

‘We’re just big bullies ...’

Gregory Burke’s *Black Watch*

By David Archibald

It seems almost disloyal, traitorous even, to voice critique of the National Theatre of Scotland’s flagship production, *Black Watch*. Based partly on interviews with former members of the eponymous Highland regiment who recently served in Iraq, it was the undisputed hit of the 2006 Edinburgh International Festival Fringe picking up a rake of five-star reviews and theatre awards on both sides of the border. The Scottish press reported its successful 2007 US tour in terms usually reserved for national sporting champions: *Black Watch* appears to be firm favourite in the ‘most successful Scottish play of all time’ competition. Praised highly by Alex Salmond, the new SNP Government mounted two Gala productions to mark the opening of the new Scottish parliamentary session.

Consequently, *Black Watch* now bears its own burden of representation: it is not simply a Scottish play about Iraq; it is the Scottish play about Iraq. But despite the seemingly universal praise that *Black Watch* has received, its politics are deeply problematic.

Let’s start with history. History is to society what memory is to the individual. In *Black Watch* the two are fused together as the soldiers’ stories are collected, ordered and placed within a broader historical narrative – ‘The Golden Thread’. As the soldiers discuss their familial connections to the regiment with a fictional writer who interviews them, there is the following exchange:

Writer: So the history’s important?

Granty: They drum it intay you fay the first day.

Roscco: Fucking non-fucking stop.

Cammy: That’s what a regiment is ay? It’s history. The Golden Thread. That’s what the old timers go on about. It’s what connects the past, the present, the future ... (p. 25)¹

There are moments when the soldiers do undercut the monumentalising narrative:

Writer: Is that why your granddad joined?

Cammy: I dinnay ken.

Roscco: He was probably just a fucking idiot tay?

Granty: He’s fay a long line ay idiots. (p. 25)

But the general thrust is one that is at ease with the official Golden Thread mythology. In one of the theatrical highlights of the piece, Cammy stands, centre stage, a strip of red carpet placed beneath his feet. In a process reminiscent of a catwalk fashion parade, he is then dressed in the changing uniform of the regiment going back three centuries, from past to present. While this takes place, Cammy narrates a history of the *Black Watch* that starts in 1715 in Scotland and encompasses Culloden, The American War of Independence, France, Egypt, Portugal, Spain,

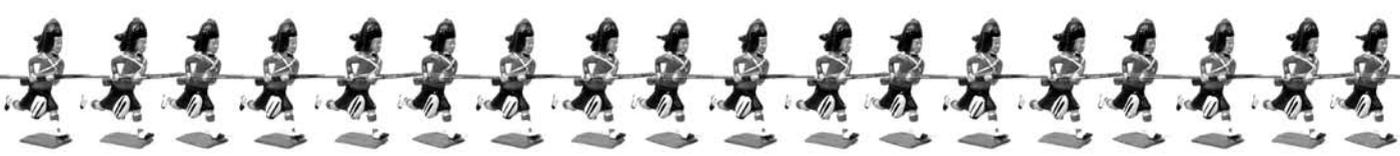
Flanders, The Crimean War, The Boer War, The First World War, The Second World War, Burma, Korea, Africa, Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia. ‘Here we are. Again,’ he concludes (p. 33).

Cammy alludes to the regiment’s problematic formative years, but not in any detail. The *Black Watch* has been, to use Engels’ phrase, a perfect example of one of the ‘armed bodies of men in defence of private property’, deployed, primarily, for reasons of economy. Look at the early formation of the regiment: Archibald K. Murray points out in his 1862 *History of the Scottish Regiments in the British Army*, that the *Black Watch*, or ‘Freiceadan Dhu’, were assembled following the 1715 Jacobite rebellion and deployed in the ‘more troubled districts of the Highlands ... for maintaining order and preventing any sudden rising, as well as for the protection of property in those lawless times.’ He continues, ‘[t]hey



THE BLACK WATCH AT THE STOPPING OF CULLODEN





were mostly composed of the sons of the landed gentry, as the Government felt that care was necessary, especially in this their first experiment, in selecting individuals who had something at stake in the common country'.² The only Highlanders permitted to wear Highland dress under the post-Culloden 1746 Disarming Act,³ in November 2007 the Black Watch, now known as 3rd Battalion, Royal Regiment of Scotland (3 SCOTS), announced a move to a new HQ at Fort George at Ardersier, near Inverness: appropriately enough it was built in 1746 to assist in the suppression of any further Jacobite risings.

