

Twin Tracks: Cultural and Political Nationalism after 1967

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for *Oxford Handbook of Scottish Politics*, eds. Michael Keating and Craig McAngus (eds), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)

Abstract:

Though easily conflated, the cultural and political nationalism of modern Scotland are not the same. This chapter surveys parallel developments in cultural production and constitutional change from 1967 to 2018, and the role of the Scottish intelligentsia in re-instituting national political space. Drawing on the key journals and magazines of the pro-devolution left, we explore the role of Scottish cultural ‘voice’ in affirming, mobilising and institutionalising the national-political frame. Scottish devolution had an important but highly mediated cultural dimension, with claims to national representation deeply entangled in electoral triangulation, and the emergence of ‘neo-popular’ Scottish identity cementing the image of anti-Thatcherite cultural consensus. But the idea of Holyrood arriving on a wave of artistic renaissance and rising national ‘confidence’ is too simplistic, and obscures important disparities between the ‘twin tracks’ of cultural and political nationalism.

The cultural and political nationalism of modern Scotland are not the same. Though easily conflated, they are like twin locomotives working on parallel tracks, usually (but not always) chugging in the same direction. They can be coupled together on the same track when required, to move a heavy cargo uphill (notably during the 2014 referendum on independence). But in general, Scotland’s cultural and political nationalism have spoken in distinct voices about distinct priorities, and given each other plenty of elbow-room in postwar civic life. Prior to devolution, it was uncommon for leading lights of Scottish theatre, literature, music or cinema to express public enthusiasm for the SNP, and that party has consciously eschewed the image of a national awakening led by kilted folk-singers and truculent poets. Patriotic actors and painters feel no compunction to defend the economic policies of the leading pro-independence party, and with few exceptions SNP politicians are only too happy to refrain from literary controversy. So while we cannot really understand Scotland’s cultural or political nationalism in isolation – they are twinned to the bone – we should beware of simply incorporating one into the story of the other. But this is a considerable challenge: a key framing assumption of modern nationalism is the underlying

unity of Scotland's claims to cultural difference and political autonomy (Gellner, 1983). The deep logic of that paradigm tends to erase the disparities of greatest interest in the Scottish case, insisting the twin tracks are really one and the same.

We begin with narratives running in parallel. The political story moves along the familiar electoral timeline: the rise of the professionalised SNP, the Hamilton shock, Labour's slow and painful embrace of a Scottish Assembly, the debacle of 1979, followed by the tartanisation of Scottish Labour in the 1980s (Geekie and Levy, 1989), cries of 'no mandate' and the 'civic' cementing of national politics leading to Holyrood (Mitchell, 1996; Hearn, 2000). After devolution, the Jack McConnell administration aimed (in 2003) to 'place culture at the heart of government', fully incorporating cultural 'rights' and industries into social and economic strategy, 'on a par with health, housing and education' (Scottish Executive, 2005). But the more telling moment, for our purposes, was Alex Salmond's canny rebrand of the Scottish Executive as the 'Scottish Government' after the SNP took office in 2007, a piece of wordplay which bolstered the national ego more effectively than anything penned by the National Makar. The 2011 SNP landslide led to the independence referendum of 2014, in which many prominent cultural figures were vocal supporters of the Yes campaign (Hames, 2012). In the wake of the No result, tens of thousands of Yes supporters flooded into the massified SNP (whose membership has increased fivefold since the vote (Audickas, Dempsey and Keen, 2018)), and brought with them a more populist and flag-waving orientation to national feeling. This style of patriotic display is relatively alien to many of the vigilantly 'civic' and technocratic SNP MSPs working under Nicola Sturgeon (the most culturally literate First Minister to date), but Saltires and related iconography are key to the 'continuity' Yes movement which now forms the SNP's political base.

Scotland's cultural nationalism is much more difficult to narrativise in this manner, with few dominos clicking neatly together to reveal how painting X set poem Y on its way. Dealing mainly in highly mediated precedents rather than direct causation, cultural history lacks the centrally organising matrix of the electoral system, which offers the (sometimes helpful) illusion of politics as a linear release of events and consequences. For this reason it is much easier to draw a coherent, if jagged, line from the 1967 Hamilton by-election to indyref 2014 than it is to link (say) the neo-folk anthems of The Corries to the 'tartan noir' crime fiction of Val McDermid, still less to the surreal internet comedy of Brian Limond ('Limmy'). If pressed, we could certainly formulate a weak solvent of 'Scottish culture' in which Muriel

Spark, Billy Connolly and the TV personality Lorraine Kelly could be made to dissolve – or, for that matter, another batch blending Ivor Cutler, Jackie Kay and *Still Game* – but the resulting brew would be an artful confection of our own, tasting nothing like its key ingredients. What we usually mean by culture is simply so various, discontinuous and borderless, it makes little sense to project tidy trajectories or commonalities from this to that; and yet linking ‘culture’ to ‘politics’ within the national frame always requires some dot-joining of this seductive though spurious kind (Thomson, 2007). We should be mindful of this difficulty even as we listen for echoes between (say) the 7:84 theatre company’s sensational ceilidh-play *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973) and the decision of the young Scottish Executive to establish a National Theatre for Scotland (in 2006). These two moments are not unrelated, but precisely how they are connected is difficult to say without begging the very questions I mean to explore here: functionally and ideologically speaking, what *is* the cultural component of modern Scottish nationalism? Specifically, what role has it played in affirming, mobilising and institutionalising the national-political frame? And finally, should political scholars take it more seriously?

Subjective and Objective Nationality

Peter Lynch justly observes that ‘Scottish nationalism is not primarily concerned with language or cultural issues but with political and economic self-government’ (2013: 229). But there is more to say, and Scottish political science has sometimes over-estimated the unimportance of ‘culture’, or conceived it in terms which obscure rather than clarify its role. James Kellas found colour but little substance to cultural nationalism in his seminal study *The Scottish Political System*:

Cultural nationalists make a small but vociferous contribution to Scottish nationalism. They encourage the use of a Scottish means of expression in literature, and cultivate Scottishness in the other arts. A few support the SNP, or political devolution, but most are uninterested in politics, preferring to change Scottish society through education and cultural activities. The SNP, for its part, takes little interest in cultural matters. (1989: 129)

If this final statement were broadly true at the time of the book’s publication in 1973, it seems an eccentric reading of developments between the first and fourth edition (published in

1989). Though many of the cultural changes briefly surveyed in this chapter occurred just adjacent to Scotland's formal political system, they were key to authenticating and broadening support for that system, and played a significant role in the articulation of Scottish difference. Indeed, it has often been argued that 'Scotland's artists did more than its politicians to dream up a new Scotland', and were the true driving force of devolution (O'Rourke, 2002: 2). 'If politics and votes were the means of bringing the parliament into existence, they were not its direct cause', according to Cairns Craig: the parliament 'has been built on the foundations of a revolution in the nation's culture' (2016: 37; 2009: 73).

