Rejecting Limits and Opening Possibilities in the Works of Iain Banks

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ABSTRACT

This text deals with the question of Scottish self-definition and also the escape from it. Scottish identity debate in 1980s and 1990s took on different forms and searched for other inspirations: outside Scotland or in dealing with identities traditionally overlooked due to the overall focus on national identity. This paper thus analyses the question of Scottishness through the subversive voice addressing the identities traditionally problematic in Scotland or even through individual self-definition as presented in Iain Banks's novels The Wasp Factory *(1984) and* The Crow Road *(1992).*

The classification of Iain Banks as a writer is probably as difficult as the classification of Scottishness itself. To claim that Iain Banks is a representative of a Scottish literary tradition poses several problems: to what extent can the works of this author be regarded as representative and how does he fit into the context of any literary tradition? He is not part of any school or movement and his literary voice does not fall under any simple label. Banks embodies many dualities, many undecided and hard-to-classify issues – and this is perhaps a feature that makes him particularly Scottish.

To assess the cultural milieu as represented in Banks's works, the most significant aspect seems to be an omnipresent mood of *identity tiredness*. After the traumatic experience of the failed devolution vote in 1979, when Scotland lost the chance to alter its status as a stateless nation after not being able to muster the necessary forty per cent of votes to enable the abolishing of the Home Rule, the sense of national identity sank into depths. Then in the mid-90's Scotland was once again disputing its future as an independent state after the Scottish Parliament was re-established.[1] McCrone suggests that the belief in exceptionalism might provide a sense of self-worth in compensation for a perceived subordinate status, but it is a trap leading only to the consideration of the trivial and epiphenomenal.[2] The search for national identity in Scotland had greatly overpowered the importance of other identities, yet it is clear that the label "Scottish" does not effectively describe most of Scotland's population.

The construction of Scottish identity represents a process burdened by many hindrances. Cristie March identifies dualities that are typical for the Scottish situation: the tension between the colonial and colonised, region and nation, Scotland and Britain, Highland and Lowland, and – last, but not least – masculine and feminine.[3] These are also reflected in the complex linguistic situation marked by the uneasy relationships between Gaelic, Scots, Scottish dialect and Standard English. The desire to re-define itself mainly stems from the collapse of the above dichotomised

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1   T. M. Devine, R. J. Finlay, *Scotland in the 20th Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 8.

2   David Pattie, "The Lessons of *Lanark*, Iain Banks, Alasdair Gray and the Scottish Political Novel," *The Transgressive Iain Banks: Essays on a Writer Beyond Borders*, eds. Martyn Colebrook and Katharine Cox (Jefferson and London: McFarland and Co., 2013), 15.

3   Cristie March, "Bella and the Beast (and a Few Dragons, Too)," *Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 43.4 (2002): 323–349.

framework of definitions and aims at breaking away from traditional myths and icons to arrive at new understanding of contemporary Scotland – not locked within itself, but in relation to the global community.

To address at least briefly some of the most oppressing Scottish dualities, the position between the *colonial* and *colonised* has to be noted in relation to the Act of Union of 1707. This was to a great extent an economically motivated decision and enabled the Scots to share in the imperial trade. "The Scots regarded themselves as the 'mother nation' of the Empire and the Union was portrayed as an imperial relationship with England".[4] On the other hand, the signs of subordination of Scotland within the Union are more than obvious in various spheres, yet are best illustrated by the linguistic situation of the multilingual Scottish milieu. Standard English was traditionally the language of institutions and, therefore, power. By linking the situation of Scotland to other countries, in which English was imposed as the language of power, one establishes the tradition of oppression for Scotland.[5]

The duality represented by the tension between *nation* and *region* is equally important. Many theoreticians claim that a nation must have functioning political institutions, which support and convey nationhood. This remains a problem in Scottish environment, in which the country's Parliament has only been relatively recently re-established and its activities already perceived with a great degree of suspicion and criticism. Cristopher Whyte addresses the problem as follows:

> [O]ne could call them small cultures, minority cultures, nations without a state. My own preference would be to speak of national groupings which have extremely limited political control over the internal organisation and external relations of the territory they inhabit. It is a constantly shifting category.[6]

Furthermore, the situation of Scotland is problematic due to the tensions between *Scottishness* and *Britishness*, which is not limited only to Scottish self-definition, but also concerns the external perception of Scotland. The cultural and historical proximity of the two nations often leads to ignoring their differences. Cristie March suggests that Scotland and its national identity are subjected to double pressure – internal as well as external.[7] The mutual interconnectedness is taken for sameness and Scottish cultural autonomy is often overlooked.

The last matter to be considered here, one which will serve as an example of cultural dualities of modern Scotland, is that of gender representation. The problem in this area is posed by the indisputably masculine nature of Scottish cultural representations and icons, which do not reflect changes that have occurred in traditional gender roles. Furthermore, Scottish history, social development, literary activity and politics have shown a significant lack of interest in gender issues. In all these spheres, however, women have made a significant impact on the development of Scottish national culture. A whole generation of modern Scottish women writers have combatted successfully not only the prevalent Scottish cultural clichés, but also artistic silence and the lack of representation.

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4 R. J. Finlay, *A Partnership for Good: Scottish Politics and the Union since 1880* (Edinburgh: Donald, 1997), 15.

5 March, "Bella and the Beast," 325.

6 Christopher Whyte, *Gendering the Nation: Studies in Modern Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), ix.

7 March, "Bella and the Beast," 326.

Iain Banks represents the generation of Scottish writers who were inspired by the revolutionary writing of the Glasgow school. Similarly to e.g. Janice Galloway, Banks describes his encounter with Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* as a literary revelation and considers it "one of the best pieces of Scottish literature at least since the second world war and possibly this century"[8]. Linking Banks to Gray and Kelman by no means suggests that the author is merely pursuing the Glasgow school literary model. Nevertheless, it is true that some of his novels, especially *The Bridge*, follow the post-Lanark mode of exploring the city-scape as Gifford suggests "to distort urban representation via the methods of science-fiction, surrealist colouring and dream allegory"[9]. Generally, Banks is a solitaire, a writer extremely difficult to label or even connect with a particular genre. What links him with the works of the Glasgow school is the tendency to break free of any fixed imagery and to cross established boundaries and thus create tension within Scottish writing. His likeness to Gray is most obvious on the level of his deep subversions and it also shows in the very structure and character of his novels.

The works of Iain Banks are connected to the Glasgow school mainly through their clear rejection of fixity (in terms of genre, imagery, language and structure). His desire to remain free of any bounds is also conveyed through his personal identity. As Thom Nairn suggests, after the publication of his first novel, *The Wasp Factory*, Banks tried to persuade the reading public as well as the critics that *Iain Banks* is in fact a trademark of a whole group of authors.[10] Banks's literary identity is further complicated by the existence of Iain M. Banks, i.e. the author's name used for his science-fiction works. The division of Banks's works into the so-called 'mainstream novels' and science-fiction has always been considered to some extent schizophrenic and the reaction of critics has become almost stereotypical: most attention is paid to the mainstream novels, the SF works remaining largely ignored. The variety of the texts is again rather striking: the novels, or Banks's own genre of *space operas*, contain typical SF features, yet the author deliberately violates the structures that a science-fiction reader would expect. Alan MacGillivray comments on some stereotypical approaches to Banks:

> Novels lacking that crucial middle initial are regularly lauded by the literary critics, novels with it are either ignored outside the SF field or curtly reviewed with grudging sufferance. The first decision has invariably been to ignore large areas of Iain Banks's science fiction and concentrate on what is rather dubiously called his "mainstream" fiction.[11]

Banks, however, has found a way of overcoming the critical hesitation concerning a significant part of his writing. As suggested above, his general rejection of fixed boundaries concerns also the genre of his works. He creates a cross-generic blend of a novel even in his mainstream works built on a mix of the real and the fantastic. This is also true for the variety of topics that the novels address. Published in 1984, Banks's first novel *The Wasp Factory* presents

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8 Cristie March, *Rewriting Scotland: Welsh, McLean, Warner, Banks, Galloway and Kennedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 7.

