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Gaeldom and multi-ethnic Scotland:
A long history and a short story
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, linguistic and political borders are both incongruous and porous – sometimes more, sometimes less. This is true in almost any country, and most definitely so in Scotland, whose richly multilingual history and literature includes, among others, Welsh, Latin, Norse, Gaelic, Scots and English elements. While this traditional multiculturality is well-known, it is not always discussed *in connection* with the more recent (perhaps indeed *especially* intense) elements of multiculturality associated with post-World War Two waves of immigration and globalisation. However, it is well worth bearing these connections and parallels in mind. Understanding intra-national cultural difference as a long-standing historical norm rather than a (post)modern aberration might also help to weaken some people's anxieties about more recent immigration and the cultural dynamics it entails.

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.

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).

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1

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 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, the nineteenth century also evolved new images of ignoble savagery: especially when 'civilising' missions appeared to have failed after all (e.g. at times of economic crisis), continuing inequalities were rationalised as consequences of immutable biological differences between 'Teutonic' and 'Celtic' races. Racial categories even came to permeate *pro*-'Celtic' discourses, for example in academic attempts to rehabilitate the specific qualities of 'Celtic' culture.

Since the twentieth century, the growth of Scottish nationalism has been parallelled by a growing critique of anti-Gaelicism and by a Gaelic language revival movement. Politics, economics, education, history, literature and the media feature many typical anti- and postcolonial strategies, including a critique of colonial history and ideology, the assertion of the margin's right to speak for itself, the subversion of linguistic hierarchies, nativist celebrations of indigenous distinctness, but also endorsements of the subversive potential of cultural hybridity.

Through the centuries, all these issues have also been reflected in Scottish literature. However, the awareness of the wider reading public is largely limited to literature in English and Scots, whereas the Gaelic perspective is still ignored by most non-Gaelic readers. As an example of how the history of Gael/*Gall* relations is reflected in Gaelic literature, the following section will offer a close reading of Tormod Caimbeul's "Am Branch Manager agus Sourbutt."

A modern literary case study: Tormod Caimbeul's "Am Branch Manager agus Sourbutt"

Although this short story's portrayal of characters and cultural relations is arguably over-schematic and somewhat simplistic, it deals with a wide range of themes that have a long history in Highland/Lowland and Anglo–Scottish relations (and in colonial and postcolonial discourse), and thus serves as a useful illustration of the impact of the above-mentioned issues on Gaelic literature and

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2

Gaelic identity discourses. It reveals a deep sense of marginalisation and voices a scathing critique of inter-ethnic relations in terms that often feature in Gaelic texts, although not all of them represent matters quite so simplistically.

"Am Branch Manager agus Sourbutt" is set in a small, largely Gaelic-speaking island community, presumably at some time during the later twentieth century. It charts the fortunes and mutual relations of this local community and the two eponymous protagonists. One of these protagonists is an upwardly mobile local Gael called Calum (whose last name we never learn) whose education and career have led him away from the Gaidhealtachd until his triumphant return as manager of his native village's local bank branch. The other protagonist, Roger Sourbutt, is a non-Gaelic-speaking incomer, apparently from England, who starts working under the Branch Manager and eventually supplants him. He also proceeds to anglicise the village, imposing his own ways and bringing in ever more incomers, many of them from his own family. Between them, they occupy more and more local space, jobs, as well as leading positions on development committees, charities and leisure organisations.

With this plot, Caimbeul's story tackles a much-criticised feature of contemporary Highland and Island reality, namely the increasing number of outsiders who buy homes in rural communities, either as affluent holiday-home owners or as permanent settlers, thus putting pressure on the local housing market (often pushing prices to levels which locals can no longer afford), and partly also competing for local jobs, as well as potentially accelerating the trend for linguistic and cultural de-gaelicisation. These incomers are often referred to as 'white settlers', which in itself is a polemic invocation of overseas colonial parallels.[3] Critics often see the 'white settler' phenomenon as part of a long tradition of external exploitation and anglicisation in the Gaidhealtachd, a tradition which includes the Statutes of Iona, absentee Highland landlords draining and mortgaging their estates to pay for wasteful luxury lifestyles in the 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.

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 againn fhìn a fhuair an inbhe agus an t-urram" ('we were happy that it was one of our own people that got the status and the honour', 60). Sourbutt likewise considers Calum's career as exceptional, albeit with less sympathy:

> Cha robh e ceart gum biodh duine mar am Branch Manager [Calum] os a chionn-san. Bha sin a' dol an aghaidh nàdar agus an aghaidh na h-eachdraidh[.] (66)

> ('It wasn't right that a man like the Branch Manager [Calum] should be above him [Sourbutt]. That was against nature and against history[.]').

When Sourbutt usurps Calum's position, he sees this as the restoration of a natural hierarchy, regarding the boss's desk as 'his own rightful place' ("àite dligheach fhèin," 66). Individual careers and rivalries thus assume a metonymic function, standing for a long history of exploitative relations between Gaelic and English-speaking populations, when the latter assumed social superiority and dominance as their natural prerogative, sometimes even going as far as attributing the differences to literally natural differences in the racial biology of 'Teutonic' and 'Celtic' peoples. The wider social dimensions of the story's central conflict are also reflected in the fact that the number of non-Gaelic incomers in the story quickly multiplies: Roger Sourbutt is clearly not an individual problem, 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

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3

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).

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 *ig*noble 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:

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4

"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 'civi-lisers' 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 wide-spread 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 multi-national 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 trans-lations, 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 transcul-tural 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 contempo-rary and international framework.

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5

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Notes

1 *Gall* is the standard term for 'Lowlander' in modern Scottish Gaelic; but it can also denote other kinds of non-Gaels.

2 English translations of Gaelic titles and quotations are my own, and are indicated with single quotations.

3 On the importance of the 'white settler' theme elsewhere in Caimbeul's work, also see Stroh, forthcoming.

4 More recently, in fact, it has rather been the other way round: some socially and geographically mobile middle-class Gaels have been accused of using their language skills to get on the gravy train of Gaelic development and media jobs without delivering enough real benefits to the grassroots of the Gaelic community, or even to the preservation of the language itself (beyond window-dressing), and of misdirecting much-needed (and still rather scarce) language development funding and resources into the wrong projects, with too much nepotism and without sufficient accountability.

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6