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MacPherson, Jim

Published in:
Northern Scotland
Publication date:
2020

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10.3366/nor.2020.0217

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History writing and agency in the Scottish Highlands: postcolonial thought, the work of James Macpherson (1736-1796) and researching the region's past with local communities

Jim MacPherson

Introduction

Since the 1970s, the historiography of the Scottish Highlands and Islands has been significantly shaped by the pioneering work of James Hunter. From his ground-breaking first book, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (1976), onwards Hunter's work has set the tone for both scholarly and public understanding of the region's past.[1] However, little noted in discussion of Hunter's work has been his use of postcolonial thought, in which he took the ideas of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said and applied them to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.[2] For Hunter, a crucial element of Fanon and Said's ideas was their emphasis on the necessity of postcolonial communities knowing their own past in order to throw off the shackles of colonial rule. Hunter's great innovation was to take these insights, arising from the French Caribbean, Africa, and the Middle East, and use them in the Highlands to promote a regional identity which eschews the notion that Highlanders were simply passive victims of an incorporating British state but, instead, had a degree of agency and control over the circumstances in which they lived.[3] The second half of this proposition has become a key focus of a number of influential works in Highland historiography, from Annie Tindley's detailed study of the Sutherland estate during the nineteenth century to David Taylor's account of profound economic and social change in the central Highland's community of Badenoch during the eighteenth century.[4] However, the first part of Hunter's analysis – his focus on Fanon and Said – has largely been neglected by scholars of the Highlands. Most recently, Iain MacKinnon's insightful assessment of Highland historiography notes the

continuing importance of Hunter's work to our understanding of the centrality of land to

Highland history yet focuses his critique on a largely class-based understanding of Hunter's

Marxism.[5] It is important, then, to return to Hunter's approach as it developed in the 1980s

and 1990s, under the influence of Fanon and Said, with an emphasis not so much on the

formation of a class-based crofting community but instead on the development of Highland

identities rooted in an understanding of the past and the agency of the region's people in

shaping its history and its future.[6]

This article is, in part, an exercise in reverse engineering, putting the postcolonial

back into Highland historiography. It does so with the purpose of analysing a particular case

study of Highland history writing: the Ossianic translations and 'Celtic' histories of James

Macpherson (1736-1796), a key figure from the eighteenth century in the literary history of

Scotland and the wider world, but someone whose legacy remains firmly dogged by

controversy regarding the 'authenticity' of his work. In his introductory 'Dissertation' to

Fingal (1762) and in the first of his histories, *An Introduction to the History of Great Britain

and Ireland* (1771), Macpherson uses the ancient past of the Highlands to make an argument

about the region's culture and value in the present. Collaborative work between academics at

the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) and the local communities of Badenoch,

Macpherson's home, explored these works (both the Ossianic Collections and the histories)

and their approach to history writing and agency. The final part of this article examines how

the central Highlands' communities of Badenoch have re-interpreted their past through re-

discovering Macpherson's writings. In his Ossianic translations of the 1760s and history

writing of the 1770s, Macpherson used tales of bardic culture to establish the agency of the

Highlands and its communities in understanding their pasts. Through exploring

Macpherson's writings in the present, these same communities, at heritage festivals and

workshops, took an active role in interpreting their culture and identity. Here, working with

communities in Badenoch helped to demonstrate that history writing could be conceptualised as a tool of agency and identity in the present day across the very different work of Macpherson, Fanon, and Hunter.

While this article engages with the postcolonial thought of Fanon and how his ideas about the power of the past can be applied to Highland history writing, it does not contribute to debate about the colonial or colonial-like nature of the relationship of the Highlands and Islands to the rest of the British imperial state.[7] Instead, this article is about the application of postcolonial ideas to thinking about the Highland past and how history writing plays a role in determining the agency of the region. Here, the article explores this in a three-stage process: first, how Hunter's writing about the Highlands and Islands was directly inspired by Fanon; second, how both Fanon's and Hunter's argument about history writing and identity can also be used to interpret Macpherson's use of history writing as a conscious statement of the region's agency in the mid-eighteenth century; and, finally, how Fanon's ideas can be applied in the context of exploring Macpherson's history writing with communities in present-day Badenoch. Interpreting Macpherson's history writing through the prism of Fanon helps communities to understand the value of the past in present-day debates about the region's social, cultural, and economic development.

The first part of this article examines how Jim Hunter used a postcolonial lens to interpret the Highland past. Hunter's innovative use of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said as tools for thinking about Highland history has been underdeveloped by other historians and much radical thinking about the region and its past has been left to scholars working in other, more theoretically-inclined, disciplines. Here, this article argues that using postcolonial thought in this way can be extended to older interpretations of Highland history. This forms the focus of part two, which uses a case study of James Macpherson to explore how history writing has underpinned notions of agency in the Highlands since the mid-eighteenth century

and how local communities' engagement with Macpherson's work can also be a source of agency in the present.

