

# Tom Nairn: 'Painting Nationalism Red'?

*by Neal Ascherson*

Published by Democratic Left Scotland to mark the presentation of the portrait of Tom Nairn by Alexander Moffat, to Dundee City Council.

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# Introduction

by Stuart Fairweather

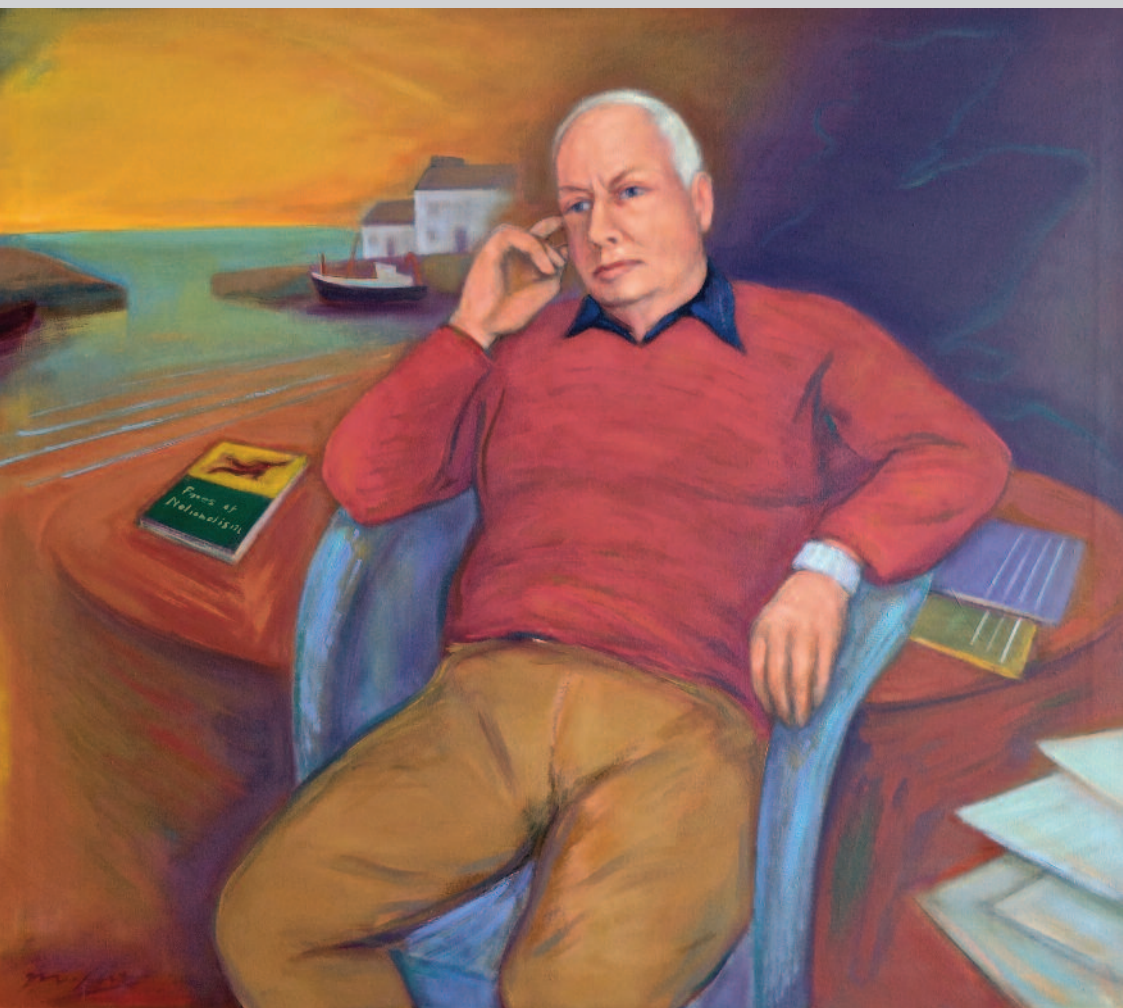
THE PORTRAIT OF TOM NAIRN by Sandy Moffat marks another step in the ongoing project by the artist, supported by Democratic Left Scotland, to represent some of the leading intellectual and cultural figures in contemporary Scotland.

Over the past few years, Sandy has drawn and painted Alasdair Gray (whose portrait now hangs in Òran Mór in Glasgow), writer Alan Bissett, and the late theatre director David MacLennan. These Sandy has done free of charge for the common good, with Democratic Left Scotland paying for the materials.

Tom Nairn has shown himself to be one of Scotland's leading intellectuals and, indeed, one of the foremost thinkers in the world on the often vexed question of nationalism. It therefore seemed fitting, in addition to ensuring the ongoing safekeeping and display of the portrait by gifting it to the Dundee City Council collection, to also commission a critical essay on Tom Nairn's life and work from one of Scotland's leading journalists, Neal Ascherson, to whom thanks are due.

Democratic Left Scotland is a political organisation, open to all, whether members of a party or not, who support our radical, feminist and green aspirations. We produce an occasional magazine, *Perspectives*, which ranges widely over political and cultural issues in Scotland, as does the DLS website – [www.democraticleft.scot](http://www.democraticleft.scot).

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Tom Nairn by Alexander Moffat

# Tom Nairn: 'Painting Nationalism Red?'

by Neal Ascherson

TOM NAIRN IS THE MOST MODEST OF PROPHETS – not a quality usually associated with thinkers whose ideas and eloquence have helped to form the politics of at least two progressive generations. But I would like to imagine that, sitting among the files and papers so neatly ordered in his Livingston home, he is perfectly aware of the enormous influence of his writing and lecturing over the last fifty years and draws satisfaction from it.

A satisfaction, though, which is tempered by outrage – never despair – at the reeling world of the 21st century, and by inescapable awareness of how much new absurdity, how many fresh stumbles into delusion, still call out to be named and denounced. Now in his eighties, he stands a bit like Auden's "Voltaire at Ferney", contemplating a night "full of wrong, / Earthquakes and executions ... And still all over Europe stood the horrible nurses, / Itching to boil their children. Only his verses / Perhaps could stop them. He must go on working ..."

Nairn has long been, by far, Scotland's pre-eminent political intellectual. It would hard to overestimate the impact of his writing over two generations on nationalist thinkers and politicians – a much wider constituency, of course, than simply the SNP. But this is anything but an essentially Scottish story. The whole British Left, Marxist or Labourist, sectarian or gradualist, even Liberal as well as socialist, has been touched by his analyses, even when they rejected them, and pricked by his sharp polemic, even when they were outraged by it. There was a time, I think in the 1970s, when a check on the non-fiction reading of Labour MPs revealed that Nairn was almost their favourite author.

And beyond that, in the cosmos of international philosophy and research, Nairn has a particular but still almost unassailable eminence in the study of nationalism. The originality and sheer radicalism of his ideas, sharpening after they were first formulated in the late 1960s, have not really decayed into obsolescence at the pace expected by impatient academics.

