A NEW DAY DAWNING: THE STRUGGLE FOR NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY SCOTTISH SONG

Throughout its turbulent history, Scotland has stood in the shadow of a powerful neighbour and an occasional foe. Sharing a border with England has been both a blessing and a curse. Whether intended with malice or goodwill or sheer indifference, the decisions that emanated from Westminster through the centuries have had an undeniable effect on the Scottish psyche. This struggle, this constant effort to exert the national will and to dispel the myth of Scotland as more than a mere appendage of England, has found expression in the lyrics of Scottish song—in English, in Scots, and in Gaelic. From the treachery and betrayal of the border ballads to the nationalism of Robert Burns to the defiant romanticism of the Jacobite movement to the labour songs of “Red Clydeside” to the work of contemporary Scots songwriters, the protest element in Scottish song has a long and distinguised pedigree.

Scotland achieved a sense of nationhood fairly early in its existence, yet the definition of Scottish identity has changed many times over the years. Periodically, various nationalist movements have led to an awakening of Scottish consciousness. As early as 1375, we have John Barbour’s long historical poem, The Bruce, which describes in great detail and with an even greater pride the Scots victory at Bannockburn. In the nineteenth century, Sir Walter Scott drew on Scottish history and literature to create an admittedly romantic image of his homeland—a Paradise Lost panorama of mountains and lochs and lone pipers in a remote glen. In contrast, during the literary
renaissance of the twenties and thirties, Hugh MacDiarmid turned to the vigorous Scots of William Dunbar (1460?–1520?), Robert Fergusson (1750–74), and Robert Burns (1759–96), for literary inspiration, and for political sustenance he embraced the hopeful egalitarianism offered by the Declaration of Arbroath of 1320—the Scottish equivalent of the American Declaration of Independence. He was joined by many others in this literary and spiritual journey, including Neil M. Gunn, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, Eric Linklater, George Campbell Hay, and more recently, Sorley Maclean, Iain Crichton Smith, Derick S. Thomson, and Donald MacAulay.

The image of Scotland as an essentially Highland country first emerged in the post-Culloden era as Highland regiments began to earn accolades for their military prowess. But one wonders. If the Highlands are crucial to Scotland’s self-image, what image is being projected? And, more importantly, who is doing the projecting? Historically, outsiders had to validate the Gaelic community before the Gael became validated in his own eyes.

Writers promoted the idea of Scotland as a tartan-clad land shrouded in perpetual myth that was populated by courtly but flawed heroes and heroines belonging to a noble and unjustly maligned race with names like “Bonnie” Prince Charlie and Flora MacDonald. The Scotland that existed in the Victorian imagination consisted of a Celtic Twilight fairyland fabricated by non-Gaels for popular consumption. Consequently, the Jacobite songs that lamented Charlie’s loss at Culloden and portrayed the Jacobite cause in a highly idealized light were immensely appealing. The popularity of these songs arrived at a time when the nineteenth-century Romantic movement was at its height. Somehow an exiled prince’s attempt to regain the throne of his ancestors struck a collective chord in the Scottish people. They, in turn, embraced a body of work that seemed to define their struggle in song—albeit in a sanitized version with little basis in reality. Indeed, by the mid-1800s Jacobite balladry was second in popularity only to the ubiquitous love song. The only problem with this scenario was that the songs that we usually associate with the Jacobite movement—such as “The Skye Boat Song” or “Bonnie Charlie’s Now Awa”—were written by professional songwriters or collectors years after the actual events that
they were supposed to chronicle had taken place and only when it was sufficiently safe to do so; that is, only when it was deemed appropriate to evoke the heroic past. Then and only then did the tragedy at Culloden and the flawed hero who was Charles Edward Stuart become the cultural possession of "true" Scots everywhere. Most of the contemporary songs and poetry written during the Jacobite era have been forgotten.

Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns, was known to have penned a few Jacobite songs himself, and two of his best compositions—"Scots, Wha Hae" and "Just a Parcel of Rogues"—were spiritual descendants of that era. "Scots, Wha Hae," arguably his most stirring nationalist ballad, celebrates the Scottish victory over the English at Bannockburn in 1314. It was inspired, however, both by the Jacobite rebellions as well as the lessons supposedly learned from the French Revolution. "Such a Parcel of Rogues" captures the anger and sense of betrayal felt throughout Scotland when the Treaty of Union with England was signed in May 1707. Burns repeatedly reminds us that Scotland was "bought and sold for English gold" by the likes of "a coward few."

