Chapter 3

The Reemergence of the Primitive Other?
Noble Savagery and the Romantic Age

As previous chapters have illustrated, endorsements of Scottish Gaels as noble savages and valuable parts of the nation were not invented by the romantic age. There are several instances from earlier periods. But in the second half of the eighteenth century, when romanticism appeared on the horizon, such images became much more widespread. Civilizing and homogenizing missions within Britain appeared fairly successful by this time, both as regards the integration of Scotland as a whole into Britain and its empire, and more particularly the integration and “taming” of the Gaels. Capitalism was firmly established, and urbanization and industrialization were well under way. It was precisely the success of these “modernizations” which cleared the path for a partial rehabilitation of the “premodern.” This general romantic tendency also affected the image of “premodern” populations: once they were no longer a threat, “ignoble savages” could become “noble savages.”

In the Scottish context, the new idealization of cultural difference could pertain to both Highland and (still sufficiently non-English) Lowland Scots traditions. Where diversity was valued for its own sake, a limited endorsement of local culture could offer harmless ideological compensation for any remaining grudges held by some Scottish nationalists against the Union, or by Gaelic traditionalists against capitalization and assimilation.

Elsewhere, difference was freed even from these moderately antiestablishment associations and was deemed directly beneficial to the British “center” itself. Partly, this is related to Britain’s self-image as the heir of Roman supremacy. This proud analogy could also entail anxieties: it was thought that the Roman Empire, spoiled by success, became placid and decadent; civil and military virtues declined; its sheer size made the realm difficult to govern and defend. Thus weakened, the empire finally fell victim to the “barbarian” onslaught; the forces of the primitive had apparently won out. These issues loomed large in late eighteenth-century thought, as illustrated by Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Modern Britons wondered if their own state and empire had to fear the same fate as
Rome. Another English scholar, Edward Wortley Montagu, gave the following warning about contemporary Britain:

To . . . universal luxury . . . we must impute that amazing progress of corruption, which seiz’d the very vitals of our constitution. If therefore we impartially compare the present state of our own country with that of Rome and Carthage, we shall find, that we resemble them most when in their declining period.²

Civilized imperial decadence was juxtaposed to the laudable frugality, virtue, and military valor of more “primitive” peoples, both ancient and modern.³ Britain sought a synthesis: could the simple virtues of internal barbarian fringes like Highland Scotland be integrated into the moral and military arsenal of the center, in a way which would make the center and its empire more resilient? The celebration of Highland loyalty as a good example to all British subjects and an antidote to social revolution, and the recruitment of innumerable Highland soldiers into the British Army, were two experiments in this direction. Here, “primitive” assets were directly placed at the service of the British state and its expanding empire. Again, this illustrates the ambivalent position of Scotland and its Gaels: as colonized, their romanticization was premised on the successful conquest of their traditions, and as colonizers their very “barbarism” offered moral and military capital for the establishment of British world power. Imperial benefits had long been a key factor in Scottish unionism, and eventually helped to integrate even the Gaels into the nation, especially via the army.⁴ The following sections chart the permutations of Highland noble savagery, both as a tool and as a counterbalance to the status quo, in more detail.

Difference as a Harmless Counterbalance to the Status Quo

General Frameworks: Romantic Zeitgeist and Celticism as Wider Phenomena

Sufficiently well-established capitalist societies tend to entail urbanization, the increase of human control over nature—often connected to the destruction of natural resources—and the mechanization and standardization of labor. In response, many people develop a liking for (and propensity to idealize) less densely populated places, “unspoiled” countryside, rural life, “tradition,” and simplicity.⁵ They often romanticize the supposedly more individualist, natural, and non-standardizable work rhythms of agriculture which depend more on the irregularities of weather and seasons than on the regular pace of clock and machinery. But the relation between individualism and tradition can also be interpreted differently: feudal agriculture may seem to embody
launderable community spirit, while capitalism is criticized for destroying such solidarities—personal liberty can also mean an atomization of society until everyone is left to fend for him- or herself, and thus more at risk if any difficulties should befall. All these critiques of capitalism have found use for cultural Others: actual or supposed alternative ways of life become objects of desire, projection screens for social or moral fantasies, and sources of temporary escapism. The Other can be viewed as a relic from a better past—a past that may be irretrievably lost or dying, but radiates a light of fading glory that can still be seen and enjoyed. Alternatively, it may be an object of moral study for those who search for a better kind of human nature, and/or the original state of morality. Temporary escapism may be gained by reading about these alternative worlds or physically visiting them oneself: the romantic age also saw an increase in tourism. The inhabitants of these “different worlds” are often portrayed as noble savages.6

Another factor in the new idealization of nonmainstream cultures was aesthetic, and a consequence of the general mutability of fashions. Some people simply seemed saturated with classicist aesthetics and Enlightened rationalism and were on the lookout for something new, something different from what they were used to. Apart from sheer unusualness (at least to mainstream eyes and ears), emotionality, dreams, mysteriousness, and the supernatural were also highly sought after. It was thought that the savage’s deficiencies in the field of rational thought bred an overabundance of metaphor and unusual, that is, potentially creative, turns of mind. Moreover, “primitive” peoples were allegedly prone to particularly strong, unrestrained feelings and passions. Thus, “savages” might be bad scholars, but they made fantastic poets.7 Historicity and traditionality were again valued for their own sake, while Enlightened progressivist scholars had discarded large parts of history as too barbarian to be interesting. Where “Enlightened” historians had shied away from subjects about which there were too few reliable written sources to yield scientific results, this very mysteriousness of remote cultures and ages was now endorsed as a field for speculation, creative imagining, and fantasy.8

Through the centuries, these roles of remote projection screen, noble savage, or alternative aesthetic model have been assigned to many different Others: “Celts,” Scots, Gaels, indigenous populations of overseas colonies such as North American “Indians,” or Maori; medieval ancestry; or even the contemporaneous peasantry and folk culture of the respective mainstreamers’ own national or ethnic collective. For England’s eighteenth-century urban middle or upper classes, even an English peasant could be different, “traditional,” and “authentic” enough to serve as a noble savage.9 Despite this wider context, the particular ways in which the “noble savage” trope has been applied to Britain’s internally marginalized ethnicities (whether Scottish, “Celtic,” or Gaelic) as well as overseas colonized cultures establishes discursive links between those regions and validates the
examination of noble savagery in the postcolonial context of the present study.

Here, it is particularly important that subjugation and control function as prerequisites for romanticization, and romantic images of Scots or Celts show many commonalities with other, more overtly hostile variants of colonial discourse. The idea that primitive peoples can possess moral virtues despite, or even because of, their primitiveness also occurs in predominantly “Enlightened” texts which embrace assimilation and “progress.” But “Enlightened” respect for “simple virtues” does not prevent those texts from regarding the assimilation of “noble savages” into the “civilized” mainstream as the most desirable course. After all, simple virtues were often invoked as a promising basis for the civilizing mission. Enlightened perspectives thus lay more stress on the beneficial aspects of culture contact and homogenization. By contrast, romanticism often values cultural difference for its own sake, professes a desire to preserve it, or at least laments its passing. Such texts tend more toward a traditionalist or nativist stance. Frequently, however, sociocultural change was already a fait accompli—romantic nostalgia only set in after the “noble savages” were under control, that is, when the Other was no longer dangerous and the civilizing mission had already been partially successful. The same was true for nature: it had to seem reasonably tameable before the last “wildernesses” could be romanticized.

Colonial discourse is not the only field where Enlightenment and romanticism are closely connected. A neatly chronological periodization between the two is impossible. Ian Duncan stresses that “in Scotland . . . ‘Classical’ and ‘Romantic’ cultural forms occupy the same moment, rather than defining successive stages.” Michael Baridon argues that Enlightened cosmopolitanism, Gothic gloom, cultural nationalism, and emotionalism were not only chronologically synchronous, but also conceptually inseparable, as an interest in emotions, cultural origins, and traditions was central to many Enlightenment achievements. In various ways, the Enlightened “modern” center’s self-understanding and universalist rationality depended on the peripheral or bygone/vanishing “primitive” Other and its particularized subjective experience, or what was constructed as such.

