ISSN 1755-9928 (Print)
ISSN 2753-3298 (Online)

Journal of
Scottish Thought

Research Articles

Scotland and the Re-invention of the Modern World

Author: Cairns Craig

Volume 8, Issue 1
Pp: 43-62
2016
Published on: 1st Jan 2016
CC Attribution 4.0

ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Scotland and the Re-invention of the Modern World

Cairns Craig

It is a real pleasure to be able to reconvene here in 2034 and to see you all looking barely changed from when we met in August 2014 in order to imagine what it might be like when we reached this day in 2034. From our perspective, of course, the world of 2014, with all its individually driven cars, its need for wires and chargers for all its mobile devices, its love affair with social media and huge television sets, seems now positively antique. But what has changed our lives out of all recognition – or rather, has changed our lives by making them unchangingly recognisable – is the Maxwell Dorian Demon. We never imagined in 2014 that within a decade the physical appearances of ageing would be a thing of the past and that the generation that has been born in the last decade and half will always look as they do when they reach maturity. We whose ageing was only suspended a decade ago now look almost grotesque, and in a few years, if we survive (I am now 85), will be gargoyle-like amongst a population who enjoy the appearance of eternal youth. The Celtic myth of the country of those who are ever young has, in our age, as with so many of our ancient myths, become the very substance of our reality.

That the MDD was a Scottish invention, and proof of Scotland's continuing contribution to the understanding of the universe and the improvement of the human condition, has been a source not only of great pride to us all but one of the drivers of our politics of independence. The inventor of the MDD, Sorley Crichton MacCaig, not only, as you all know, won the Nobel Prize for his discovery but has been a driving force in the independence movement ever since. His decision to gift the proceeds of the MDD to the Scottish nation as long as the proceeds were invested in a sovereign wealth fund for the country's future benefit has been a cornerstone of the regeneration and transformation of Scotland in the past ten years. This stunning new lecture hall in which we sit in the rebuilt Stirling campus is just one sign of the transformation brought about by MacCaig's benevolence, but is also a token of the overthrow of that neo-liberalism which dominated economic thought in the West from the 1980s till the 2020s. MacCaig was one of the fiercest critics of the ungoverned

marketplaces and the private quasi-monopolies which almost bankrupted the US and the UK in 2008 and then effectively did bankrupt them in the 'great collapse' of 2022. That the MDD was launched at the height of the ravages of the 'great collapse' made Scotland a beacon for new technologies and for a new politics that has brought us to where we are today – on the verge of an independence referendum which is being queried only by those who think it entirely unnecessary, since no one has thought it worthwhile to mount an equivalent of 2014's 'Better Together' campaign. Effectively, Scotland has been independent now for nearly a decade; the vote this week will simply be the legal formality by which that independence is internationally recognised so that Scotland can join those other parts of Europe which followed Scotland's original example in 2014 but gained their formal independence before us.

This is a narrative you have all lived through but you will probably have forgotten my own minor role in it, since I was responsible for the naming of MacCaig's invention, and, indeed, indirectly responsible for pointing him to the path that led to it. This goes back to 2015 when I was still Director of the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish studies at the University of Aberdeen: I invited a group of scientists to join with a group of cultural historians to examine what we then called the 'fantasy physics' of scientific theories that never came to fruition. Among them was a book entitled *The Unseen Universe* (1875), written by Balfour Stewart, a Scottish geophysicist, and Peter Guthrie Tait, professor of natural philosophy at the University of Edinburgh and previously co-author with William Thomson, Lord Kelvin, of their *Treatise on Natural Philosophy*, published in 1867, which sought to replace the physics of force, as conceived by Newton, with a physics of energy. The *Treatise on Natural Philosophy* brought together and synthesised the work of a generation of Scottish physicists who worked on the theoretical issues around the workings of steam engines. Their radical proposition, as put by Macquorn Rankine in 1856, was that

> all forms of physical energy, whether visible motion, heat, light, magnetism, electricity, chemical action, or other forms not yet understood, are mutually convertible; that the total amount of physical energy in the universe is unchangeable, and varies merely in its condition and locality, by conversion from one form to another, or by transference from one portion of matter to another.[1]

[1] Macquorn Rankine, 'On the Concentration of the Mechanical Energy of the Universe', paper read before the British Association on September 2, 1852, and

The stuff of the world is simply the form taken by energy in one of its metamorphoses. The immense and unifying effect of this theory on our understanding of the physical universe carried with it, however, a dark shadow, for in all transformations of matter some of the energy stored therein is dissipated into the environment – no steam engine, for instance, could harness all the energy that generated its activity – and over a long period, it was believed, the energy of the universe would be so dissipated that the universe would consist of no more than an undifferentiated and very thin soup of atoms in which no further activity would be possible. This was a prospect that had a terrifying impact on Scottish intellectuals such as David Masson who, in his book on *Recent British Philosophy* in 1865 explained

