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‘Crossing Swords with W. B. Yeats’: Twentieth Century Scottish Nationalist Encounters With Ireland

Bob Purdie

About fifteen years ago, on occasional Sunday afternoons, I would appear on the platform of the London Branch of the Scottish National Party at Speakers’ Corner, Marble Arch. One of our regular hecklers was an old Irishman and whenever he appeared I would declaim, ‘we are committed to entirely peaceful methods, the SNP would rather fail to achieve its objectives than ever to use violence’. He would splutter in outrage; ‘yer a bunch of cowards, ye’ve no guts’, and on one occasion ‘they’ll partition ye’. He was experiencing what, I believe, is called ‘cognitive dissonance’ by trying to read Scottish nationalism through an Irish prism. This paper is about cognitive dissonance the other way round; about how Scottish nationalists misunderstood Ireland.

Scotland and Ireland are alike in many ways and Scots and Irish have settled in each other’s countries and influenced each other for centuries, but there are also significant differences. Both have a Celtic cultural heritage; both have had a land question; both have been deeply divided on religious questions; both have an unresolved problem in their political relationship to the United Kingdom. But in Scotland land agitation took place in the geographically and economically marginal Highlands and most speakers of Gaelic are Calvinists not Catholics. The Irish union was made in the colonial era and was complete with a Viceroy; the Secretary of State for Scotland was a member of the Cabinet and an MP for a Scottish constituency. The Irish Union was often perceived as a conquest. Objections to Scotland’s union were that the spirit and letter of the Treaty were ignored by an English dominated government and parliament. In both Ireland and Scotland, the terms ‘independence’ and ‘Home Rule’ were often used interchangeably, but in Ireland it was Unionists who did so, to try to block constitutional change; in Scotland nationalists elided the terms, to get momentum for constitutional change.

In middle of the nineteenth century the most important religious conflicts in Scotland were within Presbyterianism, not between Catholics and Protestants. And Episcopalians were not a privileged establishment, they were a remnant of Jacobitism only recently freed from penal laws. Most Catholics were immigrants, not dispossessed natives. The potato famine of 1845–9

struck the Highlands but assistance was continued when aid to Ireland was cut off and serious levels of mortality were averted. The Highland famine was a trigger for clearing estates, but the landlords were native, in fact often the chiefs of the clans who were being sent into exile. So that the Highland Clearances were remembered as a class more often than as a national grievance.

By the end of the nineteenth century the overwhelming majority of the population of Scotland lived in an industrial and urban society. The leaders of the Scottish Labour Movement had created a united front with industrial communities in England and Wales, often taking leading positions in London. Scots were helping to expand, administer and defend the British Empire. Liberal Unionists had united with paternalistic Tories in a Scottish Unionist Party which usually did not exploit sectarian issues. And between 1850 and 1950 there were five Scottish Prime Ministers of the UK, Liberal, Tory and Labour.

Scotland was British in a way that many Irish Unionists saw as a model for their country. But a nationalist movement began to grow in the 1920s and now, in the three hundredth year of the Act of Union, Scotland has never been closer to leaving the UK. Scottish nationalism can be read as a counter-factual version of Irish nationalism. Most nationalists are Protestants; Nationalism and Unionism are two points on a continuous spectrum; cultural nationalism is, for the most part, outside politics. Language has not been a divisive issue and Scotland's territorial boundaries are not in dispute. Fenianism never existed. Few Scottish nationalists have been republicans and Jacobites have been more prevalent than Jacobins.

This paper will examine some of the ways in which Scottish nationalists responded to Irish nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century. I will show that Ireland had an important influence before 1922, but that the Scots had great difficulty in interpreting events after the Treaty. Even when Scottish nationalists directly copied Ireland, different conditions led to different outcomes. I will be looking at the first half of the twentieth century, when the weakness of the national movement in Scotland made Ireland an important inspiration and example. I will look at five aspects:

1. The Scots National League, the National Party of Scotland and Sinn Féin
2. James Connolly, John MacLean, Erskine of Mar and 'Celtic Communism'
3. Hugh MacDiarmid and Irish writers
4. Wendy Wood, Cumann na mBan, the IRA and the Stone of Destiny

5. Scottish nationalist perceptions of Northern Ireland and partition.

I ought to say at the outset that Ireland is only one external influence. Scotland looks east as well as west, and it has longstanding cultural links with Scandinavia. It has been influenced by France, because of the Auld Alliance against England, and Scots have traded with and lived in a wide swathe of northern Europe. And of course Scotland shares an island with England and Wales. But my paper is justified because the political influence of Ireland has not been thoroughly investigated by Scottish and Irish historians.

Modern Scottish nationalism began in London in 1910 when former members of the Highland Land League launched 'Comunn nan Albanach Lunnainn', named in English 'the Scots National League, London'. It declared:

> The Gaelic spirit must be revived within us. The fire and enthusiasm that should characterise the dweller among the hills must be welded with the sturdiness and perseverance of the peasant farmer of Lowlands. For this union we must work. Our aim, our ideal should be a Scottish Scotland.

