

**Christian Isobel Johnstone 1815: *Clan-Albin: A National Tale*, edited by Andrew Monnickendam (2003). Glasgow: The Association of Scottish Literary Studies (ASLS), 2003. i-xxi 561 pages + notes 562-98**

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For over three decades, the Association for Scottish Literary Studies has republished a variety of important Scottish texts, including John Galt's *The Member* (1832) and James Hogg's *The Three Perils of Man* (1822). The most recent volume in the series, *Clan-Albin: A National Tale* (1815), by Christian Isobel Johnstone, marks an especially significant milestone in the history of Scottish fiction. Andrew Monnickendam's carefully edited volume highlights the importance of Johnstone not only as a key figure in the development of the Scottish novel but also as a long neglected yet influential woman writer whose contribution to literary history is just beginning to be understood.

The career of Christian Johnstone (1781-57) today seems nothing short of miraculous. In addition to publishing two regional novels, *Clan-Albin* (1815) and *Elizabeth de Bruce* (1827), Johnstone published a cookbook, the *Cook and Housewife's Manual* (1826), which went through several editions. Johnstone also co-edited the *Inverness Courier* (1817-24), *Edinburgh Weekly Chronicle* (1824-32), *Schoolmaster and Edinburgh Weekly Magazine* (1832-33), and Johnstone's *Edinburgh Magazine* (1833-34). When Johnstone assumed the editorship of Tait's *Edinburgh Magazine* in 1834, she became the first woman to serve as paid editor of a major Victorian periodical. In addition to breaking new ground for women in the publishing industry, Johnstone was an important social reformer and proto-feminist thinker. Indeed, as Monnickendam points out, she was willing "to challenge commonly accepted beliefs about patriotism, gender, religion, nationalism, aesthetics and a multitude of other topics" (vi).

Even though Johnstone left behind a significant body of work, her biography remains somewhat of a mystery. We know that in 1781 she was born Christian Isobel Todd in Edinburgh. Her class status is unknown though it is likely that she was middle-class, given her high level of education and the fact that she had to earn her own living. She married a "Mr. M'Leish" and was subsequently divorced in 1812. Three years later, at the age of 34, she married again, this time to printer John Johnstone. The Johnstones were most likely well known in Edinburgh literary circles. James Bertram, a clerk in the editorial offices of Tait's *Edinburgh Magazine*, mentions one subscriber "who seemed never to tire of questioning me about Mrs. Johnstone" (16). News of Johnstone's achievements also seemed to reach London, where Thomas Carlyle remarked in an 1834 letter, "Mrs. J., we often say here, would make half a dozen Cockney 'famed women'" (1970: 311).

Beyond these details, little is known about Johnstone's professional and personal life because her papers have not been located. Scholars searching for the missing archive have been rewarded with only a few letters to and from Johnstone housed in the National Library of Scotland. In his introduction to *Clan-Albin*, Monnickendam addresses this problem and consolidates what primary and secondary materials are available into concise, practical form. He includes a bibliography of works written by and about Johnstone as well as a brief summary of the novel's publication history. This

baseline of information will no doubt inspire future research, and, as Monnickendam points out, might also “attract the attention” of those who know the location of Johnstone's missing papers (v).

Of all Johnstone's works, *Clan-Albin* has received the most critical attention. Recent scholarly work has established the novel as a key text in defining and complicating the *national tale* as a literary genre within the context of Scottish Romanticism. *Clan-Albin* has been the subject of scholarly articles by Ferris (1997), McMillan (2003), and Monnickendam (1998) and has been treated in more abbreviated form in Womack (1989), Gifford and McMillan (1997), and Trumpener (1997). Occurring at a period of renewed interest in Johnstone as well as in Scottish Romanticism more generally, the republication of *Clan-Albin* by the ASLS is timely indeed.

Nineteenth-century literary scholars and historians will be pleased to have the benefit of Monnickendam's excellent editorial apparatus as they navigate through this complex, fascinating novel. To edit a text that has been out of print for over 150 years is a challenge, especially a novel such as *Clan-Albin*, which is layered with political, literary, regional, historical, and cultural references. Monnickendam's critical introduction provides useful historical and political context for the novel's four books, which incorporate allusions to contemporary political events in Scotland, Ireland, and Spain, 1783-1810. For example, he situates Johnstone's depiction of antagonist Archibald Gordon within the context of Scottish reaction to the Highland Clearances, which displaced traditional clan structures and introduced the figure of the “bad laird, disrespectful towards Ireland, a terrible soldier and a coward” (viii-ix). Likewise, in his discussion of the Spanish sequences in the novel, Monnickendam is careful to contextualize Norman McAlbin's heroism within the Romantic discourse on the Peninsular War, which conventionally serves as the “proving ground for the young male” (xi) as he battles for liberty against Napoleon.

Monnickendam is also careful to locate *Clan-Albin* within the literary milieu of its time. He explores how Johnstone contributed to a broader ethnographic effort to document the customs and beliefs associated with Highland culture. Likewise, he links Johnstone's novel to the work of contemporaries such as Fanny Burney and Mary Brunton.

