

The nationalist interpretation of Scottish history

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The Invisible Spirit: A Life of Post-War Scotland 1945-75

Kenneth Roy

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For social democrats, the post-war years are usually seen as halcyon days. Across the Western world, including the United Kingdom, societies became healthier, wealthier and more equal. Inequalities were compressed as the dynamism of industrial capitalism was harnessed by the state – both national and local – and by strong trade unions, in the interests of the many not the few. Political parties, while never enjoying a golden age of public approbation, enjoyed mass memberships. Voter turnout was high. Trust in ‘official’ institutions and in the good intentions of public servants was maintained, although here too there was never a golden age. Political and social democracy co-existed for the first time. The Attlee Government’s promise of a revolution in social security and health-care won it first the votes and then the loyalty of a substantial urbanised and unionised working class employed in an economy characterised by the regionally concentrated heavy industries that had suffered such brutal punishment during the inter-war period. ‘Never Again’ was the folk memory of the hungry 1930s, to which in the post-war period the working classes and sections of the middle classes subscribed.

The swing back towards the Conservative Party that gathered pace across the 1950s was originally a middle class revolt against the ‘austerity’ imposed by the compression of inequalities across UK society. It did not seriously threaten social democracy; rather, the Conservatives added the distinctive and popular attractions of the consumer society to the social democratic foundations Labour had established. Governments – Labour and Conservative – proceeded on a consensual basis until the worldwide institutional breakdown of Keynesian social democracy during the

1970s, under the combined pressures of the oil price shock, stagflation and the associated issues of wage inflation outstripping price inflation.

Kenneth Roy's history of Scotland from the end of the war to the first drop of 'Scotland's oil' in 1975 eschews this (mostly) positive story. A BBC Scotland reporter and anchorman turned journalist and literary entrepreneur (founder and editor of *Scottish Review*), Roy's assessment of social-democratic Scotland is in fact deeply negative: 'it would be futile to pretend that it [this book] describes a prosperous and well-governed people' (p. 516). His theme is Scotland 'betrayed' by its establishment. 'No Gods and Precious Few Heroes' would be an appropriate alternative title (1). The negative tone is leavened only occasionally by the humour which I remember as a feature of Roy's Scottish newspapers columns. (As a Glaswegian I especially enjoyed: 'The city magistrates deplored the effect of each new outrage on "the good name of Glasgow", an overworked phrase which made a large assumption about Glasgow's name' (p. 332)).

The judiciary is too quick to send capital murder defendants to the gallows and guilty of hypocritically protecting its own, while presiding over avoidable miscarriages of justice (pp. 325-32). The teaching establishment appear as belt-happy, rote-teaching disciplinarians (pp. 203-4, 239, 263-6, 319-21, 513). Industrialists are often dissolute, dogmatic and too quick to blame the workforce rather than themselves for economic failure (pp. 241, 268, 272-5, 338, 341-4, 346). Civil servants are on occasion corrupt and generally out of touch with Scottish aspirations (pp. 471-80). The media (in practice for Roy the *Glasgow Herald* and the BBC) are complacent, out of touch, and at times craven to the powerful (pp. 48, 212-3, 345-6, 507-8). The Kirk is hypocritical, authoritarian, and a net contributor through its Presbyterianism to the miseries of mankind (pp. 130, 181, 512, 277-8, 288, 317). Politicians are generally of low quality – self-interested, short sighted, and 'pygmies' (pp. 269, 357-60, 378-80, 401, 443, 513).

Roy's post-war Scotland is in the grip of a malaise, one which he explains in nationalist terms, as a crisis of self-confidence brought on by the union's weakening of Scottish identity: 'The Britishing of the Scots did not wholly quash a national yearning for something better or, at any rate, different' (p. 514). The book's title *The Invisible Spirit* is to be understood in this context: as a reference both to the frustrating absence of Scottish national feeling in the post-war period and to the causal relationship between a measure of self-government and a reinvigoration of Scotland's distinctive culture, economy and society (p. 505; see also pp. 63, 93, 170,

267-8 279, 355-6, 376). Home Rule (as well as the decline of Puritanism and the end of deference) ensures Roy has a much sunnier view of the 'post-post-war era' than one might expect from an author hostile to Thatcherism (evident for example in his attitude to the Tothill report on the Scottish economy, pp. 272-5).

