

Gaeldom and multi-ethnic Scotland: A long history and a short story

By Silke Stroh

Multi- and transculturality, both in Scotland and in Britain as a whole, are an increasingly recognised fact, and the implications of this fact for national identity are the subject of lively public and academic debates. It is often implied that these phenomena are rather new, and that the traditional concept of cultures and nations as normally homogeneous entities is at least a historical reality, and (for some) also a continuing ideal for the present. Contrary to this fiction, nations and states have always been culturally heterogeneous in some way or other. Cultural,

Orientalist exoticisation, racism etc.). It is now increasingly recognised that colonial ideologies and strategies have also been frequently applied to cultural differences and hegemonies within the British Isles, e.g. in Anglo Scottish relations or the marginalisation of the Celtic fringes (e.g. see Hechter 1975, Murray & Riach 1995, Kiberd 1995, Connolly 1999, Aaron & Williams 2005). Postcolonial Scottish Studies is a growing (though still controversial) research area (e.g. Watson 1998; Stroh 2007, 2009a c, 2011; Gardiner et al. 2011; Sassi & van Heijnsbergen forthcoming). Such international colonial and postcolonial alignments are of course complicated by the fact that many Scots and Gaels were complicit in overseas imperialism, and that even today xenophobic and racist opinions are probably just as frequent or infrequent among Scots and Gaels as they are among other Britons. Nonetheless, the internally colonial and postcolonial elements in Scottish history merit further consideration not in terms of simplistic and whining victimology, but as part of a constructive investigation of key aspects of Scottish national history, culture and identity, and of the lingering (and often rather powerful) elements of anti-Gaelicism and anglo-normativity in contemporary public debates about language revival, public spending, education and the media.

It is also worth discussing these issues in relation to other forms of cultural normativity and racism directed at other minorities. In fact, various Gaels have already done so. For instance, when the respected British newspaper *The Guardian* published a text that claimed that Gaelic sounds more like somebody chewing a cushion than actual human speech (Colgan 2003), Gaels who protested against this racist dehumanisation (e.g. on the internet newsgroup Iomairtean Gàidhlig) drew explicit comparisons to overseas colonial ideologies and the treatment of contemporary non-white minorities, and at least one protester threatened to take his complaint to the Commission for Racial Equality. There have even been complaints that racism against non-white minorities might be more discredited than racism against (traditionally and still largely) white minorities like the Gaels (e.g. McLeod 2004; BBC 2011).

I will now sketch some issues which should be borne in mind in a more sustained debate about the role of Gaeldom in the multi-ethnic nation. First, I will give a brief historical overview of Gael/*Gall*¹ relations as the most fundamental traditional ethno-cultural split in Scotland since the late Middle Ages. The second part of this essay discusses how this is reflected in literature, combining a wider perspective with a case study of one particular Gaelic short story, Tormod Caimbeul s Am Branch Manager agus Sourbutt (The Branch Manager and Sourbutt), from his collection *An naidheachd bhon taigh* (*The news from home*, 1994).²

Ethnic relations between Gael and *Gall*: A historical overview

In the early and high Middle Ages, Scotland still seemed quite at ease with its multi-ethnic make-up, including its Gaelic element. Gaelic was spoken at the royal court and by much of the country's population. Later in the Middle Ages, political and cultural power shifted increasingly to the Scots-speaking world, and Gaeldom began to be marginalised and othered, although (or even because) it still retained a considerable degree of autonomy. Paradoxically, this Other also remained an integral part of Scotland's sense of self, due to its historical importance and as a marker of Scotland's cultural difference from England, which in turn could legitimise national autonomy.

The advent of the modern nation state brought the idea that cultural, linguistic and political boundaries should ideally be congruous, and that internal aberrations from the national norm should be assimilated or purged. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Scotland saw a drive towards internal homogenisation that treated Gaelic difference as increasingly intolerable. This trend was reinforced when the nation state was no longer Scottish but post-Union British: the homogenising drive caused a wave of (partly enforced, partly voluntary) anglicisation which affected both Lowland Scots and Highland/Gaelic traditions. As the modern state established colonies, Celtic and overseas savages were often portrayed as similarly backward on a universal ladder of human progress, and were subjected to political, economic, religious and linguistic civilising missions.