> how it is the collapse or winding-down of the whole solar system that recent Science, conjecturing onwards through time, has been prognosticating as inevitable in the distance. By a process which has been named the Equilibration of Forces, and which is slowly going on, it seems to be foreseen that a period will come when all the energy locked up in the solar system, and sustaining whatever of motion or life there is in it, will be exhausted … and all its parts through all their present variousness will be stiffened or resolved, as regards each other, in a defunct and featureless community of rest and death … [Farther, Science] yet sees no other end but that all the immeasurable entanglement of all the starry systems shall also run itself together at last in an indistinguishable equilibrium of ruin.[2]

Such a conclusion did not worry Lord Kelvin, with whose Presbyterian view of a fallen universe it accorded only too well, but it provoked his younger Scottish colleague, James Clerk Maxwell, to a thought experiment which so disrupted Kelvin's view of the universe that he named it 'Maxwell's demon' – a figure who was later to play a curious role in many branches of modern science, from physics to informatics. Maxwell's demon is a small creature about the size of an atom who guards a gateway between two vats containing gases, one hotter than the other. Under the laws of energy physics these ought to be cooling as the energy of the atoms in motion gradually dissipates. The demon, however, directs the faster atoms from the cooler chamber through

published in the Philosophical Magazine for November, 1852.

[2] David Masson, *Recent British Philosophy: A review with criticisms, including some comments on Mr. Mill's answer to Sir William Hamilton.* (London, 1867, second edn, 151–2).

the gateway into the hotter chamber and the slower atoms from the hotter chamber into the cooler chamber, with the effect that the hotter chamber gets warmer: what the experiment suggests is that the dissipation of energy is only a statistical outcome which, in particular parts of chaotic systems, may be reversed, thus concentrating rather than dissipating the energy available to produce change.

In the *Unseen Universe*, Stewart and Tait used 'Maxwell's Demon' as a mechanism for envisaging how the energy expended by human beings could somehow be accumulating in a parallel universe invisible to us, one from which all energy originally stemmed and to which it returns as it is dissipated. 'The law of gravitation', they insist,

> assures us that any displacement which takes place in the very heart of the earth will be felt throughout the universe, and we may even imagine that the same thing will hold true of those molecular motions … which accompany thought. For every thought we think is accompanied by a displacement and motion of the particles of the brain, and we may imagine that somehow these motions are propagated throughout the universe'.[3]

That thought energy, however, is not simply endlessly discharged but is re-collected in the unseen universe parallel to our own, which is 'connected by bonds of energy with the visible universe' but is 'also capable of transforming the energy so received'; the 'speculation' which they offer is that it is 'less likely that by far the larger portion of the high-class energy of the present universe is travelling outwards into space with an immense velocity, than that it is being gradually transferred into an invisible order of things.'[4]

The energy that each of us expends is being stored up in the unseen universe so that we can be re-united with ourselves when all the energy of the universe is finally dissipated. Stewart and Tait's 'phantasy physics' helped intensify MacCaig's search for the individual signature in the energy that we expend in our daily tasks, which he famously discovered to be as recognisable and analysable as the DNA which informs the structure of every cell in our bodies. Energy, too, was, essentially, information, information which could be collected and recycled, thereby defeating that dissipation at a cellular level

---

[3] Stewart Balfour and P. G. Tait, *The Unseen Universe: Physical Speculations on a Future State* (London, 1875), 198.

[4] *The Unseen Universe*, 199.

which is the main cause of ageing. MacCaig had found the means of refreshing our cellular structure with our own expended energy. When he first outlined this to us as he searched for a mechanism that could turn it into a practical device, I suggested to him that what he had envisaged had already been prefigured in Oscar Wilde's 1890 story, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which the portrait of Dorian ages while Dorian himself remains unchangeably young. I suggested, too, that *Dorian Gray* was an aesthetic version of *The Unseen Universe* and that his invention, therefore, in acknowledgment of the long interchange between Irish and Scottish cultures – Oscar Wilde was, of course, named after the son of Ossian in the poem by James Macpherson that was so admired by Lady Wilde – could be called the Maxwell Dorian Demon. And so, some years later, it was, and we were endowed with the unique autonomosphere in which we now live.

Looking back across these twenty years to the First Referendum debate, the difference between a physics of the dissipation of energy and a physics of its re-accumulation seems to characterise the difference between the 'No' and 'Yes' campaigns. The 'No' campaign was founded on the fear of dissipation – the oil would run out, the economy would grind to a halt as large companies left for London, the money would cease to flow from Westminster to Holyrood, Scots would be deprived of access to careers in London. The universe that the 'No' campaign inhabited was like Kelvin's universe, one necessarily running down but which would run down more slowly if Scotland remained within the UK. That is why 'No' was unable to articulate a positive vision for the Union: it was firmly camped on the territory which much of British politics had inhabited since the 1950s – the management of decline. The 'Yes' campaign was characterised, on the other hand, by a sense of energy recaptured, of vitality renewed, of a common purpose full of creative – if ill-defined – potential. The development of the campaign was like the effect of Maxwell's demon: the more the 'No' campaign tried to cool nationalist fervour the more its energy was diverted towards the 'Yes' side, as though a demon was capturing and transferring to the other side its warmest atoms – those Labour voters who began to see independence as the only road to a more equal society. At the same time, however, the 'Yes' campaign had a similar effect to the MDD – the energy it generated was recycled not to create something new but in order to ensure that things would remain recognisably the same: the same currency, the same monarchy, the same favourite programmes from the BBC. Except in the case of Trident nuclear weaponry, the paradox of the 'Yes' campaign was that its energy was directed at staying in the same

place and refusing the route to the future that had been devised by the heirs of Mrs Thatcher, while the 'No' campaign insisted the only way of staying in the same place was precisely to stay in a United Kingdom still locked into Thatcher's vision of what might make it 'great' again.

