

Multicultural Scotland – Edinburgh Summer School 2013

This summer, the English Seminar of Göttingen University enabled 40 students to enter the walls of Edinburgh University by doing three courses on Scottish literature and culture and to join this educational trip with a flying visit of Edinburgh's most famous festivals such as the Fringe Festival, which happened to occupy most of the city centre, or the Edinburgh Book Festival.

The students were able to choose between two different courses on Scottish literature, and one option was a course given by Mrs. Sandrock, named „Multicultural Scotland“. As the title of this course already indicates, its main topics were works written by Scottish writers portraying a multicultural picture of the country. Therefore, not only typical Scottish poetry or drama, such as works by Liz Lochhead or Hugh MacDiarmid, were part of the course plan but Jackie Kay and her partly autobiographical collection of poems or *Tartan and Turban* by Bashabi Fraser as well.

The aim of the course was to show that Scotland's multiculturalism is reflected also by its authors. Not only is it a political topic that is broadly discussed throughout Scottish population but something that also shows the country's various representations in different kinds of art. While writers like MacDiarmid or Thomson even tend to write their poems in Gaelic, which is still deeply rooted in Scottish culture and identity, Jackie Kay's works often deal with her struggle to find her own position in Scottish society as a black person born in this country. Whilst Jackie Kay talks about problems which occurred only in quite recent times, Liz Lochhead's drama *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* deals with the everlasting difficulties of the Anglo-Scottish relations and the treatment of Scotland's best known reign, Queen Mary. Especially in these days, right before the vote of independence which will take place in 2014, the topic of the play seems to be of current relevance.

The course started off with a brief discussion of Liz Lochhead's biography and her works. Additionally, we had the special opportunity to actually attend a reading of Liz Lochhead at the Edinburgh Book Festival which was very helpful in order to interpret her works. Lochhead herself seemed to be a woman that is deeply rooted in Scotland and fully aware of the country's literary opportunities. It was brilliant for the students to see her reading out and perform her own work, which in this case luckily happened to be *Mary Queen Of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*. One of her statements particularly influenced the discussion between the students that followed the reading: Lochhead said that it does not matter where a writer is from or what his or her history is, but rather prefers to only judge a writer by his or her works. Therefore, it was decided that some of the works which had to be discussed in the following days should be looked at without being given any background information on the authors. In 2011, Lochhead was named Scotland's National Poet, which is one of the greatest honours a writer can achieve.

Besides Liz Lochhead, Jackie Kay was an important topic of our course. The life of Jackie Kay strongly influenced her works. Kay was born to an African father and a Scottish mother in the early 1960s. After her father left, her mother put her up for adoption. So as a baby she was adopted by a white couple. Her works deal not only with her complicated relationships with her biological and adoptive parents but also with her struggle of finding her position in a prejudiced Scottish society. Kay's story not only represents the story of many Scottish immigrants and their families but shows as well how the attitude of Scottish people changed in the last decades. In her youth, Kay found it difficult to fit into society. Today though, Scotland is a country well known for its liberal migration politics and the openness of the Scots towards migrants.

The same topic was picked up by Bashabi Fraser. In her poem collection *Tartan and Turban* she explains how hard it can be for a person with a migratory background to balance the cultural influences of each culture, the one of the country one lives in and the one of the country one's parents were born in. In relation to this topic, we watched the Scottish film *Ae Fond Kiss* which depicts the relationship of a Scottish school teacher with a Pakistani DJ, whose sister is in the teacher's class. The Pakistani family does not know about the two being together for a long time, and when they find out, they break off relations with the son. But the teacher has to face some issues too, which are caused by her relationship with a Pakistani and in the end, she even loses her

job because she shares an apartment with a man she is not married to. Therefore, the film does not only show the complications a person with a different cultural background sometimes has to face but also the ones someone with another opinion or religious believe has to deal with.

Besides those multicultural writers and films, we discussed typical Scottish poetry by MacDiarmid, Thomson or Crichton Smith. Luckily, we were able to move the discussion from a sterile classroom to the Poetry Library where we received a short introduction on Scottish poetry and its history and heard some works read out by the authors themselves, on recordings. It was more than interesting to hear the authors interpret their own works. Most fascinating of all was the sound of the Gaelic language in which some of the poems were written. In order to understand the meaning of those poems, we had translations to read but which did not entirely transport the mystical character of the Gaelic originals.

All in all, the course on Multicultural Scotland was not only informative, but indeed very interesting. We examined many interesting personal works by authors with a multicultural background and combined these with works that presented Scotland as the mysterious, steeped in legend country with brilliant landscape and an unmistakable culture. The course itself was never monotonous but multi-faceted and dry paperwork was regularly interrupted by excursions and practical tasks such as vivid discussions. It was brilliant to have the opportunity to take this course in a city like Edinburgh and to get an idea of the culture the authors wrote about and the issues they dealt with. And, besides that, none of us students ever had a view as astonishing as the one that we looked at from our classroom window while studying works of talented literary characters.

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