Concerning the center’s views on marginalized or colonized cultures, the kinship between Enlightenment and romanticism is also evident in their reliance on similar binarisms, for instance when associating the “civilized metropolis” with rationality, order, and progress, and the “barbarian periphery” with irrationality, chaos, and stasis. Such binarisms also link imperial discourses of antiquity to modern ones, and intra-European fringes like the “Celtic” ones (ancient or modern) to colonized populations overseas. Advocates of civilizing missions evaluated the periphery’s supposed attributes in mainly negative terms and wanted to improve the “savage” condition, while romantic discourse reinterpreted the same alleged attributes in positive, but still patronizing, terms. For instance, intellectual simplicity no longer
connoted deplorable stupidity but laudable emotional intuition and/or moral innocence. In an inner-British context, the most uncontested candidate for the position of the center was England, while the position of the barbarian periphery could be occupied by “Celts” or even the partly non-“Celtic” subordinate nation of Scotland. Within Scotland, such role structures could be reproduced internally, with anglophone and especially Lowland Scottish culture as the center and Gaelic traditions as the barbarian periphery.

Celticism thus found itself on the rise throughout Britain, and to a certain extent also in Europe. Mainstream interest lighted upon contemporaneous “Celts” and their remote ancestors. Critics of neoclassicism could be drawn to “barbarians” of old who had (really or supposedly) rebelled against “original” Roman or Greek classicism in antiquity. These barbarians were not all Celtic: there was also an interest in Germanic cultures. But the Celts had an important advantage:

The German or Goth was not . . . apt to British romanticism, which took the form of a revolt against the established forms of England: the Anglo-Saxon, at the centre of England’s conception of itself, was first cousin to the Goth . . . ; moreover, a German dynasty was on the throne of England. These were reasons . . . to discourage a romanticism of the barbarian Anglo-Saxon. There was such a romanticism, but it was . . . feeble compared to that of the Celt. . . .

Indeed, the Anglo-Saxon came to represent . . . the opposite of the Celt.¹⁴

Despite the numerous parallels between modern and ancient images of Celts, there are also differences, for instance regarding nature and spirituality. Some ancient authors depicted the Celtic lifestyle as being closer to nature than Greek or Roman habits were, for example because the barbarians ate from the ground instead of using tables. But unlike many modern authors, ancient writers did not claim a special emotional connection between Celts and their natural surroundings. Neither did they claim a special Celtic propensity for spirituality and visions. Although “various Classical writers were fascinated by the druids, their etymological connection with the oak tree, their use of mistletoe, and their sinister activities in their sacred groves,” they did not treat this exceptional priestly section of “Celtic” society as a metonymy for Celtic sensibility in general.¹⁵ But romantic and post-romantic images would do exactly that: henceforth, all “Celts” would be suspected of a special closeness to nature, visions, and the spiritual world. Druidism became—and remains—a fashionable trope in Celticism because it seems to illustrate the naturalness, spirituality, fascinating otherness, and mysteriousness (as opposed to more established, well-known religions like Christianity) which romantically inclined mainstreamers like to perceive as a general feature of indigenous cultures.
The assumption that Celts and other “primitive” peoples enjoy a privileged relationship with nature and spirituality also ties in with romantic concepts of poetic and musical talent which laid heavy emphasis on natural genius. Material primitiveness was considered to foster creativity as well as poetic and musical tastes, both among the populace in general and in the specialists it brought forth: its bards.\textsuperscript{16} In a footnote to his long poem \textit{Rona}, the Scottish poet John Ogilvie asserted: “the inhabitants of the Hebrides have been distinguished from the earliest times, by a talent for poetic composition, and an exquisite feeling of its beauties. . . . The most admired productions in this art have appeared in the least cultivated ages.”\textsuperscript{17} The timelessness assumed here can also be found in descriptions of overseas colonized populations. By contrast, the assumption that Celts have a special talent for art is not always paralleled in overseas colonial discourse. Some Orientalists acknowledged aesthetic merit in Asian art, for instance in India. But other colonized people, such as black Africans or Aboriginal Australians, were not as readily credited with artistic talent until the early twentieth century—when, for instance, expressionist visual artists in Europe discovered the merits of African art and its geometric forms.

Some of the supposed qualities of romanticized Celts were also ascribed to women, such as sensitivity, emotionality, and an inferior capacity for rational thought. Both were disempowered social groups, and the qualities attributed to them converged accordingly, implying a need for patriarchal (or “masculine” Saxons’) guidance and protection, thus justifying disempowerment. Some non-European colonized populations—“Orientals,” for instance—were likewise feminized, and for the same reasons. While “Orientals” were not only feminized but also supposedly effeminate, this was not the case with Scotland’s “Celts”: the Highlanders supposedly possessed intellectual and emotional propensities which were conventionally “feminine,” but they were also invested with extraordinary masculinity as soldiers and sex symbols.\textsuperscript{18}

This other, masculine, extreme likewise has parallels in overseas colonial discourse: though “Orientals” were often considered effeminate, other “natives” like Zulus or certain Pacific Islanders were portrayed as the exact opposite and supposedly possessed greater manliness than “civilized” European men.\textsuperscript{19} Such manliness could concern general physical fitness attributable to a less mechanized state of economy and warfare, or it could focus on sexual potency and sexual freedom. Partly, Frantz Fanon’s observation on sexual relations in colonies also applies to Gaelic Scotland:

Since he is the master and . . . the male, the white man can allow himself the luxury of sleeping with many women. This is true in every country and especially in colonies. But when a white woman accepts a black man there is automatically a romantic aspect. It is a giving, not a seizing.\textsuperscript{20}
In anglophone popular songs, the same romance is attached to sexual relations between Highland men and anglophone, sometimes middle- or upper-class women.\(^{21}\)

Another parallel between romantic Celticist fashions and a colonial mindset is the potential link to a conqueror’s guilt complex. The “civilizers” saw how well their colonizing project was going, and they also saw the social problems which this process generated within Gaelic society. Symbolic celebration of the victims’ culture might be an attempt to appease occasional stirrings of conscience. Moreover, appropriated “Celtic” symbols lent the conquerors an aura of ownership, rootedness, and legitimacy. Parallels could be drawn to nativist fashions in North America, Australia, or New Zealand where white cultures have appropriated certain icons of the indigenous cultures they colonized, thus attempting to create a sense of rootedness and national authenticity.\(^{22}\)

Hegemonic outsiders or “colonizers” were not the only ones who indulged in romantic Celticism: idealized notions of Celtic and rural traditions as counter-constructs to industrialization and urban life also appealed to the increasing number of native “Celts” who had migrated to anglophone centers and often expressed nostalgia for home and the past.\(^{23}\) Moreover, Celticism came to occupy significant functions in regionalist or nationalist resistance, not only during the romantic era but also later. In the late eighteenth and especially in the nineteenth century, a wave of ethnic renaissances swept all over Europe—particularly through minorities and small nations suffering cultural, political, and economic marginalization. Celticism was part of this wider trend, (re)affirming pride in local specificities in places like Galicia, Brittany, or Ireland. Moreover, from the nineteenth century onwards there was increasing pan-Celticism across national borders, for instance through claims of common genealogical and cultural roots, or through mutual imitation.\(^{24}\) This destabilized dominant ideologies about a congruity of national and ethnic boundaries. Sometimes, claims to a distinct national character were used to justify wishes and initiatives to gain political or economic autonomy from a centralist state, and the celebration of past ethnic achievements could fill resistance movements with confidence in their potential to attain other successes in the future. But Celticism and similar ethnic ideologies also flourished in regions which did not possess a sufficient material basis or promising political chances for autonomy, for instance due to their lack of a bourgeois class, their weak infrastructure, a frail economy, or an all too powerful and unlenient “center” entirely unprepared to make concessions. In such conditions, past ethnic greatness and present cultural resurgence could be a mere compensation for a lack of more material autonomy in the political or economic realm.\(^{25}\) Such compensatory dimensions predominated in Scotland for a long time—though the Scots had arguably less to compensate than many other submerged nations, for example considering Scotland’s relatively high degree of integration and success.
Scotland was thoroughly integrated into the British state and its empire since the second half of the eighteenth century—not as a passive victim but as an active participant drawing considerable profits from these arrangements. Nonetheless, there was a degree of discontented patriotism which led to a resurgence of Scottishness in northern British identity discourse. The very success and thoroughness which (self-)anglicization had shown by that time was one of the reasons for the reawakening of Scottish patriotism as a sort of counterreaction. Another factor might have been English intransigence to pan-British identity constructs: initially, Scottish people had appeared more eager to discard their old national identity in favor of a larger British one than their southern neighbors had been. Continued English popular insistence on the differences between English and Scottish Britons, as well as anti-Scottish sentiment, prompted several “North Britons” to return to traditional Scottish identifications and reassert their distinctness from the southerners. Moreover, several controversial issues in the 1760s and 1770s caused some disillusionment with Scotland’s treatment in British politics. This might also have contributed to a renewed interest in Scottish traditions.26

