

HOW NOT TO 'QUESTION SCOTLAND'

Gavin Miller

There have recently emerged a number of strongly-worded critiques of a malaise which is allegedly widespread amongst those who pronounce on Scottish culture. The sickness is called 'essentialism', and its symptoms are many, even though the pathogen is identical. The doctors who have diagnosed this disease have found it in the work of (amongst others) Tom Nairn, Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull, and Cairns Craig. A striking recent diagnosis is provided by Eleanor Bell in her monograph **Questioning Scotland** (Bell 2004) – a book which is largely an assault on alleged essentialism, and which will provide a focus for my discussion. There have also been a number of other, more *ad hoc* criticisms from a variety of authors. A recent collection of cultural essays, **Beyond Scotland**, captures the mood well. We have all been stuck in the essentialist parish too long, implies the title; we need to get out more. The editors of this volume refer in their introduction to 'the damage wrought by an over-determined, self-defeating essentialism fostered by Scottish criticism's overweening desire for cultural self-determination' (Carruthers, Goldie, & Renfrew 2004, p.14). The essentialist sin is 'to mistake a complex, forward-looking, heterogeneous identity for one that is narrow and reductive in its nativism' (Carruthers et al 2004, p.15).

As the above quotation implies, sufferers from essentialism are taken to display a variety of symptoms. The following is a non-exhaustive list that I have culled from various recent critiques:

- investment in the idea of tradition
- parochialism
- singular self-definition

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Scottish Affairs

- stereotyping
- questionable generalisation
- cultural exclusiveness
- reductiveness

Few, though, have cared to explain at length, with appropriate arguments and counter-arguments, just exactly what is meant by ‘essentialism’ in this context. Even Bell’s monograph never fully addresses this central issue. If we want to know what essentialism is, then we will have to start somewhere else.

Since the term ‘essentialism’ is derived from philosophy, this is the clearest starting point. What, philosophically speaking, does essentialism entail? The linguist and cognitive scientist George Lakoff sums up philosophical essentialism in the following way:

Among the properties that things have, some are essential; that is, they are those properties that make the thing what it is, and without which it would not be that *kind* of thing. Other properties are accidental – that is, they are properties that things happen to have, not properties that capture the essence of the thing. (Lakoff 1987, p.160)

So, for example, ‘elephants might have evolved in North America, rather than Africa and Asia, and they would still have been elephants. But if no mammals with trunks, large ears, large bodies, and thick legs had evolved, then there wouldn’t have been any elephants’ (Lakoff 1987, p.172). If one then assumes that categories have an objective existence, then one can order the world in terms of natural kinds – these are classifications ‘based on shared essential properties, as opposed to shared incidental properties’ (Lakoff 1987, p.161).

National ‘essentialism’ (strictly, the existence of nations as natural kinds) is therefore most typically associated with ethnic nationalism: the ethnic descent group forms a natural kind (linked by ‘blood’) which, the essentialist argues, is the basis of a nation. In such a view, the nation persists despite any classification based on accidental properties (such as residency or civic allegiance) which citizens might care to make of themselves. Though, for example, the population of Alsace-Lorraine regarded themselves as French, the Prussians who invaded them were good essentialists who saw through this ‘nominalist’ fallacy (see Gilbert 1998, p.63).

How Not to 'Question Scotland'

