

Gaelic Scotland in the Colonial Imagination: Anglophone Writing from 1600 to 1900

Silke Stroh

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Silke Stroh's study on Anglophone attitudes to Gaelic Scotland is an important contribution not only to Scottish studies but also to postcolonial studies more generally. Stroh's main aim in the book is to justify the inclusion of Scotland within the ambit of postcolonial studies, a classification that is obviously complicated by Scotland's location in Europe and its very extensive involvement in colonial activity as a key constituent of the British state and empire. The work is intended as an introductory survey for a range of readers, not only specialists in Scottish Studies but also those working in postcolonial studies generally or with expertise "in critical ethnic studies regarding other cultural contexts" (5).

The distinction between "Highland" and "Lowland" Scotland, or alternatively Gaelic and "de-Gaelicised" Scotland, is a crucial element in Stroh's analysis and argument. The distinction has been a critical fault line in Scottish history and culture since the late Middle Ages. Although Gaelic was the language of the earliest Scottish kingdom, by the end of the fourteenth century, Gaelic was no longer spoken in the dominant regions of the country. Confined to the mountainous northwest, known in Gaelic as the *Gàidhealtachd*, Gaelic became marginalised and stigmatised, marked out as the language of barbarians. In later centuries Lowland Scots tended to associate Gaelic speakers with poverty and backwardness, leading to the adoption of aggressive measures to bring about assimilation and "modernisation," including large-scale forced removal of people in the process known as the "Highland Clearances" (c. 1780-1860). The parallels, in terms of both experiences and discourses, to peoples subjugated in the context of colonialism during the same time period are readily apparent, but any meaningful evaluation must be very careful and nuanced. For, as Stroh emphasises, the Gaels "were, despite their marginality, also an integral and integrated part of the British nation—not only an Other, but part of the nation's Self" (112). Stroh's analysis is judicious and balanced throughout; she never overstates her case and is well aware of its possible limitations. In particular, she readily anticipates potential objections and counter-arguments to her position and handles them dexterously and fairly.

The book's introduction frames the purpose and argument of the book effectively. Stroh rejects what she sees as unduly rigid views of postcolonialism which demand "very clear dichotomies, hierarchies, differences and culture clashes" and cannot accommodate "the strong ambiguities of the Scottish case" (22). In particular Stroh highlights

the tensions between what she labels “regional” and “thematic” approaches to postcolonialism. The former understanding confines “the application of postcolonial patterns of textual analysis to regions of the world that were once subjected to European colonialism” while the latter endeavours to apply postcolonial understandings and “analytical tools” to “the construction and deconstruction of ethno-cultural hierarchies, culture contact and so on” to other regions, such as Scotland (14-15). She then uses the remainder of the introduction to show how these understandings and tools may appropriately be applied to the Scottish case, and to give a useful overview of the overall structure of the book.

Most of the book (Chapters 2 to 5) consists of detailed analyses of an eclectic mix of texts published between 1698 and 1900, ranging from canonical literary works like Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814) to Robert Knox's pseudo-scientific exegesis *The Races of Men* (1850). Here and in the foundational first chapter, a detailed exposition of “The Modern Nation State and Its Others,” Stroh traces continuities and shifts in discourses through the centuries, connecting them to wider intellectual, cultural and political developments of these eras. Stroh explains that her emphasis is on Anglophone Scottish writing, that is, works written in English by Scottish rather than English writers, on the grounds that trying to address the tangles of the Anglo-Scottish relationship within the analysis would bring too much complexity to a relatively short monograph. This is primarily a literary study, but the range of genres considered is unusually broad and its presentation of historical background is detailed and well-evidenced while remaining accessible to non-specialists.

The first author whose work Stroh considers in detail is perhaps the most unusual: Martin Martin, author of two remarkable geographical and ethnographic accounts of the “*Gàidhealtachd*’s far periphery,” *A Late Voyage to St. Kilda* and *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, published in 1698 and 1703 respectively. Although he wrote in English and spent most of his adult life in London, Martin was a native Gaelic speaker from the Isle of Skye. As such Martin’s works lie in an “interstitial position . . . as Hebridean self-representations partially influenced by, but also in critical dialogue with, metropolitan discourse” (78). Martin’s work is thus an early but striking illustration of “the deeply hybrid and ambiguous nature of the Highland ‘colonial’ experience” (84).

Chapter 3 presents evidence from a range of texts from the later eighteenth century that address the notion of “Noble Savagery in the Romantic Age,” including those attributed to “Ossian” and presented by another hybridised Gael, James MacPherson. Chapter 4 is a detailed reading of Scott’s iconic *Waverley*, considering how it draws together but revises pre-existing strands of discourse concerning the Highlanders and the Highlands, while Chapter 5 addresses the application of racist pseudo-biology in nineteenth-century Scotland, at the high point of the British Empire, through which Highlanders and Lowlanders were classified by writers such as Knox as two distinct racial groups of “Celts” and “Teutons.” In Chapter 6, Stroh

demonstrates how some Gaels endeavoured to appropriate these racial typologies for use in pro-Gaelic discourse of the late nineteenth century.

Stroh is distinctive among scholars who have written on Anglophone literature in Scotland, even its Highland dimension, in that she has also expertise in the Gaelic language and Gaelic literary sources, as demonstrated in her earlier monograph *Uneasy Subjects: Postcolonialism and Scottish Gaelic Poetry* (2011), which can be understood as a companion to the current study. The failure of most scholars of Scottish literature and culture to engage with Gaelic language and literature might itself be considered in postcolonial terms.

The only shortcoming of the book, in my view, is the decision to end the analysis at the end of the nineteenth century. While Stroh justifies this on the grounds that the end of the nineteenth century was “a high-point in European certainties” about the nation-state, empire and colonialism (26), the short (five-page) conclusion, which summarises key literary, discursive and ideological developments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, presents a number of important and stimulating ideas, but in a dense and summary fashion that is likely difficult to follow for readers unfamiliar with Scottish literature and cultural politics. A longer treatment of these issues would be welcome.

Overall, then, Stroh’s book is a well-written, accessible but authoritative study that makes a valuable contribution to a wide range of readers interested in both Scottish and postcolonial studies in general.