

Reflections on Representing Scotland: An Interview with Sandra MacIver, Executive Producer of BBC Scotland's *River City*.

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In her book, *Imagine a City: Glasgow in Fiction* (1998), Moira Burgess charts the changes in the Scottish novel in the past fifty years, concluding 'the Scottish novel has changed since the war; it has become less friendly to the people, less popular, less Scottish in the old sense, and less commercial' (138). A similar comment may be made concerning the changes in Scottish drama broadcast on television in recent times. Testimony to this is the fact that Scottish Television's popular long running rural soap *Take the High Road* (latterly renamed '*High Road*') has been axed and replaced with the BBC's urban soap *River City*. The potential of television to represent the newly devolved nation, raises timely questions concerning what constitutes Scottish culture and what should be shown. The replacement of *High Road* with the new soap then is indicative of a wider concern with depicting the contemporary Scottish nation. Representing Scotland is a contested and contentious issue in terms of the country's historically peripheral position within Britain and England's hegemonic cultural influence. As a result of this situation, representations of Scotland, particularly in television and film, have taken the form of self-parodic images of the nation, depicting a mythical Scotland through the narrow tropes of the cultural nationalist discourses of Tartanry, Kailyard and Clydesideism. David Pattie defines the historic discourses of Tartanry and Kailyard as respectively, 'the conversion of the unwanted history of the Highlands into a nationally stultifying kitsch' and 'the glutinous sentimentalisation of Scottish rural life' both of which have 'warped the Scottish national identity' and 'served to trap the nation's culture in a cycle of pre-industrial infancy'.¹ Writing in 1999 before the opening of the Scottish parliament, Douglas Bicket insists that

¹ David Pattie 'The Decentring of Docherty: The Scotsman in Contemporary Drama' *International Journal of Scottish Theatre*. Vol.1 Issue 2 Dec 2000
http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/ijost/Volume1_no2/D_Pattie.htm.

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Scottish viewers are more likely to identify themselves with these recognisable, if somewhat regressive and problematic, traditional representations, even though: ‘they have little to do with the reality of everyday life in Scotland.’² However, the identification of Scotland with ruralism and sentimentalisation seems to be eroding as representations in cultural productions depict more progressive, ‘realistic’ contemporary images. This can perhaps be attributed to a renewed sense of cultural confidence and an altering sense of national identity, both of which have been fostered since devolution.

River City’s predecessor, *Take the High Road*, tended to rely on outdated, couthy, Kailyard images, depicting a parochial and, some might say, ‘twee’ version of life in Glendarroch, an idyllic, rural village, with Loch Lomond providing a picturesque back drop to the action, which almost certainly accounted for much of its success, particularly outside of Scotland. But its failure to depict a ‘realistic’ version of contemporary Scottish life ultimately resulted in it being taken off the air. Hugh O’Donnell highlights the unrealistic presentation of Scotland and its inhabitants in *High Road*:

Set on the picturesque banks of Loch Lomond, *High Road*’s most striking feature is that it is spoken almost entirely in Standard English (albeit with Scottish accents), while Standard English is a form of speech routinely ignored by the overwhelming majority of the Scottish population as far as everyday communication is concerned. But *High Road* speaks the language of its audience. With its scenic setting and pre-dominantly middle-aged cast it provides a rural idyll for middle-aged, well-educated Scots living in the residential areas of the central belt. It has never really gripped the popular imagination. (O’Donnell, 94)

The popular imagination cannot identify with a portrayal of Scotland that is completely unrepresentative of its language, geography and class; most of Scotland’s population live in or near major urban areas in the central belt, and speak in working class or lower middle-class idioms.

² Douglas Bicket ‘Fictional Scotland: A “Realm of the Imagination” in Film Drama and Literature’. *Journal of Communication Inquiry* Vol. 23 Issue 1 January 1999, p.3-19

For Ken McQuarrie, Head of programming for BBC Scotland, it is vital that the new soap portrays Scotland more accurately: 'we'd felt for a long time, as had our audiences, that there was a need to reflect contemporary Scotland through a long-running drama'.³ Reflecting the contemporary is seemingly coterminous with depicting urban life; the show has been described as an 'urban antidote to *High Road*'⁴ due to its setting in Glasgow, one of Scotland's major cities. Although it may portray a seemingly more 'realistic' version of Scottish urban life, *River City* could, however, be accused of constituting an equally stereotypical portrayal of Scotland. Though it is not concerned with Tartanry and Kailyard, it can be accused of espousing another reductive Scottish discourse, that of Clydesideism. Clydesideism's focus on the urban working-class experience was initially viewed as a more 'realistic', contemporary way of representing Scotland.⁵ It proved however to be yet another 'pernicious discourse' (Bicket, 6), depicting Scottish life through the specifically Glaswegian experience of working classes, heavy industry and hard living. The proliferation of these themes saturated Scottish cultural output during the seventies and eighties, and continued well into the nineties.

It is for these reasons that during the ill-fated nascent stages of the serial, controversy surrounded the choice of setting; critics charged *River City* with being parochial, contributing to the 'Glasgow dominance' in television and film productions, begging the question: does Scotland really need another depiction of the mean streets of Glasgow with its hard men and downtrodden females, reminiscent of the Clydeside tradition?

In its attempt to depict the 'Scottish experience' more realistically by setting the serial in urban Glasgow, *River City* seems to have adopted some of the most reductive aspects of Clydesideism. The use of the Glaswegian dialect by a number of characters in the show could be perceived as being stereotypical in that the language is associated with 'the desperately depressing tradition' of Clydesideism, connoting its reductive tropes such as poverty and the

³ Rory Ford 'Tartan River City' in *Edinburgh Evening News* (21/09/02) <http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=917&id=1049802002>. Accessed 26/10/2005

⁴ Garravelli, D. 'Going West for Soap and Glory' in *Scotland on Sunday* (6/10/02). <http://web.lexis-nexis.com/professional/document>. Accessed 10/11/2005

⁵ See McArthur, C 'Scotland and Cinema: The Iniquity of the Fathers' . Ed McArthur, C. *Scotch Reels: Scotland in Cinema and Television*. London: BFI, 1982 p40-69 for an early discussion of these issues in cinema.

working class experience as well as a ‘lack of intelligence and sophistication [...] criminality and general barbarity’ (Matheson 2002). However, by employing this language, the show arguably depicts a realistic portrayal of life in Glasgow as David Matheson points out ‘it is the language of a large mass of people who are in Scotland and who are most definitely not speaking ‘standard English’ (Matheson, 106). Executive producer of the show Sandra MacIver defends the use of this language in *River City*:

Dialogue is hugely important. I think the culture in Scotland, probably more particularly in Glasgow, results in a much more ‘robust’, harder dialogue. You’ll notice in *River City* that the dialogue used is unlike the dialogue you might hear in *Coronation Street* and *Eastenders*. We really push the language quite a lot. Now that is not in any way to be shocking, it is to be realistic and true to what we hear out there on the streets. We will use the word ‘arse’. You would never hear this on shows like *Coronation Street* and *Eastenders*, but we absolutely work within strict editorial guidelines, and that’s a given. At the same time however, I think, historically, Scottish viewers have been exposed to coarser dialogue. *Rab C Nesbitt* would be an example, not that we are that, but that in its time was quite cutting edge, it was quite shocking, probably more so to the national audience that it got. However, to the Scottish audience it wasn’t shocking, because that’s actually how people speak. It’s not obviously how everyone speaks, but it’s certainly how a section of the community speak.⁶

In this, MacIver attributes some of the growing success with the regional audience directly to the employment of such a distinctive and recognisable Scottish dialect. Randall Stevenson discusses the ‘powerful hold exercised over spectators by a language familiar to them’ in Scottish theatrical performance; he claims that ‘the

⁶ All quotes from Sandra MacIver are from an interview conducted by Aimee McNair in the BBC’s *River City* studios, Dumbarton on 26 April 2007 unless otherwise stated.

distinctive accents of the city – its expressions rubbed hard by working life – provide particular points of contact for urban audiences, adding to the powers and immediacies of Scottish theatrical language and performance’ (Stevenson, 1996). The points of identification for audiences whether of theatre or television, are those representations familiar to them in a quotidian sense. The language employed by characters provides a vital way for audiences to identify themselves with on-screen depictions, and the more realistic they are, the better. Thus, by employing the speech patterns of Clydeside industrial Glasgow, *River City*, actually represents a large number of the city’s inhabitants by dealing with contemporary issues in a recognizable language.

However, contemporary Glasgow is a city no longer synonymous with heavy Industry. De-industrialisation and the influence of multinational companies have led to a huge increase in the number of jobs in the tertiary sector of industry. The malleability of the shifting, transnational service industry results in less fixed patterns of working and therefore a larger mix of people co-exist within the city from different areas. Consequently, a large number of differing dialects and languages will be present in the increasingly cosmopolitan city. For MacIver, accurately representing the diversity of Glasgow, and indeed, Scotland is vital:

For me now, it is very important that the show represents the whole of Scotland. You’ve got the character Scott, who is from the Western Isles of Scotland; you’ve got Aberdeen represented by Roisin and her sisters. We also have a lot of East coast characters, which is very important, because I think we are all aware of the east/west coast divide. I mean it’s not a big issue, but I think there wasn’t an east coast representation on the show when it began. Now an awful lot of our characters are from the East coast, like Raymond, Jimmy, McCabe, quite a lot of our peripheral characters are East coast voices as well. It’s really important that this diversity is represented, and I know it’s very much appreciated as well, because it’s reflected in our audience research. We have a big, big following now in Edinburgh as well. Although it’s set in Glasgow, that doesn’t mean that the show should only represent Glasgow, we’ve got London

voices in there, Polish voices even, and that's the way it should be.

The transitory nature of employment patterns in contemporary Glasgow alters a monolithic definition of the Clydeside discourse. The outcome of this is a shift in discursive position, from representing working class heroic masculinity to depicting a 'crisis of masculinity' (Whyte, 1998) as heavy industry gives way to new forms of employment. John Caughie defines the latter notion of Clydesideism as 'the modernised myth of male industrial labour [...] which becomes more desperate as 'real' productive industrial labour (the culturally inscribed 'masculine domain') disappears into consumption (the 'feminine domain')'(Caughie, 1990). The Glasgow hard man is the result of this cultural transition, as Caughie explains 'when masculinity can no longer define itself in hard work it increasingly identifies itself with the 'hard man' for whom anguish, cynicism and violence are the only ways to recover the lost dignity of labour' (Caughie, 16). The set of *River City* cultivates an ideal breeding ground for the hard man, its regenerated urban landscape - complete with nouveau cafés, pubs and clubs – is overlooked by a decaying dockyard, a constant reminder of the loss of heavy industry. And there have been plenty of hard men to intimidate the residents of Sheildinch in the past five years, including most recently Lenny (who murdered local cop DCI Eddie Hunter); notorious drugs baron McCabe, violent bully JP, ex-con and wife beater Paddy and former dodgy dealer Raymond Henderson. On the surface, it seems the show has fallen into the trap of representing Scottishness in easily recognisable stereotypes; however, many of these characters exhibit alternative possibilities. *River City's* most notorious hard man and gangland figure, McCabe, had his gangster image subverted when his daughter Donna, who has special needs, turns up (in typical soap style) completely unexpectedly. MacIver explains how this storyline was conceived:

McCabe had been established as the 'gangster' of the show. He's a fantastic character for us. But up to the point when his daughter was brought in, he was very much the 'hard man', the gangster. There was no softening round the edges, you only saw him in the context of 'gangster land' mode and work. I was very

keen to bring Paula Sage, the actress who played his daughter, into the show, and that's often how we work on *River City*. We identify an actor/actress that we want to bring in and we draw characters around them. We thought she would be a great counterbalance to McCabe.

McCabe's unsuccessful attempt to build a relationship with his daughter is rescued by Scarlett, the rather voluble matriarch of the Adams family. A typical example of the virile, vitriolic urban hard man, McCabe has not developed the necessary feminine characteristics of patience, understanding and caring for charges, and is therefore reliant upon Scarlett to take over care of his daughter. Unsuccessful in his personal relationships, his role as hard man is ultimately questioned; he is incapable of buying his daughter's affection or bullying her into giving it. Only with a woman's help is McCabe able to build a relationship with Donna. MacIver agrees that this character transcends expectations of the Scottish hard man stereotype:

It was a great story for us to tell. People now have a real degree of sympathy for McCabe, you can still loathe him for how he carries out his day to day business, he would knife someone as soon as look at them, but on the other hand, he has this other aspect to his life. He struggled a lot with the fact that his daughter, who had been raised by his ex-wife, came into his life on the day his ex died. It has provided a great storyline for us, which is on-going.

Here, *River City* experiments with the traditional tropes of Clydesideism, tentatively moving towards more complex characterisation, depicting a more convincing version of the processes of change and adaptation necessary for life in contemporary Scotland.

For Stephen Greenhorn, creator of the new soap, contemporary Scotland is a place of transition. He maintains that "the co-existence of the old and new is what the soap is all about"⁷; where new forms of working in the contemporary service industries are replacing

⁷ Rory Ford 'Tartan River City' in *Edinburgh Evening News* Sat 21 September 2002 <http://news.scotsman.com/topics.cfm?tid=917&id=1049802002> Accessed 26/10/2005

traditional heavy industries like shipbuilding and the working-class community associated with it. The ramifications of these changes for Scottish culture and society, particularly in terms of patterns of working, gender relations and concepts of identity thinking, are monumental. The transition thus merits exploration and the wide-reaching public form of the televised soap opera provides an ideally suitable forum in which to do so.

The generic conventions of the soap opera permit an exploration of the changing nature of representations of the nation. Such examples, as above, point to an interesting ‘structural interweaving of narrative and ideological concerns’ (Billingham, 68); the soap’s ‘serial form, which resists narrative closure [and] multiple characters and plots’ (Fiske, 179) opens up an ideal cultural space in which to debate traditional and contemporary notions, not only of national, but also of gender and sexual identities.

This is a welcome possibility as Scottish identity has historically been represented – in the cultural nationalist discourses of Tartanry, Kailyard and Clydesideism – as inherently masculine.⁸ Consequently, Scotland’s stories have often been restricted to those depicting the white, heterosexual, working class male. Carla Sassi reinforces this point in her discussion of Christopher Whyte’s study on gender in Scottish texts. She concludes that Scottish cultural nationalism has founded ‘its definition on a canon of prevalently male authors and of literary texts centred on iconic male figures, from MacDiarmid’s drunk man, to Gunn’s overpowering male protagonists and McIlvanney’s ideal of ‘heroic masculinity’” (Sassi, 133).

River City is capable of representing Scotland in more progressive terms through its medium - the ‘feminine form’ of the soap opera - with its ‘emphasis on dialogue, problem solving and intimate conversation; male characters who are “sensitive men” [and] female characters who are often professional and otherwise powerful in the world outside the home’ (Fiske, 180). *River City* utilises these generic conventions in order to represent alternative Scottish identities, anterior to those male-centred narratives of

⁸ See Carole Jones ‘White Men on Their Backs - From Objection to Abjection: The Representation of the White Male as Victim in William McIlvanney’s *Docherty* and Irvine Welsh’s *Marabou Stork Nightmares*’ in *The International Journal of Scottish Literature*, Issue 1 Autumn 2006, <http://www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk/issue1/jones.htm> for a discussion of these themes in contemporary Scottish literature.

traditional discourses by portraying strong, confident women, particularly women at work. In Sheildinch, practically every establishment is owned and/or run by modern, professional women: Roisin owns and manages the Deli and the pub 'The Tall Ship'; Charlie runs her own successful cleaning business; Heather owns and manages the bar 'Versus' and Gina owns the 'Oyster Café'. However, *River City* resists becoming a 'female-centred narrative', which would merely replace one exclusionary discourse with another. Instead, depictions of the traditional Scottish hard man co-exist (rather idealistically) alongside strong working women, as well as homosexual characters and angst-ridden teenagers.

The soap's portrayal of gender and sexual roles is particularly inclusive in terms of the depiction of homosexuality. Usually soaps only have 'single issue characters' (Geraghty, 131-166) to explore topical social issues like sexuality. Resisting such tokenism, the serial follows the very different lives of the characters Scott, Stevie, Eddie, Jake and Fi who are all homosexual, and engage in complex relationships with other characters, avoiding becoming 'issues' in themselves. But just how reflective are they of the current state of Scottish society? It was in the not so distant past that the Scottish Labour government's repeal of Section 28 (on excluding homosexuality in the school curriculum) was vehemently opposed by the Catholic Church. MacIver concedes that the inclusive nature of these representations may be rather too idealised:

We have been very bold in the stories we have told, and sometimes I worry about this, that we are pushing this too much because the one thing you don't want to do is alienate your audience. These representations have to be treated with sympathy, especially because of the culture in Scotland, and particularly in the West of Scotland because of the religion in the area. Religion is very much to the fore, even now. We deal with this very subtly and we don't do anything to shock.

Most current of these bold storylines concerns the relationship between Scott and recently deceased DCI Eddie Hunter. *River City* has been commended in various recent reports for its emotive portrayal of Scott's reaction to Eddie's murder, made more poignant as the audience finds out that Eddie was about to propose to Scott on

the night he died. MacIver stresses the importance of addressing more controversial aspects of contemporary life in ways that the audience will find palatable:

We very consciously attempt to break down barriers in Scotland and challenge homophobia. But the stories are character driven; the audience will only accept that if they have sympathy for the characters, if it's not in your face. The character of Scott has been in the show from the outset and is much loved and accepted by our audience. We carry out research all the time, roughly every two years, and after the most recent round, Scott came out on top again. He is at the heart of the show, and we're really proud of that.

The acceptance of such storylines by a Scottish audience and the increasing success of the show could be interpreted as indicative of a wider cultural change. Indeed, more and more people are tuning in to the soap each week, with viewing figures now averaging around 600,000 per episode. Alternative character types to those depicted by archetypal discourses now lay claim to be equally as 'Scottish', reflecting a wider sea-change concerning fixed notions of the nation and identity in an era of globalization. These plural and ambivalent representations of identity offer the potential for conceptions of Scottishness to be 're-imagined' in ways reflective of the complex, multifarious postmodern nation. MacIver emphasises the importance of representing this diversity:

What's really important for us in *River City* is that we've got a cross section of people who represent the land we live in (Scotland, not just Glasgow), which is multicultural, is now very political, very confident. We are now very confident about who we are. That's reflected in the different characters. There are some very aspirational characters in the show, as well as the working classes, entrepreneurs, gangsters, families, a whole cross-section of society.

There is more awareness now of the heterogeneity of Scotland as a nation, made up of different regions and cultures. The broad range of characters is therefore vital to the diverse ethos of the show.

The diverse nature of representations suggests that a larger audience may be found if the show is about to go national as recent reports attest. It is rumoured that it will be shown on BBC daytime (as a possible contender to fill the space left by the Aussie soap *Neighbours*) or BBC3.⁹ What does *River City* offer viewers that will encourage loyalty from audiences of the two major prime-time British soaps, *Eastenders* and *Coronation Street*?

River City is quite diverse. It sits in the middle I think between these two soaps. *Eastenders* has got very bold stories but it is quite down beat, quite depressing, but that is actually one of its selling points, there is very little focus on humour. *Coronation Street* is quite camp, it's slightly melodramatic and the emphasis is very much on humour. We sit in the middle, we tell very bold stories, and sometimes it is very downbeat, because that's the nature of the story but we always try to get some light in there. I think this is inherent in the Scottish personality, that out of the darkest moments you have some really funny moments, and that's really important for us, and it's something I would like us to have more of. It's really important to keep the lightness of touch and humour which represents our culture.

Representing Scotland's culture accurately and sensitively is clearly a major concern of the executive producer and the increasing viewing figures testify to the success of *River City*'s portrayal of Scotland. The Glasgow depicted by the show is no longer synonymous with the narrow version of urban life embodied in Clydesideism; *River City*'s characters are a (usually) happy hybrid of working classes, middle classes, entrepreneurs, hard men, homosexual men and women. Its journey from depicting a parochial vision of Scottish life to the representation of the transitory nature of

⁹ Gavin Docherty 'New neighbours will fit in just fine in UK soap land' in *The Express* (Scottish Edition) July 21st 2007.

http://web.lexisnexis.com/professional/form?_index=pro_en.html&_lang=en&ut=336751493
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existence in the ever more cosmopolitan city of Glasgow is reflective of the new ways in which Scotland is imagined, both internally and externally.

Traditional ways of imagining Scotland through limiting cultural nationalist discourses like Clydesideism arose out of Scotland's 'unhealthy' peripheral political and cultural position within Britain. Arguably, Scotland is now no longer in this position; new political configurations and increased regional democratic agency make Scotland a more visible nation within the European Union. As a result, traditional identities and representations encompassing nationality, gender and sexuality depicted by these discourses are no longer as viable.

Accurately portraying a realistic version of Scotland is currently a hotly debated political topic as new first minister, SNP leader Alex Salmond, announced on Wednesday 8th August 2007 the setting up of a Scottish Broadcasting Commission, stating his desire to devolve broadcasting. According to television executive Alan Clements, this political move raises debates which are both "both cultural and industrial – both of representation and economic development. Television is a way of conducting our conversation with ourselves but [it is] also an incredibly important economic driver"¹⁰. The conversation, conducted through television, film, theatre and literature that the Scottish people have with themselves is one that has changed dramatically over recent years; it is now widely held that Scottishness cannot be reduced to a set of two-dimensional stereotypes, recognisable images and essentialist identities. Unlike its predecessor, *River City* reflects the eclecticism of modern-day Scotland, albeit in a rather idealised way. It is for this reason that MacIver believes *River City* can attain a similar level of success to *High Road*:

High Road was hugely successful in its time, but we want to be contemporary; we want to represent the Scotland that is now.

It seems being contemporary and 'less Scottish in the old sense' means representing diversity and hybridity. However, the increasing

¹⁰ Alan Clements TV Executive 'How Scotland Could Run its own Broadcasting Corporation' in *The Sunday Herald* 12th August 2007, p.3

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success of the show must be celebrated cautiously. Representing realistically ‘the Scotland that is now’ is no mean feat. It is a complex task and being utopian about Scotland’s status as an inclusive, hybrid ‘mongrel nation’ is problematic.¹¹ The potential of the nation to become so is what is worth examining. Representations should deal with the ‘sticky’ issues concerning the nation and national identity in a postmodern world, exposing rather than ignoring the more reductive aspects of its culture. Idealised portrayals of life in Scotland may produce a dissociated audience who still fail to recognize themselves in depictions of the Scottish nation. This dissociation is problematic in that it may lead to another outpouring of essentialist cultural nationalist discourses, as the anxiety over English cultural hegemony is increasingly being replaced by homogenizing (American) global influences.¹²

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¹¹ For a discussion of the modes of realism and naturalism in Scottish cultural productions see Kirsty MacDonald ‘Something Definite to Reject: A Critique of Contemporary Criticism’. *The Glasgow Seeker* May 2 2005.

¹² See Billing, M. *Banal Nationalism* London: Sage Publications 1995, p.11

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