Kellas's model is of limited help in tracing (let alone scrutinising) this story of *cultural devolution*, because it cannot grasp developments at the ragged edge of the organised party and electoral system, where 'politics' meets broader civic life. In framing his general (and today virtually uncontested) argument against a homogenously British vision of the UK state, Kellas noted that the 'criteria for nationhood'

ought to satisfy two broad requirements: that the members of the nation think of themselves primarily as such, and not primarily as members of another nation; and that the nation should have some objective characteristics of its own, such as language, 'complementary habits and facilities of communication', religion, territory, previous statehood, a history of common action, and so on. The first requirement is well fulfilled in the case of Scotland. (1989: 5)

Scotland's 'subjective' qualities of nationhood were all present and correct, but their 'objective' correlates were more doubtful (and seem especially so in retrospect). Kellas emphasised Presbyterianism and the well-attended national Kirk ('its communicants amount to around one quarter of the adult population'), and also highlighted the dominance of the indigenous press, observing that no London newspaper 'is read by more than 17% of Scottish adults on weekdays and 12% on Sundays' (1989: 6). These planks of nationality are severely weakened today – Iain Macwhirter warns that 'Scotland has a national political system, but is in danger of losing a national media' (2014: 9) – despite the growing strength and appeal of Scottishness over the intervening period (McCrone, 2017; Park et al, 2013).

Are feeling and reality connected at all? For a political scientist, the proof of the pudding will lie in the voting: the fact that people who identify as Scots do not automatically vote Scottish

nationalist (nor ‘disdain cooperation with the “English” political parties’) led Kellas to conclude that ‘most of the time [...] the political nationalism lies dormant, and the “British” pattern of political behaviour prevails’ (1989: 6). This approach conflates in advance ‘identity’ and ‘political behaviour’: you are what you vote, and only wholesale electoral rejection of the British order would manifest sub-British national identity ‘activated’ from its usual dormancy. In this perspective cultural identity can affirm established political structures, but cannot really figure in their gradual transformation, and thus cannot achieve what actually happened in Scotland over the span roughly between Lulu and *Trainspotting*: help to crystallise ‘objective’ qualities of cultural nationhood (e.g. institutions, curricula, platforms for collective memory and ‘common action’) out of mobilised national consciousness. Other-than-British national feeling, Kellas writes, ‘came to the surface during the late 1960s with the rise of political nationalism in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (the last a quite separate variety). But in reality it was always there’ (1989: 5). It is the anterior and ‘banal’ quality of this national consciousness (see Billig, 1995) – ‘always there’, gathering dust – which seems to consign the permanently open question of cultural identity to the background, in just the period it was moving swiftly to the political foreground. Kellas’s classic study is untimely because it renders illegible the dynamic role of cultural identity in challenging – and eventually expanding – the ambit and popular grounding of the existing (Scottish) political system. This is a signature development of the 1970s and 80s: increasingly, national-cultural attachment operates not merely as an anchoring residue – or, viewed from Whitehall, as a source of potential disruption to political Britishness – but as a structuring principle for the *re-constitution* of Scottish national political space.

Tom Nairn and the ‘Great Scottish Dream’

Tom Nairn’s analysis of Scottish cultural identity from the later 1960s is of crucial importance in tracing these changes and avoiding superficial readings of national awakening. Though the remaking of Scottish political identity is often linked to rising ‘cultural confidence’, it is the staleness and sterility of Scottish culture which animate the crucial advance which Nairn began. Reporting on the Edinburgh Festival for the *New Statesman* in 1967, he blasted

the tiresome fantasy-life the Scots have been doping themselves with for the past three centuries to avoid their real problem. Festival time in Edinburgh seems to have

joined tartanry, militarism, Burns and Scott – those ‘mummified housegods in their musty niches’, as Edwin Muir put it – as a constituent of the Great Scottish Dream. (1967: 265)

The ‘most important trait’ of this dream, Nairn continued in *New Left Review* in May-June 1968, ‘is a vast, impossible dissociation from the realities of history’, a vision-quest driven by ‘the hope for an identity’ where none is possible (1968: 4). Or not possible as the true identity of a living political nationhood (the ‘real problem’): Scotland’s wilful dreaming is of a romantic ‘substitute consciousness’ which at the level of camp culture-nostalgia both admits and compensates for the ‘unreality’ of lived national experience (1968: 7). Marked by a yearning for ‘identity’ rather than political power, modern Scottish nationalism is a ‘dream of redemption’ that will make good the loss of living collectivity: ‘for the Scots, national existence must represent that magic, whole reality of which they have been cheated by history – in it, their maimed past will be redeemed, in more vivid colours than a history can ever provide’ (1968: 8). We are closer here to imaginative compensation than historical recovery, and it is notable that Nairn – who first trained as an aesthete and art-teacher – draws largely on novelists, poets and literary scholars in developing this analysis. Indeed, the ‘Scotland’ which has assimilated the Edinburgh Festival into its own ‘tiresome fantasy-life’ stands revealed as a fundamentally fictive enterprise, expressing latent cultural needs in ‘crooked’ and neurotic form. ‘In Scotland the real must become unreal, and the unreal be seen at all costs as real’ (1967: 265). ‘Despite the fairly critical stances taken against political Nationalism by Scottish intellectuals’, observes David McCrone, the inescapable premise of their quest for identity is the ‘assumption that Scotland has (or had) a “national” culture waiting to be discovered’, awakened and revitalised (1992: 190). Thus the cultural unit and identity ‘Scotland’ generates a steady flow of signs, narratives and images to sustain its formal ‘identity’, all the while knowing – and bracketing – the placeholder function of this mask, a necessary stand-in for the real, redeemed nationhood yet to come. In this perspective, the tracks are not parallel so much as operating on different planes of reality, culture compensating for the emptiness of politics. On the level of cultural dreaming, even going round in the same chimerical circles keeps the national wheels and pistons from grinding to a halt, sustaining the possibility of someday escaping this drowsy half-life.

