

**BURY MY HEART AT CULLODEN:
REFLECTIONS ON EMPIRE, IDENTITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE GAELIC DIASPORA
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This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.
Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940)

Nation-states. Intercontinental travel. Vaccinations. The internet. Transnational corporations. Pesticides. Venture capitalism. Virtually every aspect of our world has been utterly transformed since Columbus set sail in 1492, to the extent that we can hardly imagine what it was like before the birth of Western modernity. These developments did not come, however, free of cost. Some groups have been big winners over the last five centuries, but others have been big losers.

The invention of racism. The enslavement and sale of Africans. The genocide and dispossession of native peoples and the theft of their lands. The reduction of the natural world to quantified and monetized resources. Large-scale extinction of animals, ecosystems, languages and cultures. The death of God and the desacralisation of the universe. The corporate mediation of human relations. Anomie and alienation. This is some of the collateral damage that has come hand in hand with the creation of Western modernity, that in fact has been the necessary cost of doing business.

Since the 15th century Western imperial powers have attempted to dominate and exploit vast territories and their populations by claiming a totality of control and authority, erecting colonial foundations that strained to exert mastery over space, time and knowledge. In his book *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, Walter D. Mignolo explains his own surprise in realising that

hidden behind modernity was the agenda of coloniality; that coloniality was constitutive of modernity; that coloniality was the secret shame of the family, kept in the attic, out of the view of friends and family. ... there is no modernity without coloniality.

Whether the story we tell about the modern world and our role within it is a tale of triumph or woe depends a lot upon the factors that determine our place in the matrix of modernity and coloniality: the colour of our skin, the communities in which we are embedded and our historical consciousness. People who enjoy the privileges procured by the trans-Atlantic encounters of the last half-millennium are less likely to reflect upon the accompanying

¹ Note: All translations of Gaelic texts into English are my own.

historical injustices than those who are still paying its costs and are sorely aware of the debts and losses visited upon them and their ancestors.

It is natural for people to tell stories about the past which explain their ancestors' place and their own in it, but the duties of the scholar include separating out the values and assumptions of those who tell these stories at a later time – the standards and ideals that they valorise from those who actually lived through these experiences, and giving these experiences a broader context. Whose stories are told and whose remain silent? What kinds of achievements and struggles are celebrated and which feats remain unsung? Can we celebrate the triumph of one group when its prosperity was built upon the suffering and annihilation of others? Is it paradoxical to celebrate an ethnic group whose success was dependent upon adopting the identity and culture of another people?

The conventional narratives about the Scottish diaspora, and about Scottish participation in the creation of the modern world in general, are problematic, to say the least. As a speaker of Scottish Gaelic who has spent considerable effort in rescuing the cultural assets and achievements of Gaelic civilisation from oblivion, the way in which I reckon the profits and losses to the Highlands differs from many others. Scottish Gaels were amongst those peoples who were caught up in the maelstrom of modernity and empire and have been utterly transformed from what they were five centuries ago by forces beyond their control. Medieval Gaeldom was a sophisticated civilisation spanning Ireland and the Scottish Highlands and Western Isles, one that participated in many of the cultural achievements of Europe yet retained its own distinctive character and indigeneity. At the height of their power, the Lords of the Isles commanded as many fighting men as the King of Scotland himself, often recruited to fight for Irish kings against foreign occupation.

It is no coincidence that the year that the Genoan navigator led the *Niña*, the *Pinta* and the *Santa María* was also the last year that the MacDonald Lord of the Isles enjoyed any degree of self-determination. King James IV of Scotland was well aware of the aspirations of European kings to centralise as much of the power and authority in the realms they claimed as possible. The Spanish ambassador Pedro de Ayala reported that James spoke not only Latin, French, German, Flemish, Italian, and Spanish, but also 'the language of the savages who live in some parts of Scotland and in the isles', namely, Gaelic. He was the last king of Scotland to speak it, since future kings of Scotland and England (which were held by one and the same crown after 1603) did not think it worthy of their attention: their subjects were to speak the imperial language, English, or be treated as non-persons.

Rival kindreds and clan leaders quarreled, fought and battled to take up the mantle of leadership after the dissolution of the Lordship of the Isles, often resulting in further internal chaos and punishment from the central authorities. An ode of seventeen stanzas by one of the Lordship's scholars laments their fall from power, praising their social, political, intellectual and moral pre-eminence:

There is no joy without Clan Donald;
there is no strength without them;

the best clan in the world:
every good man was one of them. ...
In the front line of Clan Donald,
education was entrusted;
and in their rear-guard there was service
and honor and moral standards.

