

A Shrinking Highlands:

Neil Gunn, Nationalism and the 'World Republic of Letters'

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The Unmastered Past and the Spectre of Nationalism

As a nation we have what the Germans call *eine unbewältigte Vergangenheit*—a past with which we haven't completely come to terms. (In this we are quite unlike the English, who have come to terms with their history so well that they have largely forgotten it).

Hamish Henderson^[1]

Reviewing modern historical (and semi-historical) accounts of the Glencoe massacre in the mid-1960s, Hamish Henderson's characterisation of Scottish history as, in the time-worn German expression, 'unmastered', was a reflection of what he perceived as an ongoing problem in the nation's propensity to wallow in, as he put it, 'an appalling morass of sentimental-romantic nonsense, and flighty wishful thinking' (261). 'Artfully camouflaged pieces of romantic history', he continues, 'just won't do any longer. The Scots will have to come to terms with their history if they are to survive as a nation, and secure the elementary civilised right of a nation to control over its own affairs' (261-62). Where Henderson's appeal is framed in terms of his desire for credible scholarly history to replace the sentimental narratives that have historically formed such an integral part of post-Union Scottish identity, his assertion that this process would be instrumental in the cause of national independence is a telling example of the way in which the relationship between story and history perpetually backgrounds considerations of Scottish nationalism.

In the epigraph, the '*unbewältigte Vergangenheit*' is the literal, rather than the literary, story of the past, but the expression can also be a useful reminder of the ways in which the spectre of

nationalism continues to haunt contemporary readings of Scottish literature and culture and becomes itself a problem with which writers and scholars must 'come to terms' in order to say anything about the nation at all. Tellingly, this same Henderson quotation reappeared thirty years after being published in *The Scotsman* as a subsection epigraph in Peter Kravitz's introduction to *The Picador Book of Contemporary Scottish Fiction* in 1997. Given the timing of that volume, it should be unsurprising that the introduction is largely concerned with framing the role of contemporary Scottish writers in the articulation of a less agonised and less agonistic cultural identity in the wake of the 1979 devolution referendum and on the eve of a new opportunity for a degree of national self-determination.

The contestation over what constitutes the national history, culture, and character has long been expressed in Scottish literature, and while the contest itself may have been productive at times (as in, for example, the development of the modern historical novel with Scott), it has also generated anxiety for generations of scholars who have felt obliged to advocate for a defined, scrupulously coherent cultural history. It is this impulse, Eleanor Bell reminds us, that has led to 'Scottish studies [being] more focused on canon-building and the construction of the national tradition, and too immersed in tradition-inspired approaches to take account of such theoretical developments [as post-modernism].'^[2] For scholars of Scottish literature, the desire to make a compelling case for the very existence of a discrete national literature^[3] can lead to what Bell elsewhere describes as a 'framework of cultural nationalism'.^[4] The problem that plagues Scottish studies is, we might say, the construction (or constructedness) of the nation itself, which continuously reasserts its right as pre-eminent cultural concern by virtue of its historically (seemingly) tenuous existence in the absence of state sovereignty. Consequently, it is the objects of culture that come to stand in as a substitute for the non-existence of a state-sanctioned political identity, 'Scottish'.^[5]

This kind of reliance upon cultural products as props for national identity also forces the recognition that those products can easily be manufactured and commodified, tradition can be invented,^[6] in such a way that Scotland itself comes to be seen as little more than an emblem or object.^[7] As those producers of culture who both run the most obvious risk of participating actively in that process and offer the clearest perspective on how to combat it, writers are interestingly and precariously positioned at the crossroads of transnational and national self-definition, selling their own cultural productions (branded 'Scottish') in a globalised literary marketplace while articulating through their work (at its best) an increasingly complex view of the nation.^[8] When writers develop new strategies for traversing this difficult territory, it stands to reason that the older models developed by their forebears will seem not only outdated but also suspiciously like objects themselves, the naïve sentimental narratives of national belonging or the fossilised remains of discredited, even despicable, political ideologies. The perspective that such

views offer is often a useful corrective to the uncritical appraisal of writers' attitudes as normative within a putatively homogeneous national context, but such a reading also runs the risk of replicating the homogenising gesture it critiques. To again quote Bell, who is in turn summarising Willy Maley's reading of 'postal' theory in Irish literature, 'while many Revisionist critics accuse Nationalists of homogenising discourses of national identity in order to accommodate their own agendas, [...] Revisionists, ironically, often tend to homogenise nationalism in order to undermine its political intentions' (149).

One of the subtle ways that this kind of Revisionist reductivism has entered into accounts of twentieth-century Scottish literature is in descriptions of the first 'Scottish Renaissance' of the MacDiarmid generation. Whether sympathetically reading its grappling with the crises of late modernity or challenging its residual cultural hegemony, much of the scholarship devoted to the Scottish Renaissance has taken the movement's own self-descriptions as axiomatic of its particular, even narrow, concern with Scottish culture alone. Of course these various readings can provide important insights into the literary practices and cultural legacy of the Renaissance writers, but they also can tacitly argue for a kind of Scottish exceptionalism that threatens to decontextualise the national literature, not from its place in European letters (where the links between Continental and Scottish developments are nearly always assiduously remarked upon) but from its place in the larger cultural crisis of interwar British imperial decline. In short, what has not been remarked upon is the way in which the various nationalisms of the Scottish Renaissance articulate not only the differences between, primarily, Scotland and England but also the shared compulsion towards examinations of local culture (in an inversion of the logic of Empire) at the historical moment when British imperial culture was in imminent decline (a point to which I will return at the end of this essay).