Highland history writing and agency

In his foundational article 'British history: a plea for a new subject', the great New Zealand historian J. G. A. Pocock wrote persuasively about the capacity of history writing to shape identities in the present: 'The guardianship of one's past is power'.[8] Around the same time as Pocock was writing in the mid-1970s, the History Workshop was pioneering a more community-focused version of 'history from below', in which Raphael Samuel and others promoted historical research as a 'collaborative enterprise', taking the academic discipline of History towards more democratic modes of knowledge production.[9] In a Highland context, the work of Jim Hunter stands as the best example of this kind of history writing, in which the lives, experiences and stories of ordinary people are given prominence and value. Hunter's highly influential first book, *The Making of the Crofting Community*, was published in 1976, the same year in which the *History Workshop Journal* began. Heavily influenced by British Marxists such as E. P. Thompson, Hunter analysed the process through which the western Highlands and Islands were 'improved' from the eighteenth century onwards by an elite that dispossessed tenant farmers and led to the creation of crofting as a system of landholding which marginalised and immiserated the people of the region. Through analysing their resistance to these agricultural and commercial reforms, Hunter's work gave these people voice and agency in the history of the region, negating the idea that Highlanders were no more than brow-beaten victims of landlord oppression.

This approach likewise reflected community-led initiatives, also during the early 1970s, to recover the voice of ordinary Highlanders, such as in John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stage and the Black, Black Oil* (1974).[10] Later, Hunter developed this line of thinking

further, echoing his work outwith academia in journalism, crofting and development policy. In his inaugural lecture at UHI in 2006, Hunter made a case for using narratives of the past in which Highlanders had agency and a pride in their identities to promote social, cultural, and economic development in the present:

> As John Murdoch commented, when you have your alleged inadequacies dinned into you day in, day out, you can't but end up lacking self-esteem. And where there isn't self-esteem, there can't be enterprise, initiative, advancement. That's why policies intended to expand the Highlands and Islands economy work best, as HIE's long recognised, if accompanied by a commitment to restoring our formerly demoralised population's sense of worth. Hence our need to encourage both individuals and communities to take pride in their background; to make people feel good about themselves and their surroundings; to show that the Highlands and Islands, once dismissed as hopelessly impoverished, are actually rich in music, architecture, literature, archaeology and much else; to insist that the Highlands and Islands, so well endowed in those respects, are even wealthier environmentally; to demonstrate that our area, despite its having been so long disparaged, is capable of offering all its people - established residents and newcomers - an exceptionally high quality of life.[11]

In some respects, Hunter was building on an older tradition in Highland historiography, at least on a mode of history writing from within the region which was keen to promote its culture and heritage in the face of the kinds of negative characterisations from outwith mentioned by John Murdoch in 1883. During the nineteenth century, we see a number of antiquarian and folklore studies produced from within the region, such as Alexander MacKenzie's epic *Carmina Gadelica* (1900) and Charles Fraser Mackintosh's *Invernessiana* (1875), which sought to demonstrate the vibrancy of the Highlands and its culture.[12] Before this, we see a similar process in James Macpherson's use of the Ossianic bardic tradition in

creating a Highland identity that was rooted in the past but engaged with the modernity of an emerging British fiscal-military state of the eighteenth century, examined in the final part of this article.[13]

While this longstanding emphasis on the vitality of the region continues to shape Highland historiography, until recently this was very much a marginalized narrative in broader discussions of the region's past. Instead, this approach to the Highlands was over-powered by the likes of Hugh Trevor-Roper and his characterisation of the region's culture as derivative, based on a mis-reading of the works of James Macpherson.[14] Building on research by Robert Dodgshon, Allan MacInnes, and others, new scholarship has challenged older historiographical assumptions about the lack of agency in the creation of Highland identities. Matthew Dziennik has directly rebuffed Trevor-Roper, arguing that the resurrection of tartan at the end of the eighteenth century demonstrated the agency of the Highland elite in constructing the region's cultural, political, and economic life.[15] Likewise, David Taylor's nuanced study of economic and cultural change in eighteenth-century Badenoch emphasises the region's vitality in its move towards commercialisation and the attractions of global markets.[16] Most recently, the work of David Worthington on the Moray Firth has emphasised its longue durée connectedness to the rest of the world, at least partially the function of the considerable agency which the region's population possessed.[17]

Emphasising the agency of the Highlands in this way has significant implications for the development of the region in the twenty-first century. Citing the example of Shetland as one which the Highlands could follow, Hunter argues that 'cultural renewal was translated into equal commitment to economic transformation'.[18] Such an approach is key to understanding how recent research at UHI has sought to work with students, institutions, and communities in the region. Creating new ways of producing knowledge about the past

through this kind of collaborative research process also suggests new community epistemologies which change the way in which we interpret the world.