Political songs assumed different appearances over the years, depending on the particular circumstances of the period. The folk music revival that swept across Britain, for example, during the post-World War II era was, if anything, politically inspired. In Scotland, in particular, the 1940s and 1950s brought a period of national decline and with it a growing interest in socialism. Much of this energy found expression in song. Indeed, labour and working-class songs have a rich history in Scotland, especially in the urban areas. This growing nationalist interest culminated in 1951, with the founding of the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh, whose goal both then and now was to study the traditional—rural and urban—culture of Scotland.

Few performers in either Scotland or England were more politically aware than Ewan MacColl. Indeed, MacColl was one of the most politically active figures of the revival, in both countries. Although he sang traditional ballads, many of a political nature, he also composed original songs. "The Terror Time," for example, describes the horrible social conditions confronting the Scottish tinkers, or travellers, who faced widespread discrimination and prejudice. Hamish Henderson, of
the School of Scottish Studies, wrote one of the most powerful anti-war songs, “Freedom Come-All-Ye,” which to this day is a part of the repertoire of most traditional Scottish musicians. Another Henderson song, “The John Maclean March,” commemorated the career of John Maclean, the influential Glasgow Marxist who founded the Scottish Workers’ Party. Several decades earlier, in the early twenties, Glasgow had earned a reputation as being the hotbed of socialism in Scotland. A number of prominent Glasgow politicians, including the colorful James Maxton, were branded “Red Clydesiders.”

Political songs were not always doom and gloom, however. Many, in fact, were quite funny. Although “The Wee Magic Stane,” “The Coronation Coronach,” and “Ding Dong Dollar” addressed serious issues—such as the “theft” of the Coronation Stone in 1950 from Westminster Abbey; the Scottish nationalist movement of the 1950s; and anti-American nuclear submarine demonstrations in Dunoon in 1961, respectively—the songwriters used humour to get their point across.

In our own day, contemporary singer/songwriter Eric Bogle has written some of the most powerful anti-war songs of his or any generation. Both “And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda” and “No Man’s Land” explore the tragic consequences of the so-called just-war theory. Other contemporary singers with strong social consciences would have to include Dick Gaughan, whose unusual and distinctive vocal style imbues his material with an immense power and Dougie Maclean, whose gentle delivery belie the passion of his lyrics. He may not be as forceful as Gaughan but his vision is just as unflinching. Maclean is also one of the few songwriters to note that despite pronounced differences in language and culture, the native peoples of the world have much in common. In particular, he makes reference to the spiritual links found between the Native American Indians of North America, the aborigines of Australia, and the Gaels of Scotland. “The same threads run among all these native peoples—the passion for the land, the respect for the land, the spirituality,” he notes.

The Proclaimers, twin brothers from Auchtermuchty, address these and other issues. Their music is deceptively cheerful—bouyant and full of youthful energy—yet they frequently
discuss subjects that usually are off-limits in pop music. But Craig and Charlie Reid are different in several other important ways. They are both devoutly Christian and staunch Scottish nationalists—a potent combination. Thus, their songs are laced with frequent references to Christian symbolism and imagery, but it is not a formal, strait-laced Christianity they embrace; rather, their brand of religion is high-spirited and extremely personal. In “Sunshine on Leith,” for example, they thank “the Chief” for “his work and your birth.”

Their Scottish nationalism emerges most forcefully in two songs, “Cap in Hand” and “What Do You Do?” In “Cap in Hand,” they recite a litany of things that make sense to them—from pronouncing Saskatchewan correctly without stuttering to signing a particular goalie to their favorite football club—but then they raise a sensitive issue that may make more than a few Scots uncomfortable:

“We fight—when they ask us
We boast—then we cower
We beg
For a piece of
What’s already ours”

And then they wonder:

“I can’t understand why we let someone
else rule our land
We’re Cap in Hand”

“Scotland today is perhaps not a notably oppressed country, but it is a disappointed country, uncertain of its national identity,” writes Iain Finlayson in *The Scots*. It is a concept, one feels, that the Proclaimers would instantly acknowledge.

