**The English and Scottish Journeys of J.B. Priestley and Edwin Muir**

While the construction of ‘Britain in the 1930s’ owes much to the observations of contemporaries on the relationships between industrial capitalism, the culture of modernity and the perceived state of the country, distinctions between the constituent nations of Britain tend to be elided. This article compares Priestley’s ‘three Englands’ with the various Scotlands identified by Edwin Muir in *Scottish Journey* (1935), a book intended as a companion volume to *English Journey*.[[1]](#endnote-1) Like Priestley, Muir observes a schematic cultural topography mapped over regional distinctions. Yet Muir is altogether more Manichean, strikingly setting nightmare visions of a country defiled by industrialization against the Edenic Orkney of his childhood. Against such stark alienation, Priestley’s England more readily finds its Scottish counterpart in the Griersonian celebration of modernity as part of a continuing realization of national ‘character’, seen most vividly in the series of short documentary films made for the Glasgow Empire Exhibition of 1938. Poised between the darkest years of the Depression and the run-up to the Second World War, the following discussion considers a snapshot of the views of two writers each somewhat reflexively engaged in a quest for national identity.

Edwin Muir was a poet and translator, born in Orkney in 1887 and married to the novelist Willa Muir. His interests in both modernism and socialism are well-honed in his cultural criticism, although he was himself neither a modernist in style nor a political activist.[[2]](#endnote-2) During the late-1920s and early-1930s, he was a protagonist in the Scottish literary Renaissance, and it is towards the end of that period that we find his and Priestley’s paths, if only as travel writers, appearing to converge. Priestley wandered through England in the autumn of 1933, publishing *English Journey* the following year; Muir drove around Scotland in the summer heatwave of 1934 and *Scottish Journey* came out in 1935.[[3]](#endnote-3) Both books were commissioned by Victor Gollancz and written less than three miles apart, Priestley’s from his study in The Grove, Highgate, Muir’s from 7 Downshire Hill, Hampstead. These were literary men with appropriate North London connections. Yet neither should be dubbed metropolitan intellectuals or members of the liberal elite. Of course, Priestley’s differences with the Bloomsburyites are well documented,[[4]](#endnote-4) and the formative influences of Bradford upon his thinking widely acknowledged, not least by himself. Muir’s unease was more complex: the island poet traumatised by his experience of Glasgow had spent the previous decade in Prague, Dresden, Vienna, Salzburg and Rome as well as London and Sussex, translating Kafka and several other European writers. The sense of perpetual displacement is profound and one that underpins his entire worldview. In their different ways, both authors were Christian socialists, vitriolic in their condemnation of the appalling effects of industrialism. Like adjuncts to the Ordnance Survey, their *Journeys* drew the cultural landscapes of Britain as well as sketching its recent economic and social history. Yet what I find interesting are their attempts to produce a moral topography by plotting regional distinctions in how capitalism had left its victims.

What of these maps? What made places good or bad? I am assuming the reader is familiar with Priestley’s ‘three Englands’: firstly, ‘Old England, the country of the cathedrals and minsters and manor houses and inns, of Parson and Squire; guide-book and quaint highways and byways England’ (397); then ‘nineteenth-century England, the industrial England of coal, iron, steel, cotton, wool, railways; of thousands of rows of little houses all alike … mills, foundries … slag-heaps … bethels in corrugated iron … sooty dismal little towns, and still sootier grim fortress-like cities … the larger part of the Midlands and the North’ (398-9); finally, ‘the new post-war England … of arterial and by-pass roads, of filling stations and factories that look like exhibition buildings, of giant cinemas … bungalows with tiny garages … and everything given away for cigarette coupons’ (401). By comparison, Muir’s Scotland fits a scheme of four chapters - The South, Edinburgh, Glasgow and The Highlands - each presenting a different character, importantly so since the book’s dynamic lay in the search for a unified but elusive national identity. In the Border textile towns of the South – Hawick, Kelso, Galashiels and Selkirk – he discovered ‘a curiously wakeful and vivid air’, explained by the imputation that they had ‘kept their old tradi­tions more or less intact’ (43): ‘the weaving of tweeds and other woollen cloths, which, being essen­tially local and distinctive, [had] survived the intensifying onset of Industrialism that ha[d] eaten into the core of other communities’ (44). Here, he claims, ‘history goes back without a break’, since absorption by the Reformation ‘was never so complete as in the rest of the Lowlands, for the genius of the Border people was already too completely formed to be fundamentally altered’ (45), its ‘most essential expres­sion’ being found in the ballads, which represented ‘an unchanging pattern of the Scottish spirit’ (46). It is not industry as such which is at fault, but the capitalist nature of that industry. This has echoes of Priestley’s Cotswolds, its textiles‘the products of a definite tradition’ (52), favouring the ‘dignity and sweetness of real work’ (54); an Old England of thoroughly un-modern craft skills. Priestley recognises that such preservation lies with the housing investments of ‘dream-drowned’ incomers, largely industrial plutocrats. ‘Many a prospect here is unspoiled and exquisite’, he avers, ‘because of the muck and sweat of Birmingham and Manchester’ (57). Muir presents no corresponding dialectic because it did not apply to the Borders. But where it did, in the Highlands, he is all but silent. In its wilder parts, ‘the scent of birch … [was] different from ordinary air, something along with which one inhaled the fine essence of the free things growing round about’ (187). But where agriculture had intervened, Muir found the farm labourer’s status ‘too like slavery to be agreeable’ (188), while ‘many of the children look half-starved’ (184). There is nothing of that ‘wilderness’ deliberately created by enforced emigration and evictions. Instead, he finds an eviscerated nation, ‘emptied of its population, its spirit, its wealth’ (3):

