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REVIEW: SCOTTISH CULTURE AFTER DEVOLUTION

Alex Thomson

Michael Gardiner, **The Cultural Roots of British Devolution**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, pb / hb, 192+xii pp, £14.99 / £45.00, ISBN 0-7486-2027-3 / 0-7486-2026-5.

Eleanor Bell, **Questioning Scotland: Literature, Nationalism, Postmodernism**, London: Palgrave, 2004, hb, 194+xii pp, £45, ISBN 1-4039-1331-5.

These two first books by young scholars raise questions about the study of Scottish literature and culture after devolution. Both books seek to invent ambitious new paradigms; both warn against what they call 'ethnocentric' (Gardiner) or 'essentialist' (Bell) accounts of Scottish national identity; both draw on post-colonial theory – Bell also draws on sociological accounts of postmodernity. But beneath the jargon of novelty, both authors are basically committed to reconciling cultural nationalism with a cautious liberal pluralism. The interest of the books stems in part from their successes in doing so, and in part from their failures. There are three engaging problems here.

The first dilemma faced by both authors is clearly stated by Berthold Schoene in a passage Bell cites in her conclusion. Noting the tendency for critics to seek to 'replace monolithic SCOTLAND with the more pluralistic notion of SCOTLANDS', Schoene warns that 'while ostensibly acknowledging and even promoting cultural diversity, it is […] still a territorial, historically pre-encoded and hence potentially essentialist term which serves to identify, isolate and exclude both internal and external "aliens" by clearly distinguishing what is Scottish from what is un-Scottish' (p.142). In other

Alex Thomson is a lecturer in Scottish Literature at the University of Edinburgh.

words, while we can all agree that a study which represented Scotland as primarily rural or urban, Highland or Lowland, Calvinist or Catholic, would be discriminatory and ideological, to simply call for more 'open' conceptions of Scottish identity may not be enough to stop a Glaswegian Muslim feeling some sense of unease at official representations of a multicultural Scotland which brush over a rise in race crime and border on kitsch.

The problem is that research which takes Scottish culture or identity as its object moves within a hermeneutical circle. The preliminary circumscription of the area of study presumes some form of minimum identity amongst its component parts, and such research will inevitably keep on returning as a finding some variant on that original identity. Bell's own literary analyses prove the point. To take one example, she quotes Kathleen Jamie's complaint that 'there is no more poetic energy' in the question of identity and glosses it as the need to 'resist the urge to continually reduce Scottish literature to questions relating to Scottishness [sic]' (pp.120-1). But her reading of Jamie proceeds to focus on what are not only her two most frequently discussed poems, 'Mr and Mrs Scotland are Dead' and 'Arraheids', but also perhaps the two most obviously concerned with identity. By taking these poems as typical of Scottish writing, Bell keeps in motion the circular process by which the study of Scottish culture reveals little more than the very Scottish identity which the researcher has presumed from the start.

Because she does not acknowledge that to take Scottish literature as a starting point is itself a decision, an act of exclusion and preferment, and therefore runs counter to her liberal ethical priniciples, Bell's position seems unjust on critics she condemns, like Cairns Craig, who recognise that the discussion of national identity must always be a matter of political myth-making. This leads to some confusion in Bell's account of such positions: Craig does not imagine that his 'national imagination' exists as some kind of collective unconscious; he posits it (a useful word which Bell misuses) as a discursive space. The point for Craig is that although nations are imaginary, this does not simply mean that they are fictional. And certainly the importance and interest of Craig's work is that he seems just as interested as Homi Bhabha in the ways that, in Bell's words, 'narratives of the nation are internally fractured, composed of disputes and dialogues' (p.91).

The truth seems to be that Bell wants national sentiment without the political decision which constitutes the nation as a group. Such a decision is de facto and de jure a question of discrimination – all nations have limits – but her liberalism, thereby revealing itself to be anti-political, wishes that were not

the case. Her call for a new moralism in literary studies obscures the fact that neither literature nor politics can be reduced to questions of ethics, indeed, that the conflict between politics and ethics may be irreducible and that literature itself writes out of identity into exile. This leads her to attack those writers who accept the political constitution of research into national culture as 'essentialist', an unclear term which, as Gavin Miller has argued in a previous issue of **Scottish Affairs**, may turn out to be a chimera.

