

# From *The House with the Green Shutters* to *Our Lady of Perpetual Succour*: the portrayal of alcohol in the modern Scottish novel

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In modern Scottish literature alcohol is a recurrent subject; this paper examines the different ways it is portrayed with particular emphasis on the novel. It has been seen as the resort of the weak-minded and the cause of personal degradation. It has been portrayed as a response to and a symptom of social disintegration. It has been depicted as leading to delirium and psychosis. On a positive note it has been hailed as a source

of inspiration and as a means of celebration. It has helped some troubled characters find the road to redemption. Along the way we encounter various literary stereotypes of the drinker, while the pub forms the backdrop to much of the action.

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## Introduction

Alcohol plays a major role in Scottish culture. Robert Burns wrote eloquently about it as did his 'elder brother in the muse', Robert Fergusson. James Boswell described his bouts of drinking and attempts at abstinence in his journals. William McGonagall versified the dangers of drinking in *The Demon Drink*. Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), though open to many different interpretations, has been seen as a warning tale about the dangers of drinking: a civilised man is transformed into a beast by the swallowing of a strange fluid. Hugh MacDiarmid's most famous poem was *A Drunk Man looks at the Thistle*, in which the state of Scotland is examined through the eyes of a drunkard. In traditional Scottish music, alcohol features recurrently in song, for example Andy M Stewart's *The Humours of Whiskey*. In the visual Arts, the Glasgow School of Art graduates Robert Colquhoun and Robert MacBride were as famous for their hard drinking as for their painting. John Bellany developed liver disease as a result of his drinking and painted his experience of his subsequent liver transplant. In psychiatry, RD Laing had a reputation as a wild drinker which came to overshadow his clinical work.

In modern Scottish literature the subject of alcohol continues to feature and this paper will examine the different ways it is portrayed with particular emphasis on the novel. The selection

of work is not meant to be statistically representative but is chosen to capture the variety of experiences and meanings around alcohol consumption in Scotland. The paper examines how literature can shed light on the different and changing roles that alcohol plays in modern Scottish life. Whereas sociological and medical research can provide us with a certain type of data, a study of literature is more concerned with the meaning, both social and individual, of the experience of alcohol. Of course we have to remember that stories are written primarily for literary reasons and not to provide an academic text. Thus exaggeration, distortion and unreliable narration all come into play. We cannot simply regard imaginative literature as straightforward testimony. Nevertheless these works do reveal much about Scotland's relation with alcohol. Curiously, although recent decades have witnessed an explosion of scholarly interest in modern Scottish literature,<sup>1-6</sup> very little has been written specifically about the subject of alcohol.

## Themes

### For the weak-minded

In an early seminal novel, *The House with the Green Shutters* by George Douglas Brown,<sup>7</sup> alcohol is seen as the crutch of the weak-minded, taken to bolster confidence but ultimately leading to self-destruction. John, university student and timid son of the Gourlay family, discovers alcohol and the novel

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charts his attraction to it, his increasing dependence on it and his eventual downfall.

At a drinking party with friends, John discovers the benefits of whisky:

He gulped a huge swill of whisky to cover his vexation – and, oh, the mighty difference! A sudden courage flooded his veins...The moment that whisky had warmed the cockles of his heart Gourlay ceased to care a rap for the sniggerers. Drink deadened the nervous perception of his critics... (p. 133).

Alcohol, then, emboldens the hitherto fearful John. He finds he becomes more socially at ease and more talkative. The author observes:

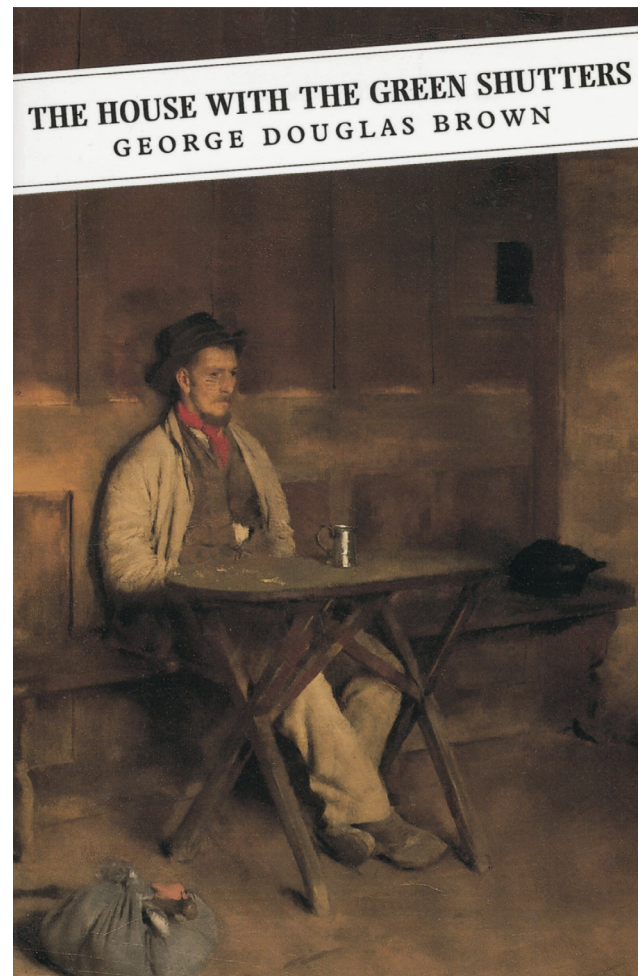
Young Gourlay had found a means of escaping from his foolish mind...drink appealed to him in many ways, besides. Now when his too-apprehensive nerves were frightened by bugbears in his lonely room he could be off to the Howff and escape them. And drink inspired him with false courage to sustain his pose as a hardy rollicker... He found, too...that drink unlocked his mind, and gave a free flow to his ideas. Nervous men are often impotent of speech from the very excess of perception – they realize not what they mean to say, but with nervous antennae of their minds they feel the attitude of every auditor... In plainer language, when he was drunk, he was less afraid of being laughed at, and free of that fear, he was a better speaker. He was driven to drink, then, by every weakness of his character. As nervous hypochondriac, as would-be swagger, as a dullard requiring stimulus, he found that drink, to use his own language, gave him ‘smeddum!’ (p.136–7).

Alcohol gives John a vague, mystical, quasi-philosophical perspective on the world. He compares his new found ability with that of his philosophy lecturer, Tam: ‘Just imagine,’ he thought, ‘whisky doing for me what philosophy seems to do for Tam. It’s a wonderful thing, the drink!’ (p.139). William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*<sup>8</sup> described the quasi-mystical feeling alcohol initially gives the drinker but warned that this was short lived and soon led to degradation.

John somehow manages to win the Raeburn essay prize and the success goes to his head. It enables him to strike a pose and Brown scathingly attacks the notion that alcoholic excess is related to genius:

Here at last he had found the sweet seduction of a proper pose – that of a grand home manqué, of a man who would be a genius were it not for the excess of his qualities. Would he continue to appear a genius, then he must continue to display that excess which – so he wished them to believe – alone prevented his brilliant achievements. It was a curious vicious inversion. ‘You could do great things if you didn’t drink,’ crooned the fools. ‘See how I drink,’ Gourlay seemed to answer – ‘that is why I don’t do great things. But, mind you I could do them were it not for this.’ (p. 160–1)

**Figure 1** *The House With The Green Shutters* by George Douglas Brown. Image courtesy of Canongate, Edinburgh



The notion that heavy drinking is in some way a sign of superior mental and creative ability is a popular cultural trope,<sup>9</sup> although Brown forcefully contends otherwise. John’s drinking becomes a habit. He neglects his studies and spends more and more of his time in the howff (pub). He develops the early signs of delirium but continues to drink. Drunk, he goes to his lectures where he misbehaves and is expelled from the University. He returns home in disgrace and is cruelly mocked by his domineering father, whom he eventually murders.

He drinks more and starts hallucinating that he sees eyes:

‘Mother!’ he screamed, ‘Mother!’ and stopped suddenly, his starting eyes seeming to follow something in the room.

‘What are ye glowering at, John?’ she wailed.

‘Thae damned e’en, ‘ he said slowly, ‘they’re burning my soul!’ he cried, clutching her thin wrist, ‘see there, there! – coming round by the dresser! A-ah!’ he screamed in hoarse execration. ‘Would ye then?’ – and he hurled a great jug from the table at the pursuing unseen. (p. 223)

He feels the eyes are watching him all the time and that they are those of his father. He has another exchange with his mother:

'Johnnie dear,' she wept passionately, there's no e'en! It's just the drink gars you think sae.'

'No,' he said dully; 'the drink's my refuge. It's a kind thing, drink. It helps a body.' (p.234).

He takes whisky and poison, which kill him.