To take one example, in his (excellent) book *The Politics of English Nationhood* (2014), Professor Michael Kenny acknowledges that "... 'The

Break-Up of Britain' has arguably exerted a greater influence than any other single work upon current thinking about Englishness. Its core thesis, and Nairn's subsequent analyses of the obfuscatory mystique fostered by the core institutions of the British state, have gradually become a template for subsequent progressive thinking ..." (p53). Kenny clearly feels that it is time to move on beyond what he may think has become almost an orthodoxy, but his book shows that the sheer cogency of Nairnite ideas on Englishness still resists most attempts to displace them. Beyond Britain, Nairn's theoretical writings on nationalism and globalism have entered almost every English-language curriculum of nationalism studies in the world, from Ireland to Australia. In a historical period which promises to propel many more small "nationhoods" into nationality politics (welcomed by Nairn as a "springtime of victorious dwarves"), his relevance is guaranteed into a long future.

Tom Nairn was born in 1932, at Freuchie in Fife where his father was a schoolteacher. Although he has spent long periods of his life in Scotland, it's important to remember what a wanderer across the world he has been, driven sometimes by necessity, often by intellectual curiosity. Paradoxically, this has contributed to his sense of rooted Scottishness, as he said in his 2008 "Edinburgh Lecture", suggesting that the centuries-long experience of emigration "may have fostered an unusually exposed and outward-looking mentality, a mind-set forcibly attuned to a wider view and to contrasts of culture and custom. More than most other nations, Scots have been so-to-speak 'pre-globalised' by such mundane circumstances." He hastens to add there that the sort of world-awareness he's talking about has little to do with what he calls "the new intello fad of 'cosmopolitanism', the aloofness deemed ethically appropriate for the globalising times."

It's not widely understood that Tom Nairn's early interests were artistic-cultural, rather than political. He studied at Edinburgh College of Art, then at Edinburgh University in the Department of Philosophy. From there, he moved to Oxford, intending to research the philosophy and ideas of Benedetto Croce who, as Tom puts it, was "at that time the emperor of aesthetics". But at Oxford he was lucky to fall under the spell and enter the friendship of Iris Murdoch, who helped him to avoid the stultifying linguistic orthodoxy which dominated British philosophy at the time, and introduced him to more adventurous, more political contacts in the university. It's clear that by now Nairn was taking a growing interest in general politics and in Marxism in particular. He had read Marx in Edinburgh and discussed ideas with left-wingers in the university, and now used his time at Oxford to take these studies and contacts further.

After Oxford, he taught philosophy at Birmingham and then at Hornsey College of Art in London. This was to be a significant, perhaps decisive, episode in his life. It was the famous year of 1968, and the currents of student revolution were reaching Britain from Paris and Berlin. At Hornsey, which already had ambitions to become a university-level institution rather than a mere art school, a vigorous student occupation began on 28 May with a teach-in which rapidly made itself permanent, attracted widespread publicity, and spread to other art colleges. The occupation was supported by much of the junior staff (including Nairn) and lasted until Haringey Borough Council sent in police with dogs on 4 July.

Nairn wrote a commentary on these events, which appeared in *New Left Review* a few days later. The language and approach of this article are revealing about his political attitudes at this stage. His interpretation is clearly Marxist, as when he uses classically *soixante-huitard* language to characterise the disruption of “mental production”, alongside “material production”, in “the circumstances of late capitalism”. But at the same time, his account is strikingly non-sectarian, protesting angrily at the interference of outside speakers who, “still deeply convinced that they were the Revolution”, went to Hornsey to upbraid the students for concentrating on their college instead of “provoking a general crisis of British capitalism”. Nairn had already joined the critical neo-Marxist intellectuals of *New Left Review* in London, and he had been contributing to the journal since 1962. Now, six years on, he strongly endorsed the Hornsey students and accepted their revolutionary credentials. There’s no trace in this article of the dismissive “infantile disorder” view of student occupations which was prevalent in Communist Party circles at the time.

But Hornsey had dire personal consequences for Tom Nairn. He was sacked, as a leading participant in the occupation. Hard evidence of academic blacklisting, usually prompted by the Security Service, has not yet surfaced in his case. But the extraordinary fact that in the following decades no university dared to offer tenure or a teaching post to the man who was blatantly Scotland’s – indeed Britain’s – leading political theorist, with a global reputation, is hard to interpret in any other way. As a result, during the next 30 years or so, Nairn was obliged to produce his long, ground-breaking series of books and articles in conditions of often painful insecurity, poverty and geographical vagabondage. It was only in 2001, thirty-three years after Hornsey, that the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia appointed him “Professor of Nationalism and Cultural Diversity”, finally granting him the public status that was so obviously his due. (Edinburgh University eventually awarded him an honorary degree in 2016, at a private ceremony.)

Nairn's early preoccupation in his *NLR* contributions was with the Labour Party, or rather with its limitations: its confinement within the mental prison dubbed "Labourism". It was later, through discussions with the intellectual circle around Perry Anderson at *New Left Review*, that Nairn began to become fascinated with the theory and practice of nationalism. It has been said that while that group comprised British and Irish Marxists finding a way towards culture and aesthetics by way of European thinkers, Nairn came towards them from the opposite direction: advancing from aesthetic philosophy into Marxist analyses. Asked in a recent interview whether *NLR* was interested in nationalism, he replied: "In one sense, too much, because the founders were from Ireland [a reference to Perry Anderson, the editor, and his brother Benedict, author of the classic *Imagined Communities*]. I mean they were Anglo-Irish, unmistakably – English in Dublin and Irish in London. And very open to new ideas from continental Marxism ..." (from "Lucky Thinker", an interview with Tom Nairn by Will Storrar and Scott Hames, for the Scottish Political Archive at the University of Stirling, 2015).

Nairn, who joined the editorial board of *NLR* and remained on it until a decisive schism in 1983, was soon working to insert a Scottish dimension into the New Left's pioneering theorising about the origins and nature of European nationalism and the nation-state. "... On the *NLR* board, they were always too worried about Ireland, but at the same time too generally open in their mentality to refuse contributions which tried to look at the same questions in terms of Great Britain, Scotland and Wales ..." So in May 1968 the journal printed his "Three Dreams of Scottish Nationalism", an essay which was to become famous as it passed through several successive versions (a process which was to become very typical of Nairn's "cumulative" publication habit). The third version, the longest and most striking, appeared in *Memoirs of a Modern Scotland*, the symposium edited by Karl Miller in 1970, and it ended with what, for better or worse, remains the best-known of all Nairn quotations: "As far as I'm concerned, Scotland will be reborn the day the last minister is strangled with the last copy of the Sunday Post".