Because of the MDD, we now take for granted the continuity of our personal identities while, at the same time, joyfully accepting the radical transformations which characterise our social environment, but the many books written to explain the hinterland to the Referendum in the years leading up to 2014 – Iain MacWhirter's *Road to Referendum*, David Torrance's *Battle for Britain*, Gerry Hassan's *Caledonia Dreaming*, Alan Riach and Sandy Moffat's *The Arts of Independence*, Gordon Brown's *My Scotland, Our Britain* and the reissue of Andrew Marr's *The Battle for Scotland* – offer a very different notion of the relationship between past and present selves and their environments. The overriding sense in re-reading these books now is of people trying and failing to find any connection between the childhood they experienced, the person they expected to become and what has actually happened to them. The gulf between a childhood in the 1950s, 60s or 70s and the environment of the 2010s is so great that there seems to be no possible explanation of how the earlier period could have been the foundation for the later. It is as though a Maxwellian demon has somehow disrupted the causal laws of history and produced an outcome which can no longer be traced back to its origin. Gerry Hassan, for instance, prefaces his narrative of how modern Scotland has – or has not – developed with a note about his personal circumstances:

> My childhood was spent in the council estate of Ardler, built in the north-west corner of the city [Dundee], where the city authorities had acquired the land of Downfield Golf Course, and built six tower blocks in an environment filled with green spaces, trees, and play areas. It was in many respects the perfect environment for a child, being defined by safety, trust and a sense of community, and against the backdrop of rising working-class living standards and increasing prosperity.[5]

That sense of security was to be radically disrupted when Hassan's father lost his job at National Cash Register, one of the international companies with a substantial plant in Dundee, an event which presaged vast changes in the global economy but which led locally to the break-up of his parents' marriage.

[5] Gerry Hassan. *Caledonian Dreaming: The Quest for a Different Scotland* (Luath Press Ltd. Kindle Edition, 2014, Kindle Locations 753–56.

Hassan's book may be subtitled 'the quest for a different Scotland' and end with a list of things Scotland should do to be *different* in the future, but what drives its quest are the fundamental differences between the Scotland of his childhood and the Scotland of the 2010s:

> Throughout my childhood my parents had a fairly positive outlook on life, society and what opportunities they thought would be available to their son. My parents believed in Britain, the future, and the idea of the labour movement as a means of bringing about social change . . . These were the three pillars of post-war Scotland and indeed post-war Britain, the powerful, potent account of 'Labour Britain' which had been given such foundation and form in the post-war Attlee Government.[6]

The Britain of 2014, however, was not the 'Labour Britain' to which Hassan's parents had looked forward and which made them vote against a Scottish parliament in 1979:

> Slowly the central state has become what can only be called a neo-liberal state: one which as its main purpose promotes the ideas of marketising, outsourcing, privatising and working in favour of corporate capitalist logic. The dynamism and mindset of the core centre in Downing Street and senior departments, which once were defined for decades by civil service impartiality, has now become over the period of Thatcherism and New Labour (and remains so under Cameron) one where the new class of neo-liberal agents and actors are embedded in the core with the consultant class having been granted permanent access and influence. This has become so entrenched as the way of doing things that the British political elite no longer see the values and priorities of this worldview and class as an ideology. Instead it is seen as incontrovertible fact. This political and economic determinism has become regarded as how the world is mixing globalisation, the power of finance capital, hyper-competition and individualism, along with the weakening and dilution of the once powerful 'social contract'. George Osborne's ambition, revealed in his 2013 Autumn Statement of taking public spending back to 1948 levels in terms of health, education and infrastructure spending

[6] *Caledonian Dreaming: The Quest for a Different Scotland*; Kindle Locations 734–35.

> (excluding individual transfers such as pensions), is the logical endpoint of this base, anti-social, elite-focused mindset.[7]

History has turned back on itself: instead of continuing the 'progress' initiated by the 1945 Labour government, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government of 2010 set out to shrink the state to the size it was pre-1948. While the Labour victory of 1997 looked as though it would restore 'Labour Britain' as the horizon and ambition of modern Britain, it had, in fact, helped embed that alternative history. 'Labour Britain', no matter what the name of the party that governed Britain from 1997 till 2010, was the lost dream of Hassan's parents' generation, the lost context of his childhood identity, the lost continuity of his adult experience.

