



**ILCEA**

Revue de l'Institut des langues et cultures  
d'Europe, Amérique, Afrique, Asie et Australie

**12 | 2010**

**La FASP : dix ans après...**

---

## “Tales from the darkside”: The role of the extractive industries in the Rebus novels

David Leishman

---



### Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ilcea/556>

DOI : [10.4000/ilcea.556](https://doi.org/10.4000/ilcea.556)

ISSN : 2101-0609

### Éditeur

UGA Éditions/Université Grenoble Alpes

### Édition imprimée

ISBN : 978-2-84310-180-9

ISSN : 1639-6073

### Référence électronique

David Leishman, « “Tales from the darkside”: The role of the extractive industries in the Rebus novels », *ILCEA* [En ligne], 12 | 2010, mis en ligne le 23 septembre 2010, consulté le 19 avril 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ilcea/556> ; DOI : [10.4000/ilcea.556](https://doi.org/10.4000/ilcea.556)

---

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 19 avril 2019.

© ILCEA

---

# “Tales from the darkside”: The role of the extractive industries in the Rebus novels

David Leishman

---

- 1 Over a twenty-year period, Ian Rankin has written a total of 17 detective novels based on the recurrent central character of Edinburgh police inspector John Rebus. These novels are easily identifiable as belonging to the genre of crime fiction, despite the author’s claims that he did not intend this to be the case, and they conform quite readily to the general sub-category of police procedural. As well as winning numerous awards for crime fiction, the Rebus novels are also tremendously successful in commercial terms and Rankin is cited on his official website as being the best-selling author of detective fiction in the UK.<sup>1</sup> The Rebus novels, now translated into 27 languages, focus on police investigations which are carefully set within a national, temporal and socioeconomic context, that of contemporary postindustrial Scotland. Although the investigations tend to be triggered by a murder, they are always situated within a web of societal forces which includes, or indeed often seems centred on, economic power. Thus as Rebus’s investigations lead him to analyse different facets of contemporary Scottish society, so do they lead him to examine a number of different areas of economic and professional activity.
- 2 This article focuses on the treatment of the oil, gas and coal industries in the Rebus novels and in the way that these industries have fashioned the personal and creative development of the author. Through a study of the novel *Black & Blue*, among others, it can be asserted that the extractive industries generate motifs of concealment and exposure, depth and surface, which have an intense resonance in Rebus’s police investigations, which themselves are often characterised by the revealing of dark truths. The “tales from the darkside” which Rebus alludes to in Aberdeen, for example, describe how violence, drug-dealing and police corruption have permeated the North East of Scotland since the oil industry brought sudden wealth to the region (Rankin, 1997, pp. 163-164).

- 3 The Rebus novels can be said then to comprise elements of social realism in the sense that they place the economy as the driving force within a society whose varied and interconnected echelons are all given consideration. Due to this element of social observation, brought to light through investigations which scour all facets of contemporary society, even the lowliest and least respectable, the novels can be seen as belonging to the "hard-boiled" tradition of crime fiction. Rankin himself cites Rebus as a "great tool for [the] dissection of society".<sup>2</sup> Such an aim allows us to consider Rankin within a modern Scottish literary tradition which harbours a strong social and humanist dimension while reaffirming contemporary society's subordination to economic forces. Within this tradition the extractive industries are present across a wide cross-section of fiction which often strays far from the category of the commercially successful thriller determined by Michel Petit as one of the defining characteristics of *la fiction à substrat professionnel*. It is for this reason that we can wonder whether the identification of the Rebus novels as *FASP* is the most pertinent analytical tool in the present case.

## Beyond the Forth

- 4 Following comments made by the author,<sup>3</sup> it has often been observed that the principal character in the Rebus novels is not actually DI John Rebus himself, but the city of Edinburgh where he is stationed. Certainly the novels stress the importance of place as importantly as they stress their socioeconomic and cultural grounding. While earlier novels fictionalised locations and settings such as pubs, streets and police stations, Rankin quickly opted to use real Edinburgh place names. The connections between the fictionalised Edinburgh and its real-world counterpart became stronger still when Rankin felt obliged to update his fictional Edinburgh to keep up to date with developments in the real world. The author was compelled to move Rebus from St Leonards' police station to Gayfield Square after he was informed by a police acquaintance that CID operations were being closed there. Yet, if the extra-literary Edinburgh structures its fictional avatar, the converse is also true. An extraordinary interplay of the two spheres is in evidence if we consider the burgeoning market of "literary tourism" exemplified notably by "Rebus walking tours" during which guides show visitors around city landmarks which feature in the novels.<sup>4</sup> Edinburgh's literary heritage was also significant enough for Edinburgh to be named the first UNESCO city of literature in 2004. The authors who used their reputation to support the application included Ian Rankin as well as his compatriots J. K. Rowling and Alexander McCall Smith.<sup>5</sup>
- 5 But while the novels clearly reserve an important space for Scotland's capital city, the series, taken together, looks beyond Edinburgh as it endeavours to portray a composite picture of contemporary Scotland as a whole. Various external locations, including the Highlands and Islands, Glasgow or the heavily urbanised small towns of the Central Belt, are equally present. A second reason for tempering the importance of Edinburgh in the novels is the fact that the pre-eminent sense of place, as already mentioned, is primarily directed not at Edinburgh, but at the region which lies immediately north of city on the opposite banks of the River Forth. The first location to be described in the Rebus novels, on the second page of the first novel *Knots & Crosses*, is that of the region of Fife, which is given added importance in that it is Rebus's place of birth. Rebus visits Fife in the opening pages of the series in order to visit the grave of his father on the anniversary of his death and so the region is immediately associated with a morose sense of personal loss and

regret. The text compounds these negative personal sentiments with a landscape of social and economic decline composed of abandoned houses and closed, vandalised shops. Rebus's hatred for his native region is described in terms of its dark, stunted past and its total lack of future prospects:

How Rebus hated it all, this singular lack of an environment. It stank the way it had always done: of misuse, of disuse, of the sheer wastage of life (Rankin, 1987, pp. 3).

