

12-15-2016

Scotland and the Caribbean

Jo DuRant
University of Glasgow

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DuRant, Jo (2016) "Scotland and the Caribbean," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 41: Iss. 1, 277–280.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol41/iss1/23>

This Book Reviews is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in Scottish Literature* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

REVIEWS

SCOTLAND AND THE CARIBBEAN

Michael Morris, *Scotland and the Caribbean, c. 1740-1833: Atlantic Archipelagos*. Routledge Studies in Cultural History, 35. New York and London: Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group), 2015. Pp. xiv + 256. \$140.00; £85.00. ISBN 978-1138778986.

Scotland's involvement in British colonialism, especially the participation of Scots in the Atlantic slave economy, was for many years ignored, glossed over, minimized, or perhaps purposely hidden. While Scottish economic historians recognized the profits that Scottish merchants and nobility gained from trade in sugar, cotton, and tobacco, the slave basis for this trading received less attention. More recently, historians, literary critics, and creative writers have begun to take another look at the role Scotland and Scottish people played in the Atlantic slave trade. Michael Morris's fascinating cultural study of the interplay of Scotland and slavery also stands as a study of Scottish participation in British colonialism or perhaps even of British colonialism as represented in Scottish authors and historical figures.

In his introduction, Morris frames his work as addressing the problem of collective amnesia and willful ignorance towards Scotland's role in the Atlantic slave economy. He sets out to write "a 'cultural history' which suggests that Scottish-Caribbean relations provide an opportunity to shine a light into the murkier corners of Scotland's 'collective memory'" (1). His announced intention is to avoid strictly literary criticism or straightforward historical narrative to study connections between Scottish identity and the economic and cultural impact of the slave trade. Morris grounds this approach in the scholarship of Carla Sassi relating to history and memory and in Lionel Gossman's ideas on the interrelation of history

and literature, so connecting older histories of Scotland with the processes of memory formation and questions of truth.

Chapter One establishes the theoretical base of the book, a transnational approach using the ideas of archipelagic and creolization theory to understand both Great Britain and the Caribbean islands. Morris argues that, unlike a national approach to this question of Scotland and the Caribbean, a transnational approach better acknowledges the complex cultural interplay within and between both societies. Among other writers on the concept of an archipelago, he quotes the Caribbean scholar Antonio Benitez-Rojo, who writes the Caribbean “has ‘neither a boundary nor a center’” (49). Morris will apply this theory to the British Isles as well as to the Caribbean, so that Scotland is presented “as a composite culture within an archipelago and seeks to trace its presence amongst the submarine roots of Caribbean creolization” (p 58).

Chapter Two, “Archipelagic Poetics: Pastoral, Georgic and the Scoto-British Imperial Vision, c. 1740-1785” explores how the poetic forms of pastoral and georgic shaped the construction of a popular idea of Caribbean life and the colonial project in general. The two poetic forms, using agricultural scenes, were used by both by an abolitionist work such as *Jamaica, A Poem* (1777) to romanticize the plight of slaves and by a pro-slavery work such as James Grainger’s *The Sugar Cane* (1764) to romanticize their brutalization into something more idyllic. Morris finds similarities between poetic representations of the Scottish poor and that of slaves in the West Indies. In its use of the georgic to present an idyllic and peaceful vision of plantation life, “Scoto-British archipelagic poetics run aground against the ‘problem of slavery’ ” (86).

In Chapter Three, Morris turns to Robert Burns, who has been a focal point for several recent critical treatments of Scotland and the Caribbean, because Burns planned to go to the Caribbean but does not make a direct condemnation of slavery anywhere in his works. The Burns problem has been thoroughly discussed by Nigel Leask, Murray Pittock, Gerard Carruthers, Corey Andrews, and others, so rather than address it explicitly Morris explores the ways that the “Caribbean is infused throughout the ‘Kilmarnock edition’” (99). He also addresses how historians of abolition and Scotland often set up a dichotomy between “British slavery” and “Scottish abolition” that can serve to erase or soften Scottish economic involvement. In looking at the work of Helen Maria Williams, Captain John Marjoribanks, and James Boswell on the abolition of slavery, he suggests how Scottish writing related to the first

socio-political reform movement to encompass the entire British archipelago. This chapter ends with the problem of remembering Burns, illustrated by his popularity both with the American abolitionist Frederick Douglass and the plantation owners of the American south, showing just how fluid an historical figure Burns can be.

