

REVIEW: REIMAGINING CULTURE

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Sharon Macdonald (1997), **Reimagining Culture: Histories, Identities and the Gaelic Renaissance**, Oxford: Berg, pb, £14.99, ISBN 1859739857, pp.xix+297.

Sharon Macdonald sets out to challenge conventional wisdom on two related counts. She presents her study as an informed stance on the analysis of identity in a 'remote' region of Europe. She argues that the ethno-nationalist constructions of culture, and implicitly 'peoplehood', are problematic and can be countered by alternative conceptions of belonging and identity. Macdonald's anthropological research was conducted on Skye in the community of 'Carnan' (a pseudonym). In addressing the first general challenge, Macdonald presents her account as an ethnographic study of Gaelic cultural identity which explores the cultural possibilities of imagining and reimagining identity in an era of 'Gaelic renaissance'. Her suggestion is that identities are not imagined 'once and for all' but, rather, are open to processes of change and reinvention, and for this she cites the now well established source on such 'imagining', Benedict Anderson. Macdonald stresses that her book is the product of a situated ethnography whereby ready-made assumptions or habitual categories of explanation are reassessed and other possibilities for understanding cultural identity are revealed. She appropriates Billig's use of 'banal' to refer to the 'everyday' expressions of identity (for example, 'Carnan' residents' relationships to animals, their taste in home decoration and the recounting of 'tourist/crofter' jokes, amongst other things), which she studies with intent in order to reveal to us the ambivalence of identity construction and expression amongst her informants. Macdonald presents herself as one who is at pains to avoid projecting 'our own' categories of thought, our ready-made assumptions, onto explanations of 'local' social relations and environment. And in order to locate herself within this 'methodological' challenge, Macdonald proceeds to reveal to us her own 'identity' and her own situated relationship to Skye, the Highlands, and

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Scotland more generally. This last account of reflexivity is now a fashionable and well-reported anthropological technique towards an informed analytical understanding.

Secondly, Macdonald sets out to challenge the ways in which we conventionally think about ethnic and national identity. The 'we' she refers to are academic and 'popular' commentators. Her intention is to present an alternative conception of cultural identity to that offered by the 'romantic-nationalist' model. Macdonald stresses the need to distinguish between models of identity which privilege ideas of coherence and overt cultural markers (such as language). She invites us to contemplate the subtle possibilities for identity formation which might lie beyond the dominant articulation of language. Here she draws on the work of Edwin Ardener and his preference for highlighting the 'muted' forms of identity formation available to people (p.13). In short, Macdonald sets out her stall as one which will expose the Gaelic cultural renaissance as a process of reworking and reshaping the past in relation to the 'new' in ways which may be viewed as creative and constructive in a current climate of 'ethno-nationalist' expansion throughout Europe.

The book is divided into nine chapters in all, but the structure of the book owes more to her three categories of study, namely 'Histories', 'Identities' and, lastly, 'Cultural Renaissance'. She begins the book with a 'Preface' discussion of the relationship between 'Anthropology, Authenticity and Ambivalence'. Simply, this is the theoretical framing for her somewhat overdeveloped theme that identity and culture are subjected to various interpretations and possibilities for practice. She notes that identity is a relational concept and one which does not fit into neat bounded entities or coherent systems (p.12). Her ethnographic account is an attempt to expose the 'dynamic of social life' and the possibilities for identity as a 'repertoire of sources for imagining identities' (p.12). Her tack for doing this is largely to examine the cultural shifts and identity ambivalence through an examination of 'generational differences' and gender difference. Whilst Macdonald recognises a growing tendency to present the individual as possessing ever-expanding possibilities regarding identity construction, she stresses that the repertoires of sources for creating identity are effectively limited; parameters of identity both enable and constrain.

The section on 'Histories' divides into two chapters, the first pertaining to the heritage of Gaelic culture and the second to the construction of the 'Crofting Community' with reference to both 'Land' and 'Religion'. Macdonald states that her intention is not to provide an uncontested 'background' to the present but rather to 'highlight' (a word she is fond of) the different interpretations

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and versions of the 'Past' which present a resource for 'imagining today'. Indeed, whilst much of what is written may be viewed as appropriate to north Skye, her discussions of 'Highland history', 'Hebridean history', 'Gaelic history' and even 'Church history' may well be regarded by some readers as both limited and skewed. Throughout the book Macdonald flits rather uncritically between localised reference to 'Carnan' and the wider socio-symbolic constructions of the 'Highlands', the 'Hebrides' and the 'Gaidhealteachd'.