Well, perhaps that's simply the distant past; what of the regiment's noble foreign excursions? Historical understanding is dependent on the construction of the causal development of events over time, but Cammy's chronology has no explanatory power, containing, as it does, only a few passing references to *why* the Black Watch ventured abroad – in Egypt and Portugal they fought the French, alluding to conflict between colonial powers, and in Kenya, where they were sent 't'ay crush the Mau Mau rebels' (p. 33). But there is one glaring omission from Cammy's list: Ireland.

The history of the Black Watch in Ireland is both long (going back to the early 18th-century) and Troubles(ome) – until recently they were based in Holywood Barracks in Belfast and tours to the US by the Black Watch pipe band are picketed regularly by Irish groups. It seems inconceivable that Ireland could have been simply forgotten in the production process: perhaps it was; regardless, its erasure allows a more acceptable, easily consumable, version of The Golden Thread to be presented. Aside from Ireland, what about further afoot? There has never been a compassionate imperialism, but Britain's role in Kenya is one that is drenched in blood. During the Mau Mau uprising in the 1950s the British army established concentration camps which housed anything up to 1.5 million people: mass hangings, mutilation and murder were routine⁴. Yet, from Gordon Brown down, there is simple

denial about the atrocities committed during Britain's imperial past.

There are moments in the play which do disrupt the official history:

Cammy: And people's minds are made up about the war that's on the now ay? They are. It's no right. It's illegal. We're just big bullies. Well we'll need to get fucking used t'ay it. Bullying's the fucking job. That's what you have a fucking army for. (p. 4)

Later, as the soldiers watch a four-hour long air strike on fleeing Iraqis, there's the following exchange.



Cammy: This isnay fucking fighting. This is just plain old-fashioned bullying like.

Rosco: It's good fun, though.

Cammy: Do you think?

Rosco: Aye. It's good to be the bully. (p. 40)

And, finally, when the soldiers discuss the imbalance in military equipment between the UK and Iraqi fighters:

Cammy: Like I say, way the difference in kit. After a while, it's more bullying than fighting ay.

Stewarty: You dinnay join up tae bully cunts day you?

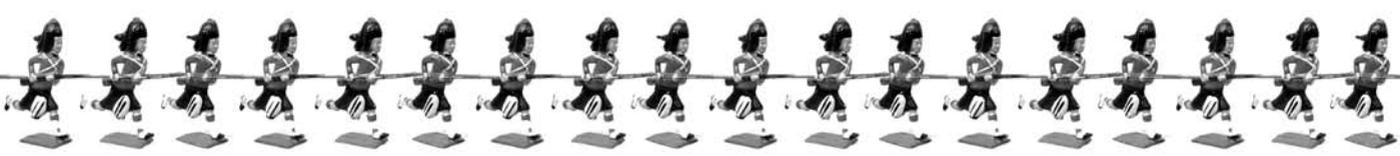
Rosco: Bullying's the job.

Granty: It's no' the reason you want t'ay be in the army, though.

Cammy: It's a buzz, you're in a war ay, but you're no really doing the job you're trained for but it's no like they're a massive threat t'ay you or t'ay your country, you're no defending your country. We're invading their country and fucking their day up. (p. 48-9)

So there is space, if not to construct an alternative history, then at least to read the one that is presented against the grain; nevertheless, the historical narrative that is privileged is the official one, the myth of 'The Golden Thread'. Henry Kissinger observed, rather shrewdly, that 'history is the memory of states'. *Black Watch* slots unproblematically into an official (Scottish) state version of the past. It has issues with Iraq,





but not with the previous three centuries of imperial subjugation.