Thinking about the Highlands with postcolonialism

While Jim Hunter's work was clearly inspired by the likes of E. P. Thompson, a little noticed influence on his work has been African history and postcolonial thought.[19] Hunter's argument that a fuller understanding of the richness of the region's past was essential if the Highlands were to have a vibrant future was directly inspired by the work of the great Caribbean postcolonial theorist and revolutionary, Frantz Fanon. In explaining how colonialism is justified by the idea of 'civilising' native populations in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1969), Fanon establishes the political imperative to state and reclaim the indigenous past in order to resist and overthrow colonial rule. Hunter then places this in a Highland context:

> By rejecting the colonialist myth that their forebears were benighted primitives; by rediscovering, in Fanon's phrase, the dignity long hidden from them, colonised nations, Fanon says, take a vital step towards liberation. Hungry West Africans may not be less hungry as a result of knowing that their Songhai ancestors administered a great, and African-created, kingdom. But the same West Africans, on learning this, could never again be party to the colonially convenient notion that they were inherently incapable of taking charge of their own destiny. Hence my conviction, implicit in this lecture's title, that getting to a better future involves revisiting the past. For here in the Highlands and Islands as in Africa, a preliminary to progress has consisted – still consists – of challenging externally imposed, and almost always negative, interpretations of our past.[20]

Here, once more, we see the idea that history research and writing can be a tool of identity formation, which is used to challenge narratives of the Highlands in the present and articulate

hope for the future. While Hunter makes clear that the Highlands were not colonised in the same way as Africa, he does suggest that mentalities and mindsets in the region have been shaped by this process of denigrating and devaluing Highland culture, language, and, vitally, history. Recent research has gone beyond Hunter's interpretation, especially for the medieval and early modern periods, in which historians such as Martin MacGregor and Allan MacInnes explore the process by which the Scottish state actively colonised the Highlands and Islands.[21] However, the racial elements of Hunter's analysis, much like his debt to the postcolonial thought of Fanon, have been underdeveloped by other scholars. Here, it is the whiteness of Highlanders which distinguished them from other colonised peoples and becomes a crucial determinant of at least partial incorporation into the belly of the imperial British beast from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards.

Hunter's use of postcolonial thought has implications for writing the Highland past that few historians have noted. Yet, as demonstrated below in the case study of James Macpherson's history writing, Hunter's work highlights how present-day communities can use the past as a tool of empowerment in the contemporary world. Extending Hunter's argument, the past can be used as a resource in the present around which a revitalised Highlands can be structured, building upon broader debates about the need to 'de-colonise' the mind in order to create new, vibrant, and sustainable futures. This reflection on the dynamics of unequal power relations in colonial (and colonial-like) settings, coupled with the demand to give voice and agency to peoples subject to these relations in the past, has inspired academic disciplines outwith history to use postcolonial thought as a tool with which to think about the Highlands. Focusing on the development of crofting and its relationship with Gaelic culture, Iain MacKinnon argues that the concept of colonisation is helpful in thinking about how land was 'de-commonised' in the late-eighteenth-century process of agricultural 'improvement'. The shift from kin and community notions of land holding expressed in the

concept of *dùthchas* to a system of crofting in which semi-privatised ideas of ownership held sway, is characterised by MacKinnon as a process of 'Scottish domestic colonisation'. In resisting these various legislative attempts to change the relationship to the land, from the 1886 Crofters' Act onwards, MacKinnon argues that many in the region were engaged in a 'struggle for the freedom to be able to think and act differently'.[22] Framing all this, MacKinnon deploys the decolonising methodologies of Linda Tuhiwai Smith in analysing the evolution of 'internal colonisation' and the 'progress of culturally invasive policies in the west Highlands and Islands from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries'.[23] Using the Maori epistemologies of indigenous scholars in New Zealand and the radical pedagogy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, MacKinnon explores ways in which Gàidheal culture can be sustained in contemporary society, to 're-member' and 're-vision' connections to the land through a process of 'activism as an act of service'.[24] As such, Freire's work can be used as the basis of a 'critical indigenous pedagogy', in which communities lead the research process in an act of transformative liberation.[25] The work of Issie MacPhail also further explores the implications for the Highlands of these postcolonial ideas, from Fanon to Spivak, demonstrating how they can be tools of resistance and change in the contemporary community land buy-out movement.[26] For both Mackinnon and MacPhail, the postcolonial thought of Fanon and others opens up the potential for radical pedagogical engagement with communities in the Highlands. The case study of Macpherson and the Badenoch community explored below becomes, then, an example of the process by which understanding the region's past allows these communities to imagine alternative futures.

A nuanced analysis of how postcolonial thought and the creative imagination can be used as an intellectual framework in re-writing the history of the Highlands can also be found in recent work by ethnologist and activist Mairi McFadyen. Writing about the community heritage and cultural work of Raghnaid Sandilands in bringing Fingalian legends to life on

the southside of Loch Ness, McFadyen makes a plea for de-colonizing the Highlands, not least in terms of communal mentalities. McFayden situates the Highlands in the same analytical field as world-wide movements for change, linking the local and the global in efforts to think differently about the place of the Highlands and its future in the world, drawing upon the theoretical resources of postcolonial thought.[27] However, the distinctiveness of Hunter's approach still stands out – that an active engagement with the past and the process of history writing is vital to this regeneration and revival of the contemporary Highlands. This connection between the past and the region's agency in the present we now explore in the example of James Macpherson's history writing and how local communities have recently engaged with his work.