The next section goes under the heading focus of 'Identities'. Chapters here examine the 'way of life' of 'Carnan' as a crofting, Gaelic and 'religious' community and also offer an exploration of 'belonging' and the claims made to 'being a part of place'. Macdonald's analysis leads her to state that 'beneath the ideological construct of 'the people' lies a good deal of 'messy complexity' (p.114) and this is always a point worth making. Her discussions with 'the people' reveal an everyday understanding that divisions run deep in 'Carnan' social relations. Macdonald produces accounts of these divisions and consequent ambivalence based on gender, age, Church, language and land, for example, which can run counter to more public and politicised claims to a unified identity as 'Crofters' or as 'Gaels'. The necessary construction of a unified identity is reinforced repeatedly, it would seem, by the construction of otherness and strangerhood attributed to incomers to 'Carnan'. According to Macdonald, incomer identity maps onto the identity of 'white settler'. Macdonald uses the term 'white settler' interchangeably with 'incomer', and in this she may well be replicating her informants' accounts, but the reader would benefit, perhaps, from a greater contextualisation of the data indicating how 'white settler' identity is formulated. Research throughout Scotland over the last decade has shown that the terms are not interchangeable, and that the 'white settler' identity in particular is a significantly nuanced construction. A group of hippies who occupied a communal house in the area for some years are cited as examples of incomers in the 'locals' midst whose presence reinforces the oppositional nature of 'home' and 'localness' to 'away' and 'strangeness'. But, again, a closer focus on those people who have come in to occupy the more obviously ambivalent position of 'incomer married to local' would have served as a more useful example of an everyday experience of negotiating identity from within the community rather than the clearly 'alien' outsiders, the hippies. She does refer to the situated and relational nature of 'incomer/white settler' identity, however. Macdonald offers the claim that some 'incomers' can lay claim to 'local' identity and vice versa, and yet much of this discussion lacks a wider reference to the macro-level institutions through which such labels are articulated and reinforced, most notably in Scotland by both the media and through rural policy rhetoric.

Her last section charts the 'Cultural Renaissance' of 'Carnan' throughout the mid-1980s with reference to the example of the building of a community hall and the setting up of a *co-chomunn* (community co-operative). Macdonald's detailed account of the strategies employed by key actors, including institutional actors such as the then Highlands and Islands Development Board and local 'activists' intent on getting things going, is a useful illumination of social relations from within the 'Carnan' area. The 'producing' of community at a 'Carnan' level through the hall, for example, has both costs and benefits, and Macdonald does capture the tense nature of public and private interplay which is a feature of rural social development practice. Although much of the data she cites is of the 1980s (there is a limited attempt to update the state of play) her writing incorporates the nuances of how such 'community' focus is more interesting in terms of the process of its realisation than the actual achievement of any goal in itself. In light of more recent trends in rural development practice which emphasise 'local partnership' and a sustainability ethos, Macdonald's observations are useful reminders of how rural residents struggle to push forward social development whilst accommodating and, in some cases, revoking the 'everyday nature' and 'taken for grantedness' of an area's cultural heritage and (historical) power relations. Her study of two competing 'Gaelic' playgroups taps into similar issues and offers the reader an insight into the multi-dimensional nature of rural identity where status, ethnicity and - a much neglected area of rural study reference - one's emotional capacities, for example, are tensely operationalised.

There are two issues of concern regarding this book. First, readers may find that her tendency to draw general reference from her 'Carnan' study is unfortunate and, at times, actively negates the subtle nuances and complex cultural histories of each island, each parish, each glen or each township that constitute symbolically bounded entities throughout the highland region. Clearly such generalising presents a greater problem for the uninformed reader, who may see this ethnographic account as representative of a wider 'Highland' or 'Hebridean' experience, whereas a more informed, 'familiarised' reader is in a position to exercise good judgement as to what the 'Carnan' case study contributes to an understanding of social and cultural life elsewhere. As it is, the book presents itself as a somewhat conflated discussion of all things 'Highland' and 'Hebridean' bound up in a single selective case study, the (due to the pseudonym) somewhat mythical 'Carnan'.

Secondly, this book was published in 1997. The fieldwork was undertaken throughout the 1980s. Macdonald's account is therefore a retrospective imagining of 'Carnan' life and the area generally. This creates certain tensions of past and present relevance for the reader. Her last chapter is the updating chapter. Here, she 'tops up' the 1980s ethnographic data with discussions of

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growing employment opportunities in media and tourism for 'Gaels' and the relative success of Gaelic medium education as indicative of the 1980s struggles being worthwhile, for example. But none of this can remove the pressing concern that this book published now is published a decade too late. To speak of ambivalence and fuzziness of identity construction, or to argue that language is not the only means by which ethnic identity can be successfully produced, are general claims throughout the book which, whilst intellectually valid enough, are now well-established arguments.

Kirsten Hastrup has argued eloquently that the anthropologist can never 'know' her subjects in their totality; the reality can never be 'exhausted' through study. Yet the ethnographer can experience from the inside a shared space with her 'natives' and can project outwards a comprehension of their understanding and social worlds. Sharon Macdonald, as an anthropologist, has set herself the task of presenting the picture of 'Carnan' from the inside, and, furthermore, 'highlighting' or bringing into relief certain processes and practices which insiders take for granted. Macdonald's book will be judged from within her own field of anthropology as an example of anthropology's self-awareness of, and responsibility to, the articulation of multiplicity of selves and the recontextualization of local essentialisms. Those who reach for this book from outwith anthropology may find that much of the account prioritises Macdonald's articulations of ambivalence. Such highlighted ambivalence can offer the reader some insight into Gaelic culture and social relations in 'Carnan' which is useful, even if it is only to explore the possibilities of such ambivalence being present, or absent from, elsewhere.

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