Green Scotland: Literature and the Seeds of Independence
Susan Oliver

To say that Scottish independence has been one of the most contentious political issues in the United Kingdom over the last decade would be to state a commonplace. On eighteenth September 2014 most people over sixteen years of age who are resident in Scotland will be able to vote on the long-awaited question 'Should Scotland be an independent country'.[1] Constitutional lawyers must have spent a considerable time inspecting the legal implications of each word in a sentence that is essentially political, concerning the sovereignty and governance of the people and place that is legally known as Scotland. But the choice of the word 'country' is curious: it gives rise to further questions. What's in a country, as distinct from a nation? What *is* a country? To what extent, if any, can an independent 'country' be thought of as something more than political and economic? Can Scotland as a 'country' extend beyond people and resources to the land itself, to signify a place comprising an interrelated and autonomous geology, ecology, and atmosphere within which human life is just part of a bioregional whole? If such a conceptualization is possible, we might ask how such a country or land was seeded and grown in the literary imagination to represent something that is recognizably, independently 'Scottish'? In a place—a country, perhaps—where cultural memory, deep literary time, and deep ecology converge these are questions that should reward attention.[2]

Medieval historian Dauvit Broun provides a point of departure for thinking about the long trajectory of the Scottish referendum question. Broun reminds us that Scotland's conscious obsession with independence began early in the twelfth century, when that independence was for the first time understood to be threatened by English invasion.[3] He points out that Scotland was then rather tenuously a single Kingdom when measured by criteria under which national identity depends upon a condition where kingship, laws, and language combine to produce a coherent, though culturally heterogeneous, 'imagined community' of the kind that Benedict Anderson argues to be a requisite for modern nationhood. Military conquest of lands and the communities that live on them, along with the growth of dynastic systems of rule, underpin the emergence of such a model. Like other medievalists working on the long development of Scotland's nationhood, Broun extends his study to the earlier society of the Picts. Pictland was spread mainly across the eastern and northern natural mass of what is now Scotland from the north side of the Forth to the Shetland Isles. By the twelfth century it represented a culture and language that had largely been lost. Pictland, which predated a unified Scottish Kingdom, is now accessible almost entirely through retrieved artifacts, remaining place names, and fewer than four hundred standing symbol-stones. The stones, which are mostly confined to eastern seaboard areas of modern Scotland or in museums, are literary monuments to a people for whom independence was lost. Their inscribed, often stylized motifs include a set of animal, bird, and landscape imagery: wolves, deer, raptors, fish, bulls, flowers, fields, boats and water, as well as unidentified mythic beasts, swirl patterns, and imagery of battles. Such a visual anchoring of the Pictish imagination to a syntax of ecological features—the stones' inscriptions are understood to reveal a common, visual language—suggests an investment in the environment. The practice, furthermore, invites comparison with the similar association of letters, words and tree species in Scottish Gaelic. Gaelic, in turn a suppressed language in the late eighteenth century, ironically was the language of a people that colonized most of Pictland. By the end of the eighteenth century, when English had become the dominant language of politics and business, the seeding and growth of a Scottish linguistic and cultural imaginary in the landscape was continued through poetry and prose.

Some of the symbol stones include inscriptions in Ogham, showing the influence of Celtic Irish, while others in Latin are thought to be attributable to Christian conversion as well as to Roman attempts at political and cultural imperialism. Old Norse is represented in some

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words. But the Pictish contents comprise the more enigmatic, pictorial imagery. The eagle figure, for example, has been interpreted as symbolic of the span of the sky, iconographically connecting characteristic landscape features with naturalized cultural and religious beliefs,[4] while in Scots Gaelic the history of use of tree names for letters and the practice of kenning similarly roots the language and culture in the soil of the country. Scotland's history of this kind of associative environmentalism reveals a complex but connected nation, where cultural diversity can be mapped bioregionally as well as according to more conventional political, linguistic and cultural borders. If sky, topography, and the soil feature prominently in Gaelic and Pictish language and symbolism, the former now thriving as a spoken first-language while the other is written in stone, all continue to inform a Scottish poetics that is resolute in its insistence on cultural independence. While Gaelic invasion was until recently accepted to be responsible for the political and linguistic occlusion of Pictland in the north and north-east of Scotland, the continuing existence of Pictish loan words reveal a contact zone in which language linked to natural features has established a common ground that remains fertile in in the national imaginary of modern Scotland.[5] The lack of resources makes it impossible accurately to estimate the traffic of loan words into Scots Gaelic. However, elements of spoken Pictish survive in the form of compound nouns, mainly in the kenning of place names, ensuring the continuance of an environmental imaginary: 'aber', as in Aberdeen and Abernerthy, indicates a river estuary, 'pert' implies woodland, and 'pit' a parcel of land. For example, the fishing village of Pittenweem on the Fife coast takes its name from the Pictish 'Pit' and Gaelic 'na h-Uaimh', kenning a parcel of land with the place of caves to form a geologically imagined identity that continues to bear witness to a narrative of historical memory.