That same sense of measuring the personal against the public pervades Iain MacWhirter's *Road to Referendum*, with its series of cameos of his journey from being a youthful socialist upbraiding his mother for her CND-inspired nationalism (when the politics of class was clearly the only important issue) to his discovery that, in the aftermath of the 1979 vote on a Scottish parliament, he 'was more sympathetic to devolution than I'd realised. I'd intended to abstain on the grounds that devolution was a crushing irrelevance, but the dismal conduct of the campaign made me think again'.[8] MacWhirter, too, sees his narrative as the story of the loss of the Britain into which he had been born after the Second World War:

> During the war Scots had fought with English soldiers across North Africa and Europe in a great project to save Western civilisation. They had been fighting, not in the interest of a British Empire or a ruling class, but for the people of a country, Great Britain, which had stood alone against tyranny and had led the world in a just war against fascism. Like the citizens of Clydebank during the blitz, they felt part of something that transcended domestic politics and national boundaries. This was a new popular Unionism, not based on tartan romanticism or imperial chauvinism. It was a Labour rather than a Tory Unionism.[9]

What this post-war 'Labour Unionism' produced was 'a truly national NHS' which 'provided security for all citizens of Britain on an equal basis', an

---

7 *Caledonian Dreaming*; Kindle Locations 964–73.

8 Iain MacWhirter, *Road to Referendum*, 198.

9 Ibid., 149–50.

outcome that was 'the legacy of the collective spirit generated across Britain by the war effort'.[10] It is the loss of that 'collective spirit' and collective security which has undermined the sense of the inter-relatedness of the individual and the society to which s/he belongs. And the same holds true of Gordon Brown's *My Scotland, Our Britain*, which provided the large-scale version of the public speeches which are generally thought to have had a significant impact on the outcome of the 2014 Referendum. What drives Brown's commitment to the Union is the 'pooling and sharing' of resources made possible by Britain's major historical innovation – the welfare state:[11] 'the pooling and sharing we engage in is thus more than a set of values we share in common: it is the everyday practice of popular institutions like the NHS and pensions system that brings these values to life. Indeed, no other country in the world has managed to persuade four nations to pool and share their resources in the comprehensive and sophisticated way we do'.[12] It is the Britain created by the Labour government of 1945 into which Brown was born that he sought to defend from a nationalism he believed to be driven not by economic or social sanity but by irrational ideology; whereas, of course, for his opponents in the SNP, their nationalism was the only defence against Westminster's destruction of those shared values. As Nicola Sturgeon put it,

> In the thirteen years of devolution, great changes have occurred. We lose sight of them in the pell-mell of politics – but unlike the privatization process south of the border, our health service remains true to Nye Bevan's founding principles; our education system has a new curriculum fit for modern teaching and learning; our universities offer education based on the ability to learn and not the ability to pay; and our older people have more security in the their later years.[13]

It is, ironically, retention of the past that drove both the 'Yes' and the 'No' versions of Scotland's future. The referendum debate was, in effect, a debate between two sides sharing the same nostalgia for the world created by the 1945 Labour government – a world also accepted by the Conservative governments of the 1950s. Fundamentally the debate was about which side could more

[10] Ibid., 154.
[11] Gordon Brown, *My Scotland, Our Britain*, 49.
[12] Ibid., 199.
[13] Quoted Torrance, *The Battle for Britain*, 192; http://www.snp.org/media-centre/news/2013/Jul/yes-independence-only-vote-more-powers

effectively maintain the virtues of that earlier world. The defining difference between them, of course, was Trident, the dark shadow which had lain across that secure world of post-war 'Labour Unionism' and which, to 'No', symbolised the continuing security of the Union and, to 'Yes', the insecurity that Westminster imposed on Scotland for the greater safety of the south of England. 'Yes' captured much of the anti-Trident vote ('SNP=CND', as some put it at the time) but the SNP's policy of remaining within NATO meant that 'Yes' hardly amounted to a commitment to a non-nuclear unilateralism.

The referendum appeared on the surface to be between two extremes – independence or continued commitment to the Union – with the nation polarised between them, giving rise to much commentary in the aftermath about how divided the country was. The eventual outcome, with almost exactly 50% for each side, despite many recounts, suggested a nation incapable of resolving its differences. What became evident subsequently, however, in the work of analysts such as Michael Keating of the University of Aberdeen, was that much of the population was a hesitant 60:40 'for' or a reluctant 60:40 'against' independence: the outcome pointed not to a divided and polarised society but to one in which almost everyone was on the same journey, except that different parts of the population had travelled different distances towards accepting independence. Carol Craig probably spoke for many when she wrote:

> Lest you think I have found deciding to vote No easy, I haven't. I'm feeling uncomfortable about it. When I hear many Yes folk speak they are talking my language: extremely critical of the Westminster regime and the politics currently on offer. My values chime with theirs. What's more there's a tremendous creativity in their campaign. They seem to have all the best tunes. Of course, I'd rather be on the same side as radicals like Andy Wightman, young activists like Zara Kitson and cultural figures like Janice Galloway and David Greig whose work I admire hugely. Instead I'm on the same side as the bowling clubs, old footballers and the British Legion. Though it is also true to say that the majority of women of my age I know – including lots of former left-wing activists and feminists – are also voting No, so I'm definitely not alone.[14]

[14] Carol Craig, 'Why this optimist is voting No', *Scottish Review*, 9 September 2014; http://www.scottishreview.net/CarolCraig172.shtml, accessed 20 March 2015.