In “What Do You Do?,” the Reid brothers delve deeper into the Scottish psyche to ask an even more troubling question:

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"What do you do when democracy fails you
What do you do
When the rest can't see it's true?"

Like many younger Scots, they aren't willing to settle for easy answers. Nor are they quite ready to give up the nationalist struggle, even though they fear that the rest of the country has fallen into a typical Scottish pattern of dejection and apathy:

"But poverty and failure aren't what I'm after
I painted "Fight" on factories
But they closed the factory down pal
I want to find out where the heart's gone
Find out where the nerve's gone"

They also address what they consider the conservative nature of the Scottish electorate, whose motto is essentially "Don't rock the boat." It's much easier and less threatening to vote Labour, the traditional "Scots way," they insist. The utter futility and frustration of the parliamentary process is brought under attack too. How can Scotland, they seem to be asking, get fair and adequate representation in Westminster—a minority of St. Andrews in a sea of St. Georges—when the populace is outnumbered nine to one, that is, when, in effect, "South always takes all"?

They end the song on a particularly provocative note:

"What do you do
When democracy's all through
What do you do
When minority means you?"

The Gaelic tradition offers equally potent examples of lyrics that ring with political resonance. An early and particularly virulent form of Gaelic poetry were the brosnachadh poems, which essentially functioned as "incitements" to war. One reason for the culture's rich poetic history is the Gaelic bardic system.

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In ancient Gaelic society, the poet held a very high social status. In return for his magical words, he was awarded with gold and cattle and land. The poet could either eulogize or satirize the chief, and it was a wise leader who knew how to manipulate the special talents and skills of his court poet.

One of the most celebrated Highland bards was Alexander Macdonald or Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair (c. 1695? or 1700?–c.1770), the best known of the eighteenth-century Gaelic poets (and reportedly the first cousin of the legendary Flora MacDonald). Almost half of his poems were written to further the Jacobite cause and to promote "a vision of resurgent Gaeldom, free at last from the taunt of Lowland manners and values." Macdonald supported Bonnie Prince Charlie during his ill-fated 1745 campaign to restore the Stuart monarchy to the British throne and in the grand brosnachadh tradition wrote violent attacks against King George and Clan Campbell, the latter being the ancient enemies of the Macdonalds.

Women have also played an important role in the composition of Gaelic songs and poems over the centuries. Although occupational songs, such as waulking songs, were primarily written by women and thus often expressed women's experiences, women also composed songs of a political nature.

Probably the most important Gaelic woman poet was Mary MacPherson (1821–98) of Skye, otherwise known as Mairi Mhor nan Oran (Big Mary of the Songs). She became one of Gaeldom's great heroes as much for her determined support of Gaelic causes as for her larger-than-life personality and even larger girth. A nurse by training, she was imprisoned in Inverness for shoplifting, a charge which she vehemently denied. Insisting she was framed, she began to protest this and other injustices in song. In "Brosnachadh nan Gaidheal" ("Incitement of the Gaels"), she championed the struggle of the crofters to achieve justice during the turbulent land reform wars on Skye during the 1880s.

"In the country granted us by the Father we may not wander the moor or strand, everything of any worth or value they deprived us of by the law of the land."
The struggle in song continues to this day. During the past few years, a distinctive and carefully drawn Celtic perspective has emerged. In this Celtic worldview, small is better, the land is sacred, and self-determination is the goal, if not the reality.\textsuperscript{13}

In Iain Macdonald's "This Land Once Was Free," the Highlands are turned into the playground of the rich or taken over for sport and recreation while in "Another Package Deal"—also by Macdonald—the land of his ancestors is reduced to just another commodity, a piece of real estate to be bought and sold in the give-and-take of the capitalist money game. Similarly, the narrator of Capercaillie's "Waiting for the Wheel to Turn" acknowledges that power still resides in the hands of a few while "the stranger" with his "waves of wealth" sits "like a king with his gold from the south" and washes away the "soul from the land."\textsuperscript{14}

The most important popular music group to emerge from the Gaidhealtachd is Runrig, a six-man band from the Isle of Skye. If the best Gaelic poetry is simple and direct, Runrig clearly follows in this tradition. Some common themes in the Runrig pantheon—all written by two brothers, Calum and Rory Macdonald—include celebration of Gaelic language and culture; the destructive yet potentially healing force of humanity; the natural beauty of the land; love of the homeland; and, most importantly, the survival and perpetuation of the Gaelic language. Their common reference points are to Gaelic place names and people, such as the writer Neil Gunn and the poet Sorley Maclean although they can just as easily recite readily identifiable names from Western culture, including everyone from Elvis to the Beatles.

