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Scotland and Scottishness
From Tradition to Modernity



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Introduction

Before we actually get to Scotland, the way in which we picture it in our imagination is mainly shaped by our readings and bookish considerations upon it and by how popular culture and media culturally construct it. We first create a mental image that takes shape in an idealistic, cultural imaginary space, prior to our confrontation to the real space, and thus we first build a Scotland of the mind before trying to juxtapose our mental image and reality.

A fairy-tale land where myths and legends speaking about great heroes, fantastic beings and extraordinary happenings are deeply rooted in the all too real and amazingly diverse and picturesque scenery, this Scotland of the mind acquires mythical proportions and an undeniably mysterious aura. This fascination with Scotland seems to spring from a particular combination of fact and fiction, legend and history, from intriguing and unexpected contradictions. What has never ceased to impress is the Scots' reverence for their heroic past, their great admiration and attachment for the land they have for so long inhabited, their continuous efforts of making Scotland famous through remarkable artistic achievements, their talent in offering a synthesised version of Scotland in a multitude of national symbols and emblems and, finally, their permanent struggle to assert and legitimise their national and cultural identity.

This introductory study is meant to offer a humble glimpse into the protean complexity of what is generally called "Scottishness". It stems from the combined efforts to further prolong the fairy-tale like representation of Scotland in our minds – that makes us fall in love with a land and its culture long before actually experiencing it – and to nuance this image, bringing it closer to "reality", by means of various facts, data, analyses and commentaries. The objective – as much as it can possibly claim to be so – look cast upon Scottish history, culture and identity does not exclude, of course, the fantastic tinge it has so far and it will always possess.

This study is the first in a series which does not claim to exhaustively cover such complex phenomena as "Scottish identity", "Scottish literature", "Scottish multilingualism" etc. but to offer an interesting starting point to a thorough study of these issues. The general frame of the included chapters is conceived such as to provide information, facts and statistics, literary texts analyses

whenever possible and funny facts, cultural curiosities and anecdotes meant to spice up the ending of each section.

Chapter one offers a panoramic view of the general cultural background necessary in understanding some basic facts about the land of “the brave”: founding myths, national symbols and emblems and characteristic attributes, conventional or stereotypical representations. These general facts are followed by a quick approach to the history of Scottish literature in the second chapter, *From ancient bards to modern writers*. It offers a brief insight into the literary beginnings of Scotland and into one of its most characteristic features – its multilingualism.

History and its representation in the early centuries up to the nineteenth century historical novels written by John Galt and Walter Scott are the focus of the third chapter entitled *The Last of the Free* which dwell on one of the Scots’ major matters of pride: their heroic past.

A large part of the conflicting yet fascinating nature of the Scots comes not only from their Celtic ancestry, their beliefs and their superstitious creeds but also from their philosophical and religious ideas. Religion and philosophy up to the eighteenth century are the topics of the fourth chapter which tries to offer a general perspective on their evolution in Scotland; the sinuous way in which religious belief came to be embraced, rejected or reformed is briefly traced and illustrated by the clash between the Catholic and Protestant ideas provided in the analysis of James Hogg’s most famous novel.

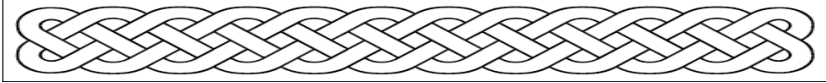
Lyrical Scotland focuses on the long poetic tradition of Scotland which is briefly traced from its early beginnings, touching the most important moments in its history and culminating with the moment of Scottish Renaissance and the poetic work of Scotland’s national poet, Robert Burns. The final chapter of this volume, *Escapes from reality*, deals with the narrative tradition and one of the Scottish favourite literary genres – the Gothic. Mystery, fantasy and the dark recesses of the human soul are once again brought into discussion, offering new insightful considerations on the Scottish conflicting nature and the elusive concept of “Caledonian Antisyzygy” that came to characterise it.

This volume attempts to offer a coherent perspective on the early period in the cultural history of Scotland and its author hopes it should prove useful and interesting enough to encourage and inspire further research into the Scottish culture.

Part 1

REIMAGINING SCOTLAND





Scotland between Past and Present

That is the Land out there, under the sleet, churned and pelted there in the dark, the long ribs upturning their clayey faces to the spear-onset of the sleet. That is the Land, a dim vision this night of laggard fences and long stretching rigs. And the Voice of it – the true and unforgettable voice – the immemorial plaint of the peewit, flying lost.