James Macpherson, history writing and Highland agency

James Macpherson (1736-1796) rose from being a modest schoolteacher in Ruthven to becoming one of the most important figures in worldwide Romanticism.[28] (In)famous throughout the world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the translator and editor of the Ossianic Collections, Macpherson's work made Scottish Gaelic poetry accessible to an English-speaking audience for the first time, as well as being translated into numerous languages worldwide.[29] Macpherson's reputation in the contemporary Highlands and beyond, though, continues to be dominated by the controversy surrounding the 'authenticity' or not of these ancient stories, purporting to be from the 3rd century.[30] The final section of this article examines the process by which Macpherson's reputation and significance is being rehabilitated in the region of his birth: Badenoch, in the central Highlands of Scotland. It presents a case study of how the agency of the region and its people can be promoted through research that is collaborative and participatory, demonstrating how this process can then change community perceptions of themselves and their place in the

world. We do this through a brief analysis of Macpherson's history writing and how he used the past to make an argument about the agency and vitality of the Highlands in *his* present, the second half of the eighteenth century.

The current low-profile of James Macpherson in the land of his birth is largely a consequence of the controversy which surrounded the publication of the Ossianic Collections, from the *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (1760) to Macpherson's two-volume revised edition *The Poems of Ossian* (1773). However, by focusing on Macpherson's extensive wider corpus of publications, in particular his history writing, we see how Macpherson was deeply concerned with promoting the vitality of the Highlands and the agency of its people. Having published the Ossianic Collections between 1760 and 1773, Macpherson spent most of the 1770s writing non-fiction history, from the ancient Celtic past to the history of Britain and its empire in the late eighteenth century.[31] In 1771, Macpherson wrote his *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland*, a non-fiction account of the Celtic peoples at the heart of the Ossianic Collection. Then, in 1775, Macpherson published the double whammy of the *Papers Containing the Secret History of Great Britain* and *The History of Great Britain from the Restoration to the Accession of the House of Hanover*, a continuation of the *History of England* series begun by David Hume in the 1750s.[32] In Macpherson's career as a government pamphleteer and propagandist during the 1770s, he also employed the approach and methods of an historian, using the techniques of history writing in the British government's response to the American revolutionaries' *Declaration of Congress* in 1776 (*The Rights of Britain Asserted Against the Claims of America*) and in his second significant government pamphlet *A Short History of the Opposition During the Last Session* (1779). Macpherson's final work, a defence of his and fellow Clan member, Sir John Macpherson's interests in India, *The History and Management of the East India Company* (1779), is a serious work of oriental scholarship, engaging with

the latest research and an impressive array of primary sources in marshalling its argument against the corruption of the East India Company.[33]

In all of his history writing, Macpherson functions as an Enlightenment historian, engaging with the past in similar ways to David Hume, William Robertson, Adam Ferguson, Edward Gibbon, and others. In his last work, *The History and Management of the East India Company,* for example, both Macpherson's chronological narrative and his analytical reflection demonstrate his concern for and engagement with Enlightenment debates about history writing. Ever since Arnaldo Momigliano outlined the principles of 'philosophical' historiography in the 1950s, scholars of history writing have sought to delineate how eighteenth-century historians balanced classical narratives of the past with reflections on the broader nature of humanity and society.[34] Described by Pocock as the 'central problem of eighteenth-century historiography', reconciling the need to narrate events with the desire to explain them was also central to Macpherson's history writing.[35] Mark Salber Phillips explores this dynamic relationship between what he terms the 'mimetic and didactic thrusts in historiography' in the works of Hugh Blair and David Hume, arguing that in their history writing of the 1750s and 1760s, narrative approaches developed to such an extent that those narratives themselves became instructional; for Phillips, then, 'the philosophical method does not stand wholly apart from traditional narrative, but is linked to it as a form of critique'.[36] Macpherson developed his literary and intellectual pursuits firmly within this milieu, and was especially influenced by Blair, his mentor and advocate for much of his career.

Macpherson's history writing, then, becomes a useful example of his work that can be explored with local communities in such a way as to inspire discussion and debate about agency in the Highlands. Local community involvement in rediscovering Macpherson's work was led by the Kingussie Heritage Festival in 2015. While featuring more 'traditional' academic papers by world-leading Macpherson scholars such as Howard Gaskill, Calum