Class or nation?

The story of the National Covenant dominates Roy's political history. Brainchild of one of the book's few heroes, John MacCormick (Tom Johnston and John Boyd Orr are others), the Covenant was a declaration in favour of a devolved Scottish Parliament which gathered two million signatures during 1949 but which was subsequently ignored by both Labour and Conservative Governments. Roy views the Covenant as an authentic expression of Scotland's overwhelming desire to express its national identity through Home Rule and indicts the major political parties for their response: 'The unionist political parties responded to this extraordinary result in a predictably low fashion, by casting doubt on its authenticity...' (pp. 92-6; also 108, 111, 158, 169, 514).

The two million signatures certainly were impressive, even allowing for the likelihood of individuals signing multiple times. But this impression encourages an obvious question: how could government ignore such a definitive expression of support for devolution? And not just one government: first the Attlee government and subsequently a Conservative government whose leading Scottish members had expressed strong support for the Covenant. The latter's support for the Covenant in the late 1940s provides a clue. Scotland, like the rest of the UK, possessed a middle and upper class that was increasingly anxious about its declining standard of living and loss of social status relative to the working classes.

The comfortable classes' anguish at the impact of the Attlee Government's economic levelling was never better evoked than in Angus and Roy Maude's *The English Middle Classes* (1949). But Scotland had a middle and upper class too. And they were to the fore in the National Covenant, as Roy acknowledges: 'The most remarkable fact about the [Covenant] movement', he writes, 'was that it was inspired and led, not by ordinary chaps, but by some of the most influential chaps in Scotland' (p. 96). No explanation is offered as to why the great and good, who had been notable by their absence from the Labour-led home rule stirrings of the inter-war period, were now so ardently in favour of a Scottish Parliament. The obvious answer, that Scotland's Tory and Liberal establishment, who retained the close links and opposi-

tion to socialism forged in the National Government of 1931-40, primarily saw the Covenant as stimulating opposition to 'centralising' socialism goes unexplored.

From this perspective, Labour's successive Scottish Secretaries Westwood and Woodburn are less slow-witted second-raters unable to see beyond their anti-nationalist prejudices, as Roy implies (p. 513), than experienced politicians who judged that support for the Covenant was broad not deep, and disproportionately to be found among Scotland's substantial middle-class Tory-Liberal electorate. Likewise the inaction of the Conservative government after winning power in 1951 becomes more explicable if the Covenant was (for some of its signatories) more a weapon to wield in the fight against socialism and less a solemn expression of nationalist feeling. That the 1955 general election marked the zenith of Tory success in Scotland suggests the possible marginality of the constitutional issue. Such was public outrage at the Conservative failure to deliver on the Covenant that the party won a majority of Scottish seats and votes for the first and only time.

Roy's constitutional-nationalist perspective precludes a class-orientated analysis of Scottish politics based on UK party competition. Roy might retort that the Tories subsequently entered a steep decline in Scotland, and that the national 'spirit' and desire for a measure of 'self-government' was evident in the SNP's by-election victories in Hamilton (1967) and Govan (1973). In fact, he does defend the book's nationalist teleology in this fashion. Winnie Ewing's Hamilton triumph is seen in the context of 'the chilling subtleties of hubris' – a condition associated with those Scots journalists and politicians who 'guffaw[ed]' at the notion of Home Rule (pp. 355-6). Margo MacDonald's subsequent Govan by-election victory is uncritically assessed as game, set and match evidence of the public's determination to see Home Rule: 'What was to be done about her and her cause? For all their posturing the established parties were as clueless as ever' (p. 465). The implication of these formidable nationalist women's defeat at the subsequent general elections goes unexplored. Not that it could be any other way. After all, on Roy's telling John MacCormick had 'got Scotland talking about its own purpose and destiny and, once the conversation had started, it proved impossible to shut it up completely' (pp. 268-9).

