

**ESSE conference 2010, Torino (24-28 August)**

Seminar "Dis/placing the British Empire: theoretical and critical views from Scottish studies"  
(organised by Carla Sassi & Theo Van Heijnsbergen)

**Paper: "Celticity and the Gaelic voice in (post)colonial discourse"**

by **Silke Stroh**, University of Muenster, Germany (Silke.Stroh@uni-muenster.de)

This paper investigates connections between Celticity, Scottish nationalism and international colonial and postcolonial discourse. Recent years have seen increasing scholarly interest in the question whether non-English territories and peoples of the British Isles, long faced with English hegemony, can be regarded as English colonies (or British *internal* colonies), and whether their social and cultural experience is in some ways comparable to former overseas colonies. Such comparisons are made despite the fact that Scottish, Welsh and Irish people have also featured as *colonisers* in Britain's overseas Empire. This ambivalence is sometimes downplayed, but also frequently acknowledged as an integral part of the (post)colonial predicament, fuelling much controversy. The adaptation of international postcolonial approaches is furthest advanced in Irish Studies. Welsh and Scottish postcolonialism is so far less prominent, though on the increase. In all three nations, the long-standing existence of non-anglophone, 'Celtic' languages and cultures has played a prominent role in establishing their distinctness from the hegemonic English Other, their supposed 'backwardness' or 'indigeneity', and the urge to 'civilise' (or 'colonise') them through anglicisation, but also in providing a reference point for nationalist discourses of resistance. While all this is noted in postcolonial Irish, Scottish and Welsh Studies, and inspires overseas comparisons, the international *mainstream* of postcolonial studies is still quite reluctant to participate in this dialogue: 'Celtic fringe postcolonialism'<sup>1</sup> is regarded as an overly ambivalent, marginal anomaly in a field whose 'proper' concerns are deemed to lie elsewhere, i.e. in Britain's former overseas colonies and their diasporas. By contrast, this paper aims to highlight the *centrality* of Celticity as an archetypal construct in (post)colonial discourses, both ancient and modern. A second aim is to show that the role of Celticity as a link between classical and modern colonialism is also reflected in Scottish literature.

The first recorded uses of the concept 'Celtic' occurred in Classical Greek and Roman texts, where it was associated with various kinds of 'barbarians' and already aggregated around itself many typical tropes of othering and civilisational hierarchisation which we know from modern colonial texts. During the Middle Ages speakers of Celtic languages again began to be marginalised and regarded as a barbarian Other, this time by increasingly English-dominated British mainstreams. This role of Celtic-speaking populations as internal barbarian Others continued into the modern period. The (mainly continental) ethnicities of European Antiquity for whom the label 'Celtic' was originally coined now came to be widely considered as ancestors or close cousins of the Celtic-speaking peoples of the northern and western peripheries of France and the British Isles. Many discourse patterns initially used for the description of continental 'Celts' were also applied to insular ones. As ancient Greek and Roman texts played a central part in western educational canons, colonial discourses from the past, with their textualisation of 'Celtic barbarians', became important models for the portrayal of modern centre/periphery relations, as regards both *internal* homogenisation within emerging capitalist nation states (e.g. the assimilation of 'Celtic fringes'), and *external* colonial

---

<sup>1</sup> The concept of the 'Celtic fringe' is of course highly problematic, especially if the entirety of these nations (e.g. including anglophone Scotland) is subsumed under it. In this paper it is merely cited as a convenient shorthand, despite awareness of its considerable limitations which, for reasons of space, cannot be discussed in more detail here.

expansion overseas. A main shared feature among all the cultures which, over time, have been labelled 'Celtic' is their shared 'peripherality' and otherness in relation to some hegemonic centre (Greek, Roman, English or French). The condition of being a 'colonised' margin almost seems inherent to the concept of Celticism.<sup>2</sup> It is thus little wonder that Celticism, in both Classical and more recent manifestations, provided a model for overseas colonial discourses. Modern discourses on 'Celts' and overseas colonised peoples often developed in parallel and employed mutual comparisons. Similar parallels and connections can be found in later anti- and postcolonial discourses.