Colvin, and Domhnall Uileam Stiùbhart, the event was emphatically in, of, and for the broader community.[37] Organised by the town's Heritage Festival and UHI academics Kristin Lindfield-Ott, Jim MacPherson, Lesley Mickel, and attended largely by locals, the event gave the community the chance to actively engage with the work of James Macpherson. Through the connection between UHI and High Life Highland, the council's arms-length body responsible for all cultural and leisure services in the region, copies of the originals of Macpherson's publications were loaned to the event and Kristin Lindfield-Ott led a workshop in which the community could read, think, and touch these rare first editions. These books, written by a local 'lad-made-good', had been returned to their site of origin, both in terms of where at least some of them were written and where the Ossianic tales came from. Through their process of travelling the short distance from the Inverness Rare Book collection (where they comprise one of the best collections of Ossianic material outside of Edinburgh), the meaning of these works by Macpherson were changed.[38] While publicly accessible in Inverness as part of the Fraser Mackintosh collection, having folks from Badenoch actively engaging with Macpherson's books was powerful, providing a direct sense of connection to these culturally important objects.[39] The crucial materiality of rare books was emphasised by such a process, demonstrating how handling and physically engaging with these items can have significant impact on how communities perceive these objects.[40] Through this, members of the local community thought about Macpherson's work and how this could be used as a source of agency in the present, a vital tool in giving the community a sense of value in the world, rooted in intellectual inquiry.[41]

Macpherson's history writing, in particular, opened up avenues for these communities to explore the agency and vitality of the Highland region that draws upon and, in fact, pre-empts many of the arguments about the present-day utility of the Highland past made by Jim Hunter two centuries later.[42] In his *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland*

(1771), Macpherson argues that if a people know their history it gives them and their culture agency and power in the present. One of Macpherson's key aims, after all, in writing this Celtic history was to demonstrate that one of the regions in which much of this history took place – the Highlands – was just as much a part of Britain as the rest of the UK.[43] Indeed, Macpherson's point is stronger still: in calling this book *An Introduction to the History of Great Britain*, Macpherson makes the claim that the whole history of the current UK state has its origins in this Celtic past, and that their contemporary, eighteenth-century descendants are, in fact, more British than anyone else.[44] In his introductory remarks on the different Celtic peoples, Macpherson reflects on the key role played by oral tradition in the passing on of knowledge:

> The art of perpetuating ideas, and of transmitting the wisdom of one age to another, is the first means of civilizing mankind out of their natural ferocity and barbarity. When some certain marks are found to send down the memory of inventions and transactions through a series of generations, a nation becomes polished in proportion to the length of time is has been in possession of that art.[45]

Here, Macpherson discusses the role of oral transmission in the composition of history, and as the means by which the history of early societies is preserved. Macpherson connects oral history with the idea of civilization, echoing the Enlightenment idea of stadial history – of different stages in history which lead to the present – espoused by his friend and fellow Highlander, Adam Ferguson.[46] Macpherson's focus here, though, is on the role an awareness of one's own history, and crucially, an attempt to record it, plays in the creation of a civilized society. Macpherson's Celtic history was, then, a history of the Highlands written from the perspective of the region which stressed the value of the Highlands' oral tradition and how this laid the basis for a society that was acutely aware of its past.

Macpherson's argument that an awareness of the past was a crucial feature of Highland society also informed his analysis of the development of the region in the present – the mid-eighteenth century. In his 'Dissertation' to *Fingal* (1762), Macpherson recognized that Highland society and culture was changing rapidly. Macpherson argued that Highlanders not only needed to rediscover these stories from their region's past, but that these historical narratives could help make sense of the modern world. Macpherson outlined a number of the changes wrought to Highland society in the present day:

> The genius of the highlanders has suffered a great change within these years. The communication with the rest of the island is open, and the introduction of trade and manufactures has destroyed that leisure which was formerly dedicated to hearing and repeating the poems of ancient times. Many have now learned to leave their mountains, and seek their fortunes in a milder climate; and though a certain *amor patriae* may sometimes bring them back, they have, during their absence, imbibed enough of foreign manners to despise the customs of their ancestors. Bards have been long disused, and the spirit of genealogy has greatly subsided. Men begin to be less devoted to their chiefs, and consanguinity is not so much regarded. When property is established, the human mind confines its views to the pleasure it procures. It does not go back to antiquity, or look forward to succeeding ages. The cares of life increase, and the actions of other times no longer amuse.[47]

Here, Macpherson furnishes us with a narrative of Highland history which covers the familiar terrain of a clan-based society collapsing in the face of a rapidly commercializing and colonizing world.[48] While identifying how these broader social and economic changes had ensured that 'the taste for ancient poetry is at a low ebb among the highlanders', Macpherson's purpose in narrating these developments was to justify his approach to the Ossianic Collections – of rendering these ancient Gaelic tales into contemporary, literary

English.[49] Fiona Stafford argues that Macpherson is merely engaged here in 'a hopeless gesture towards the preservation of Celtic Scotland'.[50] However, Macpherson's translations were an act of optimistic modernity. While the Highlands had become part of a broader British commercial and imperial world, its culture and language could be brought into the modern day through Macpherson's rendering of the Ossianic tales into the English language. In order to revive Highland culture, according to Macpherson, the region's poetry had to become part of the desirable modernity of literary fashion.[51] In returning to Macpherson's interpretation of the region's past, he argued, Highlanders could both embrace the modernity of the present and demonstrate how their culture and history was just as valid and important in shaping the modern world as the cultures of others. For Macpherson, the Ossianic tales were not the poetry of a dead or dying race – it was the story of the ancient Highlands, a region which continued to have value and importance in the present.

