

**John Hill**

### **'Political fantasy in a realistic situation': the *Scotch on the Rocks* (BBC 1973) controversy**

*Scotch on the Rocks* was a five-part drama series broadcast by BBC1 in May and June 1973. It dealt with moves towards the creation of an independent Scotland and was referred to as a 'political fantasy in a realistic situation' by the BBC. The series was based on a novel co-written by Douglas Hurd, then political secretary to Conservative Prime Minister Ted Heath, and became the object of a running campaign and formal complaint by the Scottish National Party. This complaint was upheld by the BBC Programmes Complaints Commission with the result that the programme was never repeated and for a long time was believed to have been destroyed (though three episodes have now been discovered to exist). Although the programme's effective disappearance has imbued it with a degree of mystique in certain quarters, there has so far been little serious discussion of it or the controversy that it generated. This article fills that gap by examining the political and broadcasting contexts in which the programme was produced, the criticisms directed at it and the curious ideological tensions evident in the series itself. In doing so the article identifies the peculiar position that the series occupies within the history of Scottish television drama and indicates how it may be understood as a work of greater interest than has so far been acknowledged.

**Keywords:** Television drama, BBC, Scotland, *Scotch on the Rocks*, Scottish National Party, Douglas Hurd, tartanry, kailyard

#### **Introduction: 'An excellent network thriller'**

*Scotch on the Rocks* was a five-part drama series broadcast by BBC1 on Friday evenings between 11<sup>th</sup> May and 8<sup>th</sup> June 1973. Based on a 1971 novel of the same name by Douglas Hurd and Andrew Osmond, the series imagines a scenario in which the growing electoral success of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the violent activities of the Scottish Liberation Army (SLA) lead to a situation in which the UK government is prepared to agree to Scotland's political independence. As such it is a programme shaped by both the political and broadcasting circumstances of the time. In terms of broadcasting, it was made during a period when the BBC in Scotland was seeking to raise both the volume and quality of its programming. Following the arrival of Alasdair Milne as Controller of BBC Scotland in 1968, the station had set itself the target of expanding its output in 'the high cost areas of drama, light entertainment and documentary' as a means of achieving an increased presence on the UK network.<sup>1</sup> This ambition suffered a degree of setback due to the roll-out of colour television in the late 1960s and the delay in converting Studio A in Glasgow for colour

production. However, the relative success of a six-part dramatisation of Lewis Grassie Gibbon's novel *Sunset Song*, co-funded by London, shot in colour and broadcast on BBC2 in March-April 1971, provided BBC Scotland's drama policy with renewed momentum.<sup>2</sup> *Sunset Song* was produced by the veteran BBC Scotland producer Pharic Maclaren, whose credits stretched back to the early 1950s. Prior to *Sunset Song*, Maclaren had been responsible for producing two thriller series written by Bill Craig – *Scobie in September* (1968) and *The Prior Commitment* (1969) – that had both achieved network transmission (in *Scobie's* case, after it had already been shown in Scotland). Given the general popularity of the television thriller and the evidence of some recent Scottish successes in this area, it appears as though Hurd and Osborne's novel *Scotch on the Rocks* was regarded as a good project with which to follow these up. Writing to Milne in January 1971 about the possibility of turning the novel into a popular series, Maclaren described it as a 'splendid' and 'entertaining yarn' with '[g]ood situations, characters and excitements' that 'would make an excellent thriller'. His only concern was that the production would of necessity be 'very large scale in terms of cast, extras, settings and location filming' and would therefore only be feasible if the BBC in London 'put up the money'. Milne himself regarded the book as 'great fun' and promised to pursue the matter with the Controller of BBC1.<sup>3</sup> A network commission followed and, within a few months, Maclaren was able to recruit James MacTaggart, the highly distinguished Scottish writer, producer and director who had made his name on *The Wednesday Play*, to adapt the novel for the screen. Bob Hird, whose previous work ranged from *Coronation Street* to *Dr. Finlay's Casebook*, was given the job of directing. A number of well-known Scottish actors, including Bill Simpson (*Dr. Finlay's Casebook*), John Cairney (*This Man Craig*), Iain Cuthbertson (*The Borderers*, *Budgie*) and Maurice Roëves (*Scobie in September*), headed up the cast. The programme went into production in 1972 and was subsequently broadcast the following year. It received reasonably favourable reviews from the London-based TV critics and achieved a generally good audience share.<sup>4</sup>

As such, *Scotch on the Rocks* was clearly conceived of as a prestige production that would add to BBC Scotland's reputation as a producer of ambitious television drama. It was also regarded primarily as a work of "entertainment" that no-one within the BBC appeared to consider likely to prove controversial. Indeed, this continued to be the prevailing view even after the first episodes had been broadcast and the first complaints had emerged.

Thus, when the BBC Board of Governors discussed the series at its meeting on 7 June, George Howard (a former President of the Country Landowners' Association) commended it for 'its faithfulness to the original novel' while Lady Avonside, the National Governor for Scotland, praised 'its quality as a thriller'.<sup>5</sup> It does seem odd, nevertheless, that there appears to have been so little reflection within BBC Scotland, or the BBC more generally, concerning the potential pitfalls involved in proceeding with such a production. The political aspects of the novel, and the series that it spawned, were widely acknowledged in the press, with references to it not just as a 'thriller' but a 'political thriller', and even a 'political terror-fable'.<sup>6</sup> The co-author of the novel, Douglas Hurd, also possessed clear political affiliations and, at the time of both the book's publication and the programme's transmission, was the Conservative Prime Minister Ted Heath's political secretary. Hurd subsequently became a Conservative MP in 1974 and then Conservative Home Secretary under Margaret Thatcher. Indeed, Hurd's obvious experience of political manoeuvrings within the upper echelons of government is often credited with providing his novels with 'the ring of authenticity', particularly in their accounts of governmental responses to political crises.<sup>7</sup> Described by Andrew Osmond, Hurd's co-author, as "'what would happen if" books', all three of the novels the two men wrote together involve extrapolations from then current political events.<sup>8</sup> In the case of *Send Him Victorious* (1968), this involves a conspiracy in support of Rhodesian independence; in *The Smile on the Face of the Tiger* (1969), the focus is on a Chinese threat to invade Hong Kong. In *Scotch on the Rocks*, the third in the series, a violent uprising by Scottish nationalists – in the form of the 'Scottish Liberation Army' — emerges as the book's primary concern.

### **'Pilloried by the BBC'**

Like Hurd and Osmond's other collaborations, *Scotch in the Rocks* was clearly responding in fictional form to recent political developments: in this case, the growth of Scottish nationalism that had occurred during the 1960s and the changes to the political landscape to which this had led. Although the Scottish National Party was founded in 1934, it was not until the mid-1960s that it began to make significant political headway. In the 1966 General Election, the SNP doubled its vote and, in November 1967, the SNP candidate Winifred Ewing won a dramatic by-election victory in Hamilton, becoming the first SNP politician to take a seat in Westminster since 1945. The following year, the SNP's support continued to

grow when it won over 30% of the national vote in the May local Scottish elections.<sup>9</sup> This upsurge also began to unsettle the major UK parties. Fearful of the decline in support for the Tories in Scotland, the Conservative Party leader Ted Heath announced, in his famous Declaration of Perth, support for a Scottish assembly at the May 1968 Scottish party conference.<sup>10</sup> Although the SNP failed to build on this success in the 1970 General Election, the party gained renewed impetus in the wake of BP's discovery of oil in the North Sea in October 1970. The SNP launched a campaign based on claims for the economic prosperity that an independent Scotland might now anticipate, involving the adoption of 'It's Scotland's Oil' and 'Rich Scots or Poor Britons' as highly effective slogans. A subsequent rise in popularity was reflected in electoral success in November 1973 (when Margo MacDonald secured a by-election victory in the previously safe Labour seat of Glasgow Govan) and in 1974 when the SNP won eleven seats and 30.4 per cent of the Scottish vote at the October UK General Election.<sup>11</sup>