Of course, those over 60 by-and-large voted 'No', but the situation was one in which many people wanted to be asked the question about independence and to say 'yes' … but not yet. The direction of travel, as Michael Keating told us at our conference in 2014, was clear, and if the aftermath of the referendum did not produce the 'something close to federalism' that Gordon Brown had claimed could be delivered, it produced a quasi-autonomy that came to be regarded as a quasi-independence in the eyes of most Scots, and in the eyes of most of the world, till we reached the point where the inevitability of independence was accepted on all sides.

What remained unresolved, however, was what was driving this issue – why should one of the most highly developed countries in the world, which had been part of one of the most successful empires known to history, decide suddenly that it needed to escape from the Union by which its history had been so profoundly shaped. There was, in the eyes of historians and commentators, no sufficient cause for the upsurge of nationalist politics in Scotland: it was not religiously different from the rest of the UK as Ireland had been before 1922; it was not significantly different in social attitudes or in wealth from most of the rest of the UK (as sociologists such as David McCrone never tired of pointing out); it was not 'colonised' by England, no matter how much resentment there might be about English people taking top jobs in certain sectors of Scottish culture; what Tom Nairn, in *The Break-up of Britain* (1977) described as 'neo-nationalism' in Scotland, seemed, like Maxwell's Demon, to defy the logic of political and economic history. Since the first emergence of the new nationalist politics in the 1960s, Scotland's political past had been pored over and written about as never before, but the more history that was written the more mysterious modern Scotland became. After having studied the many histories published before 2014, Iain MacWhirter was still able to declare, 'Here's the mystery. How did Scotland go from being a willing and enthusiastic partner in the Union with England to the referendum on independence within the pace of little more than a generation?'[15] That 'mystery' remains unresolved at the end of MacWhirter's narrative: 'The theme of this book has been the rise, as if from nowhere, of Scottish Nationalism'.[16] As *if* from nowhere. *If* this has actually happened in *Scotland*, how uncertain and chaotic is the world we now inhabit? Gordon Brown was almost breathless with shock: 'The speed with which Scottish political nationalism has moved from the fringes to the mainstream, then to an electoral majority in the Scottish Parliament

[15] MacWhirter, *Road to Referendum*, 13.
[16] Ibid., 375.

and now to threaten the very existence of Britain is extraordinary'.[17] Brown's astonishment reflects the fact that such a nationalism was a new and unknown force, defying the 'logic of history' or the realities of modernity: as David Torrance put it, 'in 2011–14 all the talk was of Unionists and Nationalists advocating, respectively, "the Union" and "independence", when in reality the meaning of both those constitutional options had changed almost beyond recognition'.[18] The disruptive energy of the 'mystery' of Scotland's nationalism was what drove Gordon Brown's defence of the Union, because the rise of nationalism threatens the whole direction and purpose of Scottish history:

> I do not ask those questions rhetorically but to try to understand why the trajectory of Scottish nationalism is so unlike the other forms it claims to parallel. Can we explain why there was no significant Scottish-led rebellion in 1832 or 1848, when Britain was convulsed by riots over political reform; and why no significant Scottish nationalist uprising in 1919, when there was a huge sense of injustice as British promises of 'Homes fit for Heroes' were swept aside and workers left to the mercy of a post-war depression? If repression is the trigger for an assertion of national identity, why not in the period from 1746 when Highlanders were brutally suppressed in the aftermath of Culloden? If religious differences are a potential starting pistol for a secessionist movement, why not in 1712 when the British Parliament usurped the authority of the Scottish Church? If resentment against unfair treatment is a likely cause, then why not in the 19990s when, at the time of Mrs Thatcher's government, the sense of grievance at an inequitable relationship was probably at its height?[19]

The failure of nationalism in the past, when it might have been appropriate, is the reason why it makes no sense in the present:

> So for me the central Scottish mystery of modern history is not that people feel they want to assert their Scottishness (we have *always* felt Scottish), not that there is a demand for Scottish institutions to express that identity (our institutions have *always* done so), but that while for

[17] Gordon Brown, *My Scotland, Our Britain*, 15.

[18] David Torrance, *The Battle for Britain: Scotland and the Independence Referendum* (London, 2013), 328.

[19] Brown, *My Scotland, Our Britain*, 19.

> 300 years we have expressed our identity, run our own institutions and latterly shared political power as part of Britain, now many want to do so without being part of Britain.[20]

Since no cause in the past was sufficient to produce a nationalist reaction against the Union, no cause could be sufficient to explain why Scots in this era, under these circumstances, should have decided so decisively to try to change their relationship to the Union. The whole nature of modern Scottish history is, therefore, without cause and cannot be anything but an insoluble 'mystery'.

