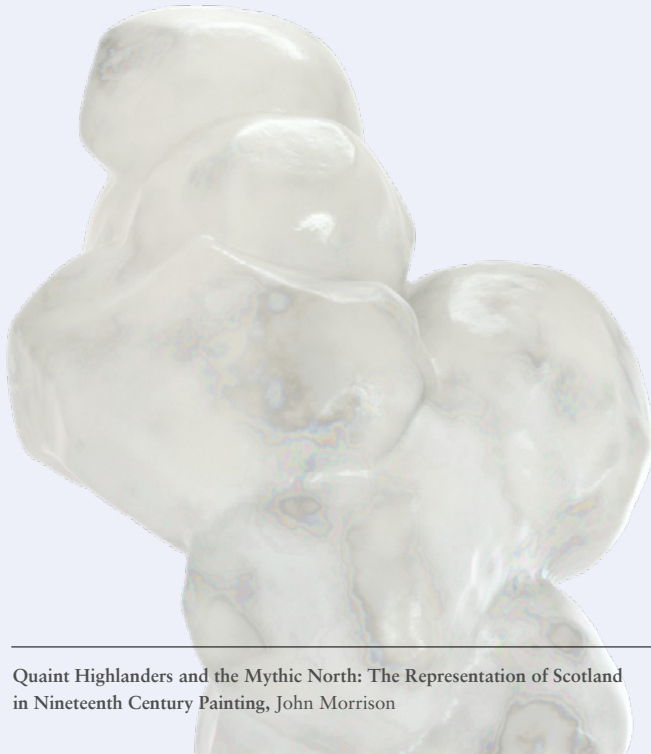


# *Quaint Highlanders and the Mythic North: The Representation of Scotland in Nineteenth Century Painting*

*John Morrison*



Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the period covered here, Scotland underwent great social, economic and cultural change. It was a time when painting came to be accorded tremendous significance, both as a record of humanity's highest achievements and as a vehicle for the expression of elemental truths. In Britain in the nineteenth century the middle classes assigned great significance to the art they bought in increasing quantities; indeed, painting became their preferred instrument for the promotion of their vision of a prosperous modern society. Art was valued insofar as it expressed their highest aspirations and deepest convictions, and it was a crucial instrument in the task of moulding a society of people who shared these values regardless of their class, gender or wealth. If nineteenth- and early twentieth-century painting functioned to corroborate the narratives people used to help validate their lives; if further it was closely linked to middle-class ideologies, then we are likely to find that the social and political power of the middle classes made art a barometer of Scottish society as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

That society, for much of the nineteenth century, was concerned either with what it meant to be Scottish, or with asserting that distinctive Scottishness. Throughout the nineteenth century and arguably until after 1914, expressions of Scottish national identity, Scottish "nationalism," concentrated on those aspects of life which gave the country its unity: the land, the people, the history, and most importantly the country's "myths."<sup>3</sup> It is in representations of these subjects, which were repeatedly painted in the period, that an expression of contemporary ideas of national identity can be found. The nature of

Scotland's myths and the cultural formations which carried them are complex.

## THE MYTH OF SCOTLAND

The term myth, in this context, is taken to mean a widely accepted interpretative traditional story embodying fundamental beliefs. Every country has its myths. They arise via judicious appropriations from the popular history of the country and function as a contemporary force endorsing belief or conduct in the present. They explain and interpret the world as it is found, and both assert values and extol identity. Here, in addition, the concept embodies something of the overtones of the moral teaching of a parable.

A myth is a highly selective memory of the past used to stimulate collective purpose in the present. With no collective purpose, there can be no national identity and therefore no nationalism. Myths are central to the very existence of nationalism. The word "myth" implies fabrication, but to have evolved at all a myth must have some connection to reality. It must reflect aspects of the realities of life and be seen to do so, or it simply will not survive. That is not to imply that myths are at some basic level objectively true. Rather they must be conceived by those to whom they relate as expressing a broader allegorical truth about themselves and their identity. The objective truth or otherwise of a myth is irrelevant and myths are not subject to destruction by dispassionate proof that they are false. What people believe is real, is real in its consequences. Given that a myth exists, its perpetuation relies on it being continually reiterated. It must become embedded in one or more cultural carriers. To borrow Raymond Williams's breakdown of the cultural

process, “traditions,” endure through incorporation into the “institutions” and “formations” of a country.<sup>4</sup> To apply this to Scottish culture we must consider the myth of Scotland and its cultural carriers.<sup>5</sup> In the nineteenth century, as Kate Flint has observed, painting in particular fulfilled the role of carrier of myth. “Art,” she observes, “had the function of confirming the narratives which (people) used to make sense of their lives.”<sup>6</sup>

The myth of the land was particularly powerful. A myth of nature “acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essence, [...] myth does not deny things, on the contrary its function is to talk about them, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them natural and eternal justification.”<sup>7</sup> The Romantic landscapes of Horatio McCulloch (1805–1867) reflect the dominant narrative in Scotland and it is a myth of the North. As Peter Womack observed of Scotland’s defining northern myth:

*We know that the Highlands of Scotland are Romantic. Bens and glens, the loan shieling in the misty island, purple heather, kilted clansmen, battles long ago, an ancient and beautiful language, claymores and bagpipes and Bonny Prince Charlie – we know all that, and we also know that it is not real.*<sup>8</sup>

Though not by any means unchallenged, this visual expression of Scottish identity was very powerful in the period under discussion. The Highlands of the north of Scotland were understood, from their representation by Walter Scott in the early nineteenth century onwards, as the home of a different type of culture and it was to that culture, or rather to a very particular fantasy view of that culture, that Scotland pinned its identity.<sup>9</sup> The Highlands as a landscape were understood as wild, empty, desolate and with a terrible beauty. The people who inhabited the region lived in a society presented as being founded on

bonds of kinship and of community, as being classless and fiercely loyal. These characteristics spawned numerous depictions of noble Highlanders operating to a different code from modern, evolving Lowland Scottish society. Paintings depicting this “different” culture or depicting simply the Highland landscape as does *My Heart’s in the Highlands* (fig. 1), are prime carriers of the Scottish myth.

This myth stressed that Scotland was an ancient land with continuing traditions, that it still possessed a distinctive social system and that it had a unique and valuable contribution to make to the constructed state of Great Britain. This manufactured identity read the Highlands as an unchanging society and, from a highly selective reading of the culture of the north and west of Scotland, purported to identify a medieval system of tribal affiliations, manrent and feudalism. This became Scotland’s defining national characteristic. Some liberal opinion objected but this northern identity held sway for a century and still resonates today.

### THE ROMANTIC HIGHLANDS

Against this reading Horatio McCulloch is seen not only as the creator of archetypal Scottish landscapes but as the producer of images embodying the essential qualities of the nation itself. During his lifetime McCulloch was hailed as “strictly a national painter,” a master of the “bold bluff of a craggy steep.”<sup>10</sup> Allusions to the culture of the North and the supposed inherent emotional, war-like tendencies of the people, are seen in the castle in the middle distance. It is not simply the link between the human culture and the land that is important. The presence of the deer in the left foreground is not negligible. It deliberately alludes to the Highlands as a place of wilderness, “unspoiled” by human impact. A place where one might encounter nature in the raw. It offers up the region as a retreat from modern human society.



Fig 1. 1. Horatio McCulloch, *My Heart’s in the Highlands*, 1860, oil on canvas, 61 x 91.4 cm, Glasgow Museums: Art Gallery & Museum, Kelvingrove.

Artists who supplied the huge demand for images of “the mountain and the flood” knew only this sentimental elegiac vision of the Highlands initially promoted by Walter Scott and burgeoning throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Scott’s *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* was published in 1805. From then onwards his vision of the Highlands as a land out of time, a wild rugged landscape, home to an ancient culture, was hugely popular. In 1822 King George IV visited Scotland, the first reigning British monarch to do so in almost two centuries. Scott was placed in charge of the ceremonial aspects of the jaunt. His orchestration of George IV’s sojourn in Edinburgh sealed the northern identity for the country. After it, the majority of Scots embraced the notion of a dual identity. They were content to be both Scottish and British. To these sentiments Scott’s pageant grafted a myth of Scotland as a unified, northern, Highland culture, with a heroic past and a history of extravagant loyalty. While the visit was taking place, the fully fifteen percent of the population that visited Edinburgh to participate or watch, embraced Highlandism wholeheartedly.

Scott sought, in his orchestration of the visit, to present Scotland as a distinct, undivided and loyal component of the United Kingdom. His manufactured identity gave the country a collective character it had lacked since the Union with England of 1707, albeit a simplistic one. It stressed that Scotland was an ancient land with continuing traditions; that it still possessed a distinctive social system and that it had a unique and valuable contribution to make to Great Britain. The loyalty of the clans was a central part of the sub-text of Scott’s celebrations. In a self-referential argument, the loyalty of the Highlanders to George IV was seen as proof of his status as legitimate heir to the Scottish throne; while simultaneously his standing as heir gave him irrefutable call on Highland loyalty. In 1822, with forced emigration from the Highlands, and political reform a focal point for both debate and direct, sometimes militant action, Scott stressed continuity, not change.

The painted image of the North which derived from Scott bore little relationship to reality. The iconographic content of the paintings was only superficially Highland and to residents of the region would often have appeared cruelly mocking rather than celebratory. The paintings frequently misinterpreted images, misrepresented people and places and ignored awkward truths. Images of wild landscapes with windswept sheep and deer became stock Scottish scenery but only for those unaware of the reality. This mythic Highlandism was a paradigm to serve the needs of a Scottish nationalism that was bound to the British union. It was a construct, not a likeness. In depictions of the people, representations of noble, simple unsophisticated, incorruptible warriors inhabiting a simple, unsophisticated, untainted environment abound. John Pettie’s *A Highland Outpost* (fig. 2) is standard fare in this regard.