Given such developments, it was hard for the television version of *Scotch on the Rocks* to be viewed as the straightforward entertainment that BBC management had envisaged. This was not only due to the significance that nationalism held for contemporary Scottish politics but also because of the use of the Scottish National Party's actual name in a programme designated as a work of fiction. This became a key bone of contention for the SNP and effectively guaranteed that the series would be closely monitored. This was particularly so given that the party had already been pursuing a campaign against 'unfair' television coverage for a number of years prior to this.<sup>12</sup> The initial focus of this campaign was the Party Political Broadcast to which, historically, only UK-wide parties were entitled. The SNP rightly claimed that this put them at a disadvantage in Scottish elections and used Labour Party support for the allocation of party political broadcasts to Plaid Cymru in Wales to press their case.<sup>13</sup> Although the BBC Scotland Controller, Andrew Stewart, and the Broadcasting Council for Scotland were sympathetic to their case, such broadcasts were subject to the agreement of the UK parties rather than in the gift of the broadcasters. The SNP's political pressure did, nevertheless, pay off and the party was allocated its first party political broadcast (of five minutes' length) in 1965, presented by the party's Executive Vice-Chairman, William Wolfe. Although this constituted a breakthrough of sorts, the SNP continued to call for more broadcasts and partly blamed the decline in their support at the

1970 election on an unfair allocation of party political broadcasting time along with a more general lack of election coverage in news and current affairs.<sup>14</sup> While the SNP's party political broadcasting time was increased for the two 1974 general elections, the party's sense of injustice regarding television coverage remained strong at the time that *Scotch on the Rocks* was broadcast and featured among its objections to transmission of the series. Thus, in a letter to the BBC Director-General, Charles Curran, the SNP's Senior Vice Chairman, Gordon Wilson, complained of the relative absence of coverage of the SNP in UK news and political programmes, the limited political coverage emanating from BBC Scotland and the restriction of the party to one party political broadcast per year. This, he suggested, stood in stark contrast to the five episodes ('over 200 minutes') of *Scotch on the Rocks* in which, he complained, the SNP was repeatedly 'pilloried by the BBC'.<sup>15</sup>

Wilson had come close to winning Dundee East in a by-election in March 1973 and went on to take the seat for the SNP the following year. He had also been a staunch campaigner for improved television coverage of the SNP since the 1960s. In his insider's account of the party's history, he recalls how he had pursued 'a policy of harassment' based on 'sending unceasing letters of claim and demand' to the broadcasters and other agencies which he then followed up with further publicity.<sup>16</sup> The same kind of tactics might be said to have been adopted by the SNP in relation to *Scotch on the Rocks*, which provided not only an occasion for the airing of specific complaints about how the programme portrayed the party but also a more general sense of grievance regarding the party's treatment at the hands of the BBC. The attacks on the series got off to an early start when, in advance of the first episode's scheduled transmission, Wilson called for the programme to be shelved. Wilson had been interviewed for the *Radio Times* and indicated how improbable he believed Hurd and Osmond's political scenario to be. But he adopted a much stronger tone in a letter to the BBC, and in related comments to the press, in which he denounced the transmission of the programme as 'reckless' and expressed fears that it might fuel 'insurrection and outbreaks of violence in Scotland'.<sup>17</sup> This prompted a reply from the Director-General, Charles Curran, in which he referred to the programme as a 'political fantasy' that he did not believe 'any viewer in Scotland or elsewhere will look upon as anything but entertainment' and which he thought unlikely to 'establish any kind of pattern for the real future'.<sup>18</sup> This was not, however, the end of the matter. For once Wilson was in

a position to view the first episodes, he wrote back to Curran declaring that a second ground of complaint had now emerged:

Your letter mentions 'enough realism to achieve that measure of dramatic credibility which is normally described as a "suspension of disbelief"'. This technique is achieved by injecting the action in and about the Scottish National Party instead of some mythical political agency in Scotland. Despite some mild disclaimers, the Party is shown to have elements favouring violence for political ends and to have extreme Left-wing associations... The two references to violence and Left-wing agitation are completely unfounded and indicate a political slur by the BBC on the Scottish National Party.<sup>19</sup>

These concerns also formed the basis of what was to become an official complaint to the Programmes Complaints Commission (PCC) by the SNP, initially lodged in June 1973 by Stewart Ewing, a former SNP councillor and husband of Winnie.

As it turned out, it was Winnie Ewing herself who met the PCC and presented the SNP's main complaints, which were broadly similar to those expressed by Wilson in his letter to the BBC Director-General. They included objections to the way in which, during the course of the series, the Scottish National Party was linked to extremist groups, gangs and the proponents of violence and how this, in turn, might be assumed to have an effect on the party's electoral prospects.<sup>20</sup> Alasdair Milne, now the BBC's Director of Television Programmes, represented the BBC at the PCC hearings and argued that there was a need to distinguish between 'a dramatic work of fiction and a political tract'. The 'fantastic nature of the plot' of *Scotch on the Rocks*, he suggested, meant that viewers would recognise that what 'they were seeing was entertainment not reality'.<sup>21</sup> The PCC, however, was not entirely convinced, arguing in its adjudication that, while they accepted that 'the programme was conceived and executed as entertainment' and constituted 'a political fantasy in a realistic setting',

the use of the Scottish National Party, clearly identified by name and emblem as part of the realism which the BBC thought was required to give dramatic credibility, inevitably created a risk that reasonable viewers might gain the impression, from the series or parts of it, that the real Scottish National Party was involved, or was likely

to be involved, in the objectionable activities mentioned in this Party's statement of complaint to us.

The PCC accepted that 'a reasonable viewer' was unlikely 'to believe that there was a link between the Scottish National Party and extremist organisations deriving funds from foreign countries or that the party has extreme left-wing associations'. But it also reached the conclusion, partly drawing on the record of telephone calls and letters received by the BBC in response to the first episode, that 'a significant number of viewers would reasonably consider that an association between the actual Scottish National Party and the use of violence in pursuit of political ends was being portrayed, and that some might give credence to it'.<sup>22</sup> Although the Commission itself did not draw attention to the fact, the BBC's case was also weakened by virtue of the way in which the broadcaster had chosen to promote the series. Devoting two pages of coverage to the programme under the title 'Could it happen here?', the BBC's house magazine, the *Radio Times*, more or less ignored the generic and stylistic characteristics of *Scotch on the Rocks* in favour of identifying some of the historical inspirations for the programme: Wendy Wood, the Scottish Patriots Association and the activities of the 1320 Club.<sup>23</sup> The magazine also invited both a number of 'Scottish activists' and members of the cast to comment on the possibility that the events in the play might 'really happen'. As such, the *Radio Times* feature became something of a commentary on both the feasibility and desirability of Scottish independence. Some of the actors virtually mimicked the views of their characters and this was particularly striking in the case of Bill Henderson, who played the rebel leader, Robert Duguid. Underneath a photograph of the actor in costume, Henderson not only expressed the opinion that 'Scotland should separate from England' but that 'this can only be done by force' as '[i]t won't happen by legislation'.<sup>24</sup>