It ended:

> Had we the spirit of the men of the Covenant, or of those who followed Montrose or Tearleach Og, we should made short work ere this of the iniquitous and alien land system which has converted millions of acres of cultivated land into a domain for wild beasts. Finally we must set up once more a Scottish Parliament for the conduct of Scottish affairs. It is only by working on these lines that Scotland can become A NATION ONCE AGAIN.[1]

The phrase 'A Nation Once Again' and the design of its programme for a bi-lingual concert in 1912, shows how deeply an Comunn was influenced by the 'Irish Ireland' movement. By 1914 it was no longer active, but the Land Settlement Act of 1919 broke up many large Highland estates and distributed land to the crofters, releasing energies that had previously been channelled through the Highland Land League. In 1920 two of the founders of an Comunn, William Gillies and the Hon. Ruaraidh Erskine of Mar, were founders of the London Branch of a new Scots National League, which had

[1] Kensington, Kenneth MacKenzie, *The Booklovers' Resort* n.d. 1910.

seven branches, of which London was by far the largest and Gillies and Erskine were President and Vice President of the SNL as a whole.

Gillies was born in Galloway and was taken to London as a child by his businessman father. He taught himself Gaelic and wrote under the name 'Liam Mac Gille Iosa'. He had been active in the Highland Land League, through which he had formed a friendship with Art O'Brien of the Irish Self Determination League; the largest Irish exile nationalist organisation. Erskine was a Catholic from a Highland recusant family and a fervent Jacobite. He was born in Brighton and brought up in Edinburgh where he learned Gaelic from his Hebridean nanny. At the age of 23 he had become President of the Scottish Home Rule Association, but soon moved to a pro-independence stance. He too had close ties with Irish nationalism and claimed to have accompanied Parnell on his last speaking tour. Both men moved to the left in the 1920s, influenced by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia.

The London Branch held its first public meeting on 26 February 1921. 'There in the heart of imperialist England', it was reported, 'Scotland's blue banner was unfurled. The audience assembled to the inspiring strain of the bagpipes'. Speakers included the Secretary of the London Branch of the Highland Land League and Cathal O'Shannon, the Irish socialist, trade unionist and comrade of James Connolly, who was described as an Ulster Scot and called for unity among the Celtic peoples. The meeting ended with 'Scots Wha Hae' and 'Auld Lang Syne'.[2] The Glasgow and Edinburgh branches were not formed until a year later and since the SNL only ever had seven branches, the London Branch provided the bulk of the League's finance as well as some of its leading members.

In August 1921 William Gillies responded to the Irish truce with a plea for Scots to act; 'Let the SNL move, or for that matter any other league that has for its object the Independence of Scotland, but for God's sake move, be up and doing'.[3] The fervency of his call was not matched by clarity about what, exactly, the action should be. But it is known, from correspondence in the papers of Art O'Brien, that he and Erskine were promoting a secret military organisation called 'Fianna na h-Alba'. However they dropped the idea when Michael Collins advised them that they were far too weak to have any hope of success.[4]

In October 1921 the 'Irish-Ireland' societies in London invited leading members of the SNL to attend a rally in the Albert Hall, to greet the

[2] *Liberty*, April 1921.

[3] *Liberty* August 1921

[4] http://www.siol-nan-gaidheal.com/gillies.htm 17/01/07

representatives who had come to over to negotiate with the British government.[5] The SNL welcomed the Treaty, with reservations, as a much greater offer than anything the Irish had hitherto achieved. Some members responded by becoming more intransigent; 'we who have done so little, shall reap much from the sacrifices of our compatriots in Ireland', wrote H. C. MacNeacail in January 1922. 'England's offer to them has sent our national movement forward by leaps and bounds. IT HAS KILLED HOME RULE FOR SCOTLAND ONCE AND FOR ALL . . . As for Dominion status, faugh! the thought is ludicrous'.[6] Lewis Spence wrote a passionate plea for independence in the *Edinburgh Evening News*. He claimed that only fear of an extended conflict in Ireland had moved the British government. He warned against assuming a benign attitude to Scottish demands. England needed Scotland as a dump for its surplus population and 'only the threat of separation will avail if we are to obtain even a minimum of self-government'.[7]

However Scottish nationalists could make little sense of a Civil War over a Treaty, which gave more than they had dreamed possible for their own country and the emphasis of the SNL swung from Highland to Lowland and from Gaelic revivalism to political action. It adopted a strategy of trying to get a majority of nationalist MPs elected, who would withdraw from Westminster to set up a Scottish parliament; on the model of Sinn Féin in 1918. But it was claimed that the idea was first put forward by Lockhart of Carnwath, a Jacobite opponent of the 1707 Union. Fighting elections needed a political party and, in 1928, the SNL merged with the Scottish Home Rule Association and other groups to create the National Party of Scotland.

