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“Dae Scotsmen Dream o ‘lectric Leids?” Robert Crawford’s Cyborg Scotland

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in  
English at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

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Bachelor of Arts in English, Virginia Commonwealth University May 2011

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Some <i>Assembly</i> Required.....	15
Programming the Scottish Brain.....	25
The Creature Lives.....	36
The Makar's Mark.....	53
Bibliography .....	59
Vita.....	65

## Abstract

### “DAE SCOTSMEN DREAM O ‘LECTRIC LEIDS?” ROBERT CRAWFORD’S CYBORG SCOTLAND

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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This thesis applies a Cybernetic interpretation to a selection of poetry by the Scottish Informationist poet Robert Crawford, drawn mostly from two collections: *A Scottish Assembly* (1990) and *Sharawaggi: Poems in Scots* (1990). Crawford is contextualized by observing the poetic influences of Robert Burns, John Davidson, and Hugh MacDiarmid, as well as the philosophical influence of George Elder Davie’s *The Democratic Intellect*. This paper argues that, in response to the *Two Cultures* hypothesis put forth by C. P. Snow and the widely-held belief that Scotland is irrevocably fractured, the shifting boundaries of the many disparate Scottish cultures are mediated by technologies of communication within *A Scottish Assembly*, updating both Scotland’s identity and its cultural canon not by merging these cultures into a single Universal Scot, but by holding them in tension—and *Sharawaggi* is observed as a means of grounding the languages and peoples of Scotland within the landscape.

## Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to examine a selection of Robert Crawford's poetry, mostly taken from the collections *A Scottish Assembly* and *Sharawaggi: Poems in Scots*. Through the lens of a Cybernetic reading, which is primarily concerned with "conceptualizing control, communication, and information as an integrated system" (Hayles 84) within interactions between human and technology, the following chapters will observe the relationships between the human, technological, and national/cultural presences in this selection of poetry in both English and Scots. In doing so, I hope to illustrate that Crawford sought not only to propose a patchwork model for a Scottish national identity, but also to create a microcosm-- a theoretical rough draft in *A Scottish Assembly*, and its helpful doppelganger *Sharawaggi*, that illustrates how the technologies of communication enable disparate cultures to unify without becoming uniform.

Between the failed 1979 Scottish Devolution Referendum and the eventual re-convening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, Scotland in the 80's and 90's was alive with nationalistic discourse (Houston 34-35). As with any potential cultural shift, the poetry and prose of the time speculated on how this new nation would take form; after all, opinions on what it meant to be Scottish were as numerous as there were Scots. Amidst the ruckus, a young Scottish poet named Robert Crawford began building a case for his own stance on a Scottish nation. Such an undertaking required him to re-examine the foundations of the nation's cultural identity and literary canon. There Crawford found an impermeable divide between the traditional Scottish

innovators of science and the “makars”<sup>1</sup> of cultural memory—a separation aptly described by C.P. Snow's lecture “The Two Cultures” as a dangerous polarization in thinking: “Literary intellectuals at one pole—at the other scientists, and as the most representative, the physical scientists. Between the two a gulf of mutual incomprehension—sometimes (particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding” (4).

This gap is only one among many to be cited as insurmountable obstacles to a coherent Scottish identity, but Crawford does not see these gaps as obstacles at all. In his two collections published within the same year: *A Scottish Assembly* and (co-authored with W.N. Herbert) *Sharawaggi: Poems in Scots*, Robert Crawford uses his synthetic vernacular to act as a Cybernetic network—a techno-organic interface between human and non-human—between the component parts of Scotland, creating a working model for a national identity that thrives on incongruity while allowing its various peoples, traditions, and histories to remain distinct.

### **Informationism and Other Influences**

Robert Crawford occasionally self-identifies as an “Informationist Poet.” Richard Price coined the term to describe a contemporary group of Scottish poets, including Crawford, himself, and several others who all attempted to address the divide between the literary and the scientific, but even he confessed that “Defining the Informationists is difficult” (“Approaching the Informationists” i). Price's description is of a hinged methodology that centers on the transmission of data, and on either side the approach of educating the reader or the criticism of contemporary uses of information.

They are, firstly, bearers of news: the information they make available in their poetry includes rather than necessarily opposes media news because part of their *raison d'etre* is to digest and transmit as many different types of data as they can.

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<sup>1</sup> A “Makar” is what it sounds like: a maker, a creator (DSL). When seen without a prefix it traditionally refers to authors, especially poets, but it can also refer to those who author laws and contracts. In a sense, a “Makar” is anyone who attempts to create something from thin air.



Little-known information, social history and all kinds of "underprivileged" facts, possibilities and ideas are recontextualised in their poetry; hierarchies are exposed. (i)

Informationism promises a hip, tech-savvy approach that seeks to update poetry and the usage of language in contemporary society. But this is less of a philosophy or ethos than it is a compositional approach—Price recommends approaching the Informationists in lieu of defining them. Robert Crawford takes a more academic approach to encompassing Informationism in his essay “The Human and the Computational,” citing several main influences including John Davidson and Hugh MacDiarmid (*Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science* 55). Of course, at the time of writing this, Crawford had benefited from over a decade of research and practice:

I have tried to relate this tradition to an earlier and continuing preoccupation with eclecticism, encyclopaedism, and the dissemination of information in Scottish culture which goes back at least to the Enlightenment, if not to the Reformation . . . [it is] associated with the polyphonic, polylingual nature of Scottish poetry over fifteen centuries, and with the plethora of cultural and often mutually aware value systems circulating in Scotland. (55)

This concern with information transfer and cataloguing echoes Price's hinged model of Informationism, reinforcing the necessity of education by calling upon Scotland's own eclectic makeup and cultural traditions.

Thematic and practical concerns with the transmission of information makes Informationist poetry an ideal subject for Cybernetic criticism—Robert Crawford doubly so, with his overt references to the original publication *Cybernetics* and frequent inclusion of communication technologies. Cybernetics is a trans-disciplinary method of inquiry which observes systems of information exchange/control, “what things *do*, how they do them and with the process within which they behave,” and by extension the delineation between self and other (Ascott 129). The Cybernetic critic’s sought-after “messages-in-circuit,” or active flows of

information, resist concrete definition in an “effervescent, continually variable form” that is “fundamentally interactive, or dialogic” (Nichols 631). A Cybernetic model is a collection of shifting interchanges and adaptive systems, positing an interconnected identity that is distributed and cumulative (cloudsourced) rather than singular.

Of the Informationists, or perhaps any contemporary poet, W.N. Herbert is the most closely connected to Robert Crawford. Since meeting in their postgraduate studies in Oxford (“Approaching the Informationists” vii) the two have collaborated on several books of poetry and criticism—as well as sneaking one-another into nearly every publication they edit.<sup>3</sup> In his criticism, Herbert describes Crawford's work as a “fiercely intelligent. . . positive affirmation of life” that pursues “the assembly of a Scots poetic language” and explores the conflict between emotion and technology (*Strong Words* 262); in turn, Crawford labels Herbert “the leading Scots-language poet of his generation,” and “consistently eccentric and highly intelligent”<sup>4</sup> (*Scotland's Books* 717-18). Both began their careers addressing similar themes of nationalism and self-identification within their work, extrapolating their own Synthetic Scots from their respective upbringings; though over time Crawford's focus widened to a more national spread of subject matter interspersed with criticism, while until recently Herbert focused most of his writing on Dundee and its eternal poet-laureate William McGonagall. Herbert's work is much more hectic, vulgar, and self-effacing than Crawford's, who sees Herbert's poetry as “risk-taking” and “sometimes careless” (*Scotland's Books* 718). Crawford's work in *Sharawaggi* is

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Herbert is included in *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science*, *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945*, and others. Crawford has enjoyed publication in *Strong Words*, *Gairfish*, and *Contraflow on the Super Highway* in return.

<sup>4</sup> Less professionally, Crawford has called Herbert's work “obscure laxative emission. . . running to an uncountable number of lines” (*Sharawaggi* 25), while Herbert describes Crawford as a “nidus o Glescae cock” (29).

undoubtedly influenced by Herbert, as Crawford's Scots verse is noticeably more adventurous and ambitious in the co-authored collection.

The Informationists are certainly not the only Scottish poets to publish in multiple languages: Tom Leonard's vernacular Scots reflects the speech of working-class Glaswegians, which Cairns Craig suggests has “come to play an increasingly decisive role in modern Scottish writing” (“Scotland and Hybridity” 235). Crawford describes the usage of “provincial vernacular” and form in Leonard's *Unrelated Incidents* as “a means of interrogating established structures of linguistic and cultural power” (*Devolving English Literature* 284). Indeed, Leonard himself corroborates this by stating in his introduction to his collection *Radical Renfrew*: “Any society is a society in conflict, and any anthology of a society's poetry that does not reflect this, is a lie” (*Strong Words* 195). Tom Leonard views vernacular language as a means to bridge the gap between the poetry of the classroom and the poetry of everyday conversation; a sentiment we will explore in Chapter 4. But Leonard's is a different breed of Scots than Crawford's—while Crawford plumbs dictionaries for Scots expressions referencing traditional superstitions or nautical terms, Leonard's research would more likely take place on the bus or at a local pub. Kathleen Jamie also creates her own brand of Scots by intermingling with other traditions—her collection *The Autonomous Region* parallels Tibet and Scotland's cultural and political situations by incorporating Tibetan vocabulary (*Scotland's Books* 720). Jamie's *Jizzen* also creates a web of interlocking poems much like *A Scottish Assembly*, described by Christopher Whyte as “a mesh of connecting and cohering stories [that] gives an assertive, even a serene undertow to Jamie's poetry” (*Modern Scottish Poetry* 216). Crawford seems to agree, as he has singled her out as the greatest female Scottish poet of the 20th century (*Scotland's Books* 721).

Despite his participation in a colorful discourse about the existence of a national language, Robert Crawford largely abandoned writing in Scots after *Sharawaggi*, usually confining it to small projects like *Simonides*<sup>5</sup> or an occasional short piece in his collections. Then again, poetry has never been Crawford's only form of expression as his prolific bibliography is overflowing with critical prose and editorial work, representing a monumental amount of research and the motivation to communicate it to others—as early as 1994, Richard Price observes that Crawford is the most established Informationist when it comes to participating in the British publishing infrastructure (“Approaching the Informationists” vi). Crawford has taken the Informationist credo quite seriously, but he is also actively pursuing a mission that began with *A Scottish Assembly*: to supplement and reorganize the Scottish cultural canon. The various editorial credits to his name, *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse* and *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945* for instance, make conscious efforts to represent the breadth of Scottish poetic tradition, and the contents pursue an agenda of questioning the boundaries of Scottish identity—*Devolving English Literature*'s very title references the process of untangling Scottish innovations and ideas from those of the English to delineate a truly Scottish heritage.

### **Robert Burns**

Since Crawford's poetry directly engages its multifaceted heritage, it is useful (if not compulsory) to look back at how his methodology developed from his influences and cultural history. As far back as the 1707 Acts of Union which incorporated Scotland into Britain, Scotland has been culturally conflicted. Through English standardization and cultural pressure,

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<sup>5</sup> A series of photographs paired with poems in Scots, *Simonides* is Crawford's latest in a series of creative collaborations—this time with photographer Norman McBeath.

the languages of Scots and Gaelic were gradually subjugated and became atrophied from disuse. This was not purely a result of outside influence, though, as the Lowland Scots, especially those in Glasgow and Edinburgh, were complicit with this process (“Suburbs of Dissent”). Scots maintained a cultural presence in ballads and songs thanks especially to the work of Robert Burns, a Scottish poet who not only composed works in Scots, but transcribed many of the ballads passed down purely through oral tradition (*The Bard* 18). Burns's poetry is filled with celebrations of Scottishness through the invocation of folk tales, colloquialisms, and historical figures that echoed through cultural memory, all the while preserving the vernacular in which they were communicated. Widely regarded as a progenitor of the Romantic movement and dubbed by some “the master poet of democracy,” Burns is the face of Scotland both within and abroad (1). Composing or discussing Scottish Poetry often involves responding to the legacy of Robert Burns, and the poetry of Robert Crawford is no different in that respect.