Gaels have looked back to the time of the Lordship as a Golden Age which recedes further into the distance. The English conquest and colonisation of Ireland, particularly the plantation of Ulster, was another crushing blow to all of Gaeldom. While there continued to be pockets of native political leadership and patronage for the Gaelic arts – the halls of particular chieftains or the enclaves of certain literary dynasties – these were increasingly fragmented and marginalised. For the anglocentric empire, the Gaels, who had been ‘Othered’ as inferior and barbaric savages since the 12th century, were a threat as long as they retained their language, culture and distinct identity.

The Gaelic intelligentsia of Scotland and Ireland rejoiced in 1745 at the prospects of regaining a royal Stewart king who was sensitive to Gaelic grievances and urged others to support the cause. While the Jacobite Risings certainly struck the chord of resistance and liberation for Highlanders, many clan leaders were already too invested in imperial endeavours to take the risks of siding with a perilous insurgence. The defeat of Jacobite forces on the field of Culloden on 16 April 1746, in the words of William Gillies, ‘became burned into the collective memory of Gaelic speakers everywhere, irrespective of religion or political persuasion’ and came to symbolise ‘the end of independent Gaelic action’.

Gaeldom was left exposed and vulnerable to an aggressively expansionist and hegemonic empire that intentionally privileged the English language and culture as the fundamental core of its identity and social ideals; those who conformed to its demands were rewarded, sometimes very richly, while those who didn’t were disenfranchised. Gaels could cling to symbols and sentiment – tartan, Highland Games, etc – at ritual times and places, but they were bereft of any serious cultural or political import. The main pillars of its elite culture were destroyed, but fragments of the Gaelic past were inherited and cherished by a few: those resilient enough to resist assimilation, and those who inhabited the geographical and social margins.

Not a few Highlanders in both Scotland and North America recalled these experiences of humiliation and subjugation as they attempted to understand the tremendous forces that had been unleashed against them. Some clearly saw their dispossession and scattering across the globe as the culmination of centuries of conflict. ‘The Highlands have become a desert since the ’45 Rising, when our customs changed and our weapons were put aside,’ said one poet in the late eighteenth century. Another asked,

Who has destroyed the Gaelic people?

Who has silenced the harp and pipe?

Where are herdsmen and warriors?
And the folk who farmed the fields?
English ways have destroyed us;
Every chieftain has pursued his own great opulence.

Iain MacCodruim of North Uist, in a song bidding farewell to emigrants bound for the Carolinas, describes the betrayal of the traditional social contract:

[The chieftains] are of the opinion
That you no longer belong to the soil ...
They have lost sight of every obligation and pledge
That they had with the men
Who reclaimed their land from their enemies.

The old Gaelic order was obliterated and subsequent generations experienced nothing less than a world turned upside down not of their own making, a ‘cosmological revolution’ to quote John MacInnes. Highlanders now faced difficult moral predicaments: should they be complicit junior partners in the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ design for world domination, or should they critique injustice and resist the efforts to co-opt them into imperial machinations? Should their recent experiences of conquest and oppression ally them with other colonised people, or should that humiliation drive them to validate themselves in the image of their new masters? In the wake of a self-reliant and self-determining Gaelic community, Britishness and whiteness offered Gaels new identities with which to identify and a new means of social and economic empowerment in the process – in fact, virtually the only means available to them, given the hegemonic hold of the British state. Collaboration empowered them.

The construction of ‘whiteness’ in North America generalised the racial superiority once claimed as the exclusive privilege of the Anglo-Saxon to others who would assimilate to their social, cultural and linguistic norms. In other words, while having the appropriate physical features helped to qualify an individual or group as an honorary Anglo-Saxon, the ‘racial dividends’ of whiteness could not be fully accessed without conforming to other aspects of Anglo-American culture, particularly the English language itself. In most of the United States, including where I was born and raised, ‘Anglo’ is used as a synonym for ‘white,’ which indicates the identity (or acquired identity) of the original advocates of the ideology of racialised privilege.

Once fully formulated, race was claimed to hold the key to understanding everything about human history and society: which ethnic groups were capable of or not suited for intellectual achievement, social privileges, and self-government. For nearly two centuries it seemed as though the sun would never set on the Anglo-Saxon’s global dominion, the obligatory burden of an inherently superior race. Thomas Jefferson wanted to depict Hengist and Horsa on the Great Seal of the United States on the assumption that it was from them that ‘we claim the honor of being descended, and whose political principles and form of government we have assumed’. The *Report on the Affairs of British North America*, written by the 1st Earl of Durham

in 1839 to determine the causes of the rebellions of 1836-7 and considered one of the most important documents in Canadian history, takes Anglo-Saxon manifest destiny for granted:

The English population, an immigrant and enterprising population, looked on the American Provinces as a vast field for settlement and speculation, and in the common spirit of the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of that continent, regarded it as the chief business of the Government, to promote, by all possible use of its legislative and administrative powers, the increase of population and the accumulation of property ... The language, the laws, the character of the North American Continent are English; and every race but the English (I apply this to all who speak the English language) appears there in a condition of inferiority. It is to elevate them from that inferiority that I desire to give to the Canadians our English character. I desire it for the sake of the educated classes, whom the distinction of language and manners keeps apart from the great Empire to which they belong.

The unspoken precedent for French compliance with English hegemony, and the aims of assimilating the subject population, was the conquest of Celtic peoples in the British Isles. The past and the future was determined, it was commonly argued, by the scientific principles of race; all else followed. *The Cyclopædia of Political Science, Political Economy, and the Political History of the United States* (1881) was one of many volumes to explain the ruination of the Celts as an inevitable consequence of their genetic inferiority:

The Celtic race, which formerly occupied all of Gaul and Great Britain, and a great part of the territories of Belgium and Helvetia, can not now be found anywhere in a pure state except in Armorica, or French Brittany, in Wales, in Scotland, particularly in the Highlands, in the Shetland and Hebrides islands, and finally, in Ireland. The domain of this valiant, imaginative, sensitive and adventurous race, once so extensive, is now reduced to this mere remnant of territory. The Celts are the most interesting and unfortunate of all the barbaric races. Their conquerors, exasperated by their stubborn resistance, never spared them, but always pitilessly tracked them, and exterminated them without mercy. This race owes its cruel destiny in part to its very qualities: its extreme sensitiveness often turned into harmful rage, imprudent, hasty hatred, and capricious sallies of contempt, while it on the other hand, easily engendered despair, discouragement and silent melancholy. This sensibility explains why the Celts have never been able, despite their valor, to preserve their independence, and why, after having lost it, they have never been able to cause their masters to bid them welcome, or to make their subjection the starting point of a new destiny.

Even as late as 1901 the book *The American Negro: What He Was, What He Is, and What He May Become* asserted that it was inevitable that African and Celt alike be ruled by others.

It is an observed fact that negro and Celtic leadership is susceptible to the weakness of ungovernable desire; that both acknowledge but slight amenability to wholesome restraint; and that, in the case of each, inconsiderate zeal has wrought irreparable injury to the race which it represents.

The tendency to categorise all of the peoples of the British Isles as Anglo-Saxon regardless of the actual ethnic identity of the people themselves was galling to some people of Celtic origin. As the editor of the *Scottish-American Journal* grumbled in 1865:

Everywhere you go you are stunned and abashed by this all-pervading Anglo-Saxon element. If your child fires a pop-gun, some pedagogue drums it into his credulous and innocent ear that it is

an Anglo-Saxon invention, although the Chinese probably invented it about the time of Confucius. If a colony of Inverness Highlanders and Connaught Irishmen clear a settlement in the back woods, it is a specimen of Anglo-Saxon energy and enterprise.

However, given the popular conviction of English racial superiority, some people of Highland descent were absolutely falling over themselves to emphasise the racial affinity, and even equivalence, between Celts (or at least Scottish Gaels) and Anglo-Saxons, and to stress their mutual distance from the subject races. The fact that they needed to belabour these points is telling in itself, for Gaels were by no means considered unquestionably to share the same racial category as Anglo-Saxons until well into the 20th century. This was as true in other parts of the British Empire as it was in the United States. Witness, for example, North Carolina governor Angus McLean unveiling a monument in 1928 to the Highland immigrants of the Cape Fear and labelling them ‘a branch of the great Anglo-Saxon family’.

It is easy to forgot the animosity once reserved for the Irish on account of their violent opposition to English governance and the efforts of many Scots to create artificial distinctions between the two branches of Gaeldom via the malleable myth of race. In a text from Scotland reprinted in the *Scottish-American Journal* in 1892, for example, a contemporary ‘authority’ claimed that

there is not one drop of Celtic blood in the veins of Scottish Highlanders. The people of Ireland have Celtic blood rushing wildly in their veins. The people of Wales have it in a less fervid form. The people of the Isle of Man, the Sheriff thinks, have none of it. The people who live in Cornwall are supposed to have Celtic blood. “It cannot be the case,” says Sheriff McKechnie, “because they are bold, powerful, generous and just. No man of Celtic blood can understand the idea of justice. I have no name for the blood that runs in the veins of Scottish Highlanders. I call it Highland blood.”

