Silke Stroh, Uneasy Subjects: Postcolonialism and Scottish Gaelic Poetry (Rodopi, 2011)

Silke Stroh opens her book with a succinct description of her project: ‘This book is intended as a contribution to current debates about the benefits and drawbacks of extending the field of Postcolonial Studies beyond its traditional core subject of Europe’s former colonies and their diasporas, to also include margins, minorities, and emerging nations within (white) Europe itself’ (11). As her opening sentence acknowledges, there is some contentiousness about such a project. Neither Scotland in general nor the Highlands in particular has ever been a colony in the same way as the overseas colonies of the British empire (or other European empires). For the last 300 years Scotland has been part of Great Britain and for hundreds of years the Gaelic-speaking Highlands have been, politically speaking, partly of Scotland. Stroh is quick to acknowledge this fundamental difference from overseas colonies: ‘a key issue is the ambivalence of Scotland’s cultural and political status, as both an intra-British marginalised Other and an integral part of the British mainstream and Britain’s sense of self’ (12). Nevertheless, there are ways in which Scotland can be seen to have been colonised by England and the Highlands by both England and the Lowlands, which leads the book, as Stroh points out, into questions of ‘how the double marginality of the Gaidhealtachd, both within Scotland and within Britain, relates to the marginality of Scotland as a whole as a result of English hegemony’ (12). However, Stroh’s argument does not rest on whether Scotland or the Highlands can be identified as ‘true’ colonies. Rather, her contention is that if Scottish Gaelic literature displays some of the patterns of discourse which postcolonial critics have identified in other literatures, then postcolonial theory can be a helpful tool in understanding it. She also suggests her study can supplement postcolonial theory which, she argues, tends to assume that the patterns it sees are all modern whereas some of them were already present in classical discourse (16). Accordingly, she begins her study well before the age of colonialism with ‘Classical colonial discourses on Scotland and the Celtic world’ (43), before moving on to medieval Scottish Gaelic texts, via some discussion of medieval Lowland texts which portray the Highlands and Highlanders.

Stroh’s methodology is to examine Scottish Gaelic poetry from its beginnings to the present day through detailed analysis of individual poems (with English translations of all quotations) in the light of postcolonial theory and practice. Employing this strategy with confidence and skill, Stroh demonstrates at numerous points the usefulness of postcolonial theory and criticism in understanding Scottish Gaelic poetry. A few examples will illustrate the insights that this approach offers.

Naturally enough, parallels between Scottish Gaelic literature and what are traditionally identified as postcolonial literatures are easier to draw in the period when the Highlands can arguably been said to have been ‘colonised’ by England and the Lowlands after the failure of the 1745 rebellion and the tightening of central control over the Highland periphery. Nevertheless, there are interesting postcolonial readings of earlier literature. For example, Stroh notes that medieval Gaelic poetry prefers a pan-Gaelic view to a national (Scottish) view and suggests this could be simply the result of literary convention but could equally be a response to the growing marginalisation of Gaelic-speakers within the Scottish nation, a situation with colonial parallels (58). Similarly, she compares the literature dealing with Highlanders’ involvement in the crusades to later literature of Gaels involved in British imperial wars, though in the crusade literature there is more sense of complicity in the imperial adventure whereas the ‘later discourses also include an increasing number of cases where trans peripheral solidarity is discernable’ (67).

As we move into the arguably ‘colonised’ period of Highland history, parallels with overseas colonies come thick and fast. For example, in analysing a poem by Maighstir Seathan, Strohe notes...
that it shares ‘many concerns (and pitfalls) of anti- or post-colonial “writing back” literature’ in that ‘Maighstir Seathan asserts that the margin’s culture also deserves respect, but the indigenous self-esteem of fellow fringe-dwellers is not enough: there is a strong need for approval from outsiders, i.e. metropolitan colonisers’ (140). A different example is provided in Stroh’s discussion of Jacobite waulking songs which ‘encode Prince Charlie as a girl’. Pointing out that ‘[t]raditional colonial discourse analysis has often identified the discursive feminisation of the colonised as a strategy of oppression and denigration’, she suggests that ‘[w]here Gaelic poets feminise their own ethnic group or their leaders … this might be expected to reflect a colonised sensibility’ but that ‘in some Gaelic poems (self-) feminisation … can be a tactical move … that allows the text to be played down as “harmless” if it comes to the attention of hostile authorities’ (122–3). Later she notes that images of ‘a feminised, sexualised, and raped country’ parallel ‘colonial and anticolonial discourses all over the globe’ (204).

One of the key subjects of Scottish Gaelic poetry has been the Clearances which depopulated the Highlands in the eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries. Again Stroh argues that while poems which lament the depopulation of the Highlands could be criticised as backward-looking and blinkered by nostalgia, they can also be viewed in postcolonial terms as writing back to Anglophone descriptions of the beauty of the Highland landscape in which it is valued precisely because it is empty of people (207). As responses to the Clearances became increasingly radical and agitation for land rights developed into the crofting movement, Gaelic poetry played an important political role. Here too there are postcolonial parallels: ‘Many of these late-nineteenth-century poems [concerned in particular with the crofting movement] can be considered to resemble overseas anticolonial literature, for instance in their strongly politicised character, their readiness to criticise both alien and native comprador elites … and the instrumentalisation of pre-colonial indigenous history as a means to inspire confidence and establish ideological reference points for forward-looking practical resistance movements’ (231).

An underlying theme of the book is the extent to which the Gaelic-speaking Highlanders can be seen either an alien group within Scotland or the most culturally marked symbolic figures of Scottish nationality. As her analysis shows, this varies over time but there are points at which the latter view prevails, for example when Highlanders came to viewed as the ideal soldiers of empire so that ‘Highlanders could now be rehabilitated, evolving from a despicable Other to either a praiseworthy Other or (again) a national Same – not only of a pan-Scottish nation, but even of an imperial pan-British one’ (157). This is at a time when Scots could see themselves as an integral (though different) part of Britain, but as the movement for devolution or even independence has grown in strength in more recent years, ‘the Gaels are again transformed from Scotland’s internally colonised Other to a pan-national Same in an anticolonial anti-Union (or anti-English) alliance’ (258).

Stroh concludes with the hope that her book ‘has helped to demonstrate that a considerable number of discourse patterns which are commonly associated with overseas colonial and postcolonial frameworks can also be identified in negotiations of Celticity, Gaelicness and Scottish national identity – and that Gaelic poetry plays a significant part in these negotiations’ (329). When readers reach this point they are likely to feel this thorough and comprehensive study has achieved its goal.

Graham Tulloch