### **John Davidson**

Although he wrote some years after Burns, John Davidson serves as the point of inception for the influences on Robert Crawford's work on the compositional level. His usage of particular, scientific terminology reminds us of Crawford, but his view of technology and scientific development could not be more at odds. Davidson wrote in a time when industrial progress seemed to be swallowing Britain piece by piece: “. . . the whetted fangs of change/ Daily devour the old demesne” (“A Northern Suburb” 5-6). Change is a centralized threat here, a singular presence that must often be resisted. But as the poem develops, change behaves more like an infection as it spreads ever outward:

In gaudy yellow brick and red,  
With rooting pipes, like creepers rank,  
The shoddy terraces o'erspread  
Meadow, and garth, and daisied bank. (9-11)

The change spreads over the countryside in a mockery of the nature that it perverts, rooting into the ground to reproduce and expand exponentially. In contrast to the opening line, “Nature selects the longest way,” the influence of change feels unnatural and premature (1).

Davidson's apocalyptic view of progress followed him to England, where his studies sculpted his writing into what Crawford credits as the first instance of Informationist poetry (*Scotland's Books* 523). “The Crystal Palace” is an examination of one of England's industrial marvels: a tremendous, glass dome housing a multitude of shops and restaurants. Davidson's portrayal is less than flattering, describing an “Immense crustacean's gannoid skeleton” that is more of a shed than a palace (17-21). Contained within are hellish contraptions, “volatile machinery best, and most/ Magnific, rotary engine, meant/ For penitence and prayer combined” (8-10). The very pronunciation of these words portrays the unearthly products of science, as he hints with the first lines: “Contraption, —that's the bizarre, proper slang,/ Eclectic word” (1-2). Davidson uses his ungainly, unfamiliar vocabulary to make The Crystal Palace an alien place, transforming a tourist attraction into a nightmare factory that ultimately devours its visitors.

Davidson's poetry sounds much more explicitly English than the dialect-driven song of Burns. John Sloan's literary biography of John Davidson notes:

Though he was himself a lover of Burns, Davidson considered the use of low Burnsian Scots dialect in poetry affected and hackneyed. In his ironic monologue ‘Ayrshire Jock’<sup>7</sup> . . . his semi-intoxicated and humourously self-revealing speaker mocks the ‘mongrel Scots’ of Burns’s imitators, choosing instead to write his poems ‘in English, catching tones/ From Shelley and his great successors’ (*John Davidson* 31-32)

Like many other Scottish poets of the time, Davidson eschews colloquial Scots in favor of an English canon of influences. This bias shows through particularly in his revision of Robert

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<sup>7</sup> The title of “Ayrshire Jock” is itself most likely a reference to a popular review of Burns by Henry Machenzy, where he titles Burns “An Ayrshire Ploughman” (see *Copia Verborum*).

Burns's "Twa Dogs," corrected to "Two Dogs," in which the former argument between two humorous talking dogs is shifted into an over-written anecdote about the speaker playing with dogs on a beach.<sup>8</sup> Though his treatment of the mutt sounds vaguely classist, Davidson does preserve the central message of "Twa Dogs": wealth and class do not determine happiness. It is rather amusing that Davidson wrote this partially from the perspective of the smarter, purebred dog, whereas the Burns version privileged the mutt's dialog—Davidson tried unsuccessfully to find happiness in London among the intellectual elite. John Sloan believes there might be a biographical basis for this within Davidson's upbringing: "Greenock provided John with a network of conflicting, imaginative allegiances that were to remain with him all his life" (7). Davidson's hometown can be seen as a metaphor for his conflicted national identity—an active port with a rapidly-expanding industry that fueled English imperialism while slowly overtaking Scottish cultural landmarks.

### **Hugh MacDiarmid**

John Davidson took his own life in a period of destitution and obscurity, but he left a permanent mark on the young Christopher Grieve. Later writing under the notorious pseudonym Hugh MacDiarmid, Grieve honored Davidson in a poem titled "Of John Davidson" that described his death as more significant than the death of his own father, the memory "A bullet-hole through a great scene's beauty,/ God through the wrong end of a telescope" (7-8). MacDiarmid would go on to continue using Davidson's brand of specialized diction, and use the action of discovering new vocabulary to jump-start the very Scots poetry that Davidson was avoiding in the first place.

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<sup>8</sup> Compare Burns's "The tither was a ploughman's collie,/ A rhyming, ranting, raving billie" (23-24) to Davidson's "With tapering muzzle, rising brow, strong jaw--/ A terrier to the tail's expressive tip,/ Magnetic, nimble, endlessly alert" (4-6). Davidson has stripped the music and colloquialisms to deliver something precise and expository.

Hugh MacDiarmid's vision of Scots and Scotland had little room for Robert Burns. Much like John Davidson, MacDiarmid held reservations about Burns and especially his followers; however, this was less from a compositional standpoint than it was about the perceived Scottish literary canon and its continued (mis)interpretation:

MacDiarmid, for example, was probably right in the justification which underlay his slogan— 'Not Burns—Dunbar!' It was the calculated misunderstanding of Burns which irritated MacDiarmid, and which, in its turn, was used to denigrate other kinds of poetry. (Dunn xli)

MacDiarmid wished to leave behind the kitschy tradition of Highland ballads and move forward with a savvy, modern Scots. This modern Scotland required a base from which to be built, which constantly plagued MacDiarmid as a man who seemed to settle on a political ideology only long enough to be ejected from its party (xxii). Though MacDiarmid would be loathe to admit it, he was an archetypal doubled Scot— he even went by two different names. This conflict was present not only in his life, but his work as well:

MacDiarmid's politics and his poetic theory were completely inseparable, as they both depended on a sense of national unity through cultural cohesion. His shifting idea of Scotland drove him to both political and poetic extremes. "On a Raised Beach" creates an impregnable wall of particular, scientific description in English that illustrates MacDiarmid's almost helpless fascination with the rampart of English language standardization: the dictionary itself. (Hart 58)

Even more so than many of his Scots poems, "On a Raised Beach" attempts to lay standardized language bare and expose it as an abstraction by utilizing particular terminology far outside our cultural knowledge, but mostly within the bounds of English.<sup>9</sup> MacDiarmid composed poetry alongside dictionaries and encyclopedias to the point that many of his lines and poems stem from the "accidental contiguity of unusual words on the pages" as Hart puts it (10). This approach

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<sup>9</sup> See Chapter Three for some analysis of "On a Raised Beach." In the meantime, here is a selection: "Cream-coloured caen-stone, chatoyant pieces, / Celadon and corbeau, bistre and beige, / Glaucous, hoar, enfouldered, cyathiform, / Making mere faculae of the sun and moon (4-7).



allowed him to revive Scots into the synthetic vernacular needed to alienate his English-speaking readers from their native language. Roderick Watson sees this as an integral property of Scots itself: “the 'strangeness' of Scots can also be seen as *ostranenie*, that literary defamiliarization which foregrounds the oddness of all language use and casts deconstructive doubt on the possibility of ever achieving any full or final meaning” (178). Thrusting readers into uncertainty, MacDiarmid sought to create a new breed of language founded in the philosophy of Modernism.

MacDiarmid's linguistic trickery may initially look like intellectual grandstanding. Indeed, a quick look through his biography shows an abrasive man who found little consistency in his social life. The speaker of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* can clue us into why that may be:

It's hard wark haud'n by a thocht worth haen  
And harder speakin't, and no for ilka man;  
Maist Thocht's like whisky - a thoosan under proof,  
And a sair price is pitten on't even than.<sup>10</sup> (105-108)

These first two lines express the eternal struggle of the poet: quality of thought is one thing, but successfully communicating intent is the real challenge. At the end of the second line is where we see the transition into a more elitist statement: not every man can articulate thoughts worth hearing. But it is most thought that is under proof, not most men. The Drunk Man's lament is that of someone who wishes that others would match the effort he puts forward, and for that he looks to his readers.

The uncertainty of a new reader approaching MacDiarmid's poetry is not meant to exclude; it is an invitation to engage MacDiarmid in discourse by researching its rich vocabulary. The ideal reader for "On a Raised Beach" is a curious onlooker who crosses the gap in

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<sup>10</sup> In English: “It's hard work holding by a thought worth having/ And harder speaking it, and not for any/every man; / Most Thought's like whiskey—a thousand under proof./ And a sore price is put on it even then.

understanding by undergoing the same process of exploration that helped MacDiarmid compose the poem, not a geologist capable of recalling the specific terminology used to describe the rocky shore. By isolating the reader from his or her own language, MacDiarmid forces one to invest in the poem and engage in research, placing them mentally in a state of curiosity and (at the time of composition, at least) physically within a center of learning. Where else could one decode these poems but at a library, or in a personal dictionary/encyclopedia? Hugh MacDiarmid sought to educate and elevate his readers so that they might gain the necessary tools to understand him, arriving at his perceived level of investment and sincerity. His works in both Scots and English share a very particular trait: they expect a lot from the reader.

### **Robert Crawford**

As Davidson left a mark upon Hugh MacDiarmid, so MacDiarmid affected Robert Crawford. Having been weaned on the poetry of Wordsworth and Tennyson, as well as “being force-fed on Burns, you know, as sometimes happens in Scotland,” Robert Crawford's childhood fascination with T.S. Eliot ultimately lead him to compose his own poetry (Dósa 243). Crawford then received tutoring from Edwin Morgan (a Glasgow University professor at the time) during his Graduate studies at Oxford, who gave him one of his six copies of Hugh MacDiarmid's collected poems (244). Crawford described this event as “a very exciting, almost revelatory, experience . . . I loved both the MacDiarmid of these beautiful early synthetic Scots lyrics and the later scientific and off-scientific long poems” (244-245). Crawford took the idea of a synthetic vernacular and utilized it both in his English and Scots poems, employing scientific— as well as international— vocabulary throughout his work.

Following the pattern of his forerunners, Robert Crawford expanded MacDiarmid's method into new territory while leaving some aspects behind. MacDiarmid worked hard to wipe

away the current Scottish canon and begin anew, following the motto he coined for *The Scottish Chapbook*: “Not traditions, precedents!” (Hart 54). Crawford spares the proverbial baby Burns by reading against its usual trademarked nationalism.<sup>11</sup> But to align himself solely with the canon would restrain the forward-thinking progress of MacDiarmid, leaving him in something akin to Davidson's contrarian view of change.

Crawford found a middle-ground within the work of George Davie, a philosopher who advocated for widespread reform to education within Scotland. In his book *The Democratic Intellect* (1962), Davie does not look to the future for a model, but rather into Scotland's own past. After all, it was a Scottish university that combined aesthetics, metaphysics, and contemporary literature with Classics education at a time when English as a field of literary study was not only unheard of, but offensive to English universities (Davie 206). This approach did not limit itself to the humanities; even a field as apparently straight-forward as mathematics saw conflict, as Scottish universities fought to continue teaching the metaphysics of Geometry that informed Hellenistic logic and rhetoric rather than the rote, clinical calculations of algebra (127-128). Robert Crawford took great influence from Davie: in a 1988 book review of Davie's follow-up book, *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect*, Crawford claims:

[the book] contains in embryonic form a theory of Scottish culture which, when developed, has the power to radically reshape English Studies and to make sense of post-Enlightenment Scottish literature by tying it into the wider Scottish cultural tradition that produced thinkers like Hume and Smith, as well as later technological achievements such as the telephone and television. (“Ecclefechan and the Stars” n.p.)

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<sup>11</sup> Even as early as the publication of both *A Scottish Assembly* and *Sharawaggi*, Crawford's direct engagements with Burns are careful not to mix the man with the legend. Burns's presence in “Burns Ayont Auld Reekie” and “The Clerk Maxwell Country” are that of a disembodied energy or impulse, whereas his part in “The Dalswinton Enlightenment” is mostly physical. Only within the realm of parody does Crawford approach Burns's Scottish cultural significance, as we can see in “Alba Einstein” later in this essay. Crawford has continued this approach to Burns in his well-received biography *The Bard* (2009).

This return to a generalist point of view opens the way for Robert Crawford to begin constructing an interdisciplinary pantheon of Scottish figures within his poetry. Rather than create a new literary canon, Crawford attempts to revivify the existing one by reuniting it with other Scottish forms of expression. Crawford makes the case that separating the sciences from the humanities leads us to a narrow view of Scottish culture. By invoking *The Democratic Intellect*, he gives a rationale not only for his inclusion of Scottish inventors, engineers, and scientists within *A Scottish Assembly*, but also for the presence of scientific language within both collections he released in 1990. Using the exploratory Scots poetry of *Sharawaggi* as a sort of biological and theoretical substrate, *A Scottish Assembly* claims that Scotland can become—and in some ways already is—unified in a cybernetically-bound patchwork mechanism of disparate cultures and people working towards similar ends.