By the end of the eighteenth century, intra-British civilising missions were so far advanced that the Gaelic Other was no longer a threat. It was now safe to idealise

Caimbeul's socio-critical short story consists of three parts, the first of which is told through a first-person narrator, a local Gael called John, while the next two parts use a mixture of omniscient third-person narration and interior monologue (with the protagonists as focalisers). Throughout the story, and in the minds of various characters, there is a strongly perceived dividing line between Gaels and non-Gaels, and a clear sense that the latter dominate and exploit the former wherever possible. Most of the locals perceive Calum's upward social mobility as an exception: they are clearly not used to one of their own occupying a position of local power and are more accustomed to these positions being filled by outsiders. Thus, they usually respond to Calum with sympathy, as if his success was a small victory for all of them: *bha sinn toilichte gur e duine dhe na daoine*

prepare dinner for the Sourbutts, the over-abundance of food seems to confirm the cliché of great Highland hospitality, and the guests greedily stuff themselves without paying heed to the conversation. When the Sourbutts later give their own dinner party (ungratefully without inviting Calum), food supplies are much less generous (63 64, 67).

Economic exploitation is compounded by power imbalances in the political and administrative sphere: here as well, outsiders try to assert their dominance over and against the locals, imposing their own ways, often with a sense of civilising mission. This is reflected in outside developers who offer high-handed advice on local land management (61 f), and in the plethora of development committees whose sheer number (and empty-sounding nomenclature) already reads like an ironic comment on their pointlessness and their failure to deliver tangible advantages to the locals – an impression which is reinforced by the ease with which Sourbutt and other suspicious incomers manage to monopolise leading positions in these organisations (63).

Further conflicts, hierarchies and attempts at domination can be observed in the cultural sector. Initially, Sourbutt may still have felt some sort of affection for the Gaidhealtachd, since he spent his holidays there and considered himself lucky when he obtained a job that enabled him to settle in the area. It is not entirely clear whether all this is only down to scenery or also to a certain romanticisation of Gaelic culture. Such romanticism of the noble savage variety is relatively common among white settlers in the Gaidhealtachd, and Sourbutt's initial desire to settle away from his own kind (62) may hint that he initially shares these sentiments. Soon, however, he clearly prefers to see the Gaels as *ignoble savages*. In line with long-standing anti-Gaelic clichés whose history goes as far back as the Middle Ages, he perceives the locals as lazy and prone to crime. He also voices the related cliché of the teuchter as subsidy junkie who needs to be weaned from his scandalous over-dependence on government money (66 f). There is also a sense of linguistic hierarchy as various characters position English as superior to Gaelic (60, 66 f). The perception of cultural difference in hierarchical terms is further reflected in the labelling of the partially anglicised, politically conservative social climber Calum as 'well, civilized' (62). It is not entirely clear which of the narratorial voices and focalisers expresses this view, but most likely it is a piece of interior monologue reflecting Sourbutt's opinions. Such patronising use of the term 'civilised' may refer to manners and class habitus,

but it can also be read in terms of cultural and ethnic hierarchies, thus evoking the long tradition of internal colonialism, colonial discourse and civilising missions in the Gaidhealtachd. Sourbutt's own civilising mission and cultural imperialism entail the imposition of a strict capitalist work ethic on the bank staff (curtailing breaks, lateness and amusements that Calum, as a lazy fellow Gael, had condoned), the imposition of anglophone name tags on staff who are otherwise known by Gaelic name forms, the introduction of further non-Gaelic incomers (whom he sees as a different, better sort of people who make the place more decent), the foundation or usurpation of local organisations, and his planned campaign against subsidies (63, 66 f).

Images of cultural hierarchy are even internalised by some of the Gaelic characters. Although Calum behaves affably towards the locals (60 f) and apparently tries to fit in, he also suffers from a cultural cringe. As a social climber from a place that, to metropolitan establishment eyes, usually appears as a remote and culturally alien rural backwater, he has internalised this outside perspective and is eager to prove his worthiness by parroting establishment views: Shealladh e dhaibh gu robh esan cuideachd fiosrachail mu ghnothaichean an t-saoghail mhòir (He would show them that he too was informed about the affairs of the wide world) and he does so by voicing stereotypically Tory opinions about respect, knowing one's place (61), rules, law and order, the death penalty, modern unruly threats to the [] fabric of our society, and his past in the army that made a man out of him. Unsurprisingly, his political repertoire also includes monarchist unionism the narrator's summary of Calum's views concludes with the exclamation: God Save the Queen!! (64). Calum's eagerness to conform to establishment standards extends to language as well: he considers it impolite to speak Gaelic in the presence of non-Gaels and actively interferes to stop such behaviour in others (63). He also expresses his gratitude to outside visitors and their developmental aid, and exhorts other locals (whose reaction seems less effusive) to do the same:

They have gone out of their way, chanadh e, na daoine mòra sin a thàinig a
ò e ou po

of this cultural cringe. Others, such as Sandy mac Bobban, are openly critical of high-handed outside interference, but several neighbours are ashamed of Sandy's bad behaviour, and Calum sycophantically apologises to the civilisers on the community's behalf (61 f). The reader is invited to sympathise with Sandy's critical viewpoint. We are also invited to develop a critical perspective on the naïve trust with which some locals, such as Calum and the ministers, believe in Sourbutt's initial (duplicitous!) displays of politeness and good intentions, thus allowing him to take advantage of them and worm his way into local life until his position is so secure that he can show his hostile and self-seeking intentions more openly (62-66).