Regional versions of Scottishness imagined through local narratives and myths have been explored from more recent literary perspectives that similarly reveal traces of an older cultural DNA. Controversy over the boundaries of Scotland is key to such a conceptual, environmental imaginary of 'country', and it could be argued that popular culture has always betrayed anxiety about independence by privileging the perimeters of the nation. The idea of the Scottish border with England as a Debatable Land was current between 1237 and 1552, with the term recorded as being in use during the early sixteenth century. In 1552 the agreed border was marked by the construction of a topographical feature that could be cartographically charted: the March Dyke or Scots Dyke.[6] The definition of a point where England ends and Scotland begins in terms of a man-made trench or fissure, testifies to the arbitrariness with which political boundaries are imposed on the bodies of nations. The dyke, like an inverted wall, is an artificial separation of people—an earthwork gash cut into the body of the land. It creates a viceral marker of independence and naturalizes a concern with inclusion and exclusion.

The aim of this essay is to investigate a historic conceptualization of Scottish independence in which country is based upon such an environmental imaginary—a space in which art and literature is self-consciously associated with flora, fauna, soil and geology. The Scottish Green Party is pro-independence. Its manifesto argues for a 'small autonomous country' in which a deep ecological understanding of the land is the basis for nationhood, arguing that 'its environment is the basis upon which every society is formed' and that Scotland must in its own, as well as world interest, get away from 'an economic system which has allowed the exploitation of people, of other species, and of our environment on a scale never before seen'.[7] The Scottish Greens have also advocated a transfer to a new currency system that reflects the nation's particular culture. (Under the *nom de plume* Malachi Malagrowther, Walter Scott fought in the mid-1820s to retain Scottish banknotes on the basis that they did precisely that.[8])

Along with the independence referendum, 2014 will also mark the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn on 24 June and the 200th anniversary in July of the publication of Walter Scott's first novel, *Waverley* (1814). *Waverley* is remarkable not least for its treatment of ongoing Scottish anxieties about 'country' and 'independence'. The marriage of convenience with which it ends is an uneasy union, because it makes its home on a soil that has been agronomically interfered with: the deep, old roots of trees are removed and replaced with new, fast-growing rhizomatic grass roots—affecting everything from water content and pH balance to texture and the ecosystem that comprises microbes, animals, and other plants. That 'cleansing' of the dirt constitutes an attempt to prevent the future emergence of any uncanny seeds or spectres of independence.[9] Tully Veolan and its newly

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landscaped grounds dramatize a Scottish nation anxious to do more than bury its problematic past. Beneath the estate's surface an entire ecosystem is altered to support the re-enactment of union. *Waverley*'s portrayal of the bland monoculture of a lawn bounded by clearly defined pathways self-consciously draws attention to the transformation of a once heavily wooded country into sheep pasture. The unhomeliness of felt absence is captured in Scott's epigraphic quotation from a Jacobite song at the beginning of the penultimate chapter of *Waverley*: 'this is no my ain house, I ken by the bigging o't'.[10]

The supernatural is part of Scotland's environmental imagination in *The Bride of Lammermoor,* where the Master of Ravenswood rides into legendary immortality in the 'Kelpie's Flow' or quicksand that still exists along part of Lothian's coast. The Master does not so much decompose, as become part of a particular bioregional landscape that produces the stories that shape a particular, literary imaginary: the entire novel has been a prelude to that point of departure where the land meets the sea.

