

The Folly of our Fable: Getting Scottish History Wrong

I The History We Deserve?

'History to the defeated
May say Alas
But cannot help or pardon.'

Auden's lines are famous, but what does history say to the victors? A struggling movement - a class or a nation - must interrogate its failures or defeats, using this to rationalise, throw overboard old beliefs, reorganise. But a successful, or at least partially successful, movement runs the danger of cashing its past in. History got us here. We are its end. Enjoy.

Such triumphalism has been heard from our transatlantic masters – Francis Fukuyama and friends. Ought we to be worried that the semi-success of Scottish self-government might breed something similar: history no longer as process, but as something we can sell?

Indeed we ought. Not only is the uptake of history in Scottish schools disappointing, but assessments of its impact, notably by Sydney Wood, have exposed islands of emotion - the 'Braveheart' factor – amid a sea of ignorance. 50 % of schoolkids recognised Wallace, no-one recognised Tom Johnston. In 1998, when the new National Museum of Scotland opened in Edinburgh, it gave the Twentieth Century over to a sort of bring-and-buy sale where the public could exchange its memories: a capitulation to the least demanding level of post-modernism.

If history is checked at the door, it will come slithering over the windowsill. I cite a couple of examples encountered in the space of a week: Wedgwoods produced a series of mugs called 'Stamps from Afar' to commemorate 150 years of the Penny Post. The Scottish one showed one stamp with 'The West Highland Sleeper' of 1890 and another with Balmoral. Balmoral is a landmass away from Fort William. No sleeper used the West Highland in 1890. The English engine pulling this ghost train was built in 1923. There were no landscape stamps in 1890 - and, oh yes, the time on the date-stamp was 16.40. If a 'historical' artefact turned out to be a fiction, historical fiction itself was in trouble. A novel *The Rising Sun* about the Darien Scheme got a near-six-figure advance from Macmillan for its author, Douglas Galbraith, but had only tangential connection with the facts. There were two, not one, colonisation bids. The *Rising Sun* flagship wasn't on the first. The book's narrator, Roderick Mackenzie, supposedly saw the rise and fall of New Edinburgh

as Secretary of the ill-fated Company of Scotland but wasn't on either - though he did shanghai the English Captain Green, who was judicially lynched at Leith in 1705. In the book Mackenzie sees this, as an innocent bystander. With facts like this, can Mel Gibson be far behind?

In commentaries about our recent past, history ought to take centre stage, given the need to 'place' the policy of our infant state. But in several influential publications – in sociology, literary criticism, politics and even social history - it registers an enigmatic Cheshire cat grin, vanishing, but still illuminating postmodern confusion and stasis. Why should this be?

II Parliament and Populism

A comparison lies nearby, in Ireland. Reacting against two successive bouts of nationalism in the post-Union schools, first unionist English and then an equally dogmatic Irish nationalist history imposed through the Catholic Archbishop Cullen, post-1945 historians reaction to Ireland's neutrality by debating over 'revisionism', and trying to relate Ireland's experience to European tendencies in economics, thought and culture. Unsurprisingly Professor Joe Lee, who has done his 'public service' as an Irish senator, created with his *Ireland, 1912-1985* (1993) the critique of Irish politics' impact on society and economy which laid the foundations for the Celtic tiger-cage. In his experimental *Modernisation of Irish Society* (1973), the model for my own *No Gods and Precious Few Heroes* (1981), he had stressed the centrality of intellectual history, something given only fitful recognition by Scots historians and politicians. Our 'new beginning' may have made us break with the past and ignore helpful as well as awkward continuities.

For example the Scottish Disruption - the split in the Kirk - of 1843 was boring in the 1960s, but not in the 1980s when the struggle for devolution questioned the parliamentary sovereignty against which the Non-Intrusionists had in 1842 issued their 'Claim of Right'. This name was used to sanction the multi-party campaign, though its Calvinist sound was modulated into consensus by the Catholic Sir Robert Grieve and the ceaselessly active Methodist-Anglican Canon Kenyon Wright.

Religious in a secular age, but satisfactorily ecumenical? The Edinburgh Parliament certainly opens the way to rational enquiry and innovation: accessing a minister within hours, instead of a lengthy to-ing and fro-ing with London. But the size of the Scottish political community is still small: Edinburgh's Parliamentarians are apparently ten times more middle-class than our Westminster ones. Their impact on the Scottish voter is limited. Into this vacuum facile ideology and populism can

flow, particularly when prefaced by assent to nationalist formulae. Much enthusiasm greeted Linda Colley's *Britons* (1992), whose 'imperial protestant' theme stressed that a fabricated emotional unity was more important than the 'mechanical' links secured by industrialisation and transport change, though her evidence was very limited anent Wales, and anent Ireland non-existent. Norman Davies' *The Isles* (1999) expected that the UK would break up, a bold coda which followed a disgracefully anecdotal treatment of the nineteenth century. Was it thus surprising when Tom Devine's *The Scottish Nation* (1999), meticulous about agriculture, demography and urbanisation (all important, sure), galloped through Victorian industrialisation in fifteen out of its 700 pages, and settled the cultural scene with a few strings of names. (I'll suspend judgement on Simon Schama's ripping yarns, but the man's canny interpretation of documentary evidence seems almost smothered under anachronistic images and extras bashing one another with swords). Never mind Karl Popper and the falsification test. Celebrate!

