Gaelic Scotland in the Colonial Imagination
Stroh, Silke

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CONCLUSION

Appropriations of racist discourse in order to defend the Gaels and other “Ceils” against quasi-colonial representations were not the only responses to the continued marginality of the Gaidhealtachd, or of Scotland as a whole, during the nineteenth century. There were also other—and at times much more radical—forms of resistance, both ideological and practical. In the press, the racist responses discussed in chapter 5 were complemented by more sympathetic voices which were informed in varying proportions by continued affirmations of progressivism, romanticizations of the Highland predicament, and radical social criticism. Several journalists resisted the widespread racialization of Highland-related reporting, deconstructed racist representations, stressed the importance of local “inside” perspectives, highlighted social rather than racial factors as the causes of the Highland problem, and at times also campaigned for radical social change.¹

Later, the land agitation movement also linked Highland social criticism to robust grassroots activism and practical resistance. Although it was not linked to the political secessionism more typical of Irish and overseas anticolonial politics, Scottish Gaelic land rights activism attained important results, such as security of tenure as well as low and stable rents, which might be celebrated as the success of an anti-imperial resistance movement. A more skeptical perspective could argue that, even in its successes, the land rights movement still relied on assumptions more reminiscent of colonial than anticolonial thought. Malcolm Chapman argues that the extraordinary social security now granted to crofters often exceeded that of other capitalist subjects and “defined [the Highlands] out of the sphere of modern economics” and of modernity itself. He further argues:

Whatever we might think of the morality of the economic system within which we find ourselves, it can be argued that isolation from it, while it might confer immunity of a kind, also represents a confirmation . . . of a wider economic impotence. . . . The crofting laws have . . . operated to keep the crofter in . . . [an] idealist half-world . . . , economically and politically irrelevant. The crofting legislation . . . was predicated upon the desirability of keeping the stout Highland stock working the land.²
Chapman thus suggests that the (arguably colonizing) romantic idealization of the Gaels as rural noble savages was partly responsible for the Lowland- or English-based establishment’s assent to some of the crofters’ demands.

Another reaction to internal colonialism was the linguistic and cultural revivalism of the Gaelic intelligentsia, though they partly aimed to achieve their own culture’s rehabilitation by placing it at the service of Britain’s external colonialism in the overseas empire.

Further Scottish voices of resistance which became slightly louder toward the end of the nineteenth century came from the aforementioned resurgence of Scottish cultural and political nationalism. Although the latter was still dominated by unionism and a desire for limited regional autonomy rather than radical secessionism, the nineteenth-century Home Rule movement might be seen to anticipate elements of a Scottish decolonizing nationalism which built up stronger momentum in the twentieth century. Endorsements of Celticity by Scotland’s anglophone mainstream can be seen as part of a wider context of cultural patriotism, even where these endorsements seem politically rather disabling, as in Celtic Twilight fictions like Sharp’s which seem to effect Lowland Scottish cultural gains at the price of racializing and discursively colonizing the Celtic fringe. The backward-looking and feminizing elements in Sharp’s work also point toward a colonizing rather than a decolonizing effect. Nonetheless, there were also authors and artists who tried to put images of feminized Celticity to more modern, forward-looking uses, such as Margaret Oliphant or Margaret and Frances MacDonald. This in turn can be seen to build a bridge to the way in which “Celtic” or Gaelic elements are treated by the modernist writers of the twentieth-century Scottish Renaissance, such as Hugh MacDiarmid: here as well, there is an attempt to fuse “Celtic tradition” with “modernity” to create an image of Scottish culture which is rooted, distinctive, and progressive.

While nineteenth-century appropriations of Celticity were supposed to energize not only the Scottish, but also—and especially—the British nation (given the dominance of unionism), twentieth-century appropriations laid their national focus on energizing the Scottish nation, often allied to a more pronounced political nationalism. The twentieth century also saw a greater readiness by mainstream anglophone Celtophiles to not just reimagine “the Celtic perspective,” or arrogate the right to speak for it, but also let “Celtic” voices speak for themselves and engage in more genuine dialogue with Gaelic culture, for instance through anthologies and other literary projects which brought together both anglophone and gaelophone authors.

In addition to nationalist appropriations, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discourse also invoked Gaelic experiences as precedents and indigenous reference points for modern radical politics. The radical movement after 1885 interpreted the Highland Clearances “not just as highland history but as a symbol for the exploitation of the Scottish people.”
Traditional “Celtic” precapitalist communal landholding patterns could be interpreted as a sort of Celtic communism. This might be seen to parallel similar concepts developed in overseas (post-)colonies, such as ideas of “African socialism,” which likewise reinterpreted selected aspects of precolonial and precapitalist indigenous social structures as valuable reference points in the search for anticolonial, anticapitalist alternatives in present and future liberation struggles. However, in Scotland the fusion of “Celtic” culture with nationalist politics could not be achieved as easily as in Wales and Ireland, because in Scotland the proportion of the population that spoke the Celtic language was numerically much more marginal.\footnote{6}

Those “anticolonial” voices which could be heard in nineteenth-century Scotland were often mainly directed against intra-British marginalization, while overseas imperialism was often condoned. A prominent exception was the anglophone Scottish writer and politician R. B. Cunninghame Graham, who not only supported Scottish and Irish Home Rule, but also leveled fairly radical critiques at British overseas colonialism, for instance in his sarcastic ironicization of colonial discourse in his essay “‘Bloody Niggers’” (1897).\footnote{7} This essay satirizes “Celto-Saxon” pretensions to being the global master race and stresses that race is a social construct, not a biological reality.\footnote{8}