Conclusion

James Macpherson might seem like an unlikely intellectual bedfellow of Jim Hunter and his postcolonial inspirations, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said. However, these disparate writers are united by their belief in the power of the past to give agency to people in the present. The example of Macpherson's history writing examined in this article demonstrates how Hunter's use of postcolonial thought can be extended to other figures and periods in Highland history. More importantly, exploring Macpherson's work as an historian and his arguments about the agency of the region in the eighteenth century with local communities in the Highlands, such as in Badenoch, then re-inscribes that past with power in our twenty-first century present. This article has made an argument about history writing and agency: how Hunter's pioneering work on the Highlands was inspired by Fanon's notion that the past could inspire action in the present. Macpherson's history writing was acutely aware of this power and how,

in his contemporary eighteenth-century Highlands, writing about the culture and value of the region were vital in efforts to revive and inspire the region through his particular version of Highland modernity. This case study of Macpherson's history writing, then, demonstrates the broader utility of postcolonialism and the black radical tradition in thinking about the Scottish Highlands. As Highland historians, scholars, and communities, we need to follow Hunter's example and draw upon the intellectual resources of the likes of Stuart Hall, Walter Rodney, A. Sivanandan, Cedric J. Robinson, and others in interpreting our past and imagining alternative futures, where the world can be made anew.[52]

Notes

[1] James Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh, 1976).

[2] James Hunter, *On the Other Side of Sorrow: Nature and People in the Scottish Highlands* (Edinburgh, 1995).

[3] For a recent articulation of this approach to Highland history, see the work of Matthew Dziennik: Matthew P. Dziennik, 'The Fatal Land: War, Empire and the Highland Soldier in British America, 1756-1783', Unpublished PhD thesis (University of Edinburgh, 2011), 5, 12; Matthew P. Dziennik, 'Whig tartan: material culture and its use in the Scottish Highlands', *Past & Present*, 217 (2012), 117-47.

[4] Annie Tindley, *The Sutherland Estate, 1850-1920: Aristocratic Decline, Estate Management and Land Reform* (Edinburgh, 2010); David Taylor, 'A Society in Transition: Badenoch, 1750-1800', Unpublished PhD thesis (University of the Highlands and Islands, 2015). For a similar perspective on the Moray Firth, see David Worthington, 'The settlements of the Beauly-Wick coast and the historiography of the Moray Firth', *The Scottish Historical Review*, 95:2 (2016), 139-63.

[5] Iain MacKinnon, 'The invention of the Crofting Community: Scottish history's elision of indigenous identity, ideology and agency in accounts land struggle in the modern *Gàidhealtachd*', *Scottish Historical Review*, 98:1 (2019), 71-102. See, also, '"Eachdraidh Nar Cuimhne" – "History in our Memories": an Analysis of the Idea that the Highlands and Islands of Scotland Can be Understood as a Site of Colonisation', Unpublished PhD (University of Ulster, 2011), 43, 143, 164. One of the very few works of Highland history to mention Edward Said is Iain's Robertson's on the later Highland land wars. Here, though, Said's ideas about how identities are shaped by landscape are referred to in passing. See Iain J. M. Robertson, *Landscapes of Protest in the Scottish Highlands after 1914: The Later Highland Land Wars* (Farnham, 2013), 206.

[6] See Iain J. M. Robertson, 'Memory, heritage and the micropolitics of memorialisation: commemorating the heroes of the land struggle', in E. Cameron (ed.), *Recovering from the Clearances* (Kershader, 2013).

[7] For recent engagements with debate about the colonial nature of the relationship between Britain, Scotland, and the Highlands, see Iain MacKinnon, 'Colonialism and the Highland Clearances', *Northern Scotland*, 8 (2017), 22-48; Silke Stroh, *Gaelic Scotland in the Colonial Imagination: Anglophone Writing from 1600 to 1900* (Evanston, Illinois, 2017); Theo van Heijnsbergen and Carla Sassi (eds), *Within and Without Empire : Scotland Across the (Post)colonial Borderline* (Newcastle, 2013).

[8] J. G. A. Pocock, 'British History: A plea for a new subject', *Journal of Modern History*, 47:4 (1975), 611.

[9] Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, 1994), 30-75. Raphael Samuel, 'History Workshop, 1966-80', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981); Bill Schwartz, 'History on the move: reflections on History Workshop', *Radical History Review*, 57 (1993), 203-20.

[10] Ian Brown and Sìm Innes, 'Parody, satire and intertextuality in the songs of *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 35:3 (2015), 204-20.

[11] James Hunter, 'History: its key place in the future of the Highlands and Islands', *Northern Scotland*, 27 (2007), 9. For a critique of the role of Highlands and Islands Enterprise (and its predecessor, the Highlands and Islands Development Board), see Danny MacKinnon, 'Rural governance and local involvement: assessing state-community relations in the Scottish Highlands', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 18:3 (2002), 307-24.