a vast clearance is taking place in Scotland at present, compared with which the clearances in the Highlands last century were mere local incidents. It is a clearance not of actual human beings, like the Sutherland ones, but simply of the resources on which human beings depend for life. The workers of Airdrie and Motherwell are allowed to stay in their houses: the dole secures them that: but any reason for their staying there - and nobody in his senses would stay there by choice - is rapidly vanishing. The squalor of Industrialism remains, but industry itself is fading like a dream.[[5]](#endnote-5)

On this our two writers were at one, sometimes uncannily so. Priestley writes of Jarrow:

Wherever we went there were men hanging about, not scores of them but hundreds and thousands of them. The whole town looked as if it had entered a perpetual penniless bleak Sabbath. The men wore the drawn masks of prisoners of war… idle men … hung about the streets, waiting for Doomsday (314).

Meanwhile, driving through the Lanarkshire coalfield, Muir observes:

groups of idle, sullen-looking young men stood at the street corners; smaller groups were wandering among the blue-black ranges of pit-dumps which in that region are the substitute for nature; the houses looked empty and unemployed like their tenants; and the road along which the car stumbled was pitted and rent, as if it had recently been under shell-fire. Everything had the look of a Sunday which had lasted for many years, during which the bells had forgotten to ring … a disused, slovenly, everlasting Sunday (1).

Unsurprisingly, both writers focus upon the landscapes of the Depression. Beyond the Americanised modernism of its western outskirts, Priestley avoids London in an attempt to situate the national essence among the provinces. Meanwhile, Muir’s chapter on Edinburgh contrasts ‘its legendary past and its tawdry present’ (38). It has become the ‘empty capital of the past’, while the cities in general are ‘monuments of Scotland’s industrial past, historical landmarks in a country which is fast becoming lost to history’ (4), a history buried ‘beneath a layer of debris left by the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution’ (45).

Priestley’s simile for the folk of his ‘nineteenth-century England’ as living ‘like black beetles at the back of a disused kitchen stove’ (399) reflects their everyday environment as a squalid legacy of industrial neglect. He uses favourite adjectives and stock images to evoke a Stygian gloom, with many a terraced suburb dubbed a ‘vast’ or ‘huge dingy dormitory’ (26, 302), ‘dingy pubs’ (262), ‘dingy side streets’ (144), a ‘dingy huddle of cottages’ (289); there is much ‘grand uglification’ (52), ‘dreary regions infested by corporation trams’ (236), the definitive factory always ‘a grim blackened rectangle with a tall chimney at one corner’ (4). There are the ‘forlorn shanties’ (289) and sulphuric slag heaps of County Durham, the ‘cynical abundance of [these] patches of waste ground … raw sores, open wounds’ (112) of the Black Country; all has been ravaged. Muir likewise talks of ‘grotesque industrial towns … the heart of Scotland’ (2). Here he presents a Dantean vision of purgatory:

iron-coloured brooks sluggishly oozed, and [where] stringy gutta-percha bushes rose from sward that looked as if it had been dishonoured by some recondite infamy … defaced and suffering patches of country … as if in this region nature no longer breathed … The forlorn villages looked like dismembered parts of towns brutally hacked off … The towns themselves, on the other hand, were like villages on a nightmare scale, which after endless building had never managed to produce what looked like a street, and had no centre of any kind … merely a great number of houses jumbled together in a wilderness of grime, coal-dust and brick, under a blackish-grey synthetic sky … bloated and scabbed villages … These black slag peaks and valleys make up a toy landscape … dwarf-like and sinister, suggesting an immeasurably shrivelled and debased second-childhood … This scene really seemed to be more like an allegorical landscape with abstract figures than a real landscape with human beings. The abstruse ugliness of this black iron and coal region is such a true reflection of the actual processes which have gone on in it during the last hundred years that the landscape has acquired a real formal and symbolical significance (168-70).

