

Review

Unstated: Scottish Writers on Independence, (2012) Edited by Scot Hames, published by Word Power Books, pp. 204 £12.99

This book contains 27 essays by writers and activists based in Scotland with varying attitudes towards the question of independence. In his introduction, Stirling University's Scott Hames suggests that, since Scotland has already achieved a form of cultural autonomy led by its novelists, poets and dramatists, the question of independence for Scotland should be discussed in an open space that allows more radical and nuanced thinking to take place. What connects all of the essays is their authors' ability to imagine aims and outcomes for the future of British democracy that are not readily available elsewhere. Hames suggests that the book should 'set the choices before us within parameters chosen by writers themselves', as opposed to the deterministic narratives of organised politics. I think that this has been achieved.

When this book was first published in December 2012 only one of the essays, Alasdair Gray's 'Settlers and colonists', was discussed in the media, as critics accused him of promoting racism. It is a provocative essay, but the assertion that Gray is anti-English suggests his critics had not bothered to read it carefully. However, their interpretation does detract from what is generally thoughtful and challenging writing. All 27 contributions have something useful to say about what constitutes a state and how this has an impact on the way they think, write and feel. This offers an insight into the thinking of anti-Westminster political movements in Britain that goes beyond the nationalist portrayals that currently dominate the media.

Nevertheless, pessimism about the future, inside or outside the UK, runs through much of the collection. For example, Jo Clifford states that 'the truth is obvious, we are part of a disunited kingdom whose other title really should be Insignificant Britain. Mediocre Britain' whilst Denise Mina likens Scotland to an unhappy wife afraid to leave her bullying husband and so she is trapped in a 'union of unequals.' Continuing these dependency metaphors, both James Kelman and Janice Galloway picture Scotland as a confused adolescent who needs to break free of the constraints

of the UK in order to grow up and lose what Galloway describes as ‘our sense that somehow we deserve not only less than we hope for, but a smack for getting big ideas in the first place.’

Most of the essayists featured are firmly convinced of the benefits of an independent Scotland but Ken MacLeod concludes that he would be against the United Kingdom going the same way as the Soviet Union or the former Yugoslavia in reverting to a collection of independent states. Other writers are more ambiguous, with Jenni Calder expressing some wariness that independence will provide too easy a way of absolving Scotland of its imperial past, and Douglas Dunn reminding us that Scotland will always have to ‘live’ with English. He concedes that ‘I haven’t lost it, nor could it lose me’ and wonders ‘What’s odd or treacherous other than the name?’

Other writers urge Scotland to take more risks and avoid the easy middle way. James Robertson, for example, argues ‘I understand about not frightening the horses - but actually I think it would be good to see a few wide-eyed sidelong glances and hear a nervous clattering of hooves.’ In a similar vein, Suhayl Saadi argues for a profound and radical change and wishes to ‘see a brain, not a crown, above the Saltire’ whilst Leigh French and Gordon Asher argue for ‘working towards a post-capitalist society’ and creating other, better worlds.

Overall then, this book makes an important contribution to the independence debate by challenging the old thought patterns and institutions that have dominated in Scotland in order to explore questions that have been shirked by the narrative of the Yes/No campaigns.

Lyn Tett

Professor Emeritus: Education, Community and Society

University of Edinburgh