The SNL had imitated Sinn Féin; but in Ireland the electoral competition was between nationalists, while in Scotland nationalists were vying for votes with Unionist parties, particularly Liberals and Labour. They found that the only effective way to maximise their vote was to respond to the issues that concerned voters; and these were rarely those that obsessed the nationalists. So the leadership of the NPS was taken over by douce Presbyterian Lowlanders and the flamboyant Highland, or would-be Highland, romantics were pushed aside.

The new party fudged the difference between independence and Home Rule and divisions appeared in 1932, when a group of Scottish notables launched the Scottish Party. The leadership of the NPS considered that its members,

[5] *Liberty*, December 1921
[6] *Liberty*, January 1922
[7] 2 January 1922

which included the Duke of Montrose and a clutch of professors and businessmen, had the social standing and contacts that could boost the influence and credibility of nationalist politics. But the Scottish Party was devolutionist and much more right wing than the NPS. This created a suspicion in the minds of many NPS members that the leadership intended to coax them into the fold by making significant political concessions.

The London Branch was in the forefront of opposition to a merger and at the 1933 NPS conference it was disbanded and two of its leading members, Angus Clark, (a Highland Land League veteran) and W. D. McColl, were expelled. They had campaigned against a new form of words about the Empire. The Scottish Party wanted Scotland and England to have joint responsibility for running the Empire and the NPS adopted the statement: 'Scotland shall share with England the rights and responsibilities they, as Mother Nations, have jointly created and incurred within the British Empire'. For Clark and McColl this would reduce Scotland to the status of Ulster. They accused the leadership of a mistaken assumption that 'any form of government for Scotland must include this higher executive or Imperial control', which had been rejected by dominion governments such as Canada.[8]

In his autobiography the leader of the NPS, John McCormick, claimed that the London Branch and those NPS members who shared their outlook, 'seemed to me to look at Scotland through green spectacles and despite a complete lack of historical parallel, to identify the Irish struggle as their own'.[9] But by this time Erskine of Mar had dropped out of politics and William Gillies was dead, so that the leaders who were closest to Ireland had left the scene. It seems more likely that McCormick and the leadership found it useful, in convincing the rest of the Party, to associate the London Branch with its Sinn Féin enthusiasm of 1910–22.

As for the Scottish Party, some of its key members came from a split in the Glasgow Cathcart Unionist Association and it wanted, as the Beaverbrook journalist, George Malcolm Thomson, put it, 'nationalism for Tories'. His book *Caledonia*, published in 1927,[10] imagined a Scotland of the future that has been taken over by Irish immigrants who have extinguished Scottish culture and driven out the native Scots. He shared his anti-Irish sentiments with Andrew Dewar Gibb who, in his *Scotland in Eclipse* of 1930, described Irish immigration as a, 'national evil of the first importance' and claimed that the

[8] *Scots Independent*, April 1933

[9] *The Flag in the Wind* (London, Gollancz, 1955), 67

[10] George Malcolm Thomson, *Caledonia* (London, 1927)

Irish were responsible for most of the crime in Scotland and for, 'dirty acts of sexual baseness'.[11] They were:

> . . . immeasurably inferior in every way, but cohesive and solid, refusing obstinately, at the behest of obscurantist magic-men, to mingle with the people whose land they are usurping; unaware of, or if aware, disloyal to all the finest ideals and ambitions of the Scottish race: distinguished by a veritable will to squalor which is mainly responsible for Scottish slumdom.[12]

Other nationalists argued that the Irish were victims of poverty and discrimination. For the poet Christopher Murray Grieve, better known by his pen name 'Hugh MacDiarmid', they had the potential to return Scotland to its Celtic roots. Catholics like Erskine of Mar and Compton Mackenzie, but also MacDiarmid, who nearly converted to Catholicism during his army service, thought they were a useful counterpoint to Scottish Calvinism. It is worth noting that, if you replace the term 'Irish' in the above quotations with 'English', it would strongly resemble Lewis Spence's fulminations against immigration from south of the Border.

The price of unity with the Scottish Party was a secret deal to expel or exclude those SNL members who were deemed to be associated with pan-Celtic nationalism and this included MacDiarmid, who was suspected, probably unjustly, of fomenting opposition behind the scenes.[13] In fact the merger did not boost the SNP's electoral fortunes and most former Scottish Party members drifted away, so that the SNP was composed, very largely, of former NPS members. But by then the influence of Irish nationalism had, for the most part, been purged from the party's system.

Home Rule had been part of the programme of the Scottish Labour Party of 1888. In this period the labour movement straddled two different strategies. The first was an alliance with other Scottish social groups on issues such as freedom of the Kirk from state interference, restrictions on the licensed trade, women's suffrage, and trade union rights. The land question in the Highlands was one of the most important unifying issues and

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[11] Andrew Dewar Gibb, *Scotland in Eclipse* (London, 1930), 55.

[12] Quoted in Bruce Armstrong, (ed.) *A People Without Prejudice?: The Experience of Racism in Scotland* (London, 1989).

[13] R. J. Finlay *Independent & Free, Scottish Politics and the Origins of the Scottish National Party 1918–1945* (London, 1994), 109.

it connected Scottish radicalism to Irish nationalism, with another common link in Home Rule. But Labour's main strategy came to be the construction of an urban working class alliance within the UK and this was implicitly Unionist.

