

Border Warranty: John McGrath and Scotland

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An invitation to discuss John McGrath's work in the Scottish theatre seems at first – to any Scottish critic, anyway – exceptionally generous and unconstraining: like being asked at a conference on Shakespeare to talk *only* about the dramatic works; or, at a conference on icebergs, to concentrate on the bits underwater. It only takes a moment, of course, to recall how far McGrath's career extended beyond Scotland, and indeed beyond the theatre. Scottish commentators and audiences are likely to forget this simply because his work was so important within Scotland – so influential on Scottish theatre; so clearly shaped by it, too. This is a perspective which may well be less accessible outwith Scotland: in any case, it is worth beginning by outlining its principal components.

From one point of view, now rather an old-fashioned one, McGrath's high standing in the history of Scottish drama might simply be attributed to the poverty of the competition. Notoriously, G. Gregory Smith's 1919 study of Scottish literature considered dramatic writing as scarce as the 'owls and snakes of Iceland'. At mid-century, the playwright George Munro continued to find only 'deserts and wild beasties' on Scotland's 'Theatre Chart'. Two decades later, Christopher Small, editor of the *Glasgow Herald*, was still ready to refer to 'Snakes in the History of Iceland' as a metaphor for the scarcity of contemporary plays.¹ Almost as clichéd as assumptions that English drama barely existed before *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, such views have been much amended in the last twenty years or so, with the general conclusion that Scottish drama went through a strong revival, beginning in the 1970s, which quickly took it well beyond the chilly deserts of earlier years. In looking harder at those earlier years, too, Bill Findlay's recent *History of Scottish Theatre* (1998) showed that however attenuated play-writing may have been in Scotland, the country never really lacked a *theatrical* tradition – one especially strong in popular performance modes, with pantomime and music-hall enjoying particular success in the late nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth. Other commentators such as Femi Folorunso and Frank Bruce have argued recently that 'probably no other cultural form has exerted as much imaginative influence on the popular mind in Scotland as the music hall and its confederates', and that 'Scotland's most consistent theatrical tradition is its popular theatre'.² In a way, this tradition might even be retraced to Scotland's first great dramatic success, Sir David Lindsay's *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaites* in 1554, which included song, knockabout action, broad comedy, and a rich humour latent in vernacular Scots to develop solidarity with its audience and to direct satire on contemporary poverty, social conditions generally, and the deficiencies of the Catholic clergy in particular. Ironically, Lindsay's attention to this last subject helped to move Scotland towards the Reformation, and hence towards forms of Christianity far less tolerant of the theatre. As Findlay's *History* shows, suspicion, persecution or sometimes physical assault by churchmen regularly added to the difficulties of theatre companies over the next three hundred years. These were obviously compounded by the removal of

the Court in 1603, and by a diminished sense of national confidence and identity after the Union of the Parliaments in 1707.

The revival in Scottish dramatic writing in the 1970s – maybe even in England's, in the 1950s – could perhaps be related to the Church's decline, and to a corresponding return of the Dionysiac to national life. In Scotland's case, there is even an argument that ministers offered their congregations such riveting, weekly versions of fire and brimstone, battles between the Beast and the Lord, as to have made other forms of drama almost superfluous. More plausibly, the growing hold of the theatre on Scottish imagination in the 1970s can be shown to have had political and ultimately economic causes. Scottish nationalism had begun to be a political force even in the 1960s: by the start of the next decade, it was much fuelled by the discovery of the resources under the North Sea and the ubiquitous Scottish National Party claim that 'It's Scotland's Oil'. It was a claim directly reflected in contemporary drama. The mercenary soldier in Stewart Conn's *Play Donkey* (1977), for example, ponders 'fighting for wur freedom, after all these centuries', significantly adding that there 'might even be a chance of . . . getting paid for it, now there's all that oil'. Tom Gallacher set an adaptation of *The Tempest, The Sea Change* (1976) on an oil rig, commenting that 'the burgeoning riches of oil off the Scottish coast accomplished a sea change in the Arts as well . . . Scottishness was an asset, not a liability'.³ Renewed self-interest in the 'asset' of Scottishness appeared at several other levels in the dramatic revival of the time, encouraging playwrights to explore further – as Hugh MacDiarmid had recommended as long ago as 1926 that they should – specific '*differentia*' of Scottish outlook and experience.⁴ Scots language played an especially significant part in this. Throughout the 1970s, playwrights such as Donald Campbell, Roddy McMillan and Bill Bryden contributed to a rediscovery of the dramatic power of Scots speech in creating solidarities and immediacies of communication between stage and audience. With most other media still dominated by standard English, this helped to make the theatre a unique public space at the time – one encouraging national interests to speak in their own voice, national identity to be particularly accented, and collective outlooks to coalesce. In these ways, and to an extent probably not yet fully recognised, it was the theatre which actually led the wider, much-vaunted, Scottish literary revival usually supposed to have occurred after, and as compensation for, the failure of the Devolution Bill in 1979.

John McGrath's work made significant contributions in this area. His use of Gaelic in *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973) was still more emotive – a still greater lever on the sympathies of Highland audiences, who might never have encountered it in live theatre performance – than the use of Scots at that time for Lowland audiences. For the latter, too, McGrath soon showed himself – in plays such as *Out of Our Heads* (1976) and *Blood Red Roses* (1980) – thoroughly adept in the gallow colloquialism of the West of Scotland; also, in *Joe's Drum* (1979), in the different tones of the East. Yet his key contribution to the 1970s dramatic revival was in another area of contemporary rediscovery: of the imaginative and theatrical potentials of Scottish history. Several playwrights had begun to use history in an essentially Yeatsian way, reconsidering, or reshaping, heroic episodes in Scotland's past which could empower nationalist consciousness in the present, consolidating ideas of 'fighting for wur freedom after all these centuries'. Possibly the best example appeared earlier, in Sidney Goodsir Smith's rousing dramatic pageant *The*

Wallace, in 1960. A prototype *Braveheart*, its Edinburgh Festival revival in the mid-1980s led to SNP factions 'spontaneously' raising banners in the auditorium, at the end of each performance, demanding Scotland's freedom. Playwrights in the 1970s had continued to work in this vein, and with similar implications. Characters in Hector MacMillan's *The Rising*, for example, persecuted for their wish to 'set up a Scottish Assembly, or Parliament, in Edinburgh', could obviously 'appeal wi confidence tae posterity' if the posterity concerned was a Scottish theatre audience in 1973.⁵

History, in McGrath's writing, was obviously put to different uses – more Brechtian, more analytic, and emotive in more structured ways. In concentrating on the Highland clearances in the *Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil*, McGrath could hardly have fixed on a more emotive phase of Scottish history, yet the play's radical shifts between epochs and alienated performance style ensured that the emotions concerned could not be indulged only for their own sake, or as part of what McGrath called the 'lament syndrome' so often associated with the Highland past. Instead, they directed and heightened audiences' awareness of 'why the tragedies of the past happened', of the capitalist machinations which threatened to reduplicate them in the present, and of the need 'to fight and agitate for the alternative'. The sentimental nationalism of the song the audience join at the beginning, 'These are my mountains . . .', develops in this way into recognition that they are not their mountains at all, but belonged first to some sheep, then to Queen Victoria, and eventually to Texas Jim: generally, into the recognition – once memorably delivered to a Scottish National Party conference – that 'Nationalism is not enough. The enemy of the Scottish people is Scottish capital, as much as the foreign exploiter'.⁶ The prescience of this warning – that unless the population was very careful, the slogan 'It's Scotland's Oil' might as well be rewritten as 'It's the Oil Companies' Scotland' – was widely apparent even before the Piper Alpha oil rig disaster killed scores of workers in 1988.