The next two chapters will study how Crawford uses technologies in conjunction with people and cultures within his poetry; the subsequent chapters will illustrate the patchwork model's function and contextualize the finished model on both an international and critical level.

### Some Assembly Required

*A Scottish Assembly* begins a dialog on technology before the reader even opens the book. “Assembly” can be taken in several ways: collecting for a meeting, gathering troops, an assembled machine or its constituent parts, a congregation; but most importantly the legislative body *called* the Scottish Assembly, which sought to establish home rule in Scotland (Oxford English Dictionary). Each meaning rings true in *A Scottish Assembly*, but the assembly of mechanical parts constructs a link between the people of Scotland and technology by making them component parts of a larger mechanism. For clarification's sake, “technology” and “science” are used somewhat interchangeably in this essay—Crawford covers this succinctly in his collaborative hybrid criticism/poetry collection, *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science*:

It might be said that what I tend to use here is technology rather than science, but I have little interest in differentiating between the two; they are surely bound together, as the technology of the printing press was bound up with the scientific breakthroughs of an earlier period. (81)

Both terms stand for human progression in its understanding of, and its ability to act upon, the world around itself.

“Opera” is the first poem in *A Scottish Assembly*, and the speaker begins the collection with an imperative statement commanding the reader to “throw all your stagey chandeliers in wheelbarrows” and join him at his mother's to celebrate her sewing machine (1). She is not sewing so much as she is “pedalling/ Iambs on an antique metal footplate” (3-4). While her foot

works the footplate, the sewing machine's needle drives the thread in and out of the fabric to create stitching in the form of sine waves—of iambic meter. These threads are poems in themselves, as the speaker says in his final line, “I went to work at school, wearing her songs” (14). Nor are these created by something commonplace, but by an “antique” that is “Powering the needle through its regular lines” (5). This machine is a “powerful instrument,” but still a domestic device made from “Mass-produced polished wood and metal” (10-11). By creating this mythic representation of his mother's craft, he illustrates that even the most mundane machine can be used to produce something poetic, and that technology can itself be part of the home.

Other critics have engaged this aspect of the poem. William Wootten, in his essay “On Robert Crawford and David Kinloch” for the *PN Review*, casts “Opera” as “a self-consciously Scottish poem with plenty of praise for the smart, nimble and the industrious” in spite of “a touch of the Walt Whitmans.” Wootten then segues into a comparison with Seamus Heaney's “Digging” that begins with good intentions, but he ends up attacking Crawford's more domestic portrait of his parents by pointing out that Crawford's father was a banker, and that compared to Heaney's father, “It is hard to believe that Crawford's mother's work at her sewing machine presented a comparable difficulty.” Wootten's comparison rides on Heaney's poem embodying “a true problem” in the discrepancy between Heaney's writing and his father's labor, which is most certainly present. Heaney expresses guilt at his choice of profession as he wishes to live up to the men in his family, regretting that “I've no spade to follow men like them” (28). But the comparison so busies itself comparing the two poets' upbringings that it fails to see the distinction between “Opera” and “Digging”: the speaker in “Opera” makes no attempt to legitimize his own craft against that of his parents, only to celebrate an oral tradition of domestic folklore through his mother. While Wootten's argument sounds classist, it does raise a good

question about Crawford's intentions behind starting the collection with a poem about his mother's home-made clothes. Wootten rightfully observes that Crawford has a “preconceived certainty or purpose” and that he takes any chance he can get to make a point, so looking closely at the poet’s agenda can provide us with a cast-on point to begin approaching the other poems.

The connection between the Scottish oral tradition of song and the intimacy of the home is a classical one<sup>12</sup> but there is another presence in “Opera”— the “S I N G E R” (10). Wootten deems the poem “a round of applause to Mum and all the hard work she does,” but this is actually misconstruing the beginning of the poem. Crawford tells us to “celebrate my mother's sewing-machine/ *And her*” (2-3, emphasis mine). It is the sewing machine that we are celebrating, whereas his mother is placed a line below the machine and physically “beneath an eighty-watt bulb” (3). Crawford also creates some moments of uncertainty through the use of line breaks. The break between “sewing-machine/ *And her*” makes it uncertain whether the speaker is speaking of them as one via hendiadys (machine and her) or as separate entities (machine, and her). Then we have the word “pedalling,” preceded by a comma that separates it from its antecedent which leaves the reader to wonder who is doing the pedaling (3). The final line break also plays with ambiguous readings:

And shone at night; and then each morning after  
I went to work at school, wearing her songs. (13-14)

Depending on how heavily the reader weighs the line break, the line reads as either a temporal transition that focuses on the speaker going to school ([it] shone at night; and then *each morning after*/ I went to work at school, wearing her songs) or as a continued focus on the sewing machine ([it] shone at night; *and then each morning after I went to work* at school, wearing her

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<sup>12</sup> Like many other Scottish children throughout the years, Robert Burns learned heaps of songs, tunes, and colloquialisms, both in Gaelic and Scots, from his mother and grandmother (*The Bard*, 17-18).

songs). These lines are a hinging point between ending on the sentimentality of the speaker proudly going off to school in his mother's works, and ending on the diligence of the sewing machine. Both instances of syntactical ambiguity leave them in a state of flux—either meaning is valid, and both take the poem in different directions.

That is, unless we find a middle ground. Approaching this from a Cybernetic<sup>13</sup> perspective provides us with an ample explanation: the speaker is approaching the memory of the SINGER in particular, so his mother exists within the poem as a component of the machine. In her essay “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway suggests that control strategies in Cybernetics, or the relationships between components, “concentrate on boundary conditions and interfaces, on rates of flow across boundaries – and not on the integrity of natural objects” (163). The speaker incorporates his mother into the SINGER by focusing on her function/presence in relation to the sewing machine, or other instances of technology such as the light bulb, which reduces her to a set of repetitive motions and disembodied limbs that serve to power the machine:

. . . I'd watch  
her hands and feet in unison, or read  
Between her calves the wrought-iron letters:  
S I N G E R. (“Opera” 7-10)

Her extremities are coordinated with clockwork efficiency, synchronized with the machine's function as she repurposes herself as an engine. The sewing machine even receives a name that suggests it is the source of these songs (and a play on the title, making it an Opera Singer) unlike the mother whose moniker exists purely as a relative term to the speaker.

Such a view of a cybernetic interaction—that the human body is obsolete, and that we are nothing more than a source of power for our machines—is a visceral horror that has spawned

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<sup>13</sup> Broadly, “the field of control and communication theory, whether in the machine or in the animal” (Wiener 11).



entire subgenres of science fiction. Thankfully, Crawford has a more optimistic view on this. The speaker's mother interfaces with the SINGER and lends her parts to its mechanical function, but the speaker is still "wearing her songs" (14). Much like Haraway, Katherine Hayles characterizes cybernetic interactions like these as "integrated systems" that are "constituted by flows of information," making the ownership of parts irrelevant (84). But Hayles invokes an argument made by Gregory Bateson, who asked whether a blind man's cane counted as a sensory organ. In this case, Hayles suggests that cane and man join in a single system, but such an act of unification doesn't annihilate the man's identity, nor that of the cane. In "Opera," the mother retains an identity through this interaction by extending her boundaries through the machine to project a modified, but authentic voice. This also serves to introduce two essential distinctions to this reading:

1. Language is a technology. Much like mathematics and music, language is an abstract system of interaction, perception, and communication.
2. Humans are techno-genetic—that is, the technology that we develop in turn develops us.

"The Clerk Maxwell Country" continues these interactions between technology and humanity with its dedication to the philosopher George Davie (*A Scottish Assembly* 17). Like many other poems in this collection, Robert Crawford looks to Scotland's history for figures that exemplify his beliefs. But Crawford does not need to reach decades into the past in this case, as George Davie argued for an education that approached science from a liberal arts perspective (Broadie n.p.). Davie's goal was to re-emphasize the Scottish tradition of a generalist education, and to encourage a more humanistic approach to the hard sciences by arming future scientists with the ability to think outside the scientific method. Even though this is nothing more than a

dedication, George Davie's connection with the poem's content and the book as a whole demands the same consideration as the title itself.

James Clerk Maxwell, on the other hand, *is* an historical figure and also worth due consideration. A scientist who revolutionized the way we look at electricity and magnetic fields (among many other pursuits), he was also an avid lover of poetry and wrote quite a bit himself (Harman n.p.). Crawford connects this to his empirical work with a line break and a shameless pun:

. . . his desklight  
Burns through storms.

The line break here invokes Robert Burns, whom Maxwell was very fond of.<sup>14</sup> But it also suggests that his poetry may have somehow been involved—the desklight shining in the darkness is quite the archetypal image of both academic and author, Burns acts as metonymy for poetry, and the storms are plainly a representation of his electromagnetic research. Not only is Maxwell creating verse in his spare time, but through his scientific work as well via metaphor, which is reminiscent of the SINGER in “Opera.”

Throughout “The Clerk Maxwell County” we find the storm of science and its potential for destruction. Scientific progress is often represented in Crawford's poems by light or electricity, such as in “Talkies” where the speaker observes “this technology crackling over California/ Eagerly, far out of sight” (21-22). Meanwhile, in the “Clerk Maxwell County” science is busy downing a tree, upsetting “the gardener's ordered symmetry” (8-9). The presence of the gardener has no real bearing on the rest of the poem unless we take this as metaphor, at which point it becomes an obvious allusion to God's Eden. After all, Maxwell's research disrupts

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<sup>14</sup> While Clerk Maxwell was certainly a great physicist, his parody of Burns's “Comin thro' the Rye” makes it clear he made the right decision in his career choice far, far away from any publisher of poetry (Maxwell).

the heretofore held view of the universe's mysterious, unseen happenings by giving them a definite source—which unbalances a Christian worldview and skews God’s orderly clockwork universe, creating a foothold for Einstein to come “trampling through that gap” to upset things even further (10). Bringing God directly into the poem is a weighty decision, but Clerk Maxwell was a devout Christian and an elder in the Church of Scotland. Maxwell was a scientist who held a religious ideology, but could reconcile his research with its disruptive effect on his own worldview (Harman n.p.). Intermixed between the two was his poetry. By no means is he an exemplar of Crawford’s argument, but he serves as a remarkably close reckoning point.

“Cybernetics” returns to the discussion “Storming through thick-walled cottages” and whistling “Auld Lang Syne,” yet another Burns reference to solidify its Scottish origins (3-4). But this isn't done lightly. Norbert Wiener, who wrote *Cybernetics* and functionally coined the theoretical approach, stated in his forward:

We have decided to call the entire field of control and communication theory, whether in the machine or in the animal, by the name *Cybernetics* . . . In choosing this term, we wish to recognize that the first significant paper on feedback mechanisms is an article on governors, which was published by Clerk Maxwell in 1868 (11)

Clerk Maxwell proves doubly significant to Crawford's poetry, as he not only revolutionized the study of electromagnetism *and* paved the way for Einstein's work in physics, but also helped kick-start a field of research that would later coalesce into Cybernetics.

Much as Cybernetics itself progressed from a simple question of interfacing into the possibility of self-deterministic systems, Crawford segues into an instance of something purely mechanical in “The Dalswinton Enlightenment.” The name is well-earned, as the steamship served to revolutionize travel by freeing ships from the need for external power— only requiring fuel to propel itself— to make something of a self-sufficient being in comparison. Donna Haraway claims that the distinction between organism and machines has sprung quite a few leaks

over time as devices have become more self-sufficient—that the dualistic definition deemed the mechanical “not man, an author to himself, but only a caricature” (152). Yet in “The Dalswinton Enlightenment” the world’s first steamship, half prototype and half progenitor for all those steam-powered vessels that follow it, is “swanning across Dalswinton Loch,” not sailing or drifting (2). The steamship’s “churning paddles articulated the loch/ In triumphant metre,” establishing intent behind the ship’s rhythmic articulations (10-11). The ship itself sings in mechanical verse much like the SINGER in “Opera,” though the vessel in “The Dalswinton Enlightenment” is both work and author at once, making a hard distinction between mechanism and organism less and less clear. Its “triumph” seems to be both in its sizable accomplishment and its shamelessness, as it is—by the virtue of being a mechanical device—unaware of the locals who jeer “*Almost* as if they were watching a ship of fools,” their attempts at denigration hardly worth the speaker’s time (12, emphasis mine).

The ship isn’t the only presence in the poem, though. Alexander Nasmyth is both landscape artist and, later, an engineer. It is Nasmyth who will, according to the poem, “later invent/ The compression rivet, and work out the axial arrangement/ Between propeller and engine” (5-7). Alexander Nasmyth actually worked under Patrick Miller doing drafting and other forms of work in exchange for later funding for his education (Cooksey n.p.). Both drafting and art utilize similar skill-sets, though in fairly different ways. Alexander Nasmyth’s ability to walk the line between creative painting and practical representation afforded him the chance to approach his professional work from a non-linear perspective, which Crawford argues is essential in scientific innovation:

It is not just that individual scientists such from Clerk Maxwell to Einstein and Wiener may have enjoyed poetry—its patternings and imaginative investigations—but that science itself is often underwritten by the formulations and imaginative structures developed and articulated by poets. (*Contemporary Poetry* 20)

This unification of technology and art in one man parallels the steamship itself—an “imaginative investigation” of locomotive systems. Alexander Nasmyth also painted the famous portrait of Robert Burns, which explains his presence at this technological exhibition— after which Burns “will write about the light/ Of science dawning over Europe,” acting as an amanuensis for the ship itself in an inversion of technology's usual status as mediator (“The Dalswinton Enlightenment” 7-8). By taking on this reverse role, Burns will allow the steamship's voice to be heard just as well as his own.

Robert Crawford has limits to his optimism, and seems to recognize that even the most forward-looking technology can be detrimental. The titular poem of his second collection, *Talkies*, recalls the crisis silent film actors experienced with the advent of sound. Crawford takes on the persona of an actress who was less than fortunate. The camera has become discerning and exclusive; it is not the crowds that shun the actors with “a foreign accent” or an odd voice, it is that “The microphone doesn't like you” (9). It is the technology itself that disagrees with the actress in question. This line's isolation, and its decisive period and line break after the word “you,” creates a sense of hostility and ostracism that places the microphone in opposition with the reader. Silent film stars are idolized and sexualized with “Ringlets, a balletic flow of knees” and “camera-loving, soundless lips” (4, 7).

Such grace fades as the poem progresses into the age of talkies; that is, film with sound. Now our stand-in for the old days, the mysterious “she,” sits at a “wrought-iron table” (13). “Wrought” is a word with plenty of phonetic weight, with its abrupt “t” and long, rhotic growl that receives an echo in the following “iron.” The evoked image is of a crude, metallic table at which an actress sits as she watches the progression of “the studio/ A hanger, a camp, a silo” (14-15). Her former workplace has turned into something mechanical and weaponized, for the

express purpose of creating and storing harmful artifice. To her it certainly is, as she is being left behind—a “Nostalgia executive” (19). But the language of the last two lines shifts into a more hopeful, forward-looking tone as the “crackling” technology proceeds “Eagerly, far out of sight” (22). This force looks to be one of positive change that will pull the world forward despite her troubles.

Robert Crawford's skepticism attenuates the starry-eyed futurism that threatens to distort *A Scottish Assembly* from time to time, and the collection boasts several poems that serve to muffle his more lofty pronouncements. But even in these worst-case scenarios we find an admiration for the crackling energy of change; the very impulse that Davidson resisted, in both his imagery and stoic attachments to the English literary canon, for its destructive tension with human society. Crawford does not fall prey to the same fallacy of absolutes—that uncertainty is antithetical to happiness or progress. Instead we have the eager energy from “Talkies” and wondrous discoveries of *A Scottish Assembly*, which celebrate human achievement alongside the legacy of scientific breakthroughs that came as a result.

## Programming the Scottish Brain

Much as *A Scottish Assembly* links technology with humanity, it also tries to join technology with the cultural conception of Scotland through its history and language. Transposing historical figures and scientific terminology, Robert Crawford assembles a Scotland that balances between the past and present on the edge of possibility. In doing this, Crawford is responding to both Hugh MacDiarmid and John Davidson: Davidson's technophobia held him in the past and present, while MacDiarmid wished to rewrite Scotland's history and create a new pantheon of Universal Scots. Crawford has recognized the strength in Scotland's innovative tradition and seeks to incorporate it into the national identity. In many of his poems Crawford uses the landscape to represent Scotland's culture and history, whereas technology itself can be viewed as the future, or change itself as seen in John Davidson's work.

Reconciling technology with Scotland's cultural history proves difficult, as Scotland is home to some of the greatest monuments to the destructive potential of industry. "Inner Glasgow" directs us towards a modern day Glasgow that has been rebranded to romanticize its prior industrial collapse:

The quays have altered, liners replaced by jasmine;  
Where docks are cultivated, hard nostalgia  
Steam-rivets us to ghosts we love, in murals  
Where everybody looks the same and sings  
Of oppression ("Inner Glasgow," 4-8)

The once-neglected quays, or loading platforms, have been repurposed for growing flowers to pretty them up. The Glasgow docks are no longer staffed or worked, but cultivated like a topiary. The only unaltered remnants of its history are the old propaganda murals that continue their

former purpose of misrepresenting the present by manufacturing nostalgia—the individuals reduced to a uniform mob of the ideal Glaswegian Industrial Worker at the pub after a day at the foundry. The speaker jars us from this illusory Glasgow by slowing down our progress through the poem, and builds tension with a comma-studded line ending in an expletive: “Of oppression, smokes, drinks lager, shouts out 'fuck'./ Shops sell us” (8-9). The admission of commodification in such a powerful word, followed immediately by a period and line break, insures that the reader’s slow progress through the semicolon-studded Glasgow of the past will halt right on the axis of his temporal transition.<sup>15</sup> The speaker keeps the reader bogged down in the following lines with a string of multisyllabic words: “Entrepreneurs' industrial/ Museums postcard grime; we're pseudo-Griersonned” (9-10). The prevalence of 'e,' 'u,' and 'r' gives the line a slogging, dragged-out sound that leads the reader to a gradual stop just in time for Crawford's next historical reference.

John Grierson pioneered the documentary by meshing together science and media, so his presence in *A Scottish Assembly* should come as no surprise. But he also studied the psychology of media exploitation—more specifically the tabloid press (Aitken n.p.). In a way, this further expands on his notion of being documented: the speaker and his fellow Glaswegians are not just being observed and recorded, but sensationalized and marketed as a commodity. The grime is featured on the postcard, not Glasgow. This poem sees nationalism as a marketable commodity “steam-riveted” to the Average Scotsman by murals and collectible postcards (6). Glasgow has become upscale, but its image has yet to catch up and remains ephemeral—the “ghosts we love.” These ghosts, of laborers and hard-drinking men, are inseparable from those who were raised on

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<sup>15</sup> This will not be the only time that line structure will act as temporal or spatial syntax, which we will see later in “The Saltcoats Structuralists” and many of his Scots poems. Though not present in all of his poems, Crawford shows great awareness of the eye’s movement through a piece—no doubt a bit of an influence from Edwin Morgan’s concrete poetry.



a diet of false nostalgia: “You don't leave me, I/ do not leave you” (13-14). The slight difference in structure parallels the past's contraction with the proper enunciation of “I/ Do not leave you.” This creates suspense by delaying the “Do not” to the next line, emphasizing the negative by placing it in front.

Crawford often references Scottish pioneers of science to argue for a new idea of Scottish-ness, but he also indulges in the Scottish pastime of ironic, national self-effacement with some of these scientists. “Sir David Brewster Invents the Kaleidoscope” invokes the name of a proud Scottish innovator known for his work in optics, but more so for his invention of the kaleidoscope (Morrison-Low n.p.). With his invention, Brewster “clears the atmosphere . . . into dense constellations that revolve/ At a hand's turn,” emboldening the device and its creator with a sense of power and clarity (“Sir David Brewster” 1-3). It is a tool that attracts all of Europe, even Lord Byron's<sup>16</sup> “starry-eyed” admiration (4). Baudelaire comments on its unique powers to make us re-examine the universe, which sends the speaker into a fit of fanciful description:

Brilliant and shifty, a fantastic model  
Of how the real will open up, the micro-  
Particular, the split, then the expanding  
Universe that spills out silent stars  
Light years from Scotland. (5-10)

This stance sounds reminiscent of Victorian optimism about scientific progress—a sense of wonder and curiosity later made clinical by the wedge driven between the artistic and scientific. It shows hope that there is a frontier awaiting us just beyond the lenses of our eyes, and that another world of transcendent beauty is just within reach. Not only does this device allow one to render the distant universe, it is also capable of modeling the microscopic down to the atomic

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that, despite Crawford's line “From Aberdeen, Lord Byron,” Byron was not actually *in* Aberdeen when this would have taken place, as Byron fled to Europe a year prior and never returned-- alive, anyway (McGann n.p.). This seems more of a weighing-in on the continuing debate over Lord Byron's nationality: although the Byron family title was located in England, Lord Byron spent much of his childhood in Aberdeen.

level. The wide berth of examination, from light years to micrometers, promises omniscience. The speaker dashes this hope with the three words that follow: "It's a toy" (10). All that mysterious power subverts itself not through outside criticism or lack of demand, but through the very nature of the kaleidoscope.

Baudelaire's observation, that the kaleidoscope is an emblem of modern art, gives us a base to observe this self-defeating turn. We can look at the figure of the magic lantern in Proust for a good comparison—a device with the singular purpose of illusion. But the kaleidoscope differs from most other optical toys in that its images are only identifiable by their similarities of color. Even then, the refraction can warp these colors by making the smallest presence overblown and misrepresented. The kaleidoscope utterly annihilates whatever it looks at, only producing a pretty distraction for the viewer. The transition from the grand, "expanding/ Universe" to "It's a toy" emphasizes its worthlessness—the kaleidoscope is a confluence of science and aesthetics, but it is not a productive endeavor (8-10).

There is a silver lining, though, as Baudelaire's comparison still stands: that "modern art's like this" (5). The casual contraction sounds dismissive or off-hand, almost like an unwilling testimonial. But the kaleidoscope's ability to distort one's surroundings is very much in line with Modernism, in that it affirms the unreliability of perception and the subjectivity of our existence. With a few simple reflective surfaces, Brewster baffled millions of human eyes by overlaying a maddening array of perspectives. This is not a simple blindness; rather, the kaleidoscope renders our world unintelligible by giving the viewer too many possibilities.

But Brewster retreats from relativity, returning to the subjective world to "become fact" by immersing himself in the local landscape (16-17). He is seen as a failure, having made no money off his patentless curiosity. Once a proud innovator and man of science, Brewster now

embodies the Scottish fascination with overlooked and hoodwinked innovators—someone who revolutionized the way we perceive and interact with the world is chiefly remembered for a novelty.

Crawford's love of ironic nationalism extends into “Alba Einstein,” in which he parodies his own mission of touting Scottish pioneers and correcting history's assumptions. Co-opting Albert Einstein into a Scottish identity shows just how easy it is to turn a popular name into a brand. The speaker creates a gauntlet of Einstein merchandise ranging from the humble keyrings and jugs of kitschy tourist traps to “Quantum Court” and “Glen Einstein Highland Malt” (10). The ubiquitous (in Scotland, at least) Robert Burns suppers are rebranded, and cultural giants like MacDiarmid “hurled awa . . . like an overbaked potato” (5-6). The Scotland of this poem cartoonishly devalues its cultural heritage, but this runaway exploitation is based in fact: the image of Robert Burns is often slapped onto products to Scots-ify them and verify that, yes, you could likely find this Haggis Whistle<sup>17</sup> in any old kirk in the Highlands.

The speaker teases readers with hints of hopeful language: “Glasgow was booming” (11). This “new energy” brings with it a sense of purpose, creating other gestures of unity: “Scotland rose to its feet,” “Scottish business expanded,” and “our culture was solidly based” (17, 21). Einstein's presence is bringing together its populace in a new, unified effort; however, in each of these instances a line break subverts these statements of progress. “Scotland rose to its feet/ At Albert Suppers” quantifies the unified gesture as happening only at this sponsored event. “Scottish business expanded/ Endlessly” creates a sense of unending sprawl that robs Scotland of its identity as a small nation, and “our culture was solidly based/ On pride in our hero” shows a rickety structure of national identity that entirely depends on a single figure.