Brown documents the disastrous effects of alcohol on a weak young man from its initial appeal as a social lubricant to violence and alcoholic delirium, culminating in suicide. The book was to be very influential and we see elements of the story played out in later Scottish novels, such as *Lanark* (1981) by Alasdair Gray, *And the Land Lay Still* (2010) by James Robertson and *Paradise* (2004) by A.L. Kennedy.

### Leading to personal degradation

*The Sound of My Voice* by Ron Butlin<sup>10</sup> is told in the second person and charts the alcohol-induced decline of Morris Magellan, a 34-year-old administrator. It captures the self-deluding nature of alcoholism. The central character tries to convince himself that he is in control and that people do not notice he is drunk. As an unreliable narrator he gives evidence that others are horrified by his behaviour: his secretary, his fellow passengers on the train, his despairing wife and his children who ask why daddy is vomiting into the sink. He also manages to convince himself that he 'needs' or 'deserves' a drink. The second person voice renders his experiences more immediate and therefore more raw. One can feel the embarrassment of his inebriated encounters with others as he attempts to rationalise his wayward behaviour.

*Rolling* by Thomas Healy<sup>11</sup> is a novel about self-destruction. It tells the tale of Michael, from his troubled upbringing in the Gorbals area of Glasgow through his years of wild excess. Drink is taken on almost every page as we witness his relentless mental, physical and social decline. Although dimly aware he is destroying his life, Michael repeatedly and perversely throws away opportunities of love, work and good health by returning to drinking. By the end he is drinking meths and looks like a derelict. He reflects: 'In many ways in Glasgow I was not unlike a lot of men. Working to drink, living to die. No aspirations, way out, or drinking, wanting a way out'. (p. 88). This is a bleak, unsentimental work which shows that for certain individuals, the desire to drink overrides all other concerns in life. The author also identifies Glasgow as place particularly productive of such self-destructive drinking. In *Espedair Street*,<sup>12</sup> Iain Banks makes a similar point. He has his hard drinking hero observe:

Drink is bad for you...there's a whole tradition of enjoying it and suffering the consequences, even boasting about the consequences, and that tradition is especially strong here in Scotland, and especially in the west, and especially in Glasgow and surrounding areas... (p. 69.)

In *Paradise*,<sup>13</sup> A.L. Kennedy portrays a heavy drinker, but unlike most examples in the genre of heroic drinking, which tends to associate such activity with men, here the central character, Hannah Luckraft, is a woman. As Ali Smith<sup>14</sup> observes, Kennedy 'matches shot for shot the drunken-oblivion boys

under the volcano'. Kennedy has Hannah comment: 'this is how a man drinks and, therefore, inappropriate for me. I should have been at home behind my curtains with the methylated gin, the Tia Maria and Blue Nun.' (p. 184).

Hannah relates the story of her alcohol-fuelled decline with a remarkable lack of self-pity. She details her downward journey of degradation which involves the loss of her job and driving licence, the damage to her relationship with her parents, to whose care she returns in disgrace, and the estrangement from her brother who finally disowns her because of her drinking. Her alcoholism leads to the breakup of her relationship with her lover, accidents, loss of self-respect, domestic squalor and, in the final phase, delirium tremens. Kennedy vividly conveys the befuddlement, confusion and lack of ability of Hannah to distinguish what is real from what is not. Kennedy gives Hannah's alcoholic journey a religious framework, the 14 chapters of the novel mirroring the 14 Stations of the Cross. At the end it is not clear whether Hannah has landed in heaven or hell, or perhaps both.

### Alcohol and its relation to mental breakdown

*Mr Alfred M.A.* by George Friel<sup>15</sup> relates the story of an elderly, unmarried English teacher and failed poet who is discontented with his lot and the vulgarity and ignorance of his pupils. Mr Alfred is dismayed at what he sees as the moral deterioration of the youth of Glasgow with their gang warfare and widespread defacement of the city with graffiti. He seeks solace each night in the pub, and, to disguise the amount he drinks, he visits several pubs of an evening. He is a shabby, unkempt figure whose drinking eventually leads to his breakdown. One evening while out drinking, he is assaulted by former pupils and suffers a head injury. He becomes confused and hallucinates.

His madness takes the form of believing that he has a double and that he is controlled by the Devil. In this, the novel pays homage to James Hogg's classic 1824 book, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*,<sup>16</sup> whose central character is likewise afflicted. Mr Alfred believes 'his twin' is standing over him, talking to him. The figure introduces himself as 'Tod' and says he is a poet whose work is published everywhere; by this he means he has produced all the graffiti in the city. Given Mr Alfred's failed ambition to be a poet and his hostility to graffiti, this is deeply ironic. The two have a long discussion about literature, politics and the state of society. Later Tod tells Mr Alfred that he is the Devil. Mr Alfred has a strange sensation: 'He was with himself but outside himself, as if there were two of him'. (pp. 164–5).

