



Review: Carla Rodríguez González and Kirsten Matthews. 2013. *Escritoras escocesas en la nueva literatura nacional*. Palma de Mallorca: Universitat de les Illes Balears. 256 pp. ISBN: 978-84-8384-253 9.

Carla Rodríguez González and Kirsten Matthews's last book, *Escritoras escocesas en la nueva literatura nacional* (*Scottish Women Writers in the New National Literature*), is the first handbook to contemporary Scottish women writers written in Spanish. Rodríguez González and Matthews are both academics who have worked extensively in the areas of modern and contemporary Scottish literature, and their book's objective is to sparkle interest in Scottish literature among Spanish speaking students and academics.

The book maps the Scottish literary scene of the last few decades and tries to shed some light on different ways of being Scottish as expressed through literature, and on different ways of pushing the boundaries of the categorisation as Scottish. Although the book might seem slightly schematic to readers who are familiar with the Scottish literary landscape of the last century, it is worth remembering that the book was conceived as an introduction for people who may have only a nascent interest in the topic. It is indeed a very good tool for those who are starting to explore their interest in the area. In addition, it is written in a flowing style that makes it very easy to read, although the fluency of the prose is sometimes hindered by the occasional long-windedness and the odd typo.

*Escritoras escocesas en la nueva literatura nacional* consists of a preface, an introduction and ten chapters. The preface is an essential tool to navigate the book, as it is where the authors state their objectives and acknowledge their limitations in writing a book with such a broad scope. The introduction, written by Margery Palmer McCulloch, is a quick survey of Scottish literature of the twentieth century and the evolution of its concerns up to the present day. She particularly remarks on the importance of the Scottish Renaissance movement in opening the way towards a self-defining literature and the role of young women writers in making space for themselves and for their successors within it.

The following ten chapters argue for the Scottishness of the writers they deal with, as well as for an expansive vision of what said Scottishness might mean in the present day. All of them open with an explanation of the position of the writer in question, followed by a survey of their literary career and a more in-depth analysis of some of their key texts, which sometimes is more descriptive than analytical. Liz Lochhead's position stands out as the Makar. Her output is explored through her involvement with the urban and (post-)industrial Glasgow landscape and her inclusion of experiences that contrast with her own. The authors emphasise Lochhead's ironic posture with regards to national stereotypes and symbols (such as bagpipes, whisky and tartan or Glasgow's bad reputation in terms of criminality

rates) as a platform for transgression in her exploration of Scottish identity. A. L. Kennedy's works are explored fundamentally through the concepts of scepticism and transcendence as the authors admit that her writing does not seem to be fundamentally concerned with questions of national identity or gender. The chapters on Janice Galloway, Ali Smith and Carol Ann Duffy revolve around the questions of private and public life and how these writers find ways of resisting mainstream narratives through alternative, more intimate personal stories. The sections on Jackie Kay and Maud Sulter highlight the writers' way of using literature as a revolutionary political tool with which they rewrite the past and the present, as well as their awareness of the need to articulate difference in a positive way at the same time they take a stance against the dangers of homogenisation. These two chapters also point to London as a space where Kay and Sulter find "links that surpass national allegiances" (165) and as a more cosmopolitan space where racial tensions are more bearable than in Scotland, and how that contrasts with London's traditional oppressive role within the framework of Scottish identity. Kathleen Jamie's poetry is largely analysed around philosophical questions focusing on her departure from the political content of her early works in moving towards an exploration of Heidegger's concept of "living in the world" (180), contemplation, and the tensions between those notions and the physicality of everyday experience. Gerrie Fellows and Leila Aboulela are marked by the authors' concern with transcultural bridges. Fellows's writing is presented as about the reconstruction of her family's past, but a reconstruction that goes against the "single narrative" (208), and includes her research and findings in official historical documents as well as fictional accounts, in a way that questions the construction of history and transcends hierarchies about truth. Aboulela is the only chapter dealing with religious difference. Here the authors highlight the importance of the interaction between romance and religion in her works, and the apparent impossibility of romantic relationships without religious convergence. The analysis of how Aboulela reverses the gendered coloniser/colonised dialectic in her novel *The Translator* (1999) merits special attention because of its questioning of the placement of responsibility when a cultural clash arises. Other key themes treated by the authors of the volume, Rodríguez González and Matthews, are womanhood, motherhood and pregnancy in the writing of Jackie Kay, Kathleen Jamie and Gerrie Fellows, even if those issues are dealt with in a way that erases the experiences of transgender people.

In the end, the book's open-ended structure (there is no conclusion chapter) results in a sense of slight disappointment, although it opens paths for discussion, inviting new audiences into the Scottish debate. Even if it only pretends to be an introductory work to the field of Scottish studies, there is room for improvement in the sense that the authors' focus seems to be largely on urban writers (most of them with links to either Glasgow or Edinburgh, and Aberdeen in the case of Leila Aboulela). At least one representative from rural Scotland would have contributed to the book's already varied scope of identities. The book seems to mainly discuss fiction and poetry, and although some of the authors included are playwrights as well, drama does not have a noticeable position within the chapters, even if it is touched upon. Also, given the importance of crime writing in contemporary Scotland, it is impossible not to wonder what stopped the authors from including a

discussion of Louise Welsh or M. C. Scott. The question of language is also worth considering, and although some works in Scots are mentioned, the role of both Scots and Gaelic as Scotland's other two national languages should have had a bigger relevance in *Escritoras escocesas en la nueva literatura nacional*.

An interest in Scottish literature and criticism is developing in Spain, as shown, for example, by the recent new translations of Alasdair Gray's *Unlikely Stories, Mostly* and Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* into Spanish or Catalan (Raig Verd editorial, 2013 and 2015). There is a tangible increase in the number of Scottish literature scholars in Spain even if at a very slow rate, probably due to the economic crisis and the publishing houses' lack of enthusiasm in embarking on translating books that may not sell. However, this rather unwelcoming situation that the academic and publishing sector find themselves in does nothing but contribute to the sense that this is a valuable contribution and a bold move on the part of the authors. I, for one, very much hope that this book succeeds in its purpose of bringing more voices to the attention of those who may, in turn, wish to express their own views on them.

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