Runrig has the nerve to suggest—to proclaim even—that the opinion, the point of view of a minority within a minority, does matter and can make a difference; that everything does not have to be filtered through a mainstream perspective (that is, through English or American lens) in order to be legitimate; that Scots can have their own opinion, their own agenda to fulfill, without seeking "permission" from the majority culture.

They sing of a collective history, yes, but also of collective emotions that consequently appeal to Highlander and Lowlander alike. "And all this talk about home, about the land, about great historical battles, and about national identity ... all this
pricks at the heart and evokes the demand, ‘I belong too—let me in,’” writes Tom Morton.15

“We never saw writing in Gaelic as a political statement,” Rory Macdonald ironically once said. “People tell us we’ve done so much for Gaelic, but we never ever set out to write in Gaelic in order to broaden the acceptance of the language.”16

Macdonald’s comments notwithstanding, the music of Runrig is revolutionary in the sense that they are considered the first full-fledged rock band to emerge from the Gaidhealtachd and, most importantly for the perpetuation of Gaelic culture at least, they are one of the few bands to create contemporary compositions in the Gaelic language. Indeed, many of Runrig’s songs have already entered the repertoire of traditional Gaelic singers, such as Catherine-Anne MacPhee from Barra and Mairi MacInnes from Arran. As Tom Morton points out in his biography of the band, thanks to Runrig, for the first time in modern pop culture young Gaels are able to hear rock songs sung in their own language. By writing songs in a rock vein, Runrig, in essence, has reclaimed Gaelic for the young. They have succeeded in making the language—which until fairly recently was considered by its own people to be a barbarous and backward tongue that would impede their future success in the “outside” world—something that young people could embrace with pride and dignity. Gaelic culture was not only worth saving, they seemed to be saying, it was also worthy of protection and perpetuation. 17

The Canadian writer, Alistair MacLeod, uses the phrase “singing to ourselves.” In his short story “The Closing Down of Summer,” he describes Cape Breton miners gathering around the grave of a colleague who died a violent death, shouting a few farewell words in Gaelic. Just as the miner is aware of his own imminent mortality, he is also aware of the precarious nature of the Gaelic language, teetering, as it does, between life and a museum piece. Indeed, he and his co-workers speak “...in an old archaic language private words that reach no one.” Another time they sing in Gaelic rather than hum modern tunes because the old Gaelic songs belong to the world of the “privately familiar.”18 Runrig, however, refuses to sing just for themselves. It is their goal to reach not only Gaels but also non-Gaels. In the words of a Lewis bard: “But still we sing.”19
In "Fichead Bliadhna" ("Twenty Years"), an anger is expressed that is not heard too often in contemporary Scots song. Calum and Rory Macdonald also present the song as something of a challenge, daring both Gael and non-Gael to explore their Scottish roots and discover the truth of their history on their own:

"Freedom of the moor
Freedom of the hill
And then to school
At the end of a summer
Children, five years of age
Without many words of English"

The young student learns many things in school—the English language, the poetry of England, even the music of Germany—but the history of his own culture remains hidden, swept away as if it didn’t matter, as if it held little relevance to contemporary Highland life. And perhaps that is the message—willingly or unwillingly—that the authorities were trying to convey:

"But why did they keep
Our history from us?"

...the narrator asks—and then answers:

"I’ll tell you they are frightened
In case the children of Gaeldom awaken...
Twenty years for the truth
I had to wait
I had to search.
Twenty years of deceit
They denied me knowledge of myself”

In “Alba” ("Scotland"), they speak of the “empty house in Edinburgh/Without authority or voice.”21 Similarly, James Campbell, a journalist from Glasgow, considers the consequences of what he calls a “sham nation” in his book, Invisible Country: A Journey Through Scotland. The lack of political power, he says, is "the most conspicuous thing about modern Scotland ... Scotland cannot declare war, cannot grant aid ... Nobody bothers to ask what Scotland thinks about the arms race, about the Middle East or Central America..."22 The English and the American may take their nationality for granted; not the Scot. The Scot con-
tinually seeks to reinvent himself; to rediscover who he is. Unfortunately, often this discovery comes not by looking at his own reflection in the mirror but to the reflection of others. Says Campbell: "...without a political instrument, a nation's will cannot function..."²³

