Rob Roy’s Contribution to Contemporary Understandings of British National Identity

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Texts serve as a crucial element in the shaping of the public mind. That nationhood and nationality are social constructs is clearly demonstrated by the ambiguity and abstractness of British nationality/nationalities. Rob Roy, written in 1817 by iconic Scottish author Sir Walter Scott, marks the beginning of how our understanding of British national identity has developed. The aim of this paper is to address British nationality in general and not “Scottish”, “English” or “Welsh” national identity specifically.

National identity is generally defined through language, customs, traditions and origins (Mischevic, np). According to Benedict Anderson, author of Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, “nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (xii). Anderson also argues that nationalism is a cultural artefact that we need to look at historically to understand why it has come to command such strong emotional legitimacy – thus suggesting that nationality has been constructed through a nation-state’s historical past. Supporting the claim that nationality is a social construct, Gellner argues that “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.” (quoted in Anderson xiii).

Moreover, the fact that nationality seems to be constructed through customs and traditions that are represented from various historical pasts is important, because Rob Roy is seen as a historical novel which also falls into the category of Romantic and nationalistic novel. Some general aspects of a historical novel are that “[...] action takes place during a specific historical period well before the time of writing [...], and in which some attempt is made to depict accurately the customs and mentality of the period” (Baldick 114). In other words, although mainly fictitious, a historical novel depicts some truthful elements of a specific time and place. While texts also serve as a foundation of the shaping of our understanding of the world, it is obvious that Rob Roy has had a great impact in how we perceive British nationality. Ironically, historical accounts may in fact not be much more accurate than historical literary works. The American novelist Jane Smiley recently wrote in an article published on The Guardian’s web page:

[…] If there is one thing that I do know about history, it is that it must be based on the author’s theory of what happened. He or she may change the theory as the research is completed, but without a theory, and if the research doesn’t fit into the theory, then the text has no logic, and therefore makes no sense. If it makes no sense, then readers will not read it. A history book is, therefore, a construct. (Smiley)

The disparity between the various British national identities is famously known, and national identities are based on historical impressions which are often somewhat inaccurate. Scott’s Rob Roy is generally acknowledged as a historical novel which both set the tone for the genre and contributed to the development of contemporary perceptions of British national identity. (Baldick 114). One aspect of British identity which is articulated in the novel, is the internal conflict between English and Scottish culture, within the framework of general British identity.

There are many examples in Rob Roy that show how the Scots were looked down upon by the British. This cultural condescension is demonstrated in the actions and attitude of upper-class British narrator Frank Osbaldistone. One of the most vivid passages is when young Frank describes a Scotchman using terms such as “savage” – a half human with wide shoulders and long arms (Scott 273), i.e. he portrays the Scots animalistically. This makes it clear that, from the narrator’s point of view the Scottishman and the English are so different that they do not even belong to the same category of beings. Another significant part is when Frank travels to Scotland with the Scottish gardener Andrew and Frank refuses to trust the gardener’s knowledge of his own land. Frank gets so angry at Andrew for riding so fast and not “obey[ing] or reply[ing]” to him that he desires to attempt to knock him off his horse (Scott 229-230). However, Frank realizes that he depends on Andrew and his knowledge of the land so even when he manages to catch up with Andrew, he decides not to knock him off.

Internal difference in British identity in Rob Roy is further demonstrated by the fact that the story is constructed in a series of binary opposites. Frank’s Anglo-Scottish relative Sir Hildebrand works with agriculture and Frank’s London-based father is a modern businessman whose work feeds into capitalism. The narrator and protagonist, Frank, is a dreamer, whereas his rival, Rashleigh, is a highly rational and smart, modern businessman. Perhaps the most significant and evident binary opposite throughout the story is, of course, the English and the Scottish. All these opposites define one another as they contrast through polarities.

Interestingly, there are various sources stating that Walter Scott was a Unionist, a Tory and a realist. An article published on The Telegraph quotes Scott’s great-great-great-grandson, Matthew Maxwell Scott, stating that “nothing in the great man’s words or deeds” [suggests] he was “anything other than a loyal unionist” (Furness). Because Scottish Unionists based their politics in the belief that Scotland should remain within the British Empire, this suggests that Scott believed
that without Britain, there could be no defined Scottish identity, and that the various internal colonies of Great Britain are all crucial to the national identity of Britain as a whole. The British Empire did, at its peak, occupy one quarter of the earth’s landmass and was scattered around the entire globe. As mentioned above, national identity is shaped through shared customs, traditions and historical pasts. From this point of view then, the previous British colonies are fragments of the British national identity too, but we do not generally define them as British. Likewise, the Scottish and the English are both two separate British identities, with a shared historical past. Arguably, the way the English view the Scots has greatly influenced the way the Scots view themselves, following the psychological process of self-fulfilling prophecy. Thus, the two identities are inseparable, and together make up the British national identity as a whole – neither one of them could exist without the other. The Scottish/Canadian journalist Ivison writes:

Scott’s achievement was that he helped create for Scotland a distinctive identity — yes, based on spurious associations with tartan, but one comfortably Scottish within the union and different from the English,” said Mr. Massie (Ivison).

Ivison also argues that “Scott put an end to the North Briton identity and gave birth to a distinct Scottish cultural, if not political, nationalism”. This supports the claim that Rob Roy has had a great influence on our contemporary idea of British national identity.

At some points throughout the novel, the young Englishman is surprised that the Highlanders speak understandable English (Scott 322-323). At the end of the novel, Frank narrates that he never saw “the bold highlander again who had such an influence on the early events of my life” (Scott 452). Ideally, that he never saw “the highlander” again, might mean that he never viewed the Scottish in the same way again, i.e. that his deeply rooted ideological concept of Scottish difference had been altered through his personal experience. Unfortunately, in the given context it is stated, it is more likely that he never saw this particular Scot again.

However, it is implied that Frank does return to visit Scotland frequently. It does therefore seem that his perception of Scotland – and additionally, the Scottish, has changed, after he came in contact with some personally. Edward Said supports this idea as he argues that we only trust the representation of a group of people because we have not experienced them in reality. Lacking this personal experience, the only knowledge we have access to is the portrait of the other in media and arts. We have preconceived notions of certain groups, what “they believe and how they act without ever having met someone” (Jhally) from that specific region, this in turn “distorts the actual reality” (Jhally). Said generally refers to the Oriental cultures when developing his post-colonial theory, but it is applicable to the case of Scotland as part of Britain. Said argues that this process is a means to understand the unfamiliar and the strange (Jhally). It can thus be argued that Scott constructed Scotland in the novel of Rob Roy in a highly romanticized way to attract visitors to his nation, so they could experience it with their own eyes, and thus they would become familiar with Scotland and its people, and as a result change the preconceived idea of the highlanders as strange, indulgent savages, with long arms and wide shoulders.

The disparity between the English and the Scots is evident in Rob Roy, and this disparity between the peoples is as obvious today, but the great distinction between the various kinds of Britons may in fact be what signifies British culture as whole. Interestingly, few people define themselves as being British. Instead the British define themselves as “Scottish”, “English” or “Welsh”. This was supported by the results of a study published in an article on BBC in September 2013 (Easton). As Rob Roy was among the first widely read historical novels, it likely greatly contributed to this specific perspective. The fact that Rob Roy so evidently looks at the obvious disparity between the Scottish and the English, and also as a result portrays how we have come to view the general British national identity, makes it a foundational historical novel with contemporary social import.
Works Cited


