

REVIEW: STONE VOICES

Brian Taylor

Neal Ascherson, **Stone Voices: The Search for Scotland**, London: Granta Books, 2002, Hb., 326pp., £16.99, ISBN 1-86207-524-7.

Enigmatic, analytical, autobiographical, entertaining, diverse, occasionally irritating. This is *histoire nouvelle*. Definitely a different way of looking at Scotland. When I asked him recently, Neal Ascherson categorised his work as post-modern, dealing as it does with impressions as well as recorded events, responding to popular perception as well as official delineation. But my former colleague from the Scottish political media pack is pleasant, self-effacing and decidedly open to ideas. Perhaps he will not mind over much if I characterise his book instead with a metaphor from my own trade of television.

Stone Voices is what historical literature will look and sound like after the analogue, linear broadcasts have been switched off. This is history in the digital, interactive age. Turn on, tune in and drop into a miasma of memory, description and scrutiny. Ascherson argues at the outset of this work that Scottish history is taught less coherently in schools than fifty years ago. He is deliberately trying to fill gaps – but they are gaps in analysis and understanding rather than historical research. For example, he says at one point that the true nature of early Scotland is routinely misunderstood by British historians who 'still unconsciously see Scotland in this period through an English lens.' Specifically, Ascherson teases modernist scholars who, he suggests, are irked by the Declaration of Arbroath because it does not fit their belief that Nationalism is a post-industrial concept. It leads them, he says, into strained theorising – or even into dismissing the document as a freak. By contrast, he says, a Scottish lens would view the Arbroath statement in the

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context of the 'undeniable link' between national and personal liberty in 14th Century Scotland. The problem, as Ascherson notes wryly, is that small countries often find much of their historical narrative has been carved 'in large, safe countries with bad consciences about their imperial past.'

His work evocatively pursues an archaeological metaphor, suggesting that Scotland's story is around us, beneath us, solidly present in the people and the land. All we have to do is dig. This image is sustained by sporadic references to actual stone structures throughout Scotland, allied to Ascherson's efforts to chisel out the story of the people who lived and live beside those structures. **Stone Voices** is Ascherson's own excavation, a rake through his own memory, his own childhood, his own historical interests, his own political obsessions. But, as well as the giant stone shapes, Ascherson is interested in the infill, the archaeological accretion which muffles the authentic sound of Scotland's story. In that sense, this is a companion volume to the more concrete work of Tom Devine, Michael Lynch, T.C. Smout and the rest.

Ascherson ranges freely – but not entirely randomly. The twin motives are his own experience and his palpable exasperation at the popular misunderstandings surrounding Scotland. So we move from charming tales of his Argyll upbringing through a brief resurrection of the Picts – 'still hiding in the population of Scotland' – to his own memories of the two devolution referendums to the Clearances to the Scottish diaspora to the Covenanters before finally settling, just a little foot-sore, in the new Parliamentary chamber on the Mound in Edinburgh. Set out like that, it can sound chaotic. But then history itself is seldom neat, seldom linear. As written, as read, **Stone Voices** is a wonderfully analytical cavalcade in the company of a brilliant author who loves his subject and his native land. There are frequent moments of stunningly skilled wordplay. Little sections leap out. Listen to the description of Labour, consumed by 'dog-bristling hatred of the Nationalists'. Or 'militant literacy', Ascherson's verdict on the Calvinists, repressed by guilt but also responsible for a massive expansion of parish education. He argues too that the image of the dour Presbyterian is over-stated, that the Reformation 'venerated both the Book and books', that the decline in the arts had as much to do with the end of Royal patronage in 1603. Occasionally, though, the very words seem to entrance him a little too much. Reflecting on the Tory policy of selling off council houses, he says this was designed to destroy the class base of opposition by social engineering. So far, so arguable. Did he really need to add that this made Mrs Thatcher 'in some respects the last Leninist'? Tempted by the simile, he has succumbed.

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However, such lapses are rare. More commonly, we uncover with delight, sprinkled throughout the book, insightful and humorous little tales of personal or historical experience.

