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What are you frightened of? I'm one of those people who watch horror movies with my eyes half covered. And yet I like that enjoyable frisson of fear that comes with allowing yourself to be deliberately, safely scared. Maybe it's this attraction that draws me towards the Gothic. Ever since teenage angst made me turn my fingernails, hair, clothes, eyes and lips a kaleidoscope of black I've been fascinated with Gothic in all its forms. But what does Gothic mean? Is there more to it than a dingy dress sense and a miserable outlook? And more specifically what does Gothic mean to Scotland?

It takes a bit of courage to approach young goths. They're not so much frightening as intimidating. I don't think they're going to vamp me, but do suspect they'll be looking down their nose at my dress sense. Goths put style above comfort. It's extreme fashion, a hybrid of Victorian vampires, rubber fetish and Pippy Longstocking. Out goth hunting in Glasgow's West End I spot a prime specimen. Tall and leather coated, a combination of *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *The Night of the Living Dead*. I approach and politely enquire what his outfit is all about. The goth says a rude word and strides on. I think this is how it should be. Why should he open the secrets of his particular crypt? But in the service of literature I persist and find Rachel and Hailey, young teenagers, dark dressed but sweeter of nature. 'People think being a goth is only about wearing black and listening to the music, but it's much more than that,' says Rachel. 'Most teenagers are just like oh Justin Timberlake and Pop Idol, and it's so sad. They're missing out by not opening their minds to things that are original and a bit more thought provoking,' adds Hailey.

So Gothic is a movement of extremes. It's part of counter culture, attractive to young folk, the alienated and disenfranchised. It might also be a safe way of exploring personal identity. But is there more to it than fashion?

Art and literature are at the biggest exponents of Gothic. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, constantly in print since 1764, is generally credited as the first British Gothic novel. The plot of *Otranto* figures an ancestral curse which must be lifted, but which results in all sorts of spooky goings on. There's foul weather, secret passages, long corridors, frightening apparitions, wicked tyrants, distressed heroines and endless scenes of flight. It's almost a template for the Gothic and you'll find echoes of *Otranto* in any modern horror movie. Scottish Gothic embraces all of these elements, then gives it's own twist to the movement.

Gothic is associated with the past, crumbling castles, decaying churches and haunted ruins, things Scotland has in abundance. But early Scottish Gothic was inclined towards a different past than its English counterpart. Put very simplistically, the perceived loss of Scottish national identity and the move towards a more Anglo-British culture associated with the 1707 Union resulted in nostalgia for an earlier, 'more Scottish' era. If the past was considered more Scottish then perhaps it's inevitable that Gothic in Scotland became associated with national identity.

Glasgow artist Heather Nevay bursts out laughing when I phone to ask if she's influenced by the Gothic. Propped on a music stand beside her is a book entitled *Paintings of the Gothic Era*.

'It's the fairy tales without happy endings that influence me,' says Heather, 'not the sweet ones. I'm drawn towards their underlying symbols, their nastiness and uneasy sexuality. Artists have always taken folklore and used it towards their own ends.'

Folklore real and imagined is central to Scottish Gothic and its quest for national identity. When it was posthumously discovered that *Fingal an Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books* (1761) was not after all translation of an original epic by Ossian, a third century Gaelic bard, the reputation of James Macpherson who had created the poem from a combination of translated texts and his own poetry, suffered. But the tales were more than a literary hoax. Macpherson was a member of one of the clans at the heart of the 1745 rising, and Ossian is redolent with loss. Scottish Gothic is plagued by corpses who refuse to lie down and the possession of the living by the dead is at the core of Ossian's poems. Artist Calum Colvin's recent multimedia exhibition, *Ossian - Fragments of Poetry*, takes Macpherson's text as its starting point. Colvin employs popular culture and a literary past to present an image of existing Scottish national identity. In *Twa Dugs*, inspired by the Burns poem of the same name, two canines stand back to back, one surrounded by Rangers souvenirs, the other by Celtic. It's a clever, amusing and shaming image.

While Walpole and other early English proponents of the Gothic concern themselves with an aristocratic past, Scottish Gothic inclines towards more ordinary members of society and their language. Robert Burns' *Tam O'Shanter* gives an Ayrshire dialect voice to the Gothic in poor Tam, seduced by whisky then pursued by witches after he tries to look up their skirts. *Tam O'Shanter* displays another characteristic of the Gothic - it doesn't take itself too seriously. The poem treats us to a list of terrible profanities displayed on the alter table and assures us there were other objects *mair . . . horrible and awefu', Which even to name wad be unlawfu'*. Tam is drunk and we can never be sure that it wasn't the whisky that invoked the Auld Nick and his coven.