Black Watch presents Britain's involvement in Iraq as an aberration in a 300-year history: the officer states, 'It takes three hundred years to build an army that's admired and respected around the world. But it only takes three years pissing about in the desert in the biggest Western foreign policy disaster ever to fuck it up completely.' (p. 71) Britain's involvement in Iraq is a disaster; unfortunately, it is not an aberration. Alan Greenspan, former head of the US Federal Reserve, writes in his latest book, *The Age of Turbulence: Adventures in a New World*, 'I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the

Iraq war is largely about oil.⁵ It may have been a miscalculation on the part of the US and the UK to invade Iraq, but the *raison d'être* for the invasion is the *raison d'être* for the countless invasions that the Black Watch has participated in over the last three centuries.

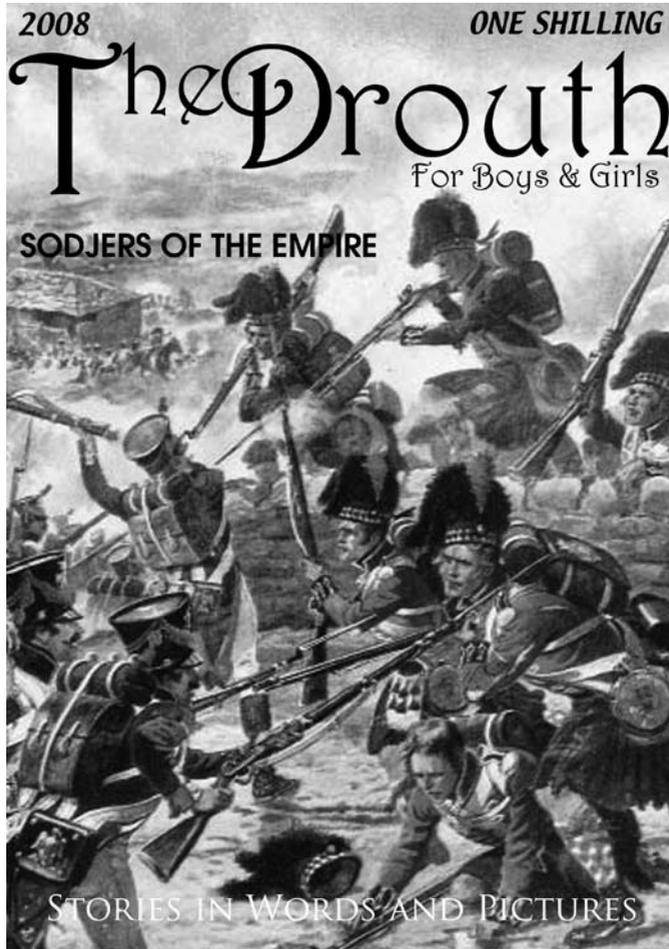
Yet it's surely a mark of the immaturity of political debate that Scotland's role in Britain's imperial past is marginalised. The costume of the Scottish, or in this case, Highland soldier is very effective in obfuscating its role, creating, as it does, an effective distance, both geographically and politically from the scene of the crime, thus

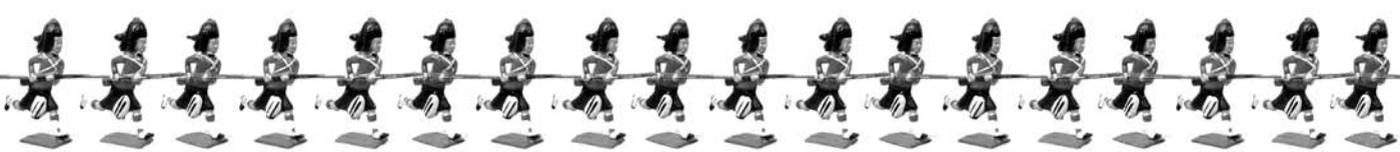
the Highland soldier appears to stand both inside and outside Empire⁶ Spiers observes that, in the 19th-century, 'Highlanders continued to provide excellent material for battle-painters and the popular art market. Lady Butler delighted in making Highlanders the subject of her paintings:

"these splendid troops," she wrote, were "so essentially pictorial"⁷ But there's more at stake than aesthetics. Cammy's perfectly choreographed fashion parade both explores the appropriation and constructed nature of Highland dress by British imperialism, whilst simultaneously becoming complicit in the fetishisation of the Highland soldier that the British Empire excels in.

In an essay commissioned by NTS, the novelist Alice Miller writes,

'[i]t is good to see political theatre reviving in Scotland. *Black Watch* is political theatre – and art – at its best: energetic, powerful, questioning, moving, complex, subtle, truthful, with no easy answers to offer. It portrays people who live political decisions in their flesh, in their blood, in their bones.⁸ 173 British soldiers have died since the invasion of Iraq, 9 from the Black Watch.⁹ On 17 September 2007, Opinion Research Business estimated that 1.2 million Iraqis had been killed, lending credence to the *Lancet* survey published in October 2006, which suggested that 650,000 Iraqis had died since the war started. Of course the soldiers' stories





demand to be heard, but what of the voice of a million dead Iraqis? Writer, Gregory Burke, says, 'I can't write for an Iraqi: that's up to Iraqis to write about their experience of this war. And the attitude of saying, "Oh, let me write an Iraqi voice in this and how terrible they must be feeling about what we've done to them", is exactly the same attitude that makes you invade their country in the first place to try to tell them how to run it.' In the play there is an exchange between the writer who collects the soldiers' stories, and Stewarty:

Writer: Did you have much contact with Iraqis?

Stewarty: I thought you said you were interested in us? I thought it was about our story?

Writer: You didn't know any Iraqis?

Stewarty: What the fuck have the Iraqis got tay fucking day way anything? (p. 46)

Contrast this parochialism with the approach presented in *Battle for Haditha* (Broomfield, UK, 2006), which deals with the massacre of 24 Iraqis by US Marines on 19 November 2005. The film is framed by the actions of the US soldiers, striving to offer an explanation for the killings, but crucial segments of *Battle for Haditha* are told from the perspective of both Iraqi fighters and civilians. Having interviewed Iraqis and US Marines, Broomfield travels to the Middle East to make the film and expresses a desire 'to bring empathy to all of the people of the war.'¹⁰ It is an empathy posted missing in *Black Watch*. In one notable scene, six soldiers discuss the actions of three of their colleagues and an unnamed Iraqi translator who are stopping and searching vehicles and who appear to have found something in a car.

Granty: 'I hope it's porn.'

The stage directions read as follows: They all laugh. There is a massive explosion from the road. Music. The Sergeant, Fraz and Kenzie

are propelled into the air by the blast wave. They fall to the ground one by one ... as if in slow-motion. (pp. 67-8)

Why are there only three bodies? The translator is also killed: but he is rubbed out, literally and metaphorically. Again, conscious or otherwise, it erases the Iraqis (even the ones fighting with 'our boys') from the narrative. Of course, it's not a new phenomenon: the Vietnamese people are virtually erased from the early US films about US involvement in Vietnam, from the liberal *Coming Home* (Ashby, USA, 1978) to the reactionary *The Deerhunter* (Cimino, USA, 1978). The absence may make for more comfortable viewing for Western audiences, but it is burdened with a limited politics of narrative identification, a politics which refuses to grapple with understanding the plight of those not in 'our' shoes, with those on the receiving end of imperial adventure.

