Scotland's Fantasies of Postcolonialism

By Harry Josephine Giles

During the 2014 Referendum, I remember the repeated assertion — in tweets, columns and books — of the normality and ordinariness of Scottish independence. If a people and the land they live on are a nation, then the default state for that nation should be statehood. These arguments persist forward and backward in time: in 2008, the *View from North Britain*, a precursor to today's febrile indyblogosphere, posted maps of the British Empire which put Scottish Independence alongside the independence of settler-states like Australia, occupied states like Palestine, and the world's largest democracy, India. A few weeks ago, @IrishScots4Indy (whose bio reads 'Independence is normal') posted an infographic comparing a putative Scottish Independence to, variously, the beginning of the Irish War of Independence, the Treaty of Kiel between the monarchies of GB-Ireland, Sweden and Denmark-Norway, and the re-establishment of Austria following both Allied and Nazi occupation. These statements, of course, elide the vast differences between different configurations of state- and nationhood and how they are achieved. In looking for others in which to see ourselves, the many constitutional, economic and social possibilities of postcolonial peoples tend to be blurred together into one received idea of what a normal nation is: the European nation-state, built out of monarchy, imperial genocide, colonial resource extraction, capitalist revolution and other specific historical processes becomes the only aspiration.

The fantasy of statehood is, in a way, a refusal of the complexity of postcoloniality — that complex, multifarious, entangled period of history unfolding through, against and beyond the period of imperial expansion. If only Scotland could be a state, like normal nations, these anxieties would be resolved: independence is freedom. But in the twenty-first century, statehood is changed utterly. Now, whatever your declaration, your country must reckon with such transnational powers as the vast economies of mega-corporations like Amazon, the coercive neoliberalism of economic institutions like the IMF, and the military demands of alliances like NATO (all of which the SNP and its allied social movements propose

being willing subjects to), let alone the peculiar social hangover of the Commonwealth of Nations, or the astonishing global social webs of international production and media dissemination. What does independence mean, if it cannot mean independence from these?

The longing for freedom, independent of historical context, is the flipside of Scotland's long-running sense of grievance: both refuse acceptance of the nation's own role in international colonialism. When I think about Scotland and coloniality, my first touchstone is always Renton in Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*: we are 'colonised by wankers. […] We're ruled by effete arseholes! What does that make us?'[1] This picture of colonisation as the theft of masculine vigour — perpetrated by the feminine, the non-reproductive and the 'very ground zero of gayness'[2] — is entirely of a piece with Mel Gibson's Scotland (and entire ouevre), in which FREEEEEDOOOOOM is about freeing the pure vitality of the white heterosexual male from the emasculating and decadent compromises of the metropolitan empire. No wonder, with this literary grounding, that post-2014 the indyblogosphere has become more and more gammon-scented.

This is a piece of successful self-marketing that has stood Scotland in good stead internationally. Travelling in the settler states of Aotearoa-New Zealand and North Turtle Island-Canada, following the colonial traces of my own home, Orkney, and learning from indigenous writers and activists about their own national resistances to colonialism, I've had several conversations where I, white and guilty, refused any sympathy offered to Scotland. 'But you're not as bad as England,' said one person. 'They colonised you too.' 'Ah don't hate the English,' I said, or more or less. 'They're just imperialists. We, on the other hand, chose to be imperialists. Given every opportunity to end an Empire, we chose to benefit from it instead. Ah hate the Scots.' We are not the Wretched of the Earth but, *pace* Welsh, its scum, floating near the top. Following the collapse of the Darien scheme and our independent imperial desire, the choice of the Scottish ruling class was to be a junior partner in their cousins' Empire, and in 2014 the choice of the entire Scottish electorate was that continuing to be a junior partner in even a dwindling Empire was preferable to dealing it a decisive blow. This political choice allows Scotland to maintain its position of colonial grievance while continuing to benefit from colonialism. And the current dominant strategy of both the independence movement and its political party avatar — as evidenced by both the SNP's report *Scotland: The New Case for Optimism* and Common Weal's *How*

to Start a New Country — is managerial caution, indicating that we believe that independence can only be achieved when it is seamless with contemporary neoliberal Empire. As Gayatri Spivak puts it, 'Once [decolonization] is won, the people want really an entry into the haunted house inhabited by the colonizers.'[3]

Scotland's double colonial history deserves unearthing in all its dimensions. We need to unpack the historical and contemporary dimensions of our current colonised state, if that is the appropriate term. Was Scotland colonised by England, or can we better understand the process as the Gàidhealtachd and the Norse lands colonised by Anglo-Saxons? In this view, the cultural extermination post-1745 and the Clearances are less a conflict of nations and more a racialised class conflict; if so, how do we understand the abiding traces of that racialisation in the context of contemporary racial capitalism and anti-blackness? The Scots, including latterly the Celtic and Norse internal colonies, are perhaps among the first people other than Anglo-Saxons to become white, with their whiteness constructed and reinforced by an enthusiastic lead in racialised genocide and land theft in the settler states, and perpetrated by actors across classes unified by their new race. And yet some classed racialisation remains, emerging in such infamous moments as Simon Jenkins' labelling of James Kelman as 'a white European male, acceptable only because he was acting the part of an illiterate savage'.[4] And to what degree is Scotland now subject to 'Westminster rule', and to what degree are Westminster and Holyrood more properly unequal partners in ongoing global capitalist-colonial resource extraction?