He tells us: 'When my mother was a little girl, most people in the district spoke Argyll Gaelic, made their own clothes, grew oats and went fishing after cuddy (saithe and lythe) in oval rowing boats they had often built with their own hands.' This is Ascherson's folk-memory bedrock, the base for his later life and character. I love, too, Ascherson's habit of elegiac elision as he conjoins one recollection to another. We learn of his chats with that other man of Argyll, John Smith. Then we are off tramping the hills with a character called Old Tobermory who used to live in the caves of their shared county. Then we learn about the caves themselves, including one used for worship. This is what I mean by non-linear, episodic history. This is empiricism writ well, an exposition perhaps of the way we first learned about Scotland. However, this work is much more than anecdotal recollection. There is powerful analysis, too. Ascherson offers new or, at least, enhanced analysis of the Highland Clearances, the Covenant and what Michael Fry has called the Scottish Empire. Certainly, Ascherson disputes certain earlier verdicts – but he resists the temptation to descend into easy iconoclasm or aggressive dogma.

On the Clearances, he disdains the deniers who would mute the grim rhythm of 'the dance called America' which took so many across the Atlantic, who would challenge the depiction of Sellar's Sutherland clearances as 'ethnic cleansing'. But he looks beyond that – or rather below such – high emotion, to pose other questions. Why, by contrast with Ireland, was there so little militant resistance to the Clearances? Was the Highland experience unique, even in Scotland, or did it fit into a wider picture of a contest between people and property which also afflicted the Lowlands and today, arguably, underpins the devolved debates over land reform?

On the Covenant, he notes quizzically that the memory of a small group of ultra-Calvinists has been subverted by others who depict them, variously and wrongly, as Liberals, Jacobins or Socialists. By contrast, Ascherson argues their motivations were theocratic rather than political, that they were relatively indifferent to the patriotism occasionally ascribed to them. Ironically, though, Ascherson argues further that the survival of Scotland as a distinct entity owes an oblique debt to the Covenanters who ensured that post-Union assimilation could not happen. He notes: 'If Presbyterianism had failed,

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Scotland today would be little more than an item of British regional geography'.

On the Scottish diaspora, he urges – following Michael Fry – that there should be a much wider understanding of the impact of Scottish international trade, both in the Nineteenth Century and much earlier. He tells of ancient Baltic links, the Scottish role in the Far East, the 'startling feat of amnesia' which has, until recently, played down the Scottish presence in the USA. Scotland, he grieves, is ignorant of its 'dense web of trading settlements which once covered much of the world'.

Similarly threaded throughout the book, of course, is Ascherson's analysis of Scottish devolution. On reading, it was at this point I diverged most obviously from the author. This is purely my personal reaction to a highly personalised narrative. I cannot help it. I am allergic to the romanticisation of politics. Neal Ascherson and I simply see things differently. He recalls the March for Scottish Democracy during the 1992 European Summit in Edinburgh. He saw 'an immense procession' as Scotland battled to take its place in the world. I covered the event and could not help also calling to mind John Major's majority, the divisions in the Home Rule camp and a broad Scottish populace which remained stubbornly unstirred. He hears the song Freedom Come All Ye – and reflects how it has become a Scottish patriotic anthem. I recall those same 1992 marchers struggling to remember the words – as the predominantly Labour platform of the time appeared determined to resist the obvious – if quasi-Nationalist – choice, Flower o' Scotland. He visits the new Scottish Parliament and sees the committee clerks and Parliamentary staff as 'the engineers of change' in re-engaging politics with the people. Well, perhaps. The Parliamentary team are deeply dedicated – and engagingly supportive of an open attitude to the media. But I would bet they blush at this verdict.

Probably, I am too pragmatic, too cynical. Neal Ascherson's narrative is a thoroughly splendid antidote. But, equally, Ascherson himself recognises the potential tension between romance and realism. He says it is not enough to chant the ancient ballads. The laws matter more than the songs – and 'to say otherwise is a wince against the pain of powerlessness.' Brilliant phrase, brilliant book.

November 2002