- 6 This charge is perhaps given greater significance if we consider that John Rebus is described as coming from the Fife town of Cardenden, which is Ian Rankin's hometown. When in 2008 Cardenden was shortlisted for Prospect Magazine's "Carbuncle" prize, awarded to "Scotland's most dismal town" with the aim of highlighting architectural and town-planning failures, Ian Rankin nevertheless spoke out in favour of the town. However, Rankin's defence of a blighted Cardenden concerned less the town itself than the resilience of the population who had had to contend with the collapse of the local coal industry.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, the author alluded to the rapid and disruptive deindustrialisation and the concomitant social problems which explain why Fife holds such a central place in the Rebus novels. The hatred expressed by Rebus for his home region in the opening pages of the very first novel of the series can be read as a deep-rooted anger inspired by social deprivation in postindustrial Scotland. Fife serves as a microcosm for this Scotland in that it was one of the most important coal-producing regions in Scotland in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Cardenden was itself a mining village, however Bowhill Colliery which was its principal source of employment was closed in 1965. Rankin was from a family of miners which included six of his uncles although his father was forbidden by Rankin's grandmother to go into this profession.<sup>7</sup> Rankin's literary background is similarly influenced by mining. He cites Scottish author William McIlvanney, the son of a miner, as one of his key influences. Aside from detective fiction, McIlvanney notably produced among his earlier work the historical novel *Docherty* which is centred on a mining community in the early twentieth century. Rankin's first published novel, *The Flood*, shares a near identical focus, although his depiction of "Carsden", a small Fife mining town in decline that is a thinly reworked version of Cardenden, is set between the 1960s and 1980s.

## Jekyll and Hyde Nation

- 7 References to Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* abound in the Rebus novels where they constitute a fertile source of analogy for a dichotomous, schizophrenic Edinburgh. The Edinburgh-born author's text served as a fitting template by which to describe the split which opposed Edinburgh's respectable identity as an elegant city of culture, architecture and tourism with the severe social breakdown in its outlying housing estates. Rankin insisted heavily on this metaphor by entitling the second novel in the series "Hide & Seek" (1990) and by placing the main action in a depraved nightclub named "Hyde's". Nevertheless, it can be contended that the description of a moribund Fife in the opening pages of the Rebus novels sets up a deeper rooted binary relationship between the city of Edinburgh (the locus of action and contemporaneity) and the region of Fife (a backwards-looking hinterland sapped by the loss of its industrial heritage).
- 8 Rebus's key function, according to Rankin, is to expose a side of Edinburgh that visitors never see,<sup>8</sup> and this binarity between the visible and the hidden often develops in the

novels into a dichotomy where the visible is a mere surface (connoted negatively as superficial and misleading) and the hidden is a dark truth which must be uncovered. The relationship of surface versus depth of course holds a certain resonance in the context of coal-mining. In this reading Fife is associated with a lost sense of working-class integrity while Edinburgh is the locus of illusory surface. In the opening pages of *Knots & Crosses* (1987), Rebus evokes the dilapidated roads in Fife in relation to those in Edinburgh where the inhabitants are overly-concerned by "surfaces" (Rankin, 1987, pp. 8). Edinburgh lends itself well to the thematics of surface and hidden realities in that, during the 18th century, parts of the city (in particular around the Royal Mile) were built directly over the lowest levels of the medieval town. While this scarcely ever involved anything other than building over the pre-existent foundations, leaving low-lying cellars, ground floors, stairwells and streets intact, this has given rise to a fertile store of supernatural tales and myths of plague victims being walled-in *en masse*. The first Rebus novel uses the presence of a subterranean Edinburgh for the closing scene where the murderer is confronted in a labyrinth below the National Library. The text highlights the presence of this dead, underground double of the city, concluding that: "you could not trust your own knowledge: you could walk right over a reality without necessarily encroaching on it." (Rankin, 1987, pp. 219). The association of repressed or unacknowledged human experience with darkness and the past is again underscored by Rankin's initial decision to have Rebus born into a family of stage hypnotists. Indeed the revelation necessary for the *dénouement* in *Knots & Crosses* is brought about by Rebus being hypnotised by his brother to bring to light his previously repressed personal history.

