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## Re-constructing heritage: the National Theatre of Scotland's *Calum's Road*

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*David Harrower's adaptation of Roger Hutchinson's novel, Calum's Road (2011, 2013) tells the real-life story of Calum MacLeod, and his quest to build a road from Arnish to South Arnish on the island of Raasay in the Inner Hebrides. Calum is representative of the everyday hero that can be found throughout Scottish texts and stories—one that remains true to himself, and fights for the cause he believes in, no matter how small it may seem to the government, or the people around him. The play highlights a dying age, and yet emphasizes the importance of merging the past with the ever changing present and is ultimately a celebration of failure. This article explores the role of heritage and heroism within Harrower's play and, by extension, contemporary Scotland, by examining the relationship between struggle and failure, as well as the mutual responsibility within the national community to work to create a new image of the Scottish nation.*

*Keywords: heritage, landscape, hero, Calum MacLeod, Raasay, National Theatre of Scotland*

### Introduction

The play *Calum's Road*, adapted by playwright David Harrower from the non-fiction book of the same name by Roger Hutchinson, opened in Glasgow at the Bridge in

September 2011. The initial tour lasted three months, culminating in a production at the Raasay Community Hall in November 2011. The show was revived and toured to different Scottish cities in 2013 for a shorter six-week tour. For the purposes of this article, I am referencing the text used for the second tour. The script refers to each actor by their first name only, and their name is in all caps, whereas the character names are depicted in sentence case. Harrower has adapted many other works, including plays such as Buchner's *Woyzeck*, Chekhov's *Ivanov* and Schiller's *Mary Stuart*, the latter of which was produced by the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS) in collaboration with the Royal Lyceum Theatre and the Citizens' Theatre. He has also adapted novels for the stage, including John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids*. Within these works he takes well-known stories from the stage and gives them a modern, and often uniquely Scottish twist. In *Calum's Road*, Harrower adapts a legendary story that is already Scottish, and thus he allows the story to speak for itself without too many theatrical additions or unconventional staging techniques. He builds upon his adaptation experience, and utilizes the fragmented story-telling technique found within the 2008 NTS and Edinburgh Theatre Festival co-production of *365*. However, unlike *365*, Harrower manages to connect the fragments and create a coherent story that touches on themes of Scottish national identity as embodied by one man from the Hebrides. The story of Calum MacLeod's life examines government roadblocks, the rapidly declining population of the islands, and the waning popularity of Gaelic, and on a cursory look may seem to lack the intensity or even drama of his famed *Blackbird* or *Knives in Hens*, plays remembered for their moments of violence and serious subject matter as much as anything else. However, the drama within *Calum's Road*, which follows the source text closely, is held within Calum's passion for his island, and his determination to save his culture. Calum's heroism is not the bloody-bladed heroism of the conquering warrior, and the seeming gentleness of Harrower's adaptation highlights the slow and subtle alterations occurring to Raasay from an

island focused on community and belonging, to one of isolation and disconnect. I assert that the purpose of the 2013 NTS production was not to merely share a story about a famous islander, but also to re-ignite an interest in the multifaceted nature of Scottish heritage through a connection to material environments and contemporary lore.

The Calum MacLeod of Harrower's play is painted as a hero among men. He built a 1¾ mile long and 10-foot-wide road, alone, by hand, over a period of approximately 10 