In all its guises a country’s myth defines identity for those who live in it. In the nineteenth century, as now, these beliefs were held to be what make Scots “different” from anyone else. The concept of “difference” is fundamentally important. Given the exceptional cultural relationship between Scotland and England, Scottish “difference” is particularly important in maintaining a sense of identity. David McCrone explains:

*In asking who we are, the totems and icons of heritage are powerful signifiers of our identity. We may find tartanry, Bonnie Prince Charlie, Mary Queen of Scots, Bannockburn and Burns false descriptors of who we are, but they provide a source of ready-made distinguishing characteristics from England, our bigger southern neighbour.<sup>12</sup>*

Comfortable or not, this adoption of a Romantic identity by Scotland differed from mainstream European Romanticism in two ways. While it had emerged as a revolutionary force

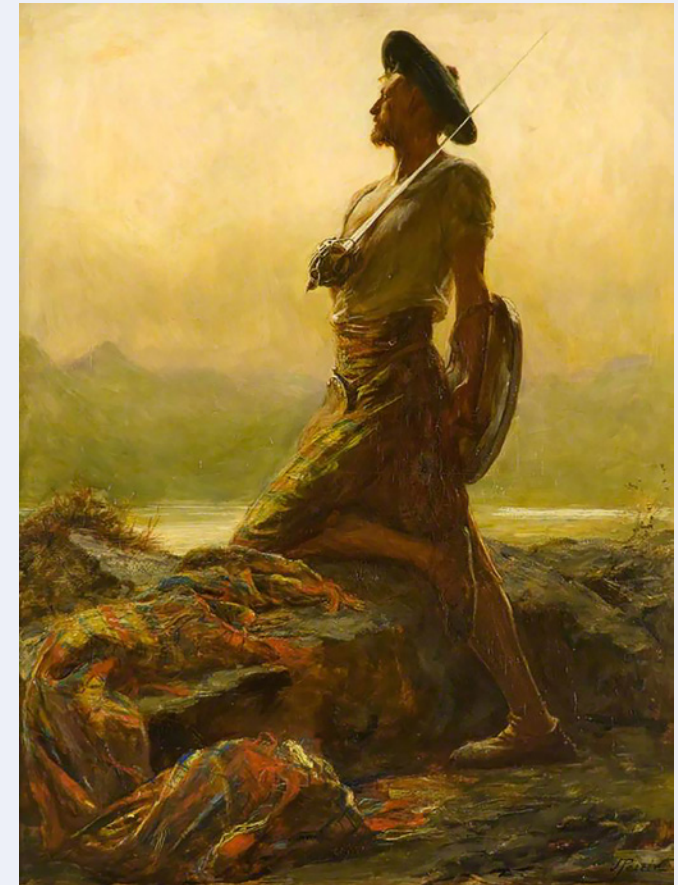


Fig 2. John Pettie, *A Highland Outpost*, 1878, oil on canvas, 74 x 86 cm, Dundee Art Gallery and Museum.



in Scottish painting, it soon lost its identity as an avant-garde, struggling against an established cultural elite.<sup>13</sup> Instead it rapidly came to fill the vacuum left by Scotland's abandoned political independence. In the face of the self-doubt which accompanied the earlier loss of statehood and the failure of Scotland's attempt at reinventing itself as "North Britain," the Romantic landscape of the North offered the notion that in the land itself could be found the heart of a unique and separate identity conferring on those who partook of it a cast of tragically heroic antecedents. The northern identity was irresistible to early nineteenth-century Scots. The outcome of this very widespread success of the myth of the North is that from the Romantic period onwards, for most Scots everything that needed to be said about what it was to be Scottish could be encapsulated in a stark mountainous Highland landscape, for example, Arthur Perigal's *Morning in Glen Nevis* (fig. 3). This mass popular appeal meant that Scotland's Romantic northern identity was not the milieu of the dissident. "Romantic Scotland" was embraced by the whole of society, making it both more entrenched and less radical than its European counterparts.

The long survival of this identity in popular culture stems directly from these factors. When the relentless pursuit of the original dictated by modernism gave rise in Europe to new cultural forms, in Scotland Romanticism continued to hold sway. McCulloch remained enthroned as the country's national painter. Emergent artists seeking to supplant Romanticism faced not only the entrenched opposition of the art establishment, but also the *vox populi*. Scotland had found its post-Union identity only with difficulty. The uniqueness it embodied was central to the country's sense of self-worth. It was not to be relinquished lightly.

#### MYTH AND REALITY

The incongruity of this northern identity was only occasionally remarked upon, and then most often, early

on before it became firmly entrenched. J.G. Lockhart remarked on the artificiality of the "plaided panorama" created by his father-in-law Walter Scott. He observed that the new identity was in poor taste and that it was positively cruel to Highlanders to lavish praise on their society while simultaneously condoning its destruction through the policy of clearance. In truth "traditional" Highland society had been under increasing pressure from the earlier eighteenth century and the putative traditional clan culture was very largely extinct by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Principal among these changes was a shift in the attitude of Highland landlords towards the land. Increasingly they sought to maximise the commercial potential of their lands and to extract as much as possible of that worth in cash rather than in any other form. As a consequence of these new attitudes the established system of Highland settlements, the *baile*, consisting of multiple tenant farmers, cottars and servants, came under unremitting attack to be replaced by a variety of systems. In the southern and eastern Highlands larger single tenant farms emerged with some additional small holdings. In the north and west the "crofting" society of individual small holdings predominated. The lauding of the ancient ways of the Gael then was by the nineteenth century a non-sequitur. The long-standing culture of the Highlands had been largely erased. There remained vestigial traces of localised loyalties, mainly, though not exclusively, in the minds of estate tenants, but the interdependent society of landowner and people bound by a system of mutual obligation had in practice been destroyed and replaced by an increasingly legalistic money-based relationship. From its nineteenth-century inception this northern identity was a fabrication.