Caroline McCracken-Flesher's *Possible Scotlands* compares a wide range of readings of Walter Scott's fiction, arguing that Scott's works when taken as a body of literature reveal him to be the author of several potential 'Scotlands', each independently imagined yet connected through the textual imagined community of the *Waverley* novels. A 'federal' literary tradition emerges, in which political regionalism maps horizontally (and conveniently) onto the British union at the same time that a deep authenticity and independence of spirit remains implanted in the fabric of the land—rooted in the soil or dirt.[11]

In his fourth *Waverley* novel *Rob Roy*, first published in 1817*,* Scott refers to 'the country of the MacGregors' as a recognizable landscape that is analogized with a wild native horse or pony: unsuccessful attempts to 'bridle' that country form the point of departure for the story (as made explicit in the 1829 introduction). To change metaphors, in *Rob Roy* Scott uses a motif of burnings in which property is reduced to ashes that are then mixed into the soil of the country. Rob Roy's father and his clansmen have twice burned the fort at Inversnaid. Dirty dealings, far from being buried, are therefore theoretically readable through traces in the soil and the associative imagination of cultural memory. There is an anticipation here of twentieth-century writing in the deep ecology tradition, such as the history of Wisconsin and the United States that is revealed in the rings of Aldo Leopold's lightning-stricken oak tree in *A Sand Counties Almanac* (1949).

Readings of place are themselves explored by Scott as being subject to historical interpretation. In *The Antiquary,* published a year before *Rob Roy*, a heated debate in a local Inn (symbolizing Scotland as a place where all the old tales are told) arises over whether place names including Ben, or *Beinn*, meaning mountain, privilege Gaelic culture over an older and less accessible Pictish legacy. Scott was dramatizing early nineteenth-century antiquarian interest in the linguistic and cultural origins of the modern nation. As an antiquarian himself, he had been interested in John Pinkerton's attempts to recover a history of the Picts that would counter the narrative of Scotland's Gaelic origins.[12] The dispute degenerates from a disquisition on place and loan words into a more personal, ironic argument about which man's ancestor had betrayed Scotland's autonomy at the time of Edward I of England, who came to the throne in 1237. We are back to Dauvit Broun's early thirteenth-century point of origin for Scottish concerns about political independence. Scott, however, draws attention to the importance of heterogeneous folklores rather than a single account as the lifeblood of the nation, when his innkeeper defuses the conflict by remarking in Scots dialect to the English spectator that the storyteller 'wad wile the bird aff the tree wi' the tales he tells about folk lang syne*'.* MacKitchinson's comment at one level trivializes the dispute by making it a satire on the limitations of academic enquiry. At another level, he warns 'this is local—it is our business', suggesting the argument is of little comprehensibility to outsiders—an admonishment sure to create rather than allay interest. Thirdly, he celebrates the vitality with which Scottish culture continues to seed itself by cultivating tales associated with a popular imaginary of mountains, woodland, and moorland alongside the grander narratives of political history.

In his 1816 *Tales of my Landlord* novel *Old Mortality,* Scott explores tensions between the monumentalism of a natural world and inscribed human histories through his depiction of an almost Wordsworthian title character (resolute and independent) who roams remote moorland close to the English borders, re-chiselling the inscriptions on moss-encrusted stones that commemorate Presbyterians who were killed in the seventeenth-century wars of the covenanters: based on the real-life Robert Paterson of Dumfries, Old Mortality spends his

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time 'In the most lonely recesses of the mountains, […] busied in cleaning the moss from the grey stones, renewing with his chisel the half-defaced inscriptions […] the remote moors and wilds to which the wanderers had fled for concealment. […][W]herever they existed, Old Mortality was sure to visit them'. After Old Mortality's death, lichen and deer-hair add to the accumulating layers of organic material on the stones, extending and enriching a readable environmental history alongside human narrative. The natural environment here assumes a different agency from the soil-as-book and ashes-as-fertilizer function in *Rob Roy,* from the onomastic obsession with kenned placed names in *The Antiquary,* and from the disturbing felt absence in the reconstructed and laundered dirt in *Waverley* that presumes the eventual, inevitable surfacing of something uncanny. The stones of *Old Mortality* refuse to privilege human history, at the same time that they continue bearing witness to its narratives*.* The survival of a cultural imaginary rooted in an earth that has its own processes for breaking down the barriers between people and other living things, forming a rich material loam for the literary imagination, remains constant in all of these works. Far from effacing history in their lonely and latterly uninhabited space, the teeming organic environment of *Old Mortality's* moss, lichen and deer-hair encrusted headstones ensures that memory of a country remains alive. Towards the end of the novel, the protagonist Morton undertakes a journey that reads symbolically as a ride through the history of the country and the nation. Beginning at an ash tree symbolizing the deep pre-national past of a forested country, he passes through a degraded environment that explicitly and increasingly identifies felt absence. Eventually, he emerges into a landscape freshly bursting with vitality imparted by a mountain rivulet. By contrast, the stream that winds in tranquility past palaces is a distraction. The analogies naturalize the potency of Scottish independence histories.