Where the basic flaw of Bell's book is that she seems trapped in the circular movement of the constitution of her object of study, the virtue of Michael Gardiner's is that he offers an alternative. The question that cannot be addressed within the circle is that of the historical constitution and limits of the idea of 'Scotland'. Gardiner offers a historical genealogy of 'Scotland' within the wider context of the rise and decline of British imperial history. By situating Scotland as an ideological category, bearing ambiguous and often contradictory values which resound with the frustrations and vicissitudes of the imperial project, a critical angle appears which offers a potentially productive way of connecting Scotland to questions of geopolitics and world literature. (Gardiner's description of his position is rather opaque: 'as the breakdown of a form of globalisation originally arising from Glasgow and Edinburgh as a Scottish adaptation to Britishness, devolution and other post-British movements could only really have arisen in Scotland' (p.xi). Eh? This looks like Scottish exceptionalism, but rewritten in the language of the **Guardian** rather than the **Herald**.)

However, the second of the wider problems exposed in both books intervenes to severely limit what Gardiner makes of this opening in the national circle: the ever-present danger that cultural criticism over-estimates the political impact of culture, while under-estimating its political inscription. For Gardiner devolution is the political outcome of a cultural process, part of a wider disintegration of the British imperial project, apparent not only in the loosening of constitutional ties between the state and the nations, but in the vitality of youth subcultures such as the rave scene of the late 1980s and early '90s. But the political character of a thousand young people dancing in a field is merely asserted, and Gardiner's proposal that the rave scene inherits the post-colonial political energies of reggae because of the bass frequencies in the music is faintly ludicrous. If one were to argue that it was the judicial and legislative reaction to rave which made it a political issue, the weakness of this argument for devolution as a whole becomes clear. What if devolution is the product not of the breakdown of the British State but of its continuing

authority, an authority which no longer needs as strong an ideological component?

On a more local level, to construe devolution as an epiphenomena of wider social developments completely effaces its specifically political character. Gardiner treats the Constitutional Convention as if it was a voice for the people of Scotland, omitting the significant absence of Nationalist and Unionist parties. But devolution can be read as a measure designed to further secure the British state by granting a veneer of electoral legitimacy to what was already a largely devolved Scottish administration, and to perpetuate Labour's dominance by defusing Nationalist support. The challenge of interpreting devolution is that it can be seen either way: but as soon as we entertain the alternative hypothesis, Gardiner's celebration of the collapse of the centre's political (as opposed to cultural) authority looks rather premature. It may be true that Irvine Welsh's novels are sites where identity is challenged and negotiated, but they are also political and cultural artefacts in themselves: what if their virtuous hybridity turned out to be merely a fashionable commodity rather than the energy of the repressed rising from below? (Prescription: a careful re-reading of Foucault on power, and perhaps Marcuse on 'The Affirmative Character of Bourgeois Culture'.)

Consistent with his idealist portrayal of cultural politics, Gardiner proceeds to undermine the critical potential of his work by continually treating Scotland as a single agent. That this is a relapse into what both he and Bell denounce as the romanticism of Renaissance writers like Muir and MacDiarmid is evident from his continual confusion of the cultural interests of particular literary elites with the nation as a whole. Scotland is treated in idealist terms as an actor with a mind. 'It would be difficult to overestimate' the influence of George Davie and Alexander Broadie on Scottish thought, Gardiner claims in an unguarded moment (p.79): but this presumably must mean that most Scots, who are unlikely to have heard of either, do not think; or else we are dealing with some 'Scots mind' (presumably defined, *mutatis mutandi*, as belonging to those who have read Davie and Broadie. And as Laurence Nicoll, Edinburgh's foremost hunter of closet Hegelians might say: 'I smell *Geist*!').

