

REVIEW: SCOTLAND AND APPALACHIA

Tom Hubbard

Richard Blaustein, **The Thistle and the Brier: Historical Links and Cultural Parallels Between Scotland and Appalachia**, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003, 174 pp., pb, \$30.00, £21.95, ISBN 07864 1452 9.

I have to declare an interest or two. I taught for four semesters at the University of North Carolina at Asheville in the southern Appalachians, and could not but be involved in readings, seminars and other events linking the region with its Scots and Scots-Irish cultural antecedents. Sure, there were comic misapprehensions, as at the Burns Supper where my improvised, be-pinned 'kilt' pretty well stayed in place upon me, as did the 'haggis' to my knife when I raised the latter, post-Address.

I'm also a poet who reworks folk material wherever I find it in Scotland or elsewhere (see my **Scottish Faust**, Kettillonia, 2004). Richard Blaustein's short book, echoing his interviewee Hamish Henderson, celebrates the closeness of 'folk' and 'art' cultures in both Scotland and Appalachia.

While researching the book, Professor Blaustein based himself in Edinburgh during the spring and summer of 1996. I wish I'd met him there and then, in between my return from Budapest in May and my first arrival at Asheville in August. During my early days in NC I was initially wary of my hosts' invocations of whatever they perceived to be 'Celtic'. I soon learned, while attending gigs at Be Here Now in Asheville and at The Pump in Black Mountain, that much Appalachian traditional music had a genuine Scottish base; one of Professor Blaustein's sources discovered in Scotland that the

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fiddle tunes in his American repertoire had been played originally on the bagpipes.

Blaustein's title derives from the two cognate heroes of Scottish and Appalachian revival: Hugh MacDiarmid and Jim Wayne Miller (Buncombe County, 1936-1996), the nurturers respectively of the thistle and the brier, both 'prickly plants stubbornly clinging to the soil of marginal uplands', and emblematic of 'creative alternatives to narrow provincialism or rootless cosmopolitanism'.

Authenticity: it is a word which Angus Calder, for his own understandable reasons, would always howl down (**Revolving Culture: Notes from the Scottish Republic** 1994, p. 1). Let us rather guard against its use to excess. Reviving cultures have needed to stake their claim against distortions, and sometimes these very distortions have helpfully if inadvertently provided a focus, a conceptual framework, for identifying the genuine article. MacDiarmid could not have highlighted that which in Scotland was 'worth haein' without having Kailyard-School sentimentality in his sights. Long before the appearance of Jim Wayne Miller and Cratis Williams (1911-1985), a fellow doyen of Appalachian studies much praised by Professor Blaustein, there was a certain busyness of well-meaning outsiders striving to interpret Appalachia to fellow-outsiders. Constance Fenimore Woolson, a Northerner, sets her novel **Horace Chase** (1894) in Asheville and its surrounding mountains; the eponymous Chase, a bumptious entrepreneur, wants to make 'a big watering-place of your hilly little village', extending the railroad, drawing tourists from the North. Just what a conservative backwater needs, one would think, and Asheville has indeed benefited enormously from lively incomers. Earlier, the lowland-Georgian poet-aesthete Sidney Lanier had attempted to reproduce East-Tennessean mountain speech in his absurd novel **Tiger Lilies** (1867); a wannabe Southern Cavalier and German transcendentalist who seasoned his prose with 'quoths', 'thees' and 'thous', Lanier survives best in his poetry, above all in a marvellously camp recording by Vincent Price. Far more successful as a proto-Appalachian writer was Mary Noailles Murfree, this time a real insider, whose short story collection **In the Tennessee Mountains** appeared in 1884. According to Cratis Williams, this book 'marks the time at which the Southern mountain people had become recognized as a people possessing their own idiosyncrasies, and not be confused with other southern types.' Prof. Blaustein himself cites Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938), the native Ashevillean who gained a world reputation. Wolfe drew on his homeland for the sprawling novels which appeared eventually under the titles of **Look Homeward, Angel** and **You**

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Can't Go Home Again – titles which in themselves carry the motifs of displacement and reconnection running throughout Professor Blaustein's opuscle.

The book dwells much on the collective inferiority complexes to which both Scots and Appalachians felt themselves induced, with the concomitant contempt displayed by metropolitans and their fellow-travellers. The situation today appears to be much healthier for the Appalachians; Joy Hendry, poet, editor and activist, is responsible for much of our cultural progress in recent decades, but as a Blaustein interviewee she does not downplay Scotland's continued failure to recognise – and fund – its own worth.

I was much taken with one Flora MacDonald Gammon of Waynesville NC, a 'cultural missionary' who has addressed herself to Scotland-in-Appalachia with equal enthusiasm and discrimination. The concepts of twee and naff are not easily explicable to Americans, but Flora clearly possesses a briskly cheerful manner of advancing Scottish music and dance beyond what she calls 'the cocktail party circuit and the tartan bandwagon'. She tells Blaustein that her cousin Jamie MacDonald was based at Edinburgh University's School of Scottish Studies, and went on to become the first American to teach Gaelic in Scotland.

The conventional, deterministic rationalism of many Left-oriented thinkers would have it that folk culture is inherently reactionary, and is often an artificial construct by bourgeois romantics serving their own agendas. Against this, Hamish Henderson invokes for Professor Blaustein that alternative-Marxist model of Antonio Gramsci, who held that their cultural revivals could help suppressed peoples to know themselves. In his **Black Sea** (1995), Neal Ascherson remarks: 'The sense of belonging to a distinct cultural tradition, of "ethnic identity", can be subjectively real to the point at which it becomes an objective social-political fact, no matter what fibs are used for its decoration.' And with the Scottish and Appalachian contexts we are far from the mendacious, sinister scenarios played out in parts of eastern Europe. Postmodernist academics in Scotland may fret over big bad 'essentialism', but a self-designated Scot is a Scot, and ditto for an Appalachian. Fine. Professor Blaustein's book is an example of American yea-saying at its best. It is ironic that, as a sociologist, he can be so readable at a time when Eng Lit profs cannot or will not write plain English.

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