A central pattern that has long been associated (almost stereotypically) with postcolonialism is the 'writing back paradigm'. For instance, while written history was traditionally dominated by the viewpoints of victors and mainstreams, postcolonial texts often attempt to rewrite history from the perspective of the marginalised. 'Writing back' often appropriates motifs and strategies from hegemonic 'master texts' to subversively reinterpret these for the margin's own purposes. Thus, Roman colonial histories which draw a mainly negative image of the Scottish colonised can be appropriated by modern 'anticolonial' discourses and reinterpreted to give a more positive picture of native society and culture as a source of resilience and resistance. This happens, for instance, in two Gaelic poems from the 18th and 19th century, Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair's "Fuirgeall" ("A fragment")<sup>3</sup> and Iain MacIlleathain's "Òran nam prìosanach" ("Song about the prisoners"),<sup>4</sup> which compare Roman colonialism in northern Britain to the modern relationship between Scottish Gaeldom and Britain's anglophone mainstream. One of the most important colonial texts which has undergone postcolonial appropriation and rewriting in Scotland is Tacitus's *Agricola*. Though Tacitus himself does not speak of British people as 'Celts', his work has often been read as part of the discourse on Celticity and 'Celtic fringes'. Though *Agricola* essentially voices a colonial perspective, it also contains a passage where the colonising author attempts to re-present the perspective of a colonised, namely the anti-Roman speech put into the mouth of the Caledonian leader Calgacus. While *Agricola* was often cited in later works that depicted Scotland or its Gaels from anglocentric, colonising viewpoints, it has also been subjected to anti-colonial re-readings which appropriate Calgacus's speech as a model for native resistance. Such appropriations have been made both by Scottish (cultural or political) nationalists and by more particularly Highland or Gaelic discourses of resistance.

A prominent example is Neil M. Gunn's *Butcher's Broom*, a historical novel about the impact of the Napoleonic Wars and the Highland Clearances on a small Sutherland community.<sup>5</sup> Though written in English, the novel arguably attempts to express a *Gaelic* perspective by reconstructing how the lower-class *Gaelic* 'colonised' experienced these events. Gunn's anti-colonial appropriation of Tacitus's Calgacus figure is achieved through the speeches of one character, Tomas the Drover. Tomas likens the Roman invasion of Caledonia to the danger of a Napoleonic invasion of Britain, and the real 'invasion' of Lowland and English sheep farmers moving into the Gaidhealtachd. He repeatedly quotes Calgacus to boost the self-confidence of Gaels in his own time and provide a precedent for native resistance in discourse and action.<sup>6</sup> The aspect of re-writing and re-interpretation becomes evident from a comparison between Tacitus's original text and the way in which it is quoted by Gunn's drover. While his quotes are otherwise very exact, Tomas leaves out two sentences where Tacitus makes Caledonians appear in a less favourable light by suggesting that they

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Malcolm Chapman, *The Celts: The Construction of a Myth* (Basingstoke & London: Macmillan; & New York: St Martin's 1992), Simon James, *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient People or Modern Invention?* (London: British Museum Press 1999); Murray G.H. Pittock, *Celtic Identity and the British Image* (Manchester & New York: Manchester UP 1999); John Collis, *The Celts: Origins, Myths & Inventions* (Stroud: Tempus 2003).

<sup>3</sup> J.L. Campbell (ed. & tr.), *Highland Songs of the Forty-five / Òrain Ghàidhealach mu Bhliadhna Theàrlaich* (1933; rev. ed. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press / SGTS 1984): 116–21.

<sup>4</sup> D.E. Meek (ed. & tr.), *Tuath is Tighearna / Tenants and Landlords: An Anthology of Gaelic Poetry of Social and Political Protest from the Clearances to the Land Agitation (1800–1890)* (Edinburgh: SGTS 1995): 158 f, 260 f.

<sup>5</sup> 1934; repr. London: Souvenir Press 1977.