But identification with the Union remained strong enough to forestall practical separatism. The Union had by now shown considerable economic success. Since the end of serious Jacobite aspirations there was also political and military stability. As political resistance seemed undesirable, Scottish nationalism and Highland pride in the late eighteenth and most of the nineteenth century was mainly restricted to the cultural sphere, where a certain degree of difference could be articulated and celebrated without jeopardizing the material status quo of modern Britain. For instance, there was an intensification of the general post-Union trend to collect bits and pieces of Scotland’s own traditions.27 Anticolonial or early postcolonial culture in overseas (ex-)colonies likewise showed antiquarian, folkloric, and revivalist interests in re-excavating native traditions which had been submerged by English imperialism. It also emphasized indigenous cultural continuities across the historical disruption lines created by colonialism. But in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Scotland, this cultural “anticolonialism” was unaccompanied by practical political nationalism.

Even non-secessionist and merely cultural articulations of national difference could be problematic: previous successes of self-anglicization had undermined the Scottish distinctness which was so crucial to patriotic resurgence. Difference became ever more elusive, especially in anglophone or Scots-speaking Scottish culture and among the educated middle and upper classes.

An especially convenient source of Scottish distinctness and “authenticity” was the Highland and Gaelic tradition, which had fulfilled this function in
Scottish patriotic discourse since the Middle Ages. In unionist and progressivist discourse of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the tradition of using Gaels as a patriotic symbol of the difference between Scotland and England had declined because Gaelic otherness was seen as a threat to the homogeneity of the nation-state or to the emerging capitalist economy. By the later decades of the eighteenth century, Gaelic political and economic otherness had been obliterated or minimized. Thus, the use of Gaelic cultural otherness could again become more popular. Though even Gaelic culture was becoming more hybridized, this process was not as far advanced as in Lowland Scots culture. Hence, Gaelic traditions were, perhaps more than ever, redefined as a pan-Scottish heritage and a marker of national distinctness. However, this is not to say that such exploitation of Gaelic symbols equated to actually supporting the survival of Gaelic as a living language for the present and future—far from it: the decline of Gaelic speech and Gaelic traditions as viable sociocultural alternatives that could challenge anglocentric norms were often a prerequisite to their romantic mainstreaming.

A major catalyst for the mainstreaming of Celtic noble savagery was provided by James Macpherson’s Ossianic works. Like Martin Martin before him, Macpherson was a native Gaelic speaker whose anglophone education and aspirations as a middle-class professional linked him firmly to the urban worlds of the Lowlands and England—and his works reflect this ambivalence, combining elements of nativist vindication, autoethnography, exoticist self-marketing, and a “colonial” anglicizing drive. Macpherson’s collections Fragments of Ancient Poetry (1760), Fingal (1761), and Temora (1763), mainly consisting of prose poems, purported to be English translations of Gaelic poems from, and about, the third century AD recounting the exploits of the mythical King Fionn and his warriors. Most poems claim to be the works of Fionn’s son Ossian, warrior and bard, who supposedly composed them in his old age, woefully commemorating the heroic deeds and dead companions of his youth. Macpherson claimed to have collected the poems from oral Gaelic tradition as well as Gaelic manuscripts, and to have separated the original elements from later corruptions, so that his “translations” represented an authentic third-century voice.

In reality, Fionn and Ossian (Oisean) were indeed part of Gaelic tradition and supposedly lived between the third and fifth centuries, but our oldest sources on them seem to date back no further than the Middle Ages, at least in the form we know. Macpherson did use Gaelic oral and written sources, but his “translations” are often remarkably free, as he adapts his materials to eighteenth-century needs and the tastes of his mostly anglophone target audience, often making substantial additions of his own. For instance, he takes the Ossianic material closer to Greek and Roman standards of epic poetry, thus satisfying mainstream classicist tastes. Elsewhere, the feeling and conduct of his heroes combine supposedly primitive assets with modern virtues more reminiscent of the eighteenth-century literature of sensibility.
Macpherson’s Ossianic publications were a big success, satisfying contemporary mainstream tastes for “primitive” poetic genius, “nobly savage” virtues like bravery, and “ancient” pieces of national heritage. These texts also influenced contemporaneous discourse about early social history, not only in Scottish and “Celtic” contexts, but even elsewhere. Notions of ethnic continuity ensured that Macpherson’s image of ancient Gaeldom also influenced mainstream ideas about modern Highlanders and their “noble savagery.” Again, it is clear that romanticization is only possible if the Other is no longer menacing: Macpherson’s Fenian heroes are safely contained in the “Dark Age” past, and even then they are dying out. Ossian, who preserves their memory, is the last survivor, and even the later Gaelic culture which succeeded them is now, in the eighteenth century, in rapid decline, which is why its poetry needs to be transferred into English for consumption by the modern audiences that own the future. In this safe form, it can be an object of sentimental retrospection, aesthetic enjoyment, and patriotic pride. Lowland Scottish endorsements of a celticized national image also resemble constructions of national identity in settler (post-)colonies overseas as analyzed by Nicholas Thomas: there, too, the (white) mainstream has appropriated elements from the cultures of indigenous populations in order to distinguish itself from “merely impoverished versions of Britishness.” Macpherson’s influence on the Celtic image is still discernible in today’s popular culture, which often associates Celticity with romantic melancholia, a close link to the supernatural, for instance via spectral visions, and a particular talent for poetry and music.

Despite Macpherson’s national and international popularity, there were also many critics. For instance, the “Dark Age” authenticity of his publications was questioned in various quarters, which sparked a lively debate over several decades. Macpherson’s attempt to position his thoroughly hybrid texts as pure primitive artifacts can be read as a strategic use of a metropolitan colonial gaze which has an appetite for “native authenticity.” The subsequent controversy exposes, and partly subverts, such exoticist demands. This can be related to similar issues discussed by Graham Huggan with regard to twentieth-century postcolonial Australian debates about authors who laid claims to Aboriginality that were later exposed as “fraudulent.” While those Australian authors were “frauds” because they did not come from the ethnic (Aboriginal) community in question, Macpherson actually did come from the “right” (in this case Gaelic) community, but there was still an element of fraud because his texts came from the “wrong” time and the “wrong” Gaelic author, being his own rewritings from a range of sources, rather than reconstructions of a “Dark Age” epic by a single bard called Ossian. The reception of this eighteenth-century Scottish literary hoax was similar to the reception of modern Australian hoaxes discussed by Huggan: both controversies were fueled by a desire for indigenous authenticity in a context of unequal cultural power relations.
The authenticity question was only one of several fields where the reception of Macpherson’s Ossian became a veritable battleground of conflicting patriotisms and ethnic identities. There were bursts of Highland regional and Scottish national pride; Scottish-Irish rivalries about who had the strongest claim to the Fenian/Ossianic heritage; English critiques of “overinflated” Scottish claims to literary eminence; and disgruntled non-Gaelic Scots who felt that Highlandist fashions obscured the Lowland or Teutonic element in the national heritage.\(^\text{35}\)