Mr Alfred wanders around the streets trying to find his way home. His strange feelings intensify: 'And more and more sharply as he wandered through the empty night he was aware of being outside himself, watching himself, listening to himself, not owning himself'. (p. 166). He begins to hear the voice of Tod urging him to write graffiti on a wall. He writes 'Glasgow Ya Bass' ('Glasgow you bastard'), which he also shouts out (p.168–9). All the time he is being watched by the police, who ask him what he is doing. However he is unable

to explain himself: 'Mr Alfred had no answer...the writing on the wall had been done by someone occupying his body in space and time, someone not identical with himself, someone who had suddenly gone away and left him to answer for it.' (p. 170).

The officers take Mr Alfred into the police car and the next morning he appears in court where he again feels he is divided into two people:

He had a return of his old feeling that he was a man outside somebody else. There was a man there in the dock with his face, answering to his name, but it wasn't him. It was another man he had been forced to keep company with, a fellow-traveller who was getting by on a borrowed birth-certificate. (p. 174).

He is remanded for medical reports and examined by two psychiatrists. Mr Alfred subsequently has 'attacks of amnesia and aphasia' and is moved to a mental asylum. (p. 178). For a man who takes pride in his facility with words, to lose his speech is a cruel blow indeed. In writing graffiti, he has been behaving in exactly the same way as the delinquent youths he so despises. Alcohol has brought about Mr Alfred's downfall and, in his psychotic and confused state, he has dramatised the conflict he sees between his learned, cultured values and the barbarism of the rest of society.

*A Working Mother* by Agnes Owens<sup>17</sup> tells the story of Betty, a typist, who is married with two children. Her husband is a heavy drinker and she begins drinking, she claims, to maintain her relationship with him. Over the course of the novel, as artlessly told by Betty, she drinks more and more, leading to the break-up of her marriage and the loss of custody of her children. She ends up mentally deranged and detained in a psychiatric hospital. Betty is an unreliable narrator who cannot see her own part in her downfall.

Betty inadvertently reveals how her drinking leads to the neglect of her children and the breakdown of her relationship with her husband. As her life unravels, she is dimly aware of her problems and muses to herself:

Finally I sank into a chair worn out by the contention inside my head. 'I know I've plenty of faults,' I told myself, 'but I do think I've tried my best to be a good wife and mother, and while I understand I shouldn't drink so much, the fact is if I didn't drink when Adam drinks I would go out of my mind...' (p. 127.)

Betty tries to rationalise that she needs to drink in order to deal with her husband. She has another brief illumination that constant imbibing is a bad idea. While drinking in a pub with her husband, she says to him: 'It's the life we lead. It's so pointless. All we do is drink.' He asks her if there anything else she would rather do and she responds: 'I looked at my empty glass. 'Just get me another drink.' (p. 129). Her husband calls her a 'lush'. Betty says, if she is, it is because of him. He replies, insightfully, that she always blames other people. Betty's life continues to disintegrate and she finds herself as a patient in a psychiatric hospital. A fellow patient who believes she is Lady Lipton tells Betty that she 'was in

a bad state when they brought' her in, 'shouting and screaming and acting like a madwoman.' (p. 186).

The novel captures the denial of the problem drinker and also the loss of contact with reality when their alcohol intake becomes excessive. Betty has no idea how she ended up in hospital and why her life has collapsed.

*And the Land Lay Still*<sup>18</sup> is a large and multi-stranded novel on the state of modern Scotland. The author, James Robertson, has revealed he only realised, after writing his book, that an invisible character played an important part throughout the story.<sup>19</sup> The character was that of drink and it informs the lives of a great many of the protagonists in the book, thus reflecting the major role that alcohol plays in contemporary Scottish culture.

There is one character in the novel, however, whose drinking drives him to madness. This is Peter Bond, a 68-year-old retired secret service agent who has become an alcoholic. He lives by himself in squalor in a flat which he admits has become a 'midden'. When he ventures out, he is mocked by a local youth for being 'shaky'.