National identity is affected in other often more subtle ways, such as when a public figure is expected to conform, usually to someone else's expectations. Mass consumerism and mass entertainment have converged to create a massive uniformity. In order to attract a larger audience, for example, Scots performers, especially those in the popular music field, have been encouraged to "throw the 'R' away," to borrow the title of a Proclaimers' song, to soften if not eradicate their accent altogether, and to alleviate their "Scottishisms" in order to make themselves more palatable to a mass market, which usually means in order to make themselves accepted south of the border or across the ocean. Scots are not encouraged, not allowed, to be themselves. They must always judge themselves according to somebody's else's standards, somebody else's culture. A healthy self-identity is one that is naturally assumed—taken for granted almost—not something that is brooded over time and again. Yet Scotland finds its identity by either looking toward the past or looking to others for vindication, oftentimes both.

"It is the dominance of Britain as a political force that threatens most of the Celtic countries; and it is English culture that menaces their indigenous cultures," notes Rod Stoneman.²⁴ "However, seen in a wider context," he continues, "it is the pervasion of trans-national cultural production that threatens all specific national cultures (including the English itself). In fact, even the local variant of the international cultural industry, 'Euroculture,' is increasingly saturated by American values and linked to American economic power." He concludes with this disturbing prophecy: "It is difficult to exaggerate what is at stake in these cultural struggles: the irrevocable extinction and loss of living cultures will only be realised in time for belated nostalgia."²⁵

The diplomat and journalist, P. H. Scott writes: "...[G]enerations of Scots have been brought up to regard English traditions and habits of thought and expression as the
norm and to be left almost entirely in ignorance of their own"²⁶ while Calum Macdonald of Runrig refers to "the Lowland Scot with English habits."²⁷

Yet Runrig offer a refreshing twist to this age-old story—they remain true to themselves and, in fact, present a portrait of the Gael fashioned in their own image. Runrig sings about a particular truth but a truth filtered through a personal point of view; the truth of Scottish history, the truth of Highland history, the truth about the Gael. Historical songs such as "Dance Called America" are not idle nostalgia but rather an attempt to uncover this truth. "America" was the name given by the ruling class of a dance, in which they mimicked the Highlanders as they were forced to emigrate:²⁸

"They did a dance
Called America
They danced it round
And waited at the turns
For America
They danced their ladies 'round"²⁹

Arguably, the band's most politically mature song to date is "Recovery." Indeed, recovery is a theme that runs through much of their work. "Recovery" is based on actual events: specifically, the land wars that erupted on Skye during the 1880s, culminating in the Battle of the Braes, in which a crowd of determined crofters threw stone after stone at government authorities who threatened to evict them from their land. The song also evokes the inspiring image of John Macpherson, who earned the nickname of the Glendale Martyr when he was imprisoned in Calton Jail, in Edinburgh, following the Glendale Riots of 1883. Such incidents led to the formation of the Napier Commission and the Crofting Act of 1886, a watershed piece of legislation in Highland history, which, among other things, granted crofters hereditary security of land tenure:

"Still the morning comes in on the land
See the new sun red and rising
See the corn turn ripe in the fields
See the growth in the glen
And MacPherson's in Kilmuir tonight
What a night for a people rising
Oh God not before time
There’s justice in our lives”

The song’s chorus compares the contemporary Gael to earlier generations, and here the emotions are indelibly cast, for despite the triumphs over the years, both have much in common. The struggle to retain their language and culture in the face of overwhelming odds continues:

“And I can’t believe
That it’s taken all this time
I can’t believe
My life and my destiny
After the clans, after the clearings
Here I am
Recovering”30

The contemporary Gaelic poet Donald Macaulay refers to “tribal loyalty,” in which the poet mentions local place names or the names of ancestors as a way of holding onto one’s roots. Just knowing that someone came before you and that someone will come after you is a reassuring thought.

The music of Runrig captures this mood, this way of being, perfectly. Their music projects a palpable sense of the past that is, nevertheless, very much a part of the present. It gives their music an immense power and a sense of durability.