Similar warnings continued to be delivered by McGrath's work later in the 1970s. Concentrating on different phases of history from most other authors at the time, he continued to highlight the limits of contemporary nationalism, and the need for socialist alternatives, in plays such as such as *The Game's a Bogey* (1974) and *Little Red Hen* (1975), portraying the 'Red Clydeside' agitation, following the First World War, led by the legendary Glasgow Marxist, John MacLean. Similar priorities remained more or less in evidence, and were sometimes further clarified, over the next two decades. In 'From Cheviots to Silver Darlings', his interview with Olga Taxidou in *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies*, McGrath outlined complex relations to nationalism – certainly never straightforwardly antipathetic – and praised Tom Nairn's version of 'Civic Nationalism' as a 'fruitful movement, a fruitful communal emotion' increasingly important within a globalised culture and the growing political centralism of modern Europe.⁷ Written in response to that failed Devolution Bill, *Joe's Drum* was ready to recommend that Scotland 'flourish, and add [its] own, independent weight to the world'. Yet in *Border Warfare* (1989), in following the 'theme, a thousand years long', of English oppression of Scotland, McGrath's principal concern remained with borders which run through countries, rather than only with those between them – ones highlighted in the conclusion in *Little Red Hen* that

there's two Scotlands . . . there's the Scotland that's . . . been robbed and

cheated and worked to the bone when it suits or thrown on the queue at the buroo when it doesnae suit – that's one Scotland; and there's a Scotland that owns factories . . . and sweat shops . . . and grouse moors and mountains and islands and stocks and shares and says what goes – and only one of them can be free at a time.⁸

As Margaret Thatcher's mercilessly sado-monetarist soliloquy at the end of *Border Warfare* emphasised, though the play's principal lesson was that Scotland was perennially 'bought and sold for English gold', the accent always fell heavily on the terms 'bought', 'sold' and 'gold', and on the thoroughgoing complicities of Scottish capital and ruling class with any machinations originating with foreign oppressors.

So if McGrath seems such a thoroughly Scottish playwright, at least to people in Scotland, it's partly because he intervened so crucially in the 1970s, and later, in debates which remained specific, and central, to Scottish politics – and in many ways to its theatre revival – throughout the last decades of the century. Playwrights, of course, are rarely celebrated only for the acuteness or timeliness of their political interventions, but rather for the ways these are staged. In this aspect, too, McGrath seems inextricably related to the Scottish context, though as a beneficiary of existing theatrical modes as well as a contributor to them. In 'From Cheviots to Silver Darlings' McGrath recalled finding on his first foray northward with 7:84, in 1971, that 'Scottish popular audiences have a totally different set of traditions of popular entertainment . . . a different language, not only theatrical and verbal, but political and social'.⁹ When he returned to form 7:84 (Scotland) in 1973, it was certainly not to find a theatre scene dominated only by historical drama of nationalist nostalgia, or entirely lacking in the kind of political agenda 7:84 sought to publicise. On the contrary, throughout the previous summer, nightly in Glasgow and then at the Edinburgh Festival, huge audiences had enjoyed one of the great unsung – not literally unsung – successes of modern political theatre, *The Great Northern Welly Boot Show*. The 'comedy, latent energy and class awareness in abundance' which Elizabeth MacLennan recognised in it were significant, at the time and later, in a number of ways.¹⁰ For Glasgow audiences in particular, it celebrated an outstanding local political success: the 1971 occupation by the workforce, led by shop-steward Jimmy Reid, of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' Yard (UCS), thinly disguised as a welly boot factory in this production. For the early 1970s, the occupation was a famous and formative event: McGrath was later to record the immediate genesis of the *Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* in Richard Eyre's suggestion of a production combining the history of the Highlands with recent events at UCS. The *Welly Boot Show* was also distinguished by the creative personnel it involved. The designer was John Byrne, creator of the pop-up book for the *Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, and later author of the *Slab Boys* trilogy. Some of the music was by Tom McGrath, author of a number of plays, most famously *The Hardman* with Jimmy Boyle. The songs, often drawing on a Scottish folk-music tradition, were performed by Billy Connolly – former shipyard-worker, late exemplar of a Scottish popular comedy tradition, and eventually, among much besides, also a playwright himself. Most importantly for 7:84, the *Welly Boot Show* provided several of the performers who went on to work with McGrath on the *Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* – John Bett, Alex Norton, and Bill Paterson; all already adept in a theatrical style using song, knockabout action, broad

comedy, and a rich humour latent in vernacular Scots to develop solidarity with audiences and direct firm satiric vision on recent political events.