9 Gifford, 39.

10 Thom Nairn, "Iain Banks and the Fiction Factory," *The Scottish Novel Since the Seventies*, eds. Gavin Wallace and Randall Stevenson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 127–135.

11 March, "Rewriting Scotland," 81.

the bizarre world of a teenager living on an island off the north coast of Scotland. This island represents the boy's own territory, suffused with a gloomy and oppressive atmosphere, shown mainly through the obscure mythology and totemic practices embarked upon by its adolescent inhabitant. The interesting twist at the end puts the whole novel into a completely different light, adding altogether new meanings to some moments, draining the meaning from others. Generically, the novel oscillates between a Bildungsroman and a horror story, full of strangely black humour. The work offers very interesting interpretations which can be related to the process of opening up concepts of Scottishness, but also of gender, obsession with religion and technology, depiction of family life, the search for self-hood, etc. A similar haziness characterises also the second selected novel, *The Crow Road*. The work initially seems to be a Scottish family saga, while at the second glance it is the story of a maturing boy, yet it also has some features of a detective story. Banks himself characterises the novel as: "about 147,000 words at the last count, but seriously, it's about Death, Sex, Faith, cars, Scotland and drink"[12].

One interesting point of analysis is the linguistic distinction between local Scots and Standard English. Banks does not distinguish between the two varieties to suggest or emphasise the national identity of his characters, but he often resorts to a kind of phonetic transcription of spoken Scots to distinguish between the characters' varied levels of sophistication. Cristie March further suggests that phonetic narrative in Banks's works "offers a comic relief as characters, caught in situations beyond their understanding, struggle to make meaning of their shifting circumstances"[13]. In *The Wasp Factory* the juxtaposition of local Scots or phonetic narrative and Standard English always signifies a situation marked by a lack of understanding or a feeling of estrangement. What is interesting about Banks's use of Scots is that, unlike for example James Kelman, who uses local Scots to characterise the national or social identity of his protagonists, Banks leaves the use of Scots to the protagonist's milieu, from which s/he feels estranged. Thus, the author reverses the signification of local or national language: situations in which the protagonist uses Standard English but where his/her surroundings are linguistically characterised by the use of local language or dialect are marked by the greatest feeling of oddity the main protagonist is experiencing. Such situations usually occur when Frank for some reason leaves his own territory of the island and tries to attempt social contact. Since he cannot find any sexual interest in girls, however, his communication with them is always burdened with a lack of understanding. The following example is taken from a chapter describing Frank's desperate attempt to enter into conversation with his friend Jamie and a girl that they met on a Saturday night in a pub: "'Is he yur bruthur or sumhin?''Naw, he's ma friend.' 'Zay olwiz get like iss?' 'Ay, usually, on a Saturday night.'"[14] Frank, in the meantime, is left wondering how to enter the conversation:

> They walked on either side of me and talked nonsense as though it was all so important, and I, with more brains than the two of them put together and information of the most vital nature, couldn't get

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12 Nairn, 127.