A common reading of the relationship of Scotland to England (and to 'Britain' as imperial state) has its roots in Michael Hechter's influential idea of 'internal colonialism', and, despite various challenges to his original formulation, the notion of Scotland as 'periphery' and England (oriented around the London metropole) as 'core' or 'centre' has remained paradigmatic. As Liam Connell has persuasively argued, however, the various theoretical models that scholars have adopted, particularly with postcolonialism, have proven inadequate to the task of describing Scotland's particularly complicated relationship with Union and Empire. The 'narrative of marginality' that typifies Scottish literary scholarship, in Connell's view, is practically limited by its lack of a materialist critique—or, to put it in different terms, its over-reliance upon abstract notions of 'cultural colonization':

Cultural colonization does not exist—indeed, cannot exist—independently of systems of economic production. For Scottish literary studies what is urgently

required is a materialist explanation of how Scots were able to benefit economically and politically from the structures of the Union and how certain characteristics of Scottish cultural distinctiveness were able to survive in the face of increasingly normative forces of cultural standardization.^[9]

Taking Connell's criticism seriously, this essay offers a reading of Scottish literary nationalism (in the figure of Neil M Gunn) in light of Pascale Casanova's theorisation of the eponymous 'world republic of letters' from which her book title is derived and Jed Esty's account in *A Shrinking Island* of the 'anthropological turn' in late Modernism. Casanova's model, derived in part from the influences of Pierre Bourdieu and Fernand Braudel, posits a transnational literary marketplace in which the exercise of 'symbolic violence' reifies the hierarchy of capital/periphery. This reification works through an implicit appeal to timeless literary value that purports to be 'nonnational' and 'ahistorical' even as it disguises the national and historical bases of the production and circulation of 'literary capital'.^[10] By adding Esty's account of the culturally nationalist response of English Modernist writers to the decline of imperial power in the 1930s and '40s, we can triangulate a new reading of the work of the Scottish Renaissance as a movement locked in perpetual struggle with the forces of the capital market of the London metropole even as it simultaneously anticipated that metropole's emergent post-imperial concern with the local signifiers that mark 'provincial' nationality.

Literary Capital and 'The World Republic of Letters'

For cosmopolitanism does not really breed the intense vision or rebellion of the native or individual spirit. On the contrary, its natural attitude is to deplore it as being unnecessary, often wasteful, and nearly always in bad form. Cosmopolitanism working through this man-of-the-world conception might out of an ultimate logic create its own ideal, but it would be the deathly or neutral idea of the perfection of the beehive.

Neil M Gunn^[11]

Neil Gunn's objection to cosmopolitanism in the 1931 essay 'Nationalism and Internationalism' is clearly predicated on a reading of the 'denationalised' realm as productive of nothing more than its own bland uniformity. Over against the cosmopolitan 'perfection of the beehive,' he asserts 'intense vision' and the 'rebellion of the native' as the energetic emanations of a distinctive and dynamic national culture. The characterisation of cosmopolitanism as mannered and enervated speaks to the unique perspective of a 'provincial' writer whose literary status and financial solvency, for all his sense of his own vision or native rebellion, would finally depend upon the

tastes and decisions of the class of London cosmopolitans that constituted what Pascale Casanova would say was the geographical and temporal capital of Anglophone letters.

In *The World Republic of Letters*, Casanova extends both Bourdieu's notion of varieties of capital exchange and Braudel's extension of economic concepts towards what would become world-systems analysis to argue for a conception of literary history that emphasises the symbolic violence and cultural contestation that form and define the 'world republic of letters' as a sovereign, cosmopolitan realm. Rather than the ordered beehive of Gunn's imagining, Casanova describes a cultural field that is predicated upon the violent symbolic struggle between national literatures in order to ultimately claim a transcendent and politically independent nonnationality and ahistoricity for the hegemonic practices of the literary elites in the nations with the most literary capital:

This world republic of letters has its own mode of operation: its own economy, which produces hierarchies and various forms of violence; and, above all, its own history, which, long obscured by the quasi-systematic national (and therefore political) appropriation of literary stature, has never really been chronicled. Its geography is based on the opposition between a capital, on the one hand, and peripheral dependencies whose relationship to this centre is defined by their aesthetic distance from it. It is equipped, finally, with its own consecrating authorities, charged with responsibility for legislating on literary matters, which function as the sole legitimate arbiters with regard to questions of recognition. (pp.11-12)

Once the 'geography' of the world republic of letters is established, symbolic space is conflated with temporal distance as well. In other words, the further a national literature is in terms of 'aesthetic distance' from the hegemonic capital of its literary language, the further it is considered behind the times—in the past.

As Casanova describes it, the effect is 'what might be called the Greenwich meridian of literature', and it is this fixed axis of cultural hegemony/capital that 'makes it possible to estimate the relative aesthetic distance from the centre of the world of letters', as well as to judge distance 'in temporal terms, since the prime meridian dictates the present of literary creation, which is to say modernity' (p.88). When a national literature like Scotland's, during a period of renewed interest in tradition or the representation of history, deviates from the circulating practices of the literary elites of London or New York, the risk is that this deviation will not register merely as difference, but as a variety of primitivism, a failure to be fully modern.