III 'Scotland's Shame'

Another Devine volume showed more of a hangover: *Scotland's Shame* (2000). It took its cue from a 'controversial' address given by the composer James Macmillan to the 1999 Edinburgh Book Festival. Macmillan's motive was positive, to foster the multiple nature of Scottish cultures. His propositions were all tenable. One: there was still religious prejudice. 'Old Firmism', unpleasant when encountered in West Central Scotland, could also be supported by elements of the unionist establishment, adrift from once-firm securities. Two: there was a left-wing, secular threat to the Catholic school system established as part of the state network in 1918. Three: Macmillan as an artist lamented the destruction wrought by the Calvinist Reformation, of music and ceremony, painting and stained glass in Scottish churches, a complaint which went back at least to Walter Scott, and was forcefully articulated in the last century by writers such as Edwin Muir and George Mackay Brown.

Macmillan put over his case in an eloquent and liberal-minded way, although one might quibble about the details – non-sectarian education is the only thing that gets extensive backing from all communities in Northern Ireland, including Sinn Féin's minister Martin McGuinness. The problem was the way the issue ballooned into prominence. Various opinion formers reacted critically to Macmillan before reading his speech, so a pause for self-examination might have been in order. Instead the mills of publicity ground, and *Scotland's Shame: The Book* emerged.

After the deluge of devolution the waters had receded and the dreary stadia of Ibrox and Parkhead stood out again. But were any new questions being asked? Where did

community loyalty stand when scarcely a single Scot played for Rangers? Where did Scottish football obsession differ from English laddism's 'beautiful game'? Or indeed from its world-wide 'industrialisation'? Were the yobs of Charleroi yelling 'No surrender to the IRA', borrowing direct from militant Ulster protestantism? Were there possible links between Rangers supporters and English football nationalism? Might there be, indeed, an ominous linkup between rightwing politics, football supporters, and the 'squaddie culture' of troops based in Northern Ireland? On all such topics, silence.

An odd but telling line came from Andrew O'Hagan – a media-savvy London Scot, whose first novel *Our Fathers* (1999) had been nominated for the Booker. O'Hagan claimed that Catholics were invisible in the modern Scottish novel. Where had the lad been? If anything Catholics had dominated the genre from Patrick McGill via A J Cronin and Bruce Marshall, to William McIlvanney. Did O'Hagan feel that he could get away with this in London literary circles? Probably: don't switch off the few northern lights the Groucho Club can make out.

Given the solid scholarship of Scots Catholicism in the past, in the *Innes Review* and elsewhere, those closest to it *were* interesting. Bishop Joseph Devine insisted on the 'embourgeoisement' of Scots Catholics; Bernard Aspinwall punctured many lazy beliefs of and about the Catholic community. Tom Gallagher, with experience of right-wing Catholic nationalism in Portugal and ethnic tensions in the 'new' East Europe, relativised Glasgow's problems against these menacing backdrops. Tom Devine's own contributions, topping and tailing the discussion, were balanced, eloquent and self-critical, as were Macmillan's responses.

Perhaps he was too generous, given the *lacunae*. Macmillan is remarkably wide in his social engagements, but there was only one woman in the book; nothing about theology or the actual content of education; nothing on the role of a doctrinally conservative hierarchy, or the absence of any 'People's Church' movement as in Holland, Germany and Austria. Instead a preoccupied sociology held itself remote from historical roots or any wider culture, a Scots-Irish obsessionality strangely quarantined from Ireland, whether *in re* Ulster, revisionism or the crisis in the Irish Church. A comparison of this with Ciaran Brady's masterly symposium *Interpreting Irish History* (1994), or with the content and autobiographies in McGonigle, O'Rourke and Whyte's recent sparky anthology of Scots-Irish writing *Crossing the Water* (2000) would be distinctly uncomfortable.

Scotland's Shame missed one peculiarity: that the rhetoric of Scots civic nationalism - covenants, claims of right, and so forth – while it echoed militant Calvinism, hadn't damaged Catholic representation in the Parliament. The real

losers were Scotland's ethnic minorities, whose one success - the election of Mohammed Sarwar as Westminster MP for Govan - was accompanied by a public pillorying. Would this ever have come the way of any Scots Catholic? And what of the 'socially excluded' on troubled estates, whose representation passed to the middle class?

