

## REVIEW: SCOTLAND AND AMERICA

*Tom Hubbard*

Michael Fry, **'Bold, Independent, Unconquer'd and Free': How the Scots Made America Safe for Liberty, Democracy and Capitalism**, Ayr: Fort Publishing, 2003, 242 pp, pb, £9.99, ISBN 0 9544461 3 5.

'It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature'. That is one of the most quoted utterances of the adoptive European, Henry James, on his native USA. A related *aperçu* was quoted by one of my students in North Carolina: 'To a European, a hundred miles is a long way; to an American a hundred years is a long time'. (I don't know who first said that – but I'd have thought that Europeans have just been through a pretty long drawn-out century.)

Michael Fry's book homes in on similarities and differences between America and Scotland, but other Europeans would recognise much that would apply more generally to transatlantic relations. During my residence in the US during the 1990s I was aware of myself as a European first and a Scot second. I do not put that down entirely to the fact that I was teaching translated European literature much more than Scottish. (Moreover, Scottish texts featured less in my classes than a broadened American canon.)

In this engaging and provocative offering, Fry charts a process from convergence to divergence in Scottish-American relations. During the eighteenth century, one was an old country, the other was new, but they shared the sense of inferior status in relation to England. Their rough outer edges, where claymore and tomahawk held sway, were far from the experience of the London régime. In more refined matters, too, the Scots had much to impart to the young nation. Fry is at his best when he traces the actual or possible influence of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy on the

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*Review: Scotland and America*

Declaration of Independence and on American governance. One of the Declaration's signatories, the Fife-born James Wilson, argued for the formalisation of the separation of powers, that key tenet of the US Constitution. Here I would have liked a reference to the concept's origin in Montesquieu, so that we could be assured that Scots need not assume all responsibility for American high-mindedness. The separation of powers squares oddly with the phenomenon of judges being elected, and thus subject to political process; as we know only too well, judges can now choose who will become President, as well as vice versa.

Fry traces the two countries' professed regard for Common Sense (with or without the capitalisation), the common man, and what in Scotland now receives lip service as 'the democratic intellect'. The Aberdonian William Smith nurtured the future University of Pennsylvania on Scottish generalist principles of education; an Edinburgh-educated American, Benjamin Rush, joined Scots and Scots-Irish colleagues in the implementation of democratic-intellectual initiatives. Fry sees Scottish influence in 'the small college in some pleasant rustic nook with a liberal curriculum, different in its welcoming atmosphere from the anonymous universities of the big cities, [which] remains an attractive feature of the US system to this day.' I can vouch personally for the value of these places. True, they are now subject to the corruptions of the consumerist attitude to education, but – unlike the Scottish universities – they have not betrayed their belief in the broad, all-round formation of their students. Well, not yet.

Fry credits Francis Jeffrey, editor of the 'clever, irreverent and probing' **Edinburgh Review**, with the setting of 'new standards for quality journalism'. One could argue that this became the inheritance of Mark Twain, H.L. Mencken and their times, but 'clever, irreverent and probing' hardly sums up the condition of the American press today.

The unloveliest link between Scotland and America was a common contrivance to serve God and Mammon simultaneously. Fry concedes that American Puritanism had origins other than those of the Scottish variety. The Calvinism of our modern, secular, sceptical Scotland is vestigial, a matter of reflexes rather than dogmas. America preaches Puritanism but does not always live up to it; we in Scotland do not preach it, but we are unfailing practitioners. In literature, Fry regards Nathaniel Hawthorne and James Hogg as involved in a common project to represent Calvinistic terrors by means of symbolism and allegory, though I am inclined to associate symbolism with

### Scottish Affairs

the later nineteenth century and with posh European Catholicism: here, the thing represented is identical to the thing itself (see the doctrine of transubstantiation). Allegory, less subtle, suits the axes-of-good-and-evil loudmouthed by extreme provincial Protestantism. Inevitably Fry invokes Herman Melville and quotes Hugh MacDiarmid's half-serious, half-cheeky claim that the author of **Moby Dick** (1851) was a Scot. At the UNC-Asheville library, in a chunky biography of Melville, I read that his great-great-something-grandfather was the parish minister of Scoonie, Fife. In the course of **Moby Dick** Melville tells us that the monks of Dunfermline turned porpoises into meatballs. We could go on playing this harmless game until we conclude that Melville wrote not only the Great American Novel but the Great Scottish Novel as well, so we might as well shut up shop and gang hame.

**Moby Dick** is the G.A.N. for many reasons, but I'll pick one: Captain Peleg's pep-talk to his young whalers as they prepare for embarkation: "Don't whale too much a' Lord's days, men, but don't miss a fair chance either, that's rejecting Heaven's good gifts." Perhaps the most probing essay on the novel is by the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes; he maintains that while Mediterranean Catholics are inwardly religious and outwardly worldly, Nordic Puritans like Peleg are inwardly worldly and outwardly religious. In the light of such an expansive observation, Fry's Scottish-American hand-holdings (often strained) appear a parochial *folie à deux* – 'Wha's like us? Wha's like thame?' As well attempt to trace the ingredients of root beer back to iron brew.

Fry is good on distinctions between the Scots and the Scotch-Irish; today, Americans confuse them. The two peoples fought on different sides in the revolutionary war (Scots as loyalists, and Scotch-Irish as patriots). He tells a pleasanter tale of the affinity between the Highlanders and the Indians: 'They competed in feats of athletic prowess, such as tossing the caber or throwing the hammer or the ball-games that the Indians played. And once they learned something of each other's languages, both sides found that they had a fund of fantastic stories to tell, especially of how spirits and fairies and other supernatural beings intervened in the affairs of men.'

Living in Asheville NC I was aware of the varied Scotch-Irish, Lowland and Highland Scottish legacies (not least in the superb music of the region); of the 'Trail of Tears' endured by the Cherokee, ethnically-cleansed from the Appalachians during the 1830s, despite the resistance of their chief, John

*Review: Scotland and America*

Ross, who was seven-eighths Scots. You could always count on a supply of fine bootleg liquor, from mountain stills, at certain parties. Fry may or may not be right in tracing the laconic Appalachian dialect back to Scots; I certainly enjoyed the examples I learned from my students: 'If God's willin' and the crick [creek] don't rise', 'Shit fire and save the matches'.

Fry ably summarises the South's resorting to Walter Scott's 'medieval' novels to justify slavery and feed its melancholy, Mark Twain's denunciation of same, and the KKK's adoption of the Fiery Cross from a canto of 'The Lady of the Lake'. For a solidier account, the reader should go to Andrew Hook's essay, in his collection **From Ganderscleuch to Goose Creek** (1999), on Scotland and the South. Fry remarks that the South failed to recognise Scott's ultimate realism. Later Scots, such as R.L. Stevenson, became scunnered at the inequalities of late nineteenth-century America. John Muir seems to apply Scottish generalism to ecology: 'When we try to pick out anything by itself we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.' His love of American nature owed much to his boyhood expeditions on the coast of Dunbar. But validating America by reference to Scotland (and vice versa) becomes an increasingly tiresome exercise as the decades roll on. Fry does recognise that by the late twentieth century, America had become what Scotland was not. He quotes Gordon Williams: 'We knew our country was a small-time dump, where nothing ever happened and nobody had a name like Jelly Roll Morton.' To the present, and our author demolishes Senator Trent Lott's Tartan Day fantasies (easy target). Fry's latter-day comparisons tend towards the terminally naff. George Dubya Bush, we are told, vacationed in Angus; even the Big Mac, far enough back, is a clanburger. Hey, jimmy, mine's a bagel supper!

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