alasdair Gray and Irvine Welsh. There's something about these writers' work which (as Lochhead suggests) seems particularly to reflect the creative potential of being

Scottish, culturally and linguistically. Their language is constantly playing on the border between Scots and English, and between the standard and the demotic; their characters and themes challenging definitions of and attitudes to nationality, class, language – and literature – in a way which reflects their allegiance to a culture whose identity is defined partly by its *difference* from England and English, by positing a different way of being British.

The Scottish poet and critic Robert Crawford (currently Professor of Modern Scottish Literature at St Andrews) writes about this aspect of Scottish literature in his book *Devolving English Literature* (2000), from which the subtitle of this article is borrowed. In fact, he identifies what he calls a consciously 'barbarian' tendency in the literature of the 'Anglo-Celtic archipelago':

There is a widespread wish in recent poetry to be seen as in some manner barbarian, as operating outside the boundaries of standard English and outside the identity that is seen as going with it. Such a wish unites post-colonial writers such as Les Murray and Derek Walcott with writers working within the 'Anglo-Celtic archipelago.' It joins the post-colonial and the provincial... For most creative users of the English language today, one of the fundamental questions is how to inhabit that language without sacrificing one's own distinctive, 'barbarian' identity.'

(p. 300)

### Devolving English Literature

In invoking post-colonialism and notions of standard English, Crawford hints here at his broader theme - the traditional and continuing dominance of standard English conceptions of 'English Literature.' In his introduction, he writes:

Much attention has been devoted to the question of how we might define, select, or construct the entity known as 'literature'. Until very recently, it seemed the word 'English' was left unexamined.

(p.2)

The development of the subject 'English Literature' has constantly involved and reinforced an oppressive homage to centralism. As such, English Literature is a force which must be countered continually by a devolutionary momentum.

(p.7)

Scottish Literature ... offers the longest continuing example of a substantial body of literature produced by a culture pressurised by the threat of cultural domination.

(p. 8)

What might these reflections on English Literature have to say to us as teachers of English Literature – in England, but also in other parts of the UK and other English-speaking countries around the world?

In England, 'non-standard' approaches to English Literature have to some extent become embedded in our practice in mainstream English teaching, though often in something of a tokenistic way - for instance in the form of the awkwardly titled 'Poems from Different Cultures' (previously 'Other Cultures') in GCSE English. The new National Curriculum Programme of Study (QCA, 2007, p.71) reinforces this tendency with its extraordinary separation between (a) 'the English literary heritage' – which it defines as 'literature in English' but exemplifies as texts written in *standard* English by *white* people in the UK – and (b) 'literature from different cultures and traditions' - which it exemplifies as texts written in *non-standard* English in the UK (e.g., Agard, Zephaniah), or in *any* kind of English *outside* the UK (e.g., Gordimer, Naidoo), or even perhaps in standard English in the UK by *non-white* people (e.g., Gavin, Syal)!

A Level English Literature has become significantly less 'centralist' over the years – although the emphasis is still pretty firmly on standard English literature from England (and occasionally North America), and certainly does not include more than the occasional nod to regional or world literature. I acknowledge with enthusiasm that the new specifications in A Level English Literature due to

be taught for the first time this September to some extent allow greater freedom in the choice of set texts, including for the first time the option to read some literature in translation, and a greater emphasis on non-fiction texts (though not media texts – can someone explain why a play is literature but not a film?). They also, to some extent, move away from the dominance of the atomistic study of a small number of single texts by single authors, introduce some variety into the previously rather rigid assessment regime, and provide greater opportunities to deal with broad issues of context and interpretation. Nevertheless, the idea of 'devolving' English literature, with its political – even (as Crawford suggests) post-colonial – associations, suggests to me possibilities beyond even those offered by these new specifications.