13 March, 85–6.

14 Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory* (London: Abacus, 1990), 80.

a word out. There had to be a way. … I thought very carefully about *words* and how you made them. I checked my tongue and tested my throat. I *had* to pull myself together. I had to *communicate*.[15]

Though it may seem that the main hindrance is Frank's drunkenness, the speech that follows proves this assumption wrong. Firstly, Frank truly struggles to find a common theme and looks for inspiration around him, when he finally receives an impulse after spotting the sign for "Union Street". His attempt to analyse the origin of the name: "… I thought the 'union' referred to in said nomenclature delineated an association of working people, and it did seem to me at the time to be quite a social thing for the town fathers to call it a street; …"[16] Although uttered in a perfectly eloquent Standard English, Frank's attempt to convey his message is a complete failure, and the only reaction to his words is the reluctant comment "'Dud he say sumhin er?' 'I thought he was just clearing his throat,' said Jamie."[17] The fact that the formal and intellectually challenging words of the protagonist are completely inaudible to the other participants in the exchange signifies the feeling of estrangement and lack of understanding and, furthermore, places English as the language with the least value, the use of which does not bring the protagonist any closer to understanding, being understood or communicating with his surroundings.

The reversed use of Scots can be linked to another aspect of Banks's writing – its regional classification, as the linguistic demarcation of a particular region has been characterized as a typical feature of regional writing. Labelling Banks a regional writer, however, is as problematic as all other attempts to categorise this author – once again, he tries to open up the regional genre and to break beyond fixed boundaries. Focusing especially on the linguistic features of the regional novel, the development of the literary handling of local dialect in relation to the linguistic standard must be noted. The use of local Scots has undergone significant development, and is no longer perceived as a hindrance to a successful narrative structure or a sign of the author's inadequacy regarding the linguistic standard. It has become a challenge to linguistic exclusivity and a new communal voice. Craig gives the example of Kelman's famous use of internal monologue, in which the multiplicity of voices is interwoven.[18] Banks uses local dialect in a rather different way: his dialect is not communal, quite the contrary. The voice of his protagonists is not collective, but solitary and signifies alienation from the community. Dialect and Standard English are not interwoven in an internal speech as in the case of Kelman's characters. On the contrary, they are juxtaposed and distributed so that they signify the divergent perspective and position of the individual character – not in terms of a region, but in terms of intellect and the ability to communicate with others.

Distorted communication takes on another form in *The Crow Road* in which the author sets off specific characters by the use of coded or cryptic language. Coded language on one hand suggests another generic blend, as the novel contains some features of the mystery tale and the detective story. The most important message, one which in fact helps to disclose the main mystery, i.e. the disappearance of Prentice's uncle Rory, is contained in Rory's discovered diary, which is

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15 Banks, 81.

16 Banks, 81.

17 Banks, 81.

18 Cairns Craig, "Scotland and the Regional Novel," *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland.* ed. K. D. M. Snell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 221–256.

written in cryptogramatic form: "*Fri* F @ Casm L.Rvr, trak, hills. Bothy; fire, fd, dnk, js. (F stnd) rt in clng! guns. F nsg. trs & scrts. F barfd"[19]. The meaning of the code is known only to a select few, who possess the key to understanding, i.e. Prentice and his friend and lover, Ashley. The second important role of the use of cryptic messages is thus to categorise the characters: the code is a secret language which signifies the special position of Prentice and Ashley and their special role in the community. On the whole, Banks represents a generation of authors for whom the use of local Scots alone no longer symbolises greater creativity and freedom. On the contrary, the widespread use of Scots as a communal language for them has become a cliché. Banks, therefore, reverses the roles of Scots and Standard English: he lets his protagonists use Standard English in juxtaposition to the language of the community, thus signifying the solitary and estranged position of the character.

Iain Banks's works can also be characterised as political, mainly on the level of the deep subversions of commonly used cultural representations and icons. He is not as openly political as e.g. Alasdair Gray, whose works challenge the fixity and entrapment of Scotishness, or those of James Kelman, which fire at the binding features of social identity. Banks subverts the concept of the Scottish masculine hero, Gaelic mythology, as well as the constraints of religious identity.