The writing of Scottish history itself, however, had been provoked from somnolence by the rise of the Scottish National Party in the 1960s. Not having its own political structures after 1707, the kinds of narratives of political change that were written about the United Kingdom (i.e. about England) were impossible in Scotland. What *could* be narrated, nonetheless, were the country's economic developments, and the consequent social changes, particularly since there had been such a dramatic transformation in its economic infrastructure with the growth of Glasgow and the development of industries – like jute in Dundee – that depended on the Empire. Scotland's history became the subject matter of a generation of historians whose ambition was to use Scotland to show the power and purpose of a new kind history that had developed in the 1960s, a history focused not on the political elite but on the economic development society and its social consequences for the mass of the people. Scotland became a kind of test-bed for how a country could manage the process of industrialisation in the wake of England's rapid progress in the eighteenth century, something which every developing economy would have to go through in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This was the burden of Tom Nairn's analysis of Scotland's 'missing' nationalism in the nineteenth century: Scotland was unique among European nations because there 'was to be only one example of a land which – so to speak – "made it" before the new age of nationalism':

> Only one society was in fact able to advance, more or less according to its precepts, from feudal and theological squalor to the stage of bourgeois civil society, polite culture and so on. Only one land crossed the great divide *before* the whole condition of European politics and

[20] Brown, *My Scotland, Our Britain*, 20.

> culture was decisively and permanently altered by the great awakening of nationalist consciousness.[21]

Scotland's unique priority in historical development led directly to its being uniquely 'belated' in the development of nationalism. T. M. Devine makes essentially the same case but transfers to the Scotland of the 1760s the fundamental experiences of modernisation which had traditionally been accorded to England:

> The traditional pattern, of basic continuity marked by some changes at the margins, abruptly came to an end in the 1760s. That decade seems to have been a defining watershed, because from then on Scotland began to experience a social and economic transformation unparalleled among European societies of the time in its speed, scale and intensity. The currently favoured view of English modernization as a process characterised by cumulative, protracted and evolutionary development does not fit the Scottish experience. North of the Border there truly was an Industrial and Agricultural Revolution.[22]

Those defining elements of the 'cause' of English history, the Agricultural and the Industrial Revolutions, are relocated to Scotland – they are not only the 'cause' of modern Scotland but also the justification for writing the history of Scotland, since it can now be presented as a – indeed, as *the* – paradigm case of economic modernisation in the Western world.

It was a theme which developed with increasing intensity around the notion of the 'Scottish Enlightenment' – that apparently dramatic efflorescence of Scottish thought in the mid-eighteenth century, and a period which came to be seen as the philosophical 'foundation' of the modern world in works such as Arthur Herman's *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots' Invention of the Modern World* (2002):

> This is the story of how the Scottish Enlightenment created the basic idea of modernity. Obviously, the Scots did not do everything by themselves: other nations – Germans, French, Italians, Russians, even the English – have their place in the making of the modern world. But it is the Scots more than anyone else who have created the lens

[21] Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (London, 1977; 1981), 108.
[22] T. M. Devine, *Scotland's Empire 1600–1815* (London, 2003), 322.

> through which we now see the final product. When we gaze out on a contemporary world shaped by technology, capitalism and modern democracy, and struggle to find our place as individuals in it, we are in effect viewing the world as the Scots did.[23]

Here, a story which had originally been developed in some obscurity about the origins of the social sciences in the United States by scholars such as W. C. Lehmann and Gladys Bryson in the 1930s and 40s, is expanded into an account of the origins and justification of the United States itself: the world of modernity, of capitalism, of democracy, of America's global influence, is possible only because of eighteenth-century Scotland. Scotland is the first cause in the sequence which produces that modernity, the single and singular cause without which it would not have occurred: 'It marks a crucial turning point in America, in the development of the British Empire, and of Europe – not to mention the United Kingdom'.[24] The nation which had defied the logic of history and which, apparently, had no cause to continue to exist, is transformed into the nation which is the fundamental cause of the whole world of modern capitalism in which we now live.

The economic consequences of the Scottish Enlightenment were clear to those who, like the directors of the Adam Smith Institute, became advisers to Margaret Thatcher, a prime minister who never understood why Scots did not respond positively to her economic policies since they derived, in her view, from a great Scotsman, Adam Smith, of whom Scots should be proud both for his contemporary influence in the work of economists such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, and for providing the foundation of the great achievements of nineteenth century industrial Scotland. Hugo Young records her as having said that 'the Scots invented Thatcherism, long before I was thought of', and declaring, 'Tory values are in tune with everything that is finest in the Scottish character. Scottish values are Tory values – and vice versa'.[25] Scotland as the *homeland* of free-market capitalism was the fundamental basis of the neo-liberalism of the 'Chicago School' which Hayek led and from which Mrs Thatcher's governments derived many of their policies. Alternative readings of Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, such as those of Andrew Skinner of Glasgow University, which underlined Smith's

[23] Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots' Invention of the Modern World* (London, 2002), vii.

[24] Ibid., vii.

[25] Hugo Young, *One of Us* (London, 1989) 528.

emphasis on the role of 'sympathy' as well as 'self-interest' in the operations of an economy, were ignored in an environment where the Liberty Press of Indianapolis was producing new editions of the works of the major thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment dedicated to revealing how they provided the intellectual justification for contemporary US free-market policies. The Scottish Enlightenment was, in reality, nothing to do with Scotland: it was an origin myth for the United States, but one which gave Scotland a key role in the world of global capitalism.