As such, *The Invisible Spirit* is reminiscent of nothing so much as James Robertson's novel of post-war Scotland, *And the Land Lay Still* (2010). Both are nationalist explorations of Scotland after 1945 – nationalist in that the objective is to recover an essential political history of Scotland beyond the boundaries, or outside the confines of, Britain and Britishness. Both are open to a familiar objection qua political history

– that the people (of Scotland) simply did not go about their daily lives preoccupied by politics, constitutional or otherwise (Bell, 2010). But the nationalist interpretation of post-war Scottish history is also open to more fundamental objection – in the emphasis it places on the constitutional question at the expense of the political economy of post-war social democracy, it is unhistorical.

An absence of political economy

The sheer impact on Scotland of full employment, an NHS free at the point of use, the establishment of the welfare state, and more widely the democratising of the British state in the material interests of the working classes – there is not much weighing or measuring of that progress in Roy's account. He praises the Attlee government 'as a great, reforming administration' that 'brought into being a revolution in social welfare', but one whose reputation was established only belatedly, with Attlee leaving office 'not much lamented' (p. 127). Except perhaps, one might say, by the 14 million Britons, the vast majority of the working class in Scotland and the UK, who voted Labour in that 1951 election.

Roy writes despairingly of 'the image of Scotland abroad' just after the war as 'a sick, impoverished nation'. This 'humiliating stereotype' of Scotland was apparently so widely held that a visiting American businessman was moved to draw a 'disconcerting parallel' between our Scottish privations and the Irish famine a century before (pp. 70-1). On the absurdity of the Irish famine comparison or the impact of the Second World War on Scottish standards of living, the book has nothing to add. Nor does Roy draw any comparison between Scotland and the (similar) privations being experienced across Britain.

The absence of political economy is a recurring weakness. Roy suggests that increased demand for NHS services in the decade after its creation evidenced greater ill-health without considering the alternative possibility that pent-up demand was unleashed as working class citizens became accustomed to the availability of free health-care for the first time (p. 181). He asserts 'the wretched condition of the poor' in Glasgow in 1947 without any comparison to the much greater wretchedness of the inter-war years or indeed before (p. 67). Likewise, Scotland's average life expectancy is deplored, again without measuring this against previous averages (p. 70).

The book's treatment of the impact of rationing is especially striking. Roy adduces no evidence for the following remarkable statement: 'In some ways the diet of the Scottish people in July 1946 was more restricted than it had been in July 1796' (pp.

40-1; see also characteristically the account of the establishment of the NHS at p. 53). Nor would the reader learn from his book that rationing and food subsidies are universally acknowledged to have increased the calorific intake of the poor and improved their nutrition. The result, historians agree, was reduced inequality, rising life expectancy and lower rates of infant mortality across Britain – and increasing middle class hostility to the Labour government on account of this redistribution of access to food (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2000).

An illuminating preface acknowledges that the central Scotland town of Bonnybridge, Roy's birthplace, was a staunch Labour community, loyal to the Attlee government and its achievements. Immediately, however, a substantial caveat is inserted. The locals, according to Roy, had few illusions about the local Labour 'mafia' who controlled the allocation of council housing, and not always by the rules. Such is the treatment of the social democratic advances associated with municipal socialism. A book which so heavily focuses on Glasgow has remarkably little to say about the role played by the Glasgow Corporation (from the 1930s under Labour control) in widening public access to parks, libraries, housing, education, transport, cleansing and the like as the means to greater equality – and all paid for by more progressive taxation (p. 208, for a little praise on housing policy). The cliché of 'lazy, arrogant Labour fiefdoms' rife with corruption is preferred (p. 398), with Roy mustering at least one argument in favour of local government regionalisation in the 1970s: 'since most people ceased to know the names of their councillors, or where to find them, or what their functions were, the opportunities for suspiciously thick brown envelopes to be thrown across surgery tables diminished' (p. 401).