"Three Dreams" was – is – a dazzling but merciless polemic against Scottish delusions and narcissisms. "Scotland is the land where ideal has never, even for an instant, coincided with fact." Nairn pointed out that the Reformation in Scotland took place long before early capitalist development, knocking on the head – at least locally – the familiar theory that Protestantism was the self-justifying ideology of a new merchant middle class. In consequence, and in the absence of that social-political connection, Calvinism in Scotland took the form of "an absolute attempt at moral and reli-



gious order, isolated from the very conditions that would have made it an integral part of history ... Just because it could not be the veiled ideology of a class, the Scottish Reformation was bound to be an abstract, millennial dream – in effect, a desperate attempt to escape from history ...” Unforgettably, Nairn named it “the divine black dream, divorced from time”.

The essay already contains some of the theoretical perceptions about nationalism which Nairn would develop later. But its contempt for the “bourgeois nationalism” of the upsurging SNP is searing. Scottish Nationalism, according to “Three Dreams”, had missed the boat of European history which sailed in the 19th century. “Nationalism belongs in a young world in eruption, where the collapse of the ancient system releases visionary possibilities of a new social order ... Scotland’s Romantic Nationalism, which slumbered through this era of history, now emerges from its grave like a revenant to confront the obsidian landscape of late capitalism.” (*Memoirs of a Modern Scotland*, p47). Nairn admits the possibility of a revolutionary nationalism, a liberation from Scotland’s myths, but that is not on offer from the SNP of 1970. “To acquiesce in the SNP’s version of our future ... is merely an uninteresting form of suicide. I will not admit that this is the best we can do, that a party incapable of even a symbolic fire-cracker in the path of the annual Royal Progress to Scotland has the right to speak for me, as a nationalist.” (p54). Hostile as the words sound, his radical readers in the SNP were not wrong to recognise in them the reproach of an ally, who in turn became distinctly less censorious about the SNP as the years passed. And that party, although it was certainly “bourgeois” by any Marxist definition, and although it had certainly stumbled onto the battlefield a hundred years after the independence movements of other suppressed European nations had been and gone, soon ceased to look like a revenant. Winning local and parliamentary seats brought healthy colour to its cheeks, and it turned out to be quite comfortable in the “obsidian landscape” of state-protected capitalism.

All this time, Nairn was digesting the most important political experience of his life. This was his encounter in France and Italy with continental Marxist thinking, and above all, with the thought and writings of Antonio Gramsci. He had gone to the university of Pisa originally to pursue his interest in Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), the Pope of idealising aesthetic philosophy. But “it was Antonio Gramsci who took me by the throat once I was there, and I became a Gramsciano ...”

It may be hard to recall, now, how important Gramsci’s ideas became to the post-war European Left, and especially in the Communist parties of France and Italy as their intellectuals, often treated as heretics by their leaders, tried

to construct a less rigid, more open Marxist account of society and the roots of political change. It's equally hard to imagine how insular the British Left had become, between the poles of Stalinism and Trotskyism. This was the isolation from European and global socialist thinking which the New Left was trying to penetrate, and Gramsci was to be one of their imports. (Hamish Henderson had translated him soon after the war, but for years was unable to find a publisher.)

Gramsci, brilliant, disabled but irrepressibly valiant, was a leader of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) until his arrest by Mussolini's Fascists in 1927. He died in prison ten years later, leaving behind him a mass of letters and fragmentary political writings which were only brought to light after the second world war and the collapse of fascism. His ideas offered an escape from the conventional Communist dogma of "base" and "superstructure" (the latter, including all forms of culture, defined as a set of merely superficial effects or epiphenomena brought about by the fundamental relations of production). Gramsci elaborated the notion of "hegemony", which argued that a working-class movement must first acquire dominant influence in "civil society" – in culture, education and the Church, among all the other institutions – before it could finally achieve political power. This concept not only broke with "official" interpretations of what Marx had written, to say nothing of Party lines laid down by Lenin or Stalin. It gave Left intellectuals an importance previously denied to them in party work: culture in the widest sense was now, according to Gramsci, a crucial battlefield in the struggle to overthrow capitalism. No wonder Gramscian ideas became so popular among middle-class revolutionaries in western Europe. A generation later, many of the ideas of the 1968 student uprisings, from the rebellion of "mental producers" at Hornsey and other centres of higher education to Rudi Dutschke's "long march through the institutions" in Berlin, derived at least as much from Gramsci's writings as from Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*.

Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and *Letters from Prison* also held original approaches to the nature of the state. In history, the dominating class in a society had generally been a closed caste, ruling by coercion. Bourgeois revolutions, on the other hand, "tend to construct an organic passage from the other classes into their own ..." A bourgeois regime, according to Gramsci, was "capable of absorbing the entire society and assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level". So the state became a sort of educator, and the modern state's most important activities were in schools, universities, law-courts: "the apparatus of the political and cultural hegemony of the ruling classes".

This history of class assimilation evidently fascinated Nairn. He and Perry Anderson, in a series of truly seminal articles in *New Left Review* in the early 1960s, reinterpreted the whole modern history of the British state – “Ukania”, as Nairn was later to nickname it (this was a learned reference to Robert Musil’s great novel *The Man Without Qualities*, in which Musil coined the derisive term “Kakania” to describe the antique, multinational structures of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy – “kaiserlich und koeniglich”, or “K und K”).

Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn understood the English upheavals between 1640 and 1688 as the earliest of “bourgeois revolutions” – but as a strange, deformed and incomplete one. This pre-modern state “was the historical mid-wife both of contemporary statehood and of modern industrialism; but that very role meant it could never become an example of either. Although it helped modernity to birth, its own genetic codes remain those of an anterior world”. (*The Enchanted Glass*, pp213–4).

An emerging merchant class, liberated from royal feudalism, laid the foundations for future industrialisation and powered England’s imperialist expansion overseas. But it did so without displacing the landowning aristocracy, which retained political power and itself became a source of capitalist development as it destroyed the peasantry and accumulated investment wealth from agriculture. By the end of the 19th century, aristocracy and bourgeoisie formed “a single social bloc” which successfully contained and repressed the growing industrial and agrarian proletariat. As Anderson put it, “After a bitter, cathartic revolution, which transformed the structure but not the superstructure of English society, a landed aristocracy underpinned by a powerful mercantile ... group, became the first dominant capitalist class in Britain.” (from Anderson, “Origins of the Present Crisis”, in *NLR* 23).

This analysis led Nairn, especially, on towards the constitutional outcomes of that class alliance, and a dramatic new accounting for the peculiar nature of the English, later Anglo-British state. The forces which overthrew the “Divine Right” Stuart monarchy in 1688 had carried out a “Glorious Revolution” which was neither glorious nor revolutionary. To oversimplify the Nairn-Anderson conclusions, they were arguing that this curious aristocracy/middle class alliance which chased out James VII had simply replaced monarchical absolutism with parliamentary absolutism. The settlement included no idea of popular sovereignty or social equality – the “terrifying” Leveller ideas which had briefly broken surface in England in the 1640s. Instead, the weird doctrine of “parliamentary sovereignty” under a Crown of limited supremacy was installed. The top-down power structure of mediaeval monarchies was preserved, under slightly different management, and with it the implication –

emerging clearly only in later centuries – that all official information was secret, the monopoly possession of the Crown in Parliament and its governments, unless authority felt moved to release it.