The end of the story, however, hints that Sourbutt's triumphs may not last. Exhaustion and smugness cause him to relax his vigilance and his workaholic habits. His plan to take some time off work may give his local staff the opportunity to plot against him and find (or plant) faults in his work which can later be reported to his superiors to effect his removal – repeating the methods which Sourbutt had used to supplant Calum. And again, the plot may be unsuspected: to Sourbutt, nighean Iain T. alias Jessie Mary Mackenzie seems a docile employee who does not openly contradict him, but her facial expression once suggests an anger that may well break into rebellion (66-68). This situation may be related to Homi Bhabha's analysis of subversive elements in colonial situations, where the sly civility of the colonised native may merely dissemble obedience and harmlessness to conceal a continued capacity for unruliness (e.g. 1994: 99 f).

Naturally, Caimbeul's text oversimplifies certain issues. The idea that the Gaelic world is not yet fully attuned to a capitalist work ethic would better suit an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century setting, when the imposition of new capitalist principles, often (though not always) by external forces and incomers, was indeed a hot topic. The story compresses the history of several centuries into a few years in the twentieth century, apparently for satirical, polemic purposes. And while there is indeed a long tradition of anti-Gaelicism, the suggestion that Gaels have been largely barred from social climbing downplays the considerable number of Gaels who could attain and retain prominent positions in Scotland, the UK and the British Empire over the centuries – as long as they played by the cultural, economic and political rules of the system. The idea that Gaels are discriminated against in the job market seems especially improbable in a story written and set

in the late twentieth century.⁴

Despite these polemic simplifications, the story reflects a real and relatively widespread sense that Gaelic communities are dominated by distant and hostile hegemonic forces emanating from centralist organisations from outside the Gaelic world (here a bank; elsewhere it might be other national and multinational businesses or the government), and that this external hegemony does not bode well for traditional Gaidhealtachd practices and populations.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this essay has been able to demonstrate the relevance of the Gaelic experience to contemporary discussions about ethnic and cultural plurality (and inequality) in Scotland. Gaelic literature can play an important role in a more pluralist reconceptualisation of Scottish national identity. It is only recently that Scottish literary histories and anthologies have begun to pay due attention to Gaelic texts alongside English and Scots ones, and the wider community of scholars and readers *still* seems quite content with a one-sided anglocentric vision, despite the increasing availability of primary texts in English translations, and of anglophone introductory works on Gaelic culture. Further initiatives to redress this imbalance should also be a stepping stone towards an even more pluralist and transcultural reconceptualisation of Scottish literature that also pays due attention to work produced in more recently introduced languages (e.g. South Asian or Eastern European ones). This will be another contribution to placing the study of Scottish culture in a thoroughly contemporary and international framework.

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Unfortunately, such anxieties about cultural plurality, and the often xenophobic and racist responses which these anxieties generate, also have a very long history. This reveals further parallels between the experiences of the traditional minorities of multicultural Scotland, such as the Gaels, and the experiences of more recent minorities. Several of the latter (e.g. South Asian diasporic groups) are rooted in former British overseas colonies, with colonialism as a significant part of both their historical memory and their recent or contemporary experience of othering in Britain (where colonial thought patterns often survive, e.g. in Orientalist exoticisation, racism etc.). It is now increasingly recognised that colonial ideologies and strategies have also been frequently applied to cultural differences and hegemonies within the British Isles, e.g. in Anglo Scottish relations or the marginalisation of the Celtic fringes (e.g. see Hechter 1975, Murray & Riach 1995, Kiberd 1995, Connolly 1999, Aaron & Williams 2005). Postcolonial Scottish Studies is a growing (though still controversial) research area (e.g. Watson 1998; Stroh 2007, 2009a c, 2011; Gardiner et al. 2011; Sassi & van Heijnsbergen forthcoming). Such international colonial and postcolonial alignments are of course complicated by the fact that many Scots and Gaels were complicit in overseas imperialism, and that even today xenophobic and racist opinions are probably just as frequent or infrequent among Scots and Gaels as they are among other Britons. Nonetheless, the internally colonial and postcolonial elements in Scottish history merit further consideration – not in terms of simplistic and whining victimology, but as part of a constructive investigation of key aspects of Scottish national history, culture and identity, and of the lingering (and often rather powerful) elements of anti-Gaelicism and anglo-normativity in contemporary public debates about language revival, public spending, education and the media.