Bond spends most of his time in his flat drinking whisky, ruminating guiltily about his past and his complicity in nefarious deeds. His past comes back to haunt him in the shape of hallucinations of the people he worked with as a spy. The hallucinatory episodes begin when he hears someone call his name as he is sitting drinking in his flat. He looks up and sees a figure in his room, posing as a butler and speaking to him. On closer inspection he sees that the figure is a fish posing as a man. Standing beside the fish-butler is a troll. The fish-butler then becomes Edgar, a person who interviewed him for the job of spy 50 years ago. From then on, Peter has recurrent hallucinations where he meets figures from his past who discuss his previous life and his role in the murky world of espionage and politics. As in *The House with the Green Shutters*, the content of the hallucinations reflects the character's past and feelings of guilt.

### Response to and symptom of social disintegration

In *Gentlemen of the West* by Agnes Owens,<sup>20</sup> heavy drinking is depicted as the response to social disintegration and unemployment in the west of Scotland, while in *The Stornoway Way* by Kevin MacNeil,<sup>21</sup> alcoholism is portrayed as a product of living in the Hebrides. In the works of Irvine Welsh, particularly *Trainspotting*,<sup>22</sup> drugs but also alcohol are used by disaffected working class youth to compensate for the lack of possibilities in post-industrial Scotland. In *How Late It Was, How Late* by James Kelman,<sup>23</sup> the central character is defiant in the face of the ravages of alcoholism and an uncaring state.

*Gentlemen of the West* by Agnes Owens tells the story of young man living in a town in the west of Scotland that offers little opportunity in the way of employment. It does however have a well-established drinking culture into which the young man stumbles. He is a lonely youth who one day happens to go into the local pub, the Paxton Arms. Here he meets Paddy, a middle-aged impoverished alcoholic. The young man

comments: 'From then on my social life began'. (p. 75). He meets other heavy drinking men and also some derelict alcoholics who gather under a bridge. The tension in the novel is whether he will escape from this world or gradually become part of it: an exclusively male culture where everything is subservient to drinking and scraping enough money together to continue imbibing. Horizons are narrowed, there is a suspicion of change, and there is a sense that there is nothing else to do in this environment but drink. We see the effects of heavy drinking: poor health, premature ageing and death.

On one occasion his mother goes to the pub, but she witnesses violence and leaves, vowing never to return. The pub is seen as primarily a male domain. At the end of the book, the young man decides to escape from his hometown and seek work up north. He resists the temptation to go for a last drink in the pub. He reckons he would just spend his savings and not leave town. He goes to see Mick and Baldy, his derelict friends under the bridge where they are drinking. They give him money despite having practically nothing.

Mick rolls a fag for the young man and gives it to him 'with a flourish':

I had the feeling I was being initiated. Maybe I could do worse than join them, because at least they had the communal outlook. The booze was usually shared. You might lack comfort but not company. You might be an outcast but you were free. It was tempting. (p. 107).

He tells them he is going up north to look for work. The following exchange takes place:

'Work never done anyone ony good,' said Baldy spitting in contempt. 'That's for mugs. Look at us, we can drink without workin' for it, an' plenty tae eat. A fish supper noo an' again, bried, cheese or a tin o' soup. Eatin' is a fallacy onyway. We're perfectly healthy.'

They could have fooled me, but I nodded in agreement.

'So long as ye've enough tae drink, that's the main thing,' said Mick wisely. (p. 107).

Mick and Baldy have outlined their philosophy in which drink takes primacy over everything else in life. The young man has a regard for them and their outlook but he decides it is not for him:

You could say that Mick and Baldy were the true gentlemen of the west. Generous, treacherous, vicious and kindly with no admiration for the rich and successful. Yet the difference between them and me was that I liked working. My body was used to it. I preferred to earn my drink and hand in a few pounds to my mother. Their philosophy was alright for them, but not for me, not yet. (p. 108).

The book ends on a hopeful note with the young man leaving town to find work and escape the culture of endless boozing. In the author's note on *The Stornoway Way*, Kevin MacNeil informs us: 'The Isle of Lewis does have a drink problem. Its

culture is conforming both subtly and overtly, to the spread of globalization'. The novel pictures Lewis as designed to make its inhabitants drunkards. The central character, R Stornoway observes: 'The Western Islander's response to our diminishing way of life is that of the oppressed the world over, from Native American to Australasian aborigine: a powerful urge to drink oneself underground'. (p. 17).

He cites the conformity of the islanders, their addiction to routine and their resistance to change. It is a place of gossip and venomous passive-aggression. Lewis is founded on guilt and anxiety. He also mentions the baleful influence of the church, especially the Wee Frees and the effects of the Highland Clearances, which made way for sheep in place of humans. The people were 'treated like scum': 'Our language, code of dress, social structure, customs and land all stolen from us... Nowadays, colonized by a nation of shopkeepers, we're a nation of shopkeepers' assistants'. (p. 128).