What the PCC's ruling also revealed was how the BBC had apparently been wrong-footed by the category of programme to which *Scotch on the Rocks* was considered to belong. Huw Wheldon, Managing Director, Television, observed in the aftermath of the decision that there had been 'many discussions within the television service about the mixing of fact and fiction' and '[i]f a drama dealt with actual human institutions which existed and traduced them in some way, it was unfair'.<sup>25</sup> Wheldon himself had been involved in a number of earlier disputes concerning the work of directors, such as Roy

Battersby, Ken Loach and Ken Russell, which he felt had upset the conventional divisions between drama and documentary and, by extension, between fiction and fact. As Controller of Programmes, he had therefore justified the decision not to show Battersby's documentary-drama *Five Women* (1967) on the grounds that the BBC's reputation was built upon 'a firm distinction between what is fact and what is not fact, what is real and what is not real'. 'Hybrid' programmes – such as *Five Women* – that blurred these boundaries were, he suggested, unacceptable.<sup>26</sup> Arguments such as these, however, were generally applied to "serious", often one-off, dramas and documentaries (such as those made for the drama series *The Wednesday Play* and the arts programme *Monitor*) and rarely arose in relation to "popular" series or genre pieces. As a result, the BBC's original institutional conception of *Scotch on the Rocks* as "entertainment" rather than serious drama appears to have allowed the series to evade the kind of internal scrutiny that would normally have been given to programmes likely to be regarded as potentially problematic for the broadcaster.

The same might also be said of the BBC's relative blindness towards the possible political implications of the programme's portrait of the Scottish National Party and Scottish nationalism more generally. As has often been noted, debate about the validity of mixing fact and fiction –or documentary and drama – often became embroiled in arguments about the validity of the expression of certain kinds of (usually oppositional) political viewpoints.<sup>27</sup> Concerns such as these had led the BBC Director-General, Charles Curran, to argue that what he termed the 'play of political advocacy' was responsible for raising fundamental issues for the Corporation's 'general obligation to balance'.<sup>28</sup> The idea of the 'play of political advocacy', however, was not only primarily associated with the tradition of the single play but also with productions held to express openly left-wing views. As a result, the more conservative – and often less visible - forms of political and ideological partisanship evident in popular forms of drama tended to pass relatively unnoticed and to avoid the same kind of inspection for evidence of "bias" and a lack of political "balance".

The comparative lack of pre-broadcast internal BBC scrutiny of *Scotch on the Rocks* also seems surprising because, in the absence of any obvious evidence of violent political upheaval in contemporary Scotland, the drama's clearest point of reference might have been assumed to be the re-emergence of armed conflict in Northern Ireland. Although



producer Pharic Maclaren declared that the production team had ‘no intention of drawing parallels with Ulster’, there was plenty of evidence to suggest that both audiences and critics believed that these could be drawn.<sup>29</sup> The despatch of British troops to Northern Ireland in 1969, the resurgence of the (Provisional) IRA in 1970 and the imposition of direct rule from Westminster in 1972 had made television coverage of the “troubles” a matter of acute sensitivity. It is more or less inconceivable that the BBC would have contemplated a drama like *Scotch on the Rocks* had the latter dealt directly with the Northern Irish conflict.<sup>30</sup> In this respect, it might be speculated that it was the very remoteness of the prospect of similar violence occurring in Scotland that encouraged the BBC to embark upon the production of *Scotch on the Rocks* with so few qualms and to fail to anticipate how the series would, almost inevitably, invite associations with the situation within Northern Ireland.

The BBC’s view, therefore, appears to have been that because *Scotch on the Rocks* was held to be an “entertainment”, employing conventions associated with “fantasy” and the “thriller”, the series was somehow immune from criticisms that it might be confusing fact and fiction, exploiting the “troubles” or adopting a politically partisan stance towards contemporary socio-political events.<sup>31</sup> However, as the subsequent controversy indicates, this assumption proved to be mistaken and led the BBC to take stock of its position on some of these matters. While the Corporation rejected any suggestion that it had engaged in ‘deliberate propaganda’ (and refused the SNP’s demand that they make a series of expository programmes about the party by way of compensation), the Director-General did accept that the BBC needed to ‘exercise special and continuing care to ensure that the line between truth and fiction in dramatic adaptations and plays was clearly drawn’.<sup>32</sup> The Board of Governors also emphasised the need to take ‘special care on the border-line between fact and fiction’ and to consider whether ‘the same liberties’ would have been taken with ‘a better known party’. ‘Would the BBC’, one Governor asked, ‘have shown the Conservative Party turning Fascist, for example?’<sup>33</sup> The controversy also heightened sensitivity regarding a forthcoming *Play for Today*, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (tx. 06.6.74) which the Broadcasting Council for Scotland feared might provoke a similar controversy.<sup>34</sup> However, given that *The Cheviot...* could be identified as falling under Charles Curran’s rubric of the ‘play of political advocacy’, it was hardly surprising that Alasdair Milne assured

the Council that 'he would be taking the closest interest in the final result' and that the programme was being monitored much more closely than *Scotch on the Rocks* had been.<sup>35</sup>

The PCC's ruling regarding *Scotch on the Rocks* also led the BBC to conclude that they would not be in a position to repeat the series or sell it abroad, with the result that it has not been screened publicly since. This subsequently fuelled speculation that the series had not only been "suppressed" by the BBC but actually destroyed. Although it has now been established that three episodes – 1, 4 and 5 – have survived, long-term speculation about the series has invested *Scotch on the Rocks* with an element of mystique as well as a degree of confusion about the reasons for its disappearance. So, while it was SNP objections that were responsible for the programme's effective "banning", stories began to emerge that it was the BBC, and possibly even the UK government, which had regarded the programme as too controversial, or even politically subversive, to risk showing again. This kind of speculation was no doubt fuelled by claims about the kind of impact that the series might have had on some of the less 'reasonable viewers' (to quote the PCC's adjudication on the SNP's case against the BBC) who may have seen it. As previously noted, the SNP's Gordon Wilson had expressed fears that the programme might encourage 'outbreaks of violence in Scotland'. According to Andrew Murray Scott and Iain Macleay, this is indeed what could be claimed to have happened. Thus, while they denounce the programme as a 'political tract' that seeks 'to forge a link in the minds of the Scottish public between the new generation of highly effective middle-class intellectual leaders of the SNP with communists and mythical terrorists', they also propose that the series acted as an inspiration to 'several hundreds, if not thousands, of young Scots' who were imbued with 'a spirit of insurrection'.<sup>36</sup> Although the evidence they provide of the links between a viewing of the programme and subsequent violent acts is at best tenuous, their argument that the programme may be understood as both a relatively crude polemic against the SNP *and* a work of imagination with the capacity to arouse nationalist sentiment helps to explain not only the curious cultural after-life that *Scotch on the Rocks* appears to have enjoyed but also something of the tension-ridden character of the series itself.