Most ironic of all, *Scotland's Shame* aimed - like the guns of Singapore - away from the real conflicts. On gays, education and marriage, no mention - only weeks before Clause 28 was to convulse Scottish opinion, providing an area for cooperation between a near-medieval prelate and a puritan capitalist. In this, the issue of Catholic schools did not surface at all. And no mention at all of that Orwellian body, the Oceanian soccer board, and the aged Numpty - was Charlie Dempsey Protestant or Catholic, and was anyone bothered? - who by denying South Africa the World Cup, probably kept wee Scotland baffling the mighty by its presence for another few years, at an almost inevitably tragic cost.

IV Rivers of Loss

If sociology sounded autistic this was, perhaps, down to its own isolation: the hope of 'progressive' academics in the 1960s, its radicalism had faded into a feeder for the privatised enterprises of market research and enterprise analysis, before being squashed by the events of 1989-91. 'Scotland the Brand', something meant ironically by the academics, was taken wholly seriously by the businessmen. George Kerevan, a former International Marxist Groupie, could be found in the *Scotsman* hymning Wullie Weir, the crusher of the Red Clyde, though this was a reaction not necessarily unexpected among 'great impersonal forces' people: the locomotive of economic causality was simply running down another track.

As well as this, there seemed a waning faith in the culture of transactional politics, and history as their record. Cairns Craig had been the stage-manager of the country's literary recovery in the 1980s. As one of the founders of *Cencrastus*, editor-in-chief of the *History of Scottish Literature* and the *Determinations* series run from Polygon, he had done much to shift cultural discourse away from the hurt of 1979 and towards thinking experimentally about past and future. But by *The Modern Scottish Novel* (1999) Craig had seemingly grown sceptical of historical continuity. Even where alternative and more 'political' readings were possible, he made the unifying factor of the novels that he studied - from *The House with the Green Shutters* to *Trainspotting* - a history grown so thin that human destinies rapidly fell through it, into the jaws of myth, linguistic or psychological conditioning. The implication of this was a continuing circularity, without any possibility of progress. At a time when scholars increasingly identified regional

poetic differentiation as a Scottish characteristic different from MacDiarmid's aim of 'seeing Scotland whole', Craig was re-erecting the centre-point, but one reduced to the cultural paralysis of the birds in Kelman's wilderness. Not an auspicious omen for our new Senators.

Parallel to Craig, yet in some ways as perplexed, was the great guerilla himself: Tom Nairn. *After Britain* (1999) was Nairn in ludic mode; a brilliant destructive critique of the Britishness of New Labour, trying to believe that despite devolution Diceyite sovereignty yet lived. But at the same time Nairn gave Scotland, when it appeared in his account, an uncharacteristic pathos. Given that his enthusiasm for Colley's *Britons* was evidently shared by Blair, one can see some reason for this dissonance. Nairn detects a continuing 'wound' to Scottish identity, inflicted by the Union, 'a hidden river of loss', against which civics wasn't gutsy enough. This line was put over in *Subverting Scottish History* (1993) a brilliantly-written assault on eighteenth-century 'improvement' by Colin Kidd in that redoubt of ancient Britishness, All Souls. Kidd mourned the destruction of traditional Scottish history at the hands of rationalist London-oriented Whigs; Muir's 'shallow banishment' of the people from their history could be heard echoing hollowly from somewhere close to the River of Loss.

It was possible to read a radical of the Enlightenment, however, like Thomas Reid, in J T Diamond's recent study (1998), and encounter Scottish ways of thought and local *virtù* without the paraphernalia of king-lists, chronicles or ballads. What wasn't covered either in Kidd or in Nairn, was the dynamism of a political debate which was not just civic but technological and scientific, which had pursued Adam Smith's 'sympathy', migrated to urban, social, religious or educational discourse, and often physically moved overseas. Yet this Protean world was not much more evident in Devine than it had been in, say, Hume Brown a century earlier. In *The Scottish Nation* not only does industrial economics retreat from the Victorian scene, so too does the Promethean Scots *bourgeoisie*, which Engels had seen as perhaps Europe's most powerful. Devine back-projects a successful social-democratic nationalism; but in a fold of the landscape there still lie concealed the old monsters and the fierce debates.

2479 words.

Books reviewed:

Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

Tom Devine, ed., *Scotland's Shame*, Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2000.

-----, *The Scottish Nation*, Hamish Hamilton, 1999, Penguin 2000.

J T Diamond, *The Social Thought of Thomas Reid*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1998.

Douglas Galbraith, *The Rising Sun*, London: Macmillan, 2000.

Tom Nairn, *After Britain*, London: Granta, 1999.