[12] Charles Fraser Mackintosh, *Invernessiana* (Inverness, 1875); Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* (Edinburgh, 1900). For discussions of these works see, respectively, Melanie Manwaring-McKay, 'Charles Fraser Mackintosh (1828-1901) and His Books: Book Collecting, Bibliomania and Antiquarianism in the Victorian Scottish Highlands', Unpublished MLitt by Research Thesis (University of the Highlands and Islands, 2018); Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart (ed.), *The Life and Legacy of Alexander Carmichael* (Port of Ness, 2008).

[13] The agency of the eighteenth-century Highland elite is explored in a similar vein in Matthew Dziennik's work. See Dziennik, 'Whig tartan'.

[14] Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), 15-42. For an example of how Trevor-Roper's mis-reading of Highland history and culture continues to shape current academic debate, see M. Mahavir Kumar, 'Plaided or dusky forms: Highland landscape in Scotland and Kenya', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Enquiry*, 7:2 (2020), 188-90.

[15] Dziennik, 'Whig tartan'. For recent debate about how heritage and traditions are in a constant state of renewal, see Ullrich Kockel, 'Reflexive Traditions and Heritage

Production', in Ullrich Kockel and Máiréad Nic Craith (eds), *Cultural Heritages as Reflexive Traditions* (Basingstoke, 2007), 19-33.

[16] David Taylor, *The Wild Black Region: Badenoch, 1750-1800* (Edinburgh, 2016). Taylor's approach builds upon research into the early modern Highlands and the region's connections across the globe. See, for example, Aonghas MacCoinnich, *Plantation and Civility in the North Atlantic World: The Case of the Northern Hebrides, 1570-1639* (Leiden, 2015); Alison Cathcart, *Kinship and Clientage: Highland Clanship, 1451-1609* (Leiden, 2006); Allan Kennedy, *Governing Gaeldom: The Scottish Highlands and the Restoration State* (Leiden, 2014).

[17] David Worthington, 'The settlements of the Beauly-Wick coast and the historiography of the Moray Firth', *Scottish Historical Review*, 95:2 (2016), 139-63. For discussion of agency as a concept in historical analysis (and in an empire context), see Jon Wilson, 'Agency, narrative and resistance', in Sarah Stockwell (ed.), *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives* (Oxford, 2007), 245-69.

[18] Hunter, 'History', 9-10.

[19] For Hunter's formative experience studying African history at the University of Aberdeen with John Hargreaves and Roy Bridges during the 1960s, see his 'Preface to the 2000 edition' in James Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh, 2010), 8-9, 28.

[20] Hunter, 'History', 7.

[21] Martin MacGregor, 'Civilising Gaelic Scotland: the Scottish Isles and the Stewart Empire', in E.Ó. Ciardha and M.Ó. Siochru (eds), *The Plantation of Ulster: Ideology and Practice* (Manchester, 2012), 33-54. See, also, Iain MacKinnon's analysis of nineteenth-century Highland development as a project of colonization, in Iain MacKinnon, 'Colonialism and the Highland Clearances', *Northern Scotland*, 8 (2017), 22-48.

[22] Iain MacKinnon, ' "Decommonising the mind": historical impacts of British imperialism on indigenous tenure systems and self-understanding in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland', *International Journal of the Commons*, 12:1 (2018), 295; James Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key*, Vols 1 & 2 (Cambridge, 2008).

[23] MacKinnon, '"*Eachdraidh Nar Cuimhne*" – "History in our Memories", 40.

[24] Ibid., 73-8.

[25] Norman K. Denizen, Yonna S. Lincoln and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (London, 2008).

[26] Issie MacPhail, 'Land, Crofting and the Assynt Crofters Trust: A Post-colonial Geography?', Unpublished PhD thesis (University of Wales, 2002). MacPhail's work engages extensively with subaltern studies, including the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. See also Issie MacPhail, 'Dualchas Aig An Oir – Heritage At The Edge: The History Brief – Developments in the History and Heritage Sector in Caithness and Sutherland', Report for HIE Caithness and Sutherland (2009), 125-6.

[27] Mairi McFadyen, 'Red John and the Rain Geese', *Bella Caledonia*, 17 February 2019, available at https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2019/02/17/red-john-and-the-rain-geese/, accessed 9 April 2019. For further examples of activism in the Highlands which seeks to offer alternatives to neoliberalism, see the degrowth collective Enough, and some of their work in Merkinch, one of the most deprived areas of Inverness:

https://enough.scot/2019/07/30/enough-community-project-begins-merkinch-inverness/, accessed 6 October 2019.

[28] For the world-wide reach of Macpherson's works, see, for example, Amanda Louise Johnson, 'Thomas Jefferson's Ossianic romance', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 45 (2016), 19-35.

[29] Howard Gaskill, 'Introduction: the translator's Ossian', *Translation and Literature*, 22:3 (2013), 293-301; Paul Barnaby, 'Timeline: European reception of Ossian', in Howard Gaskill (ed.), *The Reception of Ossian in Europe* (London, 2004), xxi-lxviii.