Banks's protagonists in both analysed works are characters who do not fit into the society or the surrounding community due to the lack of a quality that such a society most appreciates. The portrayal of Prentice McHoan in *The Crow Road* easily falls into this category. He is a member of a prominent family, so he is expected to reach high achievements in the society. However, his ambitions lie elsewhere. Prentice's desire to be independent from his father's money ends in financial problems. His studies are not particularly successful either. His greatest aim seems to be the clarification of the family business, in which he finally succeeds. In the case of *The Wasp Factory*, it is a clearly masculine heroism which the society looks up to most. After all, the novel is set in the north of Scotland and focuses on adolescent years spent in a society where "machismo is paramount"[20]. Indeed, one of the main traits of macho attitudes – hatred towards women – is very strongly present in the novel. The main character's father is portrayed as a man whose unfortunate choice of a woman led him as well as his son to hate women completely. Frank openly admits:

> My greatest enemies are women and the sea. These things I hate. Women because they are weak and stupid and live in the shadow of men and are nothing compared to them --- I don't even like having them on the island, not even Mrs Clamp, who comes every week on a Saturday to clean the house … she is ancient and sexless the way very old or the very young are, but she's still *been* a woman …[21]

It is interesting however, that Frank's hatred for women was triggered off not by their weakness, but quite the contrary, by the strength of his mother and by his father's inability to resist his wife's abusive treatment. The fear of being subject to similar weakness, combined with the hatred of anything to do with his mother, leads Frank to commit many acts of violence, including the murder of his younger brother.

The reason for Frank's hatred toward the sea is equally interesting, and to some extent is fuelled by a similar fear. On his island, Frank is an absolute ruler, one who has invented his own

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19 Iain Banks, *The Crow Road*, (London: Abacus, 1993), 412.

20 Nairn, 128.

21 Banks, *The Wasp Factory*, 43.

complex rituals (see below) and has set the boundaries of his own territory, which the surroundings (since unpopulated) seemingly respect. The sea, however, is the only challenge to Frank's absolute power: "… the Sea has always frustrated me, destroying what I have built, washing away what I have left, wiping clean the marks I have made. … The Sea is a sort of mythological enemy … It does things to the world and so do I; we should both be feared."[22] Likening himself to one of the world's powers, Frank strives to enhance his own importance and compensate for the imagined lack of a macho character.

Apart from his open hatred of women and lack of any attraction to girls of his own age, Frank displays violent and merciless traces of the machismo character, as the book contains scenes of burning dogs and sheep, blown up rabbits, etc. Such behaviours may be partly explained by Frank's belief in his sexual disability, which many see as the blackest humour in the novel. Not only Frank, but also the reader is led to believe that Frank's genitals were chewed off by a bulldog when he was attacked as a small boy. Thus, his violence and mercilessness can be justified in part as an attempt to compensate for his lack of masculinity. It is only at the very end of the book that the hero and the character find out the whole truth – due to his absolute disappointment with women and hatred for them, Francis's father decided to undertake an experiment in which, by means of hormonal manipulation, he coaxed his daughter Frances into believing that she was a man (hence the story of the eaten genitals). The final twist, in which the traditional attributes of femininity and masculinity are reversed, once again firmly strikes a subversive chord within Banks's writing. The author's reversal (one of many, but probably his most famous) puts the ideal of masculine heroism, represented throughout the work by Frank's atrocities, into a completely different light.

> Why? *How* could I have done those things?
> Perhaps it was because I thought that I had had all that really mattered in the world, the whole reason – and means – for our continuances as a species, stolen from me before I even knew its value. Perhaps I murdered for revenge in each case, jealously exacting – through the only potency at my command – a toll from those who passed within my range; …[23]

The fact that the reader enters the world of Francis Leslie Cauldhame and leaves the world of Frances Lesley Cauldhame, in which Frank's deeds suddenly seem petty and the crimes appalling, only shows that identities depend on certain circumstances and change according to them.