One of the most important themes of the Highland diaspora – one that has been left almost completely unexplored – is how Gaels who were convinced of the superiority of the English language and culture, who gained privilege and power in its power structures, who rejected their ancestral language and culture, felt that other groups needed to assimilate as well ‘for their own good’. This was a common refrain I heard among people of Gaelic ancestry in Nova Scotia from families that had stopped transmitting the language in the previous two or three generations. Their conformity to the expectations of anglophone Canadian (or British) culture meant that they expected others (Acadians, First Nations, etc.) to capitulate as well, and when they rose to positions of power and authority – whether as school-teacher, civil servant or member of Parliament – they often imposed the same sacrifice on others.

One of the most striking illustrations of the Highland deference to English supremacy in North America comes from a speech given by Alexander McKenzie in the New Brunswick legislature in 1877 in opposition to a proposition that an official document be translated into French.

The manifest destiny of the English is that they shall predominate, because of their association with the Scotch, and if any language is to be particularly fostered it is that of those who gave and preserved these colonies to the British Crown. We, as Scotsmen, however, do not ask for legislative enactments, nor do we beg for subsidies to maintain our language, for it is a gem to be displayed

only on great occasions, and it is fitting only for the expression of great things. The English language is destined to be the language of the world – the language of commerce – and where there is a Frenchman who aspires to honor and enlightenment, though he may not attain to Gaelic, he will learn English. I was surprised a while ago to hear an hon[ourable] member say the Scotch was no language. It was a language before the French or English was ever thought of, and that gentleman, himself a Celt, should feel no pride in arguing against the language of his remote forefathers in favor of another and an alien tongue. To the victors belong the spoils. The British were the victors in this country, and those who accepted the conquerors' protection, and the free citizenship they now enjoy under the British flag, should also accept the English language.

The insincere pride in Gaelic as a 'gem to be displayed only on great occasions' contrasts with the efforts of Francophones to maintain their language as a living entity embodying a distinct identity; the relegation of Gaelic to symbolic purposes for ritual occasions – the essence of Highlandism – sublimated cultural energies and resources into the construction of tartan façades and pageantry stripped of their oppositional potential.

Resisting pervasive social pressures to conform to anglocentric norms and to adopt anglocentric prejudices is an exhausting task, but there were and are Gaels who, for no tangible material gain to themselves, have resisted assimilation, critiqued colonialism, sided with other subjugated peoples, and cherished their mother tongue for as long as they could. I have often chosen to find and celebrate the stories of those who did express and act on their empathy for the oppressed, exposed the brutal killing machine that masqueraded as the pinnacle of human superiority, and oppose its hegemonic hold. These are stories well worth remembering and understanding, even if they are only part of a bigger picture, particularly because they help to explain why the Gaelic language and culture still exist, despite centuries of neglect and persecution.

One of the most interesting North American Gaels who spoke out against racism and British imperialism was Aonghas MacAoidh of Providence, Rhode Island, a frequent correspondent to the all-Gaelic newspaper *Mac-Talla* (published in Cape Breton 1892-1904). In a long letter to the editor in 1898, MacAoidh made a direct connection between colonisation of Gaeldom and Native America, and the injustices done on both sides of the Atlantic:

Some will say that it is harsh to claim that England is the most guilty of all Christian kingdoms in the world – it is certainly harsh to say – but it is the honest truth. When the Puritans of England reached the mainland of America, they bent their knee, making an offering of thanksgiving to the One who delivered them safely through the waves of the Atlantic; they were hardly concluded with their offering of thanks before they raised their swords and began to kill and murder innocent people ... The English Puritans spilt enough innocent blood in New England to float a small fleet of ships. Let us return to our own country. Who was spilling the innocent blood of Scotland? Scotland was only protecting its freedom and its culture, but England was covering it in innocent blood until they failed to conquer it. ... Since the day that the blood of the MacDonalds dried up in the veins of the nobility, what has happened to the Gaels but to be massacred, to be oppressed, and to be exiled, like the moor-hen before the hunter. The Anglo-French Stewarts, and the Frenchified Campbells, never gave the Gaels any rest or respite until they cleared out every glen, strath, field, and beautiful fertile sheltering spot that was worthy of being inhabited in the Scottish Highlands.