James VII had considered that he answered only to God, as his anointed appointee. Inheriting that royal absolutism, the post-1688 Parliaments also answered to no earthly authority. The concept of supreme law – a written constitution to which monarch, church and even a Parliament were subject – was current on the Continent and had appeared briefly during the English Commonwealth; it was clearly present in Scottish legal/political thinking (Samuel Rutherford, of Anwoth and St Andrews, had written his famous book *Lex Rex* in 1644). But it was quite alien to the institutions and spirit of the 1688–1690 reforms in England.

Nairn and Anderson therefore set to examining the nature of England – soon, in 1707, to become the Anglo-British state – from the point of view that it was an exceptional structure, product of a 17th-century upheaval which had been supported by the middle class and certainly empowered the “bourgeoisie”, but which could not really meet the strict Marxist criteria for a “bourgeois revolution”. It should be added that both – Nairn especially – were highly independent thinkers, unimpeded by orthodoxies and never inhibited by awe at “sacred texts”. Nairn had no problem in proclaiming “the deficiencies of Marx’s and Engels’s own views on the British state”. The two great theorists of the 20th century’s revolutions had lived “in the most developed capitalist society” in the world – Victorian Britain – “yet they wrote very little on the state and its hegemonic structures”, preferring to cite the more “normal” political and social development in continental Europe. And as the years passed, Nairn would insist with growing eloquence that the central defect of classic Marxism was its complete failure to understand the force and the enduring historic significance of nationalism. His celebrated essay “The Modern Janus” (1975) opens with the words: “The theory of nationalism represents Marxism’s great historical failure”.

The form of English or Anglo-British constitutionalism, surviving into the 21st century, was identified by Anderson and Nairn as almost comically anachronistic. As Nairn wrote later in *The Break-Up of Britain*, “the pioneer modern liberal-constitutional state never itself became modern: it retained the archaic stamp of its priority. Later the industrialisation which it produced, equally pioneering and equally world-wide in impact, never made England into a genuinely industrial society ... No recovery from industrial ‘backwardness’ has been possible, precisely because no second revolution of the state has taken place in England: only the state could have engendered such a

recovery, by revolution from above – but the old patrician structure of England’s political system, incapable of such radical action, has also resisted every effort at serious reform up to the present day.” (*The Break-Up of Britain*, p22). Rather than imposing their own class hegemony on civil society, the ascending and soon industrial bourgeoisie had adopted the mores and many of the attitudes of the landowning aristocracy, which continued to dominate politics for most of the ensuing century.

Those words were written in the mid-1970s, a decade before the British state attempted to deal with “industrial backwardness” by bringing about the collapse of manufacturing and extractive industry itself. But Nairn’s assumption about the nature of the relationship between political and economic culture – markedly Gramscian – has entered the mainstream of political attitudes. It was no coincidence that a few leading parliamentarians in that decade – Liberal rather than Labour – began to remark that “It’s no good saying that we would have the best political institutions in the world, if only our economy didn’t malfunction. The truth is that the economy doesn’t function precisely because our institutions don’t work.” The Liberal remedy was proportional representation and modest recasting of Parliamentary procedure. Much more formidable was the emergence, led by Anthony Barnett, of campaigns for complete, even revolutionary constitutional reform. This included a written constitution, a total reversal of power-flow through the adoption of continental “subsidiarity” models which placed sovereignty with the people, at the level of basic communities, and the entrenched grant of self-government to the nations of the United Kingdom – aiming, that is, to renovate the multinational Ukanian structure rather than to abolish it. (These demands were soon brought together in the vigorous campaigning movement Charter 88, under Barnett’s inspiration.)

It was Barnett – also a long-standing member of the *NLR* circle – who suggested to Nairn that he should approach the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam. The TNI, founded by the American radical Sam Reuben, was a left-wing think-tank which became a refuge and agora for a multitude of socialist intellectuals from all over Europe, including the so-called socialist countries in the Soviet bloc, and from the developing world. Most were independent Marxists of one shade or another. Nairn was a Fellow of the TNI between 1972 and 1976. He has said (in that Stirling interview) that “once I was there, a lot of things changed completely as a result, including my relationship with home, and earlier versions of ideology and so on. I learned about different styles of Marxism, from a variety of points of view that the TNI made possible.”

At the Transnational Institute, he was encountering dissident Marxists from eastern Europe, who were finding their way to the TNI in Amsterdam by many routes. Nairn recalls those meetings as “a process of Europeanisation”, confirming another of his own original lines of reflection. It is important – in 2017 – to remember how overwhelmingly anti-European the British Left was in this period, which saw most socialists and especially Marxists supporting the unsuccessful “No” vote for an early version of Brexit in the 1975 referendum on EEC membership. Nairn’s experience in Italy and France, and his affinity with ideas and hopes in their left-wing ideological arguments, had inoculated him against that trend. He understood the intellectual timidity of “Labourism” in Britain as in part perpetuated by isolation from European political currents; his sojourn in Amsterdam strongly confirmed his views and his sense of being at once Scottish and European. In 1973, he contributed to *NLR*, in a special issue, the book-length essay “The Left Against Europe”.

Not an easy read today (the extensive footnotes show much more of Nairn’s combative sparkle than the main text), “The Left Against Europe” is mainly concerned with unpacking the enigma of why the supposedly super-patriotic Tory party had strongly supported joining the professedly supra-national Common Market integration in 1971, while the party of the working-class had opposed it. Nairn explains that “the paradox of the national ruling class’s anti-nationalism had ... a logic of class interest behind it”, above all the interests of the City. (*NLR* 1.75, Sept/Oct 1972). But the core of the essay is concerned with Labour and “Labourism”. Nairn (in words with a special resonance in the Brexit context of 2017) writes that “in spite of a long and still lively tradition of ethical internationalism and high-mindedness towards ‘narrow nationalism’, Labour had defended national sovereignty and ‘our’ absolute ‘right to control our own affairs’ against the ruling-class ‘sell-out’”.

Labour, Nairn continued, “consistently (and quite consciously) transcended its class character in honour of the national interest ... Labourist infatuation with parliament and constitution can be seen arising from the need to be *plus royaliste que le Roi*. The Labour Party lays constant claim to the national essence, the Holy Ghost of Great Britain.”

For all its density of theoretical and historical argument, this polemic left a number of loose threads. To begin with, if the Labour Party was indeed so thirled to an essentially craven view of how a working-class mass party should help to preserve the grandeur of Great British statehood, where could it discover a positive motivation or justification for changing its mind in the matter of Europe? Nairn quotes with admiration Giuseppe Amendola’s success in turning the Italian Communist Party towards conditional approval of Italy’s

membership of the European Economic Community (EEC), but the author's own powerful feelings about his sense of European identity are kept in the background. Secondly, nationalism is presented here exclusively as a myth-encrusted, servile evasion of reality. Given Nairn's writings in the next few years, the absence of any suggestion that a "positive, progressive" nationalism might exist, as well as the backward-looking and reactionary variety, is odd.