Tartanry and Burns-worship are only the most familiar (and usually despised) faces of Nairn’s ‘Great Scottish Dream’. At another level, the zombie permanence of these

phenomena serves as endless fodder for strenuous debunking by the national intelligentsia, whose role is to castigate the symptoms while affirming the reality of the underlying pathology, so validating the quest to supply 'Scotland' with a viable political referent (or Kellas's 'objective characteristics'). The trouble, Nairn argues, is that the vigorous myth-busting of the cognoscenti coincides with their own intense romanticism, one which exceeds the sceptical impulse and figures the actuality of modern Scotland as a craven disgrace to the *ideal* nation. Thus, in the course of venerating Hugh MacDiarmid as a 'true bard' who unflinchingly 'presents the Scottish people with their own image', his raging protégé Tom Scott inveighs against 'Scotshire, a county in the north of England, an ex-country, an Esau land that has sold its birthright for a mess of English pottage' (quoted by Nairn, 1968: 10). A common misreading of this tendency overlooks how bitterly and sweepingly it scorns what really-existing Scotland has allowed itself to become. In this bleak but proudly undeceived vision, the actual Scotland visible through the kitchen window is a scar, an embodiment of cultural damage which cannot be repaired at the level of image and 'identity'. Faced with these twin falsities – the infantile tartan fantasy, the living lie of Scotshire – Scotland as subject, Nairn writes, 'is rejected as travesty, and can only be rejected *totally*' (1968: 10). The revolutionary neo-Celtic Scotland intended to take its place, in MacDiarmid's Renaissance project, is conceived as a blitzkrieg negation of this sham, but finds little purchase outside the clammy, circular debates of a vanguardist coterie. Thus the insularity and 'complacent narcissism' of an Elect literary-nationalist milieu, Nairn argues, in which the 'trash-image' of tartantry is forever being violently rejected by patriot-redeemers who find, like MacDiarmid, 'that the "real" Scotland which is worthwhile and has survived it all is—*oneself*' (1968: 9-10). This strain of national revivalism has cold contempt for 'Scottish culture' in the sense of the 'way of life' actually experienced by ordinary Scots you might see on the bus or at the bingo.

Nairn would later warm to the national cause (and to the SNP), but his crucial writing of this late 1960s period claims two profound ruptures worthy of further contemplation today: one between substantive political nationhood and degraded cultural 'identity' – the loss of the former compelling the neurotic fantasies of the latter – and a second between the sleepy self-regard of an introverted nationalist intelligentsia and the dismal reality of the heedless Scottish public. Only a few months later, the landscape would look rather different; even Nairn would cease to dismiss 'the utter feebleness of Scottish political Nationalism' after the Hamilton by-election of 2 November 1967 (1967: 265). But the developments which

followed Hamilton largely confirmed Nairn's sense of the profound rift between cultural dreaming and electoral nationalism.

'A crassly philistine body'

Hamilton marks a complex intersection between distinct currents of cultural and political nationalism; a watershed from which new streams would flow and eventually combine, but also the final ebbing of a certain purist spring of ethno-cultural revival. Perhaps surprisingly, the durable camp-followers of the Scottish Renaissance spearheaded by MacDiarmid in the 1920s and 30s – still a sizable contingent of militantly 'Scottish' cultural life in the 1960s, especially in poetry – deeply distrusted the surge of electoral success. John Herdman spoke for many in declaring 'that the SNP is for the most part a crassly philistine body whose obsessive worship of economics is only a little less nauseating than that of the unionist parties' (1971: 104). At best, Herdman argued in 1971, the apparent 'revival of nationalist consciousness' manifested in the rising nationalist vote might 'through the SNP express itself sufficiently in political action to effect a change in the constitutional position of Scotland, which in its turn would stimulate a genuine spiritual development in the Scottish people' (105). That higher plane of spiritual development and redemption remained paramount to literary nationalists such as Herdman, Tom Scott and Alan Bold. The reformist SNP and its vulgar propaganda comparing food prices in Scotland and England – its tendency, in Herdman's words, 'to appeal to everything that is basest and most inert and complacent in the public mind' (1971: 108) – could only grudgingly be accepted as a means to those loftier ends. In the immediate aftermath of Hamilton, different political orientations within the Scottish literati expressed real ambivalence about the rise of the SNP, each seeing in Ewing's triumph different portents of national degradation. For the Renaissance stalwarts, the growing strength of the SNP threatened to reduce the sacred cause of freedom to 'an attractive proposition for self-satisfied and stupid materialists' (Herdman, 1971: 108). For younger writers who despaired of the musty Renaissance, the pipes-and-whisky fanfare that followed Hamilton threatened a regression to uncritical tartanry.

While taking heart (and vindication) from the mood of national self-assertion, the MacDiarmidites kept their distance from its modernised electoral vehicle. Christopher Harvie recalled the 'a-cultural quality' of Scottish nationalism in the 1970s:

Meetings of the SNP lacked both kilts and literary figures, in contrast to the apparent situation before World War II. Writers and artists, however nationalist in sympathy, shied from a party so explicitly ‘modernising’ in its ethos and, despite the literary enthusiasm of the chairman, William Wolfe, this distrust was reciprocated by many leading figures in the party. (1991: 30)

Writing in 1978, Jack Brand argued that ‘despite the obvious quality of the modern writers, they seem to have ignored the questions of national identity which have come to be an interest of the Scottish people’ (105). This was an overstatement, but it has political and historiographic importance: the surging SNP of the 1970s did not perceive itself to have a significant literary wing, and was certainly not relying on the afflatus of poets, thinkers and Lallans activists to chart the course.

The impetus for ‘cultural devolution’ came not from national-traditional revivalists but an emergent cadre of the proto-national establishment. ‘The critical change’ in this period, wrote Harvie, ‘is one of consciousness’: the growing interest in Scotland – both scholarly and moral-political – by its native intelligentsia. The 1960s brought swift and bewildering social change, enabling a fresh look at Scottishness prompted less by stirring patriotic dreams than the pregnant disarray of inherited templates. ‘The complacent conservatism which characterised middle-class Scottish culture seems almost completely to have disappeared’, Harvie observed in 1975.

