**The Parrot’s Progress**

**The Eclipse of Scottish Culture, by Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull, Polygon 1989.**

**Review by Johnny Rodger**

Does the independence ‘debate’ consist simply in the endless repetition of the same old tropes? Sometimes it feels a wee bit stuck. One book, however - *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture –* written almost four decades ago, might be useful, in its egregious deployment of those very tropes, in gaining fresh perspective on the same. *Bella Caledonia* suggested a re-reading and a crit for our day.

The Supreme Court will decide this week on whether the Scottish Government can move directly to organise a second referendum, but either way it is surely becoming clear to most interested folks that all the arguments are already out there, that any ballot will not in fact be won by argument alone, for those arguments remain, both pro and contra, largely the same, and they keep on doing the rounds; repeated, restated, reheated and reformulated … Indeed, MacDiarmid’s famous 1930 poem with a parrot reciting the ‘auld story’ of the blessings of the Union could easily be reworked with a psittacine double-agent, squawking out alternately the same auld unionist *and* nationalist lines til we fling the claith back over the cage.

If the best we can hope for, alas, is for a provocation of interesting and enlightening reformulations, understandings and framings of already existent arguments, then *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture* by Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull certainly stood up to that mark when it was published in 1989. It was written in the full flush of the era of development of identity politics and of the rise of ‘Cultural Studies’ which confronted older established monolithic values and social and political norms. In the words of Stuart Hall, this new approach to critical thought sought to:

*… provide strategies for survival, and resources for resistance to all those who are now – in economic, political and cultural terms – excluded from anything that could be called national culture…*

It might seem ironic that it was published during the repressive Thatcher years, but it was precisely in that period that explorations of identity through race, class, gender and sexuality came to the fore and produced work that was to influence politics and society in general in the decades to follow. Arguably, the Scottish Studies work done in those years - not only by Beveridge and Turnbull, but by Cairns Craig, Marinell Ash, Lindsay Paterson and many others – can be seen as an important contribution to that field and its work in difference and alternative understandings of the political, in the rise of identity politics, in subversive effects, and in the resistance mentioned above by Hall.

On a certain level, Beveridge and Turnbull themselves are more directly related to the ‘Cultural Studies’ agenda than many of their fellow Scottishers because the notion of ‘resistance’ to assimilation is their central concern, and also because they lean heavily on the theories of Frantz Fanon, who was so influential on writings on race, colonialism and blackness.

Very simply put, Beveridge and Turnbull’s thesis is that Scottish history has been hijacked through the predominance of views of English visitors and writers and academics who portray a stark dichotomy whereby pre-Union Scotland was in unadulterated darkness, filth and poverty, and the country was saved and propelled into a future of light, wealth, education and well-being by the Union with England.

That there may be elements of truth in this -with post-Union access to Empire trade and the joint development of the industrial economy – is not disputed, but the extent to which it is perceived as a passage from black to white is viewed dubiously and compared with Europe’s colonial attitude to Africa and its pre-colonial history as one of the primitive ‘dark continent’.

This argument can be viewed as a version of the trope popularly nominated as ‘too wee, too poor too stupid’, but the novel analysis of the phenomenon here, that gives us a provocative and rewarding insight into it, is that Beveridge and Turnbull tackle it armed with Fanon’s concept of ‘inferiorisation’, whereby:

*… long term, constant disparagement of the local culture creates self-doubt, saps the native’s respect and so weakens resistance to foreign rule.*

This was certainly a more rigorously intellectual way to frame the ‘too wee…’ mentality, but ultimately, we might wonder whether in their enthusiasm for this serviceable, ready-to-hand critique from Fanon, they do not in this special cultural context go too far and give it the universal application of the zealot. Like the elect, indeed, watching the sinners suffer in hell, they seem to enjoy the spectacle of seeing their enemies wallow in their own imagined Scotch darknesses.

And as such this tract seems to be not so much an analysis of and for the duped unfortunates that are the people of Scotland, but an exposé and accusation against the alleged weak and assimilationist Scottish intellectuals who become willing partners in foisting this inferiorist agenda on the nation. (Nairn, Youngson, Smout and Bold and many others are named here).

There appears to be little space, that is to say, for the nuance and for the relationality, the intersectionality, the relative, the difference that we expect from any post-cultural studies analysis. Just like the George Davie analysis – which Beveridge and Turnbull call upon – this work seems to rely on a somewhat rosy-spectacled, erstwhile (meaning pre-Union) purity of Scottish intellectual culture, and naturally, measured against this unsullied, unadulterated version of Scottish history we will all, in the end, be judged unworthy (in a manner ironically reminiscent of those caricatures of our pure Calvinist past!).

Another discourse which is met head-on here with the exploitation of Fanon’s theories is, of course, the thorny question of Scotland and colonialism. A recent stushie saw Anas Sarwar criticised by some people for celebrating Pakistan’s independence while fighting against Scotland’s, and for claiming that Scotland was at the heart of the colonial enterprise.

This question of colonialism is, in fact, a regular feature of the debate concerning Scotland’s relationship to England. The application to Scotland of Fanon’s theories which were developed in his work on the psychological effects of oppressive French colonial power on the indigenous Algerian people, might seem surprising, not to say inappropriate, given Scotland’s full engagement in the British colonial enterprise, and its current and growing problem with institutional racism.

Yet it is significant to note that Beveridge and Turnbull are aware that while there is some usefulness and applicability of the ‘inferiorisation’ concept to some particular aspects of Scottish history and culture, they are not applying the notion of the colonised wholesale to the case, but add caveats, namely that tracts of the Scottish past have been affected ‘in ways reminiscent of the distortive action of colonialism upon ‘third world’ cultures’ and that the affects were ‘in not so crude a form’.

The involvement of Scotland in the British colonial enterprise was long, profound and voluntary, and is historically documented, as is the involvement in slavery. That some aspects of Scottish history might be better understood in their confrontation with historical norms as assumed ‘standard’ by a much larger, dominant partner in that colonial enterprise via concepts developed to analyse the experience of the colonised, arguably demonstrates a considerably mature, complex and nuanced intersectional approach to historical and geo-political realities.

The declared aim of Beveridge and Turnbull’s study was to bring ‘cultural and philosophical components’ to a debate on Scottish nationalism which thitherto (in the 60s and 70s) they believed to have been ‘overwhelmingly practical’.

Whether one shares their politics or not, or believes their propositions and intellectual standpoints to be viable, there is no doubting that they largely achieved their aim by nurturing a broader, more mature and engaging intellectual range of the discussion of the phenomenon of national history and its relation to the possibilities and probabilities of national autonomy.

Although the tropes of the debate do remain fundamentally of a very familiar type (the continual references to an ill-defined, vague federalism/the spectre of ‘separatism’, ‘too wee’, colonialism etc) this book is well worth a read, or a re-read, to appreciate how the debate can be revitalised, and why it should be.

It offers much light on the limits of Scottish exceptionalism and the belief in the self-evident virtue of Scottish nationalism and its standing apart from other nationalisms, while raising the issue of Scotland’s historical development in the capitalist order (raised by Wallerstein and Smout in the 1970s; McCrone in the 1990s), without coming up with definitive answers. But this is still a live debate and set of topics and The Eclipse of Scottish Culture is a valuable starting point in revisiting these subjects.