There are numerous comments about Native Americans in the pages of *Mac-Talla*, usually of a sympathetic nature: observations about their customs, concerns about their conditions and numbers, and notes about the natives who spoke Gaelic. Discussing the Spanish-American War in a later issue of *Mac-Talla*, the editor remarks that MacAoidh's letter

tells some facts that will displease those who do not like Britain denigrated with the truth. There is a huge difference between the way in which Britain, Spain and the United States have dealt with American Indians. Britain began to set the Indians against each other and fight each other until it destroyed, I can say entirely, the stalwart tribes along the Atlantic and in the Great Lakes until there were only a few here and there, such as the Mi'kmaw at the end of Whycocomagh Bay, and the rest of them were cleared to the North-west. The States followed the example they were given by Britain so that today there is no more than a total population of 500,000 Indians in North America outside of Mexico. ... I won't deny that the Spanish mistreated the Indians as badly as Britain and the States, but they didn't wipe them out of existence ...

There are also tantalising fragments of the interest that Native Americans had in Gaelic culture and custom. When a Highland regiment arrived in the British colonies in the Seven Years' War (1756-63), for example, it was reported: 'On the march to Albany, the Indians flocked from all quarters to see the strangers, who, they believed, were of the same extraction as themselves, and therefore received them as brothers.' Some natives admired Highland clothing and adapted the sporran and Glengarry bonnet for their own use, ornamenting them with quillwork.

During the American Civil War, a well-read native engaged a soldier named William Watson eagerly in conversation about Walter Scott's 'Lady of the Lake' upon learning that his guest was originally from Scotland:

He compared the Gaels to the Indians, and the Saxons to the whites in America, and quoting several passages, drew some very fair comparisons. ... He then went on, by way of conversation, to explain to them the story, and quoting arguments advanced by Roderick in favour of the Gaels as analogous to what might be advanced in favour of the Indians.

The travelogue of Patrick Campbell in British North America in 1792 explicitly draws parallels between the Gaels and the Mohawk, especially upon his visit with Captain Joseph Brant: when Campbell makes a speech to the natives, he calls Gaelic 'the Indian language of my country'; the men dance Indian war dances and Scotch reels in succession; when Brant expresses his concern about the damnation of the souls of his ancestors who could not receive Christian baptism, Campbell easily makes the connection to medieval Gaelic literature on the same theme. The Highland sojourner makes a positive assessment of the Mohawk children of Sir William Johnson – the Anglo-Irish Superintendent of Indian Affairs who had created a virtual fiefdom for himself and a man who was very conscious of his Gaelic ancestry – which contrasts later racialised perceptions:

To cross the breed of every species of creatures is deemed an advantage, but I am convinced it can be to none more than to the human species; as I do not remember to have seen an instance where a white man and an Indian woman did not produce handsome and well looking children: thousands of examples of this kind might be given.

The prominent role of Highlanders in the fur trade and backwoods settlements generally brought them into frequent contact with native peoples. While relations were often exploitive, hostile and opportunistic, they were sometimes also symbiotic, genial and enduring. I have been surprised at the number of times I have met natives who were ready to tell me anecdotes about Gaelic-speaking family members and ancestors. When we take account of the Gaelic diaspora in North America, we have to remember that many people ordinarily classified as ‘African American’ and ‘Native American’ have as much of a right to claim and celebrate their Gaelic heritage as their ‘white’ relations.

With our age’s preoccupations with race and material wealth, it is perhaps not surprising that there has been so little effort to account for issues of language and culture in understanding and explicating the Gaelic experience, but this is the ‘dark matter’ too often missing in scholarly equations which gives gravity and cohesive explanatory power to the entire narrative.

Regardless of the privileges that may have accrued to individual Highlanders for their participation in imperial endeavours – and these could be significant – the Gaelic language was not given official status or an institutional means of development, Highland territories were not repopulated, and the culture and language of Gaels were not treated as equally valid to that of anglophones in their own homeland. In other words, Highland participation in empire reinforced anglocentric hegemony and undermined native culture. Only in the last generation has there been any serious attempt to address this legacy of ethnocide.

The experience of Gaelic emigrants – whether voluntary or involuntary – embodies complex stories that cannot be easily generalised or glorified, especially when examined through the lenses of coloniality and social justice. What is clear, however, is that the language and culture which made diasporic Gaels who they were is highly endangered both in its last remaining North American immigrant community and in its own homeland. That is not an accident of history. To what degree Gaeldom will be able to recover from these last centuries of subjugation and dispossession cannot be predicted, but surely those in the Highland diaspora – and even those who embrace Gaelic culture despite a lack of ancestral connection – can make contributions to this revitalisation, and so much the better if it helps them become aware of, and engage with, the legacies of empire and colonisation which are inseparable from the creation of ‘Western modernity’.

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