Description of the *Welly Boot Show* in exactly the terms earlier applied to *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* is tendentious – there were obviously differences between 1554 and 1973 – but also emphasises how far the Scottish context may *always* have offered particular opportunities for direct, pungent commentary on contemporary politics; for particular solidarities of language or outlook between audience and stage; and for use of the distinctive ‘traditions of popular entertainment’, unusually prominent throughout Scotland’s theatre history, which McGrath recognised. McGrath undoubtedly brought to Scotland a set of political interests and performance idioms developed for himself, based on work at the Liverpool Everyman, on earlier experience with 7:84, and on a whole range of mentors and models no doubt including Brecht, Piscator and Joan Littlewood. Yet to an extent he arrived in Scotland to discover that his idioms and interests had got there before him, or had always been there. Differences between the *Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, or *The Game’s a Bogey*, and that earlier work in Liverpool – or, still more obviously, the naturalistic manner of *Random Happenings in the Hebrides* (1969) – indicate not only personal development and growing radicalisation after 1968, but also rapid adaptation to a new tradition. McGrath’s continuing indebtedness to this tradition, and his conviction of his own settled role within it, were clearly confirmed by the Edinburgh Festival production of *A Satire of the Four Estaites* in 1996. With almost numeric exactness, its title highlighted McGrath’s extension of a sequence of Scottish dramas, politically acute and broadly entertaining, stretching back to Sir David Lindsay’s initiative in the sixteenth century.

If *A Satire of the Four Estaites* marked a kind of final term, or terminus, in McGrath’s coalescence with Scottish traditions, there were also many important stages along the way – particularly in 7:84’s ‘Clydebuilt’ season in 1982. This revived, or virtually rediscovered, drama illustrative of what McGrath called the ‘strong cultural side’ belonging to a ‘long, rich and neglected tradition’ of working-class struggle in Scotland.¹¹ The plays included were Joe Corrie’s *In Time o’ Strife* (1927), Harry Trott’s *U.A.B Scotland* (1940), Ewan McColl’s *Johnny Noble* (1946), Ena Lamont Stewart’s *Men Should Weep* (1947) and George Munro’s *Gold in His Boots* (1947). Each reminded Scottish audiences that their theatre did indeed have a rich, neglected and highly politicised tradition, running back a long way beyond the 1970s – to the Glasgow Workers’ Theatre Group, in the case of Trott’s play; to Theatre Workshop’s Glasgow period in the late 1940s, for McColl’s; and to workers’ companies formed after the General Strike, eventually the Fife Miner Players, for Corrie’s. Both *Men Should Weep* and *Gold in His Boots* were first performed by a company in some ways directly comparable with 7:84, Glasgow Unity. Initially amateur, Unity incorporated during the war a number of largely working-class companies, including the Jewish Institute Players and the Transport Players as well as the Worker’s Theatre Group. Rather in the manner of *The Great Northern Welly Boot Show*, Unity’s productions – including their greatest success, Robert McLeish’s 1946 dramatisation of the contemporary housing crisis, *The Gorbals Story* – addressed immediate political concerns in ways specifically directed at, and sometimes even involving as performers, the ordinary people who experienced them most sharply. Sustained in dramas generally much more naturalistic than 7:84’s work, Unity’s political commitments were nevertheless equally clear. The company’s

motto, 'the theatre is the school of the people – it makes them think and it makes them feel' came from Gorki:¹² in a series of plays portraying chronic poverty, Unity repeatedly confronted its audiences with Glaswegian versions of the Lower Depths, and with a politics of implication demanding just as loudly as 7:84, three decades later, the need for redistribution of wealth and for radical social change.

