

# **Caribbean-Scottish Relations: for a Poetics of Memory**

**By Carla Sassi**

suggest that the two silences are in any way morally comparable, but just to highlight how they are both rooted in the political and ideological humus of the empire-building age, and thus how, being part of the same discourse, they inevitably build on each other and secretly collude.

The invisibility of the Act of Union foregrounds in fact the invisibility of the Scottish nation as a political and economic agent within the Union and within the British Empire: the notorious conflation between English and British, subsuming Scottishness and relegating it to a provincial entity, was no doubt one of the factors that allowed Scots to underplay their role in the imperial enterprise and also to remove more quickly and more radically than their southern neighbours their own active involvement in slave trade and slave exploitation by the time such involvement had become an embarrassing memory.

## **Issues of (in)visibility and mnemonic disconnections**

An investigation of Caribbean-Scottish relations arguably represents a journey into the epicentre of Scotland's modern history. The Scots' presence in the West Indies, first as settlers or exiles from an independent nation, then as British subjects, stretched for over three centuries, beginning in the second half of the 17th century, with Oliver Cromwell's banishment of Scottish prisoners of war, it gained further importance after the Union of Parliaments of 1707 (ushered in by Scotland's failed attempt to plant a colony at Darien, on the isthmus of Panama in 1699), and lasted well into the first decades of the 20th century, when Scottish communities still lived in some of the Caribbean islands.

Not only is this a long-standing relation then, it is a deep and complex one, not to mention its importance in economic terms, and yet it has remained largely and strikingly invisible until recently. Because this invisibility is neither accidental nor recent, let alone innocent, any attempt to correct the historical distortions and silences it generated that does not also address earnestly its deeper cultural/ideological roots is doomed to produce that defective memory Wood speaks of. And of course searching for such roots means embarking upon a difficult and problematic journey into the dark recesses of Scotland's national identity. It is even more difficult and problematic insofar as Scotland is still a stateless nation where the transmission of national culture and history is only partially granted by state institutions. While historical memory has been transmitted here as elsewhere also through non-institutional channels, it is

obvious that in Scotland national narratives have relied less on institutional legitimisation than those of established nation-states. Furthermore the friction of Scottish national historical discourse with British centralised historiography has often generated mnemonic disconnections as well as opportunities for removal and/or distortion, either in opposition or collusion with the centre. Historical memory is of course always a contested territory, as history is a construct as the new historicists has taught us open to endless revisions and subject to the ideological perspectives that prevail at the time of its (re)telling, as well as to the discovery of new evidence. In Scotland however such contested quality takes on a specific and possibly more complex meaning. It is indeed against the backdrop of the specificity of Scotland's historical memory that its amnesia of its agency in the black holocaust should be evaluated. This is of course no attempt to identify mitigating circumstances for what happened (there cannot be any), just an indication of the scope of the investigation required from scholars, if Scotland is truly to make amends for and offer at least symbolic reparation for its colonial past.

## **The Challenge of a Shared Living Memory**

Today it is not possible any longer to claim that Scotland is amnesiac of its colonial past and its involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. Since 2007, a rich series of events including exhibitions, public lectures, academic conferences, documentaries as well as a remarkable number of academic publications have made most Scots widely aware of this dark chapter of their national history. A long review-article by Neil Ascherson recently published in the *London Review of Books* is the latest in a long line of investigations attracting attention on the doings of the Scottish Empire with special reference to the West Indian connection.<sup>2</sup> Beside T.M. Devine and Emma Rotschild's newly published works on the subject, reviewed here by Ascherson,<sup>3</sup> it is worthwhile to remember at least Douglas J. Hamilton's *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World, 1750-1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005) as one of the pioneering works that shed light on the specifically national dimension of Scottish networks in the Caribbean.<sup>4</sup>

Even though no doubt much remains to be unearthed and revealed, we can indeed claim that the tip of the iceberg, as it were, is by now well visible. But is this (yet partial) visibility enough? Does the whispered *mea culpa* of the 2007

commemorations mark at once the beginning and the end of Scotland's coming to terms with its heart of darkness? How much of that dark past is still with us today? And what would be adequate forms of memorialisation? These are questions that remain largely unanswered. And possibly they will remain so as long as these issues will be addressed only through the lens of traditional/national historiography which, inevitably struggling with the unfillable gaps and silences of this long history (it is in fact largely impossible to retrieve the suppressed voice of the slaves), tends to represent the Caribbean as a *passive* source of wealth and to convey the idea that colonial history is locked in the past with no living consequences on our present. This of course is not to say in the least that traditional/national historiography does not represent an essential tool of knowledge. Indeed it *is* essential. What I am suggesting here is that for at least two important reasons Scotland's colonial history in the Caribbean will never be represented adequately exclusively through a conventional historiographic perspective: firstly, because colonial history is by definition shared history, and therefore its memory and memorialisation should also be shared, considering regions and peoples in their interactions; secondly because it involves one of the most pervasive and violent crimes against humanity in history and because the voices of its victims are no longer retrievable, and therefore it defies the tools of conventional historical narrative.

Given the moral imperative to record the terrible truth of this event, it is then not only legitimate, but necessary to integrate conventional historiography and to look for alternative forms of re-presentation.