Its formula is seen at its most complete in examining paintings where the landscape is utilised as a reinforcing agent for a message expressed in narratives of human action. Jacques Derrida has argued for the importance of landscape



Fig 3. Arthur Perigal, *Morning in Glen Nevis*, 1880, oil on canvas, 89.5 x 155 cm, Smith Art Gallery and Museum, Stirling.



Fig 4. John Crawford Brown, *The Return from Waterloo*, 1851, oil on canvas, 91 x 144 cm, private collection (Photo: Sotheby's picture library London).

in figure subjects as more than setting or background. He presents it as “parergon,” meaning “alongside the work,” rather than wholly subordinate to the work. “A parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon* the work done, [...] but it does not fall to one side, it touches and co-operates within the operation, from a certain outside neither simply outside nor simply inside.”<sup>14</sup>

J.C. Brown’s *The Return from Waterloo* of 1851 (fig. 4) is one such work. Though neither a particularly successful nor a particularly innovative work, Brown’s painting is stereotypical of an approach to the North which began in the 1820s, dominated Scottish painting for forty years, and remained a significant force in the depiction of Scotland at least until the First World War. The landscape in this work is not “background” and it is not “subject.” Rather the setting and the figures act synchronously, each reinforcing the message inherent in the other. The narrative human element is dominant here but never wholly independent of the topography in which it takes place. Two soldiers in full military Highland dress halt while the horse, pulling a wagon carrying their effects, pauses for a drink at the roadside. A young woman, unknown to either of the men – judging by their indifference – accosts them apparently in welcome. She may have emerged from the low cottage to the right of the road. In the distance can be seen a second wagon and accompanying Highland soldier.

The painting derives its signifiers and signs, that is, its carriers of symbolic meaning and the meanings themselves, entirely from the constructed myth of the North. The Highlands are here equated with militarism and personal valour and identified simultaneously as the source for staunchly loyalist instruments of Britain’s military victory at Waterloo. Highland social structure is also stressed. The woman greets the returning soldiers, not as her own family members, but as part of the extended Highland clan society of interwoven personal loyalties. By implication,

the acknowledgement offered to this first pair of soldiers will be extended to the second group further down the road. The community of interdependency is stressed. The landscape in which the action takes place reinforces the central planks of this identity. The ruined castle alludes directly to the long military history of the region and the strong unquestioning strength of the individuals is echoed in the stark, bleak mountains and barren heath of the middle distance. The figures, Brown tells his audience, have left behind the rich sunlit lower ground in the distance and returned to the northern landscape which bred them. Highlanders are strong, warlike and loyal. These qualities are inherent in the people and are the outcome of their ancient unbroken heritage worked out in a starkly beautiful but uncompromising natural environment. This harsh northern landscape is here made the progenitor of culture.

At the heart of these images of Scotland’s northern identity are two central incongruities. Firstly, they characterise Scotland as rural, timeless and largely empty, when the reality for the majority was urban, industrial and rapidly changing. Secondly, they grossly misrepresent the Highland culture which they purport to admire. That misrepresentation serves to illustrate the particular character of Scotland’s myth of the North. It appears to embody Scottish identity in a romanticised vision of an identifiable, if marginal, section of the populace. Of itself that is not remarkable. French rural realism in the hands of Jules Breton and his like pursued precisely this end. Both movements sought to idealise a section of indigenous culture and utilise the images as a touchstone for the nation. Scotland’s northern myth however derived not from a simplification of a particular section of society but from a largely separate and wholly dominant Lowland Scottish fantasy view of a minority northern, Highland culture that was largely alien to the majority from the south. Furthermore, as it hailed its own fantasy creation, the Lowlands actively pursued a policy of eradication against the actual remnants of that northern

culture. The ignorance and lack of interest in the reality, rather than the fantasy, led to an iconography which was often marked by sentimentality, excessive sanguinity and was not infrequently deeply, if unintentionally ironic.

### PAINTING THE NORTHERN LANDSCAPE

Paintings of the region typically exhibit a profound lack of knowledge and concern for the culture they purport to celebrate. Perigal's painting, *Morning in Glen Nevis*, depicts a sensationalised view of jagged, mist-sheathed mountains. Making their way towards the viewer along the floor of the glen is a kilted, plaid-wrapped shepherd and approximately thirty rather ambiguously rendered sheep. By 1880 when this work was painted the sheep population of the Highlands was made up largely of Blackface and Cheviot flocks. These breeds were introduced into the area in ever increasing numbers from the early nineteenth century onwards. Referred to by the Gaels as *Na Caoraidh Mora* or "big sheep," they were quite distinct from the smaller, hardier animals commonly kept in small numbers by the local populace. Their spread was driven by the desire of landowners to maximise the financial revenue generated by their lands and the recognition that large-scale sheep walks rented to a single individual grazier yielded both more money and was more reliably collected than rents on numerous smaller holdings. The amount of land given over to sheep walks expanded very rapidly. Between 1811 and 1854 the sheep population of Ross-shire multiplied five times, that of Inverness-shire grew from 154,000 to over half a million.