However, there is really very little ethnic 'essentialism' in contemporary debates about Scottishness. Nairn, Beveridge and Turnbull, and Craig are amongst those whom Bell, for example, designates as 'essentialists.' But we may safely assume that they offer a less sinister vision of Scottishness. In what sense, then, are they essentialists? Here the only option is to gather up the fragmentary allusions, and chains of loosely connected concepts, and figure out just what may be meant by 'essentialism' in the current debate. Reference to an essay, 'The Return of the Repressed', by Sarah M. Dunnigan will help. In her article (published in **Beyond Scotland**), Dunnigan discusses the apparent exclusion of Catholic religiosity from the Scottish literary canon. This limitation is, she argues, a result of the essentialist mindset of earlier literary critics. They have an 'investment in the idea of "tradition(s)"' apparent in a 'desire for a shining singularity of self-definition: the single, essentialist definition which occludes and excludes all others' (Dunnigan 2004, pp.127 and 116). Things become a little clearer with this quotation in mind. The domain of 'essentialism' is culture, rather than biology. The Scottish critic is naively attempting to find a distinguishing cultural mark which covers all Scots, and distinguishes them from all who are not Scots. This effort is a matter of self-definition as opposed to definition by the other (in all probability, definition by the English is the implied contrast). The supposed cultural criterion definitive of Scottishness, furthermore, is not just present at a single moment, but is presumed to extend backwards (and potentially forwards) in time as a 'tradition'. Yet, as Dunnigan's vocabulary of 'occlusion' implies, the search is doomed: rather than inclusion, we have an overshadowing of all those actual Scots who do not in fact carry forward their putative tradition. These latter Scots are therefore excluded, whatever their civic status as citizens of Scotland. Indeed, the 'investment in tradition' is a kind of wilful exclusiveness: the definition of Scottish culture slips inevitably from description to prescription, as the essentialist creates his own distinguishing marks for Scottishness.

Another way of expressing this supposed 'essentialist' ambition is found by Bell in **Questioning Scotland**. She has frequent recourse to the metaphor of the 'stereotype'. Although this word might seem to resonate with 'archetype' and 'prototype', its original meaning derives from book production. A stereotype is a cast printing plate, rather than a matrix of movable type; stereotypes of Scottish culture are therefore equally fixed and unchanging instruments of mass production. Scottish cultural critics, argues Bell, construct a model in which Scottish culture stamps out endless copies of the same unrevisable edition of *The National Psyche*:

Scottish Affairs

From a postmodern position it is no longer easy to place trust in stereotypes when concepts of the nation and Scotland itself have changed so much. Where in the past some critics have claimed, for example, that Calvinism is a dominant trait of the Scottish 'psyche', these notions of a collective 'psyche' are themselves archaic, where such overarching definitions of the nation fail to accommodate the multicultural, multireligious and also secular nature of contemporary Scotland. (Bell 2004, p.43)

For those who trust in stereotypes and essences, implies Bell, culture can be made to stand in for ethnicity in order to create a new kind of essentialism. The walls of Scottish civic society may have been over-run, but in the central cultural keep, the besieged few stand firm, marginalising at a cultural level those whom they have been forced to recognise politically. The password for entry may vary from watchman to watchman, but the effects remain the same: to exclude those who are culturally marginal to whatever standard of Scottishness is presumed.

Key targets for Bell are the accounts of Scottishness given by Tom Nairn, by Cairns Craig, and by Ronald Turnbull and Craig Beveridge. Their discussions invoke such notions as national neurosis and impotence, a national imagination in which Calvinism plays an important part, and Fanon's concept of the inferiorisation of a national culture. Bell infers that such analyses postulate a common national culture. Following Michael Featherstone, she argues that this is no longer a wise assumption: 'it is important that we consider whether common cultures exist, or whether instead it is often rather our belief and desire that they actually *should*' (Bell 2004, p.92). Even though, claims Bell, '[m]ost people are encouraged to believe in the concept of a homogenous national culture' (Bell 2004, p.92), we really have to ask whether such encouragement is wise, especially in an era of porous national boundaries, commodified corporate culture, and so forth. It may just be, thinks Bell, that such beliefs are really acts of coercion and exclusion: 'Scotland and Scottishness are not often ethically *accommodating*; rather, they exist as redundant assertions of the "national psyche", which can only, in actuality, be partial, yet which nonetheless claim a more significant and teleological status.' (Bell 2004, pp.97-98).