Priestley finds the Potteries towns ‘unique in their remote, self-contained provincialism’ (233), but for Muir just about everywhere urban is haunted by dysfunction:

most of the other small towns I have seen in Scotland are contentedly or morosely lethargic, sunk in a fatalistic dullness broken only by scandal-mongering and such alarums as drinking produces; a dead silence punctuated by malicious whispers and hiccups… private lives … forced indeed to become fantastically private beneath a reciprocal and insatiable scrutiny (43).

Here lay a suffocating parochialism, ‘sordid and disfiguring’ (67), that mocked not only the fool’s paradise of Kailyard literature, but also Burns and Scott as idols of a sentimental false consciousness of locality[[6]](#endnote-6).

Glasgow in particular symbolizes the most brutal effects of indus­trialization, the ‘rotting heart’[[7]](#endnote-7) of greed, poverty and silenced shipyards, where ‘the whole soil for miles around is polluted … every growing thing … poisoned and stunted (123-4).’ This environmental decay is mirrored in human degeneracy. He observes ‘stunted naked boys playing in the filthy pools’ (124), while ‘a sadder distinguishing characteristic of the Glasgow man … is the mark that has been visibly impressed upon him by Industrialism, in the lineaments of his face and the shape and stature of his body’ (156). In this he sees ‘the increasing bestiality of industrial Scotland’ (68), a perception vividly captured in his later autobiography. Here is Muir travelling to work:

Opposite me was sitting a man with a face like a pig’s … the words came into my mind, ‘That is an animal.’ I looked round me at the other people in the tramcar … with a sense of desolation I saw that they were all animals … creatures living an animal life and moving towards an animal death as towards a great slaughter-house.[[8]](#endnote-8)

There is one instance when Priestley has a similarly despairing insight - in a boxing den in Newcastle - where, ‘for a moment, [I] had a vision of dark sub-humanity’ (294); another when he talks of ‘the syphilitic faces’ (142) of the crowd at Nottingham Goose Fair; and the good folk of Stoke, he finds ‘extremely ugly … a sort of troglodyte mankind’ (210). Yet, he also remarks that ‘between Manchester and Bolton the ugliness is so complete that it is almost exhilarating’ (262). There is something darkly romantic, what he calls a ‘grim picturesque’ (311)in the geometry and light of industrial decay – a visual aesthetic not lost on Spender or Brandt, of course. He is shocked by the ‘extraordinary ugliness’ of the punters at a Birmingham whist drive, yet he is careful to add that these people ‘might be ugly to look at but they were not ugly to be with’ (105). Hope springs from this sense of common humanity, one that seems ultimately absent in Muir, who remains steadfastly misanthropic.

*Scottish Journey* was a rationalization of bitter personal experience. In 1901, when Muir was 14, his father lost his farm in Orkney and the family moved to Glasgow, where inside two years both parents and his two brothers died. He ended up alone and friendless, working as a clerk in a bone factory in Greenock, daily enduring the sight and stench of decaying carcasses festooned with maggots being burned for charcoal, a dehumanising experience that almost resulted in his suicide. As one biographer notes, ‘the change forever marked Muir’. It was a ghastly encounter with the ‘fallen’ world, out of Eden:

Orkney was still more or less untouched by the industrial revolution. The undesecrated landscape set the stage for an idyllic childhood … Orkney natives were ignorant of modernity and its discontents. They did not ‘know ambition … what competition was … they helped one another with their work … they had a culture made up of legend, folk-song.’ There was also a rude economic self-sufficiency.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Wrenched apart, Muir recalled being ‘absorbed in my own dissociation’[[10]](#endnote-10) and underwent Jungian analysis, explaining his concern for continuity and horror at its rupture as an existential dilemma:

I was born before the Industrial Revolution, and am now about two hundred years old. But I have skipped a hundred and fifty of them. I was really born in 1737, and till I was fourteen no time-accidents happened to me. Then in 1751 I set out from Orkney for Glasgow. When I arrived I found that it was not 1751, but 1901, and that a hundred and fifty years had been burned up in my two day’s journey. But I myself was still in 1751, and remained there for a long time. All my life since I have been trying to overhaul that invisible leeway.[[11]](#endnote-11)