(Lewis Grassie Gibbon, 1934)

In his work *Imagined communities* Benedict Anderson speaks about “nations” as being continuously defined and redefined by the way in which people belonging to a particular nation see themselves, by their common culture, traditions, language and historic past. Much of what we think and how we think about our own nation or about the others is just a cultural construct, built on our previous readings, cultural information, personal preferences and, of course, no matter how much we would try to deny it, our stereotypical understanding of a nation and its people and our cultural prejudices.

The problem of asserting the Scottish nation – the “stateless nation” as it has been defined – and legitimising it has received a great deal of attention from scholars belonging to different fields, but still remains an open question. Historians, literary critics and sociologists have tried to inscribe Scotland within definite theoretical frameworks but the endeavour turns out to be impossible since Scotland and its essence seem elusive, displaying conflicting features. Concepts such as “Scottishness”, “Scottish identity”, “Scottish nation” and even “Scottish literature” have been discussed and re-discussed, theorised and over-theorised in the attempt to reassign Scotland and its culture their meritorious and individualised place within the European context. The matter is further complicated by the fact that the religious, ethnic and linguistic dimensions of national identity have been submitted to various disruptions and dramatic changes over the centuries.

On the one hand disadvantaged by its peripheral position within the United Kingdom, and on the other hand favoured for its

remarkable landscape and its strategic location, Scotland's "imaginative geography" has been used to define its features and to influence the response to its national characteristics. The first things that come to one's mind when speaking about Scotland are the highland scenery and its legends, the famous lakes and their equally famous yet unseen monsters, the sound of the bagpipes, the intoxicatingly flavoured original Scotch and among many other things, Mel Gibson's impersonation of one of Scotland's most admired and revered heroes, William Wallace. Various described in historical chronicles and official documents, social statistics and political accounts but most of all suggestively depicted in literary texts, paintings and photos Scotland came to represent a fairy-tale land where myth and reality are very difficult to tell apart.

Modern Scotland is defined as a *nation* but not as a state hence its inclusion within the post-colonial studies (basically focusing upon the political, social and cultural situation of former colonies, most of them now independent states) as its history and socio-political evolution seem to be connected to the general experience of colonialism. Sometimes seen as a peripheral space of Great Britain, a *marginal* territory, sometimes neglected or overlooked in terms of cultural achievements, Scotland has, however, imposed itself as a powerful voice.

The early history of Scotland was poorly recorded, being mainly transmitted by oral tradition, in the shape of legends, myths and songs which cast doubt upon the authenticity of sources, upon the reality of dates and facts and upon the accuracy of the accounts. Yet a great part of what Scotland means today has been shaped by the distant myths of a distant past. All these legends have in common the stress laid upon the Scots' bravery, their savage countenance and their unity in facing dangers.

The Scots came from the combination of Picts, Celts, Gaels and different other peoples of various origins. Lacking one major founding myth, the Scots have in fact different legends related to the formation of Scotland; the Irish legends speak about Scota, the earliest known ancestor of the Scots, daughter of an Egyptian pharaoh, who married an Egyptian sage, Nelos (Neil or Nuil), and begot Gaedal Glass (Gaythelos or Goidel in other versions) who gave his name to the Gaels. In other versions Scota is considered to

be the wife of Milesius and she got killed while fighting the Tuatha De Dannan “the people of the goddess Dana”, the last generation of gods who ruled Ireland, and lived underground, before the invasion of Milesius’ sons.

Fordun, one of the first Scottish chroniclers gave another version in which Gaedal Glas was Scota’s husband; the Pharaoh pursued the fleeing Israelites, led by Moses, and by divine intervention the Egyptians were drowned in the Red Sea. Gaythelos who had sympathised with the Israelites and refused to help in their pursuit, was forced to flee from Egypt together with his family and adherents. They wandered to the West in search of a new home, reaching Africa before settling in Spain for a while. In spite of the natives’ hostility, Gaythelos built a strong town called Brigancia with a very tall tower in the middle; he urged his sons to take possession of an island he could see in the distance from the top of his tower – an island which was to be called after his son’s name (Hyber/Iber) – Hibernia or Ireland and sometimes Scotia in honour of his mother.

Lebor Gabala (The Book of Invasions) is one of the first poems in Scottish literature and relates the settlement in Ireland and the coming of the Gaels (150 BC), representing a compilation of myths, legends and Christian elements. Modern historians start from the fact that the Romans used the name Scotia to designate Ireland and conclude that Scottish identity evolved from the Gaelic tradition of Ireland as it was acquired and adjusted in Scotland.