In 1893, when the Scottish Labour Party merged with the newly formed Independent Labour Party, this strategy won out. Labour had made bigger political advances in England and Wales and Keir Hardie argued that the Liberal government was using its conflict with the Lords over Irish Home Rule as an excuse to withhold social reform. The Executive of the Scottish Labour Party reported in 1893:

> Without deprecating the importance of Home Rule to the people of Ireland, it is of minor importance to the people of this country, and not to be compared with social legislation in the interests of the unemployed, and any attempt to make this latter question subserve the convenience of Home Rule or anything else will be bitterly resented.[14]

In any case Irish immigrants had been a block vote used to pressurise the Liberals and Labour got very little support from them before 1922. After the Treaty the hierarchy and community leaders decided that Labour was the best vehicle for Irish and Catholic interests. So, although Hardie never repudiated Home Rule for Scotland, it was sidelined and this was one reason for the emergence of a nationalist party in 1928. Scottish nationalists often dreamed about getting the Irish vote on their side, but as Labour became more Unionist the Irish community became more solidly Labour.

One strategy for appealing to the Irish was to imitate Irish social republicanism. After the Civil War, left wing Irish nationalists like Constance Markievicz, J. R. White and Roddy Connolly wrote in the Glasgow socialist newspaper *Forward* and in Scottish nationalist periodicals like the *Standard* and the *Scots Independent*. They often cited James Connolly and his Edinburgh origins. But he had never endorsed Scottish self-government and his influence on Scottish social republicanism was posthumous. The main influence was the Glasgow Marxist of Highland descent, John MacLean.

MacLean had been imprisoned for his stand against the war and he had defended the independence movements in Ireland and India, as well as the

[14] Quoted in David Lowe, *Souvenirs of Scottish Labour* (Glasgow, 1919), 117.

Russian revolution. He was appointed Soviet Consul in Glasgow, but developed an independent Marxist interpretation of Scottish conditions, which made him refuse to join the infant Communist Party. The late Walter Kendall explained his thinking:

> MacLean's strategical view formed a unified whole. Scotland dominated by the industrial heartland of the Clyde valley was nearer to socialism than England. Glasgow then should strike the first blow . . . Scotland was by culture, history and tradition a separate nation. The revolution then must begin with the formation of a specifically Scottish Communist Party which would initiate the Scots revolution and set off the powder train in the rest of Britain.[15]

In 1920 he issued a leaflet headed 'All Hail the Scottish Workers Republic!' and in 1923 he founded the Scottish Workers Republican Party. The following are key passages from the leaflet:

> For some time past the feeling has been growing that Scotland should strike out for national independence, as well as Ireland and other lands. This has recently been strengthened by the English Government's intention to rely mainly on Scottish troops to murder the Irish race. . . .
>
> . . . Scotland must again have independence, but not to be ruled over by traitor chiefs and politicians. The communism of the clans must be re-established on a modern basis. (Bolshevism, to put it roughly, is but the modern expression of the communism of the *mir*.) Scotland must therefore work itself into a communism embracing the whole country as a unit. The country must have but one clan, as it were – a united people working in co-operation and co-operatively, using the wealth that is created.

We can safely say, then: back to communism and forward to communism. [16]

And he reminded the Irish in Scotland that 'communism prevailed amongst the Irish clans . . . ' so that by allying with Scottish socialist republicans they would be 'carrying forward the traditions and instincts of the Celtic race'.[17]

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[15] *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900–21* (London, 1969), 286.

[16] Nan Milton (ed.), *John MacLean, In the Rapids of Revolution* (London, 1978), 217–8.

[17] Ibid.

This was an imaginative reworking of ideas Connolly had expressed, inspired by Alice Stopford Green:

> In the re-conversion of Ireland to the Gaelic principle of common ownership . . . the worst obstacles to overcome will be the opposition of the men and women who have imbibed their ideas of Irish character and history from Anglo-Irish literature. . . . One of these . . . is a belief in the capitalist system of society; the Irishman frees himself . . . when he realises the truth that the capitalist system is the most foreign thing in Ireland. [18]

Connolly was actually making a propaganda point against the claim that socialism was a foreign importation and he was not advocating a form of 'Celtic Communism'. MacLean and Connolly had not been close before 1916, because they were in different Marxist factions and MacLean was mainly influenced by his friend Erskine of Mar. He had a short lived alliance with the SNL but he died in 1923 and his party did not long survive him. Most Scottish left wingers were hostile to nationalism and most Scottish nationalists were not socialists. The departure from the scene of MacLean, Mar and Gillies meant that Celtic Communist ideas died out for a decade until they were revived in the 1930s by Hugh MacDiarmid.

As pupil teacher in Edinburgh before the First World War, he had known some of Connolly's former comrades and encountered his writings. But after the war he was more influenced by French right wing nationalism than by Scottish socialism. In 1928 he argued that a 'Gaelic Commonwealth' was 'more in keeping with our national genius' than a 'Workers' Commonwealth'. The term 'Gaelic Commonwealth' came from the title of a book by William Ferris, a Catholic Priest and chaplain to the Free State Army. He was a right wing opponent of parliamentary democracy and advocated a decentralised monarchical system based on the political structures of Celtic Ireland.[19]

By 1934 MacDiarmid had joined the Communist Party and the 'Gaelic Commonwealth' had been transmuted into 'Celtic Communism'. In his 1966 autobiography *The Company I've Kept,* he cited Ferris as the originator of ideas put forward in Scotland by John Maclean. He had been given copies of her father's writings by Nan Mercer (later Nan Milton), Maclean's daughter. They were the basis for his 'Red Scotland' manifesto of 1935. In it he quoted Lenin's

[18] James Connolly, *Labour in Ireland* (Dublin, n.d.), 6.

[19] *The Gaelic Commonwealth* (Dublin, 1923).

statement that a British socialist who does not support the right of secession for Ireland and India is a 'chauvinist and annexationist', and went on 'that is absolutely unequivocal and necessarily applies to Scotland as much as to Ireland, India and etc'.[20]

The Communist Party, he claimed, had an opportunity to absorb the oppositionists who had been excluded from the SNP, most of whom were left wingers, and to take leadership of the national movement. But the leading Scottish Communist, Peter Kerrigan, insisted that in the event of an imperialist war, unity with the workers of England and Wales would be the priority. And he claimed that Scotland was not a nation, because it failed to meet all of Stalin's criteria for nationhood. MacDiarmid did not foresee how resistant his comrades, schooled in the anti-nationalism of the Scottish left, would be to his nationalist programme, but he also misunderstood the Comintern's position on nationalism. It backed national struggles and proclaimed the right of national self-determination; but this was predicated on nationalist movements having a social base in the peasantry, who could be won over to the side of the working class, as allies in the struggle against imperialism. It was not meant to apply to nationalism in the advanced capitalist countries, where such movements were seen as reactionary. [21]

Ireland and Scotland, despite their many similarities, fell on different sides of the Comintern's dividing line. Nationalism was acceptable in Ireland because it was assumed that it was a peasant society and because of the long tradition of support from Marx, Engels and Lenin. Scotland was mainly a capitalist country. Scottish socialists had never insisted, as their Irish counterparts had done, on separate national representation at international level and, unlike the Irish socialists, the Scots had not been allies of the Bolsheviks against revisionism and reformism before 1914. Irish social republicanism was an answer a problem that did not exist in Scotland, namely how to win a new social base for an onslaught on the Treaty settlement. And for the non-Republican Irish left, it offered a way out of isolation in a profoundly anti-socialist culture. But in Scotland socialists did not need a nationalist cover and, while most nationalists were left of centre, they preferred to appeal to an idealised classless Scotland of small towns and rural communities.

MacDiarmid was expelled from the Communist Party but he did inspire

[20] National Library of Scotland, MS27035.

[21] See, e.g. 'Theses on the national and Colonial Question Adopted by the Second Comintern Congress, 28 July 1920', in Jane Degras (ed.), *The Communist International 1919–1943, Documents* (London, 1971), Vol. 1, 138–44.

a minor strand of Scottish nationalism. One example was a review of Noelle Davis's *Connolly of Ireland* written in the Scots language, which appeared in the *Scots Independent* in 1946: 'Lenin was richt in walin oot Connolly in Ireland an John MacLean in Scotland as the anely significant warkin-class leaders o the 1914–18 war'. But Celtic Communism had almost been forgotten when it was fitfully revived by sections of the Scottish far left in the late 1960s and, more recently, by the Scottish Socialist Party.

MacDiarmid was the most important writer of the Scottish Renaissance, the movement of the 1920s which sought to rescue Scottish literature from the parochialism and sentimentality of the Kailyard writers of the late nineteenth century. He visited Dublin for the Tailteann Games of 1928, invited by Oliver St John Gogarty. During his stay he was mindful of possibilities for advancing the Scottish cause and thought he had made links which would get Irish votes for the NPS and an agreement with Count John McCormack to do a benefit concert. Nothing came of either project.

He was influenced by a number of Irish writers but his friendships were not predictable on the basis of politics. He met W. B. Yeats and their evening together gives me the title for this paper. In a 1977 interview he recalled walking through Dublin streets late at night with Yeats, who said:

> "Well if you'll excuse me. . . I must urinate" – which he did in the middle of the road . . . And I thought to myself, well what an Irish Senator can do there's no reason why a Scottish magistrate can't do, so I crossed swords with him and we became very friendly after that.[22]

He also befriended Æ who wrote a foreword for his 1931 collection of poems *First Hymn to Lenin.* But his greatest friendship was with Gogarty, who had been one of the first critics to champion his poetry and for many years after was a friend, helper and counsellor. The extent of their friendship can be measured by the fact that in 1945 Gogarty wrote a poem in Scots in his honour. MacDiarmid was doing wartime service in the Merchant Navy and, on a visit to Scotland, Gogarty made a dash to Greenock, where he just failed to get to his friend before his ship sailed. The first stanza was:

> MacDiarmid fren', I sought you sairly,
> And speered about you late and early;

[22] Alan Bold (ed.), *The Thistle Rises* (London, 1984), 291.