I have looked at how just some of Scotland's literary traditions embody a sense of independence that is as concerned with country as it is with politics. My choice of Walter Scott rather than of, say, Robert Burns (who is more usually associated with Scottish nationalism), is based on the coincidence of the bicentenary celebrations of *Waverley* with the Independence Referendum. It seems apposite that attention will be given to both of those events as well as to Bannockburn, inviting reflection as well as a looking toward the future. Like Burns, Scott believed the authenticity of his country to be embodied in poetry premised upon the closeness of communities to the specific environment in which they lived. Cairns Craig has argued that in Scott's work Scottishness is constructed as a symptom of historically recorded events, while at the same time history is constructed as a product of national identity.[13] So where, if at all, does Scotland feature as an independent 'country' alongside the political 'imagined community' that is most often read as an endorsement of union?

An answer to that question may lie in materials from Scott's own earlier narrative poems, and perhaps most pointedly in the ballad and song traditions of Scotland that preceded him and that he collated in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. Border ballads such as *The Battle of Otterburn, The Scottish version, The Flowers of the Forest,* and *Thomas the Rhymer* all turn on environmental landmarks that are rooted in a deep ecological history as well as in the literary conventions of elegy. In *The Battle of Otterburn,* the Douglas is buried directly in the soil 'beneath the blooming briar', beside 'the braken bush, / That grows on yonder lilye lee'. As a place name, 'lilye lee' on the one hand identifies a natural bioregion (the place where lilies grow) and on the other signifiers a place of battle. The conflation of those two meanings arguably turns nation into country, indicating the wild, uncultivated land of the Scottish Borders (the lilies are the bluebells of Scotland: harebells). For a headstone, The Douglas has sweetbriars and bracken that emblematize Borders flora that flourishes down into our own times. The area continues to be 'hame' to birds and to deer that 'rin wild'. Suspension of disbelief comes easily, for not only is the legend of 'The Douglas', who gave his life for the independence of his nation, embedded in the soil of a contested borderland, but the body of the hero can be imagined as part of a continuing, natural cycle.[14] *The Flowers of the Forest* similarly naturalizes the sacrifice of young men who fought for the independence of their country. In this case the historical event is the Battle of Flodden Field in 1513, between the troops of James IV of Scotland and Henry VIII of England. Around 16,000 men died, including James IV. The ballad does not address the action so much as inscribe felt absence into the landscape: the sound of young women, turned to silence by the loss of their lovers, is replaced by the sound of the wind that blows across the borders' hillsides and along empty lanes:

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I've heard them a lilting, at the ewe milking
Lasses a' lilting, before dawn of day;
But now they are moaning, on ilka green loaning;
The flowers of the forest are a' wede awae.

I conclude with motifs and themes associated with the appearance of the land that recur throughout Scottish ballads and songs: loanings (or, green valleys), mountains, rivers, hillsides of heather, forests and flowers. The images conjure a Romantic Scotland that Scott has often been accused of inventing. Can that conception of the country be anything more than a construction? Thomas of Erceldoune, the thirteenth-century Rhymer poet-prophet and eponymous subject of the ballad, composed his prophetic verses on 'Huntly Bank […] underneath the Eildon tree', before being abducted to a subterranean elf land by the queen of the Faeries. Walter Scott brought the ballad back to public attention as a tribute to the origins of Scottish literature. By the nineteenth century, the tree had long since died. However, its reputed place of growth was commemorated by the Eildon tree stone, which Scott writes about in his notes along with an account of the adjacent Bogle Burn, named after the Rymer's subterranean visitors. Fossilizing and commemorating its muse, the poem has symbolically turned the wood of the tree into a standing stone. Yet both rest upon something far older; the soil of a country to which poetry itself is attached.