- 9 *Set in Darkness* (2000) develops similar themes at a national and political level by linking three murders set in three key eras of Scotland's political history (1707, the year of the Act of Union with England; 1979, the year of the first failed referendum on devolution; in the aftermath of the 1997 decision to reconvene a Scottish Parliament). All the crimes are linked to the location of the then uncompleted Parliament building and one long-hidden corpse is unearthed in an archaeological dig directly under the proposed site. The symbolism is clear: even as Scotland's renewed political identity is being reaffirmed its dark past is prone to come to the surface.
- 10 The continual opposition of surface and depth carries an obvious crime-fiction corollary of vision and understanding. A perspicacious detective such as DI Rebus must not satisfy himself with a cursory comprehension of events and must look beyond the immediate realm of the visible to seek deeper, perhaps less evident, truths. A thematics of sight (specular images, reflections, windows, voyeurism) is sometimes employed in the novels, notably as Rebus displays his tendency to spy on his neighbours, a trait he justifies by his need to understand more fully the lives around him (Rankin, 1997, pp. 329). The novels stress the tensions between illusion and a truth which is always subject to historical mediation or subjective interpretation. They could be said to be conscious of their own "politics of representation", to reuse the term popularised by postmodernist critic Linda Hutcheon, namely that reality can never be divorced from the mediating role of discourse and that representations of that reality are therefore ideologically grounded (Hutcheon, 1989, pp. 7). Just as our fictional detective must reject misleading, superficial visions of reality so too must we dig beneath the surface of the texts and reject the notion that fiction can ever be a faithful, objective mirror of a pre-existent reality. However, as Pierre Barbéris noted, though the "théorie du reflet" may be dead, the nature of the articulation

between the written word and the socio-historical real remains a valid and vital question (Barb ris, 1973, pp. 272-273).

## Under the surface

- 11 Ian Rankin describes his adoption of crime fiction by means of a thematics of surface, designating it as a fictional genre which functions at two levels – an immediate and populist surface versus a serious academic/artistic core.<sup>9</sup> This corresponds to statements Rankin has made about wishing to exploit the accessibility and commercial popularity of genre fiction as a way of conveying more profound, social concerns to a wider audience.<sup>10</sup> The Scotland evoked in much “serious” fiction of the 1980s and 1990s is often comparable to that of the Rebus novels: a country whose rapid deindustrialisation under an unpopular neoliberal Conservative government deteriorated an already fragile situation as the wave of closures affecting car plants, steelworks, coalmines and so on brought mass unemployment and social deprivation. In the Rebus novels the descriptions of the mining industry, always centred on Fife, invariably evoke this trajectory of decline, notably by contrasting the industry’s past importance with its present-day difficulties characterised by rising costs, lower profitability, and closures leading to widespread hardship.<sup>11</sup> The transformation of the Scottish economy away from its traditional reliance on heavy industry is described with suspicion even if these changes imply potential improvements. When grass and trees are used to cover up the remains of old mines, the striking description is that of a country whose landscape is being effaced. Slag from pit bings is used to fill in open-cast mines in a smoothing out of the surface of the land to give a sense not of historical progress, but of a cancelling out of the past. The narrator comments that it is “as though the history of mining in Fife had never existed”. (Rankin, 1990, pp. 161). The re-greening of Scotland’s industrial belt is experienced as a traumatic deformation of a historical industrial identity which thus takes on the status of a national mythology. Beneath their hostility towards landscapes seen as disfigured or impermanent, the descriptions in the text suggest the possibility of an authentic Scottish essence. However inseparable from the country’s industrial past, this is now lost. In addition, the modernisation of Scotland’s economy and the loss of its local industries both generate an additional dependency on foreign capital. In many of the novels the theme of foreign investment as a corrupting influence is very strong.

## A Scottish Eldorado

- 12 The oil industry in Scotland, centred on the Shetland Isles and Aberdeen, has been a source of considerable wealth since the 1980s. While the coal industry in the Rebus novels, it could be argued, may represent a professional *adstrat* rather than a *substrat*, according to the definition given by Michel Petit (Petit, 1999, pp. 66), the oil industry in the novel *Black & Blue* (1997) is wholly central to the crime intrigue, which variously involves murder, child abuse, serial killings and drug trafficking. Victims, suspects, witnesses, the guilty, corrupt police officers are all connected with the fictional US oil company T-Bird Oil. As in other novels, Fife is evoked as a locus of Scotland’s lost industrial heritage (Rankin, 1997, pp. 242), although Fife’s decline now displays an inverse symmetry to the rise of the petroleum industry in the north. While Aberdeen is now presented as the city riven by a split of surface reality *versus* dark truth, Edinburgh is

acknowledged as the archetype of this dichotomy (Rankin, 1997, pp. 232). The theme of the corrupting influence of foreign wealth is clearly underscored by the epigraph of *Black & Blue*. The lines of Robert Burns chosen by Rankin "We're bought and sold for English gold –/Such a parcel of rogues in a nation." criticised the bribery which accompanied the Scottish Parliament's 1707 decision to vote itself out of existence. A second quote by James Ellroy introduces the question of historiographic authority and authenticity, namely the power of those who choose to rewrite history "to [their] own specifications". Together, these quotes go beyond David McCrone's analysis that a transitional, postindustrial Scotland is increasingly dependent on foreign capital and global markets (McCrone, 2001, pp. 91-92) to suggest that foreign, and in particular American (Rankin, 1997, pp. 264), investment is a pernicious, destabilising influence which cuts Scotland off from its past (Rankin, 1997, pp. 217), and thus weakens further its national, political and cultural identity. This goes some way to explaining why the oil industry is depicted so negatively in the novel (one section is notably entitled "Dead Crude"). Oil wealth is symptomatic of the sudden transformations which threaten a Scotland whose implied pre-postindustrial stability and atemporality suggest its mythologisation, even as the text, paradoxically, warns against such myths (Rankin, 1997, pp. 164). History, according to Rebus, is all the Scots have got (Rankin, 1997, pp. 111); modernity is thus again an intrusion which endangers the link with the mythologised past. When waste ground around Edinburgh is redeveloped into a luxury "Financial District" it is again the occasion to reflect on how easily the past can be effaced and forgotten (Rankin, 1997, pp. 22).

- 13 It is Aberdeen, however, which becomes the new symbol of the dangerous impermanence afflicting postindustrial Scotland.<sup>12</sup> The antonomasia of the "Granite City" comes from the region's granitic bedrock used extensively as a building material, but also connotes a solidity now directly threatened by the city's reliance on oil:

For all the associations with granite, Aberdeen has a feeling of impermanence. These days it owed almost everything it had to oil, and the oil wouldn't be there for ever. Growing up in Fife, Rebus had seen the same thing with coal: no one planned for the day it would run out. (Rankin, 1997, pp. 263)

- 14 In *Black & Blue* new investment and rapid economic growth will, it is said, supply jobs for "unemployed shipbuilders and steelworkers" (Rankin, 1997, pp. 163), transform the Shetlands into the "Klondike" (pp. 207) or a fishing port into a "mini-Dallas" (pp. 163). Such hopes are "unbelievable, incredible [...] magic" (pp. 163) precisely because they are illusory, suggests the text, as confirmed by the references to a mythologised America (e.g. the Gold Rush or the 1970s soap opera "Dallas"). The illusion of local wealth is then replaced by the reality of the corrupting power of foreign wealth: "So the initial stories of Eldorado turned into tales from the darkside: brothels, blood-baths, drunken brawls. Corruption was everywhere [...]" (pp. 164). Under the illusion also lies a realm where only money is respected, not men, and where the working conditions are equated to "slavery". (pp. 164) The antonomastic "Granite City" has become the "Silver City", which, while referring poetically to the surface of the River Dee, felicitously evokes both fluidity and the money that has eroded the previous sense of permanence (pp. 165-166).
- 15 The narrative of *Black & Blue* also externalises the two contrasting visions of the oil industry by presenting them as separate, competing discourses. The text contrasts the "depressing", alarming flyers distributed by environmentalist critics (pp. 199) with the peremptory tone of oil and tourism PR documents (pp. 171), which have effaced virtually all negative comments from their presentation of the region. The power of discourse to

shape perception is aligned with the economic power of multinationals; when Rebus reads that a 500-year-old village was bulldozed to make way for a Shell terminal (pp. 171) it is clear that both can concur to erase the past. It is thus in the context of the oil industry that we are invited to again consider the novel's epigraph which juxtaposes corruption, Scottish identity and a reflection on those with the power to rewrite history.

## A war against nature

- 16 *Black & Blue* is also keen to underline the hidden human and environmental cost of oil exploration, which is described through metaphors of conflict. The sea won't give up its oil "without a fight" (pp. 247), the key oil field in the novel is the fictional "Bannock oil and gas field" (pp. 123) named after the battle of Bannockburn, while helicopters are used to ferry supplies "like we were at war" (pp. 207). The real-life victims of this war, we are reminded, are sometimes the oilmen themselves, as evidenced through the descriptions of the 1988 Piper Alpha explosion which killed 167 (pp. 242). Elsewhere, the text alludes to the oil slick caused by the running aground of the *Braer*, a Liberian-registered petrol-tanker off the Shetlands in 1993 (pp. 110). Also mentioned is the existence of 400 North Sea Oil platforms whose limited useful lifespan and eventual decommissioning or abandonment (with the risk of pollution from chemicals, oil residues and heavy metals) form the basis of the environmental strand of the narrative (pp. 199). The novel also aligns the exploitation of the North Sea by the petrochemicals industry with the harm caused to the maritime ecosystem by over-fishing and pollution (pp. 199). While the novel's descriptions of economic wealth, foreign investment and sudden enrichment all depict money as a corrupting force, this is finally subsumed within a more generalised logic which favours maximising private profit to the detriment of long-term societal risk. One fictional tale of a minor ecological calamity involves the cutting of costs through the illegal swilling out of dirty bilge tanks, the hiring of underpaid, inadequately trained seamen and the use of decrepit oil tankers. At the same time, the oil industry is described as resorting to wilful bureaucratic obfuscation to avoid penal responsibility through a complex maze of front companies and flags of convenience (pp. 424-425).

## Black gold, black blood

- 17 The articulation between the oil industry and Scottish nationalism is often presented with irony in the novel. It is noted that the oil is not Scotland's, as the Scottish National Party claimed in the 1970s, but the jealously guarded property of the sea (pp. 247). The "Bannock" oilfield previously referred to is meant to evoke the decisive 1314 Battle of Bannockburn which was determinant in securing Scottish independence in the Middle Ages. DI Rebus, however, feigns not to know the history that is said to define who the Scots are. Instead he presumes the oilfield is named after a "bannock", a mere oatcake which, though still a characteristically Scottish cultural marker, is a much more self-deprecatory one (pp. 209). In the final section entitled "North of Hell" (again alluding to the thematics of surface and depth which permeates the novels) the epigraph is a quotation by nationalism theorist Tom Nairn, thus positing the political and cultural rebirth of Scotland (pp. 399) as central to questions about the role of the oil industry in Scotland. This has been the case since the opening scenes of the novel. Rebus has become obsessed with a (real-life) serial killer who struck in Glasgow at the end of the 1960s



without ever being caught and the detective's private investigations involve him poring over Scottish newspapers of the day. Regularly the narrative juxtaposes articles from the press relating to the rise in popularity of the SNP with, for example, the announcement of a new petrochemicals plant to be built in Invergordon (pp. 24) or the *Torrey Canyon* oil slick (pp. 380). In a discussion between Rebus and an oil-worker the stark claim is made that, in both international and domestic arenas, "you can't separate oil and politics" (pp. 213).