For writers of the early to mid-century 'Scottish Renaissance', for example, a clear anxiety persisted about the outflow from Scotland of cultural and symbolic capital in the form of both

cultural products and potential cultural producers. This anxiety quite clearly related to the notion that Scotland was not only geographically but also temporally removed from the modernity that the South represented. The case of the outflow of cultural products can be measured by the ongoing necessity of metropolitan London to literary success for Scottish writers, despite temporary national successes with small reviews and publishers like the relatively short-lived Porpoise Press. As Naomi Mitchison wrote in 1932, 'The books that are being written [by Scottish writers] are right enough. The only question is who is reading them? [...] Neil Gunn's success is a London success; Catherine Carswell seems more in contact with Lawrence than with Burns.'^[12]

The second case, the loss of population, is of course related to the pervasive anxiety in modern Scotland over emigration—the recurring sense that many of the potential architects of the Renaissance were contributing their energies towards diasporic communities around the world or towards the continued, futile administration of British imperial power at precisely the moment of that power's decline. As Neil Gunn wrote in 1945, 'vital statistics show that this [change in emigration pattern] will have to [happen] soon or it will be too late. Emigration is a remorseless way of getting rid of the best. And a dwindling population adds ever new ruins to the old ruins in the glens.'^[13] The pastness of those Highland ruins, reminders of the Clearances, also, for Gunn, forecast the future of a nation that already implicitly understands itself as belonging to an irretrievable and nostalgia-tinged past.

In short, in order to be successful in both economic and aesthetic terms, Scottish authors needed to be vetted by the literary elite of London. This state of affairs corresponded roughly with the situation of any number of Scottish intellectuals and professionals for whom the move southwards to the metropolis became not only a physical, geographic journey from periphery to centre, but a symbolic transnational journey towards deracination and capitulation to the hegemonic cultural practices of the British state apparatus. This is not to say that Scottish writers' works would not be perceived as Scottish by their largely English or American audiences any more than it is to say that Scottish emigrants, upon crossing the Tweed or embarking from a port, would somehow cease to be Scottish. On the contrary, the effect might often be a heightening of the 'Scottishness' of text or person, but in a particular and mediated form—as the version of 'Scottishness' sanctioned by an ostensibly cosmopolitan elite. In such cases, one would have to be 'Scottish' enough—though not necessarily in a popular Harry Lauder sense—to warrant the cultural tag; otherwise, one would simply be another Briton in the capital.^[14]

In the part of her argument that lays out more explicitly the politics of international literary prestige, Casanova offers a useful analysis of the relationship of literary capital to national status, which also speaks implicitly to the contention in Scottish literary history over the representation of national identity:

The classics are the privilege of the oldest literary nations, which, in elevating their foundational texts to the status of timeless works of art, have defined their literary capital as nonnational and ahistorical—a definition that corresponds exactly to the definition that they have given of literature itself. The classic embodies the very notion of literary legitimacy, which is to say what is recognized as *Literature*: the unit of measurement for everything that is or will be recognized as literary. (pp. 14-15)

The relationship between the depth and breadth of a national tradition and its capacity to be viewed as ‘nonnational and ahistorical’ is vitally important to an understanding of the complexity of Scottish cultural identity for twentieth-century writers. The conclusion reached by ‘the world republic of letters’—that the Scottish national tradition, in consequence of its subsumption into ‘British’ literature, is somewhat meager as a separate literature, or, to put it in different terms, irredeemably national and intransigently historical—would disqualify Scottish literature from having claim to any sort of timeless vantage from which it might judge other literatures or easily generate new literary fashions. But at the moment of cosmopolitan Modernism’s literary-cultural hegemony, the crisis of the impending collapse of that yet more centrally hegemonic system, the British Empire, suggested a course for English writers that would see them look towards Scottish nationalist literature for models.

Scottish Nationalism and the ‘Anthropological Turn’

If colonialism erodes traditional life, national culture kept inside its ‘natural’ or conventional boundaries, can guarantee, by contrast, a certain degree of authenticity and continuity.

Jed Esty¹⁵

The consequence of not reading Scottish literature in the context of its complex relationship with British (read ‘English’) literature is that the nationalism espoused by certain writers scans as either more or less unproblematically politically progressive (and therefore justifiable in light of the liberatory possibilities of anti-colonial nationalisms) or as dangerously close to a ‘blood and soil’ ideology that conjures the spectral energies of the twentieth century’s worst nightmares—Fascism and Nazism. These divergent readings of Scottish nationalism have been particular points of debate for assessments of the reputation and aesthetic contributions to the national literature of Neil Gunn, a figure in whom the persistent anxieties among scholars of Scottish literature about the representation of Scottishness and the role of nationalism seem to crystallise.