The sheer weight of numbers dictated that sheep farms would take over large tracts of land previously rented as multiple small holdings. The type of sheep introduced however made the consequences even more dramatic for the local population. The "big sheep" were considerably less hardy than the smaller indigenous variety. In order to survive the northern climate, they had to be moved to low-

lying ground in the winter. In the mixed farming practised by the small-scale sitting tenants this more sheltered and more fertile land was under arable cultivation. Impatient for the increased profits to be made from large-scale sheep farming the local population was cleared from the land specifically to make way for graziers, often southerners, bringing these new breeds with them.

The most notorious clearances occurred in Sutherland where possibly as many as ten thousand people were evicted from their interior arable farming lands to new crofting communities on the coast. Arguments abound about the numbers involved, the motivations of the landlords and the humanity or otherwise of the removals. What is unquestionable however is that the large numbers of people removed from their homes were often bitterly resentful at their treatment and that the focus of their ire was often the sheep walks and the sheep which supplanted them. On Skye in the 1830s, for example, there were numerous incidents of sheep killing and mutilation. Graziers were hated individuals. Patrick Sellar, a major figure in the Sutherland sheep related clearances, caused the death of an elderly woman while clearing Strathnaver. During his trial for murder the local populace expressed their hatred of him by cutting the throats of twenty of his sheep. A "Thibetan goat" belonging to Lady Sutherland, the owner of the land Sellar farmed, suffered a similar fate. Though the best known, the Sutherland clearances were not at all unique. In the 1840s and 1850s there occurred large-scale removals (rather than relocations) from the lands of the north-west of the mainland and from the islands. During the time that forced emigration and replacement with sheep were carried out, George IV's niece Victoria came to the throne. Throughout the period when these acts, which served to destroy the remnants of more traditional Highland culture and practices, were being perpetrated, Queen Victoria very publicly embraced the myth of the North, cultivated the notion of the Highlands as a Romantic retreat and, with

her consort, built a fantasy highland castle at Balmoral in Aberdeenshire.

Landscapes with sheep were therefore, singularly unsuitable vehicles for encapsulating the life and grandeur of the traditional Highlands, which was the overt intent of this celebratory iconography. Perigal's painted sheep are somewhat ill defined but it appears likely that he compounded his error by intending to depict Blackface, one of the incoming "big sheep." In fact the breed has horns and none are seen here, making the animals resemble Suffolk sheep more than anything else, but as Suffolks were unknown in the region it appears likely that it was the Blackface he (mis)represented. Joseph Farquharson was a more accomplished painter of animals. His stock-in-trade was sheep in the snow, indeed so often did he exhibit works on this general theme that his nickname at the Royal Academy was "frozen mutton." In *Driving Sheep in the Snow* (fig. 5) Farquharson rendered his animals more accurately than did Perigal but with no more suitability if his intention was to evoke the Romantic myth of the North and to hold up for admiration the less fraught way of life of its inhabitants. The inability of his subjects to thrive in poor weather was precisely the reason why so many people had to be forcibly removed from their homes and pressed into a new type of existence. This reality is very largely ignored by purveyors of Scotland's Romantic northern myth. Rather than the removal of people they instead stressed the mystical bond of people and land.

### THE PERSISTENCE OF VISION

The painting of the mythic North, which celebrated Scottish difference from England and cast that difference in terms of the culture and topography of the Highlands, dominated painting in Scotland for generations. In embracing a simplistic set of values, it unconsciously reflected and naturalised the wholesale social, economic and cultural



transformation of the region, as occurred in many European countries.

Romanticism brought on a veritable cult of the North, which gained in strength throughout the nineteenth-century, riding on the back of the nationalist wave that swept across Europe at the fin-de-siècle. However, in Scotland the identity was consciously manufactured outside of the North. It served the purposes of the majority lowland culture and quite certainly not the northern culture and landscape it purported to celebrate. In Scotland, northernness was always an invention, always an imposition. With the exception of William McTaggart none of the artists were themselves Gaels from northern and western Scotland.<sup>15</sup> They were all lowlanders or non-Scots offering a fantasy version of the North and northern identity. Beyond Romanticism there are more modern, Realist attempts to treat northern subjects in a manner equivalent to that employed in European Realist terms. Images of rural labour abound in Scotland as elsewhere and those set in the North have a particular character.

#### RURAL WORKERS – GRAIN HARVESTING

Grain harvesting images are worthy of note in this context because of the subject's iconic status in English rural painting, where it is almost invariably represented as taking place in the Home Counties around London. In England, particularly at the beginning of the nineteenth century and again in the 1850s and '60s, wheat harvesting was an immensely popular subject for painters, easily the most popular of all agricultural topics. The importance of bread as the staple element of the diet of the masses made a successful grain harvest a matter of enormous importance, and national unity and collective identity coalesced around depictions of harvesting.<sup>16</sup> It has even been argued that paintings of harvesting in 1815 directly reflect patriotic pride in the victory over Napoleon at Waterloo.<sup>17</sup> In this context paintings of grain harvesting set in northern

Scotland, always remembering contemporary perceptions of the backward, primitive, wild nature of the land and the people, make for an interesting set of images.

