

Uneasy Subjects: Postcolonialism and Scottish Gaelic Poetry

Silke Stroh

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Uneasy Subjects is a book with more than one purpose: its author even-handedly argues for the place of theory in the field of Gaelic studies; for the place of Gaelic in the field of Scottish Studies; against overly narrow or rigid conceptions of post/colonial criticism; and against the contention that post/colonial criticism and Scottish or Gaelic studies are totally incompatible. Such a categorical rejection of any attempts to discuss Scotland in post/colonial terms is found, for instance, in an essay by the late Angus Calder, one of Scotland's leading intellectuals of recent times:

One of my objections, the most severe one, to 'post-colonial literary theory' is the way it tends to privilege writing in English, or Englishes. Yet the exclusion of writings from former empires in many other languages is actually essential to its terminological coherence. It would be absurd to apply it to writings in Irish or Scottish Gaelic, twin languages far older than English, or in Bengali or in Swahili, which had literary life before imperialism. The very use of these languages expresses pre-coloniality. (Calder, "Poetry, Language and Empire" 193)

Calder's tendency to entertain and to voice strong views did not prevent him from considering the merits of other positions, which leads me to wonder whether Silke Stroh's book would have convinced him to modify his stance on the issue. Indeed, Stroh's book appears to counter precisely this kind of objection, and she accomplishes this task with such erudition, verve, and commonsense that it would be well-nigh impossible not to find her efforts valid. Her main objective is to demonstrate the value of reading Gaelic poetry from a post/colonial perspective, and if ever the proof of a pudding were in the eating, her endeavour is a good example of this axiom.

Stroh's historical account begins with the genesis of the notion of Celticness or Celticity in the context of a Classical discourse based on the perceived dichotomy between Graeco-Roman and barbarian cultures, with the Celts "often regarded as the most savage barbarians of all" (44), and yet as capable of being redeemed by Graeco-Roman civilisation. Once it had conquered the barbarians on its margin, the Roman Empire could in turn come to perceive them as noble savages: a development that Stroh parallels with changing views of the Scottish Highlanders after the failure of the second Jacobite campaign in 1746. After the defeat of the Jacobite army at Culloden, the Highlands ceased to be a source of material threat and could therefore be idealised as what Malcolm Chapman has called "a location for all the virtues of sturdy independence" (Chapman 13).

There are plenty of such trans-chronological connections in Stroh's largely chronological narrative; in the aggregate, these connections help the reader see the specifics of the Scottish case, as well as its similarities with "patterns of culture contact" (333) elsewhere. While the chosen approach naturally foregrounds similarities between the Gaeltacht or Gaidhealtachd and colonised peoples overseas, *Uneasy Subjects* gives due attention to the implication of Gaels in "imperialist ventures" (67), from the Holy Land of the Crusades to the West Indian plantations. Most notably, Stroh is neither apologetic nor euphemistic about the lack of "transperipheral solidarity" (160) shown for instance in 18th-century Gaelic poetry celebrating the exploits of the Black Watch, a Highland regiment serving the British Crown since 1725, against "yellow men with their axes, and black men with morose faces" (160).

Notwithstanding her readiness to see both sides of the coin, the main focus of Stroh's take on Gaelic poetry is its response to a marginalisation that entailed the erosion of "a confident Gaelic identity" (52) through "the growing hostility of the anglophone mainstream" (56). Stroh documents the various kinds of literary consequences: the continuity of "a spirit of loss and dispossession" (61) expressed in Gaelic poetry from the early 16th-century Book of the Dean of Lismore to the present day, as well as the growing "nationalisation and politicisation of Gaelic poetic perspectives" (77) in diverse forms of writing back that challenge, invert, or subvert the binary othering or indeed the same-ing of the Gaels. Ever wary of oversimplification, however, the author of *Uneasy Subjects* is at pains to point out contrasting or contradictory phenomena as "inconsistencies, confluences and confusions which illustrate the ambivalent position of Gaeldom within the nation state and its empire, both as an integral, loyal part of the national Self and as a marginalised and sometimes disaffected Other" (94).

The result of Stroh's effort is a lucid and informative book that is nonetheless not an easy read, especially for the scholar who has little knowledge of Gaelic. Translations are given wherever Gaelic texts are quoted; these translations, however, are often embedded in the main text together with the original lines, sometimes making it difficult to follow the progress of the argument. Another potential difficulty is created by the frequent use of the same double quotation marks not only to mark referenced quotations, but also to mark certain words or phrases as questionable or problematic. The latter precaution is part of a laudably circumspect or self-critical attitude that also gives rise to occasional clusters of statements qualified by "may" or "might": at least in some cases, such reticence would not have been entirely necessary. And while going through the motions of finding minor faults as a means not to qualify but to strengthen my commendation of the book, I beg leave to flag a couple of translations that—after consultation of Edward Dwelly's dictionary (44, 335)—still do not seem the most obvious to me. To wit, the rendering of Donnachadh Bàn's "Rinn dilsean dh'a luchd-fògraidh" as "who made henchmen of his exiles" (166); and Calum Caimbeul MacPhàil's "Is dh'fhag i iad air

tuinn an àrdain” as “and left them tossing on the waves of pomposity” (220).

However, my critical remarks are minor in the context of my admiration for this solid work of scholarship. I appreciated particularly Stroh’s reference to “tactical feminisation” (124) in Jacobite poetry, and her examination of various strategies employed in 19th- or 20th-century “depopulation verse” (202), including the imaginative repopulation of deserted habitats in order to draw attention to the human creation of much ostensibly natural emptiness or barrenness. Similarly, the description of recent and contemporary developments is both rich and thoughtful, with its discussion of diverse attitudes to the notion of an essential Celtitude or to the notion of hybridity. Stroh’s suggestion that that transculturalism may open up an even broader range of perspectives on the subject matter is compelling. In general *Uneasy Subjects* “has helped to demonstrate that a considerable number of discourse patterns which are commonly associated with overseas colonial and postcolonial frameworks can also be identified in negotiations of Celticity, Gaelicness and Scottish national identity—and that Gaelic poetry plays a significant part in these negotiations” (329). Moreover, I suspect that even Angus Calder would have difficulty challenging this argument.

Works Cited

- Calder, Angus. “Poetry, Language and Empire (1996).” *Scotlands of the Mind*. Edinburgh: Luath P, Repr. 2008. 185-99. Print.
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- Dwelly, Edward. *The Illustrated Gaelic-English Dictionary*. Glasgow: Gairm, 9th ed. 1977. Print.