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’.

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.

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. 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, raptores, 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
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, 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 the national imaginary of modern Scotland. 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 Abernethy, 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. 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’. 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.)

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—afflicting 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. Tully Veolan and its newly
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 unホームleness 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 Douvit Broun’s early thirteenth-century point of origin for Scottish concerns about political independ- ence. Scott, however, draws attention to the importance of heterogeneous folklóres rather than a single account as the lifefood 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 comprehen- sibility to outsiders—an admonishment sure to create rather than allay interest. Thirdly, he celebrates the vitality with which Scottish cul- ture continues to seed itself by cultivating tales associated with a popular imaginary of moun- tains, 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
time ‘In the most lonely recesses of the moun-
tains, [...] 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. [...]’ Whenever 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 narra-
tive. 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 dis-
turbing felt absence in the reconstructed and
launched 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 nar-
ratives. 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
loom for the literary imagination, remains con-
stant in all of these works. Far from effacing
history in their lonely and latterly uninhab-
ited 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 under-
takes 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 coun-
try, he passes through a degraded environment
that explicitly and increasingly identifies felt
absence. Eventually, he emerges into a land-
scape freshly bursting with vitality imparted
by a mountain rivulet. By contrast, the stream
that winds in tranquility past palaces is a dis-
traction. 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 independ-
ence 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 cel-
brations 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 envi-
ronment in which they lived. Cairns Craig has
argued that in Scott’s work Scottishness is con-
structed as a symptom of historically recorded
events, while at the same time history is con-
structed 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 mate-
rials 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 signifies a place
of battle. The conflation of those two meanings
arguably turns nation into country, indicat-
ning the wild, uncultivated land of the Scottish
Borders (the lilies are the bluebells of Scotland:
harebells). For a headstone, The Douglas has
sweetbriers and bracken that emblemize
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 dis-
belief comes easily, for not only is the legend
of ‘The Douglas’, who gave his life for the in-
dependence of his nation, embedded in the soil
of a contested borderland, but the body of the
hero can be imagined as part of a continu-
ning, 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, includ-
ing 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:
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 conjur 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 Rhymery 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.
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.
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).
14 For an earlier version of this argument see my book Scott, Byron and the Poetics of Cultural Encounter (Palgrave, 2005) p. 47.
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