Another issue connected to deep subversions is that of mythology. Douglas Gifford has identified the return to mythology as a strong phenomenon of Banks's literary generation. He has contrasted the mood of social realism and sceptical materialism (appearing for example in James Kelman's writing), which in his view came about as a reaction to the failure of the ideals of Socialism in the United Kingdom and is marked by a strong distrust of mythology and the literary development of 1980s. This movement resulted in a new relationship with the country and its culture, and repudiated the simple urban realism characterised above.[24] The question as to whether Banks's works can be classified in terms of this reaction to social realism is addressed by

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22 Banks, *The Wasp Factory,* 43.

23 Banks, *The Wasp Factory*, 182–3.

24 Gifford, 17.

the following analysis of mythology and the way in which the relationship between the rural and the urban are explored in both novels.

At the beginning of *The Wasp Factory* the reader is invited into the bizarre private world of rituals which Frank has created. For Frank these represent a comforting or prophetic quality, while at the same time they are extremely demanding and time-consuming, thus hindering Frank from leaving his world for too long. Thus, he has on one hand created a mythology which empowers him and gives him a sense of uniqueness, since no one but him understands the rituals or the prophesies of the Factory. On the other hand, the self-invented mythology creates a trap into which Frank himself falls. As in the very first sentence of the novel, Frank is often portrayed as "making the rounds" of his ritual-imbued "Sacrifice Poles", for which he has to regularly supply freshly killed birds and rabbits and on which he has to urinate, as well as the extraordinary Wasp Factory (an old tower-clock face, which serves as a maze for wasps and by means of which Frank tries to foresee oncoming events). He cannot break away from the island, and blinded by his seclusion as well as unnerved by the growingly grim prophecies of the Factory, he simply waits for what is to come. Cristie March sees Frank's island mythology as a means of self-protection, as she claims that "only within his carefully maintained spiritual territory does he feel safe".[25]

This view, however, seems to overlook the crucial *other* side of Frank's mythological experiment. The self-inflicting ability to foretell future events with the help of the Factory scares Frank, especially when confronted with reality: the possible return of his brother Eric (a seriously disturbed boy, whose mental instability often impels him to set dogs and sheep on fire). Banks's approach to mythology thus reveals another of his reversals: the island, with all its myths and rituals required to be performed by Frank, should on one hand add to Frank's sense of importance and power while at the same time serving as a protective refuge from the *real* world of the local community or Frank's immediate family. On the other hand, however, the outcomes of the rituals only point Frank back to the world from which he desires to escape, and thus only enhance his vulnerability.

The impact of the return to mythology in Scottish fiction does not stem from an artificial recreation of old Gaelic or other myths. The above analysis shows that a completely new mythology is being created, which is however closely connected with a particular location and its specifics. Gifford stresses the importance of this development: "These writers do not work through exploitation of the supernatural, but nevertheless do work with continuous sub-text of tradition, legend and myth, with a deliberate intention to connect contemporary and past Scotlands."[26] When related to the issue of political subversion, this tendency clearly rids the Scottish countryside of its traditional and limiting icons, which were likewise constructed artificially. The replacement that is being offered is much more encompassing and leaves space for a free Scottish imagination based on the newly perceived connection between past and present.

One of the limiting icons which the above-mentioned return to mythology strives to remove is the strong distinction between urban and rural Scotland. The strong and clichéd tradition of the working-class urban male hero, preceded by the Kailyard tradition, posed particularly strong

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25 March, 92.

26 Gifford, 38.

boundaries in terms of formulating Scottish cultural identity. The duality concerning urban and rural, which pervaded in the Scottish mind due to this heritage, was seen by some critics as a burden on Scottish communal life. Gifford notes the development toward the removal of these false and artificially constructed boundaries between urban and rural Scottish awareness. He again identifies Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* as the incitement of a whole series of dystopian city nightmares, ones which symbolise the beginnings of a more optimistic view of the Scottish community where strong boundaries between country and city are removed.[27] Banks's novel represents the succeeding stage in this development. Although Banks found the mode of Gray's *Lanark* irresistible and launched his own dystopian work, *The Bridge*, he continued on to explore further possibilities of linking the rural and urban imagery of Scotland. In the traditional literary explorations of these regions, authors mostly aimed at depicting separately the specific character of the industrial (or post-industrial) areas and rural Scotland, to a great extent internalising the above dualism. In *The Crow Road*, Banks offers the possibility of finding a link between the two. This is already suggested by the name of the novel which, as Gifford explains, unites sociohistorical reality and literary expression:

> [T]he title sum[s] up the dualisms of contemporary Scotland, since it refers as a kenning to the sky, the place of flight and escape (as in MadDiarmid's 'the laverock's hoose', or the old English 'swan's way'), but also to the very real Crow road which brings the road from the Highlands into the heart of Glasgow."[28]

The combined reference to a literary metaphor and an actual particular location can be understood as the author's suggestion of the power of a literary work to enrich the existing landscape by routes which lead across the existing boundaries. Pure reality can only overcome these boundaries with difficulty, if at all. Such a claim is once again made by Douglas Gifford, who suggests that authors following the tradition of urban dystopian works by e.g. Alasdair Gray deliberately work towards the breakdown of the artificially constructed boundaries between the urban and rural Scottish awareness.[29] The symbol of the road connecting Lochgair, the fictitious Highland hometown of the protagonist, with the city of Glasgow suggests the ease with which the validity of such boundaries can be challenged. The distance between the two divided identities is in reality quite short. As Prentice McHoan, the novel's protagonist, puts it: "From Glasgow to Lochgair is a hundred and thirty-five kilometres by road; less as the crow flies, or as the missile cruises."[30] The dualism between the rural and the urban can be negotiated as easily as the distance that the protagonists so nonchalantly travel between the country and the city.

The presence of mythology and the need for its recovery in order or find meaningful connections between past and present or urban and rural are also expressed by means of mingling the fictitious and the real. By blurring boundaries between fantasy and reality, the author suggests the overall meaninglessness of boundaries as such. The very setting of the novel is represented by a mixture of real and invented locations. Gifford identifies the effect of this method by claiming

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27 Gifford, 38.

28 Gifford, 41.

29 Gifford, 38.

30 Banks, *The Crow Road*, 442.

that "teasing near-identifications (a method familiar in the modern Scottish novel in Jenkins, McIllvanney and more recently Douglas Dunn) with real places and events, imply that this is about *Scotlands*, about possibilities."[31] Merging the real and the illusory in *The Crow Road* is, however, not limited only to the novel's setting. The actual plot of the novel can be characterised as an attempt to overcome illusions. The most obvious example is the disappearance of Uncle Rory, who is believed to have left Lochgair to travel. At the end of the novel Uncle Rory is shown by Prentice's investigation to have never left and, in fact, to have been killed by his brother Fergus.

The illusory character of some parts of the plot helps to place Iain Banks within a group of Scottish writers resisting the prevailing mode of realism. The combination of reality and illusion in modern Scottish fiction does not seem to be of a great issue to the authors themselves. Gifford claims that mind and reality are always in interplay anyhow, and: "we live in worlds we ourselves create in our language and our minds. In a sense, contemporary Scottish writing is deciding that, if the ancient traditions and hidden powers of Scotland are dead, then it's necessary to reinvent them."[32] Such a claim has strong implications, especially with regard to attempts to rid contemporary Scottish culture of fixity.

The deep subversions in the works of Iain Banks can be summarised as a continuation of the route initiated by earlier Scottish authors. Banks, however, goes beyond, painting a dystopian or existential picture of Scotland. His works move toward a more optimistic view of a renewed communal society where boundaries are crossed and old, binding mythologies are reinvented. Through his eclectic writing, which oscillates between different genres and addresses a variety of themes, the author fully reflects the previously characterised Scottish instabilities and dualisms. The rejection of limits that underlines Banks's fiction opens up endless possibilities for the writer himself: as he is not linked with any movement or genre, his writing is open to any incitements that he finds interesting.

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31 Gifford, 42.

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