

# Useful and Useless: Catholic Cultural Experience of Scotland

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For Scottish Roman Catholics, things were changing by the late 1990s, and seemingly quite radically. Increasingly, Catholics were making positive noises and interventions in the polity of Scotland and its potentialities. Cardinal Thomas Winning (1925–2001), Archbishop of Glasgow, was the most publicly identifiable and outspoken clergyman in Scotland, and it was guaranteed that he would be listened to attentively. Whether lauded for his outraged stance on issues such as poverty, or courting controversy with aspects of his moral conservatism (memorably, for instance, Section 28/2A on gay partnership), Winning was regarded as a centrally important voice. Paradoxically, the confidence of Scottish Catholicism, as exemplified by Winning, caused the nation's leading composer, Sir James Macmillan (1959–), to raise the spectre of anti-Catholicism at the end of the decade. He did so, though, precisely amid his 'palpable sense of optimism' as a Scottish Catholic delivering his lecture, 'Scotland's Shame', in August 1999 at the Edinburgh International Festival.

In this talk, Macmillan contended that now was the opportune moment to beard the national problem of deep hostility to his faith, an attitude that had been for too long and systematically evaded. The composer accused the Scottish press in particular, with its 'feature writers who regularly and vociferously attack Catholic belief and practice in unguarded visceral ways that would never see the light of day in a London quality newspaper'.<sup>1</sup> He also identified a widespread banal sectarianism, summed up in the view 'that everything would be hunky-dory if only we were to abolish Catholic schools', as well as more nakedly aggressive prejudice such as the vice-chairman of Rangers Football Club, Donald Findlay QC, filmed in May 1999 singing anti-Catholic songs that incorporated an anti-Irish slant in particular.<sup>2</sup> Part of Macmillan's confidence apparently sprang from his feeling that, in contrast

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<sup>1</sup> James Macmillan, 'Scotland's Shame', in *Scotland's Shame? Bigotry and Sectarianism in Modern Scotland*, ed. by Tom M. Devine (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2000), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Macmillan, pp. 16–17.

to days of yore, it was no longer necessary among members of the Scottish Catholic community ‘to keep one’s head down’.<sup>3</sup>

Other signals of Scottish Catholic confidence were apparent around this time, too, such as the one-day conference hosted by the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at New College, University of Edinburgh, on 9 November 1996, the proceedings of which were subsequently published as *Catholicism and the Future of Scotland* (1997). It would be difficult to imagine a publication with such a title being issued by a Scottish university in the 1960s or 1970s. Among the contributors to this pamphlet, Tim Duffy, in considering ‘the case for a Scottish Parliament’, found an analogy between ‘self-determination’ and the ‘principle of subsidiarity’ that had a long history in Catholic social and philosophical thought, accentuated most recently by the loosening of centralised authority — in theory if not always in practice — as conceived by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965).<sup>4</sup> The Labour MP (now Lord) John McFall (1944– ) identified another long-standing idea in modern Catholic teaching as being of use to Scotland, namely that of the ‘Common Good’ — that is, all of humanity, regardless of species of belief, making common cause in its shared social and communitarian conditions.<sup>5</sup> What accounted for this Catholic outspokenness on national issues, indeed Catholics bringing confessional ideas to the secular table, in a way that was much more noticeable compared with even a decade and a half earlier? In a contribution to *Catholicism and the Future of Scotland*, the leading sociologist and former Catholic seminarian, David McCrone (1945–), provided a pointer. He identified a situation in which, in 1996, ‘Catholics are, if anything, more likely to be in favour of Scottish independence (28%) than Protestants (19%)’.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, Scottish Catholics, compared with Protestants, felt increasingly more at ease in a Scotland conceivably cut loose from the British Westminster government. As reported in *The Tablet* (the leading weekly British Catholic publication), by the time of the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014, around 57% of Catholics had voted in favour of

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<sup>3</sup> Macmillan, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Duffy, ‘Church and Nation: A Catholic View’, in *Catholicism and the Future of Scotland*, ed. by Gerard Hand and Andrew Morton (Edinburgh: Centre for Theology and Public Issues, 1997), p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> John McFall, ‘A Politician’s Personal Testimony’, in *Catholicism and the Future of Scotland*, pp. 53–6.