Bell's attack on essentialism is therefore very much an attack on the notion of 'national character' (which might, indeed, be perceived as an assumption amongst those who discuss a distinctive 'Scottish psychology'). Ideas such as

How Not to 'Question Scotland'

'national character' would seem to be based on implausible psychological generalisations – to be, then, on the same shaky footing as racial typicality. Paul Gilbert sums up this view:

Characters are even more variable than appearances; and even if there were limited plausibility in constructing a classification of racial types in terms of a 'combination of averages,' there is none whatever for an analogous classification of characters. (Gilbert 1998, p.45)

Gilbert concludes that 'national characters' exist as types (he too calls them 'stereotypes') which are merely the object of national imagining. Any empirical validity to such types comes only from the self-fashioning of those few citizens who have been nationalistic enough to take these fancies for realities. Gilbert approvingly quotes the novelist Somerset Maugham in this regard:

Every nation forms for itself a type to which it accords its admiration, and though individuals are rarely found who correspond with it a consideration of it may be instructive and amusing. [...] It is an ideal to which writers of fiction seek to give body and substance. [...] Simple men, fascinated by these creatures of fiction, take them as their model and actually transform themselves, so that you may recognise in real life a type which you have seen described in novels. (cited in Gilbert 1998, p.45)

Bell identifies precisely such a process of imaginary projection in her own reflections on essentialism:

there has often been a tendency to resort to essentialist forms of national identity, such as the 'Caledonian Antisyzygy', as a convenient means of codifying and determining Scottishness. There often appears, therefore, to be a kind of persistent circularity at work, where identification with such stereotypical formulations leads inevitably to their general acceptance, generation and perpetuation. (Bell 2004, p.3)

Essences and stereotypes belong to the realm of a collective imagining: the divided Scotsman stands alongside Uncle Sam, the British Bulldog, and other players in national drama. Such codified types may exert a mild centripetal force on the various individuals who comprise a nation, but they have no validity as the average or general character. Indeed, Bell seems quite certain

Scottish Affairs

that any claim for a national imagination will lead inevitably to such essentialism. This leads her to oppose Craig's emphasis on renewing and constructing a more open Scottish imaginary:

For Craig, it is important that we view Scottish literature within its historical and cultural framework in order to prevent further evacuation of the culture. However, claiming the existence of a 'national imagination', however plural and accommodating it might aim to be, will also always remain problematic, for it must repeatedly essentialise and reduce the nation, whether consciously or unconsciously. (Bell 2004, p.88)

Note, though, that even reference to a national imaginary still involves a willingness to generalise about real people. A nation has a certain 'national character' when it is general or typical of its citizens that they *imagine* they are generally or typically of a certain character. Generalised or typified description *per se* cannot be problematic. Bell, however, has a tendency to take any general account of Scottishness as latently a prescription of an imaginary (and reductive or 'essential') national character. But this seems rather unfair. Is there not some way of innocently expressing the idea that the citizens of Scotland tend to be different because of their Scottishness, and different in more than just the objects of their typical national fantasies? Bell does not seem to think so. She accepts that Scottish critics and commentators have often tried to articulate some "typological character", but this effort she regards as entirely misplaced: 'The urge to categorise [...] still leaves the critic with the need to mythologise, to construct national identity as though it was [*sic*] truthful, striving to conceal the very artificiality and paradoxical nature of his or her own creations' (Bell 2004, p.43).

But might there be artificial constructions which do not involve 'mythologisation'? Take, for example, Beveridge and Turnbull on 'inferiorism' in **The Eclipse of Scottish Culture** (Beveridge & Turnbull 1989) – the book is targeted by Bell in a chapter which is also critical of Craig and Nairn. The authors of **Eclipse** are struck by a puzzling absence in Scottish intellectual life: Scottish institutions don't refer to ideas in Scotland in the way that English universities refer, for example, to English intellectual history. Beveridge and Turnbull therefore attempt to understand this omission: what kind of worldview can lead to such neglect of interesting ideas? They conclude that there is a culture of inferiorism in Scottish intellectual life. Furthermore, they argue (following George Davie), that there

How Not to 'Question Scotland'

was a loss of a distinctive 'democratic intellect' in Scottish universities. Such an account, indeed, involves questionable generalisations. There have to be exceptions to 'inferiorism', or Beveridge and Turnbull themselves would have been inferiorised. But a generalisation is no less valuable for admitting exceptions: if Beveridge and Turnbull did not generalise, they could not discuss the complex reality which they face.