Glasgow Unity, in other words, provided a prototype – consistent with the imaginative and theatrical resources of its age – of the Scottish People's Theatre 7:84 sought to establish in the 1970s and 1980s. Like *A Satire of the Four Estaites*, the 'Clydebuilt' season was an act of auto-genealogy: a relaxed version of Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence', through which McGrath and his company rediscovered, or recreated, their theatrical forbears.¹³ A 'long neglected' Scottish theatrical tradition would have slipped further from view without 7:84's work, which had itself always drawn on the potentials this tradition incorporated. Thoroughly plugged into Scottish social and political history, McGrath's drama was plugged into Scotland's theatrical past, in this way, in a circuit of reciprocal discovery thoroughly empowering for each. It was also widely enabling for later writers and directors, who found in 7:84's work all sorts of opportunities for combining elements domestic and international, established and innovative. Some of their indebtedness was indicated by Gerry Mulgrew, director of the popular experimental company Communicado, when he remarked in 1986 that McGrath's work had 'opened the door and provided the focus for a distinct and intelligent Scottish theatre. It engendered a whole popular movement whose reverberations are still being felt today'.¹⁴ They are still being felt in Scotland now, early in another century.

All of this should explain why it is so easy to think of John McGrath as a Scottish writer, even exclusively so. Yet it is not really the purpose of this article to claim McGrath solely for Scottish literature – though it would obviously be reasonable to claim sections of Scottish literature, at any rate substantial parts of recent Scottish theatre, for McGrath.¹⁵ Any such claim might run counter to the kind of border warnings, discussed above, about narrowly national or nationalist interests, which were such an important part of McGrath's contribution to the Scottish political scene. Instead, exploration of McGrath's Scottishness may also have much to reveal, usually contrastively, about the English context, and about the nature of political drama more generally, within Britain and beyond. There seems, at any rate, surprising scope for enquiry of this kind. Some of the best of commentators on recent political theatre, and on McGrath's work – John Bull, Maria DiCenzo, Baz Kershaw – do examine developments on both sides of the border, though not always in relation to each other. In other areas of theatre criticism, commentary of this kind is rarer, though Scottish critics should perhaps not complain too loudly about its sparseness. Dominic Shellard's recent *British Theatre since the War* (1999), for example, seems derisory in devoting to Scotland only four pages out of 260. Yet few Scottish theatre critics have paid much attention to England at all, or considered the implications for Scottish drama of developments made south of the border – apparently preferring to believe, like the early Soviets, that revolution, theatrically anyway, can happen in only one country at a time. In its political mode especially, theatre may be more intrinsically local in outlook than other literary forms, and was often made particularly so by McGrath – by his insistence that actors research and address local issues for every performance of touring shows, and by his development of quite different idioms for use in the Highlands and in the cities. This

might offer some excuse for narrowly local vision among theatre critics, but it can impose unnecessary limitations and misconstructions on their work nonetheless. English critics, for example, might have been less excited by the apparent novelty of the Osborne/Wesker/Delaney school of 1950s kitchen-sink realism had they been aware that for a decade or more, already, Scottish drama had scarcely moved more than a few feet from a kitchen sink; or noticed that Scottish companies had brought all their wares – including the kitchen sink – all the way to London at least twice, in the transfers of *The Gorbals Story* to the Garrick in 1948, and of George Munro's even grimmer *Gay Landscape* to the Royal Court ten years later.

Any British-wide assessment of the 'Second Wave', as John Russell Taylor called it, which followed the Royal Court school – the politicised generation, McGrath included, who dominated theatre in the later 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s – might usefully begin with the first line of Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain*, produced at the National Theatre in 1980: 'where the fuck are we?'. As well as its immediate relevance within the drama, the question had an obviously metatheatrical aspect, significant for the entire production, and certainly for the author himself. Of earlier work at the National, Brenton remarked that he found himself, along with his director David Hare and their cast, as if in 'an armoured charabanc . . . parked within the National walls'.¹⁶ Critics have often pondered why Hare, Brenton, David Edgar and other members of a supposedly radical generation of English playwrights were so ready to move from early work with agitprop, alternative or other small touring groups into parking spaces within the National Theatre, 'armoured' or otherwise. There remains more scope for enquiry into moves in a generally opposite direction. These define the careers not of a group of playwrights, but of the two most genuine radicals, politically and theatrically, in late twentieth-century British drama, John Arden and John McGrath. Each began with plays relatively conventional in style and in politics, performed in fairly established theatres: Arden with the pacifist problematics of *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959) at the Royal Court and *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* (1964) at the Glasgow Citizens; McGrath with the class-consciousness of drama such as *Events while Guarding the Bofors Gun*, performed at Hampstead in 1966. Each moved on, roughly simultaneously, to more radical socialist politics and to more innovative theatrical forms – Arden perhaps most clearly in *The Non-Stop Connolly Show*, produced for the Irish Trades Union Congress in 1975. Each was involved, or nearly became involved, in performances – bizarrely, though appropriately – just *outside* the country's grandest theatres. Arden picketed the Royal Shakespeare Company, at the Aldwych, during rehearsals for *The Island of the Mighty* in 1972; 7:84, apparently, were once invited to provide some form of street theatre *around* the National, as if its administration had realised at last that, like the Pompidou Centre in Paris, its interesting bits were to be found on the outside, rather than among the supposed cultural treasures ensconced within. Most importantly for the present argument, both Arden and McGrath eventually fled as far as possible from metropolitan theatre, towards the Celtic fringes of Ireland and Scotland.