Although “modernization” and the loss of “authentic” Scottish traditions were more advanced in the Lowlands, even here there was a search for such traditions. One solution was to concentrate the search more on the past than on the present, for instance by collecting older material from less anglicized times. Another valuable repository of national distinctness was located in folk tradition past and present: Lowland Scots customs and language seemed better preserved among the lower classes than among the more anglicized and cosmopolitan middle and upper ranks of society. “Celts” were not the only locals who functioned as noble savages, contemporary ancestors, or markers of Scottish national distinctness—Lowlanders, especially peasants, could serve just as well. One example is the reception of Robert Burns’s (1759–1796) supposedly untutored “peasant poetry” by the Edinburgh literati. Sometimes Burns even assumes such an “untutored noble peasant” persona himself, perhaps as a tactical move and marketing strategy. A further Lowland poet whose humble origins as a farmer’s son entitled him to primitivist reception was William Wilkie (1721–1772)—despite his university education.\(^\text{36}\)

The vogue for Lowland Scots folk culture is also reflected in the efforts to collect ballads, for instance from the Borders, as in Walter Scott’s *Minstrelsy*.\(^\text{37}\) Other authors who had a share in the fashion for Scots as a literary medium were James Hogg and John Galt. But there was a sense that Lowland cultural distinctness was dwindling, even among the “simple folk,” so that its status as a national marker was problematic. Scott implies that he collected the Border ballads precisely because “the peculiar features” of his culture “are daily melting and dissolving into those of her sister and ally.”\(^\text{38}\)

“Authentic” traditions and cultural distinctness from neighboring countries gained added importance as new concepts of “organic” national identity spread across Europe. In several other countries, such ideas of nationhood soon influenced political practice, for instance in the German unification movement. By contrast, Scottish national resurgence long remained confined to the cultural arena, without major political (e.g., separatist) correlatives. The subjugation of Scottish otherness, Gaelic or otherwise, remained a prerequisite for its romanticization. Distinctness from England had to be stressed in terms which did not renounce the status quo of post-Union Britain. It was thus expedient to locate Scottish distinctness in the *margins* of Scottish society—there was a separation between mainstream social practices on the one hand and an ideological celebration of the periphery on the other. The
romanticization of the margins was largely confined to spiritual and moral issues. It was also heavily historicized: it seemed as if a progressive Scottish mainstream ran forward into the future while throwing affectionate backward glances over its shoulder to look upon a Highland culture doomed to obsolescence. Quintessential, unadulterated Gaelicness was frequently located in the times before the great watershed of 1745. This emphasis on pastness, spirituality, and morals helped to depoliticize and de-antagonize Scottish patriotism. A romanticized, distinct past provided ideological compensation for a more homogenized unionist present.\footnote{39}

Contemporaneous Highland society had likewise ceased to be a threat. Jacobitism no longer posed any political or military danger. This made it possible to readmit the Gaels into the national community and pity them for the traumas of Culloden and the subsequent penalty measures. Such feelings are reflected in Tobias Smollett’s poem “The Tears of Scotland” (1746).\footnote{40} While Jacobitism itself is condemned as a “baneful cause” that divided the nation and even individual families, the nation is reunited in postwar mourning as the Highland penalty measures are transformed from a regional into a pan-Scottish tragedy. There is also a hint of anti-English or antigovernment sentiment, not only in the critique of the penalty measures as overly cruel, but also in the reference to Caledonia’s “insulting foe” whom the poem defies through its patriotic statement.

Further unease with the post-Union continuation of intra-British national antagonisms, prejudice, and power imbalances, for instance between England and Scotland, is negotiated in parts of Smollett’s novels The Adventures of Roderick Random (1748) and The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker.\footnote{41} However, there is also hope of enhancing mutual understanding and of making Highland or pan-Scottish merits better appreciated in the south, that is, the Lowlands or southern Britain, though much of the North-South mediation in Humphrey Clinker happens between Scottish and Welsh, rather than Scottish and English, characters.\footnote{42} That this novel traces a journey through England and Scotland is significant in itself. The voyage enhances the characters’—and readers’—knowledge of different parts of the national community, gives opportunities of negotiating prejudice, forges connections, and facilitates cultural dialogue, thus contributing to pan-British nation-building.\footnote{43} Critique of post-Culloden reprisals—here mainly the Disclothing Act—resurfaces in Humphrey Clinker through the comments of a compassionate Welsh traveler. He also seems to note signs of collective trauma among Highlanders, observing “manifest marks of dejection.”\footnote{44}

For other texts, the recent “pacification” of the Highlands provided a safe vantage point from which the region’s former violence could be recounted as a source of harmless excitement. Moreover, it was now safe and increasingly commonplace to sympathize with the defeated Jacobites emotionally, and to acknowledge a degree of moral value in their loyalty, bravery, and sense of honor, though these virtues had unfortunately been deployed in the wrong
cause—if these Gaelic merits had served the right master, all would have been well.45 There was hope that all would be well in future, when the Gaels would be finally transformed into dutiful subjects of the Hanoverian state. Economic integration also seemed to make progress, as “backward” feudal structures were replaced by more “productive” capitalist arrangements. Previously, much anti-Gaelic prejudice had been based on a conflation of Gaelic culture with undesirable political and economic agendas. Now that politics and economics were under control, the language and culture of the Highlands seemed less menacing. Moreover, even in this sphere regional distinctness was on the retreat, so that its remaining vestiges were more easily tolerable. Religious and educational integration were underfoot, many Gaels migrated away from the Highlands, and those who remained at home seemed to anglicize rather fast. English was learned with eagerness, and the percentage of Gaelic speakers among Scotland’s population was shrinking.46 Indigenous (bardic) traditions of Gaelic learning were also in relative decline. This very decline seems to have boosted the interest of Lowland scholars in Gaelic tradition. Patriotic anxiety may have played a part: an important segment of the nation’s distinct culture seemed about to vanish forever, which made Lowland literati feel that it was now their task to preserve what was left.47 There may also have been an urge to complete material economic and political conquest and “colonization” with intellectual appropriation. A third motivation could have been the romantic need for a counterculture to the mundane, “banal” industrializing society of the urban middle class. All three factors are intimately related to subjugation.

The new belief in the harmlessness of Highland culture not only stimulated academic and literary Lowland interest, but also facilitated more lenient government policies. The 1780s saw the re-legalization of Highland dress and the restoration of forfeited Jacobite estates to the families of the original owners. Capitalism and the appropriate mentality were now perceived to have spread far enough among the clan gentry to let assimilation proceed by itself without extra centralist compulsion. Many landlords had shown themselves willing and able to implement the capitalization of their estates themselves. This trend continued after the restoration of the forfeited estates. Assimilation did not go so far as to make the Highland economy indistinguishable from the Lowland one. Rather, the Gaidhealtachd entered into a “phase of super-exploitation” inflicted by Highland landlords upon their tenants.48 Instead of being “modernized” according to the principles of liberal capitalism, social relations in the area became more archaic, for instance when recruitment methods during the Napoleonic Wars revived the feudal pattern of exchanging military service for rights of land use.49 The main modernizing exception to this “bastard feudalism” was the more truly liberalist system of capitalist sheep farming, but the entrepreneurs who implemented the latter in the Highlands mainly hailed from elsewhere.50 Moreover, it was frequently impossible to reinvest profits locally in a way which was
capitalistically productive and which strengthened the region’s economic structure in the long term: often, cash influx was immediately swallowed up by the need to pay off previously accumulated debts on estates. This phase of super-exploitation bears several similarities to a colonial economy, for instance as regards its failure to extend liberalist principles to increase the personal freedom of local populations and its failure to reinvest profits in the region to build a viable, diversified local economy. Nonetheless, this colonial type of economy was highly compatible with capitalism, which traditional Gaelic feudalism had not been.