<sup>6</sup> David McCrone, ‘Catholics in Scotland: A Sociological View’, in *Catholicism and the Future of Scotland*, p. 21.

separatism.<sup>7</sup> Catholic confidence in a more autonomous Scotland in the years leading up to the devolved parliament at Edinburgh (inaugurated in 1999), and through its subsequent existence, has remained high compared with only a few decades earlier. Strikingly, at the home of Celtic Football Club, with its predominantly — but far from exclusively — Catholic support, only a few years ago the fans displayed a banner featuring William Wallace (the fourteenth-century leader of the Scottish Wars of Independence, not the Lisbon Lion). In contrast, social media quite frequently features unionist, Rangers FC fans complaining about what they allege to be the Sinn Fein equivalent — the Scottish National Party (SNP). It would seem to be the case that whereas the core Rangers support has remained consistently British Unionist over the decades, the Celtic counterpart has increasingly added Scottish nationalism to its more traditional Irish nationalism during the last 30 years or so.

Alex Salmond (1954– ), leader of the SNP (1990–2000, 2004–2014) and First Minister of Scotland (2007–2014), developed a particularly cordial relationship with Cardinal Winning, and explicitly opposed those who would abolish Catholic schools; indeed he also wished to ‘celebrate’ the achievements and the contribution made to the Scottish nation by those schools.<sup>8</sup> How different was Salmond’s stance towards Catholicism compared with that of Billy Wolfe (1924–2010), a previous leader of the SNP (1969–1979). During the Falklands War, Wolfe implied that, in Argentina, fascism and Catholicism naturally walked hand in hand, and that it was imperative to protect the ‘mainly Protestant and democratically minded Falklanders, mostly descendants of Scots’.<sup>9</sup> Wolfe here embodied a long-standing fear among twentieth-century Scottish Catholics that, if left to its own devices, an independent Scotland would become ‘Ulsterised’, and they would be under the heel of an aggressively prejudiced Protestant ascendancy. To be fair — and shedding light on the trajectory that is being sketched here – Wolfe later recanted and sincerely apologised for his unreasonable and hurtful views. However, his anti-Catholicism was far from gratuitously personal. It was conditioned by historical Scottish culture.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Tablet*, 25 September 2014: [www.thetablet.co.uk/news/3925/majority-of-catholics-voted-for-independence](http://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/3925/majority-of-catholics-voted-for-independence).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, a discussion of Salmond’s views in Stephen J. McKinney and James C. Conroy, ‘The Continued Existence of State-Funded Catholic Schools in Scotland’, *Comparative Education*, 51 (2015), 105–17.

<sup>9</sup> David Torrance, ‘Letters Reveal SNP Crisis over President’s Anti Catholic Diatribes’, *The Times*, 11 September 2010.

Here I cannot help but become somewhat anecdotal. As a Scottish Catholic I was aware of my confessional and national standing from a very young age, even as I was far from really understanding it. I was brought up in Clydebank in the west of Scotland, and my father worked for John Brown and Company, the famous shipbuilders. In the 1960s it was the 'yard', and not the council, that owned our tenement buildings in Whitecrook Street in the town, and from around the age of four I remember being told by some of my playmates 'This isn't your country!' Probably these children did not comprehend any more than I did what was being said, but they were mouthpieces — indeed tradition-bearers — for the anti-Catholicism that was rife in the shipyards and other industrial factories. Whenever anyone uses the term 'Red Clydeside', I tend to mutter to myself 'Orange Clydeside, more like'. We were one of a minority of Catholic families in our street, as Brown's employed Catholics only very sparingly. On leaving the merchant marine in 1960, my father obtained his position as a maintenance fitter in part due to impeccable references, but more because his Protestant uncle 'spoke' for him, as the parlance went, including assuring management that he was not unduly fond of alcohol (unlike so many of the other Catholics, especially those with Irish genes, so the implication clearly ran). I suspect that my father's surname, which was Scottish, also helped, although his mother's family were nineteenth-century emigrants from County Donegal. My father had a certain engineering ingenuity, and in 1967 he invented a tool for use by the firm, which was thereafter routinely adopted, and for which he was given a bonus of £3. Nonetheless, he only ever reached the status of chargehand, and was told that he could never become a foreman because he was not a Protestant. What seems remarkable to me now, but did not at the time when I heard about such conversations, was how accepting my father and his fellow Catholics were of their situation. That was just 'the reality'.