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<sup>17</sup> See <[Scottishgifts4u.co.uk](http://Scottishgifts4u.co.uk)> for more about the Haggis Whistle.

“Alba Einstein” lampoons the idea of “The New Scotland”— the belief that Scotland must update itself by forgetting its past and entering a state of national fugue. The Scottish people do not just incorporate Einstein into the existing canon; rather, “everything else was dropped:/ Logie Baird, Dundee painters, David Hume,” and even Hugh MacDiarmid (2-6). Much like “Inner Glasgow,” this Scotland's new identity is built upon memorabilia and false nostalgia for a past that never existed. Scotland takes this opportunity to distance itself from its past to become a nation reborn in science through its “Universal Scot” (22). This opposition between capitalism and the Scottish identity brings MacDiarmid to mind, who is forcefully removed from the poem—“hurled awa/ MacDiarmid like an overbaked potato”— for his incompatibility with the new commodity of Scottish culture and his mealy consistency (5-6).

Reformulating the Scottish identity cannot be achieved overnight. These changes are gradual and occur over the span of years on a sociological scale, making it difficult to construct a reliable perspective for the present direction. “The Saltcoats Structuralists” sidesteps this by examining a group of time-traveling Scottish figures that left behind a legacy that is contestable at best. These were captains of industry who “found the world's new structure was a binary/ Gleaming opposition of two rails/ That never crossed but ran on parallel” (1-3). The “binary/ gleaming opposition” references the binary of computer switches, with “gleaming” suggesting the metallic and technological, and “opposition” throwing the phrase into a sinister light. The line break also acts as a temporal shift, throwing our focus back to a time when “binary” wasn’t a reference to computers. Conflating the byte with the rail makes sense: the language of binary has become a necessity of life and allows the rapid exchange of both data and goods, whereas the “language” of the railroads was simply a more physical version of the same process. These two

rails “never cross,” bringing to mind the geometric concept of a pair of parallel lines—unending and perfect cooperation that mirrors the boundless optimism of industrial-era innovation.

These “Scots-tongued engineers” abandon their Scottish identity for the sake of profit—“They learned RP, embarrassed their families” (7, 14). RP, or “Received Pronunciation,” is the standardized English accent (*OED*). By discarding their provincial accent, they have aligned themselves with the English. The Structuralists then co-opt Scottish technology into an English, imperialistic business pursuit that drives their Scottish countrymen into poverty. Their quest for personal gain turned them into archetypal English colonists/oppressors, which ends up destroying their own homeland:

on slow commuter diesels  
They passed the bare brick shells of loco-sheds  
Like great robbed tombs. They eyed the proud slave faces  
Of laid-off engineering workers, lost  
In the electronics revolution. (20-24)

The return of the “Pharaohs” places these exploitative kings of industry on a leisurely boat ride past crowds of slaves, much like the actual pharaohs of old. “Bare brick shells” elicits the image of a pharaoh's tomb unearthed by grave robbers and stripped of artifacts. Usually filled with expensive goods for the afterlife, these tombs enshrine overwhelming greed and wastefulness. The “proud slave faces” are the formerly unquestioning servants to their god-kings that have ultimately led their empire into ruin through negligence.

“Slow commuter diesels” serve as a second temporal shift back to the present, but with a distinct difference. The line break in the beginning of the poem was an instant transition into the past, but these ponderous vessels bring the Pharaohs into the future by creating a relativistic disconnect in *time* as well as *space*, all the while allowing them a great view of the destruction they visited upon their once proud country. The new generation that greets them gives little credence to their elders, as “People laughed/ At a world still made from girders, an Iron Age/ Of

Queen Elizabeths” (27-29). The antiquated Scotland of ocean liners and iron mills is fading from sight and becoming kitschy. A Scotland wrought with girders rusts in the presence of this new electronic age, where “The Pharaohs' grandchildren's accents sounded to them/ Wee hell-taught ploughmen,” a reference to Robert Burns and a traditional Scottish identity (34-35). Through their trek, the Structuralists have isolated themselves to the point where their own kin sound foreign, and “poems didn't rhyme.”

“The Saltcoats Structuralists” is not limited to a quasi-historical view of the nation's economy. The title and language suggests another reading: that these are “Structuralists” in the theoretical sense, as in the theory of Saussure. The Structuralists of the poem see the world's “new structure” as a “binary . . . opposition”—a clear reference to Structuralism and Semiotics (Murfin 39). This underlying structure is expressed through the metaphor of transport: cargo-hauling railroads etched into the land, encoding and transmitting meaning in the form of trade. But this is attempting to impose prescriptive order and cold logic onto a world that is anything but, and thereby control speech and interpretation—a presumptuous notion that costs them dearly.

This comes to a head when we look to the central location of the poem: “they went on/ To tame the desert,” and more importantly, “They never understood the deconstruction/ Visited on Empire when their reign in Egypt/ Ran out of steam” (7-8, 17-18). The locale is no accident, as it echoes one of Baudrillard's notorious phrases: “It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours: *the desert of the real itself*” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). As the poem transitions to the desert, Baudrillard's commentary on Structuralist thought physically manifests itself. The Saltcoats Structuralists created a simulacrum of order by etching networks in the terrain, but were foiled

by their own rigidity when the world didn't follow those railroads. These erstwhile “Pharaohs” thought they could synchronize the world like a train network—much like the old kings of the desert who saw themselves as divine instruments who controlled the fluctuation of the Nile, they invested everything in a system of logic informed by their “schola cantorum of connecting rods” (6). This choir of industrialism and a computerized, logical model of the mind cause their own song to echo its mechanistic nature without incorporating a human element, which contrasts with the usual, productive relationship between man and machine in this collection. The Saltcoats Structuralists tried to implant their logic into the landscape, but the desert refuted their structure.

Although *A Scottish Assembly* takes more tonal influence from the quiet, sometimes cheeky poetry of John Davidson than the indulgent belligerence of Hugh MacDiarmid's verse present in *Sharawaggi*, Crawford still indulges his fascination with MacDiarmid's diction in this more restrained collection of poems. It was MacDiarmid, after all, that had the most visceral reaction with Crawford (Dósa 245). *A Scottish Assembly* features the experimental usage of scientific vernacular in English much like that employed in later MacDiarmid. But before drawing comparisons, it is essential to revisit MacDiarmid's own rationale for his odd vernacular. Hart models MacDiarmid's vernacular practice as “simultaneously centrifugal and centripetal . . . spinning outward into the unknown, rather than in toward the consolations of tradition” (58). MacDiarmid was actively building the remnants of a Scottish language into something serviceable within a modern context. In order to create a unified Scottish nation, he would require a unified Scottish tongue. There seemed to be little difference between the two in MacDiarmid's eyes, as Hart has mentioned previously (58).

“On a Raised Beach” celebrates the English language as a tool, utilizing particular terminology to portray a beautiful image not through metaphor or abstraction, but through the

pinpoint accuracy possible through scientific terminology. By approaching the dictionary as a resource and creating intertextual bonds with a text most people consider a mere reference, MacDiarmid draws the language itself into his dialog to show just how synthetic and unapproachable—yet sonically beautiful—English is capable of being: “All is lithogenesis—or lochia,/ Carpolite fruit of the forbidden tree,/ Stones blacker than any in the Caaba” (1-3). Greek, Latin, Arabic and French-derived words abound here, each chosen for its exactitude. “Lithogenesis,” the birth of stone, is placed squarely in opposition to “lochia,” or afterbirth, followed by fossilized fruit from Eden and stones more pure than the Islamic holy site of Kaaba. Each of these words is situated in such a way that they are irreplaceable—another word might alter the sound, proximity, or conjured image. This contemplation of mortality—MacDiarmid muses that if we aren't originally from stone, we will end up there soon enough—is written precisely as it should be.

The second of two Robert Crawford poems that share a name, “Scotland” mirrors this approach by pulling from the terminology of electrical engineering and microchip design:

Semiconductor country, land crammed with intimate expanses,  
Your cities are superlattices, heterojunctive  
Graphed from the air, your cropmarked farmlands  
Are epitaxies of tweed. (1-4)

A “superlattice” is a structure of defined order among a substrate of less orderly atoms—i.e., the structured, superconductive pathways in a silicon chip that operate as roads for the transmission of electrons (*OED*). Their heterojunctions, or the contacts between varying semiconductive materials, allow these electrons to be passed between different chips. This exchange of energy is not limited to the tightly-packed cities, but also the structured growth, the tweed epitaxy, of rural Scotland. “Epitaxy” itself is a curious and fitting term here as it refers to inorganic, crystalline growth that is specifically guided and nurtured to form different orientations and concentrations.



Its similarity to agricultural practice creates a joined image of farmer and engineer, and more importantly, a link between the croft and the microchip.

Grafting the language of circuitry into the landscape of Scotland allows the speaker to cyborg the land itself, but it also feeds into another conceit—the oxymoron of “intimate expanses.” One of Hugh MacDiarmid's more infamous poems, “Scotland Small?” seems to reject this: “Scotland small? Our multiform, our infinite Scotland *small?*” (1). But MacDiarmid also wrote a poem titled “Scotland,” in which he hints at the possibility of such a paradox:

It requires great love of it deeply to read  
The configuration of a land,  
Gradually grow conscious of fine shadings,  
Of great meanings in slight symbols,  
Hear at last the great voice that speaks softly (1-5)

Here we have three paradoxical parallels: grow to fine, great to slight, and great to softly. The trajectory of each comparison is shrinking, but not in a diminutive way; rather, each speaks of focus and interpretation. A “great love” of Scotland is required to find these details, and though the speaker here is referring to the microscopic details and not the whole, there is an appreciation for the miniaturized. The paradox of a microchip nation is based on this appreciation, as the speaker in Crawford's “Scotland” assures us that “to be miniaturized is not small-minded” (13-16). By combining classic Scottish images of “tweed,” “hay,” and the Book of Kells with the newer innovation of microchip manufacturing, Robert Crawford creates a cyborg landscape of Old/New Scotland that moves into the new world while still incorporating its cultural roots.

## The Creature Lives

Robert Crawford wishes for Scotland to be at once unified and separate in a state of paradox. Unlike Hugh MacDiarmid's need for Scotland to unify under a singular voice, he uses his synthetic vernacular to create a Frankenstein's monster of many Scotlands: peoples, landscapes, cultures, and languages all. The technology of communication—semiconductors, telephones, and electrical wire—create new connections within each piece by couching them in abstract byways, allowing cultures that live in vastly different worlds to live and communicate only streets apart. Layers of abstraction allow the seemingly disparate cultures to coexist with one another, as Katherine Hayles defines the posthuman, cyborg self as “an amalgam, a collection of heterogenous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (3). These distinct components are constantly in flux as new material is incorporated into the whole—a practice that Crawford engages in regularly. Stitching is a powerful recurring image in Crawford's poetry, which we find in the mother singing through her sewing machine in “Opera” that the mother sings through, or the stitching together of different Scotlands in “Fiesta” which are “the same, different: the next stitch in lacemaking and then/ The one after” but very much (excuse the pun) cut from the same continuous cloth (7-8). Stitching parallels acts of joining, mediating between different cultures by way of language and song.

“Bhidio” features the unknown, the outsider, mediated by television and other technology. These Gaelic-speaking people living among the Scots and are a part of Scotland as

much as any other Scot. Even so, Gaelic speakers are very much different: “Their smiles and glances/ Are what gets lost in translation,” bringing to mind the anxiety behind being present in a conversation where a language barrier excludes you from the essentials of the discussion (5-6). But multiculturalism does not dictate that a nation should just absorb cultures into itself and claim them as its own, just as these people should be acknowledged as “different.” It means that one must *accept*, not *incorporate*, these differences into one's own nation. Their voices can join the choir, and they should, but these Gaelic voices will remain distinct.