In fact, only two years passed before the appearance of "The Modern Janus", which many regard as his real irruption into the field of nationalism studies. A second version of it was to become the final chapter of *The Break-up of Britain*.

Written in short, vigorous sentences, in language almost free from the often recondite vocabulary of the 1970s Left, it is accessible to any intelligent reader. Nairn uses the image of Janus, the two-faced Roman god always represented with one face looking forward and the other backwards. Some readers wrongly assume that this represents two sorts of nationalism: one – progressive, emancipatory, modernising – peering into the future, the other – reactionary, exclusive, obsessed with violent wrongs and glories – glaring back into a largely invented past. This binary division of nationalism has since become a commonplace, almost a received idea. Michael Ignatieff's book *Blood and Belonging* later popularised this dual categorisation but under changed titles: the two Janus-faces of nationalism became "civic" and "ethnic".

But Nairn, in fact, never said that nationalism was binary. Quite the contrary. His analysis "is to say that the huge family of nationalisms cannot be divided into the black cats and the white cats, with a few half-breeds in between. The whole family is spotted, without exception ..." (*Break-up of Britain*, p348). He goes on to warn that "the substance of nationalism as such is always morally, politically, humanly ambiguous. That is why moralising perspectives on the phenomenon always fail, whether they praise or berate it." The point of his Janus image is twofold. First, that both its faces "are conjoined by a common head" of Janus. Second, that this head was traditionally mounted over a gateway: "thus does nationalism stand over the passage to modernity, for human society. As human kind is forced through its strait doorway, it must look desperately back into the past, to gather strength wherever it can be found for the ordeal of 'development'."

By now, Nairn was fascinated by the work of Ernest Gellner, the Czech-born scholar who can claim to be the founder of "nationalism studies" as we know them today. His essays in the early 1960s had opened the way to a whole family of theories which tried to associate the appearance of nationalism with the transforming power of modernisation, as it had impacted on Western

societies from the late eighteenth century on. Both Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm owed ideas to him.

As Nairn was to put it, Gellner did not simply argue that industrialisation and modernisation as such induced the phenomenon. Nationalism was provoked, rather, by the uneven diffusion of those changes. Gellner's "tidal wave of modernisation", as he called it, brought the capitalism of more advanced societies down upon the less developed and weaker societies around them, at varying paces and intensities, and provoked ideologies of resistance.

An intense admirer and later a friend and colleague of Gellner's, Tom Nairn was never a disciple. He and others were to identify weaknesses and gaps in his treatment of the origins of nationalism. Some felt that Gellner was too determinist about the economic prompters for political change. Others reacted against his implication that nationalism as he defined it could not have existed before the "modern" tidal wave. Nairn himself was much later to find some sympathy for the "primordialist" view that not only nationhood but nationalism itself had a longer biography reaching back into pre-industrial societies. It was also objected, very convincingly, that nationalism was not confined to the "dominated", but on the contrary, had usually spread to weaker societies only after originating in their stronger oppressors. And there has been a feeling that Gellner's account is somehow the words of the opera without the music. Perry Anderson wrote scathingly that Gellner and the "modernizers" had told us everything we needed to know about nationalism, except what we needed to know about nationalism: "the overpowering dimension of collective meaning that modern nationalism has always involved: that is, not its functionality for industry, but its fulfilment of identity".

*The Break-up of Britain*, published initially by New Left Books, appeared in 1977. It was to be, by far, Nairn's most influential work, read throughout British universities, by nationalists in Scotland and Wales, and by non-nationalist left-wingers in every corner of the United Kingdom and Ireland. Written in Edinburgh, London and Amsterdam, most of its contents had already been published as separate contributions to *New Left Review*, but the parts – revised and rewritten – were now brought together into a formidable whole. To its readers, it seemed to convey to its readers a basic message: that the archaic United Kingdom structure was approaching a phase of collapse, and that delayed nationalism in two of its satellite nations was turning more coherently than in the past towards self-government and possibly full state independence. The book's sub-title, "Crisis and Neo-Nationalism", suggests the undogmatic Marxism of the book's approach; much of its analysis rests on



Marxist notions of class contradiction, but refreshed and liberated by Gramscian attention to culture and to subjective realities of civil society. *The Break-Up of Britain* also revealed to a much wider audience the sardonic brilliance of Nairn's polemic writing, sometimes unforgettably witty, often startling in its capacity to knock open a problem in an original way. The chapter on "English Nationalism: The Case of Enoch Powell" has lost none of its force over the 40 years since it was composed, and remains a delight to read. "It is quite true (he writes, discussing Powell's agonised nostalgia for the certainties of an imagined English past) that the English need to rediscover who and what they are, to reinvent an identity of some sort better than the battered cliché-ridden hulk which the retreating tide of imperialism has left them ..." (p259).

In all Nairn's teaching about "Ukania", the Anglo-British state, his emphasis on the problems of Englishness and English political culture has remained central. "... It is not alarmist to suggest that the persistence of the British regime fosters the most regressive possible side of an eventual English nationalism. Those who defend it *à l'outrance* against the supposed petty patriotism of Scotland and Wales do so in honour of its liberalism and past achievements, hoping these can somehow be saved and perpetuated; they ignore the limitations and central defects tied structurally to those traits, defects which are becoming disastrous as the external situation of the state deteriorates. The latter process is irrevocable ..." (p80).

He is examining two nationalisms which, in his sense, have not behaved as they should. Scottish nationalism was delayed in its appearance, mostly by the two long centuries in which Scots or at least the Scottish middle class and its recruits benefited enormously from their participation in empire and later in the world-wide market for heavy industrial exports. English nationalism – still, in our own times, only semi-emergent – was stunted in at least two different ways: by the unique hegemony of a pseudo-aristocratic ruling class able constantly to assimilate new upwardly mobile social groups, and by the "Great Britain" imperial project which offered the mirage of a vaster, non-ethnic identity. Michael Kenny has summed up Nairn's approach usefully but critically: "Together (he and Perry Anderson) argued that the English middle class had buried its revolutionary ambitions, making peace with the landed gentry, rather than seeking to supplant it ... The working class was successfully incorporated into the political system and its radical ambitions blunted. Nairn highlighted the role and importance of a particular kind of 'inter-class nationalism' that was deliberately promoted by the state in the nineteenth century ..." (Kenny, p53). Kenny commented on Nairn's verdict on Enoch Powell

that “the more the opportunity to express and inhabit a shared sense of popular nationhood was delayed, Nairn maintained, the more likely it was that resentment, grievance and racist sentiment would emerge instead.” There was a void at the heart of English national identity, “the result of the blocked sense of aspiration associated with the delegation of sovereignty to the British state”. (Kenny, p570)

Scotland was following a different, now unblocked track: the “shared sense of popular nationhood” was present and in many ways had been expressed. Political nationalism in Scotland had been weirdly slow to develop, but seemed now to be following a recognisably European pattern. It was also an abnormal, even stunted form, but in its timing, its “belatedness”, rather than – as was the English case – in its substance.