I remember sometimes being at Mass at lunchtime on Holidays of Obligation with my mother, and turning round to see my father and half a dozen of his colleagues standing at the back of Our Holy Redeemer church. They did not want to sit on the pews in their grimy boilersuits, and were also so stationed for the purpose of making a quick getaway back to the yard, having sacrificed their meagre 35-minute lunch break, any stretching of which would have elicited no sympathy from the managers, especially not for vulgarly pursuing their popish idolatry. Later, for a brief period in the summer of 1982 and before going to university, I worked as a labourer for Brown's. The foreman, an elder of the Kirk, had a distinct fondness for young men, and I think this was why I was one of two Catholics (out of a dozen men) in his employ. I had kept quiet about my university place, and at the end of the summer I was offered my position at Brown's on a permanent basis. When I turned it down and gave the reason, I was cheerfully told by

another labourer 'I didnae think that somebody fae your background [...]'. It was clear what he was driving at, as obvious as the main noticeboard, which in that year of the visit of Pope John Paul II displayed a garish poster crying out 'No Pope of Rome!' This went entirely unchecked by management, and indeed was quite probably placed there by said management.

My family's national loyalties — to Britain as much as to Scotland — were called into question elsewhere as my mother, who was of Italian extraction, suffered racist abuse when she worked in the UCBS biscuit factory in Clydebank. Pointed remarks were made to her about her uncle's experience during the Second World War, when while out in his civvies he had been set upon by a Glasgow mob for being 'an Eyetie'. The unfortunate man had only recently been evacuated from Dunkirk as part of the British Expeditionary Force. My grandfather, Alfredo Tartaglia, had served in both the Italian cavalry and the British army prior to the outbreak of the war. He, like so many others, was interned for a period on the Isle of Man. His crucifix, which was crafted from discarded scraps of wood and tin, remains a precious heirloom within my family, and is a reminder of the one positive thing we had in terms of identity — our faith — at a time when both Scotland and Britain despised us. Earlier in her employment career, in the 1950s, my mother was part of a tiny Catholic minority at Collins the publishing firm in Glasgow (so many of the 'good' industries were well known for allowing access to only a very few Catholics, or for excluding them altogether). She enjoyed her time at Collins, and qualified as a fully trained book-binder, but it was made plain to her that her religion (and probably her gender, too) would disbar her from any significant promotion within the firm — a familiar story. She would recall that even people whom she liked in the firm, and those with whom she was on ostensibly friendly terms, made wilfully ignorant, provocative remarks about the beliefs and practices of her religion. These comments were not personal — they were about her faith, and that was self-evidently fair game!

My own experiences of being discriminated against because of my religion amount to little more than being abused as a 'Fenian' or 'Taig' when, prior to my time at Brown's, I was working for a Clydebank printing firm, or by individuals in pubs who involved me in political and religious bar-room debate. One memorable incident occurred when I was playing hockey for Clydebank College, and in an east coast pub after a game the barman wanted to find out how many of us were Catholics. He wanted to keep this tally because, as he said, the aftergame pies were reserved for Protestants. Whether or not this was intended as a joke by our jovial host, it was met by our team captain (who was also a Boys Brigade captain) with incandescent rage. I am aware of how widespread 'soft sectarianism' is, and how far up Scottish life it travels, even today — for instance, in the Burns movement (I

work some of the time as a scholar of Robert Burns), in academia, and at respectable middle-class and upper-working-class association events. In such contexts, remarks have been made which go over the head of my 'non-Catholic' friends even as they have 'heard' the comments, so that one wonders 'Am I being over-sensitive, or is anti-Catholicism the last acceptable prejudice?' There was one incident, however, when a Presbyterian friend was more outraged than I was. This occurred when an academic and SNP activist, who was talking to us in 2017 in that bastion of West End Glasgow respectability, 'The Chip', referred to the former Labour MP, Jim Murphy, as 'Genuflecting Jim'. The anti-Catholicism of our nationalist 'colleague' was apparently stoked by Mr Murphy's involvement in the 2014 'No' campaign. Here one might wonder, too, what was being said about Labour from the SNP perspective, where there was perhaps some composite bile being produced. James Queenan, my headmaster at Our Holy Redeemer Primary School in Clydebank, was Labour Party Provost of the district authority for a period. He was emblematic of the kind of 'belonging' — school, church and Labour Party (and also in the case of many manual workers, such as my father, trade union) — that provided for people such as me a positive, comfortable sense of natural community, even as we were also aware of the surrounding culture of heavy industry and of 'officialdom', and their antipathy towards our denomination.