The limited polyphonic (can we call it MacPolyphonic?) nature of *Black Watch* ensures that it does not speak with a singular voice, but

it's impossible to ignore the conservative nostalgia that comes, not only from the soldiers' stories but also from the way that they are emplotted. In *Black Watch* all the soldiers leave the army:

Writer: So what did it tell you?

Cammy: That I did nay want tay be in the army anymore.

Rosco: Me neither.

Granty: None ay us. (p. 7)

But the concluding scene rewinds the narrative to a point where the soldiers outline what they fought for as they prepare for the ultimate *Black Watch* battle:

Cammy: I fought for my regiment.

Rosco: I fought for my company.

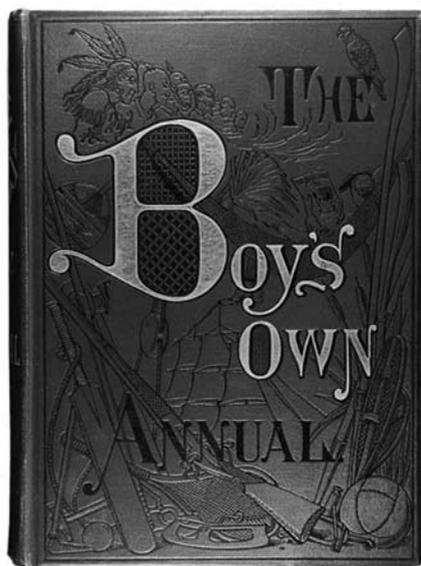
Granty: I fought for my platoon.

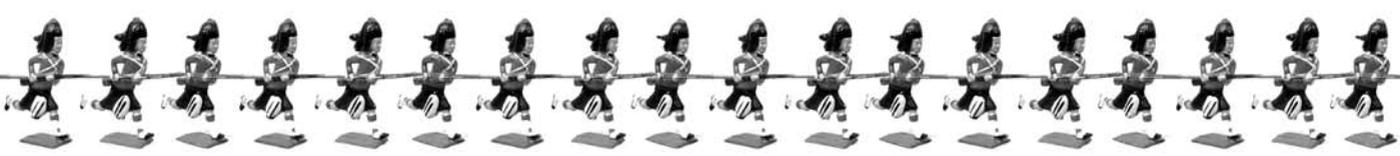
Nabsy: I fought for my section.

Stewarty: I fought for my mates.

Cammy: Fucking shite way to end though.

Officer: This may be the last attack for the First





Battalion, the Black Watch. Let us make sure it goes as well as anything we have done in the past and is one that we can be proud of.

Pause

Five – four – three – two – one.

Beat

Forward the Forty-Second! (p. 72)

The stage directions conclude:

Music: The bagpipes and drums start playing 'The Black Bear'. The soldiers start parading. The music intensifies and quickens as the parade becomes harder and the soldiers stumble and fall. The parade formation begins to disintegrate but each time one falls they are helped back on to their feet by the others. As the music and movement climax, a thunderous drumbeat stops both, and the exhausted, breathless soldiers are left in silhouette. (p. 73)

Director, John Tiffany, claims '[m]usic and movement are fantastic at opening an audience's heart so you can really hit them with the play.'¹¹ There is no doubt that it works in this scene: it is an incredibly powerful conclusion to the play. In a glowing review Ben Brantley, the *New York Times* critic, comments '[i]n the final marching sequence, as the men moved forward and stumbled in shifting patterns, I found to my surprise that I was crying.'¹² This use of affect cements an inconsistent, illogical, imperialist past, one which cannot stand up to empirical scrutiny, but which is used to great effect by the military. The ability of the bagpipes to be heard at a distance, and above the noise of battle, is important militarily, but it is their qualities of affect that has led the British Army to invest in both bagpipes and drums for the past three centuries. As the pipes and drums are used to raise the hairs on the backs of the necks of young men and women preparing for battle, so in *Black Watch*, the pipes and drums combined encourage the audience to switch off intellectually and go 'over the top' in solidarity with 'our boys', and in celebration of the Black Watch.