<sup>6</sup> Gunn, *Butcher's Broom*, 105–107, 152–55, 158 f, 306, 416–20.

were cowards.<sup>7</sup> Tomas's omission transforms an essentially colonising text into an unequivocal celebration of the colonised and their resistance. Further re-writing occurs when Tomas claims that Galgacus's men won the battle which followed the speech, while Roman authors like Tacitus claim the victory for themselves. That Tomas intends this re-writing of history to instil pride into his modern Gaelic audience is suggested by implications of continuity, as in "That was Galgacus, our ancestor" or the use of the first person in "we who stood with Galgacus and [...] hurled back the Roman conquerors."<sup>8</sup> Later, Calgacus's words are inserted into a direct comment on incoming sheep farmers during the Clearances.<sup>9</sup> Such parallels are underlined when the 'colonising' sheep farmer Mr. Heller muses upon the Gaelic margins and the power of London, calling the latter "Roman in its certainty."<sup>10</sup>

Even after his hopes for practical resistance have been shattered, Tomas continues to evoke Galgacus in a final indictment of the Clearances. Here, he even makes alignments with overseas colonised subjects by comparing the Countess of Sutherland to an African slave-trader. This comparative outlook is accentuated by a reference to an 18<sup>th</sup>-century incident when other Highland chiefs had tried to sell some of their Gaelic subjects into slavery.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, there is a clear awareness that the Gaels' position in the imperial hierarchy is more complicated than that of many overseas colonised peoples, since the Gaels could more easily exchange the role of intra-British 'colonised' victim for that of overseas coloniser: Tomas's proud list of Gaelic military achievements includes recent colonial wars in North America and India, and young men from the protagonists' community are sent as soldiers to South Africa.<sup>12</sup> Though they have experienced marginalisation and eviction by hostile 'outsiders' themselves, the novel's Gaelic protagonists show little sympathy with overseas colonised peoples: they refer to the latter as "savages,"<sup>13</sup> denigrating them in the same way in which English and Lowland Scottish sheep farmers denigrated Gaels. While the *characters* seem unaware of such parallels, the *narrator* does perceive an analogy: immediately after the reference to "savage" Native Americans and their resistance to Gaelic colonisers,<sup>14</sup> the narrator's focus shifts to the much weaker resistance of the 'internally colonised' Scottish Highlands: "Mr Heller had made more certain of his savages than that."<sup>15</sup> There is also some emphasis on parallels between Gaelic Scotland and the Irish colony, combined with an implied plea to resist imperial 'divide and rule' policies through mutual solidarity against the Anglo-British oppressor.<sup>16</sup> The references to overseas colonies elsewhere in the novel arguably extend this solidarity to the various anti-colonial movements which were stirring when Gunn's novel was written, thus placing *Butcher's Broom* even more firmly into a (post)colonial context.

Tacitus's Calgacus has also been appropriated as an emblem of national or regional resistance by the 1970s journal *Calgacus*; historian Paul Henderson Scott in *Scotland: An Unwon Cause*,<sup>17</sup> and James Hunter in his Highland history *Last of the Free*. Hunter also compares the Highlands to former overseas colonies.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Gunn, *Butcher's Broom*, 105 f; Cornelius Tacitus, *Agricola* (c. 98 AD), tr. into English by Anthony R. Birley in his omnibus ed. of Tacitus, *Agricola and Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999): 3–34, ch. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Gunn, *Butcher's Broom*, 419.

<sup>9</sup> Gunn, *Butcher's Broom*, 159.

<sup>10</sup> Gunn, *Butcher's Broom*, 308.

<sup>11</sup> Gunn, *Butcher's Broom*, 416–20.

<sup>12</sup> Gunn, *Butcher's Broom*, 108 f, 217.

<sup>13</sup> Gunn, *Butcher's Broom*, 311.

<sup>14</sup> Gunn, *Butcher's Broom*, 311 f.

<sup>15</sup> Gunn, *Butcher's Broom*, 312.

<sup>16</sup> Gunn, *Butcher's Broom*, 308 f.

<sup>17</sup> Scott (ed), *Scotland: An Unwon Cause. An Anthology with a Commentary* (Edinburgh: Canongate 1997): xiii–xi.