However, such anxieties are not the exclusive province of Gunn’s current interlocutors—they were, in fact, very much a part of his own thought on the kind of work that a nationally committed

writer could and should do. In a 1942 essay for the *Scots Magazine*, he wrote of the vexatious quality of the nationalist question:

In recent times surely more books have been published on nationalism and its horrid implications than on any other subject that affects the destiny of man. [...] Running through the variegated theme is the curse of nationalism, until the ordinary man has begun to yearn towards some vague brotherhood or commonwealth that he hopes may somehow be attained somewhere, and thus a little peace be granted in our time, O Stalin, or O Churchill, or O Roosevelt.^[16]

Gunn's description of a historical moment that saw widespread critical denunciation of nationalism speaks as much to our own time as to the early 1940s, but putting aside such political resonances, his writing demonstrates a keen awareness of the ways in which nationalist ideology engendered not only disapprobation but also critical exhaustion. It is perhaps a function of the vague desire for 'a little peace' that has played a part in Gunn's own varied posthumous literary fortunes as, outside of MacDiarmid, the most identifiably nationalist Scottish writer of the 20th century and a central figure in the Scottish Renaissance of the interwar period.

For Kurt Wittig, writing at mid-century, the Scottish Renaissance only reached its full modern expression in Gunn's work. In his 1958 survey of Scottish literary history, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature*, Wittig claimed that 'more than any other Scottish writer Neil Gunn is "modern"; he always strives to relate the past to the present, and in doing so he uses the past to provide symbols which could express the contemporary issues with which he is ultimately concerned'.^[17] By the end of the century, however, with discussion of a new, 'postmodern Scottish renaissance'^[18], critical perspectives on Gunn shifted (though not so far as to disregard entirely the writer whose complete body of work places him among the most important Scottish novelists of the 20th century).^[19]

Duncan Glen's 1999 survey, *Scottish Literature: A New History*, dismisses Gunn: 'Admirers of the novels of Neil Gunn can make a good case for them, but I remain unconvinced, suspecting them of a false blend of overwritten mystical and Celtic romanticism' (112).^[20] Criticisms such as Glen's are unequivocally grounded in the suspicion that Gunn's nationalism has, as in the case of those popular historians that Hamish Henderson excoriated, led him to embrace the sentimental narrative of Scottish national identity at the cost of a truer mode of representation.

In the seminal 1995 collection, *Gendering the Nation: Studies in Modern Scottish Literature*, perhaps the first significant intervention of gender and queer theory into Scottish literary scholarship, this scepticism is extended even further. The collection's editor, Christopher Whyte,

describes the book as 'symptomatic, even exemplary of changes taking place in the overall theoretical debate [over nationalism and feminism] and in contemporary Scottish culture'.^[21] A few pages later, he exclaims: 'This collection, then, serves notice that Scottish texts are being read in new, disruptive and not infrequently discordant ways and the wider world had better sit up and pay attention!' (xvi). The normative approach to reading the canonical texts of the Scottish Renaissance, Whyte suggests, had been to participate in and extend the nationalist and masculinist perspectives they represent by reading in a 'eulogistic' rather than a critical way. Broadly characterising the movement as a way of establishing the collection's alternative readings, Whyte describes Scottish Renaissance nationalism thus:

[The] Scottish nationalism [of] the inter-war period had a concern for linguistic and racial purity [...] Perhaps that kind of nationalism, that way of being Scottish, which strikes us as being so oppressive now, had its uses at a time when Scottish identity was defined primarily against an overarching Britishness or Englishness. There can be no doubt that different strategies are in operation today. (xiv)

In the evocation of the precepts of 'linguistic and racial purity' and the characterisation of 'that way of being Scottish' as 'oppressive', we see again the anxiety over a slippery slope from cultural nationalist ideology to Hitler Fascism haunting contemporary attempts to reckon with Scottish literary history.

Whyte's critical perspective on nationalist writers, which he focuses intensely on Gunn in his own chapter contribution to *Gendering the Nation*, 'Fishy Masculinities: Neil Gunn's *The Silver Darlings*', remains deeply suspicious of nationalism to the extent that he fails to recognise adequately the variety of progressive, international perspectives on nationalism that were available to the writers of Gunn's era. In the chapter, Whyte argues that Gunn's ideology 'was closer to that of European fascism than to any other contemporary ideological conformation [...] [and] that the time has come to look honestly [...] at the political implications of his seductive rhetoric of blood, ethnicity and gender stereotypes'.^[22] While he gestures towards 'the range of cultural nationalisms, both progressive and reactionary, practiced and preached in Scotland in the course of this century', it is clear from his characterisation of Gunn that Whyte, like many other Scottish critics of our era, finds the nationalist writing of the Scottish Renaissance embarrassingly, distastefully reactionary.

This presumption of nationalist illiberalism on the part of otherwise well-intentioned intellectuals is not a new problem for progressive nationalists like Gunn, however. In fact it was a common assumption that plagued the nationalist movements of Gunn's own time and which prompted a number of responses on his part (including the above quoted essay). But the novelist was not

alone in his meditations upon the nationalist question. One particularly useful perspective on the question of nationalism in a broader context comes from a writer whose work has received a recent resurgence of scholarly interest. The epilogue to journalist/novelist Rebecca West's 1941 masterpiece, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey through Yugoslavia*, comments enthusiastically upon the proliferation of free and independent small nation-states after the First World War (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia). West expresses dismay at the level of criticism that these nations received from citizens of the larger, more powerful nations of the West. 'It surprised me', she writes, 'that many Englishmen and Americans, who professed to be benevolently concerned with the future of man, were not in the least exalted by this prospect'.^[23] The absence of exaltation that West notices, she believes, correlates to a widespread misconception about the nature of nationalism:

The left wing, especially, was sharply critical of the new states and all that they did. This was inconsistent in those who believed, often to a point far beyond the practical, that the individual must be free to determine his own destiny, and it was partly due to a theory, so absurd that not even its direct opposite has any chance of being true, that nationalism is always anti-democratic and aggressive, and that internationalism is always liberal and pacific. Yet nationalism is simply the determination of a people to cultivate its own soul, to follow the customs bequeathed to it by its ancestors, to develop its traditions according to its own instincts. It is the national equivalent of the individual's determination not to be a slave. (pp. 1100-01)

The connection that West makes between the right of individual self-determination and national self-determination is a belief that is fundamentally shared by Gunn and other progressive Scottish nationalists. For them, Scotland's ability to make its own political decisions would be the best means to economic and social reform. Gunn approached the question in terms of the national character in a 1939 essay entitled 'Nationalism in Writing III – Is Scottish Individualism to be Deplored?': 'Why should the Scot have retained in so marked a degree his individualism, his uneasy individualism, and lost his capacity for economic co-operation? Does the logical answer lie in the possibility that the Scot was inevitably doomed to lose his capacity for co-operation from the very moment that he abdicated his power to deal with his own economic relations?'.^[24] The very ability to reconstitute an idea of cooperative community was, for Gunn, located explicitly in the kind of national self-determination that West championed.

Even more importantly, however, was, as West puts it, 'the determination of a people to cultivate its own soul'. The self-reflexivity of such an approach to nationalism, to make an obvious point, stands in stark contrast with one of the essential underpinning ideological commitments of imperial conquest—the missionary determination of a people to cultivate the souls of others. As

Britain moved from imperial zenith to a more restricted role in world affairs and turned its collective attention to the creation and implementation of the modern welfare state, an attendant consequence for many English writers was the sense that, as Jed Esty puts it in a discussion of T.S. Eliot, England must be remade 'as a national culture that no longer consumed the rich traditions of subordinate nations while letting its own attenuate and ossify'.^[25] This sense of an English national culture no longer inseparably linked with the destiny of the British Empire—no longer universally translatable and transportable, but merely one among many world cultures—led Eliot, according to Esty, to embrace as a model Hugh MacDiarmid, whose nationalist politics 'offered an explicit and prescient case for the relativisation of English culture'.

MacDiarmid's criticism of the 'sorry imperialism' of the English and the untenability of the British imperial system was an important influence on Eliot's attempts to find new vitality in a circumscribed, limited Englishness in the *Four Quartets* and *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (134). In Esty's words, 'MacDiarmid's ["English Ascendancy in British Letters" *Criterion* (1931)] thus marks a moment in the 1930s when an English intellectual like Eliot could start to come to terms with the literary-historical effects of national retrenchment'. Esty's description of this influence, though it somewhat elides the influence of Allen Tate and the agrarian movement of the American South, is compelling, but might it not also stand to reason that Eliot's acquaintance with the Gunns and their small nationalist circle in Inverness, an acquaintance cultivated on multiple trips to the Highlands as an agent for Faber (Gunn's publisher after the Porpoise Press folded), played as great a role?

For Scottish nationalists like Gunn, many of whom felt that the 'soul' (and much of the soil) of the nation had been sold along with the right of political and economic self-determination through the Union with England, the idea of a kind of spiritual renewal that would be located in both individuals and the national community was extremely powerful as a way to palliate the sense of loss inculcated by Scotland's participation in Empire. In Scotland, the interest in the local, the 'anthropological turn' towards a relativistic understanding of world cultures (including one's own), can be seen as the most logical outcome of the nation's vexed relationship to Empire. As participants in the colonial, imperial project, many Scots would have suffered a similar disorientation as their English neighbours when the looming disintegration of that project threatened a central precept of British identity. At the same time, however, nationalists, especially those of a more progressive bent, understood their position as fundamentally opposed to the global scale of a putatively exploitative capitalist system for which imperialism created the conditions. As Tom Normand has noted, the cast of most Scottish nationalism was fundamentally progressive and oriented towards community at a local, not just a national level:

Certainly mainstream nationalism in Scotland, as a political and cultural dynamic, sought to bring about a sense of community above all other desires. [...] Moreover, the ideal of community was intimately based upon shared interests, beliefs, and normative values which were present at a local level. It was, perhaps, this notion of locality which was so important in a period of economic crisis and post-colonial decline. The 'local' functioned as a political and cultural nexus wherein the dehumanising aspects of global capitalism might be resisted. In consequence the concern with identity was present as an opposition to the market-led coagulation of the anonymous consumer.^[26]

Normand's conception of the 'local' is remarkably similar to Gunn's in its fundamental ability to resist the mustering forces of imperialism, global capitalism, and totalitarianism in any guise. To understand Gunn's nationalism, the nationalism that is expressed in both his essay work and his fiction, one must understand the relationship between that limited space of the 'local' and the untranslatability of experience, culture, and all those things he considered integral to the definition of human life.

An essay for *Outlook* from 1936, 'Literature: Class or National?', speaks to this point more directly. 'The simple truth of the matter seems to be', Gunn writes, 'that literature is national in origin and has found its subject-matter or drama precisely in those class differences and other distinctions or inequalities which together make up the life of a nation. That such has been the case may—or may not—be unfortunate. That it is a fact is surely unquestionable.'^[27] The limits of the nation, for better or worse, quite simply offer the only proper material for literature:

So far as social evolution has gone, then, it would seem that a man creates most potently within his own national environment. Outside it he is not so sure of himself, not so fertile, not so profound. That appears to be the accepted anthropological fact. [...] For, whether we like it or not, the nation is still the basis of all large-scale creative human endeavour[.]

