

REVIEW: IS THE GAELTACHT A NATION?

David McCrone

James Hunter, 1999, **Last Of The Free: A Millennial History of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland**, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, ISBN 1840183764, £9.99.

That the Gaeltacht is a nation may seem a fanciful notion, and possibly better expressed by asking the question in the past tense: did the Gaeltacht have the potential to be a nation? The answer must be an unequivocal yes. We are used to taking reality for granted, assuming that outcomes are in some sense inevitable, that no other possibility can be imagined. And yet, we do not have to look far for the counter-intuitive. Jim Hunter's latest - and most comprehensive - study to date suggests that the Highlands of Scotland have always had the potential, and at times the actuality, to be different, even to the extent of being a separate imagined community. That it failed to be so was not due to some innate implausibility, but mainly due to the contingencies of history.

The publication of Hunter's book in 1999 was itself worthy of study. It drew down on the author's head all sorts of opprobrium, a usual sign that some raw nerve had been touched. A rather dyspeptic review by Michael Fry in **The Herald** suggested that the author had misused his position as part-time chairman of Highlands and Islands Enterprise, even though in the preface HIE's chief executive Iain Robertson was at pains to deny this. Fry's other objection was that Hunter had fallen prey to victimology, in other words, that the Highlands was blaming someone else for its longstanding problems. Other reviewers took exception to the comment by a crofter in 1979 that while in London they cared little for the Highlands, in Edinburgh, 'they've always hated us'. Hunter took away this worrying thought and mulled it over for nigh on 20 years. It became the basis for rewriting the history of the Highlands, and for lowlanders especially it makes uncomfortable reading. At a time of setting up Scotland's first democratically elected parliament, it

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Review: Is The Gaeltacht A Nation?

became an insidiously worrying thought. What if it were true? What if Scotland was at least two countries, a Highland and a Lowland? What if this had an older pedigree than the 19th century clearances, and further, what if the old antagonisms had not gone away? This was not a question to be asked in the new political climate, but it demanded an answer, and it provides a refrain which lies close to the surface of Hunter's book. In short, he argues, this is the oldest and deepest divide in Scottish culture and society. The nerve which Hunter touches in all Scots is that the Highlands were subject to systematic oppression, exploitation and downright ethnic hatred for much of their history, and - no, it was not the fault of the English in the main; lowland Scots were largely to blame. The time has come to confront our own history.

Thanks to Bill Ferguson's splendid book on Scottish identity, we know that the Gaels were undoubtedly the most influential of Scotland's founding peoples (Ferguson, 1998). This does not mean that they converted influence into power. Their failure so to do, and their progressive marginalisation, is one of the enduring motifs of Scottish history. The reason was simple and brutal: 'Scotland' as we know it was created by the forced oppression and incorporation of territories within its boundaries. To be sure, Scotland was not, lest we indulge in unwarranted breast-beating, unusual in this respect. All nations have been forged on the anvil of uniformity. The awkward bits, especially those which are deemed to threaten the whole, have to be beaten into shape to suit the whole. The hammer, in this case, was the Scottish state, in Hunter's words, 'a state whose rulers were committed to eradicating both Highlands and islands autonomy and all those other features whether social, cultural and linguistic, which differentiated the region from localities closer to Scotland's Edinburgh-centred heartland' (p.13). Why, we might ask, not leave people to be themselves? This liberal, late-20th century response carried no weight with those involved in mediaeval state-building. The crown was one of the very few unifying institutions in an unusually diverse polity, and it judged that it could not afford to give liberty to a region with such a distinctive culture and power-base.

From the first millennium onwards, the Scottish state struggled to subdue its unruly and troublesome periphery. From the late 12th century Somerled threatened the Scottish state from his Argyll heartland, reinforced by the Norse threat which was only removed by Scottish victory at the battle of Largs in 1263. The kings of Scotland from David I used the tactic of planting sympathetic nobles in alien soil, a tactic perfected by English kings in Ireland with greater publicity but no lesser effect. The Hebrides and northern isles received their quota of king's placemen as required. The stigmatisation of Highlanders as ruthless caterans, as, in the words of John of Fordoun 'a wild

and untamed race, primitive and proud, given to plunder and the easy way of life' (p.123) became a useful device for ethnic cleansing. Note too the early appeal to a proto-protestant ethic of having to 'earn' what you get. The battle of Harlaw in Aberdeenshire in 1411, had it gone the other way, might well have pushed back the boundaries of Scots-speaking incursion. Later in the same century, overtures between Lords of the Isles and the English monarchy might well have partitioned the Scottish kingdom to remake 'Alba' of the 9th century, leaving the lowlanders or sassenachs to fend for themselves. The rest of this history is better known. The dislike of Gaelic culture by Scotland's ruling class in the 16th century gave way to the handy weapon of religious warfare post Reformation. By the 17th century, the Scottish parliament was proposing that Gaelic should be 'abolisheit and removeit' on the grounds that it was 'one of the chief and principall causis of the continewance of barbaritie and incivilitie amongis the inhabitantis of the Ilis and Heylandis' (p.175). This was the continuance of warfare by cultural means, and set the tone and moral justification for the better-known atrocities of the 18th and 19th centuries. Perhaps surprisingly, Bonnie Prince Charlie, the feckless prince, comes out of this better than one might expect. The fact that no-one could be quite sure what his purpose was - to reinstate Highland culture to its former glory, Scotland to its independent condition, or simply his father on the British throne, suggest that he was a better politician in the modern mould than a soldier.

Let us then return to the notion that the Gaeltacht was, or had the propensity to be, a nation. Surely we cannot doubt this. It had its own foundation story, a strong claim to be the founding nation of Alba, with all that powerful cultural imagining. It was perceived as such by the Scottish crown which feared its strength and independence. Its cultural distinctiveness in language and religion marked it out as an implicit challenger to the unity of the struggling Scottish state. Not for nothing was the last battle on British soil fought against a Highland army threatening the state's overthrow. Indeed, it was the very power, not the weakness, of the Gaeltacht which brought down the wrath of first the Scottish, and then the British, state on its head. Weak and peripheral places are not attacked in this way; they are simply left to wither and die. As coup de grace, of course, the Gaeltacht had the ultimate distinction of having its very clothes stolen by the state to kit out its 18th and 19th century military machine. In due course, in a perverse irony, the whole of Scotland became 'highland' kitted out in tartan rigmarole without so much as passing blush or by-your-leave. Incorporation was complete; the Highland beast was tamed.

Review: Is The Gaeltacht A Nation?

In this context, then, asking whether the Gaeltacht is, or was, a nation, is not such a far-fetched question. On any measure of 'nation-ness' it would not be difficult to accord it such status, at least up to its brutal suppression in the late 18th century. If, for example, Scottish history had gone the other way, and Inglis-speaking lowland Scotland had simply become incorporated as part of greater England, then the Gaeltacht might have developed as distinctively other. Nothing is settled in history; it only gets to seem that way in the manner in which it is written by the victors.

One can then appreciate why Hunter's latest, and in many ways most challenging, book has caused such a stushie. It attacks one of the key assumptions on which the new Scotland is based. It implies that the Gaeltacht is Scotland's oldest colony just at the point at which democracy is being refashioned. It could not have come at a better time.

REFERENCE

Ferguson, W. (1998), **The Identity of the Scottish Nation**, Edinburgh University Press.

May 2000