Here as well, exploitation and “progress” went hand in hand with cultural (pseudo-)conservatism. Even “improvers” and anglicizers now proudly wore Highland dress—“the kilt . . . moved from being the dress of the most poverty-stricken at the periphery, to being the party-dress of the most privileged at the centre.” Discussing how tartan cult and noble savagery often coexisted with ongoing contempt for other aspects of Gaelic culture, Newton draws parallels with “other marginalised peoples whose cultures have been harvested for profit,” citing an overseas colonial example from the Native American context. Bagpipes likewise came into fashion. Previously common throughout Europe, the instrument had long disappeared almost everywhere except in the Scottish Highlands, and even there it had come close to extinction earlier in the eighteenth century. But in the romantic era, such “atavisms” suddenly appeared valuable precisely because they were rare and old-fashioned. This ensured the Highland bagpipe’s revival. Various Highland or Celtic societies were founded in anglophone cities, and further illustrate the close connection between “noble savage” romanticism and (quasi-)colonialism. On the one hand, they celebrated idealized clanship, pipe music, Highland dress, or other elements of Gaelic culture. On the other hand, their cultural pursuits often focused on antiquarian dimensions or attempted to remold contemporary Gaelic cultural expressions in the image of their own romantic notions. The clientele often belonged to the elite; many were outsiders to Gaelic culture or anglicized Highland aristocrats. For instance, most members of the Celtic Society of Edinburgh were landowners, lawyers, or intellectuals like Walter Scott. These organizations supported “improvements” like the economic missions outlined in chapter 1. This schizophrenia of cultural romanticism and material colonization did not go uncontested. An anonymous newspaper article complained:

If the Celtic Society confine itself to such parades as flatter only the ancestral pride . . . of the proprietors of the soil, without doing anything to relieve the . . . heavy distresses of the population, . . . the Society is worse than mockery; for what can be more absurd than to see Highland landlords assembling . . . to revive the dress of a people, whom they are either driving from their homes . . . or allowing them to be so expatriated without making one effort in their favour.
One of the Celtic Society’s own founders, David Stewart of Garth, held similar views, although he was persuaded to soften his critique when publishing his views on the Highlands in book form.\(^{37}\)

The Celticist vogue even reached royalty itself. King George IV’s visit to Scotland in 1822 was full of Highlandist pageantry, which was emphatically presented as a pan-Scottish national symbol. His royal highness honored his Scottish subjects by symbolically becoming one of them through wearing a kilt himself—though he did not expose his legs as traditional Highland fashion required: for decency’s sake the king wore a flesh-colored hose underneath. Most other men at the event likewise sported Highland dress.

The iconography of the Highlander, adopted as a badge of national identification by the Lowland Scot in the nineteenth century, is not the iconography of a separate Scottish identity: it is . . . the iconography of the unity of the British state. George IV’s visit . . . was . . . a symbolic re-admittance into the British Geist of that part of the nation which had alienated itself by the 1715 and 1745 risings, but had paid its debts by dying profusely on the Heights of Abraham and Waterloo.\(^{58}\) It is . . . the symbol of a unifying British identity . . . able to integrate all the differences . . . in . . . harmony. All subjects are equal in the eyes of the monarch and . . . find their status mirrored in the monarch’s adoption of their symbolic dress.\(^{59}\)

The ceremonies of 1822 helped to make Highlandism and the transformation of Gaelic symbols into pan-Scottish icons even more popular than before, although some contemporaries were critically aware of the “inauthenticity” of such reinventions.\(^{60}\) But primitivist reconstructions did not always come from complete outsiders—sometimes they were endorsed by members of the indigenous population itself, for instance in order to gain social advantages in metropolitan circles through fashionable self-exoticization.\(^{61}\)

McCracken-Flesher provides a highly informative reading of the complex ways in which the royal visit negotiated the power relations between Highland, pan-Scottish, English, and pan-British identifications.\(^{62}\) She places particular emphasis on the subversion of discursive and cultural hierarchies, for instance when a metropolitan king was clothed in the dress of a supposedly peripheral culture and coveted the sympathy of his subjects in “peripheral” Scotland to validate his authority. I agree that this exposes certain instabilities on the semiotic and symbolic level—we might take this to exemplify the complexities and anxieties of colonial discourse. And it may indeed have given some Scots a share in defining British national identity, thus partly reversing their subjugation under English discursive authority. For instance, this might have been true for Lowland culture brokers like Scott, or anglicized Highland elites masking as romantic noble savages. But their gain was arguably based on the continued discursive and social
colonization of other Scots, that is, Gaelic commoners and their traditional everyday culture, for instance on the linguistic or economic level. Even the dwindling remains of this culture, stripped of their subversive potential, were submitted to mainstream redefinition and appropriation, as a mere symbol in the identity discourse of their colonizers—arguably the last capstone of their subjugation. They seem to have profited very little from the subversive play of signs which McCracken-Flesher identifies on the level of national relations between (elite/Anglo-)Scotland and England. And even on that level, the pageantry of the royal visit left many real power imbalances intact, and arguably stabilized them, for instance through compensation. Against this background, romantic surface emblems, however unstably employed, appear considerably less subversive.

Despite this non-subversive dimension, several contemporaries objected that this pageantry gave the Highland dimension too much power. Some protested that the popularization of Highland symbols as pan-Scottish icons happened at the expense of Lowland tradition, so that standard hierarchies between Scotland’s two cultures were reversed. Several of those who advocated Lowland traditions as preferable national emblems celebrated Robert Burns as an antidote to gaelocentric Ossianism. Some patriots resented the representation of the entire Scottish nation as a horde of Gaelic barbarians.63

These disagreements notwithstanding, Highlandism remained a key component of Scottish national iconography throughout the nineteenth century, and even until today. These Scottish romantic constructs of national distinctness and “authenticity” could be tolerated and even actively supported by the nineteenth-century British establishment precisely because they were politically non-subversive. This is another point where Scotland significantly differed from Ireland, where the old Jacobite potential for unrest was soon followed by another: radical nationalism. Moreover, this nationalist movement used Ireland’s cultural distinctness as a political argument and did not content itself with invocations of the culture’s past—instead, it laid considerable stress on revival. This sets Irish pro-Gaelicism apart from its “museumizing” and depoliticized Scottish counterparts. The continued role of Ireland as a source of turbulence long forestalled the romanticization of its cultural traditions by an anglophone unionist British mainstream.64

Romanticizations of the Gaels were not limited to discussions of Scottish national identity. They could also feature in scholarly reflections about the general nature of primitive human society, as discussed in chapter 1. Concepts of noble savagery played an important part in this context. Many intellectuals considered traditional Gaelic society as a specimen of archaic “patriarchal society” which had long vanished from other parts of the globe where it could only be studied from books, like the Old Testament or the works of Homer. Surviving “archaisms” and “noble savagery” were found both in the Gaidhealtachd and among indigenous populations of overseas colonies.65 However, Gaels could be more easily studied because they were
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geographically closer to the center. Moreover, the Highlands had already been subjected to enough “civilizing” activity to become relatively safe to travel, while retaining enough “exotic” difference to remain interesting, and “primitive” enough to function as contemporary ancestors. Highlanders thus occupied an intermediate position between Lowland Scots peasants and overseas indigenous peoples. Although Lowlanders were sometimes cast as noble savages as well, they often seemed too close and too similar to the center to make such constructs credible. “Natives” of other continents, by contrast, were still beyond the reach of most: travel was difficult, and tourism to Asia, for instance, only developed in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, overseas terrains and societies were often so “wild” and unintelligible to Europeans that they were unsafe to visit.

Eighteenth-century discourse on Gaelic noble savagery ignored the probability that many Highlanders would have happily become prosperous capitalist citizens if they had had a choice, and that their freedom from luxury and “corruption” was not so much a consequence of moral superiority as of a lack of opportunity. Their enforced exclusion from the prospering capitalist community was, in the comments of outside observers, often interpreted (and idealized) as a voluntary rejection of materialism on moral or sentimental grounds.

Highland noble savagery not only performed important functions in discourse about national identity and the general origins of human society, but also in the more personal realm of individual dreams, lifestyle, and recreation. Here as well, the marginalized Other was constructed as a binary opposite of the mainstream’s urban capitalist life-world and became a site of temporary escapism via fancy-dress occasions, contemplation, reading, or tourism. For instance, in romanticizations of Highland dress,

the bare . . . knee became a piece of noble savagery, and the freedom of movement of the . . . Highlander became a laudable escape from the unnatural constraints of urban industrial civilisation. The kilt suggested an apparently ready access to Highland masculine sexuality, and so to passion and violence; these also changed from being deplorable to desirable features.

The appeal of the “wild” emanated not only from the Highlanders and their be-kilted bodies, but also from the country they inhabited: from about 1760 onwards, this landscape started to be considered worth seeing and provided a welcome change from the all too cultivated landscapes of the Lowlands and England. Initially, most travelers restricted themselves to the “tamer” southwestern and central parts of the Highlands, picturesque wildernesses already half-domesticated through estate “improvement” but still offering a pleasant contrast to the fully domesticated centers of Britain and Europe. This half-tamed Highland landscape complemented and confirmed the viewer’s
sense of human superiority over nature, rather than challenging it. The more thoroughly “wild” regions of the northwestern Highlands and Islands did not become popular travel destinations until a little later.\(^6\)

Primitiveness, though not necessarily of the “wild,” dangerous variety, was also ascribed to those Gaels who were, even by metropolitan standards, highly educated, such as the Aberdeen scholar and poet Eòghann MacLachlann (Ewen MacLachlan). An anonymous obituary on MacLachlann, published in the *Aberdeen Journal* on April 24, 1822, initially admits that the deceased had “extensive . . . knowledge of the Greek and Roman Classics.”\(^7\) But soon, the text denies MacLachlann’s intelligence again: “Ignorant of men and manners and passing through life with the innocent simplicity of childhood, he lived in a world of his own creation.”\(^8\) This view is probably influenced by an implicit belief that all Gaels as noble savages were by definition possessed of a childlike intellect which gave them moral innocence but also a degree of naïveté and simple-mindedness. This notion of noble savagery is even more obvious in one of the two anonymous anglophone poems which accompanied the obituary: “in him primeval manners shone / And friendship dwel’d with simplicity.”\(^9\) As already noted, the comparison with children is also familiar from overseas colonial contexts.

While the “innocence” of children and “savages” can give them moral superiority over more “debased” adults or metropolitans, *leaving* the children/colonized in their state of innocence without trying to educate and “develop” them can also be to their—and the center’s—disadvantage: “Had he known how to avail himself of the vast resources of his genius and industry, few could have made so conspicuous a figure in the republic of letters as he might have done.”\(^10\) The vocabulary suggests that this statement could be extended from MacLachlann the individual to Gaeldom in general, and from the “republic of letters” to a community which was more literally a “state,” though not a republic but a constitutional monarchy: Britain. The Gaidhealtachd was seen as a reservoir of human and economic resources which had hitherto remained largely unexploited because the natives in their simplicity had never known how to do so. Moreover, they were supposedly too idle for innovation and capitalist success, which in contemporary language was frequently dubbed as lack of “industry.” These failings had long prevented them from making prominent contributions to the British national community. Whereas MacLachlann, like many other Gaels of the past, supposedly died without fulfilling his potential, the Gaidhealtachd of the future faced a brighter fate: intellectually better-endowed onlookers from the center had seen the Gaels’ good potential and sent help to set regional development on its way, so that Highland assets would not be lost to the world.

Despite such apparent relish in progress, MacLachlann’s death could also be linked to “dying race” romanticism: the first poem which accompanies the obituary sentimentally demands: “wrap him in his Highland plaid— / No other shroud were half so dear.”\(^11\) The anglophone author admires the plaid
especially for its picturesqueness, as the reference to “its chequered folds”\(^75\)
indicates. But the idea that tartan cloth is highly suitable for shrouds suggests
that, although the Gaels’ economic potential may be developed, their culture
faces not progress but decline. This is reinforced in the following stanza:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Since he is gone, now man must fail} \\
&\text{To rescue from oblivious night} \\
&\text{The language of the Gael.}^76
\end{align*}
\]

Whereas the previously outlined romanticizations of Highland noble savagery
tended to serve as harmless ideological *counterweights* to (and compensa-
tions for) certain lingering discontents with the economic, political, social,
and cultural status quo, these romantic concepts could also function as direct
*tools* of the status quo, as the following sections show.

**Difference as a Tool of the Status Quo**

*Romantic Concepts of National Identity*

During its formation and consolidation, the modern nation-state had taken
care to homogenize internal cultural differences on its territory. Homogeni-
ization and modernization had eliminated or at least weakened many local
traditions. But by the late eighteenth century it was feared that moderniza-
tion might have gone too far. The fiction of a national community needed
tradition and organic continuity as ideological cement. It also needed a
degree of local particularity to distinguish itself from other nation-states. The
urban, modern, and to a certain extent cosmopolitan culture which carried
so much prestige among aspiring eighteenth-century national subjects was
not the best source of social cement because it belonged to a privileged, edu-
cated minority. Moreover, it was too new to boost the fiction of a historically
continuous national culture, and too cosmopolitan to clearly distinguish one
nation from the other.\(^77\) Thus, national identity in the late eighteenth century
came to a point where it felt a need to fall back on some of the very trad-
itions, localisms, and folk cultures which it had previously devalued as vulgar
counter-images to national elite culture, or which it had tried to obliterate
altogether as superannuated obstacles to national progress.

The romantic age saw the emergence of national identity concepts which
stressed cultural organicism rather than pragmatism, materialism, and prog-
ress. The German philosopher and poet Johann Gottfried Herder was a key
figure in this context. The central tenets of organic nationalism included
the historical continuity of national or ethnic character, and the clear dis-
tinguishability of national or ethnic groups from each other. This favored
deterministic concepts of history which claimed that inherited characteristics
and geography shaped national/ethnic psychology and distinctness. Where significant historical ruptures and sociocultural changes were difficult to deny, landscape and nature could be seen as vehicles of continuity which stood above the mutabilities of human society, such as shifting borders and power structures. The search for evidence of continuity fanned interest in ancient history, for instance in Stone Age monuments, often interpreted as druidic. There was also increased interest in early literature from the “Dark Age” or medieval period, as well as in folklore and the search for an indigenous aesthetic. In early history, cultural communities had supposedly been more sheltered from foreign influences or other forces of hybridization and change. Thus, older cultural artifacts and traditions represented the greatest “authenticity” and “purity,” the very essence of the national or ethnic spirit which distinguished societies from each other.78

In light of these new concepts, Scotland and the rest of Britain were in search of roots and essences. Even in England, there was some interest in the “Celts” because their aura of exceptional ancientness promised access to the earliest history of the entire British island. Moreover, many Scots seem to have felt that a complete assimilation into a united Britain no longer appeared satisfying because North Britishness was too recent and “artificial”—especially in view of frequent English refusals to embrace them as brethren. An emotional component was deemed crucial to national happiness, but attempts to emotionalize the pragmatic Anglo-Scottish Union by fostering mutual sympathy had been only partially successful. Those who felt that the Union had left an emotional void often shifted the focus of their affections back to more homely traditions which had been Scotland’s very own. Non-subversive ethnic self-assertions which helped Scots to feel at home in the United Kingdom were actively encouraged by the monarchy.79

Highlandism, Social Cohesion, and the Cult of the Monarchy

It was thought that Highland society possessed several noble virtues which, despite their savage provenance, could be turned to direct advantage for the modern civilized British polity. If Celtic sensibility, high morality, and family values could be adopted by their Saxon compatriots too, these values would provide useful moral glue to hold civil society together and prevent it from degeneration.80

In addition to civil society, the political sphere could also benefit from “Highland values.” Previously, Highland royalism and loyalism had often been perceived as an obstacle to modern nation-state formation because many Gaels’ fidelity to the Stuarts had set them at odds with the bourgeois revolutions which had dethroned that dynasty. Gaels had been reviled as representatives of anti-nation-state, antibourgeois, and anticapitalist forces, such as feudalism and absolutism. But around 140 years after Britain’s first bourgeois revolution—when another, much more radical bourgeois revolution
swept over France—British people feared that the French precedent might unleash social unrest in the United Kingdom, overthrow the constitutional monarchy, and erect a republic. As in the above-mentioned anxiety about over-civilization, modern British society was afraid of being destroyed by an over-radicalization of its own internal logic, for instance concerning bourgeois anti-feudalism. In search of ideological antidotes against this danger, it re-embraced the very traditions it had once combated. Highland social conservatism was now commended as a model which other, potentially more rebellious Britons should emulate.