The topos of the grain harvester as defined by the huge number of English depictions, would seem to preclude a northern setting, the region being the antithesis of his usual locale. In fact, grain was grown in the Highlands, though, given the climate and the soil, not extensively and not very successfully in the north-west. That is precisely where Joseph Farquharson set his very unusual Highland version of *Harvesting* (fig. 6). Farquharson's main outlet for his paintings was in London, and this work is clearly intended for the English market. The painting is a strange and largely unsuccessful coupling of explicitly English agrarian references with elements drawn from the myth of the North. The location Farquharson chose to represent is very specific. The two off-shore islands seen in the background are Rhum and Eigg. Given that they are five miles apart, Eigg, the closer to the mainland, is seen to overlap Rhum differentially, depending on the viewpoint. The relationship in the Farquharson painting unequivocally gives the location as the coast midway between the villages of Arisaig and Morar in Lochaber. In case his audience were in any doubt as to the setting, Farquarson furnished his elderly harvester with a glengarry bonnet to identify him as a Scot. With the locality established, the painter added the inevitable sheep in the background. Curious, then, that the reaper wields an English farm implement. The scythe increasingly replaced the sickle, and the even more venerable heuk, in grain harvesting in Scotland as the nineteenth century progressed. It required considerable strength and skill to use, however, and the elderly individual depicted would have experienced great difficulty. Had he been able to use the tool at all he would have been extremely unlikely to have used the English model, clearly identifiable by its S-shaped shaft or "sned." Such implements were used in Scotland but only in the south-east. The standard in Scotland



Fig 5. Joseph Farquharson, *Driving Sheep in a Snowstorm*, c.1890, oil on canvas, 81 x 122 cm, private collection (Photo: Sotheby's Picture Library.)



Fig 6. Joseph Farquharson, *Harvesting*, c.1890, oil on canvas, 84 x 151 cm, private collection (Photo: Sotheby's Picture Library.)

was the Y-shafted scythe. In summary, Farquharson's aging Scot is depicted standing right on the Atlantic coast, in a region with poor soil on metamorphic rock and cuts an abundant grain crop which has been generously left to mature by the free roaming sheep, using an iconic English agricultural implement. Overall an extremely unlikely set of circumstances.

The popularity and centrality of English harvesting images has been thoroughly examined. Vicat Cole's *Harvest Time* (fig. 7) celebrated all aspects of the work with the artist consciously conflating the various activities of grain harvesting into a single composite image. While the tightly packed grain in the Farquharson is reminiscent of Cole's fecund scene in Surrey, the stacked grain is only marginally less tall than the English crop; the rocky outcrop on the extreme left and the wild flowers and weeds on the right represent an attempt to acknowledge the backward, wild nature of the Highlands and promote Scotland's myth of the North. Similarly, the aging reaper in the Scottish painting, rather than the team of healthy young farm hands painted by Cole, is intended to illustrate the poverty of the region. The painting is an unconvincing assemblage of disparate parts, lacking both the drama of a Romantic Highland subject and ethnographically unable to access what was referred to in relation to Vicat Cole as a "distinctly English [...] face of the country."<sup>18</sup>

By abstaining from the usual melodrama of the myth of the North, from the "land of the mountain and the flood", Farquharson's painting largely forgoes the fey strangeness of the North inherent in the earlier images. While the technique is strongly related to contemporary European Realist visual language, the glaring inconsistencies and illogicalities in the subject undermine its claim to objectivity. The painting clearly relates to the entrenched northern markers of Scottish identity with its Hebridean background and references to rough ground and unenclosed fields. But

its ultimate source in England's fertile grain valleys show its author's failing faith in the myth of the North. Farquharson could no longer fully believe the myth but neither could he wholly abandon it, a dilemma, it might be argued, which the country as a whole still possesses.

#### RURAL WORKERS – KELP MANUFACTURE

Rather than losing some of its viability, the myth was entirely unsustainable for someone who wholly embraced Realism rather than paid lip-service to it, as did Farquharson. Joseph Henderson attempted to document the realities of particularly regional rural labour and in so doing consciously sought to dismantle the myth of the North. Kelp burning (see fig. 8), the object of which was to extract an alkaline ash from seaweed, to be used in the industrial manufacturing of soap and glass, began, flourished and all but died in the hundred years before 1850.<sup>19</sup> Kelp manufacturing had prospered because of huge rises in demand for the products to which it contributed. In addition, a contemporary government tax on salt, the root of the nineteenth-century alkali industry, made kelp relatively cheap and further stimulated production. There were better alternatives to be imported, but the almost constant wars in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries made supplies unreliable and expensive, again supporting indigenous kelp manufacture. Prices climbed dramatically over sixty years, rising ten-fold to £20 a ton by 1810 and then falling back even more swiftly to only £3 by 1834. From 1750, these price rises prompted very rapid expansion of the industry all along the west coast of Scotland and especially in the Hebrides. With a freely available and abundant supply of the seaweed, the conditions for individual enterprise would appear to have been very favourable. In fact, when letting out the land, proprietors reserved for themselves the rights to manufacture kelp, controlled the process and reaped the financial reward. Tenants were required to make kelp and paid at a fixed rate, no matter what the ultimate selling price of their product. Thus, while the landowners sold