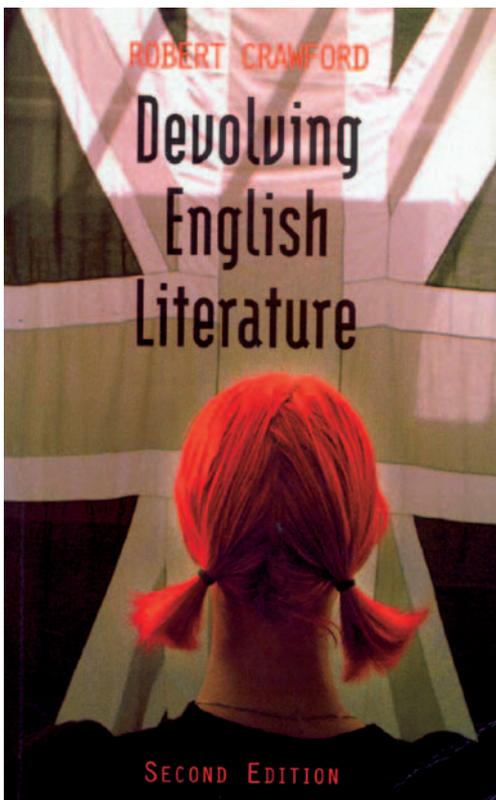
### Literature, culture, politics

First, there is the idea of redeployment and self-determination contained in devolution: the devolution of the teaching of English Literature to teachers. Greater freedom to choose texts, yes; but also the freedom to organise one's teaching around the investigation of topics; to follow one's interests and the interests of one's students; to make connections between literature and real life (writers, the theatre, broadcasting, journalism, publishing, etc.); and of course a greater emphasis on teacher assessment to free us to some extent from the ultimate centralism of the prescribed set text and exam. (We're going back here to the heady days of A Level in the 1980's – 'alternative' syllabuses, 50% coursework, and so on. I'm not, by the way, suggesting for a moment that canonical texts shouldn't be an extremely important part of what we teach, but the role that national examinations play in the commodification of that canon is surely one of those forces that Crawford suggests needs to be 'countered by devolutionary momentum').

Second, there is the cultural and political challenge to the status quo offered by devolution – the post-colonial spirit of it – offering us the opportunity to put cultural politics more centrally and more explicitly into our teaching. As English teachers we have traditionally prided ourselves on the humaneness of our discipline, and the texts that we teach frequently open up important political and cultural issues in powerful ways – from racial prejudice and colonialism in Shakespeare, say, to the gender and environmental politics of Atwood. But what about the politics of *literature* – and perhaps particularly the politics of *English* literature? What about the questions of social, cultural and linguistic function, value and judgement that courses in English Language, and Media and Cultural Studies, deal with, but which English Literature sidesteps? (Such questions are close to the concerns of many of our students: they know that *The Da Vinci Code* is not 'allowed' in literature lessons, but who decides what is allowed and why?)

### African Literature in the IB

One model for such devolution is offered by the



## The International Baccalaureate

The IB has become well-known recently since Mike Tomlinson used it as a partial model for his proposed 14-19 reforms and, subsequently, Tony Blair decreed that it should be offered by at least one state school or college in every local authority. Twenty years ago, it was taught in the UK almost exclusively in a handful of international schools; since then it has been taken up by a considerable number of both state and independent schools. It is now offered by well over 100 schools in the UK, and that number is expected to increase significantly.

The IB is an international sixth form qualification which is comparable with A Level but which takes a broader and more international approach to education. In this country it has tended to have a reputation for being elitist, perhaps because of its association with international schools and, recently, independent schools – but, in fact, both in international schools in the UK and in schools in most other countries of the world, it is taught across the full range of ability in sixth forms and their equivalents. In this country, too, it is increasingly being taken up by state schools, including, famously, Broadgreen High School in Liverpool. Broadgreen, which introduced the IB in 1992, is in a tough area of inner city Liverpool; the school – one of the earliest state schools in the UK to offer the IB – abandoned A Levels completely for the IB. It has been a great success.

