

'Just better than them': Scottish Superiorism

David Stenhouse

When Randall Wallace started to cry I knew I was on to something. In person the screenwriter who wrote *Braveheart* seems to have come straight from central casting; his skin is baked a light gold by the California sun, he has blond streaks in his hair and he speaks with a soft Tennessee accent. He was standing in the incongruous setting of a Scottish old folks home in Chicago, speaking about the auld country, when unexpectedly the tears began to flow.



First though, the setting. An eight-foot bronze piper guards the gates of the Scottish Home in North Riverside, Illinois. He is marching out with a jaunty rhythm, and if you press a button near his foot a hidden loudspeaker belts out a cheery bagpipe tune.

He's the most appropriate person to guard the threshold of an uprooted bit of Scotland which seems to have come straight from the glens of Brigadoon.

Inside the carpets are tartan, the walls are covered in paintings of Rabbie Burns, and stags' heads keep a beady watch over the stairwells. The Scottish Home was set up by Scottish immigrants to the Windy City to look after their impoverished old people in the 1800s and it has been performing that function ever since. In the basement a museum celebrates the memories of the residents who lived there before leaving this bit of Scotland behind for good. Its shelves groan with Jimmy Shand records, pots of Dundee Marmalade, *Oor Wullie* annuals and a green knitted Nessie with a Tartan Toorie jauntily fixed to her head with a single cross-stitch.

It was in this room that Randall Wallace was due to speak to the ranks of the Illinois St Andrew's Society. In the world of the American Scots, Randall Wallace is a demi-god, and his ancestor a full-blown deity. Whenever he went to speak to Scottish societies, he confessed, he was told that before *Braveheart* they had an active membership in the hundreds, but that after Mel Gibson had taken to the big screen as the blue and white painted freedom fighter, their ranks had swelled 10 or even 100-fold.

But as he told a story about taking his father to Scotland for the first time and standing on the esplanade of Stirling Castle imagining William Wallace leading his forces into battle on the plane below, he stopped, swallowed and struggled to get the words out through his tears.

You could have heard a pin drop: the audience of American Scots were transfixed by this overflowing of emotion from the man who had recreated William Wallace for the modern world.

At my table a native born Scot who had emigrated to Chicago in the last year rolled his eyes and leaned forward conspiratorially. 'Can you imagine getting away with this in Glasgow?'

Of course not. It's hard to imagine a greater contrast than that between the colourful, innocent patriotism of Scottish Americans and the glum attitudes of modern, civic, devolutionary Scotland where Victorianism is despised and the dominant mood is what the Hungarians call *honfibu* – patriotic sorrow. In Scotland the general view of American Scots is that they are embarrassing idiots. I think we could learn a lot from them.

When I left Chicago, Wayne Rethford, standing down after almost 30 years as head of the Illinois St Andrew's Society, gave me a gift of a book he had written on the Scots contribution to Illinois life. Inside, almost as an after-thought he wrote the words 'Scots are great'.

It's a sentiment which more and more of his countrymen share.

In the North America of the early 21st century there is no more fashionable leaf in the salad bowl than the thistle. James Webb, who was Ronald Reagan's secretary for the Navy, has just published a book called *Born Fighting* which celebrates the contributions of the Scotch-Irish to American life. Arthur Herman's book on how Scots invented the Modern world continues to sit high in the best-seller charts and Mary Walters, the Harvard Sociologist, has just completed research which shows that of the white ethnic

identities in the US, Scottishness is now amongst the most popular, whereas at the end of the 1980s, it was the least popular of all. Even if their mother was German and their father Scottish, 20 years ago white Americans were more likely to identify themselves as German than Scottish. Now the Germans, Italians, English and even the Irish are on the slide: being a Scots American is where it is at.

Nor is it simply a matter of ethnicity; many of the most fervent American Scots would be hard-pressed to find a pinch of Scottish DNA in their bloodstreams, and legions of O'Leary's, Scarlattis and Cohens are desperate to prove their connection to Scotland by joining Scottish clan societies. Some of these societies are now so popular that they have closed their books to new members.