Monnickendam demonstrates that while the novel clearly relies upon Romantic literary conventions and precedents, it has a somewhat problematic connection to the *national tale* as a literary genre. At first glance, *Clan-Albin* seems easy to place in the *legion of novels* that were inspired by Scott's work, yet Monnickendam argues convincingly that Johnstone's novel is “at odds with the whole concept of union and patriotism that dominates the fiction of Walter Scott, Maria Edgeworth and their contemporaries” (v, xiii). Though the novel seems to depict the Peninsular campaign as a “proving ground” for McAlbin, it also emphasizes the cruelty and meaninglessness of war. Johnstone conspicuously does not include Wellington among her list of heroes in the campaign, which is fascinating considering that the novel was published in the same year as the victory at Waterloo. Likewise, as Monnickendam points out, she “emphasises time and time again the cold, the pain, the moans of the wounded, the catastrophe of war” (xii). In her representation of Catholicism, Johnstone is equally unconventional. Rather than participating in the anti-Catholic discourse that held sway during the years before the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, she criticizes protestant

fanaticism and argues for tolerance. Johnstone, in Monnickendam's view, emphasized how a healthy sense of national pride, when taken to the extreme, can be transformed into "national prejudice" and ultimately, into international conflict (xv).

Monnickendam's use of the term *subversive* to describe *Clan-Albin* is supported by recent studies of the national tale in Scotland during the early nineteenth century. Dorothy McMillan, for example, points out that Scottish fiction of the period highlighted the "problem of maintaining more than one national identity" (2003: 30). Likewise, Ina Ferris has recently argued the national tale "was motivated by a desire to gain sympathetic attention for the peripheral nation from the metropolis," yet at the same time it represented an "uncertain destabilizing movement from the boundary that may discomfit as much as confirm the language of the metropolis" (1997: 208-209). The ambiguous and sometimes contradictory allegiances inherent in the Scottish national tale are difficult to situate within "Romanticism" as a monolithic category. As Ian Duncan has recently pointed out, the "case of Scotland may thus provoke a salutary defamiliarization of some of the fundamental categories that structure literary history, including the temporal borders of periodization and the topological borders of nationality" (2004: 10). Some scholars of nineteenth-century fiction would certainly place Walter Scott with Christian Johnstone in the category of *ambivalence* toward the colonial/British nationalist project. However, they would no doubt agree with Monnickendam's assessment of *Clan-Albin* as a novel that occupies a contradictory and subversive location at the borders of Romantic and Enlightenment ideologies as well as at the conflux of British and Scottish national identities.

The resurgence of interest in Scottish literature of the early nineteenth century has led to increased investigation of gender issues in the construction of *Scotland* as both a metropolitan center and cultural periphery. Notions of *borderlands* and *cultural translation* for Scottish women writers were complicated by their marginal status within the legal and literary institutions of patriarchal British society. As Carol Anderson and Aileen Riddell have pointed out, "Several of the women novelists [working in the national tale genre] pre-date Scott," (1997: 180) yet their works have been overlooked in many histories of Scottish literature.

Recent collections such as McMillan (1999) and Gifford and McMillan (1997) provide a useful context for Johnstone's treatment of gender issues in *Clan-Albin*. In his introduction to the novel, Monnickendam makes a strong case for Johnstone's proto-feminism, particularly her use of the figure of Lady Augusta as a rational center around which the novel's plot takes shape. She, like Johnstone, is progressive in her views toward education, emigration, and the preservation of Highland culture. As Monnickendam points out, she is in a sense Johnstone's "alter-ego" (vii). Likewise, other female characters, such as Monomia and Moome are of central interest in the novel, in many ways overshadowing the conventionally heroic Norman McAlbin. In *Clan-Albin*, Monnickendam argues, "women are the more rational beings, preferring healing to fighting, humanism to patriotism and reason to emotion" (xiv).

Monnickendam's essay provides an effective introduction to the text of the novel itself, which he has expertly annotated. Even in Johnstone's own time, many of the references to Highland culture required explanatory notes. Johnstone's annotations of her own text are included by Monnickendam as footnotes in the text of the novel. Monnickendam points out that these notes were most likely inspired by contemporary

ethnographic studies such as Ann Grant's *Essays on the Superstitions of the Highlanders of Scotland* (1811). He supplements Johnstone's annotations with his own extensive explanatory comments, which are collected in an appendix. The endnotes provide definitions for Gaelic terms as well as interpretations of various biographical, political, and cultural allusions. Taken together, they provide a fascinating snapshot of Scottish cultural history. Monnickendam identifies (and sometimes corrects) Johnstone's frequent epigraphs and quotes from literary sources. However, just as interesting as the factual information Monnickendam provides are his more speculative notes, such as his commentary on Johnstone's possible allusion to the historical figure George Buchanan (567).

Monnickendam's edition of *Clan-Albin* is a welcome addition to the Association of Scottish Literary Studies annual series. This handsome, accessible volume will no doubt find a receptive audience among scholars in the interdisciplinary fields of Scottish studies, literature, history, and cultural studies. As Monnickendam points out, it is an "outstanding-though never easy-novel," (viii) which asks us to investigate the relationship between the British union and the process of cultural translation in new, innovative ways.

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