R Stornoway's critique of Lewis echoes depictions of other parts of Scotland. George Douglas Brown's Ayrshire in *The House with the Green Shutters* is a place of small-minded, vindictive gossips. Agnes Owens' west of Scotland is a place that resists change and whose inhabitants are cowed by economic depression. On another level, R Stornoway's condemnation of his native isle could be seen as an excuse to drink. If the place is so awful, what else can a sensitive person do but drink to oblivion? He certainly likes drinking and describes his first drink as a revelation:

I had never felt so good.

Lovely alcohol. A new presence emerged from the bosom of everything. What had struck me most was the rightness, the familiarity of it. It was like bumping into a friend miles out on the bare moor when you were skiving off school. Understanding and recognition, a chemistry of rich subtlety... This feeling of mutual need lasted for weeks, months, years. Reality took on the shifting, self-transforming quality of a dream. And because this sensation was so vibrant, so alive, it was more real than the sober mundane; drink showed me reality without its clothes on. The shared reality-landscape we inherit, I surmised, is a bluff, a prop. Fantastic how such realizations enrich a person's life. Surely, I wasn't really alive before drink. I was escaping the film set, leaping with a cry of triumph towards God's admiring applause. (pp. 113–4).

However over the years the drink takes its toll and alcohol completely dominates his life. R Stornoway destroys his relationships, neglects his art and becomes a recluse. He drinks to shut out people. He writes: 'I'm getting to the place I want to be. Wilfully remote. Like an island'. (p. 114). The book ends bleakly with his suicide.

### Inspiration, celebration and redemption

In *Whisky Galore* by Compton Mackenzie,<sup>24</sup> alcohol is celebrated for its positive effects on human existence. The island in the story is plunged into depression after alcohol supplies dry up. When whisky is washed up in a shipwreck, the fortunes of the people improve as they are able to

re-acquaint themselves with the benefits of drinking. The novel hails whisky as 'the water of life'. In the book it is shown as being able to raise a man from his death bed. It gives the mild-mannered George courage to stand up to his tyrannical mother. It gives inspiration to the Gaelic poet. It makes old ladies mellow. It seems to do no harm to the doctor in his clinical practice, though he does warn about becoming a slave to it, as he admits he nearly did.

One character called Norman extols the virtue of whisky:

What gives me the necessary sagacity to outwit the Inspector? Whisky. What is it that helps me to know just where to put down the net in Loch Sleepport for Waggett's sea trout? Whisky. What makes me a good shot at a grouse or a snipe? Whisky. What is it that makes Maclaren such a hell of a good doctor? Whisky. Love makes the world go round. Not at all. Whisky makes it go round twice as fast. (p. 36).

The novel is, of course, in the comic genre and hyperbole is used for humorous effect. Alcohol has long been used a source of comedy in literature and this novel adopts a largely benign perspective on drinking. The only negative effect is that of the hangover. It is notable that drinking is primarily seen as a male activity. Men gather together to drink whisky while the women stay at home. There is also a contrast between the attitude of the indigenous Scottish people to drink and that of the English soldiers who are stationed on the island. In conversation with Captain Waggett, Sergeant-Major Odd observes of the natives:

'I meant to say, sir, I think they're all feeling the effect of the shortage [of whisky]...From what I can make out they haven't been without whisky for thousands of years. It's like depriving them of the very air they breathe.' (p. 54).

To which Captain Waggett replies: 'They drink far too much whisky' and goes on to extol the English as 'superior to every other nation in the world'. (pp. 54–5). It seems that the Scots, unlike the English, need alcohol, though Captain Waggett's pompous self-belief is punctured at the end of the story when the natives outwit him and hide the recovered whisky.

*The Sopranos* by Alan Warner<sup>25</sup> tells the story of a girls' choir from Our Lady of Perpetual Succour who go on a bus trip from Oban to Edinburgh to take part in a national singing contest. The girls style themselves the 'Sopranos' and they use the outing to drink to excess. The novel describes their wild drinking and intoxicated escapades. Initially their drinking is celebratory, but it is also used to cock a snook at the authorities, especially the nuns who have organised the expedition. The girls begin drinking on the bus and we learn that the sound of the clinking of bottles 'signalled the Sopranos nascent and flagrant right to drink, signalled their dismissal of any value winning the Final might stand for' (p.54). The Sopranos are also rebelling against their situation. Their home town, Oban, is portrayed as a place of limited opportunities. Some of their friends' only aspiration is to get pregnant. There is small town mentality where everybody knows everyone else's business. The trip to the 'big town' of

Edinburgh is seen as liberating. As one character observes, if you are banned from a pub in Oban, you are effectively banned from all the pubs because everyone knows about it. In Edinburgh, if you are banned, you just go to another pub because the big city offers anonymity.