Other legends were recorded in Sir Thomas Gray’s *Scalacronica* and Andrew of Wyntoun’s *The Original Chronical of Scotland*. The traditional image of the ancient Scots as cruel, barbaric *savages* was initiated by Tacitus’s *Agricola* where he spoke about the savage people of Caledonia. Different myths and texts produced by the medieval bardic tradition reinforced the image of the brave, wild Scots whose most important values are freedom, justice and love for their country. The image of the savage Scots has been preserved in history and culture and even now, in Glasgow, sociologists speak about another modern type of urban savage called *heidbanger*.

One of the historical facts that came to shape our understanding of Scotland is its long lasting feud with England. By the 12th century, both England and Scotland had evolved from congeries of tribal lands

into unitary mediaeval kingdoms governed by feudal institutions, laws and principles; they were for long periods of time rivals and allies. Scotland, by turns, offered and denied “homage” to England and got very often related to it by marriages. At first, the border that separated Scotland and England was traced in a friendly way by the Treaty of York (1237) which recognised Scotland as an independent kingdom. The “homage” was initially a tricky problem, initiated during the reign of Alexander II who possessed some fields in England for which he had to pay duties; the English king claimed that the homage was both for the English fields and for Scotland. Alexander III rejected this claim when it was repeated during his reign; this fact initiated the series of troubles between England and Scotland.

Scotland gradually adopted the English language (Inglis) and the English model of local administration. The historians agree upon the existence of a Scottish identity during the war of Independence (1286-1328) which intensified the European perception of Scotland as a national identity, once again stressed by John of Fordun in his *Chronical of the Scottish Nation* (Scotichronicon).

Scotland became part of the European culture due to its scholars who travelled abroad and enrolled into famous universities in France and Italy. The Scots were acquainted with Aristotle’s philosophy, with the mathematics and philosophy of both Western and Islamic worlds. The *Scotus Viator* became a stereotypical image of the Scottish scholar travelling around, acquiring and spreading knowledge. Another consecrated cliché was that of the Scotsman seen as a *brainbox* which emerged as a result of the significant cultural surge at that moment and of the fact that Scotland was considered a “land of education”. The frequently repeated anecdote that illustrates this fact is that at the time when many English monarchs could barely write their own names, the Scottish kings were learned persons – poets and writers whose works are still recorded in literary histories.

The 16th century was considered to be Scotland’s “golden age” when culture recorded a remarkable flourishing. New works appeared: Hector Boece’s *History of Scotland* (1530) asserting the Scots’ belief in their nation and in themselves and George Buchanan’s *Rerum Scotticarum Historia* (1582) which contained a minute geographical description of Scotland. The period between

1560 and 1707 was characterised by cultural and economic progress and corresponds to what historians call “Scotland’s modernity”. In 1560 Scotland decided for Calvinism as its main religious creed, decision often afterwards contested and criticised in various literary productions.

The 17th century witnessed a clash between modernity and conservatory thinking as politics and religion got entangled in debatable issues (stern Calvinist restrictions, witch-hunting, etc.). Before 1603 Scotland was a separate kingdom and until 1707 it had its own Parliament in Edinburgh. The 19th century is viewed as the Scottish enlightenment very much influenced by David Hume and his radical skepticism; once again the Scottish Enlightenment is seen as a strange combination of conflicting drives, of progress and tradition, of hedonistic individualism and utilitarianism. The culture of Victorian Scotland was considered to be crushed under money-making and fundamentalist Calvinism, submitted to an almost mediaeval theocracy which entailed the marginalisation of Scottish literature even if it still engendered remarkable names in the field.

There is a stereotypical image that has been generally associated with the Scottish culture and this is the constant, unexpected combination of extremes and conflicting features. The consecrated term is *Caledonian Antisyzygy*, introduced by G. Gregory Smith in *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919) and it was also adopted by various other writers and poets who used and further nuanced it in their literary productions like the twentieth century poet Hugh MacDiarmid who stated that “the Scottish culture (literature) relied on producing energy by bringing together clashing opposites in the way that a medieval cathedral sculptor might place a grinning gargoyle beside a saint” (MacDiarmid in Bassnett, 1997: 85). The conflicting combination of opposites is visible in all cultural achievements, probably starting with the architecture of Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland which combines the 18th century New Town (the Georgian Squares) with remains of the Old Town and the medieval catacombs.

Writers and poets generally rely on the ancient myths and legends as well as on the old historic chronicles and folk tales in order to revive the Scottish spirit; that is what Edwin Morgan, one of the most influential contemporary poets spoke about in his volume