Such a response to Bell may seem only to partly defend Nairn, Craig, and company. Even if we admit that questionable or incomplete generalisation is inevitable, we must surely ask whether such generalisations are representative. Are a majority of Scots really psychically paralysed, or inferiorised, or Calvinist in their imagination? If not, then Bell and her fellow anti-essentialists are surely correct: Scottishness is being repeatedly reduced and stereotyped.

Such a response, however, conflates the typicality of a phenomenon with its statistical presence. What is sorely missing from the present debate on essentialism is an account of how one can validly typify distinct cultures without implying that the typical features are either uniformly or statistically present. At the moment (and this is especially evident in Bell's work), any attempt at typification of distinctly Scottish cultural phenomena is liable to be treated as a myth of homogeneous national character. Indeed, this is true even amongst those who attempt such a typification. Craig, for example, has sometimes implied that such mythical constructions are all that can be attempted. The question in Craig's **Out of History** is whether such illusions are suitably life-enhancing:

what else has been the great cultural outpouring of the 1980s and 1990s but the construction of new myths of Scottish identity? [...] Myths in the sense of new totalizations, new constructions of our history. Whether it is Willie Storrar's revitalised Protestant Scotland or Murray Pittock's renewed Jacobite Scotland, whether it is Andrew Lockhart Walker's revival of Davie's Democratic Intellect or Beveridge and Turnbull's redemption of Scotland from cultural eclipse. The struggle has been to reconstruct a mythic identity that is particular to Scotland. (Craig 1996, p.220)

Craig here hands a weapon to his critics: the constructions used by various commentators are totalising myths. Little wonder, then, that Bell regards Craig's work as essentialist and reductive. Indeed, the problems intensify in

Scottish Affairs

later works such as **The Modern Scottish Novel** (Craig 1999), where Craig attempts to find a new construction of Scottishness in a distinctive literary tradition. In a conceptual scheme where fictions are myths, Craig is doubly mythicising. From made-up stories he will make up a new and national-life-enhancing myth. As Bell points out with regard to this effort: 'It remains questionable the extent to which fiction can explain or represent the nation, remaining [*sic*] as it does, fictional' (Bell 2004, p.88).

On the other hand, if there is some sense in which a fiction can indeed be explanatory or representative, then Craig need not characterise the work of Davie, Beveridge and Turnbull, et al. as the construction of myth, and Bell would be wrong to discount talk of Scottishness as essentialist. To understand how this may be possible, we have to give up the assumption that a type is truthful or representative by being present in all or most of the instances of which it is a type. The types provided by Nairn, Beveridge and Turnbull, and Craig, should not be regarded in this statistical or naively classificatory 'essentialist' way. They are closest in spirit to the 'ideal types' employed by Max Weber. Of course, 'ideal', in the sense which Weber uses it, should not be understood in a prescriptive sense: 'we should emphasize', says Weber, 'that the idea of an ethical *imperative*, of a "model" of what "ought" to exist is carefully distinguished from the analytic construct, which is "ideal" in the strictly logical sense' (Weber 1949, p.92). An 'ideal type' is ideal not because it is desirable (though it may contingently provide an ethical ideal), but because it exists primarily as an idea, and almost never with any exact instantiation.

How, though, may such an idea be more than a mere falsehood of the kind alleged to inhabit national imaginaries? An ideal type is 'neither historical reality nor even the "true" reality', rather 'it has the significance of a purely ideal *limiting* concept with which the real situation or action is *compared* and surveyed for the explication of certain of its significant components' (Weber 1949, p.93). This means that the ideal type is an instrument not for the expression of an average or mean, but for discovery of what is distinctive in a phenomenon: 'The goal of ideal-typical concept-construction is always to make clearly explicit not the class or average character but rather the unique individual character of cultural phenomena' (Weber 1949, p.101).