Chapter Four covers the movement from the abolition of the slave trade, finally enacted by the British parliament in 1807, to emancipation for slaves, enacted in 1833. Morris shows the influence that Scottish Enlightenment authors and philosophers had on this movement that focused heavily on “improvement” through gradual introduction of freedoms and individual land holdings. connects to the Scottish enlightenment. Those opposed to the emancipation of slaves feared that newly freed slaves would abandon work and destroy the economy, leading to social breakdown. Morris gives a reading of *Marly; or a Planter’s Tale*, (1828) a “Scoto-British imperial prose georgic” (164), possibly written by John Stewart, that espouses the ideal of a benevolent master gradually allowing slaves more freedoms to avoid revolts while maintaining control and ownership.

In Chapter Five, Morris studies the lives of Robert Wedderburn (1763?-1835?) and Mary Seacole (1805-81) whose lives and writings offer two different visions of a mixed race identity and different uses of their Scottish heritage. Robert Wedderburn was born free to his Scottish master James Wedderburn and an enslaved woman, Rosana, eventually moving to London. In Morris’s account, Wedderburn, embodying both the “black and red atlantic,” was crucial to the formation of the “Atlantic working class,” by connecting literal enslavement in the Caribbean with the economic situation of Scottish colliery and factory workers. Mary Seacole, on the other hand, is a Victorian heroine, very proud of her Scottish blood and a self-identified “patriotic subject of Britannia” (186). She was the daughter of a Scottish officer and a free black Jamaican “doctress.” Her work, *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857), exalts Britain (which for her includes Jamaica, Morris argues), finding few problems with British society. Indeed, Morris points to the elements of racism in her book as mainly coming from Americans, who are represented as less civilized and polite than the British. These two figures “demonstrate the diversity within Scotland’s past, which legitimizes its multicultural present” (193).

The book closes with a study of Joseph Knight, the African-born slave from Jamaica and the successful plaintiff in the landmark case of *Knight vs. Wedderburn* (1777), which ruled that once in Scotland slaves were

free and protected by Scottish law. Morris focuses on James Robertson's recent novel *Joseph Knight* (2003), a blend of history with fiction, and this interplay serves as a suitable conclusion to a work that is concerned with the creation of histories, personal and societal, and how they are remembered through time. In his criticism of the Robertson novel, Morris argues that, in a situation where through carelessness or the intent to hide all the facts are no longer available, it is necessary to look beyond the archives

Throughout the book, Morris cross-refers to instances of cultural diversity in contemporary Scotland. As he notes, statistically much of Scotland remains much less diverse racially than most of Europe, but dealing with a mixed race heritage is not just a problem of the past, of Wedderburn and Seacole. Two examples of this attention to the present come in Morris's Introduction, where he discusses the recent play *Fifty Shades of Black* by Scottish-Caribbean playwright Lou Pendergrass, about her father, a half Jamaican, half Scottish pimp in 1960s Glasgow, and the 2007 radio play, *The Lamplighter*, by the Nigerian-Scottish poet and novelist, Jackie Kay, the first of several references to Kay's work.

Morris positions his study, therefore, not only as uncovering forgotten truths, but as connecting to current Scottish politics. The body of the text was completed before the Independence referendum in September, and the introduction frames the questions of slavery and colonialism as important to the creation of a modern Scottish identity. In a short foreword, written after Scotland voted to stay in the United Kingdom, Morris writes: "The self-critical reappraisal of Scotland and empire remains an urgent issue. I am happy to situate the recovery of the memory of slavery performed here within that section of the independence movement that calls for peace, equality and internationalism" (xii). These are, of course, questions also facing many other nations. Morris sets out not to just to unravel the past, but "reweave a new history that might 'free our histories for future flowerings'" (226), to clarify the past so we can better understand our present. His broad-ranging and well-researched study should be welcomed, not only for its alert critical discussion of specific writers, but as a good introduction to recent debates and research on the legacy of Caribbean slavery, as seen from a Scottish perspective.

Jo DuRant

University of Glasgow