We are a long, long way from Brecht's desire for a theatrical practice where, to paraphrase, the audience didn't leave their brains in their hats when they deposited them in the cloakroom. There is no simple dividing line between cognitive and emotional responses, but here, the opposite seems to be desired: an anti-Brechtian E-effect. It takes a conscious effort to stand back, to sidestep the attempted emotional

manipulation of sound and movement, and the entanglement with the celebration of empire (or at least an act of wilful forgetting) that the piece demands. The multivalent ending denies a singular interpretation but *Black Watch* can clearly be read as highly critical of the Iraq debacle; however, this scene also strives to handcuff the audience to a crippling nostalgia for the loss of the Black Watch and their amalgamation into the Royal Scottish Regiment. Does anyone need reminded that opposition to the scrapping of the regiments was a central policy of not only the Scottish National Party but also the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party??

The Black Watch, as the *New York Times* critic tells us, is 'an almost 300-year-old regiment with a gloriously storied past'. With which we return to history. Eric Hobsbawm suggests, '[i]nvented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values or norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.'¹³ The success of *Black Watch*, in part, relies on erasure, not just of Ireland, or of Iraqis, but the erasure of the past itself, or, at least, its transformation into an abstract notion of 'history' or 'tradition'. The Golden Thread is a history which has no past, only a glorious story. Unfortunately *Black Watch* does not deconstruct that story: on the contrary, and particularly in its closing scene, it contributes to it.

Plans are afoot for a seven-month international tour, but there are no dates pencilled in for Kenya or India, Ireland or Iraq, only to those countries where the Scottish regiments can be celebrated relatively unproblematically. Hailed as part of a post-devolution Scottish cultural renaissance, *Black Watch* is a stunning piece of theatre: politically it is limiting, ambiguous and contradictory, in some ways radical whilst, simultaneously, deeply reactionary. Yet, it is a combination of these factors which allows its success, both at home and abroad. Whether future generations will take a similar position to the one taken by critics celebrating it in the present is yet to be determined.



Endnotes

1. All page numbers are taken from Gregory Burke, *The National Theatre of Scotland's Black Watch*, Faber and Faber, London, 2007.
2. Archibald K. Murray, *History of the Scottish Regiments in the British Army*, Thomas and Murray and Son, Glasgow, 1862, p. 251-2.
3. Edward M Spiers, *The Scottish Soldier and Empire, 1854-1902*, Edinburgh University Press, 2006, p. 2.
4. See Caroline Elkins Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya*, Henry Holt and Co., New York, 2004.
5. Bob Woodward, 'Greenspan Is Critical Of Bush in Memoir', *Washington Post*, September 15, 2007.
6. The theme of 'insiders and outsiders' in the play is explored in Kate McLoughlin, 'Gregory Burke, Black Watch', a paper presented at the Dramas and Trauma: Writers Responding to War international video conference, 3 October, 2007.
7. Spiers, p. 14.
8. Alison Miller, 'KEEP POLITICS OUT OF POLITICS!', http://www.nationaltheatreofscotland.com/content/default.asp?page=s3_1_1&id=3130 viewed on 18 March 2007.
9. 'Iraq Violence in Figures', BBC online, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/629/629/3847051.stm 8 November, 2007, viewed on 15 November 2007.
10. Nick Broomfield, *Battle for Haditha Press Notes*, Hanway Films, 2006.
11. Lyn Gardner, 'I want to seduce the audience', in *The Guardian*, Monday, 6 August 2007. Available online at <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/edinburgh2007/story/0,,2142502,00.html> Ben Brantley, 'To Tell These War Stories, Words Aren't Enough', *New York Times*, 24 October 2007,
12. <http://theater2.nytimes.com/2007/10/24/theater/reviews/24watch.html?ei=5088&en=24c2cec82f4490d3&ex=1351310400&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&pagewanted=all> viewed on 1 December, 2007.
13. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 1.

