

Bringing Scottish and Irish Studies Together

For the past seventeen years we have been conducting long-term qualitative field research in Scotland and Ireland. Our focus has been on farming and local history, linked to wider issues of government, identity, and the policies of the European Union. Moving between field sites in the South-West of Scotland, the Glens areas of Perthshire and Angus also in Scotland, and County Donegal in the Republic of Ireland and its links with Northern Ireland within the U.K., we have become keenly aware of both shared forms of heritage and contemporary circumstances, and conversely differences of historical experience. Looking at our work in these places synoptically, we realized that we were mapping out a domain of enquiry that brought together topics of linkage, as well as separation, between these parts of Scotland and Ireland as a whole.

Our long-term research has encouraged us, in turn, to make plans, over the last two years, to develop a general interest in Scottish and Irish studies at the University of Pittsburgh in the USA, where we have been based for many years within its Department of Anthropology. We have started a Scottish and Irish Studies Unit in the University, and our aim is to develop this unit both within the University and outside of it. Pittsburgh itself, and its two major universities, the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University, have a considerable heritage of Scottish and Irish history, including the settlers known historically as Scotch-Irish, or in contemporary terms the Ulster Scots, who were prominent in early days of the University of Pittsburgh and of Pennsylvania as a whole. Carnegie Mellon is, of course, named after the Scot from Dunfermline, Andrew Carnegie, and the banker whose family came from Tyrone in Northern Ireland, Andrew Mellon.

We aim to reach out to relevant academic and community institutions in both Ireland and Scotland, concentrating on the areas we know best from our field research (and our own heritage ties). In Ireland, County Donegal presents an endlessly instructive amalgam of different traditions between its western and eastern areas. In Scotland, the Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen,

and St. Andrews all have vigorous interests in topics relevant for our own purposes. For many years we have been research affiliates of the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies at the University of Aberdeen, and in Ireland we have often visited the campus in Derry of Magee College in the University of Ulster.

Our vision for the Unit we are calling SISU (Scottish and Irish Studies Unit) in Pittsburgh is that it will develop a broad cross-disciplinary focus running across the human and the health sciences, including linguistics, history, sociology, political sciences, public health and medical studies generally, as well as our own discipline of cultural anthropology. A dual focus on heritage and on contemporary problems informs our viewpoint. In Ireland in the last three years we have been studying the effects of the Eurozone financial crisis. In Scotland we have been concentrating on the Referendum for Independence scheduled for September eighteenth this year. Apart from the encouraging interest in our endeavor shown by many academic colleagues, we have the ongoing help of Dr. Rob Lawson, a Scot currently employed in the University of Birmingham, whose specialty is linguistics, and we ourselves maintain a strong interest in issues of language and identity that are obvious and ongoing significance throughout our areas of interest. The interests of SISU naturally gain strength therefore from literary studies, including local poetry. Such interests continually renew themselves through our fieldwork experiences and inform our collections of poetry from many sources: bookshops, charity shops, yard sales, and gifts from interested friends. We plan to translate much of this into undergraduate teaching in a summer Study Abroad session through our University, which has a vigorous program in International Studies and global outreach. SISU can link us also to institutions around the world, for example in New Zealand at the University of Otago in Dunedin, where we have affiliations with the Department of Anthropology and are in contact with the Center for Irish and Scottish Studies.

Our research carries us to many different parts of the world: Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Taiwan, China, Australia, Japan for example. Often aspects of these disparate areas come together in our minds. While on a recent visit to Taiwan, we were able to listen to BBC radio programs, and we came across recordings of the talks about Scotland and its senses of national identity by Professor Murray Pittock of Glasgow University. On return to Pittsburgh we were delighted to find that Professor Pittock was one of those who had responded helpfully to a letter we

sent out explaining our plans for SISU and its potential transformation into an established Center within the University. Taiwan, too, has its intricate problems of identity, language, and self-determination. Our focus on SISU can help also to articulate broader global arenas of comparative understanding. We cannot resist adding another example of serendipitous enrichment of understanding. We made a research visit to Samoa (previously Western Samoa) in 2012 with the aim of studying responses to a tsunami that hit the southern parts of the island in 2009. While there we were able to make a visit to the house of Robert Louis Stevenson, who spent the last four years of his life there, writing his novel *Catriona*, and the *Vailima Letters*, where he gives accounts of his efforts to assist a Samoan chiefly family to assert itself against the confused colonialist turmoil of the day. Stevenson's memory is still fondly preserved in Samoa. We felt, there, the effects of his genius, suddenly bringing together Scotland and the Pacific in our minds.

We invite interested persons to communicate with us about SISU and its future trajectories. Our e-mail addresses are: strather@pitt.edu and pamjan@pitt.edu.

References & Further Information

[**Andrew Strathern**](#), Andrew Mellon Professor

[**Pamela J Stewart**](#), Research Associate

Department of Anthropology

University of Pittsburgh

[**strather@pitt.edu**](mailto:strather@pitt.edu) and [**pamjan@pitt.edu**](mailto:pamjan@pitt.edu)

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