

## **REVIEW: POLITICS, POETICS AND POSSIBILITIES**

*Tony McManus*

Christopher Harvie, **Travelling Scot: Essays on the history, politics and future of the Scots**, Glendaruel: Argyll Publishing, 1999, £7.99 ISBN 1 8746 4099 8.

Kenneth White, **House of Tides: Letters from Brittany and Other Lands of the West**, Edinburgh: Polygon, 2000 £12.99 ISBN 0 7486 6279 0.

Kenneth White and Christopher Harvie share a fundamentally cultural concern in these very different examinations of the 'post-modern' world, beyond which both seek to take us.

Professor of History at the University of Tübingen, Harvie takes as his terrain the political-economic landscape of Europe within the context of 'turbo-charged capitalism'. His specific comparative references are to regional and national problems and solutions for Scotland and Baden-Württemberg, thence to a democratised Europe which he envisages taking over the 'sympathy' function assigned to the erstwhile nation-state by Adam Smith – that is, protector of the people against the tendency of wealth towards 'corruption' and 'irresponsible luxury'.

**Travelling Scot** is a collection of twenty-two essays written between the Scottish referenda of 1979 and 1997. Harvie was a most influential figure in these years in the determined effort to, as Alasdair Gray put it, 'work as if you were living in the early days of a better nation'. Insisting on seeing his field of politics and economics in the bigger cultural context and looking to a renewal of that context for ultimate solutions, he was instrumental in bringing about the change in atmosphere which has occurred in Scotland over

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those years – a patient awareness of possibilities to be pursued. His vision is of:

a move away from the post-modern condition – a *British* initiative which (has) played itself out – to a process of, as MacDiarmid put it, 'seeing Scotland whole and in relation to the infinite'.

So, he looks back to Buchanan, the Democratic Intellect, Carlyle, Geddes and MacDiarmid, in the intellectual-cultural line, and the likes of Walter Elliot, Tom Johnston, the Marxists and ILPers – and even the distinctive nature of Scottish Conservatism – in the political line.

The first step is to Europe: 'being Scottish Europeans isn't just an interesting option. It's the only chance we've got'. This is reflected in an autobiographical theme which itself reflects shifting opinion in Scotland, of a drift away from the Labour Party towards a new political alignment yet to materialise. In the meantime he travels in Russia and Canada and Europe, making connections and revealing contrasts, placing devolution and industrial decay in a global context.

His immediate aim is for a 'subsidiarity', a handing down of real power to the communities to influence land, education, health and housing - a renewal of democratic participation from individual to European levels. If this sounds rather reformist, Harvie is all too aware of the sheer power of the economic system we are up against – 'Microsoft and Intel have now much greater capital than Ford, but together employ 48,000, against Ford's 325,000' – and its ability to create its own truths. Moneys associated with the social underpinning of the system, crime, drugs, etc. do not feature in the sanitised picture capitalism presents of itself, yet these are among the daily concerns of the bulk of European populations. We have to walk carefully, in other words.

But there is also a radical voice which is never far from the surface and often given full vent as he expresses his exasperation at the absurdities of capitalism and rails against its philistinism:

the impact of private satellite channels has been disastrous, particularly on children. This is now visible, alas, in the retardation of students' capabilities in reading, organising and expressing knowledge – something for which no number of nets and webs can compensate.

From the more radical perspective it is possible to see that maybe we are not looking at a rampant, reascent capitalism but at a more natural phenomenon – the last full-bloomed flowering of a system approaching its end:

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The disaster of the little tigers suggests that a capitalism which has also lost touch with its social environment could be approaching a cognate moment of hubris.

From his 'Atlantic studio', Kenneth White looks at this 'post-modern' world's protracted 'endgame' from a 'cosmic' perspective, a sense of human residence on and of the earth. For him, a new politics is far off and requires fundamental cultural change before it can be realised. The grounding for that cultural revolution is to be in the one thing humanity shares and depends upon yet has sorely abused, the earth – hence 'geopoetics'. **House of Tides** opens with an evocation of the Atlantic's pervasive influence and continues in the ternary rhythm of thought and writing which structures his sentences, informs his ideas and impressions and makes each chapter come in like a wave. It is clear and light of touch but reverberates with depths of multiple meaning. Looking more to eastern traditions of prose-writing (Matsuo Basho's **The Narrow Road to the Deep North**, for example), White makes its fusion of prose and poetry complete, the poetry distilled from the experiences being recounted in the flow of the writing:

Everywhere, sun glinting on mica, here and there, clumps of wild carrot  
or criste marine and, once, in a quiet creek, and the blue-green water  
lapping against the rocks, a white heron.

So the earth expresses itself. What about the humans? White's humans are, mainly, affectionately drawn, but many are so wrapped up in their personal angsts (for which some, sadly, claim a political or even poetical significance) that they cannot connect with the world. They personify White's view of contemporary culture and its loss of a 'sense of world', outlined theoretically in his essays but drawn humorously here, as when he comes across a family of holiday-makers in one of his favourite haunts:

The son had a radio, the daughter had a Walkman, and the wean on the  
father's shoulders was already such a victim of civilisation that all it  
could do to express its happiness was to shout: 'Bang, bang bang, while  
making a gesture of shooting up the universe.

But other acquaintances and the cultural-intellectual figures whose signs he sees all around him – Segalen, Renan, Chateaubriand, Corbière, Hardy, the fishermen and sea adventurers of the Breton coast who, among other things, told Columbus where America was – reveal signs of direct contact with the earth and a desire to express that vital contact. In that, they are among the precursors of geopoetics and move around in White's consciousness along

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with the gulls, cormorants and herons, the stones and shorelines, the storms of wind and wave, the winter frosts, the trees and flowers of the north Breton coast. After the holiday season is over, the poetic rhythm of the world is restored:

In the immense stillness, only the sounds of seabirds: *ke-kwek-kwek, tee-wee-la-o...* In the shallow water, a shoal of little blue eel-like fishlets. Glistening spider-webs on the rocks of Ile-aux-Lapins. The sun will leave a coppery path on the pale grey of the sea, and then about midday the mist will come ghosting up and the whole coast will be wrapped in it all afternoon.

Few analyse contemporary culture with that difficult combination of clarity and depth which White achieves. Fewer still can bring those qualities, as he has done throughout a prodigious and prestigious output, to a poetic expression which does not, like so much contemporary literature, reveal little but the writer and more or less clever ways with words, but which reveals, rather, a world and an invitation to participate in that world, a bigger identity, a potential for cultural renewal.

Some will say that White's vision is too long term to be attainable, and Harvie's hope of democratising and 'greening' capitalism is a vain one. But it is precisely such pessimism which both authors challenge. Not that White would ever call himself an optimist, and I suspect Christopher Harvie might concur with White's formula – 'neither optimist nor pessimist, but *possibilist*'. That sense of possibility is not just refreshing, it is vital, and both Harvie and White, in their different ways, instil us with the sense of attainable vision.

*March 2001*