### **Tensions in the text**

The critic Robin Wood has employed the idea of the 'incoherent text' to refer to films that lack ideological coherence and in which ideological tensions remain largely unresolved.<sup>37</sup>

*Scotch on the Rocks* might be said to be an incoherent text which struggles to bring together and unify its various ideological strands. For while *Scotch on the Rocks* may be taken to be, in Robert Crawford's words, 'Unionist propaganda', it is also an internally divided work, not only belittling but also romanticising elements of Scottish nationalism.<sup>38</sup> There are different aspects to this. It is fairly clear, for example, that the series follows the novel in seeking to associate the SNP, and Scottish nationalism more generally, with attitudes and actions that work to undermine the legitimacy of both. The first episode involves the infiltration of a Glasgow gang, 'the Zulus', by an arms expert, MacNair (Bill Simpson), recruited by the security services to investigate the activities and political connections of the Zulus' gang-leader, Brodie (Maurice Roëves). Brodie, it transpires, is taking orders from a member of the SNP executive, 'socialist firebrand' and Glasgow MP John Mackie (John Cairney), who is himself revealed to be a leading member of the Scottish Liberation Army and the conduit for money and arms from the French Communist party. The revelations, by the British Prime Minister, of Mackie's association with an international Communist conspiracy forces Mackie to flee to Moscow, while support for the Scottish Liberation Army's uprising (and its planned march on Glasgow where Mackie is a sitting Member of Parliament) is also undermined. In this respect, it is fairly easy to see why the Programmes Complaints Commission felt some sympathy for the SNP's complaints that it was shown as 'having elements in it favouring violence for political ends ... as having extreme left-wing associations ... [and] ... deriving funds from foreign countries'.<sup>39</sup>

However, it is also worth noting that by the end of *Scotch on the Rocks*, the SNP has, nevertheless, formed a government and independence has been achieved. Thus, for all its demonisation of the "fringe elements" attached to the SNP, the programme shows Scottish independence as an achievable political goal. In a radio interview, the SNP chairman, William Wolfe, even managed to express a degree of satisfaction with this. Although his interviewer, Ian McIntyre, sought to impose a clear narrative meaning upon the programme's ending by asserting that 'extremism was defeated - the SNP formed a government and we listened to "Scotland the Brave" being played', this proposed an ideological clarity largely missing from the series itself.<sup>40</sup> As will be argued, the ending to which McIntyre refers is deeply ironic and lacks a convincing resolution of the various ideological tensions that the series has brought into play. The ideological 'incoherence' (to

use Robin Wood's term) that results may be attributed to a range of factors. A convoluted plot, involving a series of revelations, reversals and twists, hampers viewer comprehension of both narrative causality and character motivation. The mixing of generic elements drawn from gangland drama, the spy thriller, the historical epic and political play lead to various disjunctions in dramatic register and tone. Changes made in the course of adapting the novel for the screen, including the visualisation of scenes only briefly described in the literary original, inflect elements of the drama in ways that then fail to gel. More generally, however, the ideological incoherence of *Scotch on the Rocks* may be seen to be a product of the way in which the series mobilises a mix of representational regimes historically associated with the cultural imagining of Scotland and the Scots that has the effect of pulling the series in different directions.

It may be helpful in this regard to return to Colin McArthur's well-known argument that, despite the nineteenth-century transformation of Scotland by industrialisation and urbanisation, screen imagery of Scotland continued to remain indebted to representational traditions associated with romantic evocations of the Highlands (tartanry) and/or associated with sentimental portraits of small-town life (kailyard).<sup>41</sup> Although, as Murray argues, there has subsequently been a much greater emphasis within Scottish cultural criticism upon the 'multifaceted' character of 'cinematic constructions of "Scotland"', it is difficult to avoid the relevance of kailyard and tartanry when thinking about the ways in which *Scotch on the Rocks* works.<sup>42</sup> One of McArthur's key arguments relating to these discourses concerns the way in which they had dominated at the expense of articulations of the urban and industrial. This is also so of *Scotch on the Rocks*. Despite the narrative prominence of 'Clydeside rebel rouser' John Mackie, the drama downplays the significance of both the city of Glasgow and working-class politics more generally. So, while the series does include a scene in Glasgow Green at which Mackie addresses a political rally, and makes passing reference to unemployment and the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders' work-in (topic elements not, of course, to be found in the original novel), the working class is otherwise missing in action.<sup>43</sup> This absence, it will be argued, mainly relates to how the series stages the Scottish "national drama" in terms of ideas and images inherited from the traditions of tartanry and kailyard. But it also derives from the programme's interest in the world of the Glasgow gang, which then acts as a kind of ideological surrogate for the urban-industrial working class.

To this extent, *Scotch on the Rocks* does not entirely avoid the urban and industrial but partly invokes a sub-variant of what critics have referred to as the discourse of 'Clydesidism'.<sup>44</sup> In this version of Clydesidism, Glasgow is not so much associated with working-class labour and industrial militancy (as in the case of the UCS work-in) but the figure of the Scottish "hard man" and his capacity for violent crime and sectarianism.<sup>45</sup> Due to their links with Mackie and the SLA, Glasgow gangs feature heavily in the first episode: members of the Zulus are shown stoning a police car and razoring a police officer. The gang is led by the semi-psychopathic hard man Brodie, who assumes the role of an unlikely – and unstable – ally of the SLA. Over the course of the series, Brodie is responsible for the murders of both the Secretary of State for Scotland, Scullard (Leon Sinden), and the undercover operative MacNair. Violent gangland imagery such as this not only borrowed from a long tradition of representing Glasgow, one stretching back at least to A. McArthur and H. Kingsley Long's famous 1935 novel, *No Mean City*, but also capitalised on contemporary anxieties regarding the 'new wave of Glasgow hooliganism' that had manifested itself in the mid-to-late 1960s.<sup>46</sup> This in turn led to complaints about the programme's negative portrayal of the city and the way in which Glasgow – and the Blackhill area in particular – had yet again been cast 'in a bad light'.<sup>47</sup> However, in terms of the drama's own internal workings, the programme may be seen not only to take advantage of the moral panic surrounding Glasgow gangs in order to discredit Mackie's left-wing political project, but also to disavow the political significance of the Glasgow working class which is only permitted to appear in a displaced form, as a grotesque and threatening presence.

Given the absence of any sustained engagement in *Scotch on the Rocks* with the urban (other than in the form of the grotesque) it is images and attitudes popularly associated with tartanry and kailyard that prevail. As McArthur suggests, these discourses commonly co-exist in the form of a 'hybridization' of 'tartan exteriors and Kailyard mores'.<sup>48</sup> A similar kind of hybridisation occurs in *Scotch in the Rocks*; however, whereas McArthur suggests that the discourses tend to be mutually reinforcing, in this drama they are also mobilised in a way that puts them at odds with each other. This is revealed in the way in which the series not only expresses its disdain for the SNP by associating the party with kailyard mores but also invokes the tropes of *tartanry* in order to do so. The SNP was

indignant about suggestions that the party might be linked to communist conspiracy or paramilitary violence, but their complaints mostly ignored the programme's less obvious attack on the party's smallness of outlook. David Stenhouse's account of the novel, for example, indicates how 'the small-town SNP' and its 'Poujadist membership' are subjected to a number of 'surprisingly astute barbs'.<sup>49</sup> Critique of the party's 'poujadism' carries over into the television version: party leader, James Henderson (Leonard Maguire), is portrayed as a rather dull and colourless pragmatist, devoid of political passion and showing little of the nationalist fervour of his SNP compatriot, Mrs Merrilies (Madeleine Christie). This is also the view of the SLA leader, Colonel Cameron (Clinton Greyn), who denounces the SNP to the newly-appointed, aristocratic Secretary for State, Lord Thorganby (Cyril Luckham), whom he has taken captive. 'You know more about the real Scotland than Henderson ever will', Cameron informs Thorganby. The SNP's Scotland, he continues, will only be 'fit for clerks and accountants and middle-class trade unionists' – a country in which, he claims, neither man will ever be able to 'breathe'.