In the twentieth century, the decolonizing dynamic of Scottish identity discourse became even more pronounced, and transperipheral solidarity with overseas (post-)colonies became more frequent. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century Scottish society and culture have often critically engaged with older colonial patterns of textualizing Scotland and/or Gaeldom, as well as continuing and radicalizing earlier “anticolonial” discursive traditions. Decolonizing trends can be discerned in many fields, including politics, economics, education, history, literature, and the media. Prominent themes and strategies include the critique of cultural cringes, the reclaiming of discursive authority, the rewriting of history, a direct nationalist politicization of literature, the indigenization of educational and cultural standards, and the subversion of linguistic hierarchies. While some “writing back” merely seems to stand colonial patterns on their head, other Scottish texts transcend colonial dichotomies more fully, for instance by recognizing or even embracing the inevitability of hybridity and transculturality. All these features have also occurred in overseas anti- and postcolonial or transcultural writing. Many modern Scottish texts explicitly recognize these transperipheral parallels, although some of them also acknowledge the complications arising from Scotland’s ambiguous historical position as both intra-British colonized and overseas colonizer. Whereas in some overseas contexts postcolonialism is already considered to be on the way out, in the “Celtic fringe” its heyday
seems far from over, perhaps especially so because full independence has so far not been achieved, except in the Irish Republic.

This study has shown that anglophone texts have often constructed Scottish Gaelic identity in ways which show considerable similarities with strategies of colonial or postcolonial writing. Such strategies include the legitimation of political, legal, administrative, and economic domination of the margins by hegemonic outsiders; negotiations of religious, linguistic, and other cultural differences; discursive power imbalances; civilizational hierarchies and “civilizing missions”; the hegemony of metropolitan cultural norms on the periphery; both negative and positive stereotypes of othering (i.e., both ignoble and noble savagery); and even biologistic racism. Many features which are stereotypically ascribed to Gaels also appear in overseas colonial othering, such as barbarism, backwardness, provincialism, disorder, illogicality, indolence, filth, femininity, and childishness. There have also been signs of cultural cringes, the imitation of metropolitan standards in anglophone Highland literature, various kinds of writing back, ambivalence, and hybridity.

On the basis of these similarities, a postcolonial “school” within Scottish studies has already been evolving for some time, although this has been much more delayed than corresponding developments in Irish studies, and although the international mainstream of postcolonial studies has largely ignored these developments so far, despite a few important exceptions. The present study aims to encourage further dialogue in this area.

It is also noteworthy that many constructions of Scottish and/or Gaelic identity in colonial terms refer back to Celticist writings from antiquity. Greek and Roman texts about civilization and barbarism often functioned as models for colonial images of modern “Celts”; moreover, images of both ancient and modern Celts furnished models for the representation of overseas colonial populations. Images of Scottish Gaels, as part of a wider Celticist discourse, act as a bridge between ancient and modern colonial discourse, thus occupying a central function in the development of the British global colonial imagination.

Naturally, there are also important specificities. For instance, concentric circles of intra-British marginalization and othering are complemented by concentric circles of same-ing and concentric national loyalties. Scots, including the Gaels, have often been less thoroughly othered than, say, colonized indigenous peoples overseas. But the existence of concentric loyalties in Scotland is not necessarily an argument against “(post)colonial” comparability, since similar phenomena have been identified in overseas colonial settler societies.10

Concentric, inclusive concepts of British national identity also help to account for the fact that local elites and a certain degree of political choice played an important part in this “internal colonial” project. In Scotland, the degree of “native” collaboration was arguably much greater than it was in
Ireland or various overseas territories. The deep involvement of many Scots in transoceanic colonizing ventures is another important site of ambivalence. However, it should be borne in mind that such complicity in imperialism has also been displayed by certain overseas colonized people. For instance, black African slave traders were members of a colonized region who participated in the colonization of their own region. Examples of colonized subjects who participated in the colonization of other regions and peoples of the globe include white settler societies colonizing the indigenous peoples of “their” country, and both white and nonwhite scions of the colonies that propped up the empire by fighting in the British Army. Thus, the difference between overseas colonized peoples and the Scots might be regarded as being of degree rather than kind. Moreover, such instances of hybridity, which transgress simplistic binarisms between (ex-)colonizer and (ex-)colonized, have already been an important focus of interest in postcolonial scholarship for years, so that the inclusion of Scotland as yet another highly ambivalent field in the discipline might be considered a valuable addition.

Interdisciplinary dialogue also offers important benefits to Scottish studies. International postcolonial and transcultural scholarship has developed a wealth of tools for the analysis of multi- or transcultural societies, of correlations between social and cultural power imbalances, and of (re)constructions of national identities. All these issues are also highly important concerns in contemporary Scottish culture and academia, which might profit from a more sustained engagement with international theoretical developments and comparative studies.

It is thus hoped that this volume has been able to give an introduction to the Scottish postcolonial question which will help to promote an interdisciplinary rapprochement and dialogue between Scottish studies on the one hand and international postcolonial studies and critical ethnic studies on the other.