

Literature Review: Scotland and Post-Colonial Studies

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Recently, a debate as to whether or not Scotland could be classified as a colony has arisen among scholars, particularly among those within the field of Scottish literature and history. The introduction of *Within and Without Empire*, a collection of post-colonial essays on Scotland by Sassi and van Heignsbergen, provides a summary of the debate in its current form. On the one hand, the authors acknowledge that although it is fair to analyze contemporary Scottish writers from a postcolonial perspective, Scotland played a key role in building the British empire. Not all Scots benefitted equally from that empire-building, but the fact remains that, as a country, Scotland benefitted from Britain's participation in the Atlantic Slave Trade and its colonization of the Global South. The authors sum it up best with a quote from *The Empire Writes Back*: "While Scotland and Ireland and Wales were the first colonized by Britain, they were later complicit in its colonization making it difficult for the people to accept their identity as postcolonial" (6). In short, Scotland exists in an ambiguous position within postcolonial analysis.

Ireland, however, has frequently been accepted as a colony of Britain by post-colonial scholars, leading Jackson and Maley to justify establishing Scotland as a colony using a comparative analysis of Scottish and Irish literature. Jackson and Maley stake their claim on a discussion of hybridity and the Scottish language. The Irish, they point out, can write in Irish, English-Irish, or English, with English-Irish being a hybrid language resulting from colonization. A similar choice exists for Scots, thus forming the basis of Jackson and Maley's analysis. *Uneasy Subjects*, for which I located a scholarly book review to help me understand, makes a similar argument to Jackson and Maley, supporting a post-colonial reading of Gaelic poetry. The author of *Uneasy Subject*, Stroh—according to a book review by Malzahn—writes of the "marginalisation that entailed the erosion of 'a confident Gaelic identity' (52) through 'the growing hostility of the anglophone mainstream'" (56). In short, what Jackson, Maley, and Stroh agree upon is that the declining significance of the Gaelic language

and its hybridization with English make the case for an establishment of Scotland in post-colonial terms.

One of the biggest points of contention among scholars debating the “colonization” of Scotland is the distinction between Lowland and Highland Scots. In his critique of Jackson and Maley’s work, Liam Connell argues against the notion that the whole of Scotland is a British colony. Connell points out that Lowland Scots in fact abused and mistreated the Highland Scots; thus, to conjoin the two as one Scottish colonial experience is a mistake. The appropriation of the Highland Scottish experience by Lowland Scots was a 20th century invention to serve a nationalist end—Scotland’s independence. Connell writes, “Such revisionism is necessary because, in the absence of clear material evidence of Lowland colonization by England, colonial model of Scottish history depends upon a generalization of certain exceptional instances of Highland oppression as the normal experience of Scotland as a whole” (260). In summary, Connell is arguing that the only way in which to argue that Scotland is in fact a British colony, one must appropriate the experience of Gaelic Scots to Scotland as a whole. This reflects back to the introduction of *Within and Without Empire*, in which Sassi and van Heignsbergen point out that “the process of brutal ‘modernisation’ undergone by the Celtophone Highlands...implemented by forms of cultural repression or denigration...was closely related...to what was happening in other parts of the British Empire.” (5). Thus, although some scholars argue against the portrayal of Scotland as a colony, they will concede to the experience of some Scottish Highlanders bearing similarities to the colonization experience of the Global South.

Some writers step away from the argument of seeing Gaelic Scotland in post-colonialist terms altogether. In her essay “Gaelic Scotland—A Postcolonial Site?” Krause initially appears to support Jackson and Maley’s argument, writing of the marginalization of the Gaelic language in terms of hybridity, with English poems frequently appearing in Gaelic publications and the threat of English translations to Gaelic. However, at the end of her article, Krause switches gears, concluding that the hybridization of Gaelic only helped it grow as a language.

An overarching thread throughout the field is an agreement on Scotland’s strange position within the field of postcolonial studies, wherein it is at once arguably a colony and a colonizer. Some scholars, like Connell,

argue that its very status as a colonizer negates its status as a colony. Graeme McDonald, in his essay "Postcolonialism and Scottish studies" attempts to explore the ambiguity and nuance in Scotland's status as a colonizer and colonized. He uses James Robertson's *Joseph Knight* to epitomize this ambiguity. *Joseph Knight* is the story of "Scots forced into exile for anticolonial resistance in the Jacobite Rebellion [that] become part of the slave-owning plantocracy in eighteenth-century Jamaica" (128). Thus, the characters in the story are a metaphor for all of Scotland—at once abused by Britain, and yet themselves British abusers.

There is some confusion in the field between; it appears as though some scholars equate the study of Scotland through a post-colonial lens with the establishment of Scotland as a colony. For example, Krause's essay claims to reject a post-colonial analysis of Gaelic Scotland, but her essay is an of itself is a post-colonial exploration of Gaelic poetry. Thus, the line between questioning of Scotland's status as a colony and the legitimacy of using postcolonial studies to examine Scottish history needs clarification and elaboration.

Works Cited

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