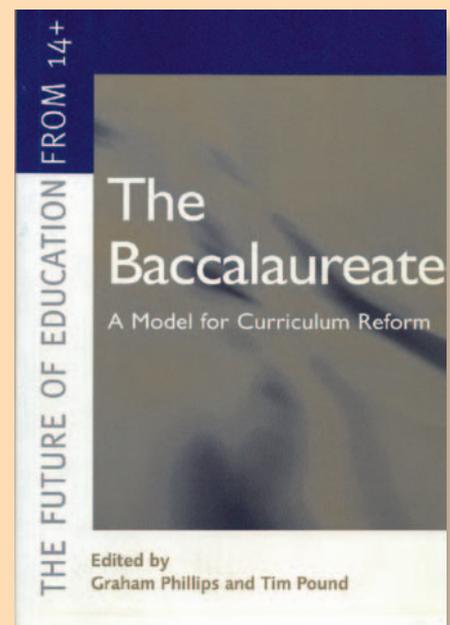
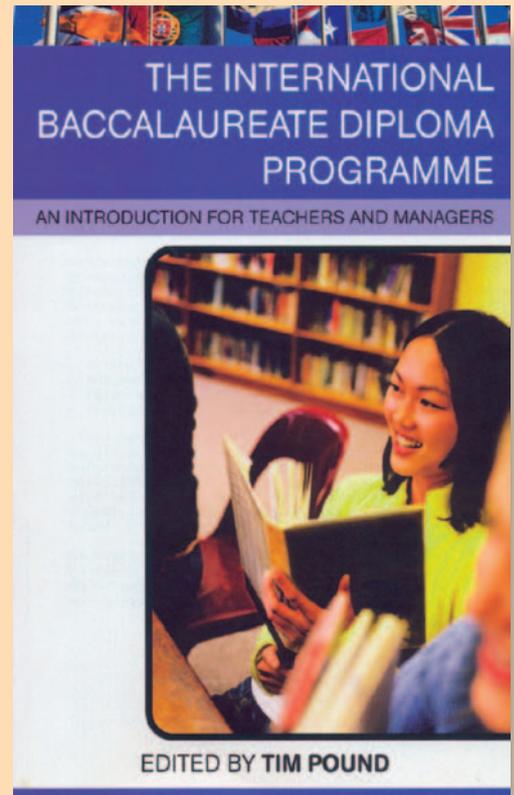
There isn't space here to explain the IB programme in detail.<sup>1</sup> In summary, however, it demands the study of six subjects (three at 'higher' level (roughly equivalent to A Level) and three at 'standard' level (roughly equivalent to AS level)) including, compulsorily, the study of one's native literature (English literature for students whose native language is English), maths, a modern foreign language, a science subject, and a social science subject. In addition, there is a strong emphasis on the cross-curricular and extra-curricular within an integrated diploma structure: all students must take a 'theory of knowledge' course (a kind of philosophy course which encourages students to draw together insights into knowledge gained from all their subjects), write an extended essay on a topic of their choice, and complete an extra-curricular programme of 'creativity, action and service.' The popularity of the IB is partly a result of concerns about the lack of breadth and coherence in the A Level system, but can in part also be accounted for by the diploma's international vision – embedded in the curriculum, as well as in the institution.

## Literature in the IB

The IB English syllabus (English A1) is a literature syllabus.<sup>2</sup> Again, there is not space here to describe the English course fully, but, in summary, a number of features differentiate the IB from the A Level syllabus – although it will be seen that A Level has moved closer to the IB in its new manifestation. IB English requires the study of 15 texts (at least one non-fiction and one Shakespeare), including 5 'World Literature' texts (three of which *must* be literature in translation). Comparative and contextual study is central, and there is an emphasis on 'synoptic' learning throughout.

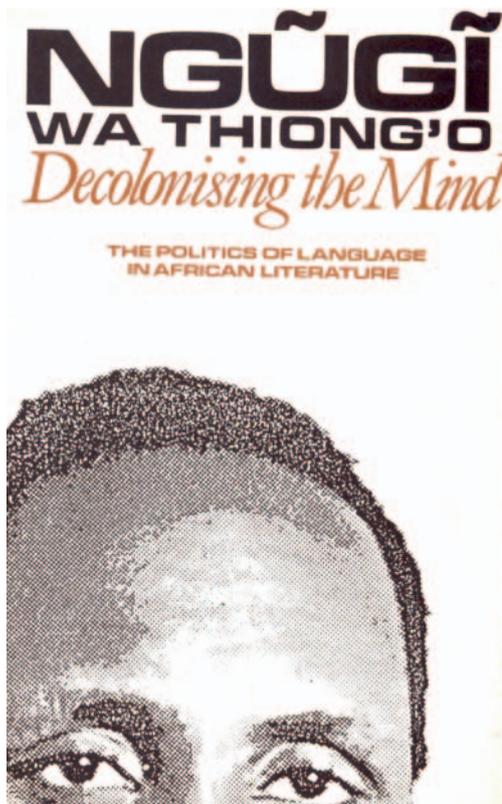
Texts are grouped in meaningful text combinations by genre, theme, place and period: there is considerable teacher choice of texts and topics and thus in course construction. There are five parts to the syllabus: World Literature – three texts in translation; Detailed Study – four standard texts from a list of set authors, to include Shakespeare; Genre Study – four standard texts in one of the main 'genres' (Drama, Poetry, Prose Fiction or Prose Non-Fiction); School's Choice – four linked texts, chosen by the teacher without a prescribed list; and the Unseen Commentary.