And the popularity and pride which now attaches to being a Scottish American has been fuelled by one central element – a recognition and celebration of Scottish over-achievement.

In North America, the Scot has been hymned as a heroic over-achiever since the end of the 18th century. In the 20th century there was Charles Hanna's *The Scot in North Britain, North Ireland and North America* (1902) George Fraser Black's *Scotland's Mark on America* (1921), John H Finlay's *The Coming of the Scot* (1940) and, to take the series right up to date, Duncan A. Bruce's *The Mark of the Scot* (1996). These books all have one thing in common: the assumption that Scots are remarkable, indeed exceptional people, and that they have made a disproportionate impact on the countries where they have chosen to live. In the introduction to a soon-to-be-published collection of essays on 'Transatlantic Scots' the American academic Celeste Ray describes the Scots as 'freakishly over-achieving'. To Scottish ears it sounds like pietistic nonsense; it's rapidly becoming an orthodoxy in North America.

It's hard to measure these claims for Scottish over-achievement against any meaningful yardstick. Just how big a contribution is an immigrant community 'normally' supposed to make to its host country? Are the Scots who signed the American Declaration of Independence, who founded American Universities and eventually sired Presidents of the United States lucky immigrants, who managed to float to the top of America's moiling economy, or something more?

Either way, the rhetoric of

over-achievement is central to Scottish American identity; almost as central in fact as the rhetoric of failure is to Scots at home.

Before I left Scotland I sent six boxes of books to Shelter. Most of them I hadn't read for more than a decade, and at the back of one shelf I discovered a particularly dusty relic. Fifteen years ago, Beveridge and Turnbull's book *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture* coined a term which was quickly adopted into the Scottish political lexicon: inferiorism.

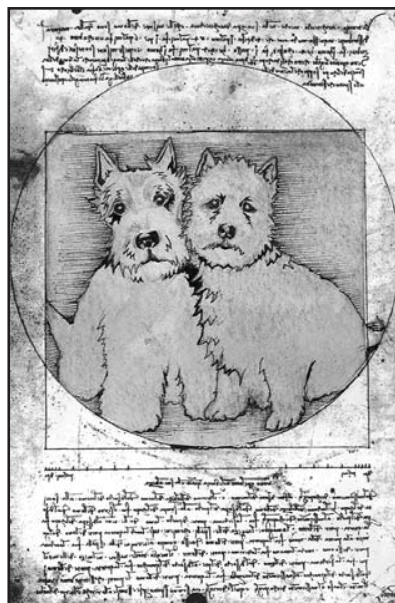
Applying Franz Fanon's model of African colonialisation to Scotland, the two argued that Scotland's indigenous culture was systemically undervalued, reframed as parochial and anomalous by dominant English culture and set up to have its differences 'reformed' away.

The idea of Scottish inferiorism found a ready audience in a country which felt under pressure from a Thatcherism blue in tooth and claw: at that time Scotland was routinely described by Thatcherite ministers as being anomalous in not having embraced the deregulation which had produced such a boom in the South East of England: Scotland, so the argument went, clung to outmoded practices and attitudes and needed to be jolted out of its complacency.

But though Fanon's theory had never been applied in quite this way before, and many questioned whether applying the model to a country which had prospered so conspicuously from colonialism was in bad taste, the idea that Scotland's culture is in some sense intrinsically inferior to others around the world has a deep resonance in Scotland.

As Paul H. Scott has so eloquently shown, almost immediately after the Union, whilst supporters praised Scotland's opportunities in expansive terms, opponents of the settlement focused on the extent of Scotland's diminution, its loss of autonomy, its disappearance as an independent international power and, crucially, its shame. A country which sold its statehood and downgraded its political institutions for the pecuniary advantage of its ruling class lost moral capital as well a political autonomy.