While this society are separate from the speaker, they are unified in another way: “Millionaires of the rain,/ Peat poets . . . They speak what it says on the roadsigns” (2-4). Theirs is a language originating from the landscape, developed naturally from their surroundings. Crawford's English interlopes on the usual Gaelic order of things, ostracizing the speaker among this tight-knit community, the “we” among the “they,” where “Neighbors/ Peg their families' souls on washing lines” (10-11). Neighbor is not a relative term here, but a statement of community; all members of this society count one another as being close, placing trust in their fellow townsfolk and the environment to care for their souls. The speaker's anxiety mounts as he begins to realize he is truly out of place:

In a close surveillance society  
Where ministers' noble, orgasmic voices  
Say the Evil One is near as he was in Eden  
Flying under the radar. (12-15)

As far as the speaker is concerned, this self-policing, closed-off society considers him as an outside, corrupting influence. The speaker has brought English to this Gaelic island, which in the past has only sought to quash Gaelic cultural development and rewrite its history. Here Crawford inverts his usual narrative of representing a people speaking an imposed language to instead become unconsciously imperialistic— the speaker leaves as soon as he realizes this: “We/ sweep

past their bungalows, heading back for the mainland” (15-16). At first glance it appears Crawford is pushing back against any form of unity, with his Gaelic speakers sequestering themselves away through abstraction: “[they] blockade their lives/ Beautifully with abandoned cars and rich/ Theological silence” and “watch us on their television” (8-10, 18). But these mediating technologies allow these different peoples to coexist with one another. Without the cars and ferries and TV sets, these populations would feel even farther apart than they already do.

Disparities between voices takes on a more domestic tone with “Mr. and Mrs. William Mulock in the Museum of Ethnology.” A quatrain structure with a rigid, alternating “abab” rhyme scheme sticks out as oddly conventional. This is intentional, as the situation is a parody of a rather conventional event itself: a husband and wife visiting a museum exhibit. Their relationship looks ordinary enough, as Mr. Mulock loafs around the exhibit—present only “to please his cultured wife” —while Mrs. Mulock observes the sarcophagi (10). But their meaningful interaction ends there: “Woman and man, each stands and seems/ Odd, undeciphered, quite alone” (13-14). This is either a poignant description of the inestimable distance between some married couples, or an overly-dramatic sitcom fadeout. In both cases proximity is highly emphasized in this poem: Mr. Mulock is the first presence on the page, whereas his wife is delayed to the end of the stanza. She is “Lost” in the life of the pharaohs and “disregards a common life,” both an average life and the common experience between the two of them (12). Here are people who, though they live together, live separate lives that *are* mediated. There is, too, “The gap between the hieroglyphs” which bears a resemblance to the semiotic gap— that disconnect between sign and signifier responsible for miscommunication. As mentioned prior, Crawford considers the sign of language a technology, so the final line's

description of the couple as “Fragments of the Rosetta Stone” establishes the presence (or distinct lack thereof) of communication (16).

The mediating technologies within this poem are treated much differently than elsewhere. Mrs. Mulock is compelled by the book, the only purpose of which is to guide and prescribe one's observations: “The guide book said,/ “All visitors must go and see”” (6-7). She is “rapturous,” religiously deferring to this abstraction to make a judgment. “And now we have” links her satisfaction not to the exhibit itself, but to following the Word of the guide book: “The guide book said” (9). It was not previously important to her to see this attraction. But now that she is here, it is the “Pharaohs' autographs” that she becomes lost in—an odd form of worship for this rule abstracted by both coffin and centuries. Once again, she defers to a higher power and stands in worship before it. Mr. Mulock himself defers to his “cultured” wife, implying a deficit, or ambivalence, in his cultural awareness. But her only awareness comes from the guide book, which makes the couple seem deficient in anything resembling character. “Undeciphered” indeed. Mrs. Mulock's voice has been hijacked and overwritten by the guidebook through her reverent quoting, leading her and the unwilling husband to take on the normative practice of visiting this exhibit in a cultural scavenger hunt.

This feeling of cultural anxiety and profound ostracism extends to the other two collections released around *A Scottish Assembly's* publication. In “Simultaneous Translation” from *Talkies*, we find that the phenomenon of simultaneous translation is a contradiction; “something you can't understand,/ Also somewhere you've been” (7-8). Note that we *cannot*, rather than *do not*, understand this familiar concept—exposed to simultaneous translation, language begins to break down and expose just where true comprehension ends: the semiotic limbo between signifier and signified. In each example we can see the leap between intention

and output: that awkward feeling of not being able to get quite the best hold on something but knowing it's just out of your reach:

It fills up the pause when you finish speaking  
Or even before you've stopped,

Gets between the chewy biro and the word-processor,  
Between 'Yours sincerely' and your name. (1-4)

Total communication is impossible, as each person's thoughts and intentions terminate upon conveyance through speech. This “It,” the “Simultaneous Translation,” is the anxiety of miscommunication. Every act of speech is *interpreted* by those that bear witness to it. Much like trying to speak or write while having several different languages shouted at you, something is always lost in translation. Though this is a universal concern for humanity, it is doubly true for Scotland as a nation of several tongues. Crawford begins *Talkies* with a quote from M. M. Bakhtin which sums up this anxiety, on both the individual and national level, much better than I: “one's own language is never a single language,” but one that is traversed by other languages of the community.

The space between us and the pen or keyboard gives way to a more direct metaphor for the sensation conveyed in the title: “This is where we all live now,/ Wearing something like a Sony Walkman,/ Hearing another voice every time we speak” (11-13). This draws us to the literal act of simultaneous translation, in which the voice we hear from the speaker is not theirs, but a translator who reinterprets the speaker into a language that we understand. Within the poem, the Walkman mediates these communications, intercepting speech and inserting someone else's interpretation in much the same way—as we can see when “A girl opens her mouth and an Oxbridge bass/ Is talking in English” (14-15). Speakers are arbitrarily assigned voices which do not necessarily match up, robbing the statement of its original tones and inflections.

Sometimes present in translations, a parallel text offers the reader a sense of authenticity by providing an imposition of the original text alongside the newer text. A translation is not only a new imposition, but also an entirely new interpretation. Even the most faithful word-for-word translation alters the work, much like even the most carefully worded statement can be misinterpreted. The “Oxbridge bass” girl realizes this, as “Already her finger is starting to creep/ Closer to the binding of a parallel text,/ Between the lines, then crossing over” (16-18). Though her finger acts out her desires—to bridge the gap between speaker and listener, writer and reader—what she attempts is impossible. As an abstract representation, each person's interpretation is subjective. The realization that language is a form of abstraction, and that it is completely relative, does make you feel like an outsider: much like being a tourist, there is a gap between you and everyone else.

*Sharawaggi* approaches linguistic gaps by inflicting them upon the reader, and “Ghetto Blastir” allows us to see this through the lens of Scots. The Oxford English Dictionary's humorously stilted definition of “ghetto blaster” points us towards another suppressed culture: “a large portable stereo radio (and cassette player), esp. one on which (black) popular music is played loudly.” Aligning Scots with African-American culture and language places an emphasis on the non-standardized, culturally constructed facets of these tongues which often serve as a barrier for those not raised within that culture. Such a barrier of ambiguity afforded by this breadth of alternate meanings creates an uncertainty of intent: are these poets here to challenge the status quo, or are they actually a legitimate threat? The first stanza below exemplifies this:

Ghetto-makars, tae the knackirs'  
Wi aw yir schemes, yir smug dour dreams  
O yir ain feet. Yi're beat  
By yon new Scoatlan loupin tae yir street

“Tae the knackirs” can be taken as both “take/challenge the butchers' things” as an act of rebellion against butchers of the language, or “stab/take the testicles” in an act of emasculation or violence, or even just plain exhaustion (*DSL*). “Schemes” can be taken as the poetic arrangement or sinister plot, while “O yir ain feet” can mean “On your own feet” or “Of your own stubbornness.” Finally, we have “loupin” which ranges from “running,” “hunting,” or “coming to rob.”

Once again we have an uncertainty of intent— a gap in understanding. Crawford is using a gap in linguistic interpretation to comment on cultural bias, as one who looks down on Scotland (arguably the case in the UK) would assume intentions of violence. The ghetto blaster is an icon of both hip-hop culture and African-American/Hispanic self-expression. Its weaponized moniker was intentional, as its portability and speaker compliment allowed users to conveniently spread music throughout urban areas that would never reach the radio, effectively waging a war on racially motivated censorship. Much like African-Americans in contemporary society, Scots know that their language was plowed under by English standardization in a comparable manner to how the Caucasian-American establishment sought to ignore Hip-Hop and Rap music. Crawford is hoping to achieve similar results with Scots poetry, which he makes clear in the final lines of the poem:

Bicoz we're grabbing  
Whit's left o the leid tae mak anither sang  
O semiconducters, Clydes aw dancin fastir  
Than yir feart shanks. Ye'll sraich tae hear amang  
Pooer-clubs and cliques, twee pubs o freaks,  
When cockiedoodlin doon yir beaks  
The raucus sweet soon o oor Ghetto-Blastir. (20-26)

Crawford and his cohorts are seizing the remnants of the Scottish language, the “leid,” to create a new song in the form of semiconductors—this “Ghetto-Blastir”— at the intersection of these different Scotlands with their many Clydes. Rivers are commonly associated with culture and



language within Crawford's poetry, so this creates a confluence of peoples. The object of the poem, who Crawford identifies as the affluent and privileged by placing them in “power-clubs and cliques,” will be compelled to dance and scream for more despite their fears (*DSL*). By wielding his “Ghetto-Blastir,” his Scots poetry, Crawford is confronting English-speakers and forcing them to appreciate the marginalized tongues present in Scotland.

Crawford's preoccupation with gaps of understanding continues in “Fur thi Muse o Synthesis.” One needs only look to the first stanza to see that he has connectivity on the brain:

Interkat intercommuner, intercommunin  
At aw leid's interfaces, skeich  
Tae interpone a hooch that intermells  
An interverts auld jorrans tae reconduct  
Aureat thru lingua franca, intercommoun  
Thru joie-de-vivre-wurds, guttir thru dictionar<sup>19</sup> (1-6)

“Inter” occurs eight times within this stanza, tying these lines together with a tangle of prefix connections that pepper its Scots with French, Latin, and English. Even connected, though, they are disparate and stick out from the page: “interfaces” and “Aureat” and “joi-de-vivre” hardly look like Scots. The speaker is redirecting the “Aureat,” high speech, through the language of the vulgate by stranding these words from sophisticated cultures in the “guttir” of Scots. Crawford's parallel text lays bare a linguistic eroticism that pins these languages together, using careful, polite euphemisms with “intercourse at all language's interfaces.” “Auld jorrans” are repurposed to romance their source languages—to ease their intellectual elitism into a more approachable, democratized state that acknowledges the more base, physical urges of humanity.

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<sup>19</sup> “Intricate negotiator between factions at variance, having intercourse at all language's interfaces, apt to startlingly interpose a cry of joy that intermingles and appropriates to a new, unfamiliar use old slow, melancholy boatsongs to reconduct high diction through common speech, the language of conversation through exclamations of delight, gutter through dictionary” (*Sharawaggi* 71)

Crawford's work in *Sharawaggi* often sees language as passionate and sexual, as we can see in "Burns Ayont Auld Reekie": "Thi Burns-sprach oozin fae thi daurk peatpoat/ Ah ken's ma muse, hauf weet cunt an hauf leid" (32-33). The speaker in this homage-cum-response to Hugh MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* sees the combination of language and biology as essential to both his creativity and humanity itself: "Fae yon bricht hybrid aw thi warld tots,/ Peat-moss o Goad, slivery weddir-gaw/ Whilk Embro fowk baith lust oan an deny" (34-46). This orifice in the ground, oozing post-coital songs, reclaims stereotypical images through some unusual rearranging. The hybrid of language, land, and biology from which "aw thi warld tots" is not uniquely Scottish in itself, but its constituent parts—Peat and Burns—are almost painfully so. Burns is billed here as the father of the Scottish people, passing his genetic information<sup>20</sup> down through the code of his verse to impregnate the peaty soil. But the people of Edinburgh, the lowlander cultural center, hold a conflicted viewpoint of both Scottish-ness and sexuality; they don't seem to be comfortable with either one, lusting and denying their unique heritage in the same breath.

"Burns-sprach" is not just ordinary language, though. It is poetic, erotic, and intensely human. "Burns Ayont Auld Reekie" contains several italicized asides that seem to be written in a Burns-like fashion as we can see in the list of an inventory of love: "*Loofs, lonyngs, skirdoch o orising, red*"<sup>21</sup> (28). Red is vaginal: the color, a spawning place, a slip where boats are pushed off the land and out into the water. Combined with lonyng/longyng this creates a series of

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<sup>20</sup> Compare DNA's continuous patterns, and its ability to assemble raw organic material into complex structures, with the S I N G E R from "Opera."