At this point, it’s as well to look at one of the most common objections to Nairn’s method. He assumes a “norm”, or “normal” pattern of development in nationalism, against which other and later developments can be judged. This paradigm is located essentially in the events of the European nineteenth century, and in the long series of national revolutions against multi-national empires and states – peaking in 1848 – out of which a certain pattern of “bourgeois nationalism” seemed to crystallise. Frequent but not universal elements would be the defence and exaltation of the national language and culture (“the poet on the barricade”), the demand for state independence, the desire to “join the world” through direct participation in modernity and all its devices and discoveries, and the invention (often) of a Golden Age in the national past. Many of those revolutions – but far from all – also involved attempts to up-end traditional social order: to overthrow rural feudalism, to emancipate the peasantry, to grant rights to oppressed minorities and at the same time to abolish all “reactionary” hindrances to free trade, investment and manufacture.

Set against that template, England and Scotland were both highly “abnormal”. Some of the conditions which had led to revolution in continental Europe and Ireland were broadly present (quite a few, in Scotland’s case) – but the bonfire didn’t ignite. The question is not so much “why” these variations occurred as whether it makes sense to consider them “deviant” and therefore in some sense morbid. Kenny is one of several critics who challenge this Gellner-Nairn “normative” interpretation of political history. He accepts that English political development is extremely untypical of the nation-state constructions which followed it. But he suggests that the very ambiguity of English national awareness may have positive value and be a source of strength. Kenny writes that “... the deep connections between the comple-

mentary connotations of England and Britain ... reflect a pattern of national sentiment that has continued to flow into the recent period, and has proved sufficiently adaptable and sinuous to be reworked in the more fraught context of recent years," (p235). Nairn, in contrast, has no doubts that England in this matter is a damaged subject, a pathological case of arrested development which is bound to deteriorate unless – his constant conclusion – England is helped to throw off the blinding, suffocating cloak of "Britishness". (A liberation which, in Nairn's view, could be prompted, if not brought about, by the break-up of Britain effected by Scottish independence.)

In an important passage of this book, he explains this diagnosis. Nationalism, he repeats, is not a simple matter of identity. "The mobilising myth of nationalism is an idea of the people. ... the (supposedly) self-initiated action of the people: the Revolution, the Overthrow of Foreign Oppression, the War of Liberation (and so on). It is of no importance that these actual events never happened as the mythology pictures them ... what counts is the later mass beliefs." (p295).

These beliefs beget a whole cultural inheritance of rewritten history, songs, novels, statues and street names. "From the process there derives an always-latent conviction of popular will and capacity. The People could always do it again. This is how the modern political principle of nationality works ..." It's exactly that "myth of people's power" which England lacks, according to Nairn, even though "the English people achieved the first great, forceful intrusion of the masses in modern times, during the Civil Wars of the 1640s." (p296). A reader of this chapter ("The English Enigma") will have no difficulty in grasping why the very principle of popular sovereignty – the basis of constitutional thinking in almost the entire rest of the world – is so alien to the British state.

British politics and political discourse have been obsessed with notions of sovereignty – never more so than in the early 21st century. All the more remarkable, then, that there is no consensus about where in "Ukania" sovereignty resides, in theory or in practice. The archaic Great-British state-nation is a polity in which nobody knows what the law of state is. This is not so much the consequence of the absence of a written Constitution, as of the presence of dream-like and contradictory assumptions uncritically carried over from a pre-modern past.

The long, doleful uproar over Brexit has included the collision of three of these dream-doctrines. One was the idea of parliamentary sovereignty – or absolutism. The second was the claim that a referendum represented some sort of popular sovereignty, and that its result was therefore binding even on

the Westminster Parliament and its elected members. The third, violently contested at Westminster in 2017, was the proposition advanced by Mrs May's government that the Executive – i.e. the Cabinet – could embody the Royal Prerogative – the sovereignty of the Sovereign herself. To put it coarsely, a prime minister could do what she or he wanted by ventriloquising the Queen and borrowing her Crown.

It's therefore not surprising that *The Enchanted Glass*, Tom Nairn's investigation of the monarchy, should have remained in print – there have been effectively three updated editions – ever since its first publication in 1989. The mystery of this astounding authority fascinated him – an entertaining section of the book describes a Royal visit to his own territory of East Fife. So did the apparent immunity of the Royal Enchantment to social and economic change. And so, especially, did its all-too evident immunity to unsparing sociological investigation.

In a Gramscian way, Nairn refuses to see the monarchy as merely an imposing item of superstructure responding to socio-economic changes at the base. Quite the reverse. The Victorian columnist Walter Bagehot persuaded his contemporaries and subsequent generations that the monarchy and all the superb ritual and ceremony of the British state were merely the “dignified” wrappings of the British constitution; the sober and discreet operations of government were the “efficient” part where the real decisions were taken. Nairn suggests that Bagehot was precisely wrong. It is the monarchy and the python-grip of “ancient” but very vigorous pageantry which still dominates the public and political imagination (even though so much of that array is fake, in the sense of having been invented yesterday). And, in contrast, it is the supposedly modern and “efficient” structures of democracy in Britain which in reality are archaic and obsolete, subordinate to that monarchical, top-down power structure and acting to preserve it.

Nairn's phrase, “the glamour of backwardness”, has entered the political dictionary. But the theme of the book is how and why this “glamour” (he uses the word in its Scots sense of an enchantment) operates to hold the English nation so firmly in its imaginative grasp. He cites Brian Masters's incredible account of how a third of the British population experience dreams about meeting the Queen or the Royals (*Dreams about HM the Queen and Other Members of the Royal Family*), servile dreams which visit even stoutly republican sleepers. In these night-visions, the Royals may kick off their shoes, ask for a nice cup of tea and reveal that they are “just like us”, ordinary humans who “have got their own problems”. But – Nairn says – “the inner meaning of the belief that ‘They're just like us’ ... is the certainty that they are not, and

cannot conceivably be just like us.” And this contradiction – gods stooping to chat with mortals – makes them even more magical and extraordinary.

They are above “them and us”, in class terms. They are the “National Family gods”. As such, they also reflect the nation – the “glass” image of the title. The Crown has become “the moral holiness of society projected into new guardian angels, delighted in as the image of everything still wholesome and presentable about ‘us’ ...” And yet, in spite of this book’s elaborate demonstrations of the power still held by monarchy over British institutions and the British public, Nairn seems to have been passing through a phase of expectation that the glamour was about to dim, or even to be switched off. He described the “Royal National (and deeply popular) conventions which have, since the middle of this [20th] century, been collapsing through remorseless stages into a single identity of ruin – into an accumulating backwardness which became the ultimate secret of the Monarchic riddle ...” (p98).

