

This issue of *The Drouth* centres on that universal theme: loss. And while at first glance its credo may appear comfortless, the essays here demonstrate that loss can be temporary; that it can offer invaluable opportunities for re-evaluation and reassessment. What is lost is not always irretrievably so; indeed, human nature appears to dictate that we must search for the hidden and reveal the obscured. When discussing *Treasure Island*, Robert Louis Stevenson argued that if one had never been on a search for buried treasure, one had never been a child. Each of these pieces surveys existing terrain with spade in hand.

In 'Robert Burns and the Excise', Gerard Carruthers reclaims a misplaced narrative in the life of Scotland's national poet through an examination of Burns's position as an employee of the Crown. Traditionally portrayed in Burns biography as an awkward and uncomfortable detour in an otherwise egalitarian existence, Carruthers argues that Burns's decision to enter the excise was made using sane and human reasoning, and that it is Scottish criticism's problem – and not Burns's – that the poet is 'never properly located'. Railing against biography's urge to 'fix' its subject's personality, Carruthers asks for realism in accounts of the life of a magisterial – but nevertheless entirely human – poet: his work for the Crown did, after all, provide many of the tools Burns needed to immerse himself in the art of song collection, an act of preservation which prevented what would have been a disastrous loss for Scottish culture. Charles McKean also engages with hidden themes in his 'A Scottish Problem with Self-Perception', which explores the country's 'miserable pre-occupation with castles' to reveal a lost narrative of the history of Scottish architecture. In its careless labelling of all Scottish dwellings as 'castles', McKean argues that history has unthinkingly demeaned Scottish architectural achievement, while simultaneously revealing Scotland's unwillingness or inability to understand itself. Interrogating the assumption that the Renaissance 'largely passed Scotland by', McKean reveals not only that the age itself has continually been misunderstood as a mere extension of the medieval period, but also that the reasons behind Scottish dwellings have been misinterpreted. While the Enlightenment's 're-writing' of history in the eighteenth century did much to bolster a traditional view of Scotland in the Renaissance as violent, poverty stricken and isolated, McKean argues that the *literati's* push for cultural 'primitivism' – represented by the fascination with and cultural power of Macpherson's *Ossian* poems –

obscured a full understanding of Scotland's relationship with other European architectures, leaving us blind to the 'deliberate cultural choices' made by knowledgeable families. As expressions of rank, lineage, individuality, political conviction and nostalgia, Scottish country seats should, McKean argues, be understood in a European, rather than British context. And while the original plasterwork and vivid brushwork in Edinburgh's St. Giles's Cathedral has been irredeemably lost thanks to the martial concerns of the Victorians, a just understanding of Scottish architecture has not. McKean's essay demonstrates that, although it took until 1986 for Scottish Museums to separate the Renaissance from the medieval period, a rich seam nevertheless exists for further, much-needed excavation.

In 'The Cunning of History . . . and Kevin Rudd's Social Democracy', Tom Nairn considers the losses and rediscoveries experienced by Australia and the wider world following the economic crisis of the last two years. Since the 'Crash', he argues, there has been widespread agreement that we live 'in a somewhat different world'; the familiar, capitalist regime has been, if not lost, radically altered; an 'era has ended'. In his piece, Nairn asks, just how different is the world? Just what have we lost? If the 'shop fronts' of Communism, Socialism and Conservatism have been 'boarded up', what replaces them? Nairn engages with these questions by examining Federal Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd's, solution: Social Democracy. While Rudd's answer appears to resurrect a lost political regime, Nairn argues that Social Democracy is not what it once was. Once seen as a 'compromise' between capitalism and socialism it now signifies, according to Nairn, 'merely the common ground bequeathed by the Great Financial Crisis'. Charting other notable losses and alterations in recent history, focusing on religion and monarchy in Australia, Nairn simultaneously argues that, alongside Social Democracy, other regimes and mindsets can be reclaimed. Just as Chantal Mouffe announces the return of 'political agency', Nairn argues that globalisation need not insist on the loss of nationalism; it is, rather, 'likely to depend on the re-expression of nationality politics'. Nairn asserts that, when one era ends and another one begins, both loss and rediscovery are central to the processes of history. In his 'Mutual Complaint of Plainstones and Causey', a rhyming dialogue between Edinburgh's pavement and causeway, Robert Fergusson's inanimate character ponders, 'For what use was I made, I wonder?' There can be



no definitive answer, of course; while narratives, people, icons and regimes are often lost by history's fashions, fads and tastes, they can also be found – what one era rejects, another can reclaim. What is taken to have been lost is sometimes simply obscured and, as Stevenson maintained, there for the hunting.

RB

# EDITORIAL