Weber provides some illustration to show what he is driving at. The concepts of modern economics, for example, 'offer us an ideal picture of events on the commodity market under conditions of a society organized on the principles

How Not to 'Question Scotland'

of an exchange economy, free competition and rigorously rational conduct' (Weber 1949, p.90). Similarly, the economic historian can look backwards to medieval society, and 'construct the concept "city economy" not as an average of the economic structures actually existing in all the cities observed but as an *ideal-type*' (Weber 1949, p.90). The concepts 'capitalist economy' and 'city economy' do not provide statistical generalisation (averaging the features of all 'capitalist' or all 'city' economies would lessen our sense of what makes each distinctive). Rather, these types accentuate the distinctive features of real economies in order to provide a heuristic instrument for analysis. In this sense, each is a '*utopia*' (Weber 1949, p.90) – not because they are necessarily desirable ('*eutopias*'), but because they are 'no-places'. Nonetheless, with such fictional 'no-places' in mind, we can take any particular real economy (e.g. the economy of Scotland in 1565), and know what to look for in order to accurately characterise this social structure. The 'ideal type' is therefore a heuristic tool to the accurate depiction of a particular phenomenon; it is *ideographic* when correctly employed.

Consider again Bell's attributions of essentialism. Typically (if I may use this almost-essentialist term), Bell treats Nairn's discussion in **Faces of Nationalism** as one more instance of a pessimistic and introverted prescription of Scottishness. Nairn, she claims, 'consistently essentialises both Scotland and Scottish people in a way that then debilitates both' (Bell 2004, p.66); indeed, in Nairn's work as a whole, 'parochialism and undesirable forms of essentialism haunt his perspectives of the Scottish predicament' (Bell 2004, p.70). But this charge simply won't stick. Nairn – as his text makes clear – is trying to understand why a certain class of Scots, the 'professional strata' who have a 'crucial place [...] in generating the identity shifts behind nationalism' have not supported what he sees as an important political project (Nairn 1997, p.188). Nairn, in other words, is not offering a statistically valid delineation of a putative 'national character.' He is, instead, offering a paradigmatic understanding for certain members of a certain class. To understand why Scotland has not achieved political independence, we need to recognise that 'Scottish intellectuals imbibe a form of national nihilism, the sense of a *Heimat* lovable yet incurably divorced from the modern' (Nairn 1997, p.188). Even if some psychological survey were possible, we need not expect to find this 'national nihilism' present as a mode, median, or mean of the responses of Scottish intellectuals. Rather, it is a typical psychology which is valuable (Nairn argues) in understanding any particular intellectual's reluctance to promote a modern Scottish national project.

Scottish Affairs

Such ideal-typical fictions as those offered by Nairn, of course, may be employed outside of the human sciences. The ideal type of an internal combustion engine, as in a schematic diagram for the education of engineers, is, for example, very different from an average of all the internal combustion engines that have ever existed (were such an operation even meaningfully possible). The employment of ideal types in the cultural sciences, though, adds further complexities which – if overlooked – can invite various ill-founded ‘knock-out’ arguments of the type offered by Bell. For instance, even an ideal type which offers little for the understanding of the majority of a class may still be nonetheless valid. Consider these remarks by the psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers on how to understand the psychology of suicide:

the frequency of the understandable connection between autumn and suicide is not confirmed by the suicide-curve, which shows a peak in the spring. This does not mean that the understandable connection is wrong since one actual case can furnish us with the occasion to establish such a connection. The fact of frequency adds nothing to the evidence thus gained. (Jaspers 1963, p.304)

Most suicides, in all probability, are not motivated by the gathering gloom of the dying year. But, nonetheless, we understand that some could be.

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How Not to 'Question Scotland'

(with implicit reference to Nietzsche's ideal-typical account of Christian psychology):

We can perhaps understand how a person who is feeling weak and wretched must feel spiteful, hateful, perhaps envious and revengeful, towards people who are better endowed, happy and strong [...]. But the opposite is just as understandable. The person who feels weak and wretched can be frank about himself, can be unassuming and love what he himself is not. (Jaspers 1963, p.357)

More mundane examples are also available, of course. If I am insulted, it is equally meaningful to respond with dignity, an insult in return, withdrawal, physical attack, tears, and so on.