The old Scottish institutions are admitted to be in dissolution; the hold of the churches has been broken; law is seen more as a restrictive practice than a national ornament; education is badly in need of reform. Political nationalism is no more prepossessing as an ideology than it was, but there is no longer a British or imperial alternative. The intelligentsia can only now create a tolerable, convivial community in its own country. (1998: 91)

Thus it was perceived cultural breakdown and crisis which precipitated the re-formation of a national politics; and the rhetorical ‘hardening’ of national politics in the 1980s, into an arena of representative power the writers and intelligentsia could claim as their own. This pattern of intellectuals *re-instituting* national consciousness is first visible in the small Scottish periodicals of the post-Hamilton period, inaugurated by *Scottish International (Review)* in

1968. This was ‘a golden age of small magazine publication in Scotland’, Herdman observes: ‘in the pages of the few long-standing journals and of those new ones which sprang up in the late sixties and early seventies the ideological wars of that era were fought out’ (2013: 82). Loosely centred on the University of Edinburgh, overlapping literary and activist circles produced a rich ecology of left-nationalist debate across the 1970s and 80s, in cheaply printed periodicals that turned ‘the Scottish dimension’ – cultural *and* political – into a living discursive formation visible in bookshops and news-agents. Though never reaching a mass audience, the wider political importance of these magazines stems from their role as a crucial testing-ground in which the Scottish intelligentsia established a new habitus and role for itself. Cultural and political reviews such as *New Edinburgh Review* (from 1969), *Chapman* (1970), *Calgacus* (1975) and *Crann-Tàra* (1977) took up elements of leftist strategy, folk revivalism and the ‘Celtic idea’, and developed a neo-Gramscian reading of Scottish cultural history. These titles laid the groundwork for the left-nationalist consensus which intersected directly with electoral politics (and post-referendum malaise) in later magazines such as *Cencrastus* (1979) and *Radical Scotland* (1982). The latter title functioned as a laboratory and clearing-house for pro-devolution strategy (e.g. the 1983 ‘Foulkes Memorandum’, in which the Labour MP George Foulkes proposed an escalating campaign of parliamentary disruption ‘to provoke the constitutional crisis necessary to get change’ (Hepburn, 1983: 16)), and carried original poetry and fiction (funded by the Scottish Arts Council, so badged from 1967). It also published an exciting new wave of Scottish cultural and intellectual history in essays by Neal Ascherson, Cairns Craig, Isobel Lindsay and Stephen Maxwell. Much of this activity took place in a brainy debatable land between socialist and nationalist politics – memorably captured in James Robertson’s epic novel of devolution, *And the Land Lay Still* – but dauntless cultural heroes seeking a higher, spiritual Scottish awakening were neither conspicuous nor required.

’79 and After

The magazine debates moved closer to the political mainstream after the miscarried 1979 referendum on a Scottish Assembly, effectively filling the vacuum where an official Scottish political system had failed to find sufficient democratic purchase. Writing in *New Edinburgh Review*, Tom Nairn was both mordant and chipper in his response to the disaster, noting that ‘the simple polarisation of the referendum dissipated a good deal of Scotch middle-class mist’. During the referendum campaign, he observed, ‘people were made to line up in some

sort of vague battle-order, and Scotland was made to see more clearly that the growth of real national consciousness is a difficult conflict, a civil war within the nation as much as a struggle between it and the metropolis' (1979: 8). But this bare-knuckle conflict would never arrive. On the contrary, the 1980s see the cultural politics of Scottishness elided with a constitutional project proud of its own urbane consensualism, keen to parade its suspension of intra-nation hostilities as a model for political renewal. In place of a 'civil war within the nation', pro-devolution politics skipped straight to the ceasefire and declared victory all round for 'representation': of a 'new' Scottish political order increasingly identified with cross-party committees, and characterised by a mood of sober 'civic' unity.

One pugnacious exception was the 'Scotch Myths' exhibition of Barbara and Murray Grigor, mounted in 1981. In Neal Ascherson's summary, this 'charged straight at the grisly tangle of sentimental kitsch which passed for the national self-image, the complex which the political thinker Tom Nairn called "the Tartan Monster". It was followed by a heretical "Scotch Myths" Hogmanay show on television, and the Monster has been weakened and derided ever since' (Ascherson, 1994). The Grigors' exhibition, and the spinoff study *Scotch Reels: Scotland in Cinema and Television* (McArthur, 1982), briefly instigated a truly critical orientation to the 'content' – not only the frame – of national culture, without pulling punches for fear of weakening Scottish 'confidence' or the cause of Home Rule. It is a rare but valuable moment on the path to devolution which figures the recognised signifiers of Scottish culture as an obstacle and problem, and not only a solution and resource. The early 1980s was a period of intense and sharpening exchange between the cultural and political spheres. Writing in *Radical Scotland* in 1983, academic and activist George Kerevan observed that 'politics is no longer confined to the Establishment and Labourist agenda of economic tinkering. Cultural values represent a new Second Front' (1983a: 23). But the role of a Scottish *cultural public* in that movement – whether simply as receptive audiences or co-creators of a revived, neo-popular national art – remained unclear. Commenting in *Chapman* the same year, theatre critic and journalist Joyce McMillan pointed out that 'working people in Glasgow are much more concerned about the next episode of *Dallas* than about the survival of Scottish culture in any form', while being 'fully as sophisticated, as up-to-date, as well-travelled and as internationally-connected as any modern Western proletariat' (1983: 70). Here, the 'maturity' and non-parochialism of the Scottish mass audience is proven by its interest in the latest transatlantic TV sensation; it is the self-conscious literati who are fixated by their nationality (most notably via the revived 'language question' of the 1920s-30s,