A variety of types of textual study and response is required (creative responses, unseen commentary, comparative essay, etc.) and there is a variety of assessment methods (30% written coursework, 20% oral coursework, 50% written exams). Despite the large number of set texts, there is less assessment: not every text on the syllabus is formally assessed. Only two exam essays are required, and each allows two hours' writing time. Not all assessments require comprehensive close reading of texts, and thus not every text has to be read in the same way or at the same level of detail.



<sup>1</sup> See Phillips and Pound (2003) for a full discussion of the Baccalaureate as a model for curriculum reform, and see Pound (2006) for a full introduction to the IB. Also, see the IB website, [www.ibo.org](http://www.ibo.org).

<sup>2</sup> At present, a language course (English A2 - similar in content to GCSE English) is offered only to students for whom English is not a native language, though this is likely to change soon.



International Baccalaureate (IB), which I taught for ten years, alongside A Level, at Impington Village College, the 11-18 comprehensive in Cambridge where I was Head of English until 2001. The IB English syllabus allowed me to experience and experiment with both aspects of devolution: the syllabus offered a freedom in course construction and an approach to assessment radically different from the A Level course; and the focus of the IB on inter-cultural education – as well as its predisposition to broad, comparative and thematic learning –

meant that, even in the English syllabus, one was encouraged to move well beyond the constraints of narrow nationalism and atomistic reading, and engage with broad cultural themes.

The chief vehicle for ‘devolutionary momentum’ in the IB English syllabus is the World Literature unit. For this unit, we developed a three-text unit on post-colonial African literature - something the IB syllabus allowed us

the freedom to do: we could choose virtually any writers in the world, as long as they didn’t write in English. There is a strong tradition in IB schools of choosing literature for this element which is truly global in its reach, rather than sticking to more Euro-centric matter: we could have chosen to do something more conventional – e.g., French or Spanish works in translation – as some IB schools do, but we decided that this was an opportunity for a more radical broadening of experience, and perhaps a more political engagement with global

issues.

One of the texts in the African unit was *I Will Marry When I Want*, the 1977 play by the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, now Director of the International Centre for Writing and Translation at the University of California, living in exile in the United States. After having written a series of well-known novels in English, Ngũgĩ had abandoned English as his literary language and started writing in his native Gikuyu in order to re-establish an African literary tradition for African audiences. He worked with a community centre in a working class town near Nairobi to write and produce *I Will Marry When I Want* – a community drama – which allowed ordinary people to tell their story and express their views, notably about the way they felt they had been betrayed by Daniel Arap Moi’s neo-colonial government following independence from Britain. The play was immediately banned, and Ngũgĩ was held in prison for a year without trial by Arap Moi. Ngũgĩ later wrote grippingly in his book *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) about this sequence of events, including the process of writing, rehearsing and performing the play, and his reasons for doing what he did – a section of the book we read together in class. Students were fascinated by the real-life political drama which lay behind the fictional politics of the play, and enjoyed re-interpreting the play with their new understanding of the social and political contexts of the play’s rehearsal, performance and aftermath. Later, students wrote letters, ‘in role’ either condemning or defending the play, giving evidence drawn from the play, Ngũgĩ’s commentary on it, and the historical background.

### The cultural bomb

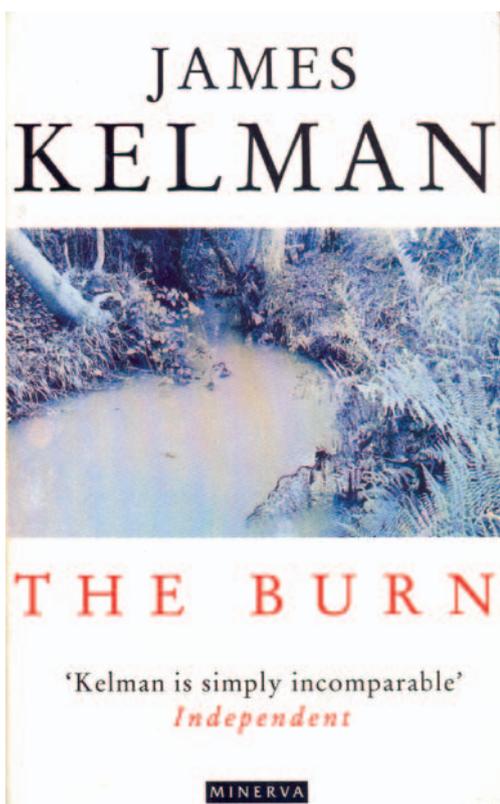
In other parts of the book, Ngũgĩ expands on the idea of English Literature as a tool of colonialism by exploring, for instance, how the British colonial regime suppressed indigenous art forms and promoted British culture, notably Shakespeare in the theatre:

The oppressed and exploited of the earth maintain their defiance: liberty from theft. But the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities, and ultimately in themselves.