In this way, Jacobitism became a symbol of monarchism in general. Similarly, there was a partial rehabilitation of chieftainship and clan feudalism: a clan could be seen as an extended family with the chief as the father of his people—ideally a benevolent one. It was thought that social relations in a clan were softened by family affection, and that the Gaels’ loyalty to their superiors and the entire social structure had a pre-political, natural, immutable aspect which set clanship apart from the more impersonal and unstable bourgeois society of the mainstream. Historical discourse about pre-1746 Jacobitism now often minimized the political motivations of the rebels, instead ascribing the risings to purely moral and emotional reasons or to innate ethnic character. Allegedly, the Gaels’ general instinct for loyalty, or their rules of hospitality (another commonly acclaimed ethnic virtue) had compelled them to help “Bonnie Prince Charlie” in 1745–46 without leaving them any choice. Such explanations downplayed intentionality and guilt. Moreover, the instinctiveness and generality of Gaelic loyalty seemed to make this loyalty easily transferable—from the Stuarts or the chiefs to the Hanoverian kings. As Hogg’s song “Donald MacDonald” puts it:

What though we befriendit young Charlie?
.................................
Had Geordie come friendless amang us
Wi’ him we had a’ gane away.82

Apart from the French Revolution, another factor which soon threatened to destabilize the status quo was the emergence of class consciousness and socialism. Here too, idealized pictures of a stable clan society promised an ideological antidote to the anxiety of the privileged, and perhaps a means to create loyalty among the lower ranks. One event which associated the Gaidhealtachd with the cult of the monarchy was the royal visit to Scotland in 1822. Romantic images of royalism and feudalism also drew other Anglo-British aristocrats to the Highlands, which became a fashionable hunting ground from the 1830s and 1840s onwards. The trend also spread to the lower gentry and middle classes. Since about the 1840s, Highland tourism also profited from improved communications and travel facilities.83 Buying or renting Highland estates became a status symbol for Britain’s elite. In 1852,
Queen Victoria herself purchased such an estate at Balmoral and decorated the castle with tartans of her husband’s own design. Highlandism acquired increasingly aristocratic associations, and became more and more dissociated from the Gaelic language—unlike in Wales, where cultural and linguistic distinctness remained more strongly linked. Its aristocratic connotations were another aspect of Highlandism which met with criticism from some Scottish patriots, who desired more demotic national icons. Again, Burns could be embraced as an alternative symbol of Scottishness, this time not because he was a Lowlander but because he stood for a more demotic (and democratic) heritage.  

“In the Army Now”: Savage Virtue and Imperialist Warfare  
Highlanders had been belittled physically, morally, culturally, and mentally in order to justify outside control. Despite this supposed inferiority, they had also been seen as a menace. The latter was strongly linked to their prominent military role in the mid-seventeenth-century Civil Wars and in Jacobitism. The contrast between their alleged primitiveness and their considerable military potential to threaten a powerful state could be rationalized through an analogy with the hardy barbarians of antiquity who threatened and eventually smashed a Roman Empire which excessive luxury had spoiled into degeneracy. Partly through direct influence from Roman texts and partly through mere “analog of viewpoint,” the modern British mainstream saw the Gaels as natural-born soldiers who could be a danger, but also a good example to its government troops. Gradually, the negative aspects of “primitiveness” decreased in importance, and the Gaels’ roles as soldiers were central to these redefinitions. Early examples can be found in anglophone Jacobite and Episcopalian discourse from the 1690s onwards: as the Stuart cause relied heavily on Highland armies, its anglophone supporters saw Gaels in more positive terms than was customary in the Anglo-Scottish or English mainstream. Highlanders could now be seen as the most patriotic of Scots, as heroes and potential saviors of their country from English occupation. Alternatively, for instance in English Jacobites’ eyes, Highlanders could appear as the most patriotic of Britons who would save Britain from a usurping dynasty.  

An example of pro-Highland sentiment in anglophone Scottish patriotic discourse is a Jacobite drinking song which begins with the words “Come let us go drink boyes”:

Let the brave loyal Clans
the Stuarts ancient race
restoar with sword in hand [?— —]
and al there foes displace
the union overturn boyes
This anticipates several attributes which recurred in later portraits of Gaelic noble savagery: extraordinary loyalty, martial valor, and antiquity. There are also anglophone Jacobite songs about love between Lowland lassies and Highland laddies where the woman personifies Scotland or more specifically its Lowlands. Sometimes she is portrayed as having once lapsed into unfaithfulness, which symbolizes Scottish complicity in the Union with England, but the true love to whom she eventually returns is the strong, virile, and patriotically ever-loyal Gael.

The trend for the future, however, was set by the employment of Gaelic soldiers not on the Jacobite side, but in the British government army. This already started on a small scale before 1745, most famously in the Black Watch Regiment. In 1725 the Black Watch was established as a rural police force, mainly to prevent cattle theft and contain the Jacobite threat. In 1743 it was first sent outside the Gaidhealtachd, to train in England for service on the Continent. Rumors that they were intended for the Caribbean led to mutiny, but later the reconstituted regiment was more successfully employed, both in Europe and overseas. Hiring Highland warriors for the British Army again had a precedent in the Roman Empire, which likewise recruited “barbarian” soldiers to use their savage hardihood for the “civilized” center’s own purposes. One of the earliest mainstream eulogies on Highland bravery in the British Army is a popular print recounting the heroism of a Black Watch soldier fighting against the French around 1740. An eyewitness account of a Highland regiment in London around 1743 explicitly invokes imperial parallels—in this case not ancient Roman, but modern overseas ones. Interestingly, the othering gaze is also playfully inverted, with a detachment and self-consciousness reminiscent of certain passages in Martin Martin’s work:

When the Highlanders walk’d the streets here, . . . there was more staring at them than ever was seen at the Morocco ambassador’s attendance, or even at the Indian chiefs. . . . The amazement expressed by our mob was not greater than the surprize of these poor creatures; and if we thought their dress and language barbarous, they had just the same opinion of our manners; nor will I pretend to decide which was most in the right.

Soon, however, the Londoners came to regard the Highlanders with respect—namely, when they learned of their military successes. The Highlanders’ gradual ascent in mainstream opinion to the position of national military heroes was delayed by the 1745 rising which ensured a temporary resurgence
of older, more negative notions about Gaels. These subsided after the victory of “civilized” forces over “barbarism” at Culloden, but even afterwards the mainstream retained enough belief in the Gaels’ primitive martial valor to harness the latter for Britain’s government army with increased eagerness.  

Highland elites played an active part in this, raising regiments and deliberately marketing the region to create a “recognizable brand in a lucrative [military] marketplace.” During the Seven Years War (1756–63), Highlanders were recruited on a considerable scale. Scottish losses during this and several other wars were disproportionately heavier than English ones, similar to the “disproportionate losses . . . [later] repeated among other ‘white’ colonies,” as Murray Pittock remarks. Their usefulness as soldiers abroad greatly contributed to a more positive evaluation of Highlanders by the mainstream. The Seven Years War was only the beginning. Even more Highlanders were recruited during the American War of Independence and the Napoleonic Wars.

Gaelic noble savages appeared as ideal soldiers, thanks to their hardihood-inducing physical environment and the loyalty allegedly engendered by clanship. Together with the hierarchic principles outlined above, Highland regiments were another factor in clanship’s rehabilitation. These regiments were often organized on a clan basis, which was regarded as an ideal asset. One reason was the supposedly natural and unlimited Gaelic loyalty to their chiefs and commanders, and by extension to the crown. Second, the soldiers had known many of their comrades from childhood, which increased cohesion. Devotion to their superiors was sometimes more myth than reality: the Clearances had created considerable anti- landlord sentiment and weakened feudal loyalties among the clan commoners, and there were several mutinies in eighteenth-century Highland regiments. Nonetheless, the myth was powerful, and the Gaels’ prominent role in Britain’s European and colonial wars contributed to their ideological integration into the national mainstream and the burgeoning empire, as well as to the transformation of Highland dress and bagpipes (though not the language) into widely accepted symbols of national and imperial pride. This “militarism and imperialism . . . distinguished Scottish Celticism . . . from its pacifistic Welsh and rebellious Irish contemporaries.” Devine points out that the military contribution of Lowland—and, for that matter, Irish—soldiers to the British Empire was also considerable, but their ideological and iconographic profile was less conspicuous, while Highland troops were distinguished by their particular dress and “clan-based” organization. In 1745 armed Highlanders had still been mostly perceived in negative terms as forces of Catholicism and autocracy. Only two decades later, they were considered a “bulwark of British liberties.” This is reflected in the popular song “The Highland Character.” Penned by Sir Harry Erskine (ca. 1710–1765), the lyrics were allegedly translated from a Gaelic text by a Black Watch soldier. The song is also interesting for its overt Roman references:
In the garb of old Gaul, wi’ the fire of old Rome,
From the heath-cover’d mountains of Scotia we come,
Where the Romans endeavour’d our country to gain,
But our ancestors fought, and they fought not in vain.99

[Chorus:] Such our love of liberty, our country, and our laws,
That, like our ancestors of old, we stand by Freedom’s cause;
We’ll bravely fight like heroes bold, for honour and applause,
And defy the French, with all their art, to alter our laws.