He so despaired of the deviation in Scottish social life from that of his remembered origins that he placed his childhood figuratively in the mid-eighteenth century. What Muir saw in urban-industrial Scotland was what Craig refers to as a generic predicament in modern Scottish literature: ‘not simply the residue of a harsh industrial world … [but] the total elision of the evidence of the past and its replacement by a novelty so radical that it is impossible for the individual to relate to it his or her personal memories. And impossible, therefore, for that environment to be “related” to a coherent narrative.’[[12]](#endnote-12) The nation thus survived in suspended animation, ‘out of history’. And here was the projection of one man’s personal nightmare as a national picture. There is an acknowledged Jekyll and Hyde tradition in the Scottish literary psyche, known as ‘Caledonian antisyzygy’, a condition ‘whaur extremes meet’ within the one entity.[[13]](#endnote-13) When Muir remarks that ‘Scotland's past is a Romantic legend, its present a sordid reality. Between these two things there is no organic relation’, [[14]](#endnote-14) he is referencing an impasse. There is no way forward without radical upheaval, hence his conclusion that capitalism must be overthrown.

By comparison, Priestley readily incorporates a return to his native Bradford, and a significant regimental reunion, as a vehicle for reflection. Acknowledging that ‘the place has changed even more than I have’ (157), appearing ‘more provincial now than it was twenty years ago’ (161), he attributes shrinking exports and reduced cultural richness to the effects of the Great War. This latter was also his watershed experience, his time in the trenches an ‘open wound, never to be healed’, as he wrote in *Margin Released* (London: Heinemann,1962,139), and a massive influence on his political vision, not least explaining a pervasive anger at the waste of human potential. There is too an optimism which Muir lacks: the beauty of Southampton’s ocean liners as against the redundant Clyde; the possibilities of reinvigorating a dormant civic sense; a modern, more democratic England ‘rapidly Blackpooling itself’ (402) in the service of more leisure for the people.[[15]](#endnote-15)

In 1934/5, Priestley and Muir were caught in a literary and chronological space between critical travelogue and documentary realism. The landscapes of the Depression were hardly evident from earlier travelogue imagery. This was, after all, an aesthetic founded on the conservative response of Romanticism. Both our authors challenged this. *English Journey* was preceded by H. V. Morton’s *In Search of England* (London: Methuen, 1927) and was succeeded by Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Gollancz, 1937). *Scottish Journey* followed Morton’s *In Search of Scotland* (London: Methuen, 1929), but as an attempt to pin down the national ‘character’ it was not succeeded by critical investigation of the Orwellian sort. Rather, there developed a debate between those seeking the face of Scotland and others looking for its heart. While Blake’s *The Heart of Scotland* (London: Batsford, 1934) argued that the ‘quiddity’ of the nation lay neither in romanticism nor realism but somewhere in between, John Grierson’s development of the documentary ideal flourished in the pre-World War II propaganda of the Films of Scotland series, most vividly *The Face of Scotland* (1938), a film crucially reliant upon continuity for its message. Its narrator concludes: ‘these people, crowded together in the smoke and sound of the drumming factories, were of the same stock as the crofters . . . Behind every Glasgow family, they say, you will find a croft, a farm or a fishing village. The Scottish industrial workers still had the best qualities of the peasants.’[[16]](#endnote-16) Like the claims made for the organic and inherited ‘character of the Scottish people’, and against Muir’s schismatic and ultimately private and vision, Priestley’s humanism was about stimulating a revived public sphere that could draw upon the engaged citizenship of ordinary folk. Both he and Grierson developed a cultural critique underlain by ethics and a reforming zeal that was internationalist rather than nationalistic in scope. In his remarks about capitalism, Muir shared this conviction, but he lacked any belief in a populist solution, not least because, ‘the reality of a nation’s history lies in its continuity’, and whereas ‘English history is real to us, because England as a living organic unity is real to us … Scotland [is] not an organic society’.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In Ruskinian vein, Collini argues that *English Journey* is valuable for ‘what it says about the tension … between the claims of how “people want to live” and how people ought to want to live’.[[18]](#endnote-18) Nevertheless, Baxendale disputes the suggestion that Priestley’s morality (the ‘ought’ element, if you will) was based upon ‘mere nostalgia for old buildings’, rightly averring that it is the democratic spirit of industrialized nineteenth-century England that, even in the much-bemoaned attrition of civic life throughout *English Journey*, Priestley hears as the strangled, albeit still small voice which can become the aspirational clamour of classless modernity.[[19]](#endnote-19) Because there can be no such collective continuity in Muir’s view, there is no such hope, only despair at the vision of ‘a lethargic and divided people’.[[20]](#endnote-20) In a recent comparison with Hugh MacDiarmid’s communist utopianism, Andrew Marr comments: ‘*Scottish Journey* sounds like a jolly guidebook. It is in fact, in the entire history of Scotland, the single most dispiriting work ever written about the country.’[[21]](#endnote-21) It would be hard to disagree with such a conclusion.