It would be wrong, of course, to suppose that this was a move which simply provided McGrath with the theatrical equivalent of a tax haven. 7:84 were accepted within the established theatre in Scotland no more readily than they had been in England, nor did they seek such acceptance. On the contrary, the lasting legacies of McGrath's work included 7:84's initiation of a circuit of small, ad hoc performance spaces –

often in parts of the country, the Highlands particularly, that had scarcely encountered live theatre previously – and the persuasion of the Scottish Arts Council, for a time, that touring to such venues was a responsibility for any funded company. The productions of *Border Warfare* and *John Brown's Body* (1990) also helped consolidate the use of an old engine-shed and former transport museum in Glasgow – first employed theatrically for Peter Brook's *The Mahabharata* in 1988 – as 'The Tramway', a regular venue for experimental and progressive forms of drama ever since. All these developments extended McGrath's sensible conclusion that the most natural and necessary spectators of left-wing drama were ones who might never go near a conventional theatre, and that plays must therefore be taken to them. His metropolitan contemporaries, on the other hand, seemed readier to accept the supposedly bourgeois audiences who usually turned up to the established theatre, even if this meant sustaining thoroughly adversarial attitudes towards them – ones summed up in Brenton's metaphors of 'Petrol Bombs through the proscenium arch', as well as of his company lurking in an 'armoured charabanc' at the National.¹⁷ Such attitudes could hardly have been further from the collaborative, educative, cajoling forms of address in McGrath's plays, or from his determination to allow audiences to identify their strengths, problems, and capacities for change for themselves. Radical contrasts were equally evident in theme. The Hare/Edgar/Brenton faction seemed almost to relish berating their audiences for Britain's late twentieth-century decline, and moved on with apparent alacrity to political self-criticism, in Edgar's *Maydays* (1983), or to fantasy forms of utopianism, in Brenton's *Greenland* (1988), when socialist politics faltered in the 1980s. For McGrath, 'hopes can't just die/When a half of humanity's hungry and poor': change and improvement were always shown as achievable, and the bone didn't break.¹⁸ *Border Warfare*, *John Brown's Body*, and *A Satire of the Four Estates* all showed political conviction and theatrical inventiveness sustained into the late 1980s and 1990s, often with renewed vigour, despite the undoubted pressures of the time.

Much of the credit for this continued optimism, and the open, enabling forms of its communication, obviously goes to McGrath himself. Yet some also reflects on the Scottish audiences so much of his work addressed, and on the history which so disposed them towards it. 'A socialist country', in the view of most of its citizens, as Elizabeth MacLennan recorded, Scotland may simply offer a natural context for radical theatre.¹⁹ A country repeatedly on the wrong end of political and economic struggle throughout the last millennium, as *Border Warfare* showed, and one of the first to experience the Industrial Revolution, Scotland was inevitably a base for much of the early development of the Labour movement, a staunch supporter of it in later years, and ready towards the end of the twentieth century to reject the Tory Party comprehensively, apparently unanimously, eventually to the last parliamentary constituency, some time before the rest of the United Kingdom had quite recognised the urgency of doing so.²⁰ Thinking over this generally radical history, and its origins, a character in *Blood Red Roses* mentions:

Culloden . . . the King's Birthday Riots in 1792, the Friends of the People agitation, the militia riots at Tranent, the Clearing of the Highland straths, the Weavers Uprising in 1820 – right through to the marines landing on Skye and Tiree in the Crofters War in 1882, and the tanks in the streets of Glasgow in 1919 . . . the British Army never seemed to stop turning out for action against the population of Scotland.²¹

Could English history offer an equivalent list? Even if it could, its component episodes would probably be ones less sharply focused within popular consciousness, less influential upon it, and less usefully or clearly available to dramatists. What Sandy Craig describes as ‘the lack of any deeply rooted sense of national cultural identity in England’ may have been part of what persuaded both Arden and McGrath to leave.²² Scotland’s advantage in terms of radical political awareness, like Ireland’s, derives not only immediately from the kind of historical experience listed above, but also from ways its influences tend to be directed: the opportunity to attribute acts of oppression to external forces – to a *British Army*, for example – obviously contributing strongly to local solidarity and readiness for collective resistance. Peripheral nations within the United Kingdom always have a political axe to grind: as discussed earlier, McGrath’s work regularly helped ensure that this sharpened socialist commitments, rather than only nationalist ones. In appealing to a specifically Scottish identity, his drama was implicitly also appealing to a radical, or at any rate firmly anti-Tory one: its occasional apparent flirtations with nationalism were in this way more strategic, and probably less ‘ambiguous’, or ‘ideological ambivalent’ than commentators such as Baz Kershaw have suggested.²³

Yet *some* version of such feelings of local solidarity might be available, increasingly, almost anywhere in the United Kingdom, or in contemporary Europe, providing that this ‘anywhere’ perceives itself as controlled from somewhere else; as a province peripheral to a centre of power. As McGrath emphasised in ‘From Cheviots to Silver Darlings’, tensions between centre and periphery, local and multinational, were already crucial to life, identity and imagination in the late twentieth century, and likely to become more so in the twenty-first, within increasingly pan-European political and economic structures and globalised forms of media and capital. Scotland’s positioning in relation to these factors is in many ways fascinatingly exemplary, rather than by any means altogether unique. Scotland’s radical tradition helped McGrath create and sustain a theatre which might have thrived nowhere else, but which remains relevant to a much wider world. McGrath himself considered that the ‘truly cosmopolitan . . . has to be local’, and that the best way to make ‘people all over the world . . . see what’s going on’ is to ensure that ‘the way you tell it – the specifics of the characters and their lives – is very, very accurate, and local, and works locally’.²⁴ In the same year Hugh MacDiarmid suggested a theatre concentrating on Scottish ‘*differentia*’, he also demanded that ‘Whatever Scotland is . . . /Be it aye pairt o’ a’ men see’. John McGrath’s drama, pre-eminently, did allow the country to be seen, and to see itself, in this way, adding enormously, for thirty years, to the possibility he hoped for – that Scotland would continue to ‘develop its own place in the world without losing its social morality and its cultural specifics’.²⁵

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Endnotes

¹G. Gregory Smith, *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (London: Macmillan, 1919), p.105; George Munro, 'The Adventures of a Playwright', unpublished typescript, Mitchell Library, Glasgow, p.5; Christopher Small, 'Foreword' in David Hutchison, *The Modern Scottish Theatre* (Glasgow: Molendinar Press, 1977), p.iii.

²Femi Folorunso, 'Scottish Drama and the Popular Tradition' in Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace (eds) *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p.177; Frank Bruce, *Scottish Showbusiness: Music Hall, Variety and Pantomime* (Edinburgh: National Museums of Scotland, 2000), p.132. As Folorunso explains, music-hall and variety shows 'declined more slowly in Scotland than anywhere else in the United Kingdom': they were still widely at work in the 1960s.

³ Stewart Conn, *Play Donkey*, rpt. in *A Decade's Drama* (Todmorden, Lancs: Woodhouse Books, 1980), p.128; Tom Gallacher, 'To Succeed at Home', *Chapman 43-4: On Scottish Theatre* (Spring 1986), p.89.