- 18 The novel's socio-political criticism is reinforced through a shifting network of metaphors, which begins when the narrative states the simple antonomastic formula: "Oil: black gold." (pp. 241). This epithet leads into a description of the economic benefits which justify investing large amounts in uncertain oilfields and the gigantic scale, as relayed by a PR document, of the oil industry (pp. 242). However, the PR brochure also allows the resurgence of the morbidity inherent in the epithet "*black gold*" by mentioning that the oil "derrick" is named after a hangman or that Scottish oil was first brought ashore at Cruden Bay where Bram Stoker once resided. Rebus wryly comments on the "vampirism" which still characterises the oil industry (pp. 243), implying a metaphor of oil as black blood, a trope which is then repeated several times. For example, Rebus has a nightmare in which he is chased on an oil platform and bleeds oil when cut (pp. 279) and it is stated in connection with the series of murders being investigated that oil was "at the heart of it" (pp. 396). The metaphor of blood of course returns us to the thematics of surface and duality by incarnating a powerfully ambiguous vector (evocation of vitality and morbidity alike) located just under the skin. The metaphor is also the key which explains why oil, and indeed the whole question of Scotland's industrial and economic transformation, is so systematically described in negative terms. The oil industry, the text asserts through one character, was not a domestically-oriented economic force which led to increased revenues and improved conditions for the local populace through policies which catered for Scottish specificities. In the absence of such, it ran counter to the specific hopes raised by Scottish nationalists in the 1970s and the revenues generated instead served the neoliberal agenda of a Conservative Government as hostile to claims of Scottish self governance as it was to the continued funding of the loss-making plants and pits which characterised Scottish industry:

Know what we did? The oil industry I mean? We kept Maggie Thatcher in power. Oil revenue paid for all those tax cuts. Oil revenue paid for the Falklands War. Oil was pumping through the veins of her whole fucking reign, and she never thanked us once. Not once, the bitch. (pp. 212)

- 19 While the Scottish oilman in *Black & Blue* adds with bravado that one can't help liking Thatcher for this attitude, his outburst points to the fact that the Conservatives were certainly greatly disliked in Scotland. Yet, due to the far higher number of English voters, the party did not need to worry about losing electoral support in Scotland which returned at that time a total of only 72 constituency MPs out of 659. As such, the text implies, there was no need to prioritise the oil revenues from the North Sea on Scottish specificities and these were consequently used for concerns such as tax cuts which resonated more strongly with the voters of Middle England. Rather than a powerful player in ensuring Scottish autonomy, or at the very least, in improving material conditions for Scots, the oil industry meets criticism for reinforcing Scotland's subordinate position within the British state by ensuring that, even in the absence of a democratic mandate in Scotland, the Conservative Government had the necessary revenues to pursue its contested policies. The Rebus novels' portrayal of the dark side of the oil industry, we discover, as

was the case with the descriptions of the coal industry and Scotland's deindustrialisation as a whole, uncovers a politicised opposition to the social and economic consequences of Thatcherism.

## Beyond "tartan noir"<sup>13</sup>

- 20 It is only when Ian Rankin's detective fiction is resituated within the Scottish literary revival of the 1980s and 1990s that the novels' social message can be truly appreciated.<sup>14</sup> The newly vibrant Scottish literary scene at this time was dominated by politically engaged writing which, throughout a number of styles and genres, sought to give voice to the dispossessed underclass who were suffering most from the neo-liberal revolution set in train by the Conservative government. The coal-mining connection that links Rankin with William McIlvanney, one of the most influential authors of the period, has already been noted. McIlvanney wrote a series of three novels based on the police inspector DI Laidlaw – *Laidlaw*, *The Papers of Tony Veitch*, *Strange Loyalties* – which the author hoped would not be categorised simply as crime fiction. Despite the fact that *Laidlaw*, published in 1977, can reasonably be considered the seminal work of tartan noir, to a great extent McIlvanney proves himself to be more concerned by the existential challenges of characters who tenaciously cling to their humanist values in the midst of an atomised society where materialistic individualism has replaced a sense of community. In McIlvanney's novel *The Big Man*, in which the author strays further from crime fiction conventions, the oil industry is again strongly present. The description of the wealth, jobs and materialism thus generated lead, however, to the conclusion that such phenomena only aggravate social division when set against a backdrop of widespread unemployment.
- 21 Novelist James Kelman also renewed such socio-political themes by focusing on the day-to-day struggles of Glasgow's workers – street-sweepers, school teachers, bus conductors, steel workers, job seekers, the marginalised welfare recipients. In novels and short story collections such as *A Chancer*, *Not Not While the Giro* or *How Late it Was, How Late*, he clearly rejected the conventions of plot, action and character psychology associated with mainstream fiction in favour of a modernist exploration of voice and narrative technique.
- 22 A novelist such as Irvine Welsh, who enjoyed great commercial success during this period, nevertheless shares many of the same social concerns as his peers. In the scope of this paper it is interesting to note that while *Trainspotting*, Welsh's most commercially successful novel, focused on heroin use among Edinburgh's unemployed underclass, his novel *Filth* shares a preoccupation with the coal industry and adheres to some of the conventions of crime fiction.
- 23 In *Filth*, the key character is a misogynist, misanthropic policeman, Bruce Robertson, whose personal bitterness is often explained in terms of traumatic incidents involving coal: his punishment as a child was to be forced to eat coal (pp. 295); his adored elder brother was killed during the miners' industrial dispute of the early 1970s when a coal bing, which the brothers were stealing coal from, collapsed (pp. 353-354); as a former miner from a mining family his self-interested decision to join the police to help crush the miners' strike of 1984 is the reason for the loss of his "soul" (pp. 261-262). The personal desolation of the character is therefore mirrored by a general breakdown in community and solidarity as exemplified by the miners' unsuccessful struggle. Welsh's text then confirms its suggestion that the Conservative government played a central role

