Kyle Granite continues her journey through the alphabet, this month featuring eminent Scots in the world of literature....

L is for LITERATURE

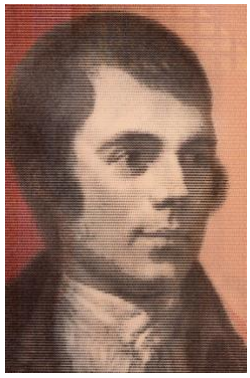
Sir Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, Robert Burns, Alasdair Gray, J M Barrie, James Macpherson, Muriel Spark and Irvine Welsh. Huge names that we are all familiar with and with one very important thing in common; they are all Scots! Scotland boasts a rich line of legendary writers, dating back to as early as the fourteenth century. This edition of my A to Z series will explore some of the key players whose work catapulted them to the literary hall of fame and inspired generations of future writers to follow in their footsteps, not only within Scotland but across the world.

The first surviving major text in Early Scots literature is from the fourteenth-century; John Barbour's epic poem *Brus* (1376). The poem focused on the bloody exploits of King Robert I aka Robert the Bruce and his tireless campaign to lead Scotland to Independence at the beginning of the century. The success of the Barbour poems, in particular their focus on military achievements, inspired Harry the Minstrel ('Blind Harry') in the late 15th century to compose the heroic romance *The Acts and Deeds of the Illustrious and Valiant Champion Sir William Wallace, Knight of Elderslie* - evidently punchy one word titles had fallen out of fashion by that point!

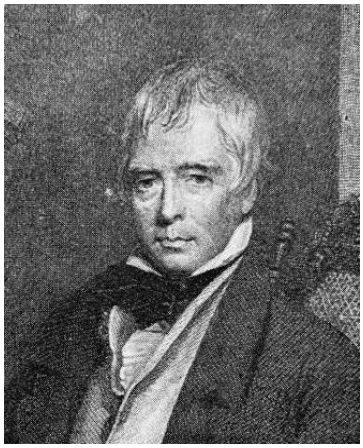
In 1423, *The Kingis Quair* (The King' Book), written by James I, was published and has since been described as the finest major love poem of the 15th century. The poem ushered in a vibrant era of Scottish literature from the years 1425 to 1550, with poems dedicated to courtly romances, and have been praised for combining elements of satire and fantasy. The establishment of the first Scottish printing press in 1507 in Southgait, Edinburgh, allowed for the easy dissemination of Scottish literature and bolstered a fresh sense of Scottish national identity.

From the 1550s, in the reign of Mary, Queen of Scots, who ruled Scotland from 1542 to 1567, cultural pursuits were limited by the lack of a royal court and by political turmoil. The Kirk, heavily influenced by Calvinism, also discouraged poetry that was not devotional in nature. In the 1580s and 1590s James VI strongly promoted the literature of the country of his birth in Scots. His treatise, *Some Rules and Cautions to be Observed and Eschewed in Scottish Prosody,* published in 1584 when he was aged 18, was both a poetic manual and a description of the poetic tradition in his mother tongue, to which he applied Renaissance principles.

It was during the seventeenth century when the ballad emerged as a significant written form in Scotland. It is likely that they were composed and transmitted orally and only began to be written down and printed, often as broadsides and as part of chapbooks, later on by collectors including Robert Burns and Walter Scott.



After the Union in 1707 and the shift of political power to England, the use of Scots was discouraged by many in authority and education. Nevertheless, Scots remained the vernacular of many rural communities and a growing number of urban working-class Scots. Literature developed a distinct national identity and began to enjoy an international reputation. Allan Ramsay (1686-1758) was the most important literary /gure of the era, often described as leading a "vernacular revival". He laid the foundations of a reawakening of interest in older Scottish literature, publishing *The Ever Green* (1724), a collection that included many major poetic works of the Stewart period. The gradual Anglicization of the Scots dialect led to the success of Robert Burns and Robert Ferguson, both of which rose to fame by writing in both English and Scots



Following the death of Burns in 1796, Walter Scott (left) became, arguably, the most prominent Scottish writer of the first half of the 19th century. Scott wrote poetry and prose in English, but his works are suffused with Scots dialogue and often engaged with Scotland's history, as a result Scott has been credited with inventing the modern historical novel.

The twentieth century witnessed a "renaissance" in literature following World War I, with writers seeking to restore and modernize the language. The leading figure in the movement was Hugh MacDiarmid (the pseudonym of Christopher Murray Grieve). MacDiarmid attempted to revive the Scots language as a medium for serious literature in poetic works including *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1936).

In addition to our strong literary heritage, our contemporary writers have contributed some of the most revered and best-loved works to the international literary canon. The list of acclaimed Scottish writers of fiction, poetry and theatre reads a little like a who's who of literature. In 2020, Douglas Stuart was only the second Scot to win the Booker Prize, with his debut novel *Shuggie Bain*. The first was James Kelman in 1994 with his masterpiece, *How Late It Was, How Late.*

So the next time you are faced with the daunting task of choosing your next book, be sure to consider one of the fine literary contributions that our ancestors have left for us. I, for one, am about to dive into the emotional rollercoaster which is *Shuggie Bain*.

Kyle Granite

Footnote:

'*Shuggie Bain'* is the debut novel by Scottish-American writer, Douglas Stuart published in 2020. It tells the story of the youngest of three children, Shuggie, growing up with his alcoholic mother Agnes in 1980's working-class Glasgow. As of April 2022, the novel has sold more than 1.5 million copies globally.