In the foreword to the 1994 edition, he went much further and wrote about “the Fall”, a sudden collapse of public confidence in the Crown, the Royals and government itself, as suggested by opinion polls. A section of this foreword is even entitled “The Shattered Glass”. But here Nairn’s political instincts betrayed him. That slump in the Monarchy’s popularity, brought on by family and tax scandals and by the psychodrama surrounding Diana’s death in 1997, proved to be only temporary, and the subsequent foreword to the 2011 edition of *The Enchanted Glass* does not mention “the Fall”. Instead, at one point, it raises the possibility of a “Republican Monarchy” in an independent Scotland, made palatable by “the replacement of ‘enchantment’ and emotionality by a straightforward calculation of joint benefits and their costs.” Nairn suggests that “(D)ifferent varieties of nationalism [in Scotland], in Wales and Northern Ireland, are bound in turn to require a novel style of constitution that could certainly include monarchy but of a somewhat different style from the one imposed by (as one might put it) the glamour of backwardness” (p xv).

Again he returns to his argument that the emergence of Scotland from the old United Kingdom structure is probably the only shock which can induce the English public to see their own political society directly, rather than through that fogged-up “British” lens. “One way the English have avoided ‘little England’ (the country on its own) has been the curiously amplified elevation of a regal family dynasty ... informally shared by the peripheral countries”. (p xv) But in the longer run, the aim must be to change the British identity-structure if social progress is to be made. “Monarchy” (Nairn writes) “... is a substantial part of that identity; while Republicanism is a proposed

revolution of national identity, as a precondition of any imaginable set of feasible programmes or socio-economic policies". (p387).

Perhaps the most original part of Tom Nairn's thinking, developed in recent decades, is his work on globalisation. Much of this was crystallised and formulated during his time in Melbourne, often in intellectual debate with Australian and other colleagues, and stimulated by the problems of the continent around him. (Samples of these ideas can be found in *Global Matrix* (Pluto Press, 2005, written jointly with Paul James). In London and then in Edinburgh, he had written extensively against what passed for "internationalism" in the European Left at the time, arguing that what purported to be a generous socialist outlook (the brotherhood of all working people, surpassing cultural and historic differences) could often amount to a delusive refusal to recognise the forces of uneven development which impelled the varieties of nationalism, a delusion which objectively often played into the hands of imperialism and reaction.

The collapse of European communist regimes between 1989 and 1992, when the Soviet Union disintegrated, was supposed by many in Britain and the United States to replace the Cold War with a "new world order", in which – according to its most crass versions – history would finally end, having reached its goal. This would be a tranquil, uniform planet of liberal democracies and free-market economics. Nairn was one of many who at once saw the absurdity of this. It was soon evident that America's hegemony over a large part of the world was evaporating, to be replaced by a "New World Disorder". At the same time, a globalisation of consumption, entertainment, style, music and other culture was clearly taking place – not for the first time, in recent centuries. It was predicted, often by the "end of history" sages, that this process would inevitably be accompanied by the fading out of smaller national identities in favour of a few giant or continental powers.

In fact, the opposite has taken place. Globalisation – such as it is – has proved to be fertile soil for the emergence of more national states in the post-Cold War period. Nairn was one of the first writers to point this out, and to examine the many ways in which globalisation was actually impelling rather than reducing diversity. Accordingly, this was not a process which deserved automatic demonization by progressives. Certainly, the onslaught of an especially rabid capitalism into previously protected territory was a foul spectacle, especially in the ex-socialist countries of eastern Europe: "the termite-mound of manic deregulation and take-all rapacity that grew so monstrously beyond the fallen walls of 1989" (*Global Matrix*, p36). But the termites themselves faced an uncertain future. "The 'one world' of globalisation is no ectoplasmic

sphere from which 'uneven development' will vanish, exorcised by priestly spells of economic correctness. It is much more likely to be one in which unevenness increases – and, above all, increases in consciousness." (p38).

Nairn concluded that "nationality politics are needed to mobilise resistance ... Far from disappearing, nationalism is changing its skin ... The modern nation-state has behind it a phased development, still under way – from the Westphalian kingdoms of the seventeenth century up to the iron-clad Leviathans that came after the Franco-Prussian war in the 1870s." Now, precisely the unevenness of this globalised impact of change was beginning to destabilise the older generation of compound nation-states, hitting their component nationalities in ways so different that gulfs separating unlike political experiences began to yawn between "core" and "periphery" – just as it had impacted on the continental empires of Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. More nationality politics, not less, would be the outcome.

"Global Matrix" also includes one of the most sustained critiques – rather than criticisms – of Nairn's work to come from another academic. In a contribution which fully, even affectionately, acknowledges his stature and originality, Joan Cocks suggests that Tom Nairn "comes to the national question through a hatred of imperial states and a sympathy for small peoples, a partisanship that lends his work real political passion." She sees his debt to the ideas of Gellner and of Benedict Anderson, author of the now-classic work on nationalism *Imagined Communities* (1983), but says that he had carried those ideas much further – and more aggressively. "He sees unequal relations between great states and vulnerable regions as the larger context in which the analysis of national aspirations must be set." Cocks is evidently no uncritical admirer of Anderson's, for she goes on: "By making domination the centrepiece of the national form, he [Nairn] gives a critical edge to 'imagined communities' that undercuts the smarmy, sentimental intimations of the phrase" (p73).

She suggests, however that he has developed what amounts to a "fetishism" for ethnicity, locality and nationality, which was not evident in his early work.

And it pains her that Nairn is "deafeningly silent" about the idea that cultural homogeneity within political unity might be a positive good. "Instead, he insists that the idea of heterogeneity-in-unity has always served to mystify the rule of one people over the rest and that, regardless of the wishes of cosmopolitan elites, the objective course of history and the subjective will of peoples lead in the nationalist direction."

That is no bad summary of Tom Nairn's position. And today, as the world watches the struggle of Scots, Catalans and Kurds against exactly that impe-

rial mystification of “homogeneity-in-unity”, the position was never more cogent. This is a political struggle, but also an intellectual insurrection against outworn concepts misused to impede historic change. Behind Joan Cocks’s questioning lie anxieties deriving from deep-seated orthodoxy: is Nairn not denying the primacy of class as the motive force in history? That is less than the truth. Nobody has provided a more convincing account of the peculiar, even eccentric role of class in the English seventeenth-century revolution than Nairn and Anderson. And nobody has watched more closely than Tom Nairn the correlations of social class with attitudes to the national question in Scotland.

Cocks also suggests that Nairn’s deconstruction of nationalism, especially in *The Break-up of Britain*, is so acute that, rather than enthroning it as the major force in politics, he leaves nothing usable behind. He “brings nationalism to centre-stage, explains it, defends it, but does not believe it. To see nationalism as intellectually false but historically right has convoluted political implications for the seer; the ability to be a nationalist is not one of them.”