Donnie Munro, their lead vocalist, frequently sings of coming home to a place—a particular place certainly (in this case, Skye)—but it’s more than just a location; it’s also coming home to a heritage, to a culture, to an identity. In “Flower of the West,” he recites the place names of Uist: “Orinsay to the Trumisgarry shore ... A loter ... the road to Ahmore ... where ... Eval meets the ... rock of Lee.”31 “Flower of the West” is in fact an exploration and a celebration of place.

By reciting specific places, by naming oneself, Runrig offer self-respect, where none existed before, and recognition, where neglect and ignorance once reigned. Writes Angus Peter Campbell: “Centuries of shame have left us embarrassed about being ourselves.”32 Later, he adds: “... [Runrig] have made the local universal and continue to give dignity to a scorned people and a scorned culture. That’s no small thing.”33
This is a potent and powerful tool. By voicing an opinion, by making the opinions of the Gael known, Calum and Rory Macdonald, in essence, validate the existence of the Gael and, by extension, the rest of the Scottish nation for what is Scotland, in the popular imagination after all, but a fanciful interpretation of Gaelic culture? What are the images of Scotland that are famous the world over? Tartan, clans, whisky, mountains, and lochs—all images originating in the Highlands. For once, if only in the words of popular song, the Gael and the Anglo-Scot—the Highlander and the Lowlander—can come together in mutual respect and admiration.

Scots see something else in Runrig. "[T]here is a sense in which the Gaelic language is a part of the personal identity and everyday life of almost every Scot," writes Kenneth MacKinnon. They are seeking a cultural identity; something that is at once foreign yet strangely familiar, familiar if not in actual everyday usage at least in collective memory. Says James Campbell: "... I realised that Gaelic was a missing part of my world, since with the modern Gael I share a history but not a language. ... Yet his history remains mine: written into my conscience in invisible ink, in a language I have forgotten how to understand."  

When the Macdonalds write, "I step the naked heath where the breathing of the vanished lies in acres round my feet," they are making a tangible connection with their past. The words evoke a continuity with the past and with previous generations. There is an intentional spirituality at work here too that seems to be saying that my worth as a human being today is due in no small part to the lives of people I never met but who, nevertheless, are very much a part of me, who are, indeed, essential to my very being. For if they had never lived, I would never have lived. It is a feeling that recalls the gentle spirituality of Neil Gunn's Highland River and indeed that Scottish classic was the chief inspiration for one of their more recent recordings, The Big Wheel.  

The Big Wheel is perhaps more spiritual than political; but in its very spirituality, it reminds us of the universality of human life and of the need for human decency in all matters, large and small. Does all change in Gaelic society come from the outside, as some have suggested? Can the Gaels determine and control
their own destiny? The words of the Macdonald brothers suggest that they can.

Runrig sings of the "watcher waiting on the edge of the world," of the "need to keep control," but it is a desire that remains increasingly difficult to maintain:

"The need to stand alone at the edge of the world... Somewhere out of the sight of the night and the light of day... And the man from St. Kilda went over the cliff on a winter's day. At the edge of the world." 37

The man who falls off the edge of the world on a winter's day is, in retrospect, the perfect metaphor for the Gael—that of a culture that has always existed outside mainstream society; always on the verge of destruction and faced with the very real threat of extinction; not allowed the luxury of being able to take its ethnic identity for granted; always defending their Gaelic nature, even in their own country; always forging an individualistic path, perhaps even at the expense of cooperation with other Gaels. It is significant too that the Macdonald brothers choose St. Kilda as their symbol, for it is an island that has been devoid of human life since the 1930s and, in fact, now functions as a bird sanctuary. 38

"We are survivors," writes journalist John Macleod. "We have to be, we Gaels and Highlanders, for we have lived for many centuries as a tribe on the edge of a rich and powerful civilisation which has long viewed us with indifference and on occasion with genocidal ferocity." 39

Despite the usual setbacks that confront a minority culture in an increasingly homogenous world, there are moments to cherish and victories to celebrate. The contemporary praise song, "Tir A' Mhurain" ("Land of the Marram Grass"), stands with muted confidence and quiet pride:

"Welcome to my language
The one learned as a child
The huge dignified language of the Gael
That stands like a banner
For me daily." 40
The narrator then confronts the reality of Highland history but remains cautiously optimistic, defiant almost in his belief that his culture will survive for generations to come. The language may be “wounded,” but, the author vows, “in this land, she will live on.”