Walter Scott thought Gothic literature itself was intoxicating. He wrote, 'Perhaps the perusal of such works may, without injustice, be compared with the use of opiates'. It's with Scott that Scottish Gothic really comes into its own. His interest in Gothic was allied to a love of folklore and a desire to record the stories and customs of country people.

In his story, 'Wandering Willie's Tale' from *Redgauntlet* (1824), fiddler Steenie Stevenson, who's also had a dram or two, descends into Hell to reclaim his lost rent receipt from his dead Laird. There he meets the Laird's dead companions whose, 'smiles were fearfully contorted from time to time; and their laughter passed into such wild sounds as made my gudesire's very nails grow blue, and chilled the marrow in his banes.'

Scott's love of the Gothic extended to architecture and is reflected in his monument on Edinburgh's Princess Street. He may have been interested in preserving the stories of the proletariat, but Scott lived in style, transforming the Melrose farm of Cartleyhole (not one to misspell) into the magnificently gothic Abbotsford House. Scott was made of sterner stuff than me. The walls of Abbotsford bristle with weapons and suits of armour stand sentinel in the hallways. Faux-medieval, armorial and slightly creepy, Abbotsford is a fantastic place to visit, but only by day.

Scott's life was not without Gothic moments. In the spring of 1819 aged forty-eight, Scott fell dangerously ill. Duke of Buchan planned a fantastic funeral for him and tried to push his way into the sick room to tell Scott the details and cheer him up. The writer recovered and survived until 1832; the Duke's reaction is not recorded.

Scott gave Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* a wonderful review. Mary had spent much of her adolescence in Scotland and Dr Frankenstein flees to Orkney pursued by his creature. But it may have been Scottish experiments into galvanisation and

hypothesises that electricity could help reanimate corpses that helped provide ‘the science bits’ in the novel.

Strict 19th Scottish Presbyterianism taught that the Devil is always waiting, often in disguise, for an opportunity to make off with a soul - the more Christian the more desirable. This is almost a summary of the plot of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) by James Hogg. Robert Wringhim, the anti hero of *Justified Sinner*, who believes himself one of the elect, is persuaded by a mysterious shape changer, Gil-Martin, that his exalted state allows him absolute moral freedom and is encouraged in several outrages including the murder of his mother, father and brother. We never know if Gil-Martin is truly the Devil or an aspect of the repressed Wringhim’s psyche breaking out with dramatic consequences, an uncertainty typical of Gothic.

Early Scottish Gothic looked towards its German counterpart and *Justified Sinner* involves elements of the doppelganger, popular in German folk tales. The hero makes an infernal pact, which releases his double who then tries to take his place, sometimes appearing at his job or committing crimes in his name, but most often attempting to steal his girlfriend. Finally in order to rid himself of the double, the hero murders him, but as the double is inextricably part of him, the murder is suicide.

This also relates to Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). As the nineteenth century progressed so did the idea of the divided self, and the realisation that the person we see may not be the whole story. There are suggestions of a gay subplot in *Jekyll and Hyde*, peopled as it is exclusively by men and featuring the violent death of late night stroller Danvers Carew, which reads like an instance of gay bashing. Stevenson himself denied the theory stating that Jekyll’s real sin is hypocrisy. The doctor states, ‘it came about that I concealed my

pleasures; and when I reached the years of reflection, and began to look round me, and take stock of my progress and position in the world, I stood already committed to a profound duplicity of life.'

Jekyll and Hyde had been a long time brewing. Stevenson had already collaborated with HE Henley on a play entitled *Deacon Brodie*, based on the true story of the Edinburgh burgess who was respectable by day thief by night. The deacon had been hung for his exploits in 1788, but his sang froid as he approached death, 'What is hanging? A leap in the dark,' combined with the fact that he'd designed the gibbet himself and boasted he knew a means to escape it, ensured that rumours of his survival persisted.

Science is everywhere in the Gothic. Stevenson was friendly with James Young Simpson who gave his name to Edinburgh's maternity hospital and whose use of chloroform to assist childbirth was initially reviled as unGodly by Church leaders. In an argument that parallels current church objections to homosexuality, they maintained the Bible insisted the pain was women's punishment for original sin and must not be alleviated. When I met Owen Dudley Edwards, reader in history and Edinburgh University he described Simpson's 1847 chloroform experiment. The scientist declared, 'This will revolutionise medical science!' clamped a mask to his face, and fell down on the floor unconscious. These chloroform experiments may well have inspired the genesis of Dr Jekyll, an overreaching scientist, who experiments with separating body and soul.