concerning whether and how to write in Scots). However, McMillan writes (echoing Nairn), the cure to this neurosis lies outside the domain of culture as such: ‘the destructive obsession with the need to emphasise and preserve the “Scottishness” of our writing far beyond what comes naturally and truthfully to writers will persist for as long as Scotland remains in political limbo; in other words, it will last until Scotland either becomes a full nation-state, or loses its sense of nationhood altogether’ (1983: 70). It follows that the success of a new Scottish cultural renaissance will be measured not by ticket-sales or penetration of the mass, TV-watching audience, but in jumping the track from Scottish cultural consciousness to mobilised political agency: a leap achieved via institutionalisation of Scottish identity (by its elite guardians) rather than direct appeals to popular taste.¹ Alan Bold concluded his 1983 study of *Modern Scottish Literature* on a note of ‘uncertainty’ about the Scottish cultural public in whose name ‘cultural devolution’ was beginning to claim institutional clout: Scottish dramatists, he said, were ‘waiting, not for something to turn up but someone to turn to’: an engaged national audience hungry for its own artistic representation (318). To a significant extent – and in common with many other nationalist movements – ‘cultural devolution’ was powered by the intelligentsia’s formidable energies of cultural production and commentary, rather than the appetites of Scottish consumers – the majority of whom would likely recall *Dallas* and the Pet Shop Boys ahead of Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark* (1981), the seminal Scottish literary achievement of the decade.

The primacy of cultural difference

Though marginal to the programme of the SNP, the re-framing of Scottish politics in this period was ultimately premised on the ‘given’ and established character of national-cultural difference. In the second issue of *Radical Scotland*, Cairns Craig argued that ‘it is precisely on the basis of the value of a *culture*, the culture of a people, that nationalist politics makes its claims. What distinguishes nationalisms from other ideologies is that the defence of cultural difference and cultural integrity is the basis of its claim to control over the economic and social powers within the society of that culture’ (1983: 24). Responding to socialist critics, Craig insists on the primacy of cultural difference not only within nationalism, but its imbrication with any leftist politics aiming to justify control over economic and government

¹ A decade later, McMillan later served as Chair of the Scottish Constitutional Commission, designing a Scottish parliamentary system on the lines indicated by the 1988 Claim of Right.

power in the interests of a defined ‘people’. In this sense, ‘to treat the problems of Scotland as a purely *political* problem [...] is to ignore entirely the ways in which culture operates as a powerful force for the existing state within the fabric of our total social experience. [...] It is on the cultural question that Scottish nationalism has failed’ (1983: 24-5).

How, and to what extent, was this problem solved? In the 1980s and 90s notions of ‘Scottish voice’ increasingly bridge the gap between liberal discourse of democratic representation and the fabric of urban social life, in the emergence of a ‘vernacular’ mode of nationalism which marries claims of class dispossession, cultural erasure and national disenfranchisement (Hames, 2013). In 1996 Michael Keating noted that ‘Scottish nationalist discourse has traditionally had a rather weak cultural dimension’ and that ‘little attention is paid to language or to ritual’ (189). But in a zone of cultural debate consciously external to SNP policy – and energised by writers overtly hostile to the SNP’s nationalism, including James Kelman and Tom Leonard – literature employing working-class language became a powerful and valorised way of mapping precisely Keating’s sense ‘that national conflict in Scotland is closely tied to perceptions of class struggle and opposition to the Conservative government with its English base’ (1996: 173). Just as Thatcherism ‘helped identify neo-liberalism with English values and restore the old association of nationalism with dissent’ (Keating, 1996: 182), the traditional demotic language held to embody Scotland’s communitarian values was charged with new kinds of political representivity. Keith Dixon writes of a ‘radical cultural *neo-populism*’ in the Scottish 1980s, motivated by ‘the need to provide authentic new representations of the people’ in conditions of democratic deficit (1996: 119). While Dixon regards the key literary figures of this movement (Kelman, Leonard, Gray) as ‘underground’ and dissident voices, the ‘neo-populist’ turn he traces clearly occurred within, and was shaped around, a *statist* constitutional paradigm derived from the Westminster system. The 1973 Report of the Royal Commission on the Constitution – intended mainly as a talking-shop when established by Wilson’s Labour government shortly after the Hamilton thunderbolt – had cautiously recommended devolution on the following terms: ‘we all see the establishment of an assembly [...] as being an appropriate means of recognising Scotland’s national identity and of giving expression to its national consciousness’ (*Report of the Royal Commission*, 1973: I, 335). Whatever it would later become in the hands of Scottish cultural vanguardists and elected politicians, for its 1970s Whitehall architects devolution was a tool for the management of national feeling: offering ‘recognition’ of identitarian claims to

national difference and autonomy by directly incorporating these claims into the structures of the ‘modernising’ union-state, strengthening its own claims to representative pluralism.

By 1989, ‘national voice’ was a key trope in (anti-Thatcher) political conditions which made the assertion of cultural difference, class resistance and constitutional disquiet one and the same. In Craig’s commentary in *Radical Scotland*, we see this political context directly informing the critical rubric in which Scottish cultural production is interpreted:

Whatever the specific quality of the works of art of the ’70s and ’80s, they have all been explorations of and assertions of the vitality and validity of the Scottish voice. And that vitality has taken the Scottish voice through the gradations from identification with the core experience of the working class – let’s say Billy Connolly – into a flexible instrument which can range across many different kinds of Scottish experience, each of which is voiced differently but still voiced as Scottish – ‘Naked Radio’ and Robbie Coltrane. The voicing of Scotland is what the ’80s have been about in cultural terms, from Liz Lochhead’s poetry to the Proclaimers’ songs, from *Gregory’s Girl* to *The Steamie*. (1989: 9-10)

The aesthetic qualities and political ‘content’ of artworks read within this frame are almost irrelevant; the nationality of the expressive channel is all. ‘Scottish voice’ now became a key metaphor for unifying constituent elements of the national community, and the direct index of social textures and values which distinguish Scotland from England. The pivotal shift over the preceding decade is not so much the retrieval of popular imagery of communal values and experience (often, as Craig argued, nostalgic and performative), but the *reconstitution* of national structures: of expression, of organisation, of cultural and political reproduction. From 1987 the anti-Thatcher ‘no-mandate’ argument highlighted the hollowness of Scottish democracy within the UK, and representative legitimacy was assertively claimed and contested in the field of ‘culture’, in both new and reactive ways. By the turn of the 1990s, organised popular defiance (of unrepresentative Tory government, of industrial policy, of the poll tax) was incorporated into an elite consensus in favour of devolution, most importantly via the Scottish Constitutional Convention (a body with deep roots in *Radical Scotland*, via its own considerable overlap with the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly founded in 1980 (see McLean, 2005)). The SNP controversially withdrew from the all-party Convention, hardliners fearing a Labour stitch-up (Lynch, 2013: 195-96; Mitchell, 1996: 241-3), though

the body's inaugurating statement, the 1988 *Claim of Right*, included audacious claims to cultural and popular sovereignty, closer to the traditions of SNP fundamentalists than the comfort-zone of Labour devolutionists (Edwards, 1989).