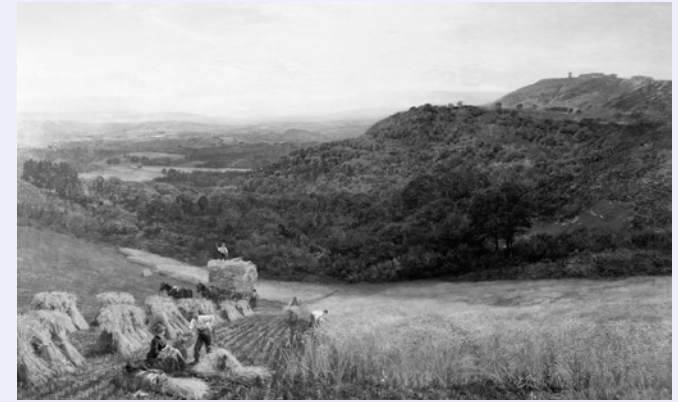


Fig 7. Vicat Cole, *Harvest Time*, 1860, oil on canvas, 95.9 x 151.7 cm, Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery.



Fig 8. Joseph Henderson, *Kelp Burning*, 1870, oil on canvas, 119.4 x 180.3 cm, Dundee Art Gallery and Museum.



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the kelp to industry at £20 a ton, they paid the producers only between two and three pounds a ton. On Skye, kelp made Lord Macdonald £14,000 in one year, more than the combined income from all other activities on his estate.<sup>20</sup>

Landowners established communities on their estates entirely devoted to kelp manufacture, with the population, much larger than could be sustained by working the land and the sea, wholly dependent on the income they made from the process. When the price crash came after 1820 these bloated communities were effectively redundant. They had no alternate means of supporting themselves. This made kelping settlements very vulnerable when landowners decided upon “clearance.” Having created the communities to serve their purpose, then exploited the price boom entirely for their own, and not their workers’ benefit, proprietors then frequently targeted the communities for forced removal and emigration.<sup>21</sup>

Kelp production fell off very rapidly from the 1830s but it did not cease entirely. If communities were not cleared, landowners found it economically sensible to keep production going, even after costs became greater than the selling price. The money which workers made allowed them to pay their rent, and thus gave the proprietor some income rather than none at all. Nevertheless, by the time artists were becoming interested in painting labour imagery, the industry was down to a trickle of its former volume. In this very reduced state kelp manufacture continued into the twentieth century. Kelp was still being transported by sea to Glasgow until at least 1914. The price at that time was just over £5 per ton.

Though no longer an economically significant factor for the Highland economy as a whole, kelp making continued to be practised and potentially witnessed by painters. The bright, light technique of Joseph Henderson helps to locate his painting firmly as a record of the dying days of the kelp

industry. The female figure is shown tending the kiln in which the dried seaweed was burned. Henderson’s image appears authentic in that it reveals specific knowledge about the process. Typically the kiln was dug into the ground on the foreshore and was approximately three metres long, as seen in Henderson’s painting. There was considerable skill involved in the burning, and the fire, which produced a heavy, oily white smoke, required constant tending over the 12 to 24 hours that any given firing lasted. That active care forms the central subject of the painting. As with the Cole image of grain harvesting which conflated the separate acts of cutting, stacking and collecting the crop, different stages of kelp manufacture are referred to in the same work. The two men shown are bringing armfuls of the dried weed, which had been collected and dried over the preceding months, to the stone lined kiln. Meanwhile the burning process, which would have started around 4 am with lighting the fire and bringing the kiln to the right temperature before starting to burn the weed, is already fully operational. There are two long poles shown between the female figure and the picture plane. These were used to stir the hot molten mass collecting in the base of the kiln. In addition to the poles, a spade, used for cutting the solidified product into manageable pieces after the burning was concluded is shown in the foreground. That cutting took place at least a day after the burning was complete and the kelp had cooled and solidified. These pieces of extremely heavy, blue-toned blocks were then put in sacks and loaded onto a cart for transportation. The sacks are seen held down by one of the poles. The single operating kiln shown makes the contemporary nature of the activity more likely. More than twenty tons of seaweed was required to produce one ton of kelp. Given that at its peak more than 5,000 tons of kelp a year was produced, implying the consumption of over one hundred thousand tons of seaweed, in the heyday of the industry multiple kilns would have operated in any one site.

In 1870 the relatively high-keyed colour employed would have furthered the reading of this painting as a consciously modern image. Though lacking the unambiguous colour divisionism seen elsewhere in Scottish painting in the later nineteenth century. Henderson’s image is clearly aware of more progressive developments in Continental painting. There is at least an acknowledgement of colour theory in the juxtaposition of the central figure’s red scarf with the grass. The generally light tone and keen interest in conveying a sense of the freshness of the breezy day also indicate modern concerns and probably indicate a general response to current developments in French painting. Whatever its origins, the method reinforces the reading of the painting as a documentary record of contemporary practice, rather than a nostalgic elegy for the past as was the stock in trade of the Romantic painters.

