

Tom Nairn and the Twilight of Ukania

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*The Break-Up of Britain*¹ is a seminal work in nationalism studies, influencing most prominently Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and Ernest Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism*.² Tom Nairn, its author and Scotland's preeminent intellectual, passed at the age of 90 in January of this year. He was central to a remarkable generation of theorists of nationalism, but in Scotland his influence was even more profound. And as one of many researchers on nationalism and Scotland, I feel his loss personally and deeply.

The chapters contained in *The Break-Up of Britain* were originally essays written for the journal, *New Left Review (NLR)*, for which Nairn was an editor. While these essays were written on distinct topics (the rise of Welsh and Scottish nationalisms, the northern Ireland 'Troubles', Enoch Powell and immigration) together they caught a state in crisis. This was a state, which since 1688 (its last major transformation) had evaded the constitutional revolutions that had swept Europe from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Indeed this was a key element of the 'Nairn-Anderson thesis' established in earlier *NLR* essays in collaboration with Nairn's friend and colleague, Perry Anderson. Yet the book's title, with its focus on Britain, belied its ambition because it offered no less than a compelling theory of nationalism. The book declared that 'The theory of nationalism represents Marxism's great historical failure.' Nairn sought remedy this.

He proposed that nationalism was a response to the 'uneven development of capitalism.'³ 'rather than accept progress as it is thrust upon them by the metropolitan centre, the hinterland has to demand it on its own terms.'⁴ Modernity was not 'one size fits all', it had to be purpose built; agency was emphasised, and nationalism provided the means. Importantly, overdevelopment, just as much as underdevelopment, could result from the vagaries of capitalism. Peripheries could be in advance of the core. This explained Catalonia's economic advance over Castile, and it contained the suggestion that with the discovery of North Sea Oil, Scotland was now economically in advance of England.

However, the Marxism that Nairn deployed so befuddled Gellner that he described *The Break-Up of Britain*, in an otherwise enthusiastic review, as 'Nationalism, or the New Confessions of a Justified Edinburgh Sinner.'⁵ This was an allusion to James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, a novel in which struggles within Calvinist theology is a central theme. That is, this was not conventional British Marxism. Nairn recalled: 'If you were a Marxist [in Scotland or Britain] you were a Stalinist or a Trotskyist, but I was insulated against that by my Italian experience, and recognition that there was a much wider intellectual, cultural atmosphere that one could go on breathing.'⁶

Nairn had undertaken his undergraduate degree in philosophy at Edinburgh and Oxford, pursuing a particular interest in aesthetics and the Italian theorist, Benedetto Croce. This led to further study at the University of Pisa. It was while in Italy that Nairn encountered the writings of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci placed a focus on intellectuals, culture and civil society, as elements around which ideology became hegemonic. This particular matrix helped explain why Scotland had not followed the trajectory of other small European nations in seeking independence.⁷ Scotland possessed a 'decapitated national

state,⁸ such that the trappings of statehood (law, education, national church) had been divorced from state power. This had implications for how intellectuals understood Scotland and its civil life. Nairn revived the notion of the Caledonian antisyzygy, that Scottish intellectuals exhibited contradictory realist and romantic traits. This schism could be found at the heart of Scottish literature, not least in RL Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. In later writing he revisited these ideas, and dismissed the idea of civil society as 'sometimes as open as a Ouija board to creative interpretation.' What mattered instead was a parliament 'which implies a qualitative shift to the 'high politics' of last-resort responsibility and extra-local statues.'⁹

Nairn had also found intellectual kinship with his Edinburgh neighbour and fellow *Gramsciano*, the poet, writer and folklorist, Hamish Henderson. Nairn remembered that 'Hamish ... never missed his *New Left Review*, but also preferred talking in Italian about the contents, which we used to do in the Meadows, walking up and down Middle Meadow Walk [in Edinburgh].'¹⁰ Indeed, Nairn's examination eschewed the parochialism of much Scottish commentary and placed contemporary developments in a European, and indeed global, context. This was explicit in his essay on Scottish nationalism, 'Scotland and Europe': nationalism was the modern Janus, simultaneously looking backwards and forwards, and tasked with the achievement of modernity on 'something like its own terms.' 'Independence in Europe' (then the European Economic Community (EEC)) was effectively Nairn's idea, and this at a time when Euroscepticism pervaded both the labour and national movements, which he had addressed in *The Left Against Europe?* This was the basis on which he was active in the short-lived Scottish Labour Party (SLP) in 1970s. Yet Nairn's activism was thereafter confined to non-party groupings.

Tom Nairn was that most international of Scots. The international perspective that was so fundamental to his writings had derived from his time away from Scotland: in Italy, at the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam where much of *The Break-Up of Britain* was written; at the Central European University's Centre for the Study of Nationalism in Prague where he was reunited with Gellner, and latterly at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. And yet he maintained strong ties and often a home in Scotland throughout. He returned to the University of Edinburgh in the 1990s, and together with David McCrone, launched the first and longest running postgraduate degree dedicated to the study of nationalism.

