INTRODUCTION

‘Tenshillingland’: Community and Commerce, Myth and Madness in the Modern Scottish Novel

Scott Lyall

Abstract

While ‘community’ as a concept has come under increasing attack in a neoliberal era, it has remained in Scotland a mythic, though not unexamined, signifier of resistance to perceived threats to national identity. Community, central to the Scottish novel since the Kailyard, continues to be a prevalent theme in the many important novels of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries explored here. Yet, while often disturbingly oppressive in tenor, many of these representations of community actually attack the myth of Scottish communalism to critique, and often expose as forms of madness, the conventional values of social class, capitalism, patriarchy, and religion.

Keywords


The Myth of Scottish Communalism

If there is an American Dream, ‘a narrative of considerable power which helps to define Americans to themselves, and they hope to other people’, what, asks David McCrone, is the ‘Scottish myth’? McCrone makes clear that by myth he does not mean ‘something which is manifestly false’. While he acknowledges

---

2 McCrone, Understanding Scotland, p. 91.
that myths ‘represent a collection of symbolic elements assembled to account for and validate a set of social institutions’, nonetheless neither is he using the term myth in entirely the same semiological sense as Barthes, who seeks the demythologisation of the everyday in order to expose as ideological what is often passed off as natural. For McCrone, myths resemble traditions in having a complex connection with the past which also informs how we make sense of the present. As such, myths are neither true or false, refutable or irrefutable in any empirical sense, but rather provide tacit credence for certain aspects of self-definition and stereotype in relation to communal or national belonging. In this regard, as Gerard Carruthers points out, ‘[w]e find such active myths as the “fighting Scot”, the “freedom-loving Scot”, the “primitive Scot”, the “puritanical Scot” and the “civilised Scot”’. However, ‘[i]n the Scottish myth', according to McCrone, ‘the central motif is the inherent egalitarianism of the Scots’.

The importance of Scottish egalitarianism to Scottish identity, society and politics has distinct implications for an understanding of what community might mean in Scotland and in representations of community in Scottish literature, in the same mythic terms outlined above. McCrone has been influenced in his thinking here by Stephen Maxwell, who in an essay entitled ‘Can Scotland’s Political Myths Be Broken?’ from 1976 – three years before the ‘No’ to Scottish devolution was returned in 1979 – argued that ‘[p]rovincial Scotland, denied the opportunity of defining its sense of national identity through the exercise of self-government, drugged itself with consoling myths’. According to Maxwell,

The idea that Scottish society is egalitarian is central to the myth of Scottish democracy. In its strong nationalist version, class division is held to be an alien importation from England. In the weaker version it describes the wider opportunity for social mobility in Scotland as illustrated in the ‘lad o’ pairs’ tradition.

Maxwell is suggesting that the Scots see themselves as an essentially classless and more democratic people than the English, with pernicious social stratification

---
5 McCrone, Understanding Scotland, p. 91.
7 Maxwell, The Case for Left Wing Nationalism, p. 17.