1. Notes

   A third volume, Philip Gibbs, *European Journey* (London: W. Heinemann, Ltd., in association with V. Gollancz, Ltd., 1934) completes the set. Intriguingly, Gibbs’s *Ordeal in England* (London: Heinemann, 1937) was strongly critical of [*English Journey*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Journey) and was later re-issued by the Right Book Club, the Conservative riposte to Gollancz’s Left Book Club. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example, Edward Moore [sic], *We Moderns: Enigmas and Guesses* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1918); Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (London: George Routledge, 1936). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Page references to J.B. Priestley, *English Journey* (London: W. Heinemann, Ltd., in association with V. Gollancz, Ltd., 1934) and Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (London: W. Heinemann, Ltd., in association with V.Gollancz, Ltd., 1935) appear in parentheses following each quotation. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See John Baxendale, *Priestley’s England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 23-9, for a discussion of the ‘battle of the brows’ between Priestley and Virginia Woolf. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Edwin Muir, ‘The problem of Scotland’, *Spectator*, 2 November 1934, 676. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. ‘Sham bards of a sham nation’, as he describes them in his poem ‘Scotland 1941’ (Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 97. Originally published in Edwin Muir, *The Narrow Place* (London: Faber & Faber, 1943). For Muir, as for MacDiarmid, the rot set in with the Scottish Reformation. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. T.C. Smout, Introduction, in Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (London: Flamingo, 1985), ix – xxxii (xxvi). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1954), 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Robert Richman, ‘Edwin Muir’s journey’, *The New Criterion,* 15(8) (1997), 26–33 (26), quoting Edwin Muir, *An* *Autobiography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1954), 54. Muir notes: ‘I was brought up in the midst of a life which was still co-operative, which had still the Medieval communal feeling’ (Edwin Muir, *The Story and the Fable: An Autobiography* (London: Harrap, 1940), 264 (Appendix II: Extracts from a Diary, 1937-9). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Muir, *Autobiography*, 141. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Muir, *The Story and the Fable*, 263. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination*. (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 21. See also Cairns Craig, *Out of History: Narrative Paradigms in Scottish and English Culture,* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. G. Gregory Smith*, Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (London: Macmillan,1919),4-27; Hugh MacDiarmid, ‘A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle’ (1926), II.141-4, in M. Grieve and W.R. Aitken, eds, Hugh MacDiarmid: Complete Poems, Volume 1 (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), 83-170. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Muir, ‘The Problem of Scotland’, 676. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. The distinction here is between Muir’s dissociation and Priestley’s belatedness. Freud interprets dissociation as ‘a process whereby the mind, faced with an incomprehensible experience, fails to organize that experience within an unfolding temporal order – fails, that is, to assign it narrative coherence’, hence the impossibility of ‘continuous or narrative selfhood’ (Andrew Barnaby, ‘Coming too late: Freud, belatedness, and existential trauma’, *SubStance*, 41 (2) (2012), 119-138 (119)). Thus, in his diary entries, Muir perceives himself to be two different people, existing at different times and places, and sharply separated by the trauma of moving from ‘pre-industrial’, rural Orkney to Glasgow. Equally, Freud frequently refers to belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*) as revision of memory impressions in the light of subsequent experience; hence Priestley’s acknowledgement of having to relate impressions formed in one era to the experience of living during another. I am particularly indebted to Martin Levy for raising the issue of Priestley’s belatedness. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *The Face of Scotland* (1938) Dir. Basil Wright (Viewable at <http://ssa.nls.uk/film/0034>). Accessed January 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Muir, *Scott and Scotland*, 100, 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Stefan Collini, ‘From the Motorcoach’, *London Review of Books*, 31 (22), November 2009, 18-20 (20). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. John Baxendale, Letters, *London Review of Books*, 31 (24), December 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Smout, Introduction, xxxi. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Andrew Marr’s Great Scots: The Writers Who Shaped a Nation. 3. Hugh MacDiarmid*, BBC 2, 30 August 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)