One of the oddities of both the literary and television versions of *Scotch on the Rocks* is that An Ceannard, the SLA leader Cameron, turns out to be an Anglo-Scots aristocrat and army colonel. It seems likely that the character of Cameron was inspired by Colonel Colin Mitchell of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, whom, Christopher Harvie suggests, 'conformed to the traditional Scottish image of the popular fighting-man' and was involved in a 'Save the Argylls' campaign in the late 1960s.<sup>50</sup> However, as Harvie points out, although Mitchell was expected to stand for Parliament as an SNP candidate, he actually did so as a Conservative. In a similar way, it might be said that *Scotch on the Rocks'* Cameron is also a High Tory who dons the guise of Scottish patriot but is largely contemptuous of his fellow Scots in the form of both organised labour and the middle classes who provide the SNP with their support.

However, what invests this clash of nationalisms with an added ideological significance is the way in which *Scotch on the Rocks* also sets the representational tropes of tartanry and kailyard against each other. The SLA uprising, when it occurs, involves the seizure of Fort William. Although the insurrectionary army seems to consist primarily of students (a contemporary reference to the student unrest that had been evident since the 1960s), they are virtually all dressed in kilts and woollen hats, rather than then-fashionable

high-waisted flares. In this respect, the uprising's staging relies heavily on the imagery of tartanry: Highland landscapes, Highland dress, and the historical referents that attach to these (such as Jacobitism, Culloden, and Bonnie Prince Charlie). The staging of the set-piece sequence that occurs during Episode 4 is especially resonant in this regard. It begins with the intercutting of SLA members disembarking from boats with shots of a Church of Scotland minister welcoming members of his congregation. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the SLA then enter the church in which the minister is delivering his sermon and force the congregation to leave. Gathered in front of the church the congregation, are then confronted, in one of the most stylised shots in the series, by a previously unseen grouping of armed and kilted rebels. Although the editing provides an ironic commentary on the minister's sermon and its appeal for the overcoming of social divisions, the sequence also works as a symbolic expression of the clash between the SLA's tartanry-wrapped romantic nationalism and the small-town values associated with kailyard (and, by implication, with the SNP). In this scene, of course, the latter is also symbolically taken captive by the former.

The same clash also underpins the downbeat ending of *Scotch on the Rocks'* final episode. By this juncture, the SLA uprising has collapsed, Colonel Cameron (à la Bonnie Prince Charlie) has gone into hiding, and the UK government has granted Scotland independence. The series ends with an Independence Ceremony at Edinburgh Castle attended by the new Prime Minister of Scotland, Henderson, and the English Prime Minister, Harvey (Anthony Nicholls). After the Union Jack has been lowered, Cameron unexpectedly appears dressed in full military regalia. He attempts to hoist the Scottish flag before stabbing himself with his own dirk, crying out: 'If this is your new Scotland I want no part of it'. As his dead body is covered in the Union Jack, the Saltire is raised to the top of the mast while titles inform the viewer that 'the rain began to fall' on 'the body, on the whirring cameras, on the two Prime Ministers, on the Lord Provost and Lady Provost, on Ambassadors and High Commissioners, and on all the hats of the ladies of Edinburgh'. As the credits then unfold, a jaunty, extra-diegetic version of 'Scotland the Brave' may also be heard. As this description should make evident, this is hardly the above-noted benign ending identified by BBC interviewer Ian McIntyre in his on-air conversation with William Wolfe. While the sequence may be viewed to signal the death of a certain kind of romantic nationalism, it also employs the very same signifiers to invoke a sense of national loss and to

criticise the 'new Scotland' for its dull and "bloodless" provincialism. In this way, *Scotch on the Rocks*' critique of the SNP is rooted less in an ideological commitment to unionism than an appeal to a supposedly more "authentic" and intense form of semi-mystical nationalist aspiration.

This feature of the programme might, in turn, be said to reveal an ideological fault-line running through the whole series. Given Douglas Hurd's co-authorship of the original novel, it has been common to see *Scotch on the Rocks* as offering a particular kind of moderate, "centrist" politics. Alex Salmond suggests, for example, that the narrative's fictional UK Prime Minister, and the form of pre-Thatcherite consensus politics he represents, should be understood as Hurd's 'self-image'.<sup>51</sup> Hurd's biographer also suggests how his novels reveal 'a marked disdain for the politics of populism and extremism' and a 'preference for moderation, good sense and consensus'.<sup>52</sup> Evidence within the text in support of such views may be found in Harvey's relaxed attitude towards demands for independence, his willingness to negotiate with the SNP when they win enough seats to hold the balance of power within Westminster, and his determination not to act rashly towards the SLA. However, while the programme may be read as setting out to uphold the propriety of constitutional politics this is partly upset by the way in which the extra-parliamentary activities of the SLA, and the romantic nationalism with which it is associated, are counterpoised with the SNP's drabness.<sup>53</sup> This might also be said to reverberate against the British government itself which is identified with the same kind of pragmatism as the SNP (albeit without the same variety of fringe elements). The British government also appears to possess little by way of ideological conviction – including any evidence of a particularly strong attachment to the maintenance of the Union.

In this regard, the British government's pragmatism is partly borne of recognition that it is confronted by forces that run deeper than its own political manoeuvrings. Despite having previously been a prisoner of the SLA, Secretary of State Thorganby tells the PM in Episode 5 that there is something 'very special about them... something old-fashioned and positive' which means that, in Thorganby's view, 'in the end they'll win'. Moreover, although the revelations about the SLA's links to the French Communist Party appear to remove any pressure for the British Prime Minister to concede independence he goes ahead and negotiates it anyway, as if in unacknowledged recognition that Thorganby's prediction



will prove true. There is a suggestion that the granting of independence is the reward for the SNP leadership rejecting the SLA's violence. But, in a scene that caused particular offence to the actual SNP, fictional party leader Henderson is shown to be prepared, at least temporarily, to turn a blind eye to violent acts should it prove 'convenient' for the achievement of his party's political aims.<sup>54</sup> Insofar as the SNP only succeeds in negotiating full independence (rather than the devolution that it had previously agreed) in the wake of the SLA's armed insurrection, the drama's supposed investment in the virtues of constitutionalism is undercut by an underlying narrative drive and causal logic premised on the employment of violence for political ends. One of Tom Nairn's key arguments concerning what he identified as the 'sub-national culture' of late-twentieth-century Scotland was its separation of 'heart' (associated with emotionalism, the representation of the past and 'civil society') from 'head' (associated with realism, the present and the state). Such a split, he suggested, functioned historically to reinforce 'a sternly "realistic" acceptance of the Union, the Great-Britain political hegemony, as a sort of present without history'.<sup>55</sup> In some respects, it is this same split that *Scotch on the Rocks* exhibits, counterpoising the reasonableness and statecraft of the British government with the romantic but doomed 'sub-nationalism' of the SLA. However, insofar as the series does not end with the reassertion of the Union and the political status quo but rather, with a pragmatic acceptance of Scottish independence, the 'Caledonian antisyzygy' to which Nairn refers may be seen to generate an unexpected outcome – albeit one arrived at without going beyond, or subverting, the 'sub-national' representational repertoires furnished by the discourses of tartanry and kailyard.<sup>56</sup>

## **Conclusion**

John R. Cook has drawn on the title of James MacTaggart's pioneering BBC Scotland production, *Three Ring Circus* (1959) to suggest how all Scottish TV dramas represent 'a kind of three ring circus'. The elements that Cook refers to as the 'about, by and for' of Scottish drama may coalesce or pull in different directions. The high cost of television drama, for example, means that drama produced by Scottish broadcasters will rarely be aimed at just Scottish audiences, a fact with possible consequences for 'the kinds and quality of images of Scottish life' put into televisual circulation.<sup>57</sup> This was certainly the view of the 1977 Annan report on the future of UK broadcasting, which complained that '[s]omething is wrong with

the image of Scotland which television projects to the rest of the United Kingdom' and that Scottish 'national culture is reflected too much by hackneyed symbols'.<sup>58</sup>