To this, Tom Nairn retorted: “*Yes it is: guilty as charged!*” He was not – although he might have been – accusing his critic of a lack of historical imagination by overlooking post-modernist debates about the value of “authenticity”. Instead, he was taking the opportunity to explain, at length, how, in his view, the world had changed substantially since Cocks wrote (in 1997–8) and even more since *The Break-up of Britain* appeared thirty years before. “The course of events since 1989 has changed everything”. Before then, in a time when “two competing forms of political universalism contested the earth”, nationalism was “essentially a retrospect”. Now, and above all since 11 September, 2001, with its transformation of American policy, the illusion that history (and nationalisms) had ended in a new free-market universalism had broken down. Nairn wrote that “Economic mesmerism at last gave way to politics; and the politics were still those of nationality, albeit on a vastly extended stage.” In other words, the national interests of the United States had taken over from the global authority or hegemony which the USA had exercised over much of the planet during the Cold War. Political nationalism was moving out of the periphery – he cited examples from Bosnia to East Timor – into the centre – “the powerhouse of the new globalising order”.

We were looking at a “nationalist” great-power takeover bid, made possible by globalisation, but also at the return of local projects of national resistance to the take-over – another of globalism’s outcomes. The bid is imperial, but not in the old way of annexing, settling and forcing “the natives” into replicas of “Us”. Instead, “the distilled *Geist* of empire is now neo-liberal economics



plus ‘democracy’, in a mode entailing that the suborned follow ‘best practice’ – representative election guaranteeing participation in the existing order ...” That “incorporative democracy” effect is a process which he had long before described as “self-colonisation” – and for which he had offered Scotland as a telling example. In his 2008 “Edinburgh Lecture”, Nairn pointed out that “the Scots were never colonised ... they ‘did it to themselves’ via ‘self-colonisation’, the subordinate affirmation of a kind of flightless or contained nationality ...”

Tom Nairn’s expectations of a socialist transformation have grown more distant and ironic since 1989, and perhaps some time before that. His criticisms of classical Marxism and the “Labourist” Left on the matter of nationalism are formidable and have irrevocably changed serious socialist reflection. But his mode of organising and impelling argument, like the sometimes ferocious slash of his polemic, retain a Marxist rhythm.

Is that enough to maintain Nairn’s categorisation as a Marxist intellectual? That question was first raised long ago, in the most formidable and impressive of all criticisms of Nairn’s position – Eric Hobsbawm’s review of *The Break-Up of Britain* in *New Left Review* (NLR 1.105, 1977).

Hobsbawm’s writings and teaching consistently show an intense, enduring distaste for nationalism. He has been said to have had “a tin ear for nationalism”, but that is to underrate a great historian: he was well aware of its enormous force and mobilising power, and gave many accounts of its significance in political and social change. To put it another way, Hobsbawm was not deaf to nationalism but he detested its flavour. This emotion could lead him into unfairness (in this review he dismisses “what passes for nationalist theory”) and into instant suspicion of academic attempts to justify the proliferation of small polities (“Balkanisation”). He is also rather sceptical of the concept of “uneven development”, which he clearly considers over-used by the *New Left Review* intellectuals to explain political change.

But his review sets out to be scrupulously fair, for instance praising Nairn for his “lengthy, impassioned and often brilliant enquiry into the ‘crisis of England’”, and for “breaking genuinely new Marxist ground” in his discussion of how cultural and political conditions were linked to British capitalism’s failure to adapt in the late 20th century. Hobsbawm doesn’t use the word “globalisation”, but his account of how medium-to-large states and economies are falling apart under the impact of multinational capitalism is essentially the same as Tom Nairn’s.

What Hobsbawm was challenging here was Nairn’s suggestion that nationalism and separatism can be understood as being “in some way the gravedigger of capitalism”. He wrote: “There is no reason to suppose *a priori* that Scots

or Welsh revolutionary Marxists have a good chance of transforming the SNP or Plaid Cymru into some kind of Vietcong ... There is no way of turning the formation of national communities (i.e. the multiplication of nation-states as such) into a historic engine for generating socialism.” Hobsbawm goes on to assert “the basic fact that Marxists are not nationalists.” It’s a matter of priorities, even of loyalties. “The crucial question must be whether the break-up of Britain or other large nation-states will help socialism.” And he gives a harsh example of such priorities. “The test of a Jewish Marxist, even one who wishes to preserve what is now an established Jewish people in Israel, is that he or she should not be a Zionist. This also applies to Scots.”

The austerity of this Marxist loyalty test is no longer much more than historic. Nairn, to whom “this also applies,” can be seen as both a socialist and – in the Scottish context – something of a “Zionist”. His writing certainly does not promise that Welsh independence would lead inevitably to a socialist Wales. What he is saying is that the overthrow of anachronistic structures of power opens the way to previously inaccessible choices – one of which must always be the politics of public interest and social justice. But that overthrow must happen, whatever the risks. Lenin’s mockery of socialists who “try to paint nationalism red” does not apply to him.

He is a revolutionary still, and his political legacy to Scotland is the need for an uprooting, unsparing radicalism. It’s true that he was always wary of Communist or other party discipline. Nairn never became a sectarian, and his early background in aesthetics, art and literature not only left him with the marvellously witty and sparkling prose of his best writing but also helped to immunise him against dogmatism and false optimism. As Hobsbawm himself conceded in that *NLR* essay long ago, “his strength has always been to see the auto-mystifications of those who talk of ‘demystification’, the intellectual cotton wool behind political phrases masquerading as political analysis, the refusal to recognise realities because they are disagreeable.”

It’s only now that Nairn’s achievement, scattered through countless publications and institutions across the globe, is beginning to come together to be appreciable as a whole. The entire approach of academics and many politicians to the emergence of “new” nation-states, once (outwith the decolonising context) perceived as an essentially reactionary process, has been modified and often reversed by his work over the last half-century. And his gift for vivid expression has helped to construct a whole vocabulary with which to discuss new concepts. When he and Hamish Henderson walked on Edinburgh’s Meadows long ago, discussing the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, they spoke in Italian because it seemed the only possible language in which those ideas

could be expressed. Today, the language and discourse which Tom and Hamish constructed in their later writing and teaching has made that thinking at once precious and widespread.

So it came about that Tom Nairn injected into Scottish nationalism, previously in a mental corral of flags and votes, the intoxicating notion of cultural hegemony. The liberation of Scotland from its self-colonisation lay as much through conquering the commanding heights of “civil society” – Kirk, theatre, media – as through by-elections or occupation strikes. The historic fact that Scotland’s independence movement has become so strong and plausible, combining – in its extra-parliamentary leadership – both political radicalism and cultural confidence, owes much of its inspiration to the working lifetime of Tom Nairn.

■ *Neal Ascherson was born in Edinburgh but was a child in Greenock during much of World War II. As a journalist, he has worked mainly for the Observer (foreign correspondent) and the Scotsman. His books include Black Sea (1995) and Stone Voices: The Search for Scotland (2002). His novel The Death of the Fronsac was published in 2017.*

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