The smallness of Scotland, its physical inferiority, is forever assumed even when it is explicitly rejected; from MacDiarmid's 'Scotland small?' to the flipping of Scotland's presumed weakness into a (moral) strength. Michael Marra's 'Hairless' with its celebration of the small town values of staying innocuous and staying safe is wittier than most but



assumed Scottish powerlessness is normally implicit rather than sung about.

Even that persistent nationalist argument about how Scotland should become 'just like the other small nations of Europe' valorises Scotland as a timorous beastie, closer to a Denmark or a Luxemburg than to its constitutional bed partner these last 300 years.

Size is indeed an issue in Scotland, but not in the way we think. Like Grampa Broom in one of Dudley Watkins' most entertaining strips, Scotland often seems to be wearing a pair of glasses which exaggerates the smallest details to the size of mountains and reduces looming facts to a microscopic scale.

If, around the world, Scotland is thought to be a remarkable place, and in Scotland, according to a recent poll, only 44% are 'proud' or 'very proud' of being Scottish, where exactly does the problem lie?

Helpfully, running counter to the rhetoric which accepts, valorises or laments Scottish inferiority, there is another persistent strain of argument which maintains that Scotland is intrinsically better than the other nations of the world, and certainly than its southern neighbour: let's call it Scottish Superiorism.

Though Scottish superiorism is now accepted most readily outside Scotland, it was once a British orthodoxy. In the 19th century the idea that Scots were culturally, even genetically, programmed for success, was an accepted part of the British national debate, and opinion formers went to considerable lengths to explain it. To take only one example amongst thousands, in November 1898 the Revd John Watson, who as 'Ian McLaren' had published *The Bonnie Briar Bush* four years earlier, spoke to the Liverpool Caledonian Society on the occasion of St Andrew's Night. The subject of his talk was 'Scottish Character'.

When the Scot went to a foreign country, he had a keen sympathy with the political struggles of that country, and was not inclined to quarrel with its political traditions: but left to himself, nine Scots out of 10 reverted to that just and strong democracy which was created by John Knox, who found a number of nobles and their retainers and left a consolidated and independent nation. (Applause.)

No-one would try this today, but if they did, it would be seen as a hoary Victorian piece of J.M. Barrie-ism which is irrelevant to the real issue of Scotland and Scottishness.

But while the Scottish opinion making classes now believe themselves to be too sophisticated to swallow such stuff, it's easy to find evidence of Scottish superiorism in popular culture: the bookshelves groan under the weight of books with titles like *Great Scots!*, *Famous Scots* or *Scottish Achievers*, celebrating Scottish achievements at home and abroad.

Nor is the idea that Scotland is a remarkable country which produces remarkable people confined to the popular press:

'I remember being at a party with [then Labour leader] John Smith,' John Lloyd, the editor of the *Financial Times* magazine told me, 'and he said, "why don't they [the English] realise we're just better than them?"'

To many in contemporary civic Scotland this talk just sounds plain weird. It's important to realise though that in the great scheme of things, it's those who don't believe it who are the odd ones out.

In November this year I went to see Duncan Bruce, the author of *The Mark of the Scots*, first published in the mid-1990s and the book which first turned many American Scots on to the splendours of their tartan heritage. We were speaking about the relationship between the Scottish diaspora and the Scots in Scotland. One thing he said has stayed with me ever since: 'What you must realise in Scotland is that there are thousands of people all around the world who think of themselves as Scottish. They may not vote in Scotland, they may not follow the twists and turns of Scottish politics but they, we are Scottish.'

That statement, with its vision of a global Scottishness which straddles international boundaries and political systems, offers a profound challenge: to somehow connect domestic civic Scottishness with expansive UK and international Scottishness and to reframe Scottish experience in such a way that the conspicuous successes of Scots abroad are seen, not as the exception to Scottish experience, but as a rule which can inspire life in contemporary Scotland. Perhaps the first element in that would be for civic Scotland to stop treating the Scottish diaspora as something between a joke and an embarrassment and start listening to their views. In the process we might learn that we're not as small as we thought we were.

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