Until one day I very nearly
Met your Marine
Wha could have told where sic a ferlie
As you hae been.[23]

Gogarty, of course, was not an opponent of the Treaty – in fact he had nearly been assassinated by the IRA. The Irish writer with whom MacDiarmid might be supposed to have most in common was Sean O'Casey, but Gogarty had been an adviser during his bitterly contested divorce case, while O'Casey gave evidence for the other side. Relations between them remained hostile until the 1960s.

MacDiarmid was grateful that Gogarty took him round the pubs in which he used to drink with James Joyce. Joyce, whom he never met, was the Irish writer who had the most important influence on MacDiarmid's Synthetic Scots, his literary language which brought together words and phrases used in different dialects of Scots at different times, to express meanings that could not be precisely conveyed by English. As Alan Bold explains:

> To MacDiarmid, dialect Scots was contaminated by the kailyard and he used Synthetic Scots, quite deliberately, as an indigenous equivalent of Joycean prose or the poetic idiom associated with Pound and Eliot. The fact that the pseudonym Hugh MacDiarmid was first used, and the first MacDiarmid lyric published in 1922 is of crucial importance: MacDiarmid's appearance came in the creative interval between the publication of Joyce's *Ulysses* in February and Eliot's *The Waste Land* in October . . . [24]

The logic of his politics might have led him to become a Gaelic revivalist, but as a Lowlander he had no Gaelic and he did not have time to learn. It was much easier for him to extend his existing Borders Scots vocabulary. But this was not, ultimately, why he chose to write in Scots. He was a philosophical essentialist and he believed that the recapture of any part of Scotland's national essence must lead to the recovery of all of it. Scots contained many words that were derived from Gaelic and the psychological effect of using it as a literary medium would lead Scots back to their heritage, which had been stifled under

[23] *The Voice of Scotland*, June 1948, 23
[24] Alan Bold, *Hugh MacDiarmid: The Terrible Crystal* (London, 1983), 8–9.

the blanket of English civilisation. In effect he thought that a literature written in Scots would lead to the kind of national revival that had been advocated by the Irish language revivalists.

Making Gaelic the first official language of Scotland would have required a revolution even more sweeping than that of Ireland. It would have opened up divisions between Lowland and Highland and created enormous practical difficulties. But the Scottish Renaissance did not ask Lowlanders to supplant English as the language of everyday life. And it also implied linguistic plurality, not competition, between Scots, Gaelic and the Norn of the Orcadian and Shetland writers. MacDiarmid's literary revolution helped to blunt the political edge of the language issue and, much against his will, this strengthened the moderation of Scottish nationalism and reinforced the division between the political and the cultural.

In 1942 John McCormick took nearly half the SNP membership into his Scottish Convention, a Home Rule pressure group. After the war he had some success with the cross-party Scottish National Assembly and the Scottish National Covenant, which was signed by two and a half million Scots. Just before the war ended the SNP's electoral strategy appeared to have been vindicated, when Dr. Robert MacIntyre won the 1945 Motherwell by-election; but he was heavily defeated in the general election a few months later and in the subsequent decade nationalist candidates scored derisory votes. The SNP ploughed on, organising branches and fighting elections, but other nationalists resorted to stunts to try to attract the attention of the public. The most celebrated of these was the recovery of stolen property, at Christmas 1950, by a group of young people who liberated the Stone of Destiny from Westminster Abbey. And when the new Queen adopted the title 'Elizabeth II' shop windows decorated with these digits were broken and pillar boxes blown up. Songs about these exploits, with lyrics in broad Scots, were sung in the pubs and howffs where nationalists gathered.

Ian Hamilton and the others who retrieved the Stone were supporters of McCormick, but the most consistent perpetrators of stunts were the Scottish Patriots led by Wendy Wood. For example they burned assisted emigration forms outside the Australian consulate in Edinburgh and danced an eightsome reel on the ashes. In 1959, when the GPO refused to bring out a commemorative stamp for the bicentenary of the birth of Robert Burns, she had her own stamps printed and perforated them on her sewing machine. In 1972 she went on hunger strike demanding Home Rule, but gave way to pressure from her friends to abandon it.