Nairn was throughout a determined critic of Britain's *ancien régime*, effectively establishing a genre of writing that has sought to provide a detailed anatomy its failings, and which has been pursued by, among others, Will Hutton and Gavin Esler. Yet Nairn's voice remained distinct, and unmatched, marked as much by its historical allusions as its humour. In *The Enchanted Glass*, the House of Windsor was exposed not as a relic of a bygone age or as a gossip column feeding heritage industry, but as the very pinnacle of the state and its archaic constitution. In *After Britain* Nairn took aim at Prime Minister Tony Blair's modernizing project. Britain's decline was akin to the Hapsburgs, he argued, and so shared much with Robert Musil's depiction of Austro-Hungary or, as Musil called it, 'Kakania.' Kakania's preparations to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the Emperor's accession to the throne in 1918 prefigured Ukania's (Nairn's label) Millennium Project. Both were characterized by desperate attempts to celebrate the latest emblems of modernity while leaving their ramshackle constitutions intact. (While Franz Joseph's celebrations never took place, Elizabeth Windsor's platinum jubilee did, and with some success, through the canny co-option of popular culture, not least the revelation that Her Majesty shared with Paddington Bear a fondness for marmalade sandwiches.)

Brexit Britain bears a remarkable resemblance to Nairn's Ukania. Delusions of grandeur continue to plague the British political elite. The pomp and pageantry of Queen Elizabeth's funeral (not ancient ritual but a carefully choreographed digital event) juxtaposed the state's creaking social and political institutions, its chaotic response to Covid 19, and its drift from Europe. 'Global Britain' has never looked so insular. Was this the last hurrah? King Charles III's Coronation (more 'invented traditions'), Europe and Ireland (no longer governed by a 'Protocol', but by the monarch-sanctioned, 'Windsor Framework'), Scotland's 'IndyRef2' (and its prospects following the sudden resignation of Nicola Sturgeon), and Englishness and immigration (the issues at the heart of the Brexit referendum) are contemporary topics at the very core of Nairn's *oeuvre*. Indeed these were in Nairn's oft-used phrase the 'bees in his bonnet.' We will be the poorer for the loss of his trenchant analyses.

Tom was quiet spoken, which only accentuated his authority and thoughtfulness in conversation. The exception appeared to be when he spoke in Italian, when he was reputedly much more animated. Though, characteristically, Tom later played this down. My own interactions with Tom were all too few. As a graduate student, I was in awe of Tom, his writings had taken on a somewhat mythical character in my imagination; they placed Scotland and nationalism at the very centre of academic attention; they were required reading in both my Politics and Sociology undergraduate classes. Yet in person Tom could not have been warmer, and he was incredibly generous with his time (though he had little for the University's bureaucracy). I recall wide-ranging conversations that encompassed the historiography of the 1820 rising, as well as discussion of a proposed documentary in which prominent writers would walk the borders between nations. We discussed who might be best placed to do this in Québec. The last occasion was at a reception organised by David McCrone to celebrate the award of an honorary doctorate at the

University of Edinburgh. We have lost not only a true polymath, but also a warm and incredibly humble friend and mentor.

Endnotes

¹ Published originally in 1977 by New Left Books (later Verso), with a revised edition in 1981 and a final revision in 2021. There was some debate on whether a question mark was to be included in the title. With hindsight, Nairn suggested ... that 'Peremptory statements can last better than nervous questions,' *The Break-Up of Britain*, Third Edition (Verso: 2021), p. 395.

² It also notably drew the ire of the Marxist historian, Eric Hobsbawm. See Hobsbawm's 'Some Reflections on "The Break-Up of Britain"', *New Left Review*, 105/1 (1977).

³ Immanuel Wallerstein was acknowledged, but it was Gellner's 'uneven diffusion' of industrialism, that was the more influential, drawn from his essay in *Thought and Change* (London: 1964), which at the time, Nairn described as 'the most important and influential recent study in English.'

⁴ *The Break-Up of Britain*, p. 97.

⁵ E. Gellner, 'Nationalism, or the New Confessions of a Justified Edinburgh Sinner', *Political Quarterly*, 49/1 (1978), 103-11.

⁶ Scott Hames and William Storrar 'A Lucky Thinker: An Interview with Tom Nairn', *Scottish Affairs*, 25/4, p. 441.

⁷ Nairn was familiar with, and made reference to Miroslav Hroch's *Die Vörkämpfer der nationalen Bewegung bei den kleinen Völkern Europas* (Prague: 1968), which had still to be translated and published in English.

⁸ *The Break-Up of Britain*, p. 129.

⁹ *Faces of Nationalism* (Verso: 1997), pp. 77, 237 fn.18. These comments were a response to Lindsay Paterson's influential *The Autonomy of Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh: 1994), which offered an alternate explanation for Scottish

nationalism's lateness, namely the considerable degree of political autonomy that Scottish elites enjoyed through much of the Union era.

¹⁰ Hames and Storrar, 'A Lucky Thinker,' p. 444.