

The American right and Scottish nationalism

Steve James
3 February 1999

Staffordshire University research fellow, Dr. Euan Hague, spent four years in America researching the marketing of "Scottishness" by organisations such as the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Tourist Board. In a lecture delivered to the Royal Geographical Society, "The Production and Consumption of Scotland and Scottishness in the USA", he paid special attention to the celebration of "Scottish culture" and support for Scottish independence amongst America's right wing and fascist movements.

Hague noted the dramatic increase in cultural organisations such as St. Andrews Societies and Caledonian Groups, which celebrate Highland Games, Burns Nights, bagpipes, clan genealogy and tartan. In 1969, 20 groups across the US organised Highland Games. Now there are 200 such groups.

In part, these activities are harmless, if not to everyone's taste. At the same time Dr. Hague brought out the distinct militarism, the celebration of a muscular backwardness--drinking and throwing trees--and the distinctly all-white character of most of the proceedings.

They also reflect the search for an identity that apparently has nothing to do with contemporary, socially polarised America. One man interviewed at a Caledonian event told Dr. Hague, "I think the clans have nothing to do with how people usually sort themselves, e.g., by class, race, sexuality, or whatever."

Of the promotion of a wider "Celtic identity", Hague says, "An added level of this spectacle is that much of it perceives a wider Celtic relationship between Scotland, Ireland and Wales, all conjoined in an anti-English bloc. Thus, in the construction of Scottishness understood in the United States, Celtic imagery and cultural commodities are to the fore. This is seen in the associations made between Scotland and Ireland in 'Celtic festivals' across the United States and in the Hollywood film, *Braveheart*.

"What is appealing about asserting a strong Celtic Scottishness within this imagination of Scotland? They [the Celts] are the original primordial folk and it is their culture and community that are embedded in Scotland.

Deeply and spiritually immersed in, and at one with, the physical territory of Scotland, the purity of the Celts is understood by many in the Scottish American community to have been corrupted by Anglicisation."

This interest is not confined to the traditionally right-wing Caledonian Societies. Southern secessionists and outright fascist groups have both adopted a version of Scottish history as their own, and celebrate Celtic culture.

Contemporary Southern secessionist Dr. Michael Hill, leader of the racist League of the South, said in 1997, "Our Anglo-Celtic Southern culture and its history, heroes, songs, symbols, and banners are under attack and their defence could serve as an immediate rallying point. But we should go beyond that to the task of educating our people about their ties ... the names and deeds of William Wallace, Andrew de Moray, Robert Bruce.... Sir James (the Black) Douglas, James Graham of Montrose among scores of others should become commonplace." All these are from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries of the feudal era in Scotland.

The connection between the Southern right and Scotland has a historic progeny. The Ku Klux Klan is said to have been formed by emigrant Scots cavalry officers within the Confederate Army in 1860. Its oaths were imported from the Society of the Horseman's Word in North East Scotland, and the burning cross was used as a call to arms by Scottish clans in the fourteenth century. The Confederate flag bears a distinct resemblance to the Scots Saltire.

The sinister and openly fascistic Christian Identity is viewed as one of the more influential fascist networks in America. It has circulated 50,000 copies of the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath championing Scottish independence. Christian Identity view all "Celtic" races including Scots, Irish, Welsh, regional English, as descendants of the 10 tribes of Israel, with the Scots being the "purest". Jewish people by contrast are described as descendants of the devil.

The *Scotsman* newspaper interviewed Thomas Leyden, a former white supremacist, who told of a visit to an

Aryan Nation's compound in Oregon where haggis and bagpipes were as praised as Hitler's brownshirts and the Ku Klux Klan. Leyden told the *Scotsman*, "There is an image they like to cultivate of tough, hardy people in the Highlands who fight a London government which cares nothing for its culture or its people."

On March 20 last year, the US Senate passed a resolution inaugurating an annual Tartan Day every April 6. This is to "recognize the outstanding achievements and contributions made by Scottish Americans to the United States". Tartan Day emerged after several years of campaigning by the Scottish Coalition of business and heritage groups. Though it won Democratic backing, the Republican right, most notably party leaders Trent Lott and Newt Gingrich, heavily promoted the Tartan Day resolution. Lott had moved the resolution for three years running before it was finally passed.

The resolution bizarrely claims the Declaration of Arbroath as the inspiration of the US Declaration of Independence. It goes on, "This resolution honors the major role that Scottish Americans played in the founding of this Nation, such as the fact that almost half the signers of the Declaration of Independence were of Scottish descent, the Governors in 9 of the original 13 states were of Scottish ancestry, Scottish Americans successfully shaped this country in its formative years and guided this Nation through its most troubled times."

Linking the Arbroath declaration of the late Middle Ages with the Declaration of Independence--a document inspired by the progressive ideas of the Enlightenment--is at best highly dubious. But it encapsulates the right wing's preoccupation with Scotland. As Hague explains, "Scottish identity in the USA is substantially more than just romantic nonsense. Scottishness in the USA is constructed within a specific political rhetoric.... Tartan Day reasserts the authentic, original America, using as a route to this an assertion of Scottish ethnicity and Scottish tradition.... Today's society, by contrast, is perceived to be amoral and superficial, whereas the 'ancient' Scottish and especially Celtic traditions are understood as authentic and spiritual.

"This Scotland is strongly imagined in terms of being white, militaristic and family oriented. Such opinions tally with the US political right, and hence it is no surprise when Republican and right-wing conservative leaders sponsor Tartan Day."

The Scottish National Party raises support and maintains an office in the US, and its recruiting leaflets are circulated at Celtic fairs and events. Hague warned

them: "Scottishness in the USA is tied up in a politics much further to the right than the SNP advocate for Scotland. Perhaps this could come back to haunt Scotland, especially as the feeling is that American Scots should have more say in Scottish affairs."

It is apparent that sections of the US far right, including those presently assailing Clinton, find a mythical version of Scottish history useful for their present political purposes. This fabricated Scotland closely echoes contemporary rhetoric. This nation of "Bravehearts" has no social classes, only Scots. It devotes itself to defending "ancient freedoms"--that are thankfully bound up with land, property and religion--against a foreign threat, both external and internal.

This is not a recent invention. In addition to portraying Scotland as classless, Scottish nationalism has always had a pronounced right-wing element. The origins of the SNP itself lie partly in the National Party, one of whose 1930s pamphlet declared, "Class antagonism is a thing quite foreign to the Scottish spirit. It was unknown here until it was imported from England.... In Scotland there is no such inherent feeling of a separation between classes."

In 1937, at a time of considerable anti-Catholic hysteria directed against Irish workers in Scotland, the SNP warned of a "Green Terror" caused by Irish immigration, and called for the Scottish people to be given the "key to the racial destiny of their country" or face a race war.

Today, the SNP present themselves as a left-wing party of "civic nationalism". They dismissed Hague's warning, albeit rather nervously, and attacked him in the Scottish press. Both the SNP and the Labour government welcomed Tartan Day as a means to win more US investment in Scotland. Nevertheless, the ease with which the extreme right in America has assimilated Scottish nationalism and its historical icons contradicts the view advanced by the SNP and others such as the Scottish Socialist Party that Scottish nationalism is inherently progressive. It should, as Hague cautions, give pause for thought regarding the true political character of the current resurgence of nationalism.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact