

Dying for Empire, Blair, or Scotland?

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Some deaths – like [Yasser Arafat's](#) [1] – gain an obvious, global significance from the sheer magnitude of the lives they end. Some attain importance from the way they are memorialised: how they are “caught”, say, by a great poet or painter. Some, ending otherwise unremarkable lives, achieve retrospective, symbolic weight, as with the first person to be killed by a great war or a new disease.

Sometimes, though, one can see even at the time how a moment of death – even the death of someone previously unknown to the world, even a violent death in a time and place where hundreds die thus – is also a moment of transformation, not only symbolising but crystallising a seismic shift in temper and perception. So it may be with the dying in Iraq on 4 November [2004](#) [2] of Stuart Gray (aged 31), Paul Lowe (19) and Scott McArdle (22).

From Belfast to Sicily

On 9 March 1971, the senseless killings of three young Scottish soldiers sparked a flame of anger that has burned ever since among the pro-British, Protestant (and “Loyalist”) community in Northern Ireland. John McCaig (17), his brother Joseph (18), and Dougal McCaughey (23), all of the Royal Highland Fusiliers, were on that day murdered by the Irish Republican Army (IRA [3]) – were lured to their deaths by people pretending to be friends, and shot by a roadside while still clutching their beer glasses.

They were not the first victims of the modern Irish “[troubles](#) [4]”; the most authoritative [analysis](#) [5] of the conflict lists sixty-five killings before theirs. They were not the first British soldiers to die, nor the first to be killed by the IRA. But in a way that defies logical analysis, those three murders marked – and were almost immediately seen to mark – a point of no return.

Time after time, men who went on to become Protestant paramilitary activists – sometimes vile sectarian killers – have recalled that as their moment of conversion to violence. British army units thereafter began to act in a more ruthless, vengeful spirit towards Ulster Catholics – not least Scottish units, some of which soon gained a fearsome reputation for near-random brutality among Republicans. And the IRA itself, previously posing (or maybe, genuinely seeing itself) as the defender of Catholic communities, seemed “liberated” by the murder of the three Scots to pursue ever bolder and more indiscriminate acts of carnage.

Stuart Gray, Paul Lowe and Scott McArdle of the [Black Watch](#) [6], similarly, are not the first British soldiers to die in Iraq. There have (as of 11 November) been seventy-four British fatalities there since March 2003. They are not the first victims of suicide bombers. They are not the first Scots to die. They were not the Black Watch's first casualties. They have not been, and will not be, the last: Pita Tukutuwaqa, a 27-year old Fijian serving with the regiment, has already joined them on its roll of honour.

Gray, Lowe and McArdle were not even the only victims of the incident in which they died. Their Iraqi interpreter was also killed. No report or official statement seems to give his name. Perhaps – one hopes – this is to protect his family: but one fears his anonymity in the media reflects instead an all too familiar hierarchy of suffering.

Why, then, are the deaths of three decent but unremarkable young men from Fife likely to be of such momentousness? Why do I – like millions of others with no particular connection to their regiment, to their home area of Fife, or even to Scotland – feel it so personally? Why, the next day, did I find myself in utterly unexpected tears listening to [Dick Gaughan](#) [7]’s recording of a song by [Hamish Henderson](#) [8] from the 1940s, *The 51st Highland Division’s Farewell to Sicily*?

Scots’ soldiery, political mastery

A little bit of the answer lies in the very ordinariness of those three men. They were – from their families’ and friends’ comments – clearly no fools, of either the thuggish or the vainglorious sorts. They knew and had reflected on both the risks, and the troubling political implications, of the work in which they engaged. They so obviously did not fit the stereotype – always anyway unfair – of the British Army’s rank and file as drawn from a brutish, otherwise unemployable underclass.

Equally, they didn’t fit the image popular among some Scottish nationalists, of Scots soldiers as a kind of mercenary, mindlessly fighting and dying in England’s wars. It was probably the historian John Prebble who first popularised the idea of Scottish regiments in British uniform after the Union being “colonial auxiliaries”, easily disposable cannon fodder for the wars of empire. More recently, other Scots writers like [Murray Pittock](#) [9] have repeated and renewed the stereotype.

Things are more complicated than that – and in those complexities, perhaps, lie the deeper reasons for both the sorrow, and the significance, of Gray’s, Lowe’s and McArdle’s deaths. In their origins, Scottish regiments like the Black Watch are maybe the least democratic of all the United Kingdom’s fighting forces. Highland units, especially, began as semi-feudal levies effectively forced into enlistment by their clan chiefs and by the dispossession of the [Highland Clearances](#) [10]. But today Scottish troops come from and cannot help but in some measure reflect a more democratic civil society and culture than England’s.

Scots democratic radicalism has taken many forms, by no means always politically *nationalist* but invariably, distinctively *national*. It looks back – albeit always with the admixture of myth and sentiment which all national self-imaginings involve – to the Declaration of Arbroath in [1320](#) [11], to the Covenanters and Cameronians in the 17th century, to a myriad egalitarian and socialist movements of the 19th and 20th.

The political radicalism has always intertwined with a distinctive and powerful artistic tradition, which has singers and songwriters like Dick Gaughan and Hamish Henderson near its heart.

As writers like [Tom Nairn](#) [12] and [Neal Ascherson](#) [13] document, this Scots political and cultural ethos was dramatically renewed in the drive for self-government from the 1970s onward. Since the achievement of the Scottish parliament in [1999](#) [14] it seemed to become more quiescent again, amidst the near-inevitable bureaucratisation and partisan factionalism of the new devolved [settlement](#) [15].

