‘[…] a distant country from which I now live’ – Walter Scott, the voiceless, and *Blackwood’s* Highland Gothic

By Oliver Robinson-Sivyer

The study of Scottish Gothic has been dominated, almost inevitably, by the presence of the 1707 Act of Union. This essentially political event embodies cultural implications whose persistence has affected not merely those fictions historically written out of Scotland but also the critical interpretations imposed upon them from the eighteenth century to the present day. With regard to the distinctive nature of Scottish Gothic, which has been extensively defined by critics as various as David Punter, Ian Duncan, Carol Margaret Davison and Monica Germanà, the clear implication is that genre is bound up with identity, and that the very nature of that identity is complicated by the processes through which the very idea of Scotland, the course of Scottish history and the depiction of highland landscapes were Romanticised in a tradition popularised by Sir Walter Scott. Hence, as Alison Lumsden asserts,

> *[…] Scott’s work is thus held to deprive the Highlands and sometimes Scotland as a whole of any progressive identity, for while the region is constructed romantically it is simultaneously consigned to the past, inevitably giving way to the forces of history which position it on the side of failure most notably in the context of the Jacobite rebellions somehow belonging to a lost or rapidly fading world.*[1]

Indeed, as Davison and Germanà suggest:

> *[It was …] ‘Scotland’s fate to have become a Romantic object or commodity’ […] The Highlands served […] as a synecdoche for a Scotland that exemplified two primary attitudes towards British history and rapid modernisation.*[2]

Those very Highlands, though – and the conceptuality they might be said to represent under a mode of representation influenced by Scott – bear further consideration in the light of one of the most recent and fruitful approaches to the genre, that of the EcoGothic.

Such an approach was quite possibly signalled as early as 2015, when Nick Groom wrote in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Gothic* that '[the Celts] identified themselves through a kinship with natural environments rather than via tribal history.'[3] Both the environmental and the tribal, it might be argued, are identities whose very nature changes when associated within the socio-political impact of the Act of Union. For it was the Union that eventually led to the Industrial revolution and by extension the ecological and historical destruction of a Scotland that Scott portrays.

This can be explained through ecologist Murray Bookchin, whose theory of Social Ecology, adds a Marxist grounding to this Scottish EcoGothic paradigm. Bookchin's work touts '[…] nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems.'[4] And that 'the hierarchical mentality and class relationships that so thoroughly permeate society give rise to the very idea of dominating the natural world.'[5] Acknowledging this, it may be argued that the Union brought a damaging hierarchical class mentality into the nation that problematises earlier models of ecological kinship. This is not surprising, considering the union was essentially an absorption of the state of Scotland into the state of England to form a United Kingdom. This changes the nature of Scotland both in an ecological but also a class-based lexis, as Bookchin categorising of societal progression defines 'first nature' as one that is more primal, more naturalistic, and instinctual in life. This form of governance is the base, wild order which in humans progressed to a hierarchical 'second nature'.[6] What this ignited was a transgression from an agnatic and organic Celtic society that held first nature ecological kinship, to an explicitly second nature hierarchy that favoured western economic expansion. Whilst it may be argued that Celtic and tribal ways of life are indeed second nature – the preceding societal framework towards a modern industrial world, it is the introduction ofapitalism and its industrial focus that leads to class-divide between bourgeois, in this case England and its allies, and a proletariat or lower-class, in this case Scotland and the highlander identity. Bookchin asserts:

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In relation to Scott's expression of the Scottish EcoGothic, his short story 'Narrative of a Fatal event' begins to lay grounding for this reclamation of the Highlands. Published within *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*'s March 1818 issue, William Blackwood had recently made himself editor; having ousted his previous editors, Cleghorn and Pringle, for inserting Pro-Whig pieces in the previous issue. This meant that Blackwood directly approved of this submission from Scott – having been in correspondence with him about his criticism of *Frankenstein* that same issue. [7] *Blackwood's* use of Scott, as a distinctly national figure, demonstrates his understanding that Scott's piece would be significant in its Scottish sentiment. However, despite Scott's fame, *Blackwood's* published his piece anonymously, prefacing it with:

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will find the courage to one day meet people face to face and tell them that this tale is his.

The piece was written during a significant ecological and Scottish political event. In 1817, construction of the Union canal, a dominant trade route for the British coal industry in Scotland, had begun. This led to the draining of the Loch in Edinburgh and significant alterations to the landscape of Scott's city. These were drastic changes made in the name of capitalist industrial progress, further enhancing the 'Lallan' or Lowland/ Highland divide. It is in Scott's 'Narrative of a Fatal Event' that we see his Scottish EcoGothic sentiments.

