“We always think of ourselves as the oppressed”: Scotland’s Conflicted Imperialist Legacy in Aileen Ritchie’s The Juju Girl

By Phillip Zapkin

1995 saw two major films about Scottish history: Michael Caton-Jones’s *Rob Roy* and Mel Gibson’s *Braveheart*. Both present Scotland as – to one degree or another—subordinated to and seeking liberation from England. Gibson’s film is the more overt, focusing on William Wallace (played by Gibson), who fought the English king Edward I for Scottish independence. But even in *Rob Roy*, there is a clear sense that the climactic battle between Rob Roy (Liam Neeson) and the sadistic and foppish Englishman Archibald Cunningham (Tim Roth) pits solid, honest Scottish virtues (especially individual liberty) against English deceit and corruption, a sense amplified by the film’s setting in 1713, just two years before the Jacobite uprising. These films – especially *Braveheart* – sparked a renewal of interest in Scottish history, especially as it relates to resistance against England. In 1999, Aileen Ritchie’s play *Juju Girl* premiered at Edinburgh’s Traverse Theatre, and it complicates images of Scots as colonized/conquered, as developed in films like *Braveheart* and *Rob Roy*. By simultaneously acknowledging Scotland’s position as a kind of junior partner, if not outright colonial possession, in the UK and highlighting the role Scots played in the creation and expansion of the British Empire, Ritchie’s play stages a more complex and challenging image of Scotland’s relationship to colonialism. The play’s protagonist is Kate, a contemporary Scottish backpacker who travels to Zimbabwe to leave her grandmother Catherine’s ashes at the site of the Victorian mission Catherine had grown up on. This modern journey is intertwined with nineteenth-century scenes from Catherine’s life with her husband Andrew, a Scottish missionary. I argue that the play interrogates stories Scots tell about their relation to colonialism, both about being a kind of internal English colony and about Scotland’s relationship to colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Ritchie's play directly evokes the idea of Scotland as an English colony – and therefore comparable to Zimbabwe. This is only mentioned early in the play, when Kate tells her new Zimbabwean friend Daniel, 'Colonialism is everywhere. I'm from Scotland. We were colonized by the English too' (13). In an attempt to connect with Daniel, Kate tries to evoke a parity between the experience of Zimbabwe under British colonialism and Scotland as a part of the United Kingdom. She even describes the Scottish mentality: 'We always think of ourselves as the oppressed, the underdogs' (13). And there is, of course, a reasonable basis for seeing Scotland as a colonial possession going back to the 1706–07 Act of Union, which brought Scotland formally into the United Kingdom of Great Britain, much to the dismay of Scotland's many Jacobites who would rebel in 1715 and 1745. This mentality, however, risks ignoring the major role played by Scots in imperial conquest, especially in the nineteenth century. In a 2014 article for the *Scotsman*, Colin Kidd and Gregg McClymont make this very critique, writing that calling Scotland a colony is:

> *not only largely nonsensical as history, but offensive and insulting to many non-white, non-European peoples who did, in fact, find themselves oppressed or even dispossessed by the 'British' Empire. Scots were complicit in empire, and it is insulting to the real victims of empire to assume otherwise.*

I don't entirely agree that it's nonsensical to see Scotland as a long-term English colony, and it's particularly problematic to assume that only 'non-white, non-European peoples' can be victims of empire – just ask the Irish – or that they never build empires themselves.

In Ritchie's play, Daniel similarly points out that Scots were central to colonizing what is now Zimbabwe. After asking whether Scotland is a rich country, Daniel informs Kate, 'It must be. Your ancestors grew rich from our country', and when she questions that, he tells her, 'Yes. It was the Scottish who colonized us' (13). Strikingly, Daniel doesn't say it was the *British* or the *English*, but the *Scottish* that colonized his country. And Kate's attempt at post-colonial conviviality further breaks down as it is revealed how little she understands the complexities of colonialism's ongoing impact in Africa. Daniel describes the tension with white landowners who oppose land re-distribution programs. To be fair to Kate, Daniel does rather try to trap her:

KATE. Well, I won't be crying for them.

DANIEL. You don't mind that these people have made a life here, provided employment for thousands of Africans. Now they are being driven out.

KATE. Well that shouldn't happen. That's like ethnic cleansing. Whatever happened before – well, it's in the past, isn't it?

DANIEL. Sure. The Scots came here, took the best land and now we plough the poorest soil and our crops are first to fail when the drought comes. Is that fair?