*Scotch on the Rocks*, of course, was an expensive five-part series firmly aimed at the UK network. This inevitably gave rise to concerns, particularly within Scotland, that it too depended on the use of 'hackneyed symbols' and Scottish stereotypes in order to attract the interest, or confirm the preconceptions, of audiences outside Scotland. The SNP, in particular, objected to the portrayal of their party and prevented the series from being broadcast again. In this respect, Scottish responses to the series were markedly different from those elsewhere and highlighted some of the pitfalls involved in making drama 'about' Scotland that was not primarily 'for' Scottish audiences. In revisiting the *Scotch on the Rocks* controversy, I have sought to shed light on the circumstances in which it occurred and the issues that it raised. While the Scottish National Party succeeded in its case against the programme, *Scotch on the Rocks* was not so much the result of a deliberate BBC attack on the party. Rather, it was the consequence of a production strategy designed to strengthen BBC Scotland's position within the UK broadcasting system combined with a degree of institutional blindness regarding the significance of the programme's representations of Scottish nationalism for audiences within and outwith Scotland. However, in seeking to explain the circumstances of the programme's production and reception, and in assessing its significance, I have not set out to "redeem" the series by arguing that it has been critically undervalued. Instead, I have sought to identify the peculiar position that *Scotch on the Rocks* occupies within the history of Scottish television drama and to suggest how it may be understood to be a work of greater interest than has hitherto been acknowledged.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### **Acknowledgements**

This article is one of the outcomes of the 2013-17 AHRC-funded research project *The History of Forgotten Television Drama in the UK*. My thanks to Trish Hayes of the BBC Written

Archives Centre and to Ian Hamilton of *Scots Independent* for their help with the research for this article.

## **Bibliography**

Bartie, Angela, 'Moral Panics and Glasgow Gangs: Exploring "the New Wave of Glasgow Hooliganism", 1965-1970', *Contemporary British History* 24, no. 3, (2010): 385-408.

Bain, Douglas and Bain, Ouainé, 'Woman, Women and Scotland: "Scotch Reels" and Political Perspectives', *Cencrastus*, no. 11 (1983): 3-6.

BBC, *BBC Annual Report and Accounts for the year 1970-71*, Cmnd. 4824, London: HMSO, 1971.

BBC, *BBC Handbook 1975 incorporating Annual Report and Accounts 1973-4*. London: BBC, 1974.

BBC Programmes Complaints Commission, 'The BBC Programmes Complaints Commission delivers an adjudication', *The Listener*, 4 October (1973), 455.

Burnett, Ray, 'Socialists and the SNP', in *The Red Paper on Scotland*, ed. Gordon Brown, 108-124, Edinburgh: EUSPB, 1975.

Cook, John R., 'Three Ring Circus: Television Drama about, by and for Scotland' in *The Media in Scotland*, eds. Neil Blain and David Hutchison, 107-122, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

Crawford, Robert, *Bannockburns: Scottish Independence and Literary Imagination, 1314-2014*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Curtis, Liz, *Ireland: The Propaganda War*. London: Pluto Press, 1984.

Green, Chris, 'Scottish independence: BBC Scotland's referendum coverage "institutionally biased", Alex Salmond claims', *Independent*, 14 September 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/bbc-scotland-protests-scottish-independence-referendum-coverage-institutionally-biased-salmond-9732095.html> [Accessed September 27. 2017].

Harvie, Christopher, *Scotland and Nationalism: Scottish Society and Politics 1707-1994*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London: Routledge, 1995.

Hetherington, Alastair, *Inside BBC Scotland 1975-1980: A Personal View*, Glasgow: Whitewater Press, 1992.

Hill, John, 'From *Five Women* to *Leeds United!*: Roy Battersby and the Politics of "Radical" Television Drama', *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 10, no. 1 (2013): 13-150.

Hill, John, 'Dominic Behan and the Beginnings of Television "Troubles" Drama', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 37, no. 1 (2017): 65-81.

Kellas, James G., 'Scottish Nationalism' in *The British General Election of 1970*, David Butler and Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, 446-462, London: Macmillan, 1971.

Lynch, Peter, *SNP: The History of the Scottish National Party*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2013.

Macwhirter, Iain, *Disunited Kingdom: How Westminster Won a Referendum but Lost Scotland*, Glasgow: Cargo Publishing, 2014.

McArthur, Colin, 'Scotland and Cinema: The Iniquity of the Fathers' in *Scotch Reels*, ed. Colin McArthur, 40-69, London: BFI, 1982.

McArthur, Colin, *Brigadoon, Braveheart and the Scots: Distortions of Scotland in Hollywood Cinema*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2003.

Milne, Alasdair, *DG: The Memoirs of a British Broadcaster*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988.

Murray, Jonathan, 'Straw or Wicker? Traditions of Scottish Film Criticism and *The Wicker Man*' in *Constructing The Wicker Man: Film and Cultural Studies Perspectives*, eds. Jonathan Murray, Lesley Stevenson, Stephen Harper and Benjamin Franks, 11-36, Dumfries: University of Glasgow, Crichton Publications, 2005.

Nairn, Tom, 'Old Nationalism and New Nationalism', in *The Red Paper on Scotland*, ed. Gordon Brown, 22-57, Edinburgh: EUSPB, 1975.

Pentland, Gordon. 'Edward Heath, the Declaration of Perth and the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, 1966–70', *Twentieth Century British History* 26 no. 2 (2015), 249–273.

Petrie, Duncan, *Contemporary Scottish Fictions: Film, Television and the Novel*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

Petley, Julian, 'Factual Fictions and Fictional Fallacies: Ken Loach's Documentary Dramas' in *Agent of Challenge and Defiance: The Films of Ken Loach*, ed. George McKnight, 28-59, Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 1997.

*Report of the Committee on Broadcasting* (Chairman: Lord Annan), Cmnd. 532, London: HMSO, 1977.

Salmond, Alex, 'Interview: Alex Salmond, why he is a fan of Douglas Hurd', *Scotsman*, 2 August 2010, <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/interview-alex-salmond-why-he-is-a-fan-of-douglas-hurd-1-821079> [Accessed September 27, 2017].

Scott, Andrew Murray and Iain Macleay, *Britain's Secret War: Tartan Terrorism and the Anglo-American State*, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1990.

Shepherd, Gillian, 'The Kailyard' in *The History of Scottish Literature Volume 3: Nineteenth Century*, ed. Douglas Gifford, 309-320, Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1989.

Smart, Billy, 'Sutherland's Law (BBC Scotland 1973-76): Presenting Scottish landscape to a UK audience'. Paper presented at Screen Studies Conference, University of Glasgow, June 2014, <https://forgottentelevisiondrama.wordpress.com/2014/06/30/sutherlands-law-bbc-scotland-1973-76-presenting-scottish-landscape-to-a-uk-audience/> [Accessed September 27, 2017].

Stenhouse, David, *How the Scots Took Over London*, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2005.

Stuart, Mark, *Douglas Hurd: The Public Servant*, Edinburgh and London: Mainstream Publishing, 1998.

Torrance, David, *Salmond: Against the Odds*, Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2011.

Wilson, Gordon, *SNP: The Turbulent Years 1960-1990*, Stirling: Scots Independent, 2009.

Wood, Robin, 'The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the 1970s' in Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 46-69, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

**John Hill** is Professor of Media at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the Principal Investigator on the AHRC research project, 'The History of Forgotten Television Drama in the UK' (2013-17) and the author, co-author or co-editor of a number of books and journals including *Cinema and Northern Ireland* (2006) and *Ken Loach: the Politics of Film and Television* (2011).