Scott communicates this situation through an awareness of his Scottish audience and employs local nuances through his choice of the name Campbell. In the text, Scott's narrator clearly states, 'I shall speak of him by the name of Campbell; it can interest few but myself now, to say that it is not his real name.'[10] Ironically, this aside draws greater attention to the name emphasises the significance of what happens to the narrator's travelling companion. The Campbell clan are a well-known Highland clan who would be instantly recognised in a Scottish audience. To this day, 'The hated Campbells are best known for the massacre at Glencoe at the ancestral lands of Clan MacDonald'.[11] This locates them within Highland clan history but also conveys a treacherous implication. Further, Clan Campbell supported British-Hanoverian government and fought against the rebellion, only reiterating this traitorous nature but on a national scale.[12] Campbell translates from Gaelic, with 'Cam' meaning crooked and 'Beul' meaning mouth.[13] This alludes to the companion's contorted face in death as described later in the piece, but also, when considering the crooked mouth in biblical literature, it harkens similarity to proverbs 8:8 which states

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Interestingly, the placement of the fatal event is designed for Campbell. The Sound of Jura, being in Argyll, is Clan Campbell Land.[15] What transpires within Scott's story is a profoundly symbolic death. With the fictional Campbell being drowned in a connective river on ancestral land, what Scott is doing in a sense is portraying the landscape as a revenging Highlands that reclaims its powers back from traitors. This anticipates the Scottish Gothic motif of doubling, as it is an Uncanny river, one that doubles the Union canal. This river is 'remarkably transparent', and of a natural origin, and consumes the human for the sake of the countryside, whereas the inverse applies for the Union Canal.[16] Scott has created an uncanny Highlands, no longer the romantic one of *Waverley* – the setting for *human* action and failure, but a violent and sublime landscape that takes the active role in revenge upon the human. This healthful flowing river consumes him and others like him as Scott's narrator comments: 'I thought I saw three or four corpses, struggling with each other'.[17] This doubly reflects the Scottish Gothic condition. In one sense, the Scot is at war with one's past, struggling with previous failure. These phantom bodies also represent the four clans who sided with England at Culloden. Despite the possible refraction of the water explaining this, the effect it has further perpetuates the Scottish Gothic trope of the unreliable narrator and the uncanny history.

Continuing from this, the narrator recalls:

> *at the same moment, I heard a loud and melancholy cry from the bushes […] A superstitious dread came over me as before, for a few seconds, but I observed an old gray goat.* [18]

This superstitious dread is fitting, as the folkloric traditions of Celtic culture – which are the basis for a profound amount of Scottish writings – place great stock in omen of a crying goat. Whilst it is often considered that a goat is the Devil (for example black Duncan from John Gregorson Campbell's *The Gaelic Otherworld* published in 1900), what is more fitting is the Gaelic and Celtic creature known as a *Glaistig* which is characterised as a grey-skinned water-sprite that can take the form of a Goat.[19] This creature can be benevolent or malign but is incredibly defensive of nature using her magic to drown or even exsanguinate victims. It is also known to cry much like Banshee at the death of something significant. Thus,

Campbell's drowning and demise in Argyll Highland territory can be a significant death in that it is a vengeful death undertaken by nature. The superstitious dread is well-felt, it causes the narrator to be frozen in horror, a horror that is caused by the sublimity of the Highlands and their raging nature. The Glaistig's cry is the Highland's cry. As Botting's *Gothic* stipulates:

> *It is the moment of negative sublime, a moment of freezing, contraction and horror which signals a temporality that cannot be recuperated by the mortal subject. Horror marks the response to an excess that cannot be transcended.*[20]

The narrator's inability to act is the realisation that he cannot dominate the power of nature. This is the raw power of first nature, an instinctive and wild arena that he suddenly feels he has no place in. It is also a demonstration of a mortal, first-nature response, an instinctual fight-or-flight freezing that blatantly overpowers the second-nature response to aid his companion.

Scott's depiction of a Highlands that is vengeful, wild, and most importantly, not for those who no longer respect it. It creates a profound discord within the narrator which has led for him to seek counsel from others and to warn Scotland of the fear and power of the natural world that they have abandoned. Scott's narrator hides himself to connect with every reader of Scotland. His justification reads: 'my name will be unknown, for the event passed in a distant country from that in which I now live.' [21] The country he now lives is not the Scotland he remembers; it is a Scotland that Scotland has failed, by refusing to remember it correctly. The recursive ancestral identity that Duncan champions is a ghost that haunts the Highlands, but its form is now the Highlands itself. Scott's imploring tale speaks volumes of his love for the ecosphere of Scotland and the people who lived in partnership with it. Within the pages of *Blackwood's* Scott sounds an ecological call to action, one that challenges the Scottish reader to think more critically of the Whig government and industry that has been brought to Scotland.

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