The evocation of the national community as an anthropological fact not only interestingly anticipates Esty's argument about late Modernism's general interest in a reevaluation of the local but it also suggests Gunn's peculiar form of resistance to what he called 'idealism'—abstracted ideas that are easily manipulable and with which it is easy to manipulate other people. So long as one might stay 'grounded', he suggested, one might avoid the seductions of ideological theories that are disconnected from lived, communal experience to such an extent that they may make possible the worst imaginable violence. 'The longer I live the more I distrust idealism,' Gunn wrote

in the essay 'The Essence of Nationalism', 'not for what may be genuinely implicit in it, but for the lengths to which history has shown me human nature will go in order, as we say, to implement it. Let an idealism, with power, once get the bit in its mouth and nothing will stop it. It becomes capable of cruelty and slaughter on a gargantuan scale.'^[28]

Of course to claims of a 'grounded' and purportedly non-ideological nationalism (which opposes the abstract idealism that Gunn deplors), theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Terry Eagleton would respond with the charge that such 'groundedness' is always already ideology and represents the dark undercurrent of German Romantic thought that arose in (arguably the misapprehension of) Herder and informed, for instance, the Nazism of Heidegger. While such a criticism raises important questions, particularly insofar as Gunn does belong to a broader Romantic tradition that could (and did), in some cases, inspire reprehensible ideologies, the more particular and important point for this essay relies upon a more historicised understanding of the writer's work.

The particular cultural contexts for expressions of Romantic nationalist ideas are absolutely critical and should be a prerequisite for any comparative readings of writers across national, linguistic, temporal, or other boundaries. Where ideological similarities do exist, however tenuously, between writers who share some background in an intellectual tradition (in this case, Romantic anti-rationalism), we should look to the conditions to which those writers addressed themselves for evidence of what kinds of politics those ideologies underwrote. In Gunn's case, the historical moment to which he is responding is that of British imperial contraction and the inward turn of a social-scientific endeavour that ultimately failed in both its effort to communicate convincingly a particular set of ('British') cultural values as universal and to understand fully the range of 'Other' cultures towards which it had turned an analytical eye. In short, Gunn's philosophy is circumscribed by the fact of imperial decline and the emergence of a kind of cultural relativism that made the component national cultures of the United Kingdom themselves available as objects for 'anthropological' scrutiny.

It is inarguable that Gunn the cultural nationalist has his Herderian moments, but in light of a broader late Modernist concern with 'national culture', that Esty convincingly argues also helped give birth to cultural studies in the work of E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, it seems to me a mistake to read Gunn's ideological investments too narrowly. Gunn felt himself, as he felt all people to be, inevitably and inescapably a product of his particular background, and that background is always already both limited and relative to all other backgrounds. 'In recent years,' he wrote in the *Scots Magazine* in 1941, 'the field anthropologist has done a lot to help us realize how much we are the children of our background, of our own particular culture pattern, however fondly we may have believed that ours was the only "right" and therefore universally applicable

one.'^[29] The insistence on the particularity of experience ultimately offers not only the possibility of individual freedom, but also the freedom of each 'culture pattern' to express itself in a specific fashion. This almost multiculturalist perspective is not merely a product of the nationalism that Gunn so frequently defended in print; it is also a symptom of the Scottish writer's perception of the role of small national literatures in a global literary economy that, in spite of the 'anthropological turn' of high Modernist figures such as Eliot and Woolf (see *Between the Acts*), continued to define literary value as concomitant with an internationalist, cosmopolitan perspective.

The Local Universal and Imperial Decline

Take down the Union Jack, it clashes with the sunset
And ask our Scottish neighbours if independence looks any good
'Cos they just might understand how to take an abstract notion
Of personal identity and turn it into nationhood.

Billy Bragg^[30]

'Take Down the Union Jack' is not a product of the Scottish Renaissance, or even of a Scottish writer; rather, it is a protest song by the English socialist songwriter Billy Bragg that reached number 22 on the UK singles chart in late May 2002. Bragg's lyrics do, however, describe the desire for an English nationality that, once rid of the both the exploitative 'economic union' and archaic ornaments of nineteenth-century Empire, might take its cue from the kind of progressive nationalism that has, it is implied, led to at least a modicum of success in parliamentary devolution for Scotland. It proposes precisely the kind of solution to the cultural crisis precipitated by imperial decline that many interwar British writers of all nationalities faced—an interrogation of post-imperial nationality, phrased in this case by Bragg as attention to 'what it really means / To be an Anglo hyphen Saxon in England.co.uk'.

The Union Jack, as emblem of Empire, clashes with the sunset that ironically and belatedly signals that Empire's decline. In the absence of such nostalgic signifiers of past colonial greatness, the challenge for the English, Bragg suggests, is to let the example of Scottish nationalism, just as it had with the influences of MacDiarmid and Gunn on T.S. Eliot, provide a model for the integration of a felt personal identity with the communal sense of belonging to a nation. A positive nationalism of this kind represented legitimate cultural and political possibility for certain interwar Scottish writers—it truly was a source of both creative potential and anti-

imperial critique, and not, despite some contemporary critical claims, merely a lamentably backwards ideology that would best be forgotten.