Perhaps then the most important change occurs not in the political arena, not on the world stage but rather, ultimately, within the heart. Sometimes the smallest of victories yield the greatest of human triumphs. It’s enough to make one believe that one can find universal meaning—hope—in the most unlikeliest of places, even at the edge of the world:

“In the smallness of one heartbeat, power
overthrow...
For the universe and the stars are around you now.
But the healer in your heart is only a breath away.
For there’s silence and there’s blindness in a
raging world.
But the healer in your heart is only a
moment away.”

Amid the “silence” and the “blindness” of this “raging world,” Runrig reminds us of the immense power that can be found in “the smallness of one heartbeat;” that one person can make a difference and, yes, that a tiny country and a battered culture on the periphery, does, indeed, matter. Change begins, after all, with the individual. In the end, it becomes a matter of choice. Your choice. Our choice.

JUNE SKINNER SAWYERS
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
NOTES

1 During the past two decades or so deflating the tartan myth has become an important—and necessary—aspect of contemporary Scottish pop culture. Examples of this new revisionist trend include the 7:84 Theatre Company’s production of John McGrath’s *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* in 1973, Murray Grigor’s *Scotch Myths* in 1980, and a major touring exhibition *As an Fhearan (From the Land) Clearance, Conflict and Crofting: A Century of Images of the Scottish Highlands* in 1986, which marked the centenary of the Crofting Act of 1886 and which also produced a handsome catalogue [edited by Malcolm MacLean and Christopher Carrell and published with the joint cooperation of Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh, An Lanntair, Stornoway, and Third Eye Centre, Glasgow]. In addition, the bleak realism and gallows humour of such contemporary urban writers as James Kelman, Jeff Torrington, and Janice Galloway are a far cry from the maudlin sentimentality of the Kailyard school while the working-class portraits by Glasgow-based artists Ken Currie and Peter Howson reveal a darker mentality at work. Clearly, a tougher, more realistic image of Scotland—created largely by Scots—has emerged in the late twentieth century.


3 “The Skye Boat Song” was written in 1884 by Sir Harold Boulton, an Englishman; “Bonnie Charlie’s Now Awa” was written by Lady Nairne, a Scottish aristocrat.

For the lyrics of these and other Scottish songs, see Jerry Silverman, *Songs of Scotland* (Pacific, Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, 1991).


By the late eighties, the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) was promoting itself "as the trendy, exciting alternative to the cautious, old-before-their-time style favoured by the Labour leadership. It became, in short, cool to be a Nationalist." See Andrew Marr, *The Battle for Scotland* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 213. Thus, many young Scottish rock stars were more than happy to join the SNP bandwagon. Whether it was mere opportunism or due to a deep personal conviction is hard to say. There is little reason, however, to question the sincerity of Patrick Kane. Lead vocalist of the Glasgow-based pop group, Hue and Cry, Kane is one of the most committed and outspoken supporters of the nationalist cause in contemporary music. In addition to his role as rector of Glasgow University and founder member of the nationalist organisation, Scotland United, Kane is also an astute, intelligent, and perceptive observer of the Scottish scene. Many of his best journalistic pieces appeared in *The Scotsman* and were published as an anthology in *Tinsel Show: Pop, Politics, Scotland* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992).

The Scottish nationalist movement itself is a complex and fascinating story, much too complicated for this paper to adequately address. But a few historical events may help put the contemporary political situation in proper perspective. Home Rule for Scotland became a viable topic for discussion in the British parliament as early as the 1880s during William Gladstone's term, and various Home Rule bills have been introduced over the years. During the post-World War II era, the nationalist mood intensified, so much so that on 29 October, 1949, a Covenant was presented at the Church of Scotland Assembly Hall on the Mound in Edinburgh, whose goal was "to do everything in our power to secure for Scotland a Parliament with adequate legislative authority in Scottish affairs." (See Andrew Marr, 96–97).
Some forty years later, on 30 March 1989, another like-minded gathering convened in the same room. The words of this second Covenant were slightly different, but the message remained essentially the same: “We, gathered as the Scottish Constitutional Convention, do hereby acknowledge the sovereign rights of the Scottish people to determine the form of Government best suited to their needs ... To agree a scheme for an Assembly or Parliament for Scotland; To mobilize Scottish opinion and ensure the approval of the Scottish people for that scheme; and To assert the right of the Scottish people to secure implementation of that scheme.” (Marr, 205).