in Scotland's degeneration as the entirely meritless and corrupt Robertson is said to "idolise Thatcher" (pp. 389).<sup>15</sup>

- 24 Though the Rebus novels are clearly identifiable as belonging to the FASP genre and though the novels mentioned in this paper clearly take the extractive industries as a professional *substrat*, it is perhaps unwelcome to analyse these themes from a linguistic, cultural or literary standpoint while excluding the other novels that do not meet all the required characteristics of FASP. In a study of how coal mining is represented in Scottish literature it would be unwise to exclude William McIlvanney's historical novel *Docherty* simply because it is neither a crime novel nor a best-seller. Bourdieu's opposition of commercially-motivated or heteronomous art with the autonomous art which is inspired by a creative need (Bourdieu, 1992) should not blind us to the continuum that exists within the field itself and indeed within the cultural production of individual authors. While Ian Rankin's first novel *The Flood* is unquestionably a piece of autonomous art as the debut novel of an unknown literature student published by a small-scale university publishing house, we move closer and closer to the heteronomous pole as we consider Rankin's first forays into a commercially lucrative genre; his authorship of several hastily written "potboilers" or "airport" novels under the pseudonym Jack Harvey; the successive constitution of the Rebus novels as a best-selling franchise; the subsequent re-edition of *The Flood* by a major publishing house in an edition which seeks to capitalise on the success of the Rebus novels by duplicating the jacket design and title fonts of his crime novels. In particular, it would seem problematic, particularly from a textual perspective, to define a corpus among such a continuum of texts by referring to the arbitrary, extraneous and shifting criteria of readership or sales figures.
- 25 Another pitfall when analysing the Rebus novels as FASP would be to consider them merely as a ready store of specialised terminology and idiom, which could complete our knowledge of the language habits of the industrial sectors or professions forming the *substrat* of the novels. If we were to study the novels merely as a viable corpus of pre-existing professional sociolects<sup>16</sup> then we would lose sight of the complex interplay between the fictional text and the extraliterary universe. When the Rebus novels portray a mood of underlying suspicion as regards the end of the coal industry and subsequent rise of the oil industry in Scotland, they do not simply reflect sociolinguistic phenomena (the voicing of grievances relating to industrial transformations) but also articulate them (i.e. giving them form through narrative, lexical, semantic and syntactic choices). Literature, for Marc Angenot, does not meekly reproduce stable discourses which are ideologically unambiguous and exist in isolation, but reveals, builds on and adds to social discourse in all of its contradictions and cacophony (Angenot 1992, pp. 17-18). In addition, the inherent fictionality of a literary work should caution us against considering such texts as faithful mirrors of reality even in lexical and semantic terms. While Rankin has a reputation for slavishly researching his novels so that they are as faithful as possible to actual police procedure and infrastructure in the Edinburgh area, he nonetheless uses his creative licence to invent spurious police terminology and slang. In *Black & Blue* the interrogation cell is named the "biscuit tin" and the uniformed officers "woolly suits", but both these terms are avowed inventions.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, we must always be attuned to the potentially apocryphal nature of the linguistic corpus offered by a work of fiction.
- 26 Providing that we accept the provisos above, the Rebus novels represent a wealth of material for FASP specialists in terms of both professional and cultural representation. The industrial sectors and professions presented in the novels are situated within a

distinct cultural, economic and political framework which describes a Scotland which was profoundly destabilised in the 1980s and 1990s by a policy of deindustrialisation overseen by Westminster. The questions subsequently raised about Scottish identity and about Scotland's position within the United Kingdom have since led to the devolution of power to Scotland, a major and ongoing constitutional upheaval which brings with it uncertainty about the form and even the continued existence of the British state in the future. When looking for the vectors and catalysts of such profound change it is not unreasonable to turn to the literature, and even more so to the *popular* literature which gave form, medium and audience to such national doubts, fears and questionings. FASP is useful in that it reminds us, as Bakhtin pointed out, that we should not think of language as something "belonging to no-one" or "neutral" since any word we might care to use already evokes "a *profession*, a genre, a tendency, a political party" and so on (my italics). Bakhtin's conclusion is that all language carries within itself its context and social existence and as such we use words which are never free of ideology, but instead are always already "populated with intention" (Bakhtin, 1975, pp.114). The thematics of surface and depth, illusion and truth, which the extractive industries help us to observe in the Rebus novels, reminds us that under the surface of commercial genre fiction there is always an anchoring of the fictional world to an economic and political bedrock and that even the most frivolous of fictional worlds convey an ideological worldview, either in their criticism of or their complicity with the discourses of society's dominant groups. The worldview lingering under the surface of the Rebus novels, so bound up in the history of coalmining, naturally tends to be a dark one. We could argue, though, that this is not to instil a sense of national failure and pessimism as lived out through the disappearance of the Scottish mining industry, but a way of resituating a national and personal trajectory in relation to an industrial past whose human dimension is brought to the fore. It is therefore also a means to honour the passing of the mining families who toiled in the dark to bring Scotland and the UK to their current position of modernity and wealth.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHIE

- ANGENOT, Marc, « Que peut la littérature ? » dans Neefs, Jacques & Ropars, Marie-Claire (dir.) *La politique du texte : enjeux sociocritiques*, Lille, Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1992.
- BAKHTIN, Mikhail, [1975], *Esthétique et théorie du roman*. Paris, Gallimard, 1994.
- BARBÉRIS, Pierre, *Lectures du Réel*, Paris, Editions Sociales, 1973.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre, *Les règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris, Seuil, 1992.
- HUTCHEON, Linda, [1989], *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London – New York, Routledge, 1991.
- MCCRONE, David, « Sociologie d'une Ecosse en mutation » dans Dixon, Keith (dir.), *L'Autonomie écossaise – Essais critiques sur une nation britannique*, Grenoble, ELLUG, 2001.

PETIT, Michel, « La fiction à substrat professionnel : une autre voie d'accès à l'anglais de spécialité », *ASp*, n° 23/26, 1999.

ZIMA, Pierre, *Manuel de Sociocritique*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1985.

#### Fictional works cited

KELMAN, James, [1983], *Not Not While The Giro*, London, Minerva, 1989.

—, James, [1984], *The Busconductor Hines*. London, Everyman, 1985.

—, James, [1985], *A Chancer*, London, Minerva, 1995.

—, James, *How Late it Was, How Late*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1994.

MCILVANNEY, William, [1975] *Docherty*, London, Coronet, 1985.

—, [1977], *Laidlaw*, London, Sceptre, 1992.

—, [1983], *The Papers of Tony Veitch*, London, Coronet, 1990.

—, [1985], *The Big Man*, London, Sceptre, 1990.

—, [1991], *Strange Loyalties*, London, Sceptre, 1992.

RANKIN, Ian, [1986], *The Flood*, London, Orion, 2005.

—, [1987], *Knots & Crosses*, London, Orion, 1998.

—, [1990], *Hide & Seek*, London, Orion, 1998.

—, [1993], *The Black Book*, London, Orion, 1998.

—, [1997], *Black & Blue*. London, Orion, 1998.

—, *Set in Darkness*, London, Orion, 2000.

WELSH, Irvine, [1993], *Trainspotting*, London, Minerva, 1996.

—, *Filth*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1998.

## NOTES

1. [En ligne], <<http://www.ianrankin.net/books.asp>>, [author's official website], consulted September 2009.

2. "I just thought a detective was a great way of getting access to every nook and cranny. He can be talking to the politicians and the judges and the business people who run the city one minute and the next minute he can be down in the stews talking to the prostitutes and the down-and-outs and the people who have absolutely nothing. He's a great tool for that dissection of society." "An Interview with Ian Rankin". *Bookslut* [online interview] <[http://www.bookslut.com/features/2005\\_04\\_005009.php](http://www.bookslut.com/features/2005_04_005009.php)>, consulted May 2009.

3. "The city itself is a central character in the series, and beyond that each book tries to focus on one part of modern-day Scotland, so that the series itself becomes a jigsaw, laying out where the country's going, and how it got to where it is." "Interview with Jon Jordan" reprinted on "Writing Scotland : Ian Rankin 1960", [online writers' index], <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/...>>, consulted May 2009.

4. *The Observer*. May 27 2007. "Forget Burns, show me Rebus's pub". Reprinted on <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/...>>, consulted May 2009.