---

<sup>1</sup> *BBC Handbook 1975*, 109; see also Milne, *DG*, 52. Although BBC Scotland had historically sustained a tradition of drama production, it had always done so under firm financial constraints. As Andrew Stewart, Milne's predecessor as Controller, Scotland, indicated to a meeting of the Broadcasting Council for Scotland in 1961, when asked why BBC Scotland should not have made the network serial *Rob Roy* (broadcast during April and May that year), the 'first call on Scottish resources went to Religion, Current Affairs and Soccer, thus reducing the effort available in Scotland for programmes [such as drama] acceptable to the United Kingdom as a whole'. Minutes of the Broadcasting Council for Scotland, 12 May 1961, BBC Written Archives Centre (hereafter BBCWAC), R6/241/3.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Annual Report of the National Broadcasting Council for Scotland for 1970-71, the series, which combined location filming and studio recording, constituted 'the most complex production ever undertaken by BBC Scotland', *BBC Annual Report 1970-71*, 133.

<sup>3</sup> Memo from Pharic Maclaren to C.S., 26 January 1971, BBCWAC SC 96/50/1. The memo also contains Milne's hand-written reply.

<sup>4</sup> According to a BBC audience research report, the final episode was watched by 13.8% of the UK population, which was more than half of those watching television at that particular time (Audience Research Report on *Scotch on the Rocks*, 9 July 1973, BBCWAC VR/73/348).

<sup>5</sup> Minutes of the Board of Governors, 7 June 1973, BBCWAC R1/41/2.

<sup>6</sup> Review, *Times*, 7 January 1971, 7; Times Diary, *Times*, 15 August 1970, 10.

---

<sup>7</sup> Stuart, *Douglas Hurd*, 58.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Stuart, *Douglas Hurd*, 59.

<sup>9</sup> Lynch, *SNP*, 124.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed account of the Conservative response to the rise of Scottish nationalism at this juncture, see Pentland, 'Edward Heath'.

<sup>11</sup> Lynch, *SNP*, 131.

<sup>12</sup> 'The Scottish National Party', Memo from O. J. Whitley to C.S. (Controller, Scotland), 16 December 1966, BBCWAC R78/2594/1.

<sup>13</sup> 'Political Broadcasts in Scotland and Wales', Letter from Gordon Wilson, Assistant Secretary, Scottish National Party, to Viscount Alan Brook, BBC, 7 April 1964, BBCWAC R78/2594/1.

<sup>14</sup> 'Scottish Political Scene', Memo from Alasdair Milne, Controller, Scotland to Director-General, 7 July 1970, BBCWAC R78/2594/1. Referring to the votes cast in Scotland for the SNP compared with the Liberals, Milne largely accepted that the party was being 'inequitably treated' and proposed that the BBC should consider what attitude to take towards future PPB allocations.

<sup>15</sup> 'Party Protest on "Scotch on the Rocks"', *Scots Independent*, July 1973, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, *SNP*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> 'Protest on TV Serial', *Guardian*, 4 May 1973, 8.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Charles Curran, Director-General, to Gordon Wilson, Vice-Chairman, Scottish National Party, 16 May 1973, BBCWAC R62/9/203.

<sup>19</sup> 'Party Protest', 4.

<sup>20</sup> 'Scotch on the Rocks: Note of Mrs. W. Ewing's presentation of the Scottish National Party's complaint', 8 August 1973, BBCWAC R78/249/1.

<sup>21</sup> 'Scotch on the Rocks: Note of BBC's comments on the Scottish National Party's complaint', 13 September 1973, BBCWAC R78/249/1.

<sup>22</sup> 'The BBC Programmes Complaints Commission delivers an adjudication', *The Listener*, 4 October 1973, 455.

<sup>23</sup> *Radio Times*, 3 May 1973, 8. Wendy Wood was a well-known nationalist activist with a long record of protest and civil disobedience on behalf of Scottish independence (including a hunger strike in 1972 when she was 82). She founded the Scottish Patriots in 1949 and was

---

also a co-founder, in 1967, of the 1320 Club, established in commemoration of the Declaration of Arbroath. Although the SNP formally disassociated itself from the 1320 Club in 1968, Wood was commonly regarded as providing the inspiration for the character of the fanatical party veteran Mrs Merrilies in the TV version of *Scotch on the Rocks*. Another of those associated with the 1320 Club, Major Frederick Boothby, has been credited with the invention of the 'Scottish Liberation Army' in the pages of the Club newsletter, *Sgian Dubh*. According to Scott and Macleay, the SLA was 'at first a figment of his [Boothby's] highly wrought imagination' but subsequently became a 'publicity device for attracting nationalists interested in using violent methods'. *Britain's Secret War*, 30.

<sup>24</sup> *Radio Times*, 3 May 1973, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Minutes of the Television Weekly Programme Review, 3 October 1973, BBCWAC.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Huw Wheldon, Controller of Programmes, Television to Tony Garnett, 29 May 1968, BBCWAC T47/176/1. For a discussion of the issues raised by *Five Women*, see Hill, 'From *Five Women* to *Leeds United!*', 132-6.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Petley, 'Factual Fictions and Fictional Fallacies'.

<sup>28</sup> Memo from C. J. Curran to The Chairman, 21 February 1969, BBCWAC R78/2327/1. Curran was particularly vexed by the case of *The Big Flame*, a play about workers occupying the Liverpool docks, made in 1968 by the producer Tony Garnett, director Ken Loach and writer Jim Allen, and which the Corporation was reluctant to broadcast.

<sup>29</sup> *Daily Mail*, 17 March 1973. The BBC audience research report for the final episode notes that some viewers thought 'the violent struggle carried on by the National Liberation Army' bore 'too close a resemblance to the present events in Northern Ireland' (Audience Research Report on *Scotch on the Rocks*, 9 July 1973, BBCWAC VR/73/348).

<sup>30</sup> This nervousness was reflected in the near-absence of dramas about "the troubles" in the early 1970s. Liz Curtis, for example, indicates that the BBC cancelled a play about Northern Ireland by Jim Allen that was originally commissioned in 1970: Curtis, *Ireland: The Propaganda War*, 153. Hill also discusses the delays and cuts made to Dominic Behan's play about the historical roots of the conflict, *Carson Country*, prior to its broadcast in 1972: Hill, 'Dominic Behan and the Beginnings of Television "Troubles" Drama', 72-3.

<sup>31</sup> Although it was not an argument used by the BBC itself at the time, the other defence mounted on behalf of *Scotch on the Rocks* was that it was essentially a comic work. Douglas



---

Hurd wrote to the *Glasgow Herald* (6 June 1973, 10) to complain that the SNP lacked a ‘sense of humour’, and Hurd’s biographer suggests that Hurd and Osborne were writing with ‘their tongues firmly in their cheeks’: *Douglas Hurd*, 59. In his memoir, the former Controller of BBC Scotland Alastair Hetherington declares *Scotch on the Rocks* to have been ‘hilarious’: Hetherington, *Inside BBC Scotland*, 20. However, while there is certainly plenty in the series that might appear comic to a (post)modern sensibility, the series itself reveals little by way of comic self-awareness or knowingness, and there is virtually no historical evidence to suggest that either contemporary audiences or critics responded to it as other than “straight”. Indeed, the BBC audience research report for the final episode reveals that while some viewers may have found it far-fetched, others felt it ‘frighteningly realistic’ (Audience Research Report on *Scotch on the Rocks*, 9 July 1973, BBCWAC VR/73/348).