The outpouring of anger at what has happened, is happening, and may yet happen to the Black Watch threatens, or promises, to renew it, and to give new form and force to an already immense reservoir of anti-war sentiment in Scotland. Scottish National Party ([SNP](#) [16]) leader

Alex Salmond's bitter contrast of the soldiers' idealism with the cynicism of the politicians who sent them to war was just one tip of a growing wave.

When Geoff Hoon, the UK minister of defence, denounced Salmond for "making political capital" out of the tragedy, the widespread response in Scotland – and beyond – will be: who, from George W Bush downwards and including Hoon himself, has not sought to do that? One intensely principled SNP activist – an ingrained sceptic about what he considers the SNP's more jingoistic stances on issues like fishing rights and Scottish regiments – told me he felt "proud" to hear his party leader thus assailed, since "I do know that they are attempts to deal with the problems of the human beings we represent, as well as the voters whose support we elicit."

Part of the irony, if not tragedy, of the situation is that New Labour's ranks, even its upper ranks, are stuffed with people who once shared and participated in that historic Scottish radical culture. Robin Cook, of course, did so; and those memories and emotions clearly have much to do with his anti-war stance and his resignation over it. But Gordon Brown [17], youthful editor of the *Red Paper on Scotland* and loving, exasperated biographer of that emblematically quixotic idealist Jimmie Maxton [18], was part of it too. So was Labour's minister of health John Reid, while education minister Kim Howells [19] was deeply imbedded in its equally passionate Welsh equivalent. Where have those feelings gone – and can Labour in Scotland survive their loss? More, does it *deserve* to survive it?

Callants and braggarts

Hamish Henderson was himself a soldier in 1939–45. His songs [20] came out of grim direct knowledge of that war which had to be fought, as well as deep disgust at later, colonial wars which did *not* have to be. *The 51st Highland Division's Farewell to Sicily* says nothing either of the horrors, nor the supposed glories. It's about tired soldiers packing their bags, saying goodbye to a place they'd been sent to fight, had endured, were glad to see the back of. Its refrain is simple:

"Puir bloody swaddies are weary"

Another of Henderson's songs, *Freedom Come All Ye*, is fiercer, and was indeed adopted as an anthem [21] by some nationalists. But as Ascherson notes in his great book Stone Voices [22], its words "declare that Scottish soldiers are not glorious, but have drenched the world with innocent blood for the sake of a racist Empire".

"Nae mair will oor bonnie callants [young men]
Mairch tae war when oor braggarts crouselly [joyously] craw,
Nor wee weans [children] frae pit-heid and clachan [farm]
Mourn the ships sailing doon the Broomielaw;
Broken families, in lands we've herriet [harried],
Will curse Scotland the Brave nae mair, nae mair..."

Scottish nationalism is not always radical, let alone necessarily sharing Henderson's (and Gaughan [23]'s) socialism. It includes a powerful strain of popular militarism. As many historians have pointed out and Henderson's *Freedom...* implies, the military efforts of British imperial expansion, like its commercial ones, always included a disproportionately large number of Scots.

Scottish migrants to Ulster played a crucial role in making the region the bloody battleground it has been. Those who moved on again to North America, usually called there "Scotch-Irish", were among its great pioneers and frontiersmen. But by the very same token they were among

the most fervent “Indian–killers”, major participants [24] in the genocide of Native American peoples. And their characteristically harsh Presbyterian faith was one of the main streams which fed into the United States’s moralistic majority Republican culture, today seemingly ascendant [24] as never before.

So there is no need to sentimentalise or glorify Scotland’s political culture, nor its military traditions. Yet now those feelings, even in their reactionary, uniform–loving parts, threaten (or, again, promise) to rebound with great force against the Iraq war, against Blairism [24], and especially New Labour’s fortunes in Scotland. As Tom Nairn has said, they cross social classes, they cross the historic Highland-Lowland divide, increasingly they cross party lines too. It may be not from the SNP, but from within the ranks of Scottish Labour itself, that Blair has most to fear. If it comes to be felt that we were lied to about the reasons for the Black Watch’s redeployment [25] into the *Sunni* triangle, as we were about the reasons for war, the reaction will be yet more intense.

After that earlier triple Scots military tragedy, in Northern Ireland in 1971, some very ugly emotions were unleashed on all sides. The task now is to see that the inevitable, just anger is put to more productive, humane use than it was then. Everyone says, as they did for decades in relation to Northern Ireland: “we can’t just pull out – that would result in an even worse bloodbath”. As in Northern Ireland, they’re right. “Troops Out” is a kneejerk slogan, not a policy nor an ethically defensible stance. But we have to ask, harder than ever: How many lives is the Bush–Blair venture worth? Scottish lives, British ones, coalition ones, Iraqi ones [26]?

A recent article in the *Lancet* estimated Iraqi civilian fatalities so far at 100,000 [27]. It is an avowedly speculative and much criticised figure – but not an utterly implausible one, not one which can be dismissed. If it is even vaguely close to the truth, and even on the most optimistic scenario of the war’s outcome (a reasonably democratic regime in Iraq, and a “domino effect” of democratisation across the middle east), can the war now be justified? I suspect not. Given that there was, and was known to be, no serious weapons of mass destruction threat [27], then the hoped–for democratisation (the US neocons [27]’ great dream) is the only remaining morally decent rationale for the war. How many casualties would that be worth, if achieved? Given the lack of certainty (to put it very mildly) that it *will* be achieved, how many lives could either wisely or decently be staked on the gamble for it? Certainly not 100,000 – and maybe not even those of three young men from Fife.

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http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-iraqwarafter/article_2223.jsp

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