Gardiner's enthusiasm seems to stem from a belief in the possibility that culture and politics might somehow become aligned (which bears a family resemblance to Bell's pious wish to see ethics and politics matched up). Although fabulously unrealistic, this is a perfectly honourable position, romantic in every sense of the term. But the romantic worldview is dominated

by an ideal of unity which contradicts the jargon of hybridity and multiplicity: and in hotwiring the cultural studies literature on subcultures to the familiar claim that Scottish interest in existentialism is exceptional, Gardiner confuses elite with popular cultures. (And can we all finally get over the idea that Macmurray's attack on Descartes is somehow deconstruction *avant la lettre*, when his position seems to fit squarely within a much wider tendency which Lovejoy described as 'the revolt against dualism' (1929) and which is entirely typical of early twentieth century philosophy?). Admittedly this is an error with a long genealogy: inaugurated by the attack on the kailyard, twentieth century Scottish literary studies has remained animated by a suspicion of the culture consumed by Scots, for the simple reason that so little of it is specifically Scottish in any meaningful sense. (An obsession with tartanry is the inevitable by-product of cultural studies which focus on Scottish difference, rather than on similarities to English culture.) Devolution, a political development driven by Scotland's cultural elites, only delivers the democracy it promised if we accept the cultural nationalist position that we're better off for being dictated to from Edinburgh rather than London. But what if vertical divisions are a gaudy distraction from horizontal ones?

Here we come to the third problem exposed in these books. Both boil down to an unobjectionable concern for treating people fairly, transposed into the language of twentieth-first century liberal academic orthodoxy: for both authors 'empire' is inevitably bad, 'interdisciplinarity' just as unquestionably good. Well, perhaps. But these abiding clichés of the theoretical turn in literary studies map surprisingly well onto New Labour speak, just as postmodern military theorists have found themselves talking the same language as the decentred warriors of the Pentagon. This may be a wider issue in literary studies. Robert Young, of whom both Bell and Gardiner approve, has argued that the attack on aesthetic and linguistic conceptions of literature in the name of history and politics operates in an awkward complicity with the instrumental managerialism in Higher Education which seeks to subordinate learning to the aims of statecraft. Specifically, one wonders how two books which strive so hard to be oppositional basically advance no claim which could not be cited as proof that Scotland is already the tolerant, democratic, forward-thinking multicultural country that the advocates of devolution would have us believe.

Critics used to argue that the renascence of Scottish literature in the 1980s and 1990s was the product of a sublimation of the political energies frustrated in 1979. If there had been any truth to this, one might have expected national

cultural production to disappear in a puff of smoke with the establishment of a Parliament (perhaps leaving Alan Massie ploughing a lonely furrow). The quite proper cynicism with which most writers have greeted the Executive's cultural policies reflects the fact that literature's integration into political process will never be possible on the terms it might imagine for itself, but only as the source of national political kitsch (cities of literature, notwithstanding). If the same cannot be said for its critics, something's rotten in the state of Ukania. An unpopular suggestion would be that the best way to sidestep all three of the problems in which these writers find themselves ensnared is to begin from a specifically oppositional position: but I cannot see many lectureships being advertised in North British studies – yet that might be a fairly accurate term for the most valuable historical research being carried out into eighteenth and early nineteenth century Scottish writing.

Although Irvine Welsh acknowledged the contradiction between his recently-expressed horror at the mushrooming of yuppie flats around the Leith docklands and his own residence in a swanky Dublin waterside pad, his comments underline the potentially perplexing inscription of both literature and criticism into social and political contexts. In Welsh's case, literature has been a line of departure from the very working class life for which he continues to claim to be a representative spokesman: consequently his work will always involve an element of bad faith. For the critic it may be equally tempting to invoke mythical cultural solidarities (or hybridities: 'open' or 'closed', the structural function of identity in the argument is the same) to underwrite textual or political analysis. Both books under review here are alive to that danger, and yet neither manages to entirely avoid it. That this might be for essential reasons, connected to the political construction of literature itself, suggests that it need not be considered a simple mistake on the part of either author.

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