However, if we forget that opposites are equally meaningful responses, then we might assume that the proliferation of contradictory typical understandings leads to the mutual invalidation of each psychological account. Bell approvingly quotes Francis Russell Hart:

Centuries of social observers have told us of the distinctiveness of Scottish culture by invoking a peculiar national character. Put together, this heritage of tropes and stereotypes produces a logical absurdity. That grandly anomalous person 'the typical Scot' is 'a schizophrenic creature at once realistic and recklessly sentimental, scientific and soldierly, bibulous and kilted, teetotal and trousered [etc.]' (cited in Bell 42)

Were cultural commentators in fact scientific observers, then this deconstruction of typicality would be fitting. But, for the understanding of psychology, opposites are equally meaningful and equally typical. One person may, for example, respond to English cultural domination with inferiorism, and another by investigating neglected Scottish thinkers and writers. The same person may be inferiorist one year, and then anti-inferiorist next year. The antithetical responses are still equally meaningful. There is no paradox.

When the peculiarities of ideal typicality and of psychological understanding are properly appreciated, then the so-called Caledonian antisyzygy appears in a different light. Although understood by its originators as evidence of a typically paradoxical Scottish psychology, this conclusion is unwarranted. What appears as a statement of 'schizophrenic' national character may be better understood as evidence of scrupulous understanding. 'Realism' and

Scottish Affairs

'sentiment', 'kilts' and 'trousers', and so forth, are all appropriate types for the understanding of particular responses in Scottish cultural history.

Plurality is normal. It is only when cultures mythicise that one-sided understandings are elevated into national essences. Take a familiar example: post-war France. Both collaboration and resistance were present during the war as psychologically understandable responses. Post-war, the myth of the Resistance arose, and took its place in the national imaginary as the essence of the French under Occupation. Historians, of course, know quite well that the French both resisted and collaborated. Note, however, that scrupulous historiography is not treated by the French as the debilitating postulation of a 'schizophrenic' national imaginary: the illustration of opposing responses is the negation of essentialism, not its apotheosis. Yet, within Scotland, the complex and antithetical psychological ideal types employed by cultural commentators have been naively categorised as essentialist. The so-called myth of the Scottish 'Jekyll and Hyde complex' or 'national schizophrenia' is in fact a resistance to national mythology, but one that has been misunderstood by those who developed it, and by many who have analysed it.

The danger, then, in present reflections on Scottishness is that any attempt at nuanced psychological understanding through typification may be regarded as an effort to prescribe a reductive national mythology. Bell, for example, constantly resorts to such intellectual sleight-of-hand in order to convict of 'essentialism' every commentator who is not sufficiently 'beyond Scotland'. She repeatedly misinterprets attempts to understand why Scots indulge in distinctive national behaviour as if they were intended to prescribe a national character. This involves a quite glaring confusion in conceptualisation (statistical validity is confused with ideal typicality), methodology (understanding is assimilated to explanation) and illocutionary mode (description treated as prescription). Having made these conflation, Bell feels free to characterise her targeted writers as latently reductive, stereotypical, or essentialist *because* they have dared to provide typifying accounts of Scottish culture. But Bell too is implicated in such a procedure. Although she may prescribe a postmodern alternative, she still typifies when she discusses what she perceives as the essentialist assumptions of an earlier intellectual culture.

There are, of course, essentialists in the sense which Bell and other anti-essentialists employ. There are plenty of mythologies surrounding Scottishness. One prominent literary critic, for example, has referred to the

How Not to 'Question Scotland'

Scots dialect as a force once arrayed amongst 'the vast magical powers wielded by poets in the ancient Celtic world – to which, of course, contemporary Scotland is linked by direct descent' (McClure 2000, p.198). This is the kind of grandiose overstatement, and latent cultural prescription (true Scots speak magical Scots), that sullies accounts of Scottish nationality and nationalism. But in the current debate on Scottishness, the word 'essentialism' is being used in the way that vulgar Marxists used to employ the word 'bourgeois' – as an all-purpose pejorative within a larger vocabulary of denigration. In their efforts to provide 'postmodern' accounts of Scottish identity, some commentators are failing to scrupulously examine the basic concepts which they employ. An interesting dialogue between traditional and postmodern accounts of national identity cannot even begin, though, until established concepts and analyses are treated with care and precision.

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Scottish Affairs

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