She first became aware of Irish nationalism in the Basutoland bush in 1913, where she and her newly-wed husband trekked with Roger Casement's brother Tom, and she decided that the same principles must be applied to Scotland.[25] In 1932 she was arrested for leading a group that pulled down the Union Flag from Stirling Castle and replaced it with a Scottish Lion Rampant. As a result she was invited to Dublin by Cumann na mBan. She was thrilled by the Celtic designs on the currency, the Gaelic street names, observing a debate in the Dáil and attending a Cumann na mBan meeting, at which she understood the discussion in Irish. But she seems not to have thought it significant that she was the guest of an organisation which aimed to overthrow the political institution she had just been admiring from the gallery. She was like an amnesiac, wandering around not understanding the history of what she was seeing, but judging only on the basis of immediate impressions.[26]

In the mid-1930s she fell in love with Amhlaidh Mac Aindreas, who was half Irish and half Scots and had, she claimed, 'served his other country actively against our common enemy'.[27] They shared a croft in Moidart, from which they organised a group called Comunn Airson Saorsa na h-Alba. They visited London and made contact with Jimmy Joe Reynolds, who was in charge of IRA operations in England. (He was a bomb maker whose last words, in 1938, were; 'stand back John James – there's a wee mistake'.)[28] They hatched a plot to liberate the Stone of Destiny with the help of the IRA, but the plan was vetoed by HQ in Dublin.[29] What they didn't realise was that their allies considered the Stone to be Irish and intended to take it to Ireland.[30]

In June 1939 Comunn Airson claimed to have accepted a pact of peace between the IRA and Scotland and that the Scottish police had acknowledged that it was being kept. But they warned: 'guard should be kept in case of *agents provocateurs*. In such an event the Intelligence Department of the Organisation would be pleased to co-operate with the Police'. Mac Aindreas wrote:

> We regard the Scottish police as Scots, like ourselves, whose first duty is to Scotland. We look to them as an essential part of the machinery

[25] Wendy Wood, *I Like Life* (Edinburgh, 1938), 141.
[26] Ibid., 271–7; see also Wendy Wood, *Yours Sincerely for Scotland* (London, 1970), 183–5.
[27] Wood, *Yours Sincerely for Scotland,* 125.
[28] J. Bell Boywer, *Secret Army a History of the IRA 1916–1970* (London, 1970), 153.
[29] Information supplied to the writer by James Monaghan, Dublin.
[30] Information supplied to the writer by Gery Lawless, London.

> of normal life, though at present they are being forced to serve, not the Government of Scotland, but an alien legislature. [31]

Even on the furthest fringe of Scottish nationalism the forces of the state were not looked upon with a Fenian mindset. They regarded Police officers and soldiers in Scottish regiments as mistaken in serving the London government; but they were not enemies to be eliminated, they were potential allies to be persuaded.

The next encounter involved Scottish nationalists from the opposite wing of the movement. In the summer of 1934 a delegation of eight senior SNP members visited Northern Ireland, the Irish Free State and the Isle of Man, to report on the workings of their government structures. They noted that Stormont was able to keep Harland and Wolff's going while Greenock yards were closed. They were impressed by the progressive education system of Northern Ireland and its provisions for Catholic schools. The Stormont MP, George Young, told them: 'we have the shaping of our destinies as a people in our own hands, and we will never be foolish enough to go back to Westminster'. Lord Craigavon was quoted praising the benefit of a Senate and House of Commons, 'manned by Ulster stalwarts'.[32]

In Dublin they contrasted the Land Commission favourably with Westminster provision for the Highlands. They praised the Vocational schools and aid to the Gaeltacht. They saw no evidence of persecution of Loyalists and quoted the Bishop of Ossory on the good relations that prevailed, between Catholics and Protestants. The Independent Senator, Colonel Sir John Keane, told them that the old Unionists no longer looked to Westminster but ranged themselves with those whose interests they shared. 'Out of this', he said, 'has emerged a new and different loyalty – a loyalty not to Westminster or to British rule, but to the larger conception of King and Commonwealth'.[33]

Summing up, the delegation reported that:

> The intense loyalty of Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man disposes completely of the suggestion that Self-Government involves any idea of separation from the British Commonwealth of Nations or from the Crown as the symbol of Unity. We were interested to learn from President de Valera that the Irish Free State did not wish to cut herself

[31] *Scots Independent*, June 1939.
[32] *Scots Independent*, September 1934.
[33] Ibid.

> adrift from the British Commonwealth and that, in his opinion, the grant of Self-Government to Scotland would help in settling matters between the Free State and the United Kingdom.[34]

They resembled nothing so much as a delegation of earnest Fabians, investigating collective farm nurseries and workers' sports centres in the USSR, and finding exactly what they went there to see. But the interesting question is, not the selectivity of their perceptions, but why they emphasised continuing loyalty to the Crown and the Commonwealth. The answer is clear when we look at the composition of the delegation.

The most prominent member was James Graham, the old Etonian Sixth Duke of Montrose who held five other hereditary titles. He was a member of the Royal Company of Archers, the Monarch's bodyguard in Scotland; he was hereditary Sheriff of Dumbartonshire; Lord Lieutenant of Buteshire; a former naval ADC to the King and a Commodore in the RNVR. He had been an Assistant Private Secretary to Chancellor of the Exchequer in the House of Lords in 1905 and president of a trade mission to Canada in 1932. [35] The group also included Sir Alexander MacEwen, a former Provost of Inverness who was a member of various bodies concerned with development in the Highlands.[36] Another was Ex-Ballie William Thomson, who later left the SNP and tried to re-establish the Scottish Home Rule Association because of his opposition to the Party's reaffirmation of independence.[37] And J. Kevan MacDowall, a former member of the Cathcart Unionist Association and a founder of the Scottish Party. He had been Chairman of the Imperial Union Association since 1932 and described himself as a 'Scottish Home Ruler and British Imperialist'.[38]

So a number of them were far closer in culture and outlook to Craigavon than to de Valera. They illustrate a crucial difference with Ireland. In Scotland unionism and self-government were not polar opposites, both positions depended on a prudential calculation of what was in Scotland's interests at any given time.