For a writer like Neil Gunn, the irony of such contemporary criticism is that it frames the novelist's nationalism only in terms of the Scottish national scene itself and does not recognise the extent to which nationalist feeling could be understood in a more general late-modernist, Anglo-European context as a potentially progressive ideology (as in Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*), and/or, as Jed Esty claims of the late work of Modernist figures such as Eliot and Woolf in *A Shrieking Island*, typical of a 'second-order universalism based on [national] cultural integrity' and a 'reinscri[ption of] universalism into the language of [national] particularism' (14).^[31] In Gunn's case, both of these characterisations apply. An independent Scottish state would, he believed, be the most practical institution through which to mount a counter-attack to the exploitative practices of global capitalism. At the same time, however, his attachment to his native Highland landscape and especially to his childhood experiences of that landscape (which gave the land such imaginative significance), led Gunn to embrace the idea that, to adapt a 1940 statement of Eliot's about Yeats, 'in becoming more [Scottish], ... he became at the same time universal'.^[32] Such a statement would be a fitting epitaph to the modern Scottish Renaissance.

What a re-reading of Gunn can do for our understanding of this period of Scottish literary history, long-haunted for the 'internationalist' scholar by the shadow of chauvinistic nationalism, is provide a sophisticated narrative of, to put it in terms that Gunn himself would appreciate, post-imperial British culture (in the specific form of a nationalism that anticipated imperial decline) coming upon itself as an object of critical and creatively productive scrutiny. Where the philosophical protagonists of the late novels almost literalise the 'anthropological turn' that occurs among the English high modernists that were his contemporaries—in *The Other Landscape's* Walter Urquhart this is actually the case—Gunn had established the pattern for this search for the universal in the local long before. To see this, we need think only of one of his most celebrated novels, *Highland River* (1937), in which the protagonist Kenn, psychologically scarred from his service to the British Empire in the Great War, returns home to trace the source of the river that played a central role in his childhood imagination.

While the journey of *Highland River* is, of course, as much an interior, psychological or philosophical one as a physical trek, nevertheless the physical impulse is key in the sensory descriptions of the environments Kenn encounters, reinforcing the necessary literal quality of the trip. What is striking, however, is the way in which the nature of the quest itself represents a localised version of the prototypical imperial narrative—another Scotsman's, Dr. David Livingstone's, search for the source of the Nile. Kenn's journey, as Matthew Wickman has recently noted, problematically (and fascinatingly), casts 'experience as a private, internal

phenomenon' just when Gunn would seem to want that experience to be communal—the desire for 'full experience, Benjamin's *Erfahrung*' is unsustainable in light of the protagonist's modern alienation from a community that is at any rate, as Gunn insistently reminds his readers throughout his *oeuvre*, dying. What remains is '*Erlebnis*,' the 'decay and romanticisation' of experience.[\[33\]](#)

Wickman's reading suggests that this movement inward signals Gunn's eventual retreat from active nationalist politics, and this seems accurate to a great extent. But we might also read here, as I have suggested above, the cultural endgame of imperial decline in the author's insistence on the secrecy, the incommunicability, of an experience located in the specific kind of local landscape that had come to symbolise or synecdochically represent the nation. The logic of Empire, inscribed upon Livingstone's tomb in Westminster Abbey, is 'To Explore the Undiscovered Secrets'[\[34\]](#) so that they might be permanently uncovered, evangelised, and rendered part of a system of improving 'civilisation'. For Kenn, who is overcome with a powerful and nearly inexpressible feeling upon arriving (unlike Livingstone) at his river's source, 'a deep, secret tenderness' fill his eyes.[\[35\]](#) What is revealed is Kenn's own being in some fundamental way—he is able to 'see what lay in his heart and in his mind'. Truth is thus reduced to the bounded existence of the individual subject rather than in the external expanse of conquered territory. Is this not, in some sense, the most extreme example of Normand's description of Scottish nationalism as 'contractile rather than expansionist'?[\[36\]](#)

Through his essays on nationalism and tradition as well as in his fictional practice, Gunn is emphatic about the immeasurable value of subjective, individual experience in articulating an approach to the problems created by the dissolution of traditional cultures under the pressures of imperialism, industrialisation, and modern commodity culture. A reassessment of Gunn in this light, rather than in the diffused half-light he himself sometimes cast over his own work (especially the later work), would allow for a reading of such novels as *The Silver Bough* (1948), *The Well at the World's End* (1951), and *The Other Landscape* (1954), 'the books', as Margery Palmer McCulloch puts it, 'in which he pursues themes of disintegration and freedom in the modern world', as something other (and more) than 'on the whole unsuccessful' or marred by their philosophical concerns.[\[37\]](#)

Such novels, thematically linked by their exile-academic protagonists—an archaeologist, a historian, and an anthropologist, respectively—arriving at/returning to Highland landscapes that exude both familiarity and alterity, may not paint convincing portraits of the main characters as representatives of their respective fields of inquiry. What they do, however, by extending the work of Gunn's earlier novels and essays, is dramatise the moment in which the energies of imperial narration return in altered form to the communities that supplied the Empire with its requisite

intellectual and physical effort. In short, they are symptomatic of both the Scottish writer's critique of the undifferentiated conformity (the 'beehive') of the cosmopolitan ideal, including 'the world republic of letters', and of the moment in which the failure of imperial culture to maintain perpetual, (seemingly) universally translatable meaning required a return to the nation as a site for cultural renewal.