The Gothic image of the ambitious, morally blind scientist persists into modern times, creeping into debates about cloning and biotechnology. Lay people fear doctors and our unease is reflected in the Gothic. Ken Currie's brilliant portrait of Professors Steele, Cuschieri and Lane of Ninewells Hospital Dundee, *Three*

*Oncologists*, has the venerable professors looking guiltily towards the viewer, interrupted in the act of passing through a dark curtain, looking as if they are about to embark on something very sinister indeed, and yes, one of them has blood on his hands.

Some rather more sinister servants of medicine inspired Stevenson's short story, 'The Body Snatchers.' Visit the museum of the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh and in amongst the glass cases displaying medical apparatus and body parts, you'll find a corner devoted to Dr Robert Knox, pioneering surgeon. One case contains a mock-up of Knox's studio, including a wax model of the doctor, who seems to stare at visitors with frankly anatomical interest. In a nearby case is the death mask of William Burke and a small pocket book bound in his tanned skin, samples of which were distributed to dignitaries after his execution.

William Burke and William Hare provided a regular supply of exceedingly fresh cadavers to one of the leading anatomists of 1820's Edinburgh, Dr Robert Knox. Their exploits began in November of 1827 after one of Hare's lodgers, an old army pensioner named Donald, fell ill and died. Hare was outraged that Donald had passed away owing £4 in rent. After the authorities had been called to fetch the man's body, he came up with a plan to collect the debt. With Burke's assistance, he hid Donald's body and filled the coffin with tree bark. After the funeral the two went off to find the offices of top anatomy instructor Professor Munro, but, in asking directions, were redirected to the classrooms of Professor Robert Knox. Burke and Hare got the grand sum of £7 for the body, decided they had struck on a very good business plan and began bumping people off to sell to the anatomists. It was a profitable if grizzly business and they murdered sixteen victims before finally being uncovered.

The National Museum of Scotland has a section devoted to Victorian funeral customs. In amongst them is a mystery, in 1836 a collection of little peg dolls, all individually dressed, each with its own little coffin, were found by some children in a cave on Arthur's Seat. No one really knows what they signify. It has been speculated they might have been sympathetic burials for Burke and Hare's victims, taken to the anatomists table and denied decent funerals. Or employed in some kind of witchcraft. Ian Rankin, who famously referenced the dolls in his twelfth Inspector Rebus novel, *The Falls*, has described them as, 'yet another example of the hidden Edinburgh'. Rankin's characters must be mindful of the past lest it sits up and bites them. He has cited Stevenson as an influence and Rankin's evocation of the modern capital continually reminds us that beneath the trendy wine bars and smart shops is an older Edinburgh, a place of dark tunnels and lost streets. Like Scottish Gothic, the city is beholden to its history.

Author Alan Bissett describes Gothic as 'not a genre but a way of seeing' and in the anthology, *Damage Land: New Scottish Gothic Fiction*, he collected contributions from a diverse bunch of Scottish writers including Laura Hird, Ali Smith, John Burnside, Janice Galloway and Michel Faber.

Scottish Gothic is definitely 'in' and Faber has just completed a short story commissioned by the Victoria & Albert Museum to accompany their major exhibition of Gothic Art. He says he gave himself 'permission to turn up the Gothic knob to "11". The scene metamorphosed monstrously and became a gruesome extravaganza of black humour called 'Flesh Remains Flesh' . . . The story also features a heroic taxidermist called Damien Hirsch...'

The adaptability of the Gothic is well established. It's ever changing and ever constant, continually referencing the past, and yet has its sights set firmly on the

future. It's impossible to measure the influence Scotland has had on the Gothic. Would Edgar Allan Poe have become the writer he was if he hadn't spent formative years in Irvin? Scottish writers, artists and alternative dressers are still inspired by the movement, but what is the future for Scottish Gothic? If the Union of the Crowns in 1707 sparked a quest for national identity that ignited a distinctive Scottish strain of the movement, will the establishment of a Scottish Parliament signal its demise?

Historian Owen Dudley Edwards thinks Scottish Gothic will continue to flourish. 'We have the mountain rising around it. (The Parliament) Arthur Seat and Salisbury Crag. . . I'm all for the Scottish Parliament, I rejoice in it very much but the fact that they are dwarfed by a whole series of visible signs of what centred humanity on folklore, upon a mythical past and so on, the Scottish Parliament is bound to become Gothic too!