5. *The Guardian*. October 14 2004. "Edinburgh crowned the capital of literature". <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/...>>, consulted May 2009.
6. *The Scotsman*. December 07 2008. "Cardenden? It's nothing to write home about". <<http://news.scotsman.com/latestnews/Cardenden--It39s-nothing-to.4769076.jp>>, consulted May 2009.
7. "Ian Rankin. Exile on Princes Street: Inspector Rebus & I". <<http://www.twbooks.co.uk/authors/rebus.html>>, [online interview], consulted May 2009.
8. "Interview with Jon Jordan", *op. cit.*
9. "I think what I wanted to do was write something that was on the surface a crime novel that was going to sell loads of copies, but which would be accepted by my peers in academia as being serious Scottish fiction." Plain, Gill. 2002. *Ian Rankin's Black and Blue*. London, Continuum Press: 11. Reproduced on <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/arts/...>>, consulted May 2009.
10. In a conference given by Ian Rankin on 4th July 1998 during the "Culture et nationalismes" Summer School organised at Stendhal University, Grenoble, Rankin explained that after observing his father abandon James Kelman's *The Busconductor Hines* he was inspired to present the same social realities through a more accessible genre.
11. "[Rosyth Naval Dockyard] seemed to be the only place in Fife where work was still available. The mines were being closed with enforced regularity. Somewhere along the coast in the other direction, men were burrowing beneath the Forth, scooping out coal in a decreasingly profitable curve [...]" (Rankin 1990, p. 225). « John Rebus had once known Cowdenbeath very well indeed, having gone to school there. It was one of those Fife mining communities which had grown from a hamlet in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries when coal was in great demand, such demand that the cost of digging it out of the ground hardly entered the equation. But the coalfields of Fife didn't last long. [...]; Like the towns and villages around it, Cowdenbeath looked and felt depressed: closed down shops and drab chainstore clothes. But he knew that the people were stronger than their situation might suggest." (Rankin 1993, p. 127).
12. Glasgow too is described as suffering from an identity crisis brought about by its redevelopment. See Rankin, 1997, p. 57.
13. The phrase is said to have been coined by James Ellroy specifically for Rankin whom he described as "the king of tartan noir" in a promotional book cover quotation. Taylor, Andrew. April 1 2001. "Ian Rankin: the King of tartan noir". *The Independent*. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/...>>, consulted September 2009.
14. The importance of the oil industry in *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973) created by John McGrath's 7: 84 theatre company is analysed in Christopher Harvie, "North Sea Oil and Scottish Culture" in Hageman, Susanne (ed.). 1996. *Studies in Scottish Fiction: 1945 to the Present*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, pp. 159-185. It is certain that 7:84 were a strong influence in the literary revival of the 1980s and 1990s, as evidenced by Rankin's allusion to the group on p. 348 of *Black & Blue*.
15. Welsh's character also shares the preoccupation with the historiographic authority usurped by history's victors which Rankin foregrounded through the Ellroy epigraph in *Black & Blue*. In *Filth* we can read that Robertson chose the side of the police over the miners because he was aware that : "The important thing was to be on the winning side [...] Only the winners or those sponsored by them write the history of the times. [You understood that] history decrees that only the winners have a story worth telling." Welsh, Irvine. 1998. *Filth*. London, Jonathan Cape: 261.
16. In the sense given by Pierre Zima of a more or less formalised group language which incarnates, through its lexical, semantic and syntactic choices, the social group's collective interests and values. Zima, Pierre. 1985. *Manuel de Sociocritique*. Paris, L'Harmattan: 130-131.
17. "Interview 09: Ian Rankin on Rebus", <<http://www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk/...>>, [Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech website], consulted June 2009.

---

## RÉSUMÉS

En tant que romans policiers qui mettent l'accent sur les procédures liées aux métiers de la police, les romans de la série des Rebus de Ian Rankin correspondent à la définition convenue de la FASP. Cependant, les investigations touchent souvent d'autres professions et secteurs d'activité, ce qui nous permet de les considérer du point de vue de l'intersection de leurs différents substrats professionnels. Cette communication cherche à explorer le rôle des industries pétrolières et charbonnières, qui revêtent une importance toute particulière, ayant façonné non seulement l'évolution personnelle et créative de l'auteur, mais aussi le contexte national et sociopolitique dans lequel les romans s'inscrivent. Nous avons surtout l'intention d'examiner la manière dont la représentation des industries extractives génère des motifs de dissimulation et de révélation, de superficialité et de profondeur qui ont une résonance particulière face à la description des investigations policières menées par Rebus, qui se caractérisent souvent par la mise au jour de vérités sombres. De surcroît, en rattachant ces thèmes aux sources d'énergie qui sont déterminantes dans le développement du monde industrialisé, et dans l'histoire de l'Écosse depuis les années 1970, les romans soulignent les liens entre des enjeux commerciaux, politiques et sociaux. De cette manière, les romans de la série Rebus incarnent une tradition littéraire écossaise moderne qui réaffirme la subordination de la société moderne aux forces économiques. Cependant, en réinscrivant ces romans au sein d'une tradition littéraire où les industries extractives ont toujours été très présentes, il est possible de nous interroger sur la pertinence ici de l'appellation de FASP. A la place, nous constatons que les mêmes questionnements socioéconomiques mis en rapport avec des thématiques professionnelles semblables sont partagés par nombre d'œuvres de fiction écossaise au sein d'un continuum qui passe du roman policier commercial à des œuvres plus exigeantes de littérature expérimentale.

As mainstream detective fiction with a strong focus on police procedure, Ian Rankin's Rebus novels fit the accepted definition of FASP. However, the investigations often touch on other professions and industries, allowing them to also be considered from the perspective of their intersecting professional *substrats*. This paper intends to explore the role of the fossil fuel industries, which are of particular significance, having shaped not only the personal and creative development of the author, but also the national, socio-political context in which the novels were written and set. It is our intention to examine in particular how the representation of the extractive industries generates images of concealment and uncovering, superficiality and depth which have particular resonance with the depiction of Rebus's police investigations, generally characterised by the revealing of dark truths. More significantly, by linking these themes to the energy sources which have been pivotal to the modern world's industrial development, and particularly to that of Scotland since the 1970s, the novels foreground the links between commercial, political and social concerns. By doing so, the Rebus novels characterise a modern Scottish literary tradition which reiterates the subordination of modern society to economic forces. However, in resituating the novels within this literary tradition where the extractive industries have always been strongly present, it is possible to question the pertinence of the FASP label in this instance. Instead, it can be seen how the same socioeconomic concerns connected with similar professional themes are shared by a number of Scottish works along a continuum

which ranges from commercially-driven detective fiction to more challenging works of experimental writing.

## INDEX

**Keywords** : coalmining, extractive industries, FASP, Ian Rankin, oil industry, Scotland, Scottish literature

**Mots-clés** : Ecosse, FASP, Ian Rankin, industrie charbonnière, industrie pétrolière, industries extractives, littérature écossaise

## AUTEUR

**DAVID LEISHMAN**

Université Stendhal – Grenoble 3