KATE. No. I'm not trying to defend them. I only want what's right. (14)

Kate's last line here is significant – 'I only want what's right' – because in a way this sets the ethos for much of the play. The conflict revolves around characters seeking what appears to be right from their own point of view, and often missing the fact that others have a different sense of what's right. This is especially prevalent in the scenes with Kate's grandparents Catherine and Andrew, the nineteenth-century missionaries.

Catherine and especially Andrew's conception of how to help the local Shona people differs radically from what the Shona themselves likely want. In particular, Andrew approaches Africa with a blend of tourist-style adventurism, rigorous Calvinistic discipline, and racism. At one point, Andrew recounts for Catherine how he shot an elephant, telling her, 'My heart was pounding like a drum and I felt so … so … alive. I am going to write about it in the book I am going to publish on Christian Witness' (55). He also speculates that, 'I was probably the first white man to see any of that landscape' (55). Andrew approaches Africa almost as though it's a theme park and he is a boy's-own-paper style adventurer. His 'Christian Witness' involves big game hunting and the taking of an animal's life for his own pleasure. But if Andrew approaches Africa as a safari goer, he approaches Africans with a racist and paternalistic distrust. When Catherine tries to find work for Joshua – a Shona man with leprosy who has sought shelter at the mission – Andrew warns him, 'My wife wants you here, but understand this – any theft or drunkenness and you are finished, do you understand me?' (66). He starts from negative assumptions about Africans, believing that they, as a rule, engage in what Andrew considers immoral vices. Joshua needs to prove his innocence to Andrew, rather than being given any benefit of the doubt. This attitude is rooted

in Andrew's religious ideology. Immediately after this warning to Joshua, Andrew turns to his wife and paraphrases Proverbs 13:24, 'Spare the rod and spoil the child, Catherine. You will learn the hard way otherwise' (66). While this is patronising to Catherine, it also clearly positions Andrew in a parental role over Joshua. There is an echo of Kipling's 'half devil and half child': not only is Joshua to be distrusted, he is to be distrusted specifically because he is African and colonial ideology sees Africans as child-like.

This dichotomy between Africa as adventure park and Africans as untrustworthy is also expressed in the contemporary scenes by an Australian backpacker named Ozzie, whom Kate meets briefly. Ozzie warns Kate about her African friends, 'nice as they seem – at some stage they'll screw you over. One way or another' (64). While he admires Africa's landscapes and natural wonders, Ozzie is distrustful of Africans, thinking they see white tourists only as 'a walking meal ticket' (65). His views mirror those of Andrew, with the distrust of Africans balanced against a love of Africa as a physical space.

Kate's position is a bit more complex. On the one hand, she dismisses Ozzie as 'a racist idiot, that's all' (65), but she also expresses neocolonial attitudes, partly rooted in her ideological position coming from a global north country. Kate tells Daniel that she hopes, 'Maybe one day when economically things are better – maybe then it will be better for your country. Like it is for us in Scotland' (82). Kate's frame of reference for a better Zimbabwe is to become more like her native land. Kate's assertion ignores the continuing issues of economic inequality and poverty in Scotland, or in the UK more generally. Especially since the tenure of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in the 1980s, wealth and income inequality has increased significantly in the UK as the welfare state was eroded in favor of privatisation and deregulation. As fellow Scottish playwright David Greig wrote in the introduction to his 2000 play *Oedipus the Visionary*, set in an economically divided post-apartheid South Africa,

> *Perhaps, if our township existed as blatantly as it does in South Africa we would find it intolerable. But, like so much else in Scotland, the architecture of power is rather elegantly executed and so the ugly realities are kept out of sight. (5)*

Even more than Ritchie's *Juju Girl*, Greig's play explores the complexities of economics in southern Africa, but both plays provoke important questions for

Scottish audiences about their own position within the global economy and global power systems.