Roy has a little more to say about the institutional pressures which subsequently bore down upon social democracy. By offering its core working class constituency material betterment and greater educational opportunity as a means to a more middle class lifestyle, social democratic parties including Labour risked undermining the basis of their own working-class support in the electorate, including among the trade unions. His discussion of the declining Clyde shipyards, UCS sit-in, the unsuccessful groping for better relationships between management and unions, and the enlightened industrial partnership approach of the Tory businessmen Iain Stewart and Hugh Stenhouse, bear upon this coming of the social-democratic crunch (pp. 289, 336-8, 346-8, 337-8, 426-44).

Such an analysis is not sustained however and the relationship between deteriorating industrial relations and economic 'decline' unexamined. Roy offers instead the

suggestion that Scotland was a ‘branch economy’ of the UK and, as such, offered no stimulus to the ‘native entrepreneurship’ necessary to economic success (pp. 242, 289). Although the book subsequently offers a characteristically idiosyncratic socio-cultural explanation for the ‘doomed’ attempts of governments to sustain Scotland’s loss-making manufacturing industries – the fascination which machines and machinery of all kinds held for the lowland Scots (man) could not be sustained when automation replaced the craftsman with the assembly line (pp. 490-1).

Britishness and Scottishness

Writers should write about what interests them and Roy’s interests do not lie in the post-war history of social democracy, a creed which, as Leszek Kolakowski put it, has ‘no prescription for the total salvation of mankind’ but ‘an obstinate will to erode by inches the conditions which produce avoidable suffering, oppression, hunger, wars, racial and national hatred, insatiable greed and vindictive envy’ (2). Nor is this academic history; anecdotal and impressionist rather than quantitative and comprehensive, the primary sources utilised are of a narrow range – contemporary newspapers, biography and autobiography, and the fruits of Roy’s personal encounters over the years with some of the public figures around whom his history is organised. ‘A life of Scotland’ is the book’s subtitle, an aspiration more commonly associated with biography, and one which further distances Roy from any claim to comprehensiveness.

Mutatis mutandis, the book’s constitutional-nationalist framework is simply not convincing as the basis for a post-war history of Scotland. Too much of the social-democratic story is lost; political economy is vanquished. The loss in historical understanding is considerable. It is also, I would argue, unnecessary. The imperative which drives the nationalist interpretation of history and gives it intellectual energy – namely the recovery of a distinctive Scotland apart from Britain – is misdirected. Scotland’s integration into the post-war social democratic state was not, as Roy suggests, assimilation – the ‘Britishing of the Scots’ did not threaten to overwhelm Scotland’s sense of itself as a nation. Britishness was in addition to, not instead of Scotland. Certainly, the admixture of these two (or more) identities has changed over time with Britishness stronger in some periods than others. But Scottishness has always remained at our identity’s core. Scots have always been Scots – or Irish.

The doyens of the Scottish Enlightenment coined the term ‘North Britons’ to describe themselves in the early years of union, Walter Scott’s tartan and bagpipes told a Whiggish story of Britain’s integration, and twentieth-century Scottish Unionist party

politicians such as Glasgow's Walter Elliot mounted staunch defences of the United Kingdom. But Smith, Hume and Ferguson were also Scots who taught at ancient and distinctively Scottish universities. Scott wrote repeatedly about Scotland and indeed espoused a politically deracinated and kitschy form of cultural nationalism. Walter Elliot was representative of the Glaswegians who populated his West End constituency.

Roy repeatedly criticises the SNP for its Anglophobia, Europhobia, right-wingery and general eccentricities across the post-war period (pp. 360-1, 381-5, 408, 483, 494-5, 515). Home Rule is the golden thread running through the book not 'independence'. All the more striking then, the conclusion of *The Invisible Spirit*: 'Scotland reverted to the place *ascribed* [my italics] for it in the union as an unthreatening backwater distinguished by the poor education, poor health and poor housing of its people' (p. 515). This is too close for comfort to the colonised/coloniser caricature of Scotland's relationship, cleaved to by a surprisingly large number of Scots, as Linda Colley has recently noted (Colley, 2014, 93).