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The advent of the modern nation state brought the idea that cultural, linguistic and political boundaries should ideally be congruous, and that internal aberrations from the national norm should be assimilated or purged. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Scotland saw a drive towards internal homogenisation that treated Gaelic difference as increasingly intolerable. This trend was reinforced when the nation state was no longer Scottish but post-Union British: the homogenising drive caused a wave of (partly enforced, partly voluntary) anglicisation which affected both Lowland Scots and Highland/Gaelic traditions. As the modern state established colonies, Celtic and overseas

savages were often portrayed as similarly backward on a universal ladder of human progress, and were subjected to political, economic, religious and linguistic civilising missions.

By the end of the eighteenth century, intra-British civilising missions were so far advanced that the Gaelic Other was no longer a threat. It was now safe to idealise Gaels as noble savages, partly as a politically harmless form of Scottish distinctiveness and patriotism, and partly to morally counteract the darker sides of progress. Gaelic primitive virtues, like physical hardihood and battle prowess, were also instrumentalised in the British army and overseas colonialism.

While romanticisations of Gaelic noble savagery have survived until today, th

Branch Manager agus Sourbutt

Lowlands or in England, the often violent imposition of capitalist principles that culminated in the Clearances, the subsequent pauperisation of crofters while the best lands were transformed into sheep farms and into deer parks for wealthy amateur hunters on holiday, as well as the anti-Gaelic implications of the 1872 Education Act, and the still insufficient provision of Gaelic education and media services.

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although he acts as a catalyst. Just as Sourbutt usurps Calum's job, his cousin Tony usurps the banking job of another local Gael. The scale of white settler colonisation of the Gaidhealtachd is also reflected in the narrator's reference to parallel settler influx in many villages on the mainland (62).

On a more symbolic level, cultural difference and exploitation are expressed through the contrast between two dinner parties: when Calum and his wife prepare dinner for the Sourbutts, the over-abundance of food seems to confirm the cliché of great Highland hospitality, and the guests greedily stuff themselves without paying heed to the conversation. When the Sourbutts later give their own dinner party (ungratefully without inviting Calum), food supplies are much less generous (63-64, 67).

Economic exploitation is compounded by power imbalances in the political and administrative sphere: here as well, outsiders try to assert their dominance over and against the locals, imposing their own ways, often with a sense of civilising mission. This is reflected in outside developers who offer high-handed advice on local land management (61 f), and in the plethora of development committees whose sheer number (and empty-sounding nomenclature) already reads like an ironic comment on their pointlessness and their failure to deliver tangible advantages to the locals – an impression which is reinforced by the ease with which Sourbutt and other suspicious incomers manage to monopolise leading positions in these organisations (63).

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They have gone out of their way, chanadh e, na daoine mòra sin a thàinig a chompàirteachadh an eòlas agus an tuigse, ged nach do thuig sinne mòran dheth.

We are in your debt, chanadh e riutha []. Agus rinne: Show your appreciation. (61)(They have gone out of their way, he would say, these great/distinguished people who came to impart their knowledge and their skill, although we did not understand much of it.

We are in your debt , he would say to them []. And to us: Show your appreciation.)

A number of locals, including John the first-person narrator, seem to share some of this cultural cringe. Others, such as Sandy mac Bobban, are openly critical of high-handed outside interference, but several neighbours are ashamed of Sandy's bad behaviour, and Calum sycophantically apologises to the civilisers on the community's behalf (61 f). The reader is invited to sympathise with Sandy's critical viewpoint. We are also invited to develop a critical perspective on the naïve trust with which some locals, such as Calum and the ministers, believe in Sourbutt's initial (duplicitous!) displays of politeness and good intentions, thus

eighteenth- or nineteenth-century setting, when the imposition of new capitalist principles, often (though not always) by external forces and incomers, was indeed a hot topic. The story compresses the history of several centuries into a few years in the twentieth century, apparently for satirical, polemic purposes. And while there is indeed a long tradition of anti-Gaelicism, the suggestion that Gaels have been largely barred from social climbing downplays the considerable number of Gaels who could attain and retain prominent positions in Scotland, the UK and the British Empire over the centuries as long as they played by the cultural, economic and political rules of the system. The idea that Gaels are discriminated against in the job market seems especially improbable in a story written and set in the late twentieth century.⁸

Despite these polemic simplifications, the story reflects a real and relatively widespread sense that Gaelic communities are dominated by distant and hostile hegemonic forces emanating from centralist organisations from outside the Gaelic world (here a bank; elsewhere it might be other national and multinational businesses or the government), and that this external hegemony does not bode well for traditional Gaidhealtachd practices and populations.

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(c) The Bottle Imp