[30] For summaries of the 'Ossian wars' and the broader reception of Macpherson's work, see Dafydd Moore, 'The reception of *The Poems of Ossian* in England and Scotland', in Gaskill, *The Reception of Ossian in Europe*, 21-32; Gauti Kristmannsson, 'Ossian and the state of translation in the Scottish Enlightenment', in Dafydd Moore (ed.), *The International Companion to James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Glasgow, 2017), 39-41. For a recent public re-hashing of these arguments, in response to the National Museum of Scotland's 'Wild and Majestic' exhibition in 2019, see Phil Miller, 'Romantic or real? Ossian tales to be at centre of new National Museum show', *The Herald*, 17 November 2018, available at https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/17230079.romantic-or-real-ossian-tales-to-be-at-centre-of-new-national-museum-show/, accessed 5 July 2019.

[31] *Fragments of Ancient Poetry* (Edinburgh, 1760); *Fingal, an Ancient Epic Poem in Eight Books: together with Several Other Poems composed by Ossian, the Son of Fingal* (London, 1762); *Temora, an Ancient Epic Poem in Eight Books: together with Several Other Poems composed by Ossian, the Son of Fingal* (London, 1763); *The Works of Ossian, the Son of Fingal. Translated from the Galic Language by James Macpherson*, 2 vols (London, 1765); *The Poems of Ossian. Translated by James Macpherson* (London, 1773).

[32] J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, Volume 2: Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge, 1999), 199; Fiona Stafford, *The Sublime Savage: James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Edinburgh, 1988), 182.

[33] See Kristin Lindfield-Ott and Jim MacPherson, *Macpherson the Historian: History Writing, Nation-Building and Identity in the Works of James Macpherson* (Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming, 2021).

[34] Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, Vol. II*, 4-6; Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley, 1990).

[35] Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, Vol. II*, 207.

[36] Mark Salber Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton, 2000), 52, 21-2.

[37] See the Kingussie Heritage Festival programme at https://macphersonsossianiclegacy.wordpress.com/public-events/conference-heritage-festival-18th-19th-april-2015/, accessed 5 July 2019; Lesley Mickel, 'Encountering Macpherson's Poetry: A Case Study in Transmedialisation', in S. Coelsch Foisner and C. Herzog (eds), *Transmedialisierung* (Heidelberg, 2019), 61-74.

[38] Kristin Lindfield-Ott, 'James Macpherson, "The Highlander" (1758)', *Meet the Books*, 2015, available at https://www.highlifehighland.com/meet-the-books/james-macpherson-the-highlander-1758/, accessed 5 July 2019.

[39] Tom Ramage, 'Awesome Ossian!', *Strathspey and Badenoch Herald*, 23 April 2015, 16.

[40] See the work of Tamar Evangelestia-Dougherty and her pioneering rare books' workshops with school children in Richmond, Virginia, https://twitter.com/evangelestia/status/992468763219054593/photo/1, accessed 5 July 2019.

[41] Photographs of these workshops can be seen here: https://macphersonsossianiclegacy.wordpress.com/public-events/conference-heritage-festival-18th-19th-april-2015/, accessed 5 July 2019.

[42] Jim MacPherson, 'James "Ossian" Macpherson: history writing, the power of culture and inspiring change in present-day Badenoch', Laggan Heritage Society, 23 February 2020, https://twitter.com/LagganHeritage/status/1231677662382432258

[43] Dafydd Moore, 'James Macpherson and "Celtic Whiggism"', *Eighteenth-Century Life* 30:1 (2006), 1-24.

[44] Kristin Lindfield-Ott, 'See SCOT and SAXON Coalesc'd in One': James Macpherson's 'The Highlander' in its Intellectual and Cultural Contexts, with an Annotated Text of the Poem', Unpublished PhD thesis (University of St Andrews, 2011); Colin Kidd, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689-c.1830* (Cambridge, 1993), 219-46. For a similar argument in relation to the Scottish Border poet, James Hogg (1770-1835), see Meiko O'Halloran, *James Hogg and British Romanticism: A Kaleidoscopic Art* (Basingstoke, 2016).

[45] James Macpherson, *An Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1771), 59.

[46] Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, 158-9.

[47] Macpherson, *Fingal*, xv.

[48] MacInnes, *Clanship*. For an account of the rather more uneven process by which a commercial society replaced that of a clan-based one in Macpherson's homeland, Badenoch, see Taylor, 'A Society in Transition'.

[49] Macpherson, *Fingal*, xv.

[50] Stafford, *The Sublime Savage*, 160.

[51] For a similar process in the context of how tartan was used by the Highland elite during the late eighteenth century to promote the modernity of the region, see Dziennik, 'Whig Tartan'.

[52] Seamus MacPherson, 'Walter Rodney in the Highlands', *The Empire at Home*, 24 April 2019, available at https://theempireathome.com/2019/04/24/the-journey-begins/, accessed 29 April 2020.