<sup>21</sup> "Loofs": palms, love, the rigging or windward side of a ship, and a nautical course (*DSL*). "Lonyng": a long strips of land used by animals as trails, as well as a narrow passageway. "Longyng": a sense of longing that is used interchangeably as a preposition of space. "Skirdoch": Flirtatious or anxious, giddy or easily frightened. "Red": a reed, raid, to read, a slip for boats: the track on a beach up which boats are pulled to a trench above water level. Crawford's parallel text translates it as "spawning place" (*Sharawaggi* 51)

physical images with associative double-meanings, portraying a space that is vulnerable and intimate (red, warmth, palms, awkward flirting and reluctance to leave) intensely physical (blunt reference of “red” as spawning in footnote, longing as lust or a physical condition, arising as phallic metaphor) and domestic (reluctance to leave, *loof* as rigging/path/guidance, entire inventories of loving memories, spawning as home). This highly associative and culturally-specific verse echoes the rich oral tradition at the heart of Scots, which we can see reflected in the final Burns-speech stanza:

*Fae thi drouthy taing heich abune thi flistricks  
An fae Embro tae, fae ticht, daurk vennels  
This sang hails oot, rid, rid lik auld bracken,  
Shairp lik whin an deid lik a geantree  
Afore spring in this land o Burns.*<sup>22</sup> (81-85)

The final stanza is an act of birth-- the thin alleyways gushing forth a red song from the rock among several poignant plants.<sup>23</sup> This leads us back to the image of the vaginal fissure in the earth, half womb and half language. The song, Scots and the Scottish people, has lain dormant through a harsh winter of several hundred years. But even in its fallow state it has remained vibrant and ready to bear fruit and flower. This is not birth as much as *rebirth*; Crawford is mapping a deciduous model of dormancy and activity to the “livin leid,” re-establishing its roots in biology, humanity, and the land itself.

The “livin leid” of synthetic Scots is composed of the dead husk of past texts, the “stolum o Scoatlan,” or “broken off fragment of Scotland” (19). *Sharawaggi* speaks often about the

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<sup>22</sup> “From the thirsty tongue of land above the submerged ledges of flat rock rising just to the surface of the water, and from Edinburgh also, from narrow, dark alleyways the song gushes out, red, red like old bracken, sharp like gorse and dead like a wild cherry tree before spring in this land of Burns.” (*Sharawaggi* 55)

<sup>23</sup> Three plants are referenced here: bracken, a poisonous fern-like plant; gorse, a flowering thorny plant that was once fed to livestock; and a wild cherry tree. The bracken is red, which suggests its autumn reddening; the gorse become sharp towards maturity and survives long into winter; the cherry tree is toxic except for its berries, and its scientific name *prunus avium* means “bird cherry” in Latin. Out of these plants the cherry tree is the only perennial, and its deciduous growth means it lies dormant in the winter. (*GRIN*)

cyclical relationship between the living and the dead, which Jeffrey Skoblow points to: “The language itself represents a contradiction in terms: a womb and a tumulus . . . a body of the dead that inspires the living who animate the body of the dead: a closed circle” (32). This paradox harkens back to Crawford's image of the “daurk peatpoat”: a gash in the earth that serves as both womb and resting place, a boomerang trajectory back into the same orifice of the land itself. The speaker of “Fur thi Muse o Synthesis” criticizes the solipsistic poets who act as if they are the first ones to map this trajectory by pointing out that it is integral to the function of language:

yir lusbirdans o phonemes hae spreit  
 Tae staun oan thi mune, tae ratch licht fae skau, an tae sacre  
 Fowk vivual an vieve again whan thi makars wha cam  
 Tae thi keyburd o thi leid lik piper's invites (14-17)

These “lusbirdans,” or pygmies, of phonemes stand on the moon—the threshold of day's progress into night, life into death—to tear/rip with great effort (*DSL*) or dislocate (*Sharawaggi*) light from the passage of time (*DSL*) or ruin (*Sharawaggi*). And even though the poets came to this late, the language still revives and vivifies the living while it “maks/ Regenerate thi stolum o Scoatlan” (18-19). The speaker is composting the dead to fertilize the living, and is making it clear that this is something that has always been the case.

Yet another Scots poem, “The Eelist,” will help us expand on this relationship between the living and dead:

an we struck oan in  
 By heathir-burns an gosk, oor endless cassette  
 Swiggin thru thi caur lik unspoken waatir  
 Tae mak us kemmins, kemps wi a kebbie-lebbie,  
 A hallyoch<sup>24</sup> (33-37)

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<sup>24</sup> “. . . and we struck on in by the burnt roots of heather and grass that sprouts through dung, our endless cassette turning rapidly through the car like the miraculous water that cures those on the point of death to make us great strong men, champions in an argument where everyone speaks at once, a strange gabbling noise of an incomprehensible language” (*Sharawaggi* 65)

“Burns” could be a reference to Robert Burns, while the burnt roots of heather are emblematic: Scotland is the “land of heather” after all, and Scots has been burnt to the root. Heather is also burned periodically to encourage new growth, as it allows younger plants to take root and create more dense foliage (*GRIN*). Gosk provides us with an image of the current state of Scots, growing and expanding despite being held back by literal scat.

Much like the gosk replaces waste with abundance and the heather burns and regrows each year, the process of linguistic and cultural development is cyclical. The endless cassette is a recursive image, bending back on itself to connect the spools in an endless cycle. Its comparison to “unspoken waatir/ Tae mak us kemmins” demands some close examination, as unspoken water is defined as “Water from under a bridge, over which the living pass and the dead are carried, brought in the dawn or twilight to the house of a sick person, without the bearer’s speaking either in going or returning” (*DSL*). The living reach back and under to pull the sick to their level. By taking in the water and growing strong, the sick are (ideally) subverting the linear bridge of life, using the river beneath to return to their initial, healthy state on the other side. This cassette, a transcription of non-living abstraction, loops endlessly to strengthen and prepare the listener for a larger dialog among other voices.

This wide-scale dialog comes to fruition in *A Scottish Assembly*. The titular poem peppers the reader with images of incorporation. The initial list of Scottish things, “Circuitry’s electronic tartan, the sea,/ Libraries, fields,” scatters to later “come home to roost,” bringing back with it experience from the outside world (1-4). The speaker imagines pieces of Scotland retrieving influence from the outside like a cormorant brings back fish. It is “remaining an explosion reversed”—separate parts constantly coalescing into a whole with an intake of energy (9). These multitudes of unique individuals are being brought into the whole without compromising their

identities, the result of which being an “unkempt country” with its mishmash of components (5). While their vocalizations are mediated, as in “Simultaneous Translation,” they also *receive* mediated response without an expectation of adhering to established norms. Fiona Stafford sees this process as a sign of cultural development:

Translation and imitation are no longer to be regarded as signs of national under-confidence, ostentatious erudition or wavering originality, but rather as opportunities for innovation, wordplay and technical virtuosity. The parallel text can be read as a sign of receptiveness to other cultures, as well as of the multivocal audiences at home. (231)

The Scotland of Crawford's work actively creates connections between these cultural channels that allow multivocal audiences to stand out while contributing to the whole. As Hugh MacDiarmid says in the final lines of his poem entitled “Scotland”:

So I have gathered unto myself  
All the loose ends of Scotland,  
And by naming them and accepting them,  
Loving them and identifying myself with them,  
Attempt to express the whole. (13-17)

Crawford was influenced by this poem to the point where his own poem “Scotland,” the second one at least, closely matches up with MacDiarmid's in subject matter. Below are Crawford's final lines:

Among circuitboard crowsteps  
To be miniaturised is not small-minded.  
To love you needs more details than the Book of Kells—  
Your harbours, your photography, your democratic intellect  
Still boundless, chip of a nation. (12-16)

Here we get a recap of sorts, tying together some of the conceits found within *A Scottish Assembly* by creating a pastiche of images: the harbors of “Inner Glasgow” and “The Saltcoats Structuralists,” the photography of Sir David Brewster and Grierson, and the democratic intellect between Alexander Nasmyth and Robert Burns. These are only a selection of the passages that

one line calls to bear, collecting these details into a sort of photomosaic—that is, the larger image of Scotland made of many different smaller Scotlands.

Comparing the language between MacDiarmid and Crawford's poems proves fairly enlightening to the differences in their methods. MacDiarmid's "Scotland" is only complete once he becomes its embodiment, taking in all its aspects to create a new Universal Scot within himself. But Crawford's "Scotland" addresses the nation in the second person, the disembodied speaker describing a sort of technological, metaphysical arrangement of Scotland's many parts. Whereas MacDiarmid sought to bring Scotland into himself and act as its avatar, Crawford has integrated the microchip of Scotland into the circuitboard of the world stage. This acknowledgement of unity-in-disunity, that a concrete representation with a single voice is impossible, is what Vincent Kenny describes as reflecting his proposed third-order of cybernetics: "Mind is revealed to be selfless—that is, without a self that is a centralized and all-powerful agent" (107). Kenny's stance is that one cannot privilege or take for granted their own experience, so using the self as a solid base is questionable at best—the best solution being to "busily observing observers," to not fall prey to solipsism (100). With his bird's-eye-view of Scotland, Crawford comes much closer to achieving that mindfulness.

By contextualizing its synthesized and diverse culture as a processor of the fettle that ties each nation together, Robert Crawford is firmly stating that Scotland is a fully realized nation in its own that deserves recognition. "A Scottish Assembly" ends with a stout declaration of loyalty and intent: "Voting with my feet, and this hand" (14). The speaker's feet, the connection between land and human, places him physically within Scotland; but more importantly he raises the hand with which he composed *A Scottish Assembly* in support.

Between “A Scottish Assembly” and “Scotland,” the disembodied feet and hand are the only human embodiments in this idealized nation. Both poems speak more to a conceptual framework for Scotland's cultural identity than a representative description; even so, a menagerie of cultural objects might come off as desolate without the physical presence of people. Much as we have seen before, *Sharawaggi* often uses imagery of humans, the landscape, and biological processes for the sake of metaphor. “The Herr-Knit Bunnet” is no different, and it greets the reader with a phallic image: “Ah glaum lik a clood among Munros, turnin thi dwang/ O Scoatlan” (1-2). To “glaum” is to ineffectually grab at or stare but Crawford's footnote twists it towards the perverse with “grope in the dark,” and turning the dwang is to raise a caber in a feat of strength (*DSL*). A fairly clear euphemism: Scotland is a large, timber phallus. At the opposite end of the stanza rests “thi cunt o thi yird,” or the vagina of earth (11). Leading up to the end of the stanza, the speaker expresses exacerbation for how long it is taking for them to meet, which leads into a final burst of desperate movement to reach the end:

'Proochie, baist, proochie!  
 I'd scaich tae thi future — an nae tae a moartcloath  
 Fur haigs an snibbed haingles tae mak tairesie owre—  
 But a kinna hainch tae rase thi laun oot  
 O bein swiffed in midsimmer an tae tak it doon  
 Laughin thru thi snaa wi a sairin sae yi'd ken aa its nocks  
 Vieve again, thi cunt o thi yird.<sup>25</sup> (5-11)

The speaker is snatching the land away and absconding through both space and time as he moves from summer directly into winter. Skoblow sees this as a phallo-centric, sexualized parody of the Highland games, though it is more than that (52). The future is not a death veil in the speaker's eyes, but an act of catapulting forward—like the skipping stones of the Orkney islands, or the

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<sup>25</sup> “Approach, beast, approach! I'd cry out to the future – and not to a coffin-drape for tale-telling women and gelded louts to make evil fury over – but a kind of sudden throw to pluck the land out of being blown over by sad winds in midsummer, and to take it down laughing through the snow with a knowledge of satisfaction so that you would see its beautiful small hills clear again, the vagina of the earth” (*Sharawaggi* 85).



eye's movement from “doon” to “Laughin” across the line break that serves as a temporal transition. This lurching, breakneck pace terminates in the earth's vaginal fissure that acts as both the location of climax and death, once again uniting the act of creation and destruction within the same orifice. With a joyful disregard for his own impermanence, the speaker can embrace the future and anticipate the joining place between Scotland and the womb of the land— though they will unite, it is crucial to the second half of the poem to preserve a distinction:

Ah tell yi Ah huv seen thi herr-knit bunnet,  
Nae Scoatlan's powcap o Orkneys an Arctic  
But a het teuchter's bunnet purled fae human herr  
Dour lik thi greek o stanes.<sup>26</sup> (12-15)

Scotland's cap is not the snow caps atop its mountains, but the hair atop the people's heads. The hot-tempered Highlander, a begrudged symbol of Scotland, cements the land and nation together with his association with gravel. But the bonnet extends past the more archetypal Scots and into the common people: “Yon punk's/ Mohican flambé, cockendy-bill-bricht, an yon/ Jillet's blak strand ur menkit thegither”<sup>27</sup> (15-17). These wildly different hairdos are being knitted together to create a patchwork that is “plattit oot/ O thi scalps o this laun,” uniting the people under a unified toupee of a nation made from both “locks o thi deid an thi manky blawn herr o thi vivual”<sup>28</sup> (18-19, 24). Skoblow points out that “To knit a hat of human hair is to turn to use the part of us that is dead” (52). The dead hair grows from the living to vivify the larger body of this nation, mirroring the growth of the living from the dead/earth; animate benefiting inanimate vs inanimate benefiting animate. This model creates a symbiotic relationship between the two,

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<sup>26</sup> “I tell you I have seen the hair-knit beret, not Scotland's cap of Orkneys and Arctic but a hot unsophisticated Highlander's beret stocking-stitched from human hair grimly stubborn as the grain of stones.” (*Sharawaggi* 85)

<sup>27</sup> “That punk's Mohican flambé, bright as a puffin's bill, and that pubertal girl's black strand are mixed together” (*Sharawaggi* 85)

<sup>28</sup> “Locks of the dead and the disgusting, woolly blown hair of the living” (*Sharawaggi* 85)

invigorating both the present and past. The result is a “moosewob atwen the bens' shanks/  
Electric wi threids o herr,” an electrified spiderweb of hair between the legs of two mountains  
(26-27). This pubic hair brings us back to the motherly role of the land and the nation that  
springs forth, kept alive by a form of self-maintenance in linguistic reflection.

An electric spiderweb of hair also echoes the landscape-cum-circuitry of “Scotland” and  
“A Scottish Assembly,” populating this conceptual Scotland by coming full circle in both  
concept and image. Assembled like so many cogs in a machine, the poems discussed in this  
chapter work towards an inclusive, yet individually expressive model of a modern-day Scotland  
forged from compromise, reflection, and innovation. Rather than forcing C.P. Snow's “Two  
Cultures” to merge, Crawford *encourages* the discourse between them and takes Haraway's  
standpoint—that we should embrace “permanently partial identities and contradictory  
standpoints” (154). To hold a nation, or even a single citizen within it, to a single unchangeable  
stance is to deny the subjectivity of even moment-to-moment perspective. Haraway also wisely  
states: “Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters,”  
highlighting the short-sightedness of assuming that unification requires uniformity (154).  
Crawford's assemblage of Scots caught mid-integration is an embodiment of Haraway's model  
for society, which at first glance seems, to borrow a word from Davidson, a “contraption” that  
might malfunction or disassemble itself. But Scotland proves to be far more resilient, boasting  
deep roots in the landscapes and minds of its people.

## **The Makar's Mark**

An independent Scotland will not be an immediate cure-all for its cultural consciousness; if anything it opens the door to other influences that prey on fledgling nations. Commercialism and corporations pose a threat if allowed too much sway, as we can already see happening with a certain combed-over millionaire's dealings in the Highlands (NPR.org). There is also the unfortunate reality of cultural tension between what would soon become the new establishment and those who wish to make a better nation for themselves. Robert Crawford is a skeptic at heart and very aware of the potential threats. In "Land 'o Cakes," Crawford explores how excessive development and commoditization can lead Scotland into an even more exploitative state than the present. The piece's setting is rather topical: "In the Highlands people didn't use knives and forks. They were cleared like a table/ To make way for shortbread" (2-3). The speaker refers to the exploitation of the Highland peoples, who were gradually cleared out by forced evictions and labor shortages by their landowners and employers (Houston 90-93). Coupled with upheavals in their social structures and an ever-growing resentment from Lowlanders, it is a cruel irony that Scotland began to identify itself internationally with Highland culture during the worst of this subjugation, thanks to Sir Walter Scott's novels and Queen Victoria's fascination with kilts and ghillies. In "The Land o' Cakes," the Highland peoples do not use these tools of consumption on their own land, so they are cleared away for those who would gladly devour it in their stead.

And devour these other people do, with some "bestial" people openly grazing on the "naked ground" and others "Would point to a landmark, then ask their gillies/ to go over and cut

a few slices” (5-8). The speaker condemns those who took part in or gained from this rebranding of Scotland, but he/she does not spare even the curious whose “Study-holidays” ends up chipping pieces from the Highland landscape (4-5). As the poem moves, the scale widens until “Bottling plants jammed the glens,” sending off pieces of Scotland to Europe, New York, and elsewhere (9). Even the undesirable bits, like Glasgow and Dundee, are eventually repurposed into pig-feed or swallowed whole (12-15). Devoured by the outside, the Scottish people are only left with a culinary substitute—soya, or soybeans—for “The tender parts have all been eaten” (18-20). Other poems within *A Scottish Assembly* deal with the co-opting of Scottish culture and false branding, but here we can see a timeline that definitively begins with the Highland clearings orchestrated by the Scots themselves. Within the context of the collection and its location towards the end, “The Land o' Cakes” serves as a reminder that Scotland is more than capable of acting against its own best interests unaided, and that allowing one region to exploit another is the worst sort of betrayal.

Years later, Crawford revisits this image of Scotland being consumed in *Spirit Machines* (1996) with “Exchange,” only this time the perpetrator is not human; rather, Scotland falls to the exchange of money. Crawford's examination hinges on a sublimated view of currency—that “Promising always to pay the bearer, money aspires to the condition of the purest spirit” (1-2). Spirit (animus) is the potential to draw breath, the most basic yet essential form of power to a human being; without that potential we cannot live. In a capitalist society money is itself potential, so the comparison is valid, if not a bit horrifying that an artificial concept can so easily mimic what makes us tick. Crawford exploits this unease: “Money burns the body of everything, so it can become spirit, dreams and thoughts of money” (8-10). This sounds oddly reminiscent of

change's spreading corruption in Davidson's "A Northern Suburb,"<sup>29</sup> and as the poem moves it takes a similar course: "Now shapeless itself, its body deferred forever, money promises all cybery shapes: an immortal form of star-eyed silence. In the Ossianic twilight woven with the shuttles of money screens of the world fade out and rekindle with light" (10-14). The speaker postulates a Scottish version of the Celtic Twilight that ends in a grey-goo<sup>30</sup> scenario, where money has promised the people of Scotland an idyllic existence in a parody of a Christian afterlife. Money has transcended physicality, and thus human control, to become a disembodied presence with its own agenda. While this personification sounds like science fiction, the comparison is not a tremendous leap: money in large enough amounts becomes effectively self-sufficient, expanding itself just by its very presence and attracting a support structure to protect it from harm. Greed also motivates self-destructive behavior, which brings us back around to the human element that started it all. Crawford is once again warning Scotland against the dangers of commodifying Scotland, but shows that the threat is not necessarily physical in nature.

In his later poetry, Crawford goes further with his warnings to insist that the "Canny Auld Enemy" is "us"-- in this case, the weekend warriors of Scottish independence who are in it part-time for the nostalgia, but fearfully back down when questioned (*The Tip of My Tongue* 17). Crawford describes his leanings on Scottish independence as "nuanced," and that he would like to see Scotland independent, but that: "I neither wish to nor could conceive of myself as living in the Scotland of Barbour's *Bruce* or Blind Harry's *Wallace*, in the times of these blood-myths on which Scotland (like many, perhaps all, other nations) is founded" (Dósa 246).

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<sup>29</sup> See the introduction.

<sup>30</sup> A scenario in which a device, designed only to replicate itself by breaking down other forms of matter, eventually converts all matter on Earth into itself. See Eric Drexler's *Engines of Creation* (1986)

Robert Crawford's cautionary poetry is by no means the only discussion on *A Scottish Assembly* and its bid for Scottish nationalism. Though criticism tends to be favorable towards Crawford's first collection, there are some dissenting opinions worth noting. One critic writes:

Scotland is the exemplar of the *failed* unity of the nation, its whole literary history back to the eighteenth century fraught with doubles, fratricides and outcasts representing the fractured, uncompletable project of national unity. Crawford's litany of modern, multiple Scotlands could be repeated of the Scotland of any period of its history, so that hybridity can scarcely represent a *new* configuration in our understanding of Scottish culture. (Cairns Craig 240)

Craig is right to point out that Scottish literature is rife with internal struggles and dissolution; however, to use these troubles as evidence to preclude any type of unity is defeatist and narrows the scope of what unity *is* possible. Calling Crawford's view of Scotland a hybrid is ignoring the title of his collection. *A Scottish Assembly* is not a blended hybrid, but a collection of seemingly incompatible parts that remain distinct through mediation, while becoming unified in their relationship with the whole. Rather than a spliced cell, this view of Scotland is of a multicellular organism—a collective that can endure, and derive energy from, the friction of discourse

In his book *Modern Scottish Poetry*, Christopher Whyte says that Robert Crawford “declines to explain” his motivations for creating *A Scottish Assembly* (210). His summary of “A Scottish Assembly” is as follows: “The speaker was faced with a choice. He had alternatives and could have gone, or stayed, elsewhere. Exemplary status is conferred on his decision” (210-211). Whyte deems this a “peculiar lack of interiority.” “A Scottish Assembly” does not seek ownership of Scotland and to make it Crawford's own, but to take part in the collective expansion from a provincial consciousness into a nation: he even prompts the reader not to “expect any rhyme or reason” for his actions (8). Crawford is taking a step back and becoming a fraction of the whole, creating a call for others to do the same. Whyte also finds the name of the collection to be a grandiose claim for a poet:

But there is an underlying implication, especially if one is willing to interpret 'assembly' as 'assemblage' or 'collection', that the book itself must be regarded as equivalent to, as an acceptable substitute for, the political institution: an implication that Crawford (1959--) can deliver this to his readers, encapsulating between two covers, before it has become a reality. (210)

Whyte sees Crawford as trying to act as Scotland's voice and to reshape its identity before its time; that this volume of poetry is wholly “symptomatic of the transitory but intense love affair” with nationalism. The phrasing suggests Crawford is attempting to commodify Scotland, to “encapsulate” an “acceptable substitute” to “deliver this to his readers.” As we saw in his poem “Alba Einstein,” Crawford is keenly aware of this practice and is quite against it. While Crawford is certainly a proponent of an independent Scotland, *A Scottish Assembly* is hardly attempting to overwrite the Scottish identity. Whyte's claim is a false equivalency and a willful misreading of the title—the very first word is “A,” an article that points either to one *among a range* of referents, or an abstract/hypothetical referent.

To view *A Scottish Assembly* purely from a localized approach bypasses the rich span of intra/intertextual references that Crawford weaves throughout. The poems do not parade these figures for their simple existence—each scientist, poet, and dabbler has a cultural identity that works in the poem's favor, bringing in the odd details to flesh out his Scottish canon: Maxwell's love of Burns, the engraver's diminutive stature and funny looks, Nasmyth's art interacting with his technological innovation, and so on. This *Assembly* of figures binds the text together in a web of cultural covalence. By mediating between the many different cultures, histories, and peoples of Scotland, Robert Crawford has stitched together a workable vision of a nation by dashing the idea of a singular voice to the rocks. Instead of impressing a prescriptive Scottishness as MacDiarmid sought to do, Crawford has used MacDiarmid's methods to re-approach Robert Burns's methodology of intimate connection. Whether through the purposeful abstraction of a near-indecipherable Franken-language or the techno-organic transmission of data through

pulsing electrons or fluid transfer, these buffers allow the sometimes radically different presences within the poems to interact and coexist. Though economic and social factors are making the upcoming Scottish Independence Referendum look more and more difficult to pass this time around, Robert Crawford has shown that the Scottish culture is already robust and unique enough to exist on its own. A paradoxical “chip of a nation” and an “explosion reversed,” Scotland's status as a nation seems like an eventuality at this point.



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