If in recent years there seems to have been some change in the 'acceptance' of Scottish Catholics, noticeable particularly in positive discussion of Catholic schools, the latter area continues to throw up some very dubious 'logic'. One instance was the response by a journalist in *The Times (Scotland)* to repeated anti-Catholic graffiti ('All Taigs are Targets') during the period 2020–2021. She suggested that the obvious solution to such awfulness was to end Catholic schooling. Do away with the victim, do away with the crime — it was quite simple. Many among the middle classes see it as 'common sense' that Catholic schools should be expunged, since these schools segregate children from an early age in a rather arbitrary fashion. However, the same people raise no objections to private schools, or for that matter to Jewish or Episcopalian schools, which do exist in Scotland (one suspects that opponents of Catholic schools are also probably wary of occasionally mooted dedicated Muslim schooling where similar narratives of superiority and alienness can be deployed). Perhaps the ending of denominational schooling might, in the past at least, have in a strange way worked to the advantage of Catholics, in the helpful dispelling of their abstruse saintly and theological nomenclature under which, so far as many Scots were concerned, 'God knows what' goes on!

When I was a postgraduate, a retired manager at Rolls Royce had returned as a student to the University of Glasgow in 1988, aged sixty-nine.

He expressed surprise that at my school, St Andrew's RC Secondary School in Clydebank, the same Ordinary and Higher-grade courses were offered as in the non-denominational sector. This very pleasant elderly man became a friend with whom I stayed in touch throughout the rest of his life, but at the time of my revelation to him I could not help remembering our careers master at St Andrew's telling the fourth-year boys who were looking to move on at the end of the year, 'No point in applying for an apprenticeship there, lads, your face won't fit'. These days it is interesting to note a different, more overarching anti-religious impetus in Scotland, in the UK and elsewhere. Today I find myself often enough making common cultural cause with Presbyterians, Episcopalians and others in the face of aggressive and frankly fanatical secular humanists who wish to drive faith groups from public view, and effectively to cancel them. Often the cry is that faith folk are 'unelected', when society is more complex in what ought to be its rightful representation in the civic square, rather than comprising solely those voices that have been accredited via the ballot box.

National belonging, as the foregoing account attempts to suggest, is not necessarily straightforward for a Catholic in Scotland and Britain. Historically, and in a sense logically, Catholics were — and arguably remain — effectively debarred from some political offices and functions. In recent history, Tony Blair only became a Catholic after his career as prime minister of the UK was over. Often tipped as the next leader of the Labour Party and as a potential prime minister, Catholic Andy Burnham will be an interesting religious test case in point should these things come to pass.<sup>10</sup> There has been no testing of the reality, which would include the prime minister advising the monarch, who is head of the Church of England, on the appointment of Church of England bishops, among other things. A nice point has been made that technically the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 included within its safeguarding clauses that no Catholic could be so involved in episcopal appointment, and this section of the act has never been repealed.<sup>11</sup> It would be genuinely objectively interesting to see a UK Catholic prime minister in action — indeed to see if he or she *could* act in such

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<sup>10</sup> I find rather spurious the claims that Boris Johnson was the first Catholic prime minister of the UK. Although he was baptised in the church and married (for the third time) in a Catholic ceremony, he has never practised or identified as Catholic; see [www.scottishcatholic.com/the-last-catholic-prime-minister/#:~:text=James%20Bundy%20examines%20the%20legacy,Minister%20of%20the%20United%20Kingdom](http://www.scottishcatholic.com/the-last-catholic-prime-minister/#:~:text=James%20Bundy%20examines%20the%20legacy,Minister%20of%20the%20United%20Kingdom).