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Notes

1. The electoral register for the referendum comprises: British citizens resident in Scotland; Commonwealth citizens resident in Scotland who have leave to remain in the UK or do not require such leave; Citizens of the Republic of Ireland and other EU countries resident in Scotland; Members of the House of Lords resident in Scotland; Service personnel serving in the UK or overseas with the armed forces who are registered to vote in Scotland; Crown personnel serving outside the UK with HM Government who are registered to vote in Scotland. The minimum age for voting in the referendum will be sixteen by 18 September 2014. The Scottish Government **www.scotreferendum.com**.
2. Deep time is a concept explored in Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2008). Deep ecology means understanding complex, interrelated ecosystems that are inclusive of humanity whilst not endorsing a natural right of humans to exploit other species. The term was first used by Norwegian Philosopher Arne Naess, in 'The shallow and the deep, long range ecology movements: a summary', *Inquiry* (Oslo), v.16.1975.
3. Dauvit Broun, *Scottish Independence and the Idea of Britain: From the Picts to Alexander III* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).
4. Toby D. Griffen, 'The Grammar of the Pictish Symbol Stones', in *LACUS Forum* 27 (2001), p. 219; Miranda J. Green, *The Gods of the Celts,* Godalming: Bramley, 1986, p. 188.
5. Broun discusses controversial positions on the decline of the Picts through reference to Pictish names of Kings and other words. 71–97.
6. Built in 1552 and recorded named or unnamed on several maps, the Scots Dyke is a linear 5.25 km earthwork that still marks part of the border with England. *Roy's Military Survey* of 1744–1755 clearly records it.
7. **www.scottishgreens.org.uk** and **www.scottishgreens.org.uk/policy/** Accessed 19/12/13.
8. Scott wrote three letters under the name Malachi Malagrowther to the *Edinburgh Weekly Journal* in 1826 (published February 22, March 1, and March 8). All three were published as pamphlets by William Blackwood, of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine.* Through these letters, Scott led the successful campaign to retain Scotland's banknotes.
9. I am concerned here with attempts symbolically to remove from the country's soil the roots of independence*. For literary tropes of burial relating to the suppression of Scotland's past see John Barrell, 'Putting down the Rising', in *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism,* eds. Leith Davis, Ian Duncan and Janet Sorenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) pp. 130–138; Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: the Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton University Press) pp. 182–214; and Caroline McCracken-Flesher, *The Doctors Dissected: a Cultural Autopsy of the Burke and Hare Murders* (Oxford University Press, 2012).
10. Included in James Hogg, *The Jacobite Relics of Scotland* 2 vols. ed. Murray Pittock (Edinburgh University Press, 2002–2003).
11. Caroline McCracken-Flesher, *Possible Scotlands: Walter Scott and the Story of Tomorrow* (Oxford University Press, 2005).
12. John Pinkerton, *Dissertation on the Origins and Progress of the Scythians or Goths* (1787) and *Enquiry into the History of Scotland Preceding the Reign of Malcolm III* (1789).
13. Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh University press, 1999) p. 117.
14. For an earlier version of this argument see my book *Scott, Byron and the Poetics of Cultural Encounter* (Palgrave, 2005) p. 47.

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"The Church of Scotland and the Church of England seem to have decided that their commonality as national Churches justifies them in setting aside other ecumenical relationships and etiquette," he wrote. Before being formally adopted by both organisations, the Columba Declaration will be debated by the Church of England's General Synod next month and then by the Church of Scotland's General Assembly in May. Responding to the bishop's comments, the Church of Scotland denied that his organisation had been sidelined. Independent Minds Comments can be posted by members of our membership scheme, Independent Minds. It allows our most engaged readers to debate the big issues, share their own experiences, discuss real-world solutions, and more. The Wars of Scottish Independence were a series of military campaigns fought between the Kingdom of Scotland and the Kingdom of England in the late 13th and early 14th centuries. The First War (1296–1328) began with the English invasion of Scotland in 1296, and ended with the signing of the Treaty of Edinburgh-Northampton in 1328. The Second War (1332–1357) began with the English-supported invasion by Edward Balliol and the 'Disinherited' in 1332, and ended in 1357 with the signing of the Treaty of