Daniel challenges Kate on whether or not Zimbabwe *should* want to become more like Scotland/the global north, and Kate falls back on the (neo)colonialist trope of blaming Africa/the global south for problems rooted in colonialism and on-going international imbalances of power:

> *DANIEL. Has it ever occurred to you that we might have got it right? That what is ruining our country and our culture now is Capitalism and the push to be like the West?*
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> *KATE. We're not forcing that on you. It's your government's choice.*
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> *DANIEL. I think people have very little choice. Rural farmers don't grow food to feed their families any more, they grow tobacco – a cash crop. It makes the farmer dependent on trade and somehow, it's always these people who lose out. (83)*

As Daniel points out, colonial power structures remain in place in much of Africa because of global economics, trade imbalances, and debt structures developed by international financial institutions, all of which work in favor of economies in the global north. In this sense, imperialism didn't end with national liberation for colonized countries, it merely continued by other means. Under neoliberal policies imposed by international financial organizations like the IMF and World Bank, there have been few African success stories, partly because 'When capital *has* come into Africa in recent years, it has been overwhelmingly in the area of mineral-resource extraction' (Ferguson 2006: 35). Neoliberal policies have also devastated many contemporary African economies. As David Harvey points out,

> *The IMF and the World Bank […] became centres for the propagation and enforcement of 'free market fundamentalism' and neoliberal orthodoxy. In return for debt rescheduling, indebted countries were required to implement institutional reforms, such as cuts in welfare expenditures, more flexible labour market laws, and privatization (29).*

As a rule, this economic liberalisation has led to an outflow of resources and money to the global north, the diminishment of labour protections in the global

south, and an increase in economic inequality both within individual nations and between countries.

Kate's assertion that Zimbabwe would benefit from trying to become more like the global north reflects that on-going missionary element of neo-colonialism, paralleling Andrew's belief that Africans must adopt Christianity following the lead of their European colonizers. In some ways, it isn't especially surprising that Kate gives voice to a modernised incarnation of Andrew's missionary desire to re-make Africans in a European image. Kate is ambivalent about the nineteenth-century missionary movement, divided between the proper liberal response to condemn the missionaries' role as agents of empire on the one hand, and her personal desire to absolve her grandmother Catherine. During one of several discussions about religion, Kate tells Daniel, 'well, the missionaries sold you guys down the river, didn't they? Gave you religion and took your land. I mean I admired my gran for having such strong beliefs but she was a product of her time' (31). The general condemnation of imperialism and the religious leaders who aided the imperial project is in tension with the exception that Kate wants to carve out for her grandmother. If we were to demand consistency, either all of the missionaries – including Catherine – should be held responsible for their role in colonial exploitation, or they should all be acknowledged as 'products of their time' who thought they were doing good work, even though we now find it abhorrent.

Kate's rosy image of her grandmother is shaken later in the play as she finally moves toward completing her quest. After recovering Catherine's ashes – which had been stolen near the beginning of the play – and travelling to the site of the old mission, Kate finds a ruin the locals believe is haunted, rather than the idyllic kirk her grandmother described. Unable to find the site initially, Daniel brings Kate to a witchdoctor to try and learn the location. Nyanga, the witchdoctor, takes a different perspective on Catherine's missionary work than Kate does:

> *NYANGA. Someone you love has passed.*
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> *KATE. Yes. They were born here. This was her homeland. She was happy here.*
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> *NYANGA. No. She brought sorrow.*
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> *KATE. No, you don't understand. She worked here – she was a missionary.*

NYANGA. You must go to the place of tears.

KATE. No, that isn't the place. She built a mission. A church.

NYANGA. That is the place I cannot tell you more. (88)

After this encounter, Kate and Daniel travel to the site of the old mission, which is a desolate ruin. None of the locals will build on the site because of a legend that it is haunted by ghosts from the mission days – a tragedy we see in the Victorian scenes. Seeing the broken and abandoned remnants causes Kate to question her grandmother's stories about her work in Africa. She remarks, 'I know it's not the fairytale she told me but it [*sic*] still the place she wanted to end her days. Whatever happened there' (91). In other words, Kate learns that the positive narrative of an African idyll told to her by her grandmother obscured the real truths of colonial violence and of her grandmother's role within that colonial system.

The complexities of this play raise questions about the Scottish preference for seeing themselves as victims of English colonialism rather than perpetrators of British imperialism. Indeed, I would argue that pointing out the complexity of Scotland's relationship to empire was a valuable counterpoint to the ideological position of films like *Braveheart* and *Rob Roy*. And the value of this complexity continues into the twenty-first century with the increased push for Scottish independence, as supporters of independence often lean into the discourse of Scotland as a colonized nation. By highlighting the very real role of Scottish people in maintaining and expanding the British empire, and by throwing into stark relief some of the differences between the experience of a nation like Scotland and a nation like Zimbabwe, the play at the very least undercuts an easy identification of Scotland as an internal colony. Ultimately, I do not think *Juju Girl* discredits those who see Scotland as a long-held British colony, but the play certainly reminds us that Scotland's position is a complex one, and that Scots have been both victims and perpetrators of imperialism.

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