<sup>11</sup> [www.legalcheek.com/2021/06/this-one-crazy-law-from-1829-could-topple-our-newly-married-prime-minister/](http://www.legalcheek.com/2021/06/this-one-crazy-law-from-1829-could-topple-our-newly-married-prime-minister/)

instances (undoubtedly there would be complaints, and undoubtedly no Catholic prejudice would be brought to the process).<sup>12</sup> For many years I was a member of the Labour Party, until I left in 2003 over my objection to the invasion of Iraq. My most core set of political principles, more so even than socialist ones, are republican (I am a great admirer of Thomas Paine, who was so crucial to the thinking of the American and French revolutions in the eighteenth century). Recently, when I told an educated middle-class Scot of my professional acquaintance that I was a republican, he replied, 'Ah, an Irish Republican'. 'No', I said, 'just a republican'. It was clear that once again my known religious/ethnic affiliation was being brought into things. My republicanism is in fact one of the reasons why I am sceptical about both nationalism and unionism. Official SNP party policy, like that of their unionist opponents, includes the retention of the British monarchy. When I point this out to nationalists I am often met with the exasperated rejoinder that this is just an electoral position, and that once independence for Scotland has been gained, the House of Windsor will be removed from Scottish polity. I have two things to say in response to this — first, I wish then that this would be the honestly stated policy, and second, such wiping out of the monarchy might be easier said than done — legally and practically — in an independent Scotland.<sup>13</sup> For one thing, presumably the SNP maintains its stance on retaining the monarchy because it is currently seeking to garner votes, and will want the support of these same royalist voters for its party in a post-independent Scotland.<sup>14</sup>

Scotland's medieval past, obviously enough, was Roman Catholic. During the twentieth century the loss of this was particularly lamented by one strong line of cultural nationalism since, it was argued, it had led pretty much consequentially to Protestant-glued Great Britain. Somewhat crudely, Calvinist Scots, in their individualism, were seen as a result of this newly awakened deep nostalgia for the medieval period as inevitably capitalist (in

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<sup>12</sup> It should be acknowledged that the office of Lord Chamberlain (essentially chief official to the Royal Family) was occupied for the first time since the Reformation, from 1998 to 2000, by a Catholic, Lord Camoys (1940–2023).

<sup>13</sup> [www.heraldscotland.com/politics/23219191.poll-scots-favour-republic-king-charles-yes-vote/](http://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/23219191.poll-scots-favour-republic-king-charles-yes-vote/).

<sup>14</sup> For an interestingly nuanced poll from YouGov on this topic, see <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/10/11/do-scots-want-keep-monarchy-independent-scotland>



a somewhat facile version of the Weber–Tawney thesis).<sup>15</sup> It was only a short step from this view to seeing Scottish Protestantism’s inevitable incorporation of Scotland into Great Britain, where the juicy fruits of English-originated — but enthusiastically Scottish — worldwide Empire could be enjoyed. Such was the picture painted of the historical trajectory of the Scot by George Douglas Brown (1869–1902) in his novel *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901). This text set out the case that recent Scottish literature/culture was most wilfully misleading in its depiction of the grounded, essentially rural Scot of the ‘Kailyard’ school of fiction in the 1880s and 1890s (this movement was hugely popular across the English-speaking world, particularly in the colonies, and was supposedly the forerunner of the cosy, couthy *Sunday Post* and the ‘Brigadoon’ image of Scotland). Instead of this self-affirming fantasy, Brown suggested, we ought to bring into proper view the aggressively rapacious Scot with his cunning engineering mind, devoid of culture (as puritanical Calvinism was not keen on impractical art), or in other words the colonial Scot manifesting all of his awful opportunistic British Protestantism.<sup>16</sup> This was the Whig progressivist, British exceptionalist version of history inverted or ca’d at the knees. Laugh-out-loud funny and rather cartoonish, although simultaneously clever in its satirical panache, *The House with the Green Shutters* was the work of a personally embittered, partly Oxford-educated Scot. Nonetheless, Douglas Brown’s national characterisation came to be influential, and was taken very seriously amid the so-called Scottish literary ‘Renaissance’ from the 1920s onwards. The chief figure of that cultural movement was the poet Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve, 1892–1978), who hoped that immigration from Ireland might be speeded

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<sup>15</sup> For the crudity of the Weber–Tawney thesis in itself, see Winthrop S. Hudson, ‘The Weber Thesis Re-examined’, *Church History*, 57 (1988), Supplement: Centennial Issue, 56–67.

