
In this book, Celeste Ray considers the manifestations of Scottish heritage enthusiasm in the American South from the viewpoint of her professional discipline, which is anthropology. Her regional focus is justified by the specially intense Scotophilia which can be observed in the South: Ray says that about half of all Scottish heritage organizations in the U.S. are based there, and this figure rests on a definition of “the South” which excludes (unaccountably) Maryland and West Virginia (pp. 182, 231). The historical presence of a large Highland Scottish settlement in North Carolina, and the Lost Cause myths and military traditions which have been so powerful in shaping the Scottish and the Southern identities alike, help to explain the strength of Scottish ethnic romanticism in the South. There is, moreover, as Ray argues, a distinctively Southern version of Scottish-Americanism, in which disparate cultural traditions have been filtered, revised and recombined in ways which reflect that region’s experience and cultural needs.

Ray’s approach has been to combine “ethnographic field work” with “ethnohistorical research” (p. xiii). “Field work” in this case means attending Highland Games and Burns dinners and suchlike events, and interviewing other participants. At some points, readers who have their own experience of the Scottish heritage subculture will see that Ray’s conclusions are skewed by her failure to pick up on something. For example, her analysis of gender roles on the Highland Games circuit ignores the more egalitarian *mores* of the competitive Highland dancers and bagpipe-band members, two interconnected, free-floating populations where the mean age is younger than elsewhere in the heritage world, and to which Ray in general should have given more attention. (Travelling with a bagpipe band for a season would have been an illuminating extension of her field work; and Ray’s theme of evolving traditions and “emergent authenticity” [p. 115] would
have been better served by examining the competitive bagpipe repertoire, than the athletic events which she discusses at undue length."

But putting such quibbles aside, Ray’s “ethnographic field work” has been fruitful. She is an amiable guide to the Highland heritage world, never condescending to her subjects nor burdening them with overanalysis. “Scottish heritage enthusiasts engage in [heritage] activities for fun and sociability,” as she admits. But “they also take their rituals and interpretations of the past . . . seriously” (p. 204). Ray’s theoretical resourcefulness enables her to offer subtle readings of those rituals and interpretations, but her sense of humour and intellectual humility prevent her from going too far: sometimes a caber is just a caber.

It is in her “ethnohistorical research” that Ray runs into trouble. The book is littered with errors of historical fact, and with signs of its author’s unfamiliarity with Gaelic language and culture. Her bibliography reveals several shocking omissions. More extensive consultation of Murray Pittock’s oeuvre would have saved her from three interrelated misconceptions. Pittock would have disabused her of the idea that the Jacobite army in 1745-46 was a mainly Highland force which found little support in the Lowlands; of the idea that our modern canon of Jacobite songs is a bundle of late-eighteenth-century forgeries; and of the idea that “Highlandism” (the politicized fetishizing of tartan and other Highland paraphernalia among non-Highlanders) dates back no farther than the lifetime of Sir Walter Scott.

Ray’s historical vision is sharper when it comes to the period after the Second World War, when the Scottish-American heritage subculture assumed its present form. She recognizes the role of commercial exploitation (e.g., by the tourism industry) in this process. I think she should have said more about political manipulation. We are told of Senator Trent Lott’s (R.-Mississippi) help in securing Congressional approval of National Tartan Day (6 April) in 1997. It so happens that at precisely this moment, another badge of whiteness, the Confederate battle flag, was under renewed
threat as a public symbol because of efforts to remove it from the South Carolina statehouse and because of a court case involving license plates in Maryland. This suggestive circumstance goes unmentioned in Ray’s discussion of National Tartan Day, as do Senator Lott’s well-known links with various unsavoury “Southern heritage” organizations. Ian McKay’s work on Highlandism in Nova Scotia exemplifies the more politically attuned scholarship which one wishes Ray had attempted.

Indeed, Ray’s treatment of the racial politics of Scottish heritage in the South is disappointingly hasty and apologetic. She suggests that it is some kind of coincidence that the burning cross, a rallying signal among the Highland clans, should have been adopted as a symbol by the Ku Klux Klan; and she implies that nobody ever affirmed a connection between the clans’ and the Klan’s flaming crosses until D.W. Griffith’s film Birth of a Nation (1915) (p. 190). But this account gets everything backwards. The original KKK, a short-lived terrorist organization formed after the Civil War, never used a burning cross. That was an innovation of the new KKK, formed in 1915, at Stone Mountain, Georgia (today the site of an annual Highland Games). And at that time, the Klan’s burning cross was explicitly an appropriation of the Gaelic symbol. One of the new KKK’s founders, the North Carolinian preacher Thomas Dixon, who wrote the novel on which Griffith’s film was based, was a Walter Scott fanatic. The burning cross was his idea.

In correcting Ray on this point, I do not mean to suggest that her Southern Scotophiles are all closet racists who are using their tartan festivals as an acceptable vehicle for a Dixonian ideology. I do not believe that. But there are issues here which require engagement, however uncomfortable they make us.

Underneath the racist appropriation of Highlandist imagery lies a rich historical irony. Scots generally, and Highlanders in particular, were a despised minority in the colonial South. (Their pariah status was the cause, not the effect, of their tendency to side with the British government in the
War of Independence—a point historians, including Ray, continue to misunderstand.) When the definitive study of Scotland’s contribution to Southern culture comes to be written, this paradox will emerge as one of its most salient features: Highland Scots were the original targets of the nativist ideology which now claims the Highland heritage as its own.

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