Andrew Marr thinks it unfair to judge the Scottish people too harshly for the failure to achieve Home Rule, the anticipated aftermath of the 1992 British general election. Indeed, Marr finds fault not with the electorate but rather with the ineffectiveness of the politicians who, for varying reasons, were unable to translate the will of the people into law. It was the politicians and the media, Marr insists, who assumed that Home Rule would be the inevitable outcome of the election. When it didn’t materialize, politicians blamed the voters for lacking nerve, for backing down when the threat of true independence became real. Marr counters: “The majority of the Scottish electorate (52 per cent) voted for Home Rule inside the Union; just over a fifth voted Nationalist; and just over a quarter voted for the status quo. The vast majority of seats, fifty-eight out of seventy-two, went to the parties that backed Home Rule ... “ (230). He continues: “The people had voted for Home Rule time and again. Again and again the politicians had dangled it and (for varying reasons) failed to deliver it. If there was a mood of weary suspicion among Scottish voters on the subject, there was no one to blame but
the politicians." He concludes that to condemn the "level-headed Scottish people" for letting the politicians down is absolute absurdity or, in his words, just "plain, old-fashioned cheek." (237)


13 The Celtic perspective, in my view, promotes what could be called an international nationalism rather than a narrow nationalism; the latter is insular and provincial, the former confident and forward-looking.


17 For an entirely different point of view, see John Macleod, *No Great Mischief If You Fall: The Highland Experience* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1993). Macleod, a young journalist with the *Glasgow Herald* whose forebears came from Lewis, offers a highly personal and often controversial perspective of contemporary Highland life and culture that dares to be both unfashionable and politically incorrect. "Gaelic has long been deemed central to our identity as Hebrideans and Highlanders. But is this true?," he asks. "Is not our Gaeldom as much racial, and psychological, as linguistic? And is Gaelic not so much the core of our identity as a badge of our difference?" He then goes on to encourage his fellow Gaels to create "a post-Gaelic Highland identity" more concerned with economic rejuvenation than language maintenance. (193) Macleod’s contention that loss of language does not necessarily mean loss of culture or identity is a subject worthy of separate study.
Alistair MacLeod, “The Closing Down of Summer” in *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986).

Murdo Macfarlane, as quoted by Donnie Munro in *Going Home: The Runrig Story*, 153.


In his *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson*, James Boswell, the Scots man of letters, describes a dance that he witnessed during his travels in October of 1773: “We had again a good dinner, and in the evening a great dance. We made out five country squares without sitting down; and then we performed with much activity a dance which I suppose the emigration from Skye had occasioned. They call it ‘America.’ A brisk reel is played. The first couple begin and each sets to one — then each to another — then as they set in the next couple, the second and third couples are setting; and so it goes on till all are set a-going, setting and wheeling round each other, while each is making the tour of all in the dance. It shows how emigration catches till all are set afloat.” Quoted in J. M. Bumsted, *The People’s Clearance: Highland Emigration to British North America 1770–1815* (Edinburgh and Winnipeg: Edinburgh University Press and University of Manitoba Press, 1982), 1.
Calum and Rory Macdonald, “Dance Called America,” Storr Music, 1985. In 1988, Scotland’s Grampian Television produced an excellent three-part series, “The Blood Is Strong,” which explored the experience of Gaelic Scots at home and abroad. The programme, also available in video format, was accompanied by an informative booklet and a memorable soundtrack by the Scots band, Capercaillie.


Angus Peter Campbell in Going Home: The Runrig Story, 8.

Ibid., 10.


James Campbell, Invisible Country, 106.

Neil M. Gunn, Highland River ([1937] Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1991). Gunn’s cyclical novel evokes the memory of his ancestors, especially the people who were evicted from the land during the Highland Clearances: “Once the crying of curlews in the night had made him think of the men and women and children burned out of their homes in Strathnaver more than a century before. The spirits of his people, the disinherited, the nameless, the folk.” (206). Later, he writes of “the abiding land: of which the departing figure was a silent emanation, more inevitable than any figure in any vision.” (241).