The book's approach to the teaching of history in Scottish schools is in this vein too: 'The exclusion from the curriculum of all but a tokenistic smattering of Scottish history – a policy pursued by governments of both political persuasions – could not have been other than *wilful* [my italics] in the same way that the proscription of Gaelic in the schools of the Western Isles had been *wilful* [my italics]. In denying children an adequate knowledge of their own culture and identity, it asserted the relative insignificance of Scotland' (p. 514). A serious allegation to which Roy brings to bear worryingly little in the way of actual evidence, beyond the opinion of Lord Cooper, Scotland's senior judge – precisely the kind of establishment figure, let us remember, whom the book otherwise excoriates (p. 90; also pp. 92, 362).

The book offers glimpses of the contemporary nationalist imagination's 'othering' of England. John Junor, Scottish editor of the *Daily Express* is dispatched thus: 'He lived near Walton Health [sic] golf course in the Surrey Stockbroker belt, a destination which brought to mind O. H. Mavor's observation that the Scots who went to England became more English than the English themselves' (p. 122). The definition of England's essence as residing among Shires financiers will come as news to the forty million or so Englishmen and Englishwomen who do not live in the South East, or indeed the fifty million plus residents of England who are neither stockbrokers nor from Surrey. It will not come as news however to even the occasional reader of Iain MacWhirter's or Lesley Riddoch's output (3), or an Alex Salmond speech. London looms large in the nationalist imagination and in *The Invisible Spirit*

too. The aforementioned Mavor is greatly admired, not least for his insistence that Scots ought to work in Scotland' (p. 124). The TV presenter Mary Marquis less so – or at least her confession that she wanted to try and make a career in London and that she expected others felt likewise (p. 412).

The other side of England's 'othering' is Scotland represented as more liberal, left-wing and working-class than the rest of the UK. Roy writes that the Soviet invasion of Hungary evinced 'widespread sympathy for a working-class people, not dissimilar in temperament to the Scots' (p. 194). Of the characteristics of this similar temperament nothing is adduced. Teddy Taylor's success on Glasgow's South Side is explained away in terms of 'his ability to exploit the darker instincts of the urban working-class voter' (p. 408). *The Scotsman* newspaper's greater liberalism on social and economic issues is confidently asserted to have 'articulated Scottish feeling more faithfully' (p. 345). Scots doctors' hostility to the new NHS proceeded 'despite the supposedly more humane sympathies of the Scots' (p. 72). The question – whose supposition? – is not so much unanswered as unasked.

Likewise, Roy's satisfaction at the decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales in 1967 fails to explain why Scotland did not follow suit for another thirteen years (until Robin Cook MP successfully amended the law). The Kirk's social conservatism and its influence on Scottish attitudes – an issue to which the book otherwise devotes attention – was surely influential in explaining this disjuncture but goes unexamined; so too the attitudes of Scottish Catholicism (an institution which the book ignores almost entirely) (p. 345).

That Roy actually offers plenty further evidence to the contrary – a Scottish Tory majority in the 1955 general election, the true-blue Conservatism of the *Glasgow Herald*, Teddy Taylor, the tough line on law and order favoured by the Glasgow public, and Scots doctors opposed to the NHS – is beside the point. His defining of Scotland against an English 'other' is *a priori*.

Such are the contemporary nationalist resonances of Roy's post-war history, which 'others' England, vanquishes political economy in favour of the constitution, and dethrones class in favour of nation. These aspects of the book's character are illuminated by the following anecdote – or rather, illuminated by the service to which the author puts it. As a Scots Labour MP newly-elected in the Attlee landslide of 1945,

Coatbridge's Jean Mann, soon to be known as the housewives' champion, had some difficulty booking a berth on the sleeper to London for the first day of

the new parliament. There was a cancellation; she travelled first-class. 'I would have slept in the guard's van', she said. How would Scotland travel – first-class or in the guard's van? We were about to find out. (p. 38)

Jean Mann was the housewives' champion not just Scottish housewives' champion.

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References

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Notes

1. The title of Christopher Harvie's nationalist history of modern Scotland (1998).
2. I owe this reference to Peter A Russell: <http://planetpedro.wordpress.com/2013/05/14/leskjek-kolakowski-on-social-democracy/comment-page-1/>.
3. For an acute unpicking of Lesley Riddoch's 'othering' style of analysis see Peter A. Russell: <http://planetpedro.wordpress.com/category/scots-myths/>.