

The SRB at the Festival – Part 2 – Scottish Review of Books

by Nick Major

Monday 15th August. Late afternoon. The Book Festival had settled into its routine. Readers were enjoying a pint of heavy in the sun. Sugar-starved children surrounded the ice-cream stand. Panicked late-comers ran across the grassy Square, Festival programmes flapping at their sides. The heat was pulsing in the entrance to the Studio Theatre. Inside, the audience were wiping sweat from their brows and clutching bags to their chests. There was no room to wriggle, and, anyway, not enough oxygen to allow for such physical exertion. But the sticky heat was soon forgotten when acclaimed Highland historian James Hunter and Canadian academic and journalist Myrna Kostash arrived on stage.

The audience were transported back to the early nineteenth century and given a peek into two locations on the same latitude – 58 degrees north – that have a shared history, even if they are 3,500 miles apart. Hunter was promoting his new history of the Sutherland Clearances, *Set Adrift Upon the World*. Many of the families evicted from their homes in north-east Scotland were sent to what is now Winnipeg, Canada. Myrna Kostash includes this vast expanse of land and people in her ‘patchwork quilt’ of a book, *The Seven Oaks Reader*, which ‘weaves together interviews, declarations, memoir and poetry to tell the story of the competition between the North West Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company for the lucrative fur trade’. Many of the usurped Scots Hunter writes about were embroiled in this trade war which culminated in the short, bloody Battle of Seven Oaks.

At the beginning of his reading Hunter raised the question: why write another book about the clearances? His answer was simple: to reach beyond ‘the generalities’ and ‘get to the stories of the people on the ground’. His inspiration was E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*. When this classic appeared in the 1950s Hunter was a history student. Thompson tells the ‘story of the ordinary folk, the miners, the factory workers, the hand loom weavers.’ He wanted to rescue these people from what he calls the ‘“enormous condescension of posterity”’. Hunter writes in the introduction to his book that ‘historians

often inclined to deal mainly with the powerful should also listen out to the voices of humanity at large'.

Hunter believes historians should get a sense of where history happens. Once in a while they should leave the dusty archives and step out into the landscapes of the past. He quoted Simon Schama's teacher, who once told the popular historian, 'you must pay attention to the archive of the feet.' Hunter 'spent some time walking the straths of Sutherland in to what, ironically, is now called wild land...but I was also keen to go to places like Churchill [Manitoba]...the polar bear capital of the world.' Myrna Kostash also emphasised that the land the Scottish settlers worked on was no empty canvas upon which to paint a new life. It belonged the Métis people, an indigenous Indian-French race who fought on the side of the North West Company. A sadness descended on the room as the event drew to a close. There was an acknowledgement that to read these two books would be to read of how the dispossessed of Scotland were pitched against the dispossessed of a new found land.

Next time Hunter and Kostash are invited to the Book Festival, perhaps they should be given a larger space. Two hours later, there was plenty of room available for an extra two hundred people in the Main Theatre, where the James Tait Black Awards were announced. The prestigious nature of the Awards merit a prime time slot. But every year the public fail to turn up. Who can blame them? They know what's going to happen. Someone's going to win a prize. It's about time the ceremony was moved to a more humble abode. That aside, the James Tait Black is unique. As Sally Magnusson said in her opening remarks, it is the only award of its kind to be presented by a university.' The books shortlisted are not picked 'because someone wants to pat someone else on the back...or because the judges think this is the sort of thing they are supposed to like.' Postgraduate students and academics from Edinburgh University draw up the two shortlists, one for biography and one for fiction. The prize for each winner is a tidy sum: £10,000.

Two academics from Edinburgh University discussed the shortlists on stage. The biography category contained the most interesting works. One can always trust academics, however, to pick a shortlist of writers who have all written books about writers. The two biographies that stood out were Ruth Scurr's *John Aubrey: My Own Life* and Bloomsbury's *Outsider: A Life of David Garnett* by Sarah Knight. Born in 1892, Garnett was a novelist, publisher, libertine, gentleman farmer, conscientious objector, and general oddball. Now largely forgotten, he won the James Tait prize in 1919 for his novel *Lady into Fox*. He was the former lover of the painter Duncan Grant, who went on to father Vanessa Bell's daughter, Angelica. Garnett was present at the birth of this child and declared his intention to one day marry her. Twenty years later the pair exchanged wedding vows.

John Aubrey was 'England's first great biographer and a most entrancing antiquarian' who lived in the 17th Century. Scurr's book is written as though it is Aubrey's autobiography. Although Aubrey never wrote a diary, Scurr composes a mosaic of his writing from a wide of variety of sources. This assemblage is given authenticity through the shoring up of the trivial with the deeply serious: 'one minute,' said Magnusson, 'he's talking about the execution of Charles I – "we who remain behind must weather the disturbance of the world" – and the next minute he's going on about his testicle healing quite nicely'. The biography prize went to a different book about the 17th Century, James Shapiro's *1606: Shakespeare and the Year of Lear*. Why Shapiro was picked above the others is anyone's guess. Shapiro – once just a 'kid from Brooklyn' – shows how even the most trivial events of 1606 can give insights into Shakespeare's plays such as *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Macbeth*. It was described by the judge as a 'wonderful blend of literary and historical research.'

The fiction shortlist was uninspiring, and the discussion dragged on. Kevin Barry's *Beatlebone* is about a 'semi-fictional' version of John Lennon who journeys to an island on the west coast of Ireland. According to the judge, it 'has a slippery, fluid relationship with fact,' which goes some way to explain that it's a novel. Sarah Hall's *Wolf Border* contains a 'counter-factual narrative' that might be of particular interest to Scottish readers. It is set during the run-up and aftermath of the Scottish Referendum in 2014. When Scotland says Yes Alex Salmond becomes prime minister of an independent country. The protagonist, Rachel Caine, is zoologist who returns to Cumbria to help raise two wolf cubs which are to be reintroduced to the wild. The pair break free and cross the border at a time when 'Scotland is returning to something more authentically primal'.

David Markovits bagged the fiction prize for *You Don't Have to Live Like This*, despite the 'annoying' nature of his narrator. Set in 2008, the novel is about a group of idealists and moneymen who set out to gentrify a semi-derelict area of Detroit. Markovits gave an excellent reading that saved the evening. The perfectly paced scene described a young black girl sitting with her dying father in a white neighbourhood, unsure of how to seek help in a hostile world. Markovits' casual, barroom prose was a joy to listen to. It was a shame there were so few people in the room to hear it.