Re-framing Scotland and 'experience of the state'

'Culture' in the sense of poetry and painting played almost no role in the machine politics by which devolution was slowly and painfully squared with the electoral interests of the 1970s Labour Party and eventually 'delivered' by New Labour in 1998 (Hames, 2020), but of course these developments and strategic responses were ultimately actuated by electoral behaviour which cannot be severed from cultural affiliation and mobilisation. Explaining *The Growth of Nationalism in Scotland* in the midst of this shift, Keith Webb noted 'that national feeling is a permanent feature of Scottish culture':

It is not possible, therefore, to explain the rise of a nationalist movement by referring to a sudden spread of nationalist sentiment. What is needed is an explanation of why the nationalist feelings already held by many Scots became politicized when they did. [...] What seems to have happened is that the Scottish identity has become relevant to politics, whereas previously politics was only seen in British terms. (1978: 102)

One possibility here is suggested by Stephen Kendrick, who highlights changing broadcast media and their role in socially embedding the national-political frame. Noting the relative uniformity of post-war social and economic change across the UK, Kendrick is sceptical of economic or cultural explanations for the emergence of Scottish political 'difference' in the 1960s. He instead directs our attention to shifting 'experience of the state', and specifically the impact of state broadcasting on that 'set of taken-for granted assumptions which underlay the rhetoric of the national political game' (1989: 79). The arrival of Scottish Television in 1957 prompted the BBC to broadcast its first specifically Scottish news bulletin the same year, and coverage of Scottish current-affairs quickly established a 'frame of reference which accepts Scotland as the national unit which national economic management and national politics are about' (1989: 81-82). The impact of this media frame, which 'assumes a national identity on the part of the viewer and invites the viewer to share a national perspective' (85-86), was heightened by the erosion of earlier customs and alignments across the same restive period. Treating communications media as the crucial link between state intervention and the

domain of everyday life, Kendrick posits ‘that the electoral divergence between Scotland and England is in part a consequence of the forefronting of the national frame of reference on the part of new national media with a particular impact on those for whom older forms of identity are weakening’ (1989: 86).

Crucially, those fading patterns of settled social identity – including the de-alignment of working-class Labour support, in a 1970s Scottish trend where ‘class has a diminishing role in relation to voting behaviour’ (Brand, 1978: 146) – could be *re-created* in the neo-national consciousness associated with rising SNP support in the New Towns. Writing in 1983, George Kerevan argues that changes in class composition – above all, the expansion of university education – was a key factor in artistic dynamism, attributing ‘the explosion of cultural activity in Scotland in the Seventies and Eighties’ to collective release of ‘the psychic frustrations of this new and enlarged intelligentsia’, an army of disenchanted schoolteachers and middle-class professionals with limited allegiance to the ‘service ethos’ of their predecessors (1983b: 26-7). The changing mediascape has significant power to re-fashion this group’s orientation to wider political horizons: ‘those who have become most detached from older forms of social embeddedness will be those most open to having their relevance-structures and even identities’ shaped by the ‘national framing assumptions’ of Scotland-centred media (Kendrick, 1989: 85-86). Thus, fraying traditional loyalties and kinship bonds, and the rise of expressive freedoms echoing the ‘world youth revolt’ of the 1960s, induce a new thirst for roots and ‘identity’ which can be readily satisfied within the strengthening national frame. (Needless to say, the salience of the Scottish media frame rests upon a prior foundation of cultural identity – had there been no audience ready to see and understand itself as ‘Scottish’, the national perspective could not have been affirmed and politicised.) In this reading, Scotland’s cultural rebirth since the 1960s is premised not on the recovery or intensification of distinctive patterns of national community, tradition and cultural self-knowledge, but something closer to the opposite. The fading and dislocation of those bonds and attachments, on a pattern which is general to the globalising, de-industrialising west, created the conditions in which the national frame could re-surface and fill Kendrick’s ‘identity vacuum among the privatized, post-solidaristic citizenry’ (1989: 84). However bleak, this pattern better accords with the themes and profoundly individual, alienated lives represented in the key Scottish novels of the post-1970s period (Hames, 2016).

Arguably, the most important frame here was not the Scottish national media, but the UK electoral system. Throughout the 1980s, anti-Thatcherism turbo-charged electoral divergence and generated an image – perhaps a mirage – of a sturdy and indeed strengthening welfarist and communitarian consensus, at just the moment the economic structures and ingrained cultural patterns of post-war Scotland were falling away. It has often been observed – notably by the novelist Allan Massie – that it has been in the period of Scotland’s loss of distinctive cultural traditions and practices (above all, in religion) that the signs and claims of separate identity have become stronger and more politically insistent. In this pattern, the wounds and scars of de-nationalisation – so keenly felt by radical literary nationalists of the 1970s such as Tom Scott – have been repurposed as the signs of a new and assertive heritage of dispossession: a creed focused less on the promised land of self-government or national (spiritual) reconstruction, but the expression and affirmation of Kerevan’s ‘psychic frustrations’. Arguably, the inheritors of MacDiarmid’s project today are not the neo-makars of crowd-funded poetry pamphlets, but the nihilist internet comedy of figures such as Limmy, swathing signs and narratives of Scottishness – notably the anti-Thatcherism of his parents’ generation – in a blank irony which mixes scorn for ‘confident’ cosmopolitan Scotland, the self-contempt of gamer culture, and a Twitter troll’s refusal of ‘debate’ as a meaningful political activity (Limmy, 2019). This is close to the antithesis of the ‘civic Scotland’ ideal, in which a restored deliberative democracy would enable the recovery of national selfhood and agency, but closer to prevailing popular taste in Scotland today.