<sup>16</sup> Such Scotophobia stands in a long tradition dating back to the eighteenth century, when writers such as Samuel Johnson and Charles Churchill saw the Scottish people as gobbling up the benefits of union with England, displacing Englishmen from positions that they ought to occupy, and giving little in return. Up to and beyond Douglas Brown’s time, it also included T. H. W. Crosland’s *The Unspeakable Scot* (London: Stanley Paul & Co., 1902), which was published remarkably close in time to the former’s novel, as well as the popular prejudice against recent Scottish prime ministers of the UK, namely Gordon Brown and even (in his somewhat debatable Scottishness) Tony Blair. See Gerard Carruthers, ‘Scotland in Britain’, in *The Nation in British Literature and Culture*, ed. by Andrew Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 51–67.

up so that, with a steady influx of Catholics, Scotland would become less crassly puritanical.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand a somewhat debatable proposition is that Irish Catholicism is devoid of puritanical elements, but on the other hand, MacDiarmid was commendably speaking out within a milieu that repeatedly saw the Church of Scotland condemning the ‘alien’ menace that was posed to Scotland by Irish immigration.<sup>18</sup> In his *Scottish Journey* (1935), Edwin Muir (1887–1959), who was an ally of MacDiarmid, saw this author embark on a bleak anthropological tour in which he witnessed a bleak Scotland blighted by the Industrial Revolution and Protestantism. Muir found only very few pockets of positive cultural relief, including Carfin Grotto in the midst of industrial Lanarkshire, a Catholic shrine that had been established in the 1920s by Monsignor Thomas Taylor (1873–1963). Emblematic of all that Muir saw as missing, and surrounded by huge historical deficit, the Marian shrine had often harnessed in its development through the period of the Great Depression the labour of the unemployed. Muir’s admiration for Carfin, Taylor and the other Catholics behind it is clear as he sees the humble and wonderful faith that accomplished it as radiant in a way not comprehended by Protestant Scotland: ‘It is a part not only of Scotland but of a whole world of which Scotland knows nothing. It is as international as the industrial region that surrounds it, but in a completely different way’.<sup>19</sup> Muir, a great Europhile, saw Scotland (and Britain) as being largely cut off from much of the traditional cultural vitality of Europe. Scotland, with its grim Calvinist Protestant conditioning, was in his view lamentable. Even as the gargantuan struggle against the Nazis was pursued by Britain and her allies, Muir sustained his theme of disastrously inhuman Scottish Calvinism, most notoriously in his poem ‘Scotland 1941’:

We were a tribe, a family, a people.  
Wallace and Bruce guard now a painted field,  
And all may read the folio of our fable,  
Peruse the sword, the sceptre and the shield.  
A simple sky roofed in that rustic day,  
The busy corn-fields and the haunted holms,  
The green road winding up the ferny brae.  
But Knox and Melville clapped their preaching palms  
And bundled all the harvesters away,

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<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Richard A. Barlow, *Modern Irish and Scottish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), especially pp. 93–138.

<sup>18</sup> See David Ritchie, ‘The Civil Magistrate: The Scottish Office and the Anti-Irish Campaign, 1922–29’, *Innes Review*, 63 (2012), 48–76.

<sup>19</sup> Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (London: Flamingo, 1985), p. 177.

Hoodicrow Peden in the blighted corn  
 Hacked with his rusty beak the starving haulms.  
 Out of that desolation we were born.<sup>20</sup>

Never formally committed to Scottish nationalism, or in fact to Catholicism or any organised religion, Muir believed — more or less — that the Scottish nation was irreparably lost, never to be brought back from its consummate British-Protestant-state benightedness. The more theoretically hopeful MacDiarmid, looking longingly both for the potential revival of Scots and Gaelic as culturally energising literary languages, and for Irish immigration, became furious with Edwin Muir's despair. Sharing a similar outlook to Muir, although expressing it even more vehemently, Fionn MacColla (Thomas Macdonald, 1906–1975) was a former Church of Scotland teacher in Palestine who converted to Catholicism and was a stalwart of the early SNP. Like another Catholic convert, Compton Mackenzie (1883–1972), co-founder of the National Party of Scotland (which eventually merged with the Scottish Party to form the SNP), MacColla hoped that Scotland might find a way forward (paradoxically enough) to retrieve something of its Catholic past. From the 1930s, having largely retreated to the Catholic enclave of Barra in the Western Isles, and often espousing Jacobitism, Mackenzie imagined a non-Protestant Scotland. From Barra he produced *Catholicism and Scotland* (1934), which among other things hymned 'the vitality of the Irish nation in the twentieth century, which makes every Scots patriot blush with shame'.<sup>21</sup> Rather like my father and his colleagues in heavy industry a few decades later, Mackenzie and his colleagues found Scotland in the context of its inter-dependent historic, religious and political culture extremely problematic. Imaginatively, however, these literati (including previous cultural activists involved in reviving Scottish culture, notably Robert Burns and Walter Scott) were not devoid of success in their dissent towards British Scotland. Celticism (including Celtic Football Club),