<sup>18</sup> Hunter, *Last of the Free: A Millennial History of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland* (Edinburgh & London: Mainstream 1999, repr. 2000): 204, 242, 258, 303, 382 f; *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh: John Donald 1976, new ed. 2000): 7–10, 28; *A Dance Called America: The Scottish Highlands, the United States and Canada* (Edinburgh & London: Mainstream 1994): 28, 96, 177, 189, 235–37, 243; *Glencoe and the Indians* (Edinburgh & London: Mainstream 1996): e.g. 34, 52 f, 59, 66 f, 73, 118, 123 f.

A Scottish post/colonial consciousness which extends from the Roman to the British Empire and suggests solidarity between the marginalised in Scotland and Britain's former overseas colonies is also evident in the poetry of William Neill, who writes in Scots, Gaelic and English. "A Celtic History"<sup>19</sup> admires the "determination" of "the auncient Celts" (without regional specification) in resisting the Roman Empire. Specific references to *Scotland* in relation to the Roman empire occur in "Home Thoughts in the Piazza"<sup>20</sup> and "Marching the Wall."<sup>21</sup> "Sawnie's Complaint" compares the imperialism reflected in Tacitus's *Agricola* (which it quotes) to English imperialism within Union Britain, which marginalises Scotland politically, economically and culturally.<sup>22</sup> Whereas "Unkipling the Raj"<sup>23</sup> notes Scottish participation in overseas imperialism, "St Andrew's Day, 1966"<sup>24</sup> places Scotland within an international alliance of the colonised, comparing Scottish and overseas anticolonial nationalism, expressing solidarity, but lamenting that Scotland has so far been denied the political autonomy which overseas ex-colonies have now gained. Scotland is thus presented as one of the last colonies, and incited to make a more determined effort at emancipation similar to overseas models. While these poems suggest that the entirety of Scotland is colonised, a specifically Highland perspective is expressed in "The Jolly Trimmers," where non-Gaelic incomers purchasing estates are accused of "attitudes colonial."<sup>25</sup>

To conclude, I would like to briefly raise some wider issues which we can hopefully tackle in more detail in our discussion. Firstly, I'd like to suggest that the recent increase in Scottish overseas postcolonial alignments is related to wider redefinitions of post-imperial British national identities, contemporary discourses on multiculturalism, and the urge to define a modern Scottish national identity distanced not only from monoculturalism but also from discredited imperial Britishness. Secondly, it might be worthwhile to discuss potential reasons why, despite their evident relevance, there is still so much neglect of a) Gaelic issues in Scottish postcolonial studies, and b) Scottish Studies in international postcolonial scholarship. Thirdly, I'd like to argue that it is worth trying to overcome this neglect, as greater interdisciplinary cooperation in this field offers significant benefits. For instance, the 'Celtic dimension' helps to extend the historical perspective of international postcolonial studies into premodern periods, offering alternative insights into the relation between colonial discourse and modernity. Scottish, Celtic and Gaelic Studies can profit from the wealth of tools which postcolonialism has developed for the analysis of multicultural and multilingual societies, correlations between social and cultural power imbalances, re/constructions of national identities, and the representation of these issues in literature. As these are key concerns in contemporary Scottish culture and academia, international postcolonial dialogue can offer additional insights – and contribute further to setting Scottish literature in a global context.

---

<sup>19</sup> Neill et al., *Four Points of a Saltire: The Poetry of Sorley MacLean, George Campbell Hay, William Neill, Stuart MacGregor* (Edinburgh: Reprographia 1970); repr. in Neill, *Selected Poems 1969–1992* (Edinburgh: Canongate 1994): 5.

<sup>20</sup> Neill, *Selected Poems 1969–1992*, 198.

<sup>21</sup> Neill, *Caledonian Cramboclink: Verse, Broadshets and in Conversation* (Edinburgh: Luath 2001): 20.

<sup>22</sup> Neill, *Caledonian Cramboclink*, 112–18.

<sup>23</sup> Neill, *Caledonian Cramboclink*, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Neill, *Poems* (Preston: Akros 1970): 4.

<sup>25</sup> Neill, *Caledonian Cramboclink*, 131–43, here 136.