Henderson dismissed Scotland’s mythic North. In place of its innate falsehood and masking of the region, he saw only people and the work they undertook. Inherent in that vision was a recognition that because the identity was consciously manufactured outside of the North it served the purposes of the majority lowland culture and quite certainly not the culture it purported to celebrate. The artists producing these northern images were almost entirely lowlanders or non-Scots, thus there was no emergence of northern artists to a prominent position on the international stage as there was in other parts of the world where a mythic North held sway. Scotland had a mythic North, but its inherent falseness meant that it masked the region and exploited the people. It was not a vehicle for their rise to prominence.

<sup>1</sup> The expression of Scottish national identity through architecture is considered in Miles Glendinning, Ranald MacInnes, and Aonghus MacKechnie, *A History of Scottish Architecture from the Renaissance to the present Day* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 188–9, 252, 276, and passim.

<sup>2</sup> Murray Pittock dates the decline of “Scottish-Britishness” from 1945. Murray Pittock, *Celtic Identity and the British Image* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 106–7; Murray Pittock, *Scottish Nationality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 135. Normand agrees that the unionist-nationalist phenomenon extended beyond 1914 in so far as he sees nationalist parties and groups through the later 1920s and into the 1930s as being largely unionist-nationalist in character. Tom Normand, *The Modern Scot: Modernism and Nationalism in Scottish Art 1828-1955* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000) 31–3.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 115–120.

<sup>4</sup> All three aspects of the above – the myths, their carriers and their treatment – were brought together in the 1980 *Scotch Myths* exhibition at the Crawford Art Centre, St Andrews, organised by Barbara and Murray Grigor. The show mercilessly pilloried the myths of Scotland; at least that was its intention. In fact it attacked the carriers of the myths, “Tartanry” and “Kailyard.” The Grigors isolated and ridiculed these formations, accusing them of hijacking Scottish culture, masking the true personality of the country and reducing the identity of Scotland to a nightmare world of kitsch tartan gonks and caricatures of meanness. What is interesting in this context is that although the exhibition purported to be a dissection of “myth,” the analysis did not get beyond the carriers of myth. This attack on the “tartan monster” could proceed no further therefore than earlier efforts. There was no identification of the fundamental Scottish myths and no discussion of any other potential carriers of these myths.

<sup>5</sup> Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 197.

<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1973), 143.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Womack, *Improvement and Romance: Constructing the Myth of the Highland* (London: MacMillan, 1989), 1.

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the development of the Scottish myth of the Highlands see, Womack, *Improvement and Romance*; C. Withers, “The

Historical Creation of the Scottish Highlands,” in *The Manufacture of Scottish History*, ed. Ian Donnachie and Christopher Whatley (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992), 143–156.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Lindsay Errington and James Holloway, *The Discovery of Scotland: The Appreciation of Scottish Scenery through Two Centuries of Painting* (Edinburgh: National Gallery of Scotland, 1978), 111.

<sup>10</sup> The phrase originates in Scott’s *Lay of the Last Minstrel*. Canto vi, stanza 2.

‘O Caledonia! stern and wild,  
Meet nurse for a poetic child!  
Land of the heath and shaggy wood,  
Land of the mountain and the flood,  
Land of my sires! what mortal hand  
Can e’er untie the filial band  
That knits me to thy rugged strand!

<sup>11</sup> David McCrone, Angela Morris, and Richard Kiely, *Scotland the Brand: The Making of Scottish Heritage* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1995) 7.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of Horatio McCulloch as a revolutionary Romantic landscape painter see John Morrison, “Debating Chamber: The Royal Scottish Academy and Artistic Discourse in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Ages of Wonder: Scotland’s Art 1540 to Now* (Edinburgh: Scottish National Gallery, 2018, 63–76.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 54.

<sup>14</sup> William McTaggart (1845-1910). McTaggart was the son of a crofter from Campbeltown in Kintyre. His paintings, most pointedly those directly depicting emigration, address the realities of Highland rural life and culture rather than the fantasies of the mythic north.

<sup>15</sup> See Christiana Payne, *Toil and Plenty: Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England, 1780-1890* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 16–17, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Rosenthal, *British Landscape Painting* (London: Phaidon, 1982), 132–34.

<sup>17</sup> *Art Journal*, April 1861, 139. The observation was made in relation to A Surrey Cornfield.

<sup>18</sup> See Malcolm Gray, “The Kelp Industry in the Highlands and Islands,” *The Economic History Review* 4, no. 2 (1951): 197–209; K.H. Wolff, “Textile Bleaching and the Birth of the Chemical Industry,” *The Business History Review* 48, no. 2 (1974): 143–163.

<sup>19</sup> T.M. Devine, Clanship to Crofter’s War. The Social transformation of the Scottish Highlands (Manchester: MUP, 1994), 48, 52, 54.

<sup>20</sup> Malcolm Gray, “The Kelp Industry,” 200.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>22</sup> William D. McKay’s *A Hard Taskmaster* (1883) in Royal Scottish Academy Diploma Collection is an example.