## **The 'art' of memory**

The desire to gauge new tools for such alternative forms of investigation and re-presentation inspired two consecutive projects I worked on, the first funded and coordinated by the University of Trento (2006) the second as a Royal Society of Edinburgh Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Stirling (2008).

Caribbean-Scottish Relations brought together in Trento four scholars from the fields of Scottish and Caribbean studies who investigated family memories, historical evidence and literary representations from both the Caribbean and Scotland, with the aim of offering a relational as well as a poetic approach to the colonial encounter of these two regions.<sup>5</sup> The Stirling project relied also on an interaction between Scottish and Caribbean Studies specialists, and followed an

interdisciplinary approach by involving historians as well as literary scholars and creative writers/artists.<sup>6</sup>

As far as my own interest in this field and the kind of approach I have privileged are concerned, a major source of inspiration was indeed a creative work – James Robertson's *Joseph Knight* (2003) – an historical novel reconstructing the personal and legal odyssey of an African-born slave who followed his master from a Jamaican sugar plantation to his Scottish home and eventually won his freedom in a civil court in 1778. There is no doubt that this novel, like no conventional historical investigation so far, has gone a long way to account for the horror of the

In the past ten years or so there has indeed been no dearth of probing and self-questioning literary/artistic re-presentations of Scotland's involvement with slavery which have pushed investigation beyond the limits of traditional historiography, and have indeed made of the memory of Caribbean-Scottish relations a *living* and *shared* memory. The only type of memory that can indeed

(2011), pp. 8-12.

<sup>3</sup> T.M. Devine, *To the Ends of the Earth: Scotland's Global Diaspora, 1750-2010* (Allen Lane, 2011); Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires: An 18th-Century History* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Douglas J. Hamilton, *Scotland, the Caribbean and the Atlantic World, 1750-1820* (Manchester University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> See Giovanna Covi, Joan Anim-Addo, Velma Pollard, Carla Sassi, *Caribbean-Scottish Relations: Colonial and Contemporary Inscriptions in History, Language and Literature* (Mango Publishing, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> See *International Journal of Scottish Literature* No. 4 (2008) Special Issue Scottish-Caribbean Passages , Guest editors Carla Sassi, Gemma Robinson.

<sup>7</sup> Beth Forde was commissioned by St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art to create a new artwork to commemorate the 200th Anniversary of the Slave Trade Act (within the Towards Understanding Slavery Initiative ).

<sup>8</sup> Graham Fagen, *Clean Hands Pure Heart*, (Tramway, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> See Murc

was the exploitation of natural and human resources in the West Indies. Also, both commemorations were not contrary to what is often the case extraordinary events within a yearly national remembrance ritual, but rather an *una tantum* duty, performed with what seemed more a sense of external obligation than genuine participation. The history of Atlantic slavery, in fact, had been pushed to the margins of British historiography as well as of collective memory indeed a case of blind memory , in Marcus Wood s phrase, of a memory that stubbornly refuses to remember.<sup>1</sup> No memorials in fact recollected in Britain (until 2007) the loss of human lives in the name of profit (while several commemorated the lives and deeds of abolitionists), the Queen has never offered



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Since Robertson's novel publication, more writers and artists have challenged Scots' imagination as a national community by inscribing Scottishness in the history of the black holocaust. Jackie Kay in *The Lamplighter* (2008) retrieves poetically the voices of four (fictitious and yet real) African women slaves:

mixing such different styles and genres as folklore, storytelling, balladry, and the rhythm of blues and spirituals she effectively interweaves her characters' life stories with historical references to Glasgow's involvement in the slave trade and plantation economy. Beth Forde, an artist of a mixed Barbadian and British descent, enacts the experience of slavery as a violent suppression of identity and forces it into our comfortable present through a series of powerful installations which include a masked self-portrait.<sup>7</sup> Also Graham Fagen reaches into our present by collaborating with reggae artist Ghetto Priest (singing a re-arranged version of the Robert Burns song 'The Slave's Lament' from 1792) in a solo exhibition and publication at the Tramway, (2005).<sup>8</sup> Michael Visocchi designs the first memorial to slavery in the UK, located in London and opened in 2008, which makes the African slaves in the shape of a series of sugarcane-shaped granite pillars of varying degrees of colour, tone and textures take centre-stage in the very heart of the city whose wealth was built upon their suffering.<sup>9</sup>

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While of course the history of slavery still remains a central issue in the revision of Scotland's history (it is worthwhile to remember here that while specialistic studies are today quite numerous, sadly no national history of Scotland records adequately this event yet), it is also true that (post)colonial encounters often develop along complex lines, and do generate new, enriching cultural configurations. As with Glasgow-based Scottish-based Jamaican writer Kei Miller who in his literary blog often acutely annotates consonances between his homes, and whose words may aptly close this brief overview:

Sometimes at night, this country will play a trick on you. Mind, it has to be this country (Scotland) and you have to be someone like me (from Jamaica). The trick is this: you look up and in a window you see your flag. Except it isn't. Only two countries in the world have saltire flags – the diagonal cross on which Saint Andrew was crucified; I live between these countries. This blog is about that – Scotland and Jamaica – and also about the books I write – and, actually, about a whole lot of randomness – which is the best way to describe my life. <sup>10</sup>

Not only does Miller's inscription convey effectively the rich creative potential of