The Enlightenment was also, of course, a Unionist myth: Scotland's importance in the events of the world was a direct outcome of the Union, and without Union Scotland would simply have remained the barbaric backwater from which the Union rescued it; indeed, for many, that rescue was merely a temporary escape hatch from a backwardness to which Scotland returned with the onset of Romanticism and the sentimental evasions of the reality of Scottish life that characterised Scottish culture from Burns and Scott to Stevenson and Barrie. As Hugh Trevor-Roper (who has some claim to being the first to promote the notion of a Scottish 'Enlightenment'[26]) argued, the Enlightenment in Scotland was the nation's very brief foray into rationality: Scottish culture was, in its essence, perhaps in its genes, a *mythopoeic* culture, fundamentally resistant to rationality, one in which 'one myth surrenders only to another'.[27] Scotland's Enlightenment could not, therefore, prevent the return of mythopoeic falsehood, this time in the form of James Macpherson's Ossianic poetry:

> if Scottish belief in the authenticity of Ossian weakened in the course of the nineteenth century, that was not because the Scots, however belatedly, yielded to reason. Like Boece's kings and Buchanan's ancient constitution, Ossian's poems lost their authenticity, not when they were disproved, but when changing circumstances made them no longer necessary – and when another myth was available to supersede them.[28]

---

[26] The notion that there had been a specifically Scottish Enlightenment was, it seems, first publicly proposed by Hugh Trevor-Roper at the second International Conference on the Enlightenment at St Andrews in 1966. John Robertson relates that Trevor-Roper and Duncan Forbes both laid claim to the creation of the concept, Forbes because of a course he ran at Cambridge on 'Hume, Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment'; see http://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/4408/1/The_Scottish_Contribution_to_the_Enlightenment_by_John_Robertson___Institute_of_Historical_Research.pdf; accessed 21 July 2014.

[27] Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History* (New Haven, 2008), 72.

[28] Ibid., 188.

The myth which displaced Ossian was the equally fabulous vision of Scotland's tartan past as conjured up by the 'Wizard of the North', Walter Scott. Scotland founded the modern world only to retreat from it into its ancestral backwardness, just as its industrial domination in the nineteenth century, when it was the 'workshop of the world', was but a prologue to decline into a dependent economy of unrelieved industrial failure, from the Hillman Imp to Silicon Glen.

To the economic and social historians who used their new analytical tools to chart the past, the world of 'culture' was no more than an epiphenomenon of the real drivers of change – technological improvement, trade and profit. If Scotland had inspired the building of the modern world, it had expired into irrelevance with its industrial decline in the aftermath of the First World War, and a culture which had turned its back on the universal truths of the Enlightenment in the nineteenth century would, in the twentieth century, and despite the efforts of Hugh MacDiarmid's Scottish Renaissance movement, decline into parochial redundancy: Scotland's cultural identity was a reflection of its misshapen and ineffective economy. As Tom Nairn summarised it in 1978, Scotland was: 'cramped, stagnant, backward-looking, parochial . . . the one thing which the Scots can never be said to have lacked is an identity'.[29] Such a culture could never be a cause of political change: there was nothing there for a nationalist movement to gather around and celebrate, and the Scottish National Party resolutely accepted the judgment of the historians and focused its campaigning on the need for economic change in Scotland, and, subsequently, on the need for social justice. Its slogan in the era of its initial impact was not 'Make Scottish Culture Anew' but 'It's Scotland's Oil'. The SNP was not a party of cultural nationalism but a party of economic nationalism, complaining about the failure of successive Westminster governments to effect any major change in the Scottish economy – even in a period like the 1980s when oil from the Scottish North Sea was bailing out the faltering British economy. It is easy, now, after 27 years of continuous SNP government in Scotland to forget just how feeble this strategy had proved through the twentieth century: in the 1997 general election which was to lead to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, the SNP won only 3 seats; in the first Scottish parliamentary election, where it could benefit from the system of proportional representation, it could manage only 35 seats which, while the same as the Conservative and the Liberal Democrats combined, did not

[29] Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain*, 131.

come anywhere near displacing the Labour party, which had 56 seats. Gaining twenty-eight percent of the votes cast did not suggest that the SNP were about to transform Scottish politics, since those declaring for independence had remained consistently at about thirty percent in the polls from the 1980s till the 2010s, driving expectations in 2014 that there would be a 70:30 vote in favour of 'No'.