(p.3)

This is one of many aspects of Shakespeare as a literary phenomenon that conventional literary study doesn’t often give students the chance to consider! Ngũgĩ also deals powerfully with the idea of drama as a physical and political act, and its potential as a major cultural force in the community – another issue that conventional literary study doesn’t often touch on.

The explicit combination of literature and politics, both the politics within the literary text and the politics



surrounding it, was stimulating stuff in the classroom, raising a variety of important issues about the way in which literature functions in society, the relationships between literature, culture, language and power, and the cultural politics of a post-colonial world. In particular, this work enabled us to look in a very concrete way at the way in which the value of English Literature is in many ways culturally specific and contested in sometimes very political ways.

## From Africa to Scotland

All this made me think of Scotland, and Crawford's suggestion that 'Scottish Literature offers the longest continuing example of a substantial body of literature produced by a culture pressurised by the threat of cultural domination.' Another devolutionary element of the IB programme is called 'School's Choice,' which gives the teacher the freedom to put together a thematic unit on English Literature without reference to any list of set texts or authors; the unit is assessed by internal oral assessment and tasks can be negotiated with individual students. Taking advantage of this freedom, I decided on a thematic unit that enabled students to build on some of the issues covered in the African study and look at some of the ways in which literature, culture and politics might interact nearer to home. I also wanted to take the opportunity to experiment with getting as far away as possible from the idea of the atomistic study of a whole self-contained text which is the dominant mode of most literary study at this level.

Thus – returning to Crawford's idea of the barbarian in modern English literature – I decided to explore with students some of the cultural and linguistic tensions and questions of national identity that exist within Britain as manifested in twentieth century literature from Ireland (Seamus Heaney), England (Tony Harrison), Wales (Dylan Thomas), and Scotland: as one of the four texts in this part, I devised a short anthology of contemporary Scottish literary texts, focusing on a sequence of poems, short stories, essays and extracts from longer works by James Kelman, Irvine Welsh, Liz Lochhead, Tom Leonard, Alasdair Gray, and Edwin Morgan:

- James Kelman: (Very) short stories from *The Burn* *How Late It Was, How Late* (extracts)
- An essay from *Some Recent Attacks*
- Tom Leonard: Poems and prose from *Reports from the Present*
- Alasdair Gray: Stories from *True Stories, Mostly Why Scots Should Rule Scotland* (extracts)
- Irvine Welsh: *Trainspotting* (extracts)
- Edwin Morgan: Poems from *Selected Poems*
- Liz Lochhead: Poems and prose from *Bagpipe Muzak*
- Douglas Dunn: Intro to *The Faber Book of Contemporary Scottish Poetry*
- Newspaper reports about Kelman and the Booker Prize, *Trainspotting*, the phenomenon of new Scottish writing,

debates about attitudes to culture in Glasgow and Edinburgh

- A recording of a 'Late Show' programme about Kelman Some Scots ballads and classical poetry

## Kelman and the narrative voice

The starting point for this study was James Kelman. Beginning with some of his very short stories, in *The Burn* (1991), we looked at some of the ways in which he experiments with narrative voice, looking particularly at 'The Hon' (*The Hand*), a 350-word story in the form of a vernacular anecdote which begins:

Auld Shug gits oot iv bed. Turns aff the alarm cloak. Gis straight ben the toilit. Sits doon in that on the lavatri pan. Wee bit iv time gis by. Shug sittin ther, yonin. This Hon. Up it comes oot fri the waste pipe. Stretchis right up. Grabs him by the bolls.  
(p.123)

Here we see Kelman experimenting in miniature with the Scots dialect 'speaker-narrator' – a line of experiment which reaches its culmination with the controversial Booker-prize winning novel, *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994), in which the entire novel has a third person Scots dialect 'writer-narrator', and in which the voice of the narrator and the voice of the main character, Sammy, seem to merge into each other:

Sammy had stopped, he turned to the tenement wall and leaned his forehead against it feeling the grit, the brick, he scraped his head along it an inch or two then back till he got that sore feeling. The thing is he was going naywhere, nayhwere. So he needed to clear his brains, to think; think, he needed to fucking think. It was just a new problem. He had to cope wit it, that's all. that's all it was. Every day was a fucking problem. And his was a new yin.  
(p.37)

*How Late It Was, How Late* is a powerful work about class and power in society, in which we become privy to the moving inner life of a traumatised working-class Scotsman, and yet when it was awarded the Booker Prize, many were outraged because of the frequent swearing throughout the novel. One of the judges, rabbi Julia Neuberger, threatened to resign, arguing that the novel was 'a dsigrace'. Kelman himself refused to go and collect his prize, not wishing to participate in the English literary establishment's annual self-congratulatory shindig.

In class, as well as looking in detail at these short stories and extracts from Kelman's work – focusing on issues about narrative voice, viewpoint and dialect – we looked at newspaper articles about Kelman and the Booker prize incident, read an essay by Kelman (1992), and watched a video of a tv documentary about Kelman. In the video, Kelman movingly talks about his mission to

# 'Foul-mouthed' novel is £20,000 Booker winner

**JAMES KELMAN** was awarded the 1994 Booker Prize last night after a lengthy disagreement among the judges. After a televised dinner at Guildhall, London, his novel, *How late it was, how late*, was named the winner.

It was the second time on the shortlist for the 48-year-old Glaswegian author — after *A Disaffection* in 1989 — and it won him £20,000. The chairman of the judges, John Bayley, conceded that the judging process had been rocky: "We had an extremely complicated and difficult meeting and were very divided. It was finally a question of three votes to two . . ."

It is possible that some of the disagreements centred on the novel's lack of conventional punctuation and exuberant bad language. *How Late it was, how late* is almost certainly the most foul-mouthed novel ever to win the Booker. A high proportion of the words in the book have just four letters.

But in an interview with the *Independent* last Saturday, Kelman said: "When people

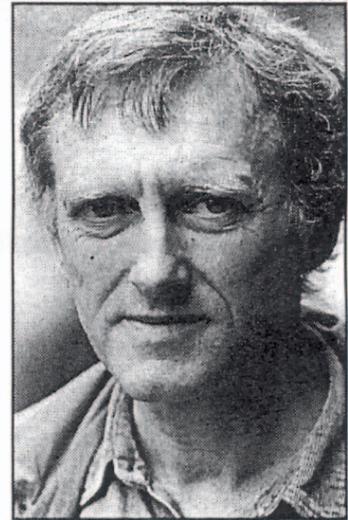
ROBERT WINDER  
Books Editor

talk about the so-called expletives they're not talking about the real issue, you know. The real issue is to do with suppression — the standard literary voice won't allow it."

The novel rummages around in the mind of an ordinary man, Sammy, who is baffled by bureaucracy and baffled by life. He veers between anxiety and despair in a voice that gives a bright shimmer to ordinary speech.

The other novels on the shortlist were: *Reef* by Romesh Gunsekera, *Paradise* by Abdulrazak Gurnah, *The Folding Star* by Alan Hollinghurst, *Beside the Ocean of Time* by George Mackay Brown, and *Knowledge of Angels* by Jill Paton Walsh. The other judges were James Wood, Rabbi Julia Neuberger and Alastair Niven.

In some quarters this year's shortlist was criticised as boring. One bookseller even re-



James Kelman: Booker success after divisions among judges

ferred to it as "the mogadon Booker", an odd thing for a retailer to say about a publicity campaign on his behalf. But a certain amount of public dismay has become a well-established part of the Booker proceedings. If the judges pick well-known writers, they are accused of playing safe. If they pick less famous names, people scratch their heads and accuse the jury of overlooking the big players.

If nothing else, however, Kelman's victory seems likely to spark a warm discussion over whether literature is allowed to be as foul-mouthed as life.

legitimise the working-class Scots narrative voice in English literature, pointing out that throughout the history of the novel, all third person narrators have been standard English and therefore middle or upper class: dialect voices only appear in dialogue, and always mediated by a standard English voice. Here, in the essay we read, he makes the point fully:

How do you recognise a Glaswegian in English Literature? He — bearing in mind that in English Literature you don't get female Glaswegians... — he's the cut-out figure who wields a razor blade, gets moroculous drunk and never has a single solitary 'thought' in his entire life. He beats his wife and beats his kids and beats his next door neighbour. And another striking thing: everybody from a Glaswegian working-class background, everybody in fact from any regional part of Britain — none of them knew how to talk! What larks! Every time they opened their mouth out came a stream of gobbledygook. Beautiful! Their language a cross between semaphore and morse code, apostrophes here and apostrophes there; a strange hotchpotch of bad phonetics and horrendous spelling — unlike the nice stalwart upperclass English hero (occasionally Scottish but with no linguistic

variation) whose words on the page were always absolutely splendidly proper and pure and pristinely accurate, whether in dialogue or without. And what grammar! Colons and semi-colons! Straight out of their mouths! An incredible mastery of language. Most interesting of all, for myself as a writer, the narrative belonged to them and them alone. They owned it. The place where thought and spiritual life exists. Nobody outwith the parameters of their socio-cultural setting had a spiritual life. We all stumbled along in a series of behaviouristic activity; automatons, cardboard cut-outs, folk who could be scrutinised... In other words, in the society that is English Literature, some 80 to 85 percent of the population simply did not exist as ordinary human beings.

(p.82)

Later in the video, a Black South African writer talks about the way in which Kelman's championing of the suppressed voice in literature inspired Black South African writers during the struggle against apartheid — creating another link between this work on Scotland and the African unit previously studied.

## Voices in the classroom

The discussion which took place in class as a result of these few but highly concentrated stimuli was urgent and thoroughly engaged. Students were particularly taken with the idea of the voices that literature suppresses, the potential exclusivity of literature – which in turn raises fundamental questions about literature, education and society, and, more specifically, about the literature which is legitimated by the teaching of English. A range of questions about language, literature and culture arose, too: about the nature of swearing; about the Booker prize; about the differences between spoken and written language, and between literary and non-literary and whether you could use non-standard English to narrate a novel without making it incomprehensible; about exactly whose voice a third person narrator actually is; about who is represented in and by literature; etc. There was also an interesting discussion – crucial in relation to Kelman's work – about who the intended readership of the novel was: wouldn't it just be read by middle-class literary types like me?

We went on to look further at a variety of issues through other short pieces or extracts, including the history of the English language (taking the opportunity to look at some Anglo-Saxon, and medieval Scots and English), and the implications of Scots as a separate language from English; the definition of dialect, and Kelman and Welsh's bi-dialectalism – swapping between standard and non-standard writing; the ironic imposition of non-standard language on to standard literary forms, as for instance in Morgan's 'Glasgow Sonnets'; questions of stereotype and national identity, and so on.

## Devolutionary momentum

I suggested earlier that Crawford's idea of devolution might be applied through challenges to the 'centralism' enshrined both in the prescriptive controls of English Literature syllabuses and examinations, and in the cultural exclusions of the idea of English Literature. So what kind of 'devolutionary momentum' did we build up through all this? And what did these devolved freedoms offer us? I'd like to think that by using the freedom to move away from the close study of the lengthy set text, and the freedom to explore a range of literature from different cultures and languages, we covered a lot of literary ground: we read – and made links between – a wide range of texts (including medieval texts!) which raised a wide range of issues. At the same time, we did a lot of close reading and talked a great deal about language – narrative, form, and so on: working with short texts and extracts focuses attention on language in a very concentrated way.