No effeminate customs our sinews unbrace,
No luxurious tables enervate our race,
Our loud-sounding pipe bears the true martial strain,
So do we the old Scottish valour retain.

We sons of the mountains, tremendous as rocks,
Dash the force of our foes with our thundering strokes.

Quebec and Cape Breton, the pride of old France,
In their troops fondly boasted till we did advance;
But when our claymore they saw us produce,
Their courage did fail, and they sued for a truce.100

The qualities of ancient colonizers and colonized are amalgamated, and the virtues of both are projected onto the modern Gaels. Here, the invader who threatens Gaelic liberty is not an intra-British enemy (e.g., Lowlanders, English people, the anglocentric British state), but France. This external menace strengthens British intra-national cohesion. The Celtic defenders of freedom do not fight against their immediate “colonizers”—Rome or the British state—but for them, protecting the United Kingdom’s interests against a rival empire.

The military virtues fostered by “primitive” Gaelic traditions are also noted in Smollett’s novel The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker and Adam Smith’s economic treatise The Wealth of Nations. But their endorsement of the primitive is not unqualified: they also identify grave problems in traditional clanship, such as local autocracy, disorder produced by chieftains’ disregard of central government authority, and lack of productivity. Moreover, Smith argues that the valor of Highland-style militias is still surpassed by that of modern standing armies—to which, however, they are a helpful supplement that also counteracts the risk of authoritarianism entailed by standing forces.101

The army has also been associated with the revival and maintenance of piping traditions.102 This connection has survived into the present, as can be
seen from the annual Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo where pipers from all over the Commonwealth (and beyond) display their skill. Apart from these imperial associations, Highland dress also acquired a more domestic symbolic function: especially during the Napoleonic Wars, it became an emblem for defending the whole of Britain against republican and revolutionary threats. Early nineteenth-century eulogists of Gaelic noble savagery and martial valor include David Stewart of Garth: “nursed in poverty, he [the Highlander] acquired a hardihood which enabled him to sustain severe privations”—“the simplicity of his life gave vigour to his body.” The ways in which Enlightened and romantic thinkers acknowledged the presence and usefulness of the noble savage in the midst of their own, generally more “advanced” society is one way in which the primitive can anachronistically irrupt into a model of linear social development which normally assumes a clear succession of mutually distinct historical stages. It thus highlights the complexities of Enlightenment concepts of history and of the Highlands’ role in the construction of modern Scotland and Britain.

But “even as the local colour grew brighter, it was reduced to the function of tinting an imperial outline.” The romanticized Highland soldier became an iconic symbol of Scotland’s junior partnership in Britain’s global empire. Military recruitment drained the Highlands of fighting men, thus reducing the risk of internal disorder at home. As an incentive, the state offered cash grants to chieftains who raised regiments. Moreover, the army offered promising careers for Highland aristocrats. Partly, however, especially as regards the commoners, the Gaels’ complicit role in imperialism was based on direct or indirect compulsion: for many Jacobites, joining the British Army was the only way of gaining pardon and social rehabilitation, and such recruits often “remained openly cynical about the British cause.” Others were induced by the fact that their home districts offered few ways of earning a living. There was also more directly enforced recruitment, for example during the Napoleonic Wars, via press gangs or chieftainly blackmail: some landowners gave land leases only to families who gave a son for the chief’s regiment. The modern British capitalist mainstream had long fought feudal relics in its midst as obstacles to progress and liberty. But now, after the commercialization of estate management and the end of private clan armies, it was happy to use a feudal pattern (exchanging land for military service) in the wars fought by the central government to establish capitalism in overseas colonies and beat competing European powers.

Not all military participation in imperialism was enforced, of course: even commoners developed considerable identification with the nation and its empire. Military Highlandism could flatter Gaelic ethnic pride. This may have been especially important in the early years when Gaelic traditions at home and in civil contexts were still regarded with suspicion, for instance during the time of the Disclothing Act. Even then, the army allowed the otherwise prohibited Highland dress as uniforms, which offered Gaels legitimate space
for practicing and displaying their traditions. A similar attraction may have been that the Highland regiments were organized in a way which retained some semblance of traditional military clanship. This may have appealed to those who regretted the decline of the old Gaelic society, especially to the tacksmen whose traditional privileged status and class confidence had greatly relied on their military role within the clan, but who were now losing their status at home through the decline of clan feudalism. A “revival” of military clanship in the government army might have seemed an interesting option. Other factors which increased national and imperial identification among higher- and lower-class Gaels alike were successful careers in the colonial army and administration, a share in the honor and spoils, and the advantages which the wars had for the domestic economy of the Highlands. The need to clothe and feed the armies, as well as restrictions on Continental imports, increased the demand for Highland goods like wool, cattle, and kelp. Military recruitment temporarily eased demographic pressure: there was less of a “population surplus” which had to live off small, infertile patches of land, or compete for a limited number of tolerable local jobs. Soldiers’ wages and pensions sent home to their families or brought back by survivors increased capital influx.

Their military usefulness also promoted the establishment of Gaels as colonial settlers. Sometimes the government rewarded disbanded soldiers with land grants overseas. As early as the 1730s, Highlanders who had fought in the government army were promised land in Georgia. Further land grants were offered to those who had fought in the wars of 1756–63 and 1776–83. Nonetheless, there were occasional attempts to curtail migration. In the early 1770s, for instance, there were rumours that as many as 20,000 Gaels were preparing to emigrate. This caused fears in government circles because hopeful overseas “pioneers” might be less likely to join the military than Highland tenants threatened by clearance, crofting, and chieftainly pressure. Several members of the political establishment were Highland landlords who had an additional interest in retaining Gaelic tenants as a profitable labor force. Sometimes, there were clashes of interest between London politicians and the provincial governments in the colonies, since the latter could show a more immediate interest in encouraging migration. All in all, the usefulness of Highlanders as soldiers and settlers implicated them considerably in the colonizing process.

The advantages which the Gaels drew from their complicity in army and empire do not necessarily preclude a postcolonial approach to the Highland experience. First, military recruitment often relied on direct or indirect coercion. Second, the Gaels were not the only colonized ethnic group that came to serve in the imperial army:

The Gaels’ experience of gaining a measure of “respectability” through military service was later shared by ex-slaves and their descendants in the United States; and the long and distinguished service of the
Highland regiments . . . [was] setting an example for Sikhs and Gurkhas, other conquered races of “warlike” character who joined the British cause.\textsuperscript{108}

Third, the material and ideological integration of the Gaels did not last forever: after the Napoleonic Wars had ended, many Highland soldiers and Highland-produced goods were no longer required. This contributed to a general economic crisis in the Gaidhealtachd, and the resultant pauperism caused another change of discursive trends: Highlanders again became more of a despised colonized than a celebrated colonizer (see chapter 5).

But for the time being, the new respectability of the Gaels also found its way into—and partly even emanated from—anglophone literature. And although the image of Gaelic noble savagery would face a serious backlash as the nineteenth century progressed, it never entirely disappeared, as romantic perceptions exerted a lasting influence. One of the most important novels from the latter end of the romantic period—though not a \textit{completely} romantic text itself—was Walter Scott’s \textit{Waverley}. Like James Macpherson at the start of the romantic era, Scott played a crucial role in shaping perceptions of the Highlands, and of Scotland in general. The next chapter provides a case study of \textit{Waverley}, charting the interplay of romantic and Enlightened colonizing discourse strategies, as well as elements which could be read as anticolonial.