⁴ Hugh MacDiarmid, 'R.F. Pollock and the Art of the Theatre' in *Contemporary Scottish Studies* (1926; rpt. Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p.181.

⁵ Hector MacMillan, *The Rising*, rpt. in Bill Findlay, ed., *Scots Plays of the Seventies: An Anthology* (Dalkeith: Scottish Cultural Press, 2001), pp. 82, 127.

⁶ John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (London: Methuen, 1981), pp.xxvii, 77, 66.

⁷ 'From Cheviots to Silver Darlings: John McGrath interviewed by Olga Taxidou' in Stevenson and Wallace (eds) *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p.154.

⁸ John McGrath, *Joe's Drum*, rpt. in *Six-Pack: Plays for Scotland* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), p.293; *Border Warfare*, in *Six-Pack: Plays for Scotland*, p.8; *Little Red Hen* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), pp.2-3.

⁹ 'From Cheviots to Silver Darlings: John McGrath interviewed by Olga Taxidou' in Stevenson and Wallace (eds) *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p.151.

¹⁰ Elizabeth MacLennan, *The Moon Belongs to Everyone: Making Theatre with 7:84* (London: Methuen, 1990), p.43.

¹¹ *Clydebuilt Souvenir Programme* (Edinburgh: 7:84, 1982), p.3.

¹² David Hutchison, *The Modern Scottish Theatre* (Glasgow: Molendinar Press, 1977), p.106.

¹³ Critics have sometimes identified still further ancestors, and further connections of McGrath's work with a Scottish tradition. Barbara Bell suggests particular analogies with the Scottish National Drama of the early nineteenth century, largely based around adaptations of Sir Walter Scott's fiction, and dependent, she considers, on

'the very popular theatre forms McGrath identifies as forming the basis for his work' (p.4). See Barbara Bell, 'From Murray to McGrath' in Alasdair Cameron and Adrienne Scullion (eds) *Scottish Popular Theatre and Entertainment* (Glasgow; Glasgow University Library, 1996), pp.1-11.

¹⁴ Gerry Mulgrew, 'The Poor Mouth' in *Chapman 43-4: On Scottish Theatre* (Spring 1986), pp.64-5.

¹⁵ McGrath comments of work included in *Six-Pack: Plays for Scotland* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996) 'although these plays are written for Scotland, I am not ethnically Scots, being an itinerant Liverpool-Irish person of Welsh upbringing, Oxford and London training, and Scottish only by marriage, domicile and commitment' (p. ix).

¹⁶ Quoted in John Bull, *New British Political Dramatists* (London: Methuen, 1984), p.29.

¹⁷ John Bull, *New British Political Dramatists* (London: Methuen, 1984), p.16.

¹⁸ John McGrath, 'Is the Dream Over?' in the programme for *John Brown's Body*.

¹⁹ Elizabeth MacLennan, *The Moon Belongs to Everyone: Making Theatre with 7:84* (London: Methuen, 1990), p.148.

²⁰ Only *apparently* unanimously, of course: McGrath's theatre could never assume that it was preaching to the converted, and never did, as he explains in 'The Year of the Cheviot', included as a preface in the Methuen edition of the play. See also Maria DiCenzo, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.180-1, 207-8, 218.

²¹ John McGrath, *Blood Red Roses*, rpt. in *Six-Pack: Plays for Scotland* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), pp.223-4.

²² Sandy Craig, 'Unmasking the Lie: Political Theatre', in Sandy Craig (ed) *Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain* (Ambergate, Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press, 1980), p.44.

²³ See Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.164, 161.

²⁴ 'From Cheviots to Silver Darlings John McGrath interviewed by Olga Taxidou' in Stevenson and Wallace (eds) *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996)', p.157.

²⁵ Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926); rpt. in Michael Grieve and Alexander Scott, eds, *The Hugh MacDiarmid Anthology: Poems in Scots and English* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p.97; Preface to *Six-Pack: Plays for Scotland* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1996), p.viii.

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