



Riach, A. (2016) Scotland: The Promised Land, Part I: Unanswered questions, unfulfilled potential ... *National*, 2016, 29 July.

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Deposited on: 30 November 2017

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Scotland: The Promised Land (Part 1 of 2)

Alan Riach (Friday 29 July 2016)

Readers of The National will be familiar with the political bias of mass media news reporting in Scotland. John Robertson has written extensively online providing scholarly examinations of how this has worked over recent years, his conclusions a result of his own meticulous research. He has also written appropriately scathing exposés of the suspect credentials of certain TV “presenters” to comment upon matters of history and the arts. (Check out: <http://newsnet.scot/archive/flawed-fake-history-boys-bbc/>) Here, I want to consider another kind of television.

Over the course of three weeks in March and April 2016, BBC 2 Scotland broadcast a series of programmes entitled “Scotland: The Promised Land”, produced and directed by Colin Murray, with research by Nadine Lee, Amy Cameron and Joanna Taylor. The commissioning executive producer was David Harron and the executive producer Rachel Bell. They’re available to purchase from BBC Store and for a while since transmission, were in the public domain on the BBC iplayer. Technology has its uses. I think these three programmes were that rarest of things: excellent television. I’d like to explain why.

The programmes themselves are history now. I want to look back and think about them as a single, coherent “literary” text, a multi-faceted, carefully-researched construction of meaning, where implications, suggestions, questions without answers, linger and stay. Three very different programmes, each was focused on Scotland in the 1920s, in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. Each was themed in a different way, each of them complementary, each rising from, reflecting on, and nourishing the others, in ways I can’t remember any series like this doing before now.

First, cards on the table: I was invited to take part in the third episode and became “Programme Consultant”. Normally, modesty would insist I say nothing in the wake of the shows and let them do their job for themselves. But since the series ended, they’ve stayed in my mind as a single, coherent enquiry, and when I asked myself what was so impressive about them, I began to make notes that I think are worth pausing on for a bit longer than most TV reviews allow.

Unanswered questions and unfulfilled potential are what the series was about, far more than predictable securities and propaganda-biased definitions. That’s the essential thing. These were TV programmes in which this strange message was coming across: a lot more is going on under the surface than what you ever see on the screen. Unlike most news reporting, these programmes were offering an interpretation, in which selectivity was clearly shown to be an essential part of their construction.

There was not a “celebrity” in sight. No “personality” taking us through the locations, tossing hair or cracking jokes, no kowtowing to “celebrity culture”. The voice-over narration by the actor Ken Stott was restrained, sometimes sounding tough in recognition of what was

being shown, sometimes permitting itself a little ironic humour at things – but never a trace of condescension, never an insinuated implication of superiority. Always an understated sense that the narrator’s voice was as human and mortal as any of the people we would meet in the programmes, and as each of us watching them is. What was consistently in focus was the exposition of the historical data, what happened to real people in real places, what the events of their lives arose from, and what they led to: the consequences for us, nearly a century later.

Three programmes: (1) “The Birth of Modern Scotland”; (2) “Homes for Highland Heroes”; (3) “The Cultural Revolution”. Each one was determined by the question, “What happened in the immediate aftermath of the First World War?” Each was constructed from documentary news footage of film, photographs and records from the era; each also incorporated on-location film of people in our own time; each had contributions by a range of contemporary scholars in different fields of expertise, and by teachers, curators of archives, librarians, offering comment, introducing books, newspapers, preserved artefacts, objects, memorabilia, communicating their knowledge to others, younger generations, curious citizens. The value of these educational workers, their beneficiaries and the benefits that might be bestowed by such knowledge and understanding, sustained the series. But the focus was not on them but on what they were addressing: the people, the economy, the forces moving in this axial period of Scotland’s history.

Take them in turn:

The series began with “The Birth of Modern Scotland” (broadcast 23 March): “In late November 1918, in towns across Scotland, crowds of well-wishers gathered to welcome their troops as they began to arrive home from the horrors of war. The ‘war to end all wars’ had left 100,000 of their comrades dead. No town, village or home was untouched. These soldiers came from all classes, all walks of life.” As Dr Catriona MacDonald of Glasgow University put it, “These were not professional soldiers, these were citizens in uniform” and so, if this had been a “people’s war” it had to be “a people’s peace”. As we hear these words, we see contemporary film of returning soldiers, marching one-legged on crutches in their hundreds, eye-patched, bandaged, in hospital beds, and then film of working people in industrial cityscapes, looking around, at us and at each other. One month after the war ended, in December 1918, all men over 21 and women over 30 were allowed to vote for the first time. Meanwhile “in Ireland, a nationalist rising developed into a full-blown war of independence and in Russia the revolution was threatening to spread west.” When a political demonstration in Glasgow turned into a riot, tanks were sent onto the streets. Order was reinstated. But “under the surface” things were building.