Once most of the former Scottish Party members had drifted off and McCormick had defected, the door was opened for many of the expelled radicals to return and the SNP tilted back towards sympathy with Irish nation-

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[34] Ibid.

[35] *Scottish Biographies 1938* (London, n. d.), 566.

[36] Ibid., 464–5.

[37] Jack Brand, *The National Movement in Scotland* (London, 1978), 234.

[38] *Scottish Biographies 1938*, 464.

alism. In 1944 a resolution was put on the agenda of the annual conference supporting the Irish campaign against partition, but it was deferred to the next conference and was then overtaken by the outbreak of war.[39] In the 1950 general election the charismatic nationalist Oliver Brown, stood in Greenock as a joint Scottish Nationalist and Irish Anti-Partition candidate, but gleaned only 1.77% of the vote. J. R. Campbell, the Communist candidate, got 3.3% in this chilly period of the Cold War.[40] Hugh MacDiarmid criticised Brown for alienating Protestant voters without winning Catholic support.[41]

In 1951 the future leader of the SNP, Arthur Donaldson wrote, under the heading 'Partition Bedevils Irish Politics', that no-one in the South now thought that force would settle the issue and that there was practical co-operation across the border.

> What does annoy the Eire people and a good many in Northern Ireland too, is that they can have no real meeting as equals so long as Northern Ireland has such limited powers of self-government. On anything that's really important both have to act through London on matters which only concern the two sets of Irish. Had Northern Ireland really been given self-government – the status of self-respecting state instead of an oversize County Council – many of the problems of Partition would have been solved in fact if not in appearance.[42]

For Donaldson, partition was a practical question that could be solved by co-operation amongst the Irish themselves, on the merits of the case. And he assumed that, once they had thought it through, Ulster Unionists would realise that they too needed real self-government and not Westminster control. He entirely missed the fact that the Irish Anti-partitionists wanted Westminster to hand over Northern Ireland to Dublin sovereignty, not to negotiate with the Unionists. And that the Unionists would have regarded any dealings with the Republic as a betrayal.

What conclusions can be drawn from all of this? First that Scottish conditions drew nationalists towards pragmatism and moderation because Scotland's perceived grievances were less extreme and the movement existed in a society in which the political structures were robust and widely accepted.

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[39] *Scots Independent*, June 1944.

[40] www.psr.keele.ac.uk/area/uk/ge50/i10.htm 24/01/07

[41] *National Weekly*, 4 March 1950.

[42] *Scots Independent*, October 1951.

Second, because no constituency within Scotland was irrevocably opposed to self-government, not even English immigrants, all who lived in Scotland were potential allies. This meant that there was always scope for broadening support through compromise. Third, Scottish nationalism, originating in the Highland Land League was supplemented by social radicals from the Labour Movement. It was a splinter of nineteenth century Scottish Liberalism and its line of descent was from Whig opposition to absolutism. So it shared common values and methods with its main opponents. Fourth, its main grievance was constitutional. The Act of Union had allowed Westminster governments to override Scottish interests and they were ineffectively checked by a Parliament in which English votes would always prevail. The remedy was political, the return of the sovereignty surrendered in 1707. This did not require a fundamental cultural revolution and, in twentieth-century conditions, it was best pursued through existing democratic structures.

Until the 1920s the existing political parties offered channels through which these grievances might be redressed. In the late 1920s changed circumstances created a new party, which brought together cultural nationalists who imitated Ireland with devolutionists who had moved to a more radical position. But most Scots continued to think that the existing political structures offered adequate remedies. The consequence, for the nationalists, was marginality, frustration, splits and futile experiments. But all of these led them back to the conclusion that the only hope of success was through electoral activity and democratic persuasion. The strategy finally began to pay off in the late 1960s, but that falls outside the scope of my paper.

Does this history tell us anything about Ireland? I would suggest that, first, the comparatively greater support for extreme movements and strategies in Ireland must reflect its different status within the UK. Second, Ireland could not have been seen as a model by Scots if there had been no common factors. The most significant of these was alienation from London government and a Westminster Parliament that served other interests and was impervious to their protests. Thirdly, the gulf between nationalism and unionism was much wider than in Scotland because political divisions were based on religious identity. Fourthly, the fact that a stable parliamentary democracy did emerge in the 26 Counties implies that the undertow of Whig and Liberal values must also have been present within Irish nationalism. Fifthly my conclusions suggest the scope of the work that still has to be done if we are to construct a properly comparative history of Ireland and Scotland.

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