

The Arts of Independence: Tradfest at Blackwell's



As few can have failed to notice, in less than 5 months we'll have the opportunity to say yes or no to Scottish independence. Debate is hotting up, and now [Tradfest](#), the city's festival of Scottish culture, tradition, Gaelic and folk arts, has joined the fray with a series of events co-hosted by [Blackwell's](#). The first took place on Wednesday night, when **Alan Riach**, poet and Professor of Scottish Literature at Glasgow University and **Alexander Moffat**, artist and former Head of Painting at Glasgow School of Art, introduced their book, **The Arts of Independence**, to a packed audience.

Arts of Independence arose from the article quoted above, in which Riach argued the cultural case for independence. It examines all areas of Scottish cultural life, from fine art to literature, music to film and even television.

Moffat began the evening by reading from a recent article in the London Review of Books, in which Colm Toibin looks at the independence campaign in Catalonia, where debate has moved into the forefront of regional life. Toibin argues that the Catalan language and the region's other cultural differences are central to the separatist movement's agenda. Barcelona has inaugurated major museums in honour of three of its greatest artists, Picasso, Miro and Tapies; Toibin sees these as having a more powerful presence and greater public resonance than any government building. The Catalan independence movement would, says Toibin, be the poorer without the arts.

Riach explained that Arts of Independence was not intended to promote any particular political party, but to facilitate

debate, encourage dialogue between 'poets, philosophers and politicians', and engage public imagination; the authors have referred to artists, writers and musicians that readers will already know such as McTaggart, Fergusson and Peplow to make their thesis more accessible to everyone. Moffat's illustration for the front cover shows the moment *before* conflict; the authors are passionate about the arts but want conversation to be open and engaged. Consumerism and the celebrity culture are becoming the focal points of UK society; the arts counter ignorance, and compel us to experience humanity. They allow us to participate in the 'international conversation'; being one nation allows our message to transcend borders.



Riach and Moffat believe that a 'carapace of caricatures' about Scotland is preventing us from understanding the challenges in art; only through independence can we turn away from the trivialisation and dumbing down that is stifling democratic thought and suffocating what Ezra Pound called 'immaterial man', towards a society that is not obsessed with possessions, fame and market forces. Moffat explained that many of the main players in the Modernist movement of the early 20th century were Scots (Fergusson, Geddes); Fergusson said that artists were at that time way ahead of politicians in their ideas about transforming society. Riach and Moffat want to counter indifference about the arts, to create a dynamic debate about what the arts can do, for Scotland and for humanity.

Nationalism alone, they say, is not enough; the arts in Scotland are fundamental – without them the country would be 'just another economic region to be exploited.' Asked by Hugh Andrew (MD of Birlinn Books) why, if the arts are so important to the independence movement, the [SNP's White Paper](#) devotes only six pages to them, Riach agreed that this was a failing, and re-emphasised that neither he nor Moffat intended their

book to back any one political faction; they want to see an independent Scotland that would deliver the opportunity – and the responsibility – to work towards a more human society.

Moffat pointed out that the widespread dissemination of literature and paintings is relatively recent and concurrent with the rise of neglected voices – first those of the working class of 19th century industrial Britain, and more recently those of women, a whole new generation of whom are learning from past events and seeing that changes need to come; Liz Lochhead, poet and Glasgow Makar, was a prime example of this. The work of developing a true democracy should be the fundamental driving force of independence.

Scotland, says Riach, is ‘a complex theatre of memory’ that can now be drawn upon to teach us how to do things better.

The head and heart should work together with neither dominating; nationalism gives us the political and economic arguments for independence; the arts ‘give us the data on the nature of what it is to be human.’



This was a thought-provoking and entertaining evening (Riach even gave the audience a rendition of Tyburn Tree); time ran out before the questions did – which may well be what is said on September 18th 2014.

[The Arts of Independence](#) is published by [Luath Press](#) and available from Blackwell's.

Tradfest and Blackwell's continue the debate on **Tuesday 6th May**, when **David Torrance** will introduce his book, **A New Union**, in which he argues for a new federation, in which Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England would become sovereign states on a more equal footing. On **Wednesday 7th May**, **Gerry Hassan** will discuss **Caledonian Dreaming: the Quest for a Different Scotland**, in which he challenges the myths that define modern Scotland and its place in the UK. Each event

starts at 6.30pm; free tickets are available from Blackwells front desk or by calling 0131 622 8218.

Tradfest continues until 11th May, with a wide range of music, talks, storytelling and exhibitions.