The war had cost money. There were to be public expenditure cuts. Overcrowding, malnutrition and high infant mortality were rife. Professor Richard Finlay of Strathclyde University (Programme Consultant) commented that by 1922, it was increasingly realised that this was not “a land for heroes”. Rhona Rodger of Dundee’s McManus Gallery and Museum showed the register photographs of inebriates and down-and-outs: portrait pictures of hard, damaged, brutalised working-class women and men. The visual impact was

shocking. In the 1922 Dundee election, working-class and ex-service men and war widows all were ready to vote. Dr Billy Kenefick of Dundee University remarked upon the candidates: Winston Churchill of the ruling Liberal Party, in post, but disdaining women's rights and opposed by the working-class and Irish constituents; Dundee-born Edwin Scrymgeour, independent Christian, socialist, pacifist and prohibitionist; Willie Gallacher, revolutionary communist, recently returned from meeting Lenin; Edmond Morrel for the Labour Party. Scrymgeour won overwhelmingly.

But Labour were on the up, because they were talking class, and now class mattered. The Red Clydesiders, James Maxton and John Wheatley among them, went to London as parliamentary representatives. We see film and photos of them. The leader of the Labour Party, Ramsay Macdonald, illegitimate son of Lossiemouth farmworkers, had the problem of reconciling the seemingly-wild behaviour of the Labour members with the respectability of the parliament in which he wanted to preside. Cut to the present: Macdonald's granddaughter takes us around her house, reminiscing. Scenes of contemporary Lossiemouth. In 1924, the Conservative government fell and Macdonald was PM. Labour was in power for the first time. The question is now pressing: how to deliver a better society? And the other question: how to demonstrate parliamentary credibility? "But the forces of conservatism were mustering and strange conspiracies were forming." Dr Gill Bennet of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office gives details of the "Zinoviev letter", a forged secret document passed by British Intelligence to the Daily Mail, published just days before the election. The effect was to incite distrust of Labour and bring down the Labour government. The Conservatives, class warriors, traditionalists, were back in.

If there was a red Clydeside there was obviously a blue Clydeside too. Rebecca Quinton of the Burrell Collection, Glasgow Museums, shows us some of the most fashionable and expensive dresses (each one-of-a-kind, the bill to be sent to the husband) that would have been worn by fashionable wealthy women of Glasgow, perhaps to be glimpsed by people in the street as such a woman stepped from taxi to venue. Film from the era shows just this. The Conservatives, known as the Scottish Unionist Party, are returned in the wealthy South Side of Glasgow, commented on by journalist David Torrance. John Gilmour, landed gentry, Orangeman, scourge of the socialist, definitive imperialist is appointed Scottish secretary. His descendants look at his campaign medals and reminisce. Monuments to the war dead are unveiled all over the country, confirming a vision of a conservative, patriotic, unionist Scotland. Faith (Protestantism), monarchy and empire were essential to this form of Scottishness. But, as the decade wore on, Catholics were increasingly a significant component in Scottish industrial life, and anti-Catholic sectarianism was growing too. Professor Enda Delaney of Edinburgh University looks at the poisonous tract held in the Scottish Records Office called "The Menace of the Irish Race to Our Scottish Nation", written by "bigot-in-chief" Reverend John White, emphasising the power of the Kirk in 1920s Scotland. Scotland's economy collapsed, wages were cut, the General Strike approached because of the decline of 19th-century industries, coal, steel, ships, locomotives. London drew Scotland closer. Gilmour became Secretary of State for Scotland. We see film

of him visiting St Andrews to play golf, but not welcomed by the working people of Fife, unemployed miners confronting the aristocrat on the fairway.

In 1928, equal franchise for women at the age of 21 was established. This was called “The Flapper Vote” but most women were not of the bright-young-things “flapper” class. Conditions of deprivation and physical debility were common. Dr Lesley Hall of the Wellcome Library shows various books and pamphlets providing information about contraception from the era. The underlying sense is that the lives of women – motherhood, working and social life – were as vulnerable, dangerous and threatened as those of men in mines or any hard industries. We see film of Jenny Lee, a miner’s daughter from Lochgelly in Fife, who stood up for women’s rights and class justice, was voted into power at the age of 24 in the mining constituency of Shotts in central Lanarkshire, and went to Westminster. Her biographer, Baroness Patricia Hollis, explains her story, her choosing her side, beautiful, argumentative, sexually uninhibited, a brilliant orator, for a while she combined film-star glamour with working-class solidarity. In 1929, the equal representation act ensured votes for all women over the age of 21. In the election, Labour and Jenny Lee were voted back into power. But the outcome is salutary: Jenny seduced, and was seduced by, Westminster. Abandoning her ties with Shotts, she settled in England. Labour parliamentarians representing Scotland were compromised in London.

But in the 1929 election, something new happened. Two candidates stood for a fringe party that would set itself against Westminster, the National Party of Scotland (established 1928), and they won between them just 3,000 votes; five years later, it would become the SNP. “Not only was a new kind of nationalism stirring, but the once all-powerful Liberals were eclipsed, never to be a dominant force in Scotland again; the Labour Party had become electable, but a deep Conservatism had also been revealed. Crucially, though, the future of the country was in the hands of its people, regardless of their sex or class...”

And “these inter-war years also saw the birth of a new story for Scotland as seeds of change were sown that would take root deep in British political thinking.”

The first programme, then, set the scene with hard data and historical reference, documentary film and photographs from the era. The focus was industrial Scotland and political representation. The visual impact was powerful, indeed. But if the main centres of Scotland’s population were the industrial cities depicted, especially Glasgow and Dundee, there is more to Scotland than its people and their economic conditions. There are vast stretches of depopulated wilderness, territories where even the small towns and villages had been disproportionately affected by the “Great War”. This brings us to the second programme, which we’ll come back to next week.