Review


With the broadening application of postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies, it is inevitable that scholars would debate the merits of these methodologies in analyzing Scottish history and cultural expressions (typically formal literature, both prose and poetry). Over the last couple of decades, many scholars of Scottish Studies have proclaimed their field unsuited to a postcolonial analysis. Arguably the most public feud over the postcolonial treatment happened in the pages of the Edinburgh newspaper The Scotsman in the summer of 2010. Robert J.C. Young argued for applying the postcolonial lens to Scottish life, emphasizing that the historical experience of the Highlands in particular fit the classic model (16 August). Keith Brown responded three days later, accusing Young of “a woeful ignorance of the subject matter” and of privileging feelings over logic. He continued by downplaying Highland-Lowland divisions, highlighting Scottish participation in Empire, and satirizing the concept of postcolonialism. He concluded condescendingly about his academic peers, “It is our responsibility, however, to highlight the dangers in misusing history, to pour cold water on emotive, manipulative language and to expose sloppy thinking.”

Ironically, it is doubtful that Brown is capable of recognizing the hallmarks of colonial discourse in his own text. Such sadly familiar diatribes have long inhibited critical developments within Scottish Studies: most discussion has
focused on the wrong frame of reference, assuming Scotland to be a homogenous unity and ignoring the colonial legacy within the country itself. Indeed, the fact that so much “Scottish” scholarship is still exclusive of Gaelic indicates the latter’s continued marginalized state in academic institutions established when “North Britain” gave greater weight and prestige to its Anglo-Saxon and Germanic legacy than to its Gaelic and Celtic heritage. This new volume takes the postcolonial issue seriously for the case of Scottish Gaeldom, examining several centuries of Gaelic poetry within its historical and cultural context and demonstrating the relevance of postcolonial theory for understanding these landmark cultural expressions.

Stroh wisely begins her study with a brief overview of postcolonial theory, sidestepping intractable political and economic controversies (e.g., whether or not Gaeldom was exploited or ruled as a colony) to establish a more general and fruitful application:

In this context, it must be understood that the main interest of the present study lies not in colonialism and post-colonialism as historical, political or sociological concepts, but rather in postcolonialism as a methodology for analyzing certain discursive and ideological patterns which occur in the context of inter- or transcultural encounters and power imbalances – patterns which are not necessarily restricted to post-/colonies proper (p. 14).

Chapter Two begins by examining the ancient colonial discourse of Othering and inferiority evident in Greek texts about the continent Celts and Roman texts about the British Celts, discourse which claims that the colonizer possesses “a monopoly on logic, order, legality, discipline, progressive historical dynamics, functioning social and intellectual
structures, and sometimes also superior morality” (p. 45) to justify its civilizing mission. The recurrence of these tropes in imperial discourse across many centuries in a Gaelic context (even repeated in contemporary Scottish newspapers when the Gaelic language is debated) serves to warn against defining subalternity in racialized terms. Complementing Othering is the discourse of “Same-ing,” used strategically to justify assimilating Gaeldom or appropriating its physical or cultural assets when it has suited the élite.

Chapters Two through Nine chart the poetic responses of Scottish Gaels to colonial discourses and policies from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, identifying such familiar tactics as asserting ethnic solidarity in the face of piecemeal division and conquest, endorsements of cultural hybridity, critiques of the civilizing mission, writing back to colonial discourse, and reclaiming inferiorized elements of identity. Her close readings of exemplary texts produce many new important insights about Gaelic cultural expressions and highlight the historical and literary potential of this evidence, especially to scholars unfamiliar with Gaelic scholarship. Too many historians have not attempted to take account of Gaelic perceptions in such contentious events as the Jacobite Risings or the Clearances, and this volume demonstrates their importance.

Stroh relies heavily on modern editions of poetry, especially those in the long-running Scottish Gaelic Texts Society series as well as the more recent anthologies published by Birlinn. It would have been impossible for her to integrate the evidence of raw materials scattered across many archives, but subsequent research considering a larger sample of material will yield new revelations on these, and other, matters. Further discussion in this volume on the political role and social currency of Gaelic poets and poetry – why is this form of evidence relevant for assessing Gaelic perceptions
and attitudes, and across what social groups? – would have
been valuable for the non-specialist.

The limitations of easily accessible texts, and the impact
of this shortage on her study, are particularly marked in her
examination of the North American Scottish diaspora. In her
examination of relations with Indigenous Americans, Stroh
concludes that “there is not much evidence of solidarity
between Scottish people and indigenous populations of
overseas colonies, at least not before the twentieth century”
(p. 198). A wider examination of sources may have facilitated
a more nuanced analysis of the full spectrum of Gaelic
attitudes: from the very earliest encounters there are
empathetic as well as hostile opinions, and Gaelic sentiments
about Indigenous Americas say as much about Gaels’
perceptions of themselves vis-à-vis the “civilizing mission”
(i.e., natives serving as mirrors of themselves) as they do
about “exotic” peoples *per se* (a topic I have explored in
several recent publications not consulted in this volume).
These problems highlight the underdeveloped state of
Scottish Gaelic Studies in North America rather than Stroh’s
theoretical framework, however, and there is much scope for
future research.

There is always the danger in work of this nature for
modern values and perceptions to be imposed
anachronistically and produce dubious results, and I feel that
this is the case with her evaluation of early references to India
and “Turks” (Muslims) in Gaelic poetry. The boast in a
fifteenth-century poem that the power of legendary hero
Fionn mac Cumhaill had reached as far as India is not an
omen of British imperial enterprises nor an endorsement of
colonial relations, but rather a conventional panegyric trope
whereby the subject of praise is claimed to be ruler of a *tuath*
or province which he did not actually rule, updated with
modern geographical knowledge (note also that Gaelic
concepts of rule were tributary in nature). She disappointedly
notes that the experience of inferiorization and Othering did not “automatically lead Gaels to develop a generally anti-imperialist outlook or solidarity with the Islamic world” (p. 66), but in the periods in question (the age of crusades and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire) one could hardly claim that Muslims were helpless, minoritized victims of the same imperial constructs as the Gaels. Pagans could no longer serve as the anti-image of Christian virtues after conversion was complete, and as Gaels were solid members of European Christendom (regardless of Anglo-Norman discourse to the contrary), they cannot be logically expected to have empathized with an expansionist militarized empire threatening territory and religion (pp. 83-5), regardless of modern ideals of multiculturalism and religious tolerance.

Regardless of some minor criticisms I have of this nature, this is a ground-breaking volume which deserves to find a wide audience. I concur with Stroh that Celtic Studies, and the various constituent branches such as Scottish Gaelic Studies, could revitalize themselves by integrating such modern approaches and demonstrating to the uninitiated that they are not restricted to medieval or folkloric topics, and thus broaden their appeal (p. 34). Doing so may also facilitate dialogue with communities of scholars and citizens examining the “transculturality” of an increasingly globalized world negotiating complex imperial and colonial legacies.

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