These questions confound me, perhaps most of all because we lack a language to express Scotland's position anent coloniality. The expanding idea of 'postcolonialism', developed primarily in nations struggling for independence from European empires, doesn't seem to cut it, although Jessica Langer applies the theory to the double roles of Japan and Canada[5], and it has been applied persuasively to Welsh[6] and Scottish[7] literature. The 'internal colony'[8] comes closer, but is more commonly applied to racialised class dynamics, as does Malek Bannabi's 'co-colonialism',[9] describing the willing participation of 'colonisable' people in neoliberal processes, but again primarily within an African colonial context. Where is the theory of European minority nations, their languages and literatures? Are we, colonised and colonising, going to continue to look for fantasies of ourselves in other subalterns and other imperialists, or can we

develop a language for a politics of our own?

All of which provides perplexing background to Kelman's own recent comments on Irish literature, as quoted in the *Irish Times*:

> *'Without knowing it, they seem to take on the Anglo-Irish perspective. They get cushy jobs in London or New York in all the usual organs because they never challenge a single damn thing. There has been nothing of note in the Irish tradition for about 100 years.'*

Kelman contrasts this with his own experiments in language and their common ground with postcolonial writers in Africa, the Caribbean and beyond; the other crucial grounding for Kelman as a postcolonial writer is his lifelong and enduring anti-nationalist and anti-colonial activism, expressed in his own interventions and through solidarity with international anti-colonial movements. But if Kelman is right, why should that situation obtain in Ireland and not in Scotland, which demurs at independence and never had a proper Rising? That the *Irish Times* also summoned an impressive roster of writers to consider Kelman's question, offering a depth and subtlety of response I've never seen in Scottish newspaper criticism, suggests that things may not be so healthy here after all. Kelman's own work notwithstanding, what other postcolonial critique does Scottish literature offer, and are we at risk of fantasising ourselves as being in common with other postcolonial others?

There is the vast and under-recognised range of Naomi Mitchison, which knows no contemporary Scottish equal in scope, and which, particularly through science fiction, imagined a post-national world of anti-colonial diversity and plenty, albeit one shaped by her own aristocratic liberalism. There is the feminist tradition of Janice Galloway, Ali Smith and Jenni Fagan, another major site in which experimentation with form and language can be found, here to foreground women's voices and experiences against a patriarchal norm. There are the novels of Jackie Kay and Luke Sutherland, challenging the abiding whiteness and straightness of Scotland's self-image. Robert Alan Jamieson has perhaps most directly confronted the dual colonial position of Scotland — or more specifically Shetland — in his novels, using his knowledge of and invention with Shetland's language (postcolonial anent Norse and Scots as much as English) to explore the islands' experience under colonial extraction and participation in colonial

settlement.

And yet these literary investigations seem to have little counterpart in the political sphere: if poets are the unacknowledged legislators of a nation, then where is the poetic imagination in Scottish independence's new managerialism? If more of my generation, myself included, had heeded Kelman's warning and refused to actively participate in 2014's Referendum, to lend our imaginations to the project, perhaps things would not be so bad; as it is, we underestimated the continuing appeal of nationalism and its ability to absorb and neutralise any potentially liberatory currents. Independence is now a black hole, a void of thought sucking in Scotland's political energies. There is only 'political rationality indistinguishable from that of (say) the operations manager for a global packaging firm', 'that anti-utopian escapism indistinguishable from common sense', as Scott Hames puts it. Scotland in 2018 appears not to have a politics, let alone any new kind of postcolonial politics.

But against this I can only offer my own postcolonial fantasies, the product of a decade or so's participation in anarchist and autonomist political movements: where others look to Norway and Iceland, I look to Chiapas and Rojava, those surviving de-colonial experiments in anti-colonial organisation, peoples without nations, administrations without states. But how could such practices, resulting from the regional fracturing of multiple empires, be enacted in the placidity of a European minority nation? Our historical comparators, autonomous uprisings against the imperial nation-state within Europe, the Paris Commune in 1871 and the Catalonian anarchist revolution of 1936, were notably less abiding and successful. Perhaps, as not-quite-colonised, Scotland and its like can never quite be postcolonial. But in rejecting both the received model of the nation-state and an other-idealising image of postcolonialism, in thoroughly examining its history in all its real complexity, Scotland, and other minority groupings, could potentially begin to find new languages for our political condition and new possibilities for its change. And wherever there is a new language, there can be a new literature.During the 2014 Referendum, I remember the repeated assertion — in tweets, columns and books — of the normality and ordinariness of Scottish independence. If a people and the land they live on are a nation, then the default state for that nation should be statehood. These arguments persist forward and backward in time: in 2008, the *View from North Britain*, a precursor to today's febrile indyblogosphere, posted maps of the British Empire which put Scottish

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