What the energy of the 'Yes' campaign in the run-up to the Referendum revealed, however, was that support for Scottish independence and for Scottish nationalism was much broader than support for the SNP as a party, even if the two were to become much more aligned in its aftermath. Where had that energy come from? It had come, I suggest, from precisely the epiphenomenon which economic historians regarded as having no causal efficacy, from culture, and from the transformation of Scotland's self-perception in the period after the failure of the first devolution referendum in 1979. That failure revealed to many how feeble was the grasp of most Scots on their own past, on its values and achievements, and how, lacking such a conception of their national heritage, they had no basis for supporting a specifically Scottish politics or resisting their steady incorporation into an English-dominated, or globally organised, cultural environment. Cultural activists in Scotland in the 1980s went in search of their possible predecessors: the folk song revivalists of the 1950s; Hugh MacDiarmid, whose work from the 1920s and 30s had begun to attract revived interest in the 1960s; the working-class playwrights of the 1920s and 30s whose drama was revived by the 7:84 company in the 1980s; the women writers of the inter-war period who feature prominently in the first round of the Canongate Classics series in the 1980s. These acts of recuperation were accompanied by an explosion of creativity that, if an origin is required, can be traced to the publication of Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* in 1981, which is itself structured like Maxwell's thought experiment since its protagonist moves back and forwards between alternative worlds each of which is running down as its energy dissipates. Across all of the arts, it was as though the political energy dammed (and damned) by the referendum result flowed into the creative invention of alternative Scotlands: in poetry (Hamilton Finlay, Morgan, Lochhead, Dunn, Paterson, Kay), in the novel (Gray, Kelman, Galloway, Kennedy, Banks, Welsh), in drama (Lochhead, Byrne, Hannan, Greig, Burke), in art (Campbell, Colvin, Mach, Watt), in film (Forsyth, Douglas, MacDonald, Ramsay), in music both classical and popular (James Macmillan, Runrig, Proclaimers, Deacon Blue etc.). That explosion in creativity was matched by a sudden efflorescence of works designed to

recuperate and reinterpret the Scottish past: the four-volume *History of Scottish Literature* produced by Aberdeen University Press in 1987–8, Duncan MacMillan's groundbreaking account of Scotland's artistic traditions, *Scottish Art 1460–1990* (1990), Alexander Broadie's challenging interpretation of *The Tradition of Scottish Philosophy* (1990), John Purser's revelatory *Scotland's Music* (1992), Charles Jones's *Edinburgh History of the Scots Language* (1997) and Bill Findlay's recuperation of what had been supposed not to exist in Scotland in his *A History of Scottish Theatre* (1998). By the millennium Scotland was a country culturally transformed, endowed with rich independent cultural traditions that had been invisible in the 1960s and 1970s. The existence of the Scottish parliament made it possible for Scottish voters to vote for the SNP without fear of undermining Labour's chances of winning Westminster elections, but what made that commitment possible was a rising tide of cultural nationalism on which the political ambition of the SNP was a small floating barque.

It is the continuation and expansion of that cultural nationalism which has underpinned the development of modern Scotland: we have recuperated the eighteenth-century from its free-market and Unionist mythologies; we have connected it again to the development of nineteenth-century Scottish culture and revealed that in the energy physics of Kelvin, Tait and Clerk Maxwell are the real foundations of the modern world, *our* modern world; we have returned to the vision of a just and equal society as envisaged by Keir Hardie and other Scottish leaders of the labour movement; we have redrawn the map of Scotland's twentieth-century cultural achievement, in part by foregrounding the work of neglected women writers and artists and in part by reconnecting art in Scotland to its local intellectual environment; we have recovered Scotland's contributions to ecology from the predecessors of John Muir to those subsequently inspired by the ideas of Patrick Geddes; we have rediscovered the worldwide influence of the philosophical and psychological traditions of twentieth-century Scotland, stemming from the philosophy of John Macmurray and the anti-psychology of R. D. Laing; we have recast Scotland's cultural development in the light of its relationship with its xenitean migrant communities[30] and made Scottish culture once again central to the curriculum of the Scottish universities. We are now producing

[30] 'Xenitea' is an alternative Greek word for 'diaspora': while 'diaspora' implies a people forced to emigrate and nostalgic for their homeland, xeniteans set out to recreate their homeland elsewhere, with no intention of returning. Scotland as a country with a xenitean empire was the burden of my contribution to John M. MacKenzie and T. M. Devine (eds), *Scotland and the British Empire* (Oxford, 2011), 84–118.

Scottish science as well as Scottish philosophy, Scottish theology, Scottish history, Scottish literature, each of them developing out of Scottish traditions and their international interconnections – renouncing the blandishments of a globalisation that once assumed you could only be *inter*national by ceasing to be national.

The Scotland we now inhabit will join, this week, the many small nations that have re-emerged from those large colonising nationalities forged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and will, in its renewed and reaffirmed independence, celebrate the diversity that we now recognise as essential to humanity's creative potential. Global uniformity, after the great collapse, is a thing of the past: we are now in a new ecosystem of nations, nations like ourselves made young again by MacCaig's invention and by the Scottish government's decision to share MDD technology with the poorest countries in the world, giving each of them the opportunity to live in their own autonomospheres. Scotland, it turned out, was the 'demon' in the world system, the pathfinder for a new kind of nationalism that has reshaped the world's political geography and liberated its peoples from the clutches of a global system that was driving us to economic and ecological ruin. The Americans who sought in the Scottish Enlightenment the origins and justification of their free-market domination of the world could hardly have suspected that the Scotland they saw as origin and justification of their world-wide power would turn out to be the source of resistance to that global empire and the model for its overthrow. We may now be belated entrants into the post-US, post-China era of newly independent national cultural formations, but our belatedness does not diminish the impetus we gave to that process in 2014.

Cairns Craig
University of Aberdeen,
September 2034