Integrating Parallel Stories

Despite the pitfalls we noted at the start of this chapter, we should attempt to draw these threads into some kind of cohesive picture. That integrated story begins with electoral divergence from England during a nebulous period sometime between Beatlemania and the discovery of North Sea oil, held by nationalists to manifest ingrained Scottish differences – whether civic-institutional or moral-political – somewhat mysteriously activated from their prior dormancy. The democratic signal represented by (sporadically) rising votes for the SNP in the 1970s expressed more than shifting party preferences, but a politicisation of Scottish identity linked both to UK electoral conditions and rising national-cultural consciousness. This optimism was badly bruised by the failed 1979 referendum on devolution, but was spurred by this very trauma to take a leading role in piloting forms of ‘cultural devolution’ which left the politicians behind. Fostered and partly institutionalised by Scottish writers and

intellectuals, this newly assertive sense of national-cultural distinction was a key component of the pro-devolution political consensus which emerged in the later 1980s. The proto-parliamentary campaign bodies were strongly mediated by party politics (including complex internal wrangling within the Labour party) but articulated their cause as a broad national dissent against a malfunctioning – and increasingly illegitimate – British democratic order, in which Scottish rights to distinctive government, self-determination and cultural dignity were being systematically infringed. After 1992 and a decade of ‘democratic deficit’, in which the preferences of Scottish voters were increasingly misaligned with UK electoral outcomes, the nation’s political elite (and legislators in waiting) began to catch up with the cultural vanguard, voicing passionate and increasingly emotive ‘national’ demands for Scotland’s own machinery of representation and legislative authority. Devolution was nobody’s utopian dream, but could be welcomed both as a pragmatic upgrade to the UK constitutional order, a recognition of Scotland’s ‘voice’, and a strong affirmation of the neo-national identity constituted within the campaign for devolution: marginalised and disrespected, but inventive, egalitarian and increasingly self-reliant. On these terms the establishment of Holyrood in 1999 might seem to ‘resolve’ a problem of Scottishness which lay outside and prior to the arena of political deliberation, but it also instituted this very problem as the motor and warrant of devolution, conceived as a mechanism for supporting, recognising and strengthening Scottish national – which is to say, cultural – identity.

In his account of these developments, David McCrone argues that

the point is not that suddenly Scots changed their values and attitudes, but that the political prism through which they expressed these altered. [...] This is perhaps how one should understand Scottish-English differences, not as the result of some deep differences in social and economic structures (because there are no significant structural ones), nor because there are separate ‘Scottish’ and ‘English’ values (again, because there are few), but because the cultural prism for translating social change into political meaning and action is different, always has been, and if anything, has become more so. (2005: 78-9)

The creeping differentiation of the Scottish ‘cultural prism’ since the 1970s cannot simply be attributed to developments within ‘culture’ of the kind we might corroborate with references to literary texts or popular songs; but neither can they be separated or disentangled from the

growing sense of national-cultural difference and alienation. After 1967 Scottish cultural otherness (within the UK) is overtly mobilised at the electoral level, and becomes a functional basis on which to solidify and democratise the Scottish political system, while installing notions of national difference and representation at the heart of an increasingly separate political culture. In truth the political culture was becoming more distinct even as national life (viewed in sociological terms) was becoming less so, with ingrained patterns of Scottish custom and tradition fading significantly, above all in the decline of the Kirk. This allowed (and perhaps required) the confidence and separateness accrued in the cultural sphere (in the sense of literature, music, entertainment) to accrue a heightened, structural importance, increasingly a scaffold and platform for national life rather than its ornamentation. In 1989 Cairns Craig argued that ‘culture’ led a recovery of Scottish ‘voice’, stimulating further development of national forms of social organisation:

Essentially what happened after ’79 was the declaration of autonomy by groups which gave up on the political scene as a whole and concentrated on creating a devolved, autonomous power base for their own activities within their own sphere of control. The creation of new institutions – in the arts new magazines, new publishing houses and imprints, new archives for the past achievements of Scottish culture, new facilities for creation and promotion – took the business of independence into the very texture of creative life. (1989: 10)

‘Self-determination’ emerges as a key but ambivalent principle in this milieu, operating on multiple scales (personal, class, national). This flexibility has been key: one reason post-devolutionary Scotland has been open to strategically reimagining national identity and its symbols is the historic marginality of ‘the cultural argument’ within organised political nationalism. This weak cultural basis – that is, the minimal extent to which the rationale for political independence is safeguarding and developing distinctively Scottish culture – has allowed devolved Scotland to bypass the ‘traditionalist’ quandary by which a narrative of cultural preservation inevitably imposes past-oriented restrictions on the nationalist imagination. Arthur Aughey observes that

nationalist politics in Scotland, perhaps because it did not have any heavy culturist baggage, has become reasonably nimble in adapting to [post-devolutionary] self-confidence. The embrace by nationalism of an attractive popular culture rather than a

single-minded attempt to make traditional culture popular may now be its strength and its appeal to youth in Scotland. (2001: 121)

Culture and Politics Today

I will conclude by briefly scanning the present political horizon. In many respects, the Scottish cultural-political field has, since 1999, been substantially frozen in postures of ‘resistance’: of unpopular Westminster ventures such as the Iraq War, austerity and Brexit, but also the bureaucratic frustrations of Creative Scotland, the successor to the Scottish Arts Council through which cultural strategy is linked to democratic governance. Though bullish in social and political debate, the dissenting energies of Scotland’s ‘cultural sector’ have been considerably de-fanged by devolution itself. Fully incorporated into the business and ethos of Scottish Government, there is little political leverage in an egalitarian Scottish cultural identity when the governing order successfully articulates itself as the steward and expression of that identity. By 2014, Scotland’s cultural intelligentsia had lost effective leadership of the left-nationalist project incubated in the earlier magazines, surrendered without much struggle to the electoral dynamite of Alex Salmond’s one-nation social democracy. In the aftermath of the No result, it became clear that the energies of pro-independence politics had shifted in a populist direction: the very success of the Yes campaign in catalysing a national movement made august cultural leaders of the 1980s-90s somewhat redundant, and we can safely assume that the (pro-Yes) indyref activism of figures such as Alasdair Gray, Liz Lochhead and Irvine Welsh was dwarfed by the impact of the *Wee Blue Book* distributed in pubs by supporters of the controversial nationalist blog *Wings Over Scotland*. Even to ponder the continuities of the Scottish political blogosphere with the magazine culture of the 1960s-80s (most closely in a website such as *Bella Caledonia*) is to recognise the revolutionary impact of the internet on forms of political culture and behaviour; perhaps too revolutionary to permit serious comparison. The online subcultures of Scottish politics would require a whole other chapter, but suffice to say that galloping ‘privatism’ in the neoliberal era has been yoked to ‘filter-bubble’ tribalism on terms that make a distinct and coherent Scottish cultural public more elusive than ever. The post-2014 establishment of the pro-independence tabloid *The National* while the quality Scottish press suffers slow but severe collapse, and the eventual, somewhat grudging establishment of a ‘BBC Scotland’ (digital only) television service, only mask an underlying hyper-fragmentation. For younger Scots, the national media-frame of television is no longer a central social rubric and ‘relevance-structure’, but

