

## **REVIEW: BEING SCOTTISH/BEING IRISH**

*Anthony P Cohen*

Tom Devine & Paddy Logue (eds), **Being Scottish: Personal Reflections on Scottish Identity Today**, Edinburgh: Polygon at Edinburgh, 2002, 315pp, £9.99, ISBN 1 90293036 3.

Paddy Logue, ed., **Being Irish: Personal Reflections on Irish Identity Today**, Dublin: Oak Tree Press, 2000, 295pp, hb £19.99 ISBN 1 86076187 9, pb £10.99 ISBN 1 86078176 3.

Identity is a notoriously slippery concept, and Scottish identity a notoriously elusive case. As an anthropologist, it has been my constant obsession for many years, during which I have made little progress, other than repeatedly to bore my readers and interlocutors with the proposition that it is indeed elusive, and that there may be as many instances of Scottish identity as there are people who claim it.

One modest compensation gained by me from the present book is to have that tedious view confirmed, and explicitly re-stated by many of the contributors to it. If you ask a hundred people to say in 800 words what 'Scottishness' means to them personally, you invite divergence. You also run the risk of a good deal of self-indulgent twaddle and pretentiousness among some impressive writing, and the book has all these characteristics. It is possible to abstract out some frequently recurring themes, and none of them are surprising: landscape, music, language (and how often the contributors resort to vernacular phrases to make the point), democracy and egalitarianism, social responsibility, pettiness and the infinite convolutions of relationship typical of a small society.

In the end, you can come to no conclusion other than that there are so many, and such different, claims made on 'Scottishness' as an icon of this and a

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vehicle for that that it is rendered pretty meaningless by the compilation. Readers will take from it what they will. I personally value three points in particular.

The first is that you can identify anything at all with Scottishness, if you are disposed to do so. John Laird puts it sharply: 'A people and a nation are not defined by the land on which they live. They are defined by what is in their mind.' But that is in the nature of a national identity, which has to capture the individual voices and minds of so many different people – it has to be so plastic that individuals can use it to identify those features which most sharply define their selves. Stewart Sutherland, always so wary of Little Scotlandism, gives us his intellectual hero, David Hume. But, just as eloquently, points to his great aunt's three-piece suite – or, more precisely, to the fact that he has kept it. Neil MacCormick goes to the continuously recurring relationships which are so characteristic of a small society. 'I ken't his faither' is revealed as a reasonable descriptive feature of Scottishness.

There are also negative expressions of this association of personal experience with Scottishness. The Kenyan-born Mukami McCrum's contribution (for my money, the outstanding chapter in this book) is all the more eloquent for its terseness: 'Clearly my colour and being Scottish were mutually exclusive and a challenge for many people.'

The third point, presaged earlier, is that so many people reflecting on Scottishness and Scottish identity are led to the conclusion that there are indeed many Scotlands. It is not to be taken lightly, because the readiness with which it is acknowledged may indeed say something interesting and distinctive about Scotland. In those circumstances in which collective identity has to be forged deliberately in order to effect a fundamental transformation – say, to independent nationhood or statehood; or to the dictatorship of the putative proletariat or of the faith – divergence is proscribed. Collective identity in these circumstances becomes doctrinal, and is enforced with the full coercive power of the state. It is not at all the same thing as saying, in effect, 'make of it what you will'. That there are such essentially liberal attitudes to Scottish identity seems entirely congruent with the liberal and civic nature of our nationalism, but also entirely appropriate to the sociological and cultural characters of the country.

In this regard, it seems to me the contributors have done what I assume the editors hoped they would do: they have written as Scots (whatever that may

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mean) or as themselves, rather than for others. These are genuinely personal reflections; some more interesting than others, some acerbic or ironic, some cloyingly bathetic; but in almost every case I feel the writers really are trying to say something important about themselves. The volume does not add greatly to the sum of human knowledge; but it is gently entertaining, taken in small doses.

The companion volume, **Being Irish**, is even less satisfying – though perhaps for interesting reasons. There really is very little in it, aside from the obvious references to the importance of the diaspora and the North-South divide. I have a very strong sense of these pieces being written with more inhibition than their Scottish counterparts. There is some indication in the book of the significance of the huge sea-change which membership of the EU and the transformation of the Irish economy have effected. It is almost as if these writers have declared an end to the long, dark night of soulful Irish introspection. Declaring that she and, by implication, her contemporaries no longer ponder on their Irishness, Jennifer Johnston declares: 'We bored the world and solved no problems.' Douglas Kennedy writes, 'The only unique thing about the Irish, perhaps, is their utter conviction that there is something unique about being Irish.' That, surely, could be said of very many peoples, but usually those whose cultural and national histories are much thinner. The sense of embarrassment in this book is palpable.

Why the difference? We could speculate and theorise about this endlessly. But a tempting, if already well rehearsed, proposition must be that for those nations, like Scotland, which lack statehood, cultural identity, however imprecise or indefinable, assumes a special importance and political significance. We have long observed the difference in this regard between Scotland and England. But it had not occurred to me that Ireland might have fallen into the same box as England — and, notwithstanding the evidence of this book, I am still disinclined to believe it.

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