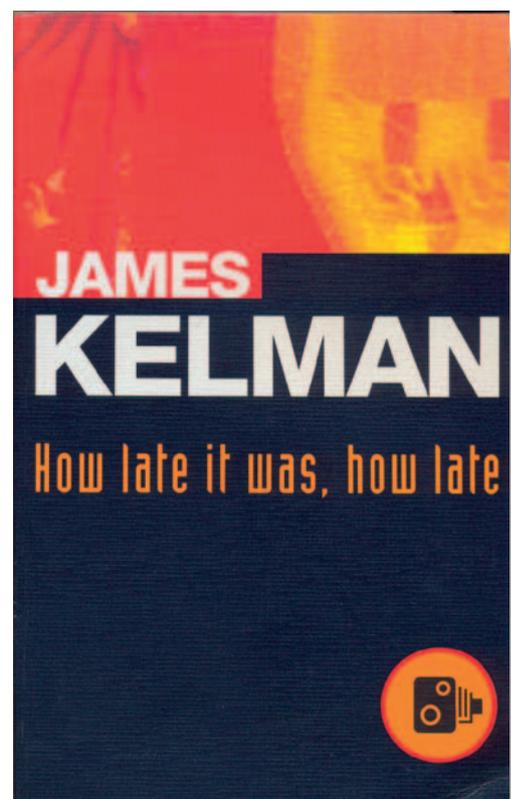
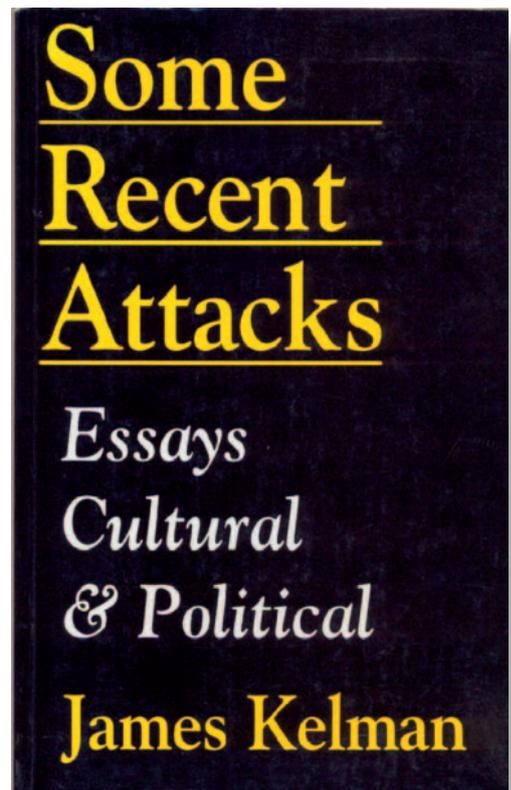
Students learnt a lot about *literature*, I felt, rather than about a single literary text - though perhaps this was partly because I also used the freedom to explore literature in a more explicitly social-cultural-political way than literature syllabuses often allow or encourage. Texts like the African and Scottish texts we studied have rarely

been seen on an A Level syllabus, and some important (essential?) literary, cultural and linguistic issues like the ones we discussed are not often tackled in the English Literature classroom in schools. Choosing these particular texts, which raise such explicit issues about the nature of literature and language, and which focus on the 'barbarian' challenge to English Literature, opened rich veins of study and discussion, particularly in the area of literature's connections with language, class and culture, but also nationality and identity. Again, I find this a motivating area for students, as it explicitly addresses issues of cultural and social difference and value which concern them very directly.

## Voices and cultures

I'm not suggesting that it would be desirable to do this *all* the time: the detailed reading of the prescribed set text within a structured syllabus clearly has an essential part to play in literary studies. But I am suggesting that this kind of work - allowing students to hear a wide range of voices and to examine how voices, and whose voices, are heard in literature – can at least help to frame conventional literary study in ways that help students to access and gain ownership of its discourses – rather in the way that Gerald Graff promotes 'teaching the conflicts' in the US 'culture wars' (Graff 1992).

Graff, now Professor at the University of Illinois, is part of a strong tradition in North



American universities of thought about curriculum and pedagogy in modern English Studies which has challenged the authoritarianism of English Literature. (As Crawford points out, North America as much as Scotland had to resist the Englishness of English Literature. It is no surprise, either, that devolutionary work of this kind has been central to the teaching of English in other English-speaking countries – Australia, South Africa, etc.)

In his book *The Rise and Fall of English* (1998), Robert Scholes, Professor at Brown University in the US, gives an account of the work that he did with U.S. schools to formulate an advanced literature syllabus. The elements of the course were entitled 'Voices of Modern Cultures,' 'Encountering the Other, Being the Other,' 'Cultures and Voices in a Single Text,' 'Inheriting Earlier Voices,' 'Film, Language, Culture,' 'Mediating Culture, Representing Events and People.' (pp 132-141). The course titles indicate the way in which textual study is set in a broad context which emphasises concepts of voice, culture and representation. As Scholes writes:

The political enters the study of English primarily through questions of representation: who is represented, who does the representing, who is object, who is subject – and how do these representations connect to the values of groups, communities, classes, tribes, sects and nations?... Eliminating the political is the fond hope of those nostalgic for ... cultural homogeneity... But we cannot do it now and still be responsible educators. Responsibility here must take the form of establishing a disciplinary framework strong enough to allow the political full play in the study of

textuality. By being responsible in this way, we will not suppress the power and beauty of language that have always been our concern. We will simply resituate them in a more rhetorical and less literary discipline of thought and study.

(p. 153)

#### Note

*The World Literature course in African literature was developed by Fiona Swanson at Impington Village College, for whose inspiration and guidance I am immensely grateful.*

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