NOTES

[1] Hamish Henderson, 'Glencoe on our Minds', in *Alias MacAlias: Writings on Song, Folk and Literature*, ed. by Alec Finlay, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004), pp. 257-62 (p. 257).

[2] Eleanor Bell, 'Postmodernism, Nationalism and the Question of Tradition,' in *Scotland in Theory: Reflections on Culture and Literature*, ed. by Eleanor Bell and Gavin Miller (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), p. 86.

[3] We might call to mind here the continuing effort in North America to petition the MLA for full division status for what is currently the Scottish Literature Discussion Group.

[4] Bell, *Questioning Scotland: Literature, Nationalism, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 149.

[5] For what is perhaps the most trenchant and oft-cited example of this critique, see Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: New Left Books, 1977).

[6] See, most (in)famously, Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'The Invention of Tradition: the Highland Tradition of Scotland', in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 15-42.

[7] For a particularly lucid description of this process during the Romantic period, see Ian Duncan with Leith Davis and Janet Sorensen, 'Introduction,' in *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1-19. For an account of this process in the context of the heritage industry and from a sociological perspective, see David McCrone, Angela Morris, and Richard Kiely, *Scotland the Brand: The Making of Scottish Heritage*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

[8] For a more substantive and nuanced discussion of the complexities of the representation of Scotland and 'Scottishness' in the work of Scottish writers, see Alan Riach, *Representing*

Scotland in Literature, Popular Culture and Iconography: The Masks of the Modern Nation (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[9] Liam Connell, 'Modes of Marginality: Scottish Literature and the Uses of Postcolonial Theory', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23.1&2 (2003) http://www.cssaame.com/issues/volume_2312_2003.html [accessed 28 October 2007], pp. 11-12.

[10] Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* [orig. *La république mondiale des lettres*, 1999], trans. by M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 14-15.

[11] Gunn, 'Nationalism and Internationalism' [1931] in *Landscape and Light: Essays*, ed. by Alistair McCleery (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987), pp. 177-80 (pp. 177-78)

[12] Naomi Mitchison, 'Letter' from *Scotland in Quest of Her Youth: A Scrutiny*, in *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland, 1918-1939: Source Documents for the Scottish Renaissance*, ed. by Margery Palmer McCulloch (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2004), pp. 253-54 (p. 253).

[13] Gunn, 'Belief in Ourselves' [1945] (see Gunn above), p. 161.

[14] For a convincing argument on behalf of the little-acknowledged importance of such popular cultural representations of Scottishness as Harry Lauder's stage Scotsman (as an alternative to 'highbrow' literary representations such as Hugh MacDiarmid's), see David Goldie, 'Hugh MacDiarmid, Harry Lauder and Scottish Popular Culture', *The International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 1 (2006) <http://www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk/issue1/goldie.htm>.

[15] Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.130.

[16] Gunn, 'The Essence of Nationalism' [1942] (see Gunn above), pp. 141-44 (p. 141).

[17] Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), p. 338.

[18] See Cristie Leigh March, *Rewriting Scotland: Welsh, McLean, Warner, Banks, Galloway, and Kennedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) for more on the origins of claims for a new Scottish Renaissance.

[19] Claims for Gunn's relevance and achievement do persist, as in Cairns Craig's description of Gunn as 'the novelist of the Renaissance movement most fully committed to exploring and overcoming the structures of fear which have permeated the Scottish imagination'. Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 71.

[20] Duncan Glen, *Scottish Literature: A New History from 1299-1999* (Kirkcaldy: Akros, 1999), p.112.

[21] Christopher Whyte, 'Introduction', *Gendering the Nation: Studies in Modern Scottish Literature*, ed. by Christopher Whyte (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. ix-xx (p. xi).

[22] Whyte, 'Fishy Masculinities: Neil Gunn's *The Silver Darlings*' (see Whyte above), p.66.

[23] Rebecca West, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey through Yugoslavia*, (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. 1100.

[24] Gunn, 'Nationalism in Writing III – Is Scottish Individualism to be Deplored?' [1939] (see Gunn above), p. 117.

[25] Esty, p.133.

[26] Tom Normand, *The Modern Scot: Modernism and Nationalism in Scottish Art, 1928-1955* (Hants: Ashgate, 2000), p. 163.

[27] Gunn, 'Literature: Class or National?' [1936] (see Gunn above), pp. 118, 121.

[28] Gunn, 'The Essence of Nationalism', p. 141.

[29] Gunn, 'On Background' [1941], (see Gunn above), p. 202.

[30] Billy Bragg. 'Take Down the Union Jack'. *England, Half English*. 2002. CD. Elektra 62743.

[31] In both of these quotations I have replaced Esty's original "English" with "national."

[32] Quoted in Esty, p. 14.

[33] Matthew Wickman, *The Ruins of Experience: Scotland's 'Romantick' Highlands and the Birth of the Modern Witness* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 184-85 (p. 184).

[34] Dean and Chapter of Westminster, 'David Livingstone', *Westminster Abbey: from 1065 to Today*, <http://www.westminster-abbey.org/search/12283> [accessed 28 October 2007].

[35] Gunn, *Highland River* (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1991), p. 241.

[36] Normand, p. 164.

[37] Margery Palmer McCulloch, *The Novels of Neil M Gunn: a Critical Study* (Glasgow: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), p. 178.