<sup>32</sup> ‘TV serial complaint by SNP upheld’, *Glasgow Herald*, 4 October 1973, 26; Minutes of the General Advisory Council, 17 October 1973, BBCWAC R78/249/1.

<sup>33</sup> Minutes of the Board of Governors, 4 October 1973, BBCWAC R1/41/3. In his June 1973 letter to the *Glasgow Herald*, Douglas Hurd argued that Conservative Central Office had not objected to his 1968 co-authored novel, *Send Him Victorious* (1968), in which ‘a prominent Conservative is engaged in a plot for kidnapping the King’. It does seem likely, however, that the BBC would have been much more nervous about showing members of the current Conservative government acting in an extra-legal manner than they were in the case of the Scottish Nationalist characters in *Scotch on the Rocks*, particularly given the reach and impact of a peak-time television serial compared with a novel.

<sup>34</sup> Minutes of a meeting of the Broadcasting Council for Scotland, 12 October 1973, BBCWAC, R78/25/2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Scott and Macleay, *Britain’s Secret War*, 77. Some comparison might be drawn here with the ways in which Mel Gibson’s *Braveheart* (1996) was politically and ideologically appropriated for Scottish nationalist purposes despite its many historical inaccuracies and, for Colin McArthur, ‘proto-fascist’ outlook: McArthur, *Brigadoon, Braveheart and the Scots*.

<sup>37</sup> Wood, ‘The Incoherent Text’, 46-69.

<sup>38</sup> Crawford, *Bannockburns*, 227. Crawford is referring to the original novel rather than the TV version which is arguably the more tension-ridden of the two. His reference occurs in

---

the context of a discussion of James Robertson's novel of post-war Scottish history, *And the Land Lay Still* (2010), which Crawford suggests reframes the earlier novel's narrative of, and ideological perspective on, Scottish independence.

<sup>39</sup> BBC Programmes Complaints Commission, 'The BBC Programmes Complaints Commission delivers an adjudication'.

<sup>40</sup> Excerpt from the Radio 4 series *Analysis* – 'United We Fall' – broadcast on Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> July, 1973, 8.45-9.30 p.m., BBCWAC R78/249/1.

<sup>41</sup> McArthur follows Tom Nairn ('Old Nationalism and New Nationalism') in regarding kailyard and tartanry as enduring cultural traditions that extend well beyond their historical origins. Kailyard, for example, refers to a series of Victorian novels by writers such as Ian Maclaren and J M Barrie and associated with small-town communities and simple moral pities: see Shepherd, 'The Kailyard'. As with tartanry, however, the kailyard discourse has subsequently been understood to have evolved into a much more wide-ranging and historically mutating 'melange of images, characters and motifs': 'McArthur, 'Scotland and Cinema', 40.

<sup>42</sup> Murray, 'Straw or Wicker?', 30.

<sup>43</sup> This scene occurs in Episode Two, which is one of the missing episodes. The BBC Written Archives hold a very hard-to-read copy of the screenplay which indicates that the scene was shot on film on location, but there is no indication of how the scene was shot. The work-in at Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) took place in 1971-2 in response to the threat of shipyard closures. This occurred after the novel was written so the reference to it was presumably added by MacTaggart. While this might be said to evoke the city's tradition of working-class militancy, the fact that Jimmy Reid, the work-in's most famous leader, was a member of the Communist Party might have also suggested a – less than flattering – link between Reid and the character of Mackie.

<sup>44</sup> Although he does not actually employ the term 'Clydesidism' in the *Scotch Reels* collection, McArthur suggests how certain films, such as *Floodtide* (1949) and *The Gorbals Story* (1949), sought 'to define the meaning of Scotland in relation to the Clyde': McArthur, 'Scotland and Cinema', 52. Douglas and Ouainé Bain more specifically identify 'Clydesidism' with heavy industry and 'the valorisation of the Scottish male industrial worker': 'Woman, Women and Scotland', 4.

---

<sup>45</sup> Petrie, *Contemporary Scottish Fictions*, 18-19.

<sup>46</sup> Bartie, 'Moral Panics and Glasgow Gangs'.

<sup>47</sup> Minutes of a meeting of the Broadcasting Council for Scotland, 16 May 1973, BBC WAC, R78/25/2. There had, in fact, been recurring concerns about the way in which Glasgow was represented in television current affairs. A visit by *Panorama* ten years earlier in 1963, for example, had caused particular offence and was even revealed to have involved 'staged vandalism' (Minutes of the Television Weekly Programme Review, 20 November 1963, BBCWAC).

<sup>48</sup> McArthur, 'Scotland and Cinema', 41. This combination of 'tartan exteriors' and 'kailyard mores' may be observed, for example, in *Sutherland's Law*, the major BBC Scotland series to follow *Scotch on the Rocks* in June 1973 (in the wake of the success of a pilot the previous year). For a discussion of the programme's use of 'attractive Scottish locations', filmed in the Oban area, in the context of a 'community' drama in the lineage of *Dr. Finlay's Casebook* (BBC, 1962-71), see Smart, 'Sutherland's Law'.

<sup>49</sup> Stenhouse, *How the Scots Took Over London*, 212. Poujadism takes its name from the French politician Pierre Poujade, whose *Union de Défense des Commerçants et Artisans* was associated with the interests of small businesses and small towns. Although *Scotch in the Rocks* mounts its 'anti-Poujadist' critique of the contemporary SNP in High Tory terms, it was a view of the actual SNP shared by many on the left at this time. In 1975, for example, Ray Burnett declared that: 'The SNP is very much the party of the small man, the frustrated Scottish businessman smelling profit in oil yet unable to cash in only to spectate, and the lower middle-class and professional elements watching their hard-won status and security disappear in the furnace of inflation'. Burnett, 'Socialists and the SNP', 121.

<sup>50</sup> Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism*, 180.

<sup>51</sup> Salmond, 'Interview'. Although Salmond – a future SNP party leader and Scottish First Minister – accepts in this interview that the SNP were right to object to the drama's association of the party with violence, his biographer suggests that the programme may also have been a 'cultural influence' upon him, particularly regarding those elements most concerned with the political negotiation of independence: Torrance, 63. Salmond became involved in his own dispute with the BBC over its 'unconscious bias' during the 2014 independence referendum campaign: see Green, 'Scottish independence'. This partly

---

reflected a broader dissatisfaction amongst viewers in Scotland with the journalism emanating from London-based reporters and correspondents in particular: see Macwhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*, 91-95.

<sup>52</sup> Stuart, *Douglas Hurd*, 60.

<sup>53</sup> It might also be noted how the series draws attention to the role of the “secret state”. MacNair, who has infiltrated the SLA on behalf of Special Branch, comes to act as an *agent provocateur*, responsible for explosions that the organisation would not otherwise possess the expertise to undertake.

<sup>54</sup> This scene occurs in Episode 4 and was an addition to the original novel. In their ruling, the Programmes Complaints Commission indicated that they believed that the inclusion of ‘the scene in which the leader of the Party goes very near to encouraging violence in order to assist his political ends’ seriously weakened the BBC’s defence of the series: BBC Programmes Complaints Commission, ‘The BBC Programmes Complaints Commission delivers an adjudication’. According to James G. Kellas, in his discussion of the 1970 General Election results, the SNP had ‘carefully nurtured’ an ‘image’ of itself as ‘a responsible, non-revolutionary, non-violent party’: Kellas, ‘Scottish Nationalism’, 456.

<sup>55</sup> Nairn, ‘Old Nationalism and New Nationalism’, 33-34.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>57</sup> Cook, ‘Three Ring Circus’, 108.

<sup>58</sup> *Report of the Committee on Broadcasting*, 409.