one, on-demand consumer choice among others. In today's mediascape, a specialist TV platform for fans of Scotland is rather akin to a sports channel or cooking podcast; just another stream to choose from, without the power to integrate a cohesive picture of social reality and political purpose.

I have hardly touched on cultural Britishness, but the Anglo-Scottish union as a cultural tradition and ideological project seems much weaker than political support for the constitutional status quo. In 2014 Scottish voters gave the Union its strongest-ever democratic endorsement, with over two million votes against independence. But there are few signs of renewal for *Unionism* (as opposed to what we might call 'No-ism' on the question of independence). It may be that the Union was preserved by (economic, transactional, rhetorically post-British) campaigning arguments that actually weaken its prospects of long-term renewal (Hames, 2015). In a 1977 memoir John Herdman recalled his boyhood reading of H.E. Marshall's *Scotland's Story* (1906), with its confident recuperation of William Wallace into a British national imaginary: 'if Scotland had been joined to England in the days of Edward, it would have been as a conquered country, and the union could never have been true and friendly' (1977: 88). Though already a curio in the 1970s – the narrative ends abruptly in 1822, breezily concluding that 'you must read the rest of the story of Scotland in the story of the Empire' (2005: 345) – Herdman finds Marshall's 'tortuous doublethink' highly expressive of 'the central ambivalence toward Scottish nationality and Scottish experience' of his privileged upbringing in Edinburgh during the 1940s-50s (1977: 89). One way of charting the Scoto-centric shift in McCrone's 'cultural prism for translating social change into political meaning and action' is to note the baffled mirth these passages elicit from university students today. Boilerplate sentiments of traditional Scoto-British patriotism are virtually incomprehensible to most Scots under 40, who struggle to parse (let alone embrace) the rudiments of 'unionist nationalism' (Morton, 1999). By 2015, social attitude data 'seem to show that saying you are *British* is much more of a "political" statement than saying you are Scottish' (McCrone, 2017: 485). What Colin Kidd (2008) calls 'banal unionism', the taken-for-granted arguments for Scottish Britishness which were effectively 'background noise' in Scotland until the 1960s are, today, hoarse whispers from another age, though still sedimented in key elements of the devolved political infrastructure (including, notably, broadcasting). Nationalist hostility to the BBC stems not only from (real or imagined) 'unionist bias' in its output, but the anomalous holdout represented by the BBC's durable structural frame for integrating Scottish and UK-wide perspectives.

Conclusion: from *The Cheviot* to a National Theatre of Scotland

This brings us full circle to the case of *The Cheviot*, a famous but complex moment in which the twin tracks appear to converge. Devised as the maiden production of 7:84 (*Scotland*), the company's first foray outside of England, and written by John McGrath, in his own words 'a Liverpool-Irish person of Welsh upbringing, Oxford and London training and Scottish only by marriage, domicile and commitment' (2015: 17), *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* is a barnstorming historical polemic with music, linking the Highland Clearances to the exploitation of North Sea Oil. It made its debut at the 'What Kind of Scotland?' conference in April 1973, organised in Edinburgh by *Scottish International*. This event was (in McGrath's description) a crowd of 450 'politicians, union men, writers, social and community workers, academics, and ordinary people who cared about the future of Scotland' (2015: xi), gathered together to ponder radical visions of a changing nation at a moment when not only devolution but Scottish independence seemed a tantalising possibility. Seven weeks later, the play was also performed at the SNP's annual conference in Oban, on the invitation of party leader William Wolfe. As McGrath recalls,

we wrote pointing out that we were not nationalists, and would attack bourgeois nationalism, but he repeated the invitation, hoping our politics would stimulate discussion within his party. We discussed it, and decided to go. [...] it would do no harm for the chauvinists and tartan Tories to get a dose of what we were saying. (2015: xxviii)

What they were saying was, in brief, "Nationalism is not enough. The enemy of the Scottish people is Scottish capital as much as the foreign exploiter" [...] some cheered, some booed, the rest were thinking about it' (xxix). But it was not the provocative content of this single, iconic play that might explain its formative role in the later establishment of a National Theatre. Rather, it is the developing context in which the play was received (cheers, boos and otherwise) as a 'national' moral and historical statement, giving 'voice' to urgent sentiments that 'masses of people in Scotland wanted said' (McGrath 2015: xi). The key change between the heady days of pondering 'What Kind of Scotland?' and the official solidity of The Scottish Government is not just about shifting ideological and electoral loyalties, of the kind we can measure with political-scientific precision, but the effective merger of those two

Cheviot audiences in early April and late May 1973. Two groups gathered to debate the national future, one in a free-wheeling, vituperative and ‘radical’ intellectual milieu (in Edinburgh, with *Scottish International*) and the other in the more sedate and tweedy atmosphere of an organised party conference (in Oban, with the SNP). With devolution, and above all in the self-image of ‘cultural devolution’, these two groups are invited to recognise and embrace each other as pulling in the same direction, both on the winning side of a civil struggle not within but ‘for’ Scotland, conceived as a ‘trans-class people-nation’ (Law and Mooney, 2012: 172): a culturally distinctive society crying out for ‘representation’ rather than revolution. It was not 7:84’s agit-prop historical drama that changed Scottish politics, or any other tally of landmark cultural achievements over the past five decades. It was the national public these plays, magazines, novels and media formats helped to ‘constitute’ and solidify, one gathered into a civic-democratic unity under the national – which is to say, cultural – frame of Scottish identity.²

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² This chapter draws extensively on research presented at full length in Hames, 2019.

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