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<sup>20</sup> [www.poetrynook.com/poem/scotland-1941](http://www.poetrynook.com/poem/scotland-1941)

<sup>21</sup> Compton Mackenzie, *Catholicism and Scotland* (London: George Routledge, 1936): <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=ChFDEAAAQBAJ&pg=PT15&lpg=PT15&dq=the+vitality+of+the+Irish+nation+in+the+twentieth+century,+which+makes+every+Scottish+patriot+blush+with+shame&source=bl&ots=OllmGwMGZL&sig=ACfU3U2gRR3aQ0nJSAOEMb3rYW6zyNH6Ww&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjQkJGFjf78AhUwQUEAHao4AwwQ6AF6BAgTEAM#v=onepage&q=the%20vitality%20of%20the%20Irish%20nation%20in%20the%20twentieth%20century%2C%20which%20makes%20every%20Scottish%20patriot%20blush%20with%20shame&f=false>

Jacobitism, Mary Queen of Scots and a comparative sympathy for previously down-trodden, colonised cousins in Ireland (these days perhaps more widespread than ever) all make for a cultural landscape in the Scotland of today that is to some extent, we might say, crypto-Catholic. In fact really all we are talking about is a country — Scotland — that is readily recycling and reutilising ideas and images from its historic past when issues of official state worship or royal dynasty are these days of little actual (overarching) import to the practical business of real politics.

What, then, of the present moment and the attitude that a Catholic might adopt towards Scotland either independent from or continuing in union with Britain? Increasingly, there is some consensus that Westminster in its heavily centralised working is unfit for purpose. We have had another round of Conservative sleaze from 2022, flagrant breaches of the ministerial code, and the most appalling financial mismanagement (with future inquiry also likely to show gross mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Britain, including corrupt practices in the procurement process for protective equipment). It may be the case that the Holyrood administration handled the public health crisis better in general, but there are long-term questions about its running of the National Health Service and of care homes, and also about the state of dentistry during and even before the pandemic. The Scottish government record on transport infrastructure, education and child poverty is not good. The SNP has had its share of financial and sexual scandals in recent years, too, including party infighting and vendettas seen in the prosecution of Alex Salmond (who as a result is no longer an SNP member) through the courts. As a result, the number of people who were once starry-eyed about Nicola Sturgeon and her administration seems to be diminishing. We see something of this effect, certainly, in the controversy surrounding the Gender Recognition Act.

To many Catholics (and numerous others), the SNP along with others in the Holyrood bubble, especially the coalition allies of the governing party, namely the Greens, seem intent on pursuing an agenda of niche metropolitan cultural issues and identity politics.<sup>22</sup> What about seriously tackling the issues around poverty that feature in a depressingly unaltering index of multiple deprivation (in which, incidentally, areas with large Catholic populations feature disproportionately)? Again, why are the Greens so intent on immediate, zero-tolerance approaches to carbon emissions when, it might be countered, this is unrealistic amid a hugely vulnerable Scottish economy? We are told that the country is well equipped to be a world leader in renewable energy, but the infrastructure is still decades away from

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<sup>22</sup> [www.thetimes.co.uk/article/two-thirds-of-voters-oppose-snps-gender-reform-plans-d8wh3wh9w](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/two-thirds-of-voters-oppose-snps-gender-reform-plans-d8wh3wh9w)

enabling this to actually be achieved. There is, too, the undoubted economic disaster that is Brexit. Scotland, like London and various other parts of England, voted to remain in the European Union. But what about a future independent Scotland seeking to rejoin Europe, and in the process presumably having trade borders and tariffs with non-European England? Assuming, although this is by no means certain, that Scotland would be allowed re-entry to the common market, would this not be to repeat the mistake of Brexit, by cutting off truly free trade with our most important trading neighbour, namely England? Or would there be some kind of 'backstop' deal, as in the case of Northern Ireland? If so, that certainly does not augur well. One of the things that was least convincing about the nationalist case in 2014 concerned the currency, and next time around the independence case would continue to be that Scotland for some indeterminate time would utilise sterling. However, new members are not admitted to the EU if they use another nation's currency. The best proposition for the future Scottish independence campaign, whenever that happens, would be the adoption of the euro; this is not the current SNP position. However, even then, linkage to the euro without EU membership also raises questions about how much of a reality financial freedom (i.e., practical independent sovereignty with a Scottish central bank) could be. For this Catholic, the prospect of Scottish independence under the circumstances envisaged by the SNP and others is just as dispiriting as the current arrangement of being ruled over by a too often dysfunctional, Brexit-hedged Westminster.

Formally, theologically we might say, the Catholic position on nations and 'nationalism' is today much as it has always been. We see this in Pope Francis's recent 'Encyclical Letter: Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship' (2020).<sup>23</sup> This commends in effect a mental state for humanity of being 'without borders' and the need for 'the care for creation' universally and collectively by all of the human race. What might seem platitudinous is in fact simply profound, and Francis's concerns related specifically to recent events at whose centre Britain stood:

For decades, it seemed that the world had learned a lesson from its many wars and disasters, and was slowly moving towards various forms of integration. For example, there was the dream of a united Europe, capable of acknowledging its shared roots and rejoicing in its rich diversity. We think of the firm conviction

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of the founders of the European Union, who envisioned a future based on the capacity to work together in bridging divisions and in fostering peace and fellowship between all the peoples of this continent. [...]

Our own days, however, seem to be showing signs of a certain regression. Ancient conflicts thought long buried are breaking out anew, while instances of a myopic, extremist, resentful and aggressive nationalism are on the rise.

It would seem obvious that it is British nationalism (i.e., Brexit) that Francis has in mind here. However, Scottish nationalism post Brexit suddenly, although arguably through no fault of its own, is part of a chain of fragmentation in which the post-1980s nationalist mantra of 'Scotland in Europe' is problematic. Beginning with the classic account of Scottish philosophical, education and cultural traditions, namely *The Democratic Intellect* (1961) by George Davie (1912–2007), a line of thought developed that reimagined Scotland as an essentially European nation. Davie's clever book was rather exclusive in positing what he saw as 'Presbyterian ethics' at the heart of this European Scotland, but let such problematics pass. Despite longstanding (and today still powerful) Euroscepticism within Scottish nationalism, the SNP skilfully developed a narrative of Scotland as a small, modern, muscular, resource-rich nation in Europe. The likes of Ireland and Norway were, and still are, here referenced in relation to wider economic and cultural arrangements, whether these are in the context of the EU or the Nordic Council. All of this was entirely reasonable, until Brexit painfully hedged the logic of this position with multiple impracticalities, both present and future. Cut off from Europe, a future Scotland could conceivably also be somewhat cut off from England. The means of being commendably 'without borders', in Francis's words, might simply be unavailable to Scotland. Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic and in a situation where we are manifestly failing as a species in the stewardship of creation, macro-cultural and macro-economic conditions currently pose a series of existential questions that are difficult to answer.

Neither the Catholic church nor the experience of Catholics in Scotland can offer any clear direction on whether or not the individual Catholic, or indeed anyone else, ought to be a nationalist, a unionist, or adopt some other variety of political outlook. Currently, and for the reasons outlined above, levels of optimism about a future fully autonomous Scotland would not rationally be high, but people are nonetheless entitled to be gratuitously optimistic (in one sense this is what the Holy Spirit teaches us to be). We need to live in some political form, and I have a hunch that in future, perhaps many decades down the line, our constitutional realities will be transformed

out of all recognition. The present is just too 'presentist'. Ironically, at a time when we are hearing from many sides that moral authority is utterly diminished, we seem to be in a position where our culture and society often adopt a searingly condescending, judgemental view of the past. Reassuringly, this overweening certainty that we are more 'right' in our views than any previous generation is the kind of teleological fallacy in which humans have always indulged. No doubt the process of moral discernment is always a work in progress, and so too are our political and all other institutions. In the present moment, the tone of political and cultural difference (massively amplified by the fairly recent opportunities provided by social media) is often ungenerous and bad-tempered. Catholics, like other Christians, and like folk of all other faiths or none, need to realise this, to tolerate difference better and always to listen to one another. As it is, we continue to find new ways to batter the broken body of Christ. Ultimately, whether in politics or anything else, it ought to be all a matter of good faith with one another and with ourselves.