The drink allows the Sopranos to rebel against notions of how girls should behave. They object to the nuns' ideas about female decorum, moderation and modesty. The drink allows for the expression of lesbian feelings and new friendships are forged. As one girl says, while drinking to excess in an Edinburgh pub: 'Any opportunity we get in life, you should just GO for it. Grab ah it. Ah don't want end up like feeling old and no, no'. (p.186).

However the girls' drinking soon proves reckless, leading to vomiting, accidents, being robbed and vulnerability to sexual assault. The concert is a disaster and the girls are expelled from school. Despite all this, the novel ends with the girls starting the next day by drinking again. Alcohol can certainly cause mental and physical damage, but for the Sopranos it also offers adventure, liberation and a way to celebrate companionship.

*1982, Janine* by Alasdair Gray<sup>26</sup> traces the breakdown and eventual alcohol-fuelled suicide attempt of Jock McLeish. Gray drew on his own youthful experiences at the Edinburgh Festival to sketch the early life of Jock McLeish and it is possible that he also drew on his own experiences of heavy drinking to portray the middle-aged, by now alcoholic, McLeish. McLeish uses alcohol and pornography to avoid facing up to his problems. The novel takes the form of a monologue in which McLeish muses over his life and his current situation.

We learn about his heavy drinking. At weekends he indulges in what he calls 'pubcrawling' in which he tries to disguise how much he is drinking by moving from pub to pub so that in each establishment, he seems to be having only a few drinks. However this practice becomes unstuck as his behaviour gives him away. He is caught shoplifting but taken pity on by young shop assistant, who tells him he will not prosecute him: 'Out of pity for your condition I will take no action'. McLeish remarks: 'I left the shop feeling sober and proud to be one of a species which had produced a boy of such dignity and decency'. (p. 163).

His downward spiral continues and he finds himself in a hotel, drinking and planning to take an overdose. He swallows numerous pills and a large tumbler of whisky. However he vomits up the tablets and survives. He reflects: 'But what a typical piece of human daftness, to poison myself in a fit of despair because I could no longer stand work that I hate, work that was killing me!' (p. 176). He goes on to consider how he changed for the worse over the years and alienated his wife, Helen:

I made myself completely predictable so that the firm could predict me. I stopped growing, stopped changing. I helped the firm grow, instead of me. I became a damned chilly gentlemanly mild-mannered self-crushing bore like my father. No wonder Helen had to leave me at last, even

though she loved me.

Helen loved me. I've just noticed that. (p. 323)

He leaves the hotel, a wiser man, having made the decision to leave his work. It has taken a night of heavy drinking and an overdose to make him realise the error of his ways.

### Literary stereotypes

The literary stereotype of the hard-drinking detective is represented by John Rebus in the novels of Ian Rankin, Bruce Robertson in *Filth* by Irvine Welsh,<sup>27</sup> and by Zander Flaws in Tom Morton's *Guttered*.<sup>28</sup> There are also heavy drinking teachers such as Patrick Doyle in James Kelman's *A Disaffection*<sup>29</sup> and Mr Alfred in George Friel's eponymous novel. Alcoholic journalists appear in James Robertson's *To be Continued*<sup>30</sup> and in Denis Mina's Paddy Meehan series.<sup>31</sup> There are heavy drinking doctors such as Dr Maclaren in *Whisky Galore* and many of the doctors and medical students in Stuart MacGregor's *The Myrtle and Ivy*<sup>32</sup> drink to excess. Curiously, both of these latter novels claim that drinking can make some doctors better clinicians.

*Guttered* by Tom Morton relates the tale of a drunken Highland detective, called Zander Flaws. It begins with his admission to hospital after an accident while drinking. Medical staff note that he has a major alcohol problem and he is given Librium and Antabuse on discharge. Significantly, for most of the novel, Flaws remains abstinent in order to solve the case he is investigating, though he does have a drink at the end of the story.

The novel attacks the romantic view of drinking. In this account, drinking is associated with serious medical problems and personal degradation such as being sacked, living in squalor and becoming a public embarrassment. It debunks the narrative of such heavy-drinking detectives as Ian Rankin's Rebus who is portrayed as drinking to excess but still able to fight with criminals and solve complex cases. The novel suggests that heavy drinking precludes being an efficient detective. Flaws says he hates such romantic portrayals: 'that school of literature where hard-nosed Hemingway heroes strode through a grim Glaswegian twilight, fighting with maudlin, pathetic nobility and angst the temptation to fall once more into the glorious gutter'. (p. 134).

Irvine Welsh also debunks the notion that hard drinking makes for a better detective. In *Filth*, DS Bruce Robertson is rendered completely dysfunctional by his intake of alcohol and drugs.

### The pub

The pub forms the back drop of much of Scottish literature. From Burns' *Tam o' Shanter* to the novels of William McIlvanney, the pub has been a male preserve. Hugh MacDiarmid wrote:

Now, I am not a misogynist by any means. I simply believe there is a time and place for everything...And like a high proportion of my country's regular and purposive drinkers

I greatly prefer a complete absence of women on occasions of libation...no one wants to be distracted from that absorbing business by music, women...<sup>33</sup>

In the works of McIlvanney the pub is an exclusively male domain. As Cooke<sup>34</sup> has observed: 'McIlvanney invokes the concept of unreconstructed masculinity as part and parcel of pub culture' (p. 192). In *The Bus Conductor Hines*,<sup>35</sup> by James Kelman, males go to the bar with their wives and girlfriends, but the men and women sit at separate tables to drink. Only in recent times, in the work of A.L. Kennedy, Alan Warner and Agnes Owens have females been permitted full entry rights.

In Rankin's *Rebus* novels, the pub is where the detective does much of his work, meeting contacts and deliberating about the case. A pub plays a central role in Stuart MacGregor's *The Myrtle and Ivy*, where a fictional version of Sandy Bell's in Edinburgh is the meeting place for hard-drinking medical students, folk musicians and Scottish nationalists. In his book on the social life of modern Scottish writers, John Herdman<sup>36</sup> demonstrated the importance of the pub in the Capital's literary, musical and political culture. In *The Ossians* by Doug Johnstone,<sup>37</sup> the state of Scotland is examined via a tour of the nation's pubs by a rock band. The pub features recurrently in the work of Irvine Welsh and is often a place of confrontation and conflict. The pub, of course, provides a convenient location for writers to have their characters meet and interact, and to bring together a diverse group of people.

### Concluding remarks

Alcohol features recurrently throughout modern Scottish literature. Of course authors from other countries have also written on the subject. Irish writers such as James Joyce and Flann O' Brien provide celebratory accounts of the joys of drinking. Russian literature, particularly in the novels of Gogol, Gorky and Dostoyevsky, depict the heavy drinking of its citizens. Indeed, in his short tale, *A Nasty Story* (1862), Dostoyevsky arguably outdoes Scottish versions of the narrative of personal degradation. The negative effects of alcohol are also examined by French writers such as Henri Murger in *Scenes de la Vie Boheme* (1851) and Emile Zola in *L'Assommoir* (1877). Modern American literature not only has numerous accounts of alcoholic excess, but many of its novelists such as Ernest Hemingway, John Cheever and F. Scott Fitzgerald took on the persona of the hard-drinking writer.<sup>38</sup>

In modern Scottish literature, accounts of drinking are, in the main, bleak. It leads to personal decline and breakdown. Positive accounts such as *Whisky Galore* are in the minority. Novelists often link heavy drinking with adverse social circumstances, and some writers, for example Irvine Welsh and Agnes Owens, implicate society in the creation of alcoholism. Several writers identify Glasgow and the west of Scotland as particularly immersed in the culture of heavy drinking. Until comparatively recently, Scottish literature has portrayed drinking as an exclusively male activity. Newer work by A.L. Kennedy, Agnes Owens and Alan Warner has concentrated on the female drinker, thus reflecting changes in drinking patterns in modern Scottish society. So far there has been little representation of drinking by gay people, which

is surprising given that alcohol-related problems are high in this group.

Many authors seem to suggest there is something in the nature of being Scottish that necessitates the intake of large amounts of alcohol; other nations, notably the English, seem to manage life without drinking to excess. Is it the wild Celtic soul that cannot accommodate itself to grey mundanity? Is it a sense of inferiority that needs alcohol to bolster self-confidence? Is it self-hatred that seeks its own destruction? All have been suggested by writers, and each may contain an element of truth.

Reading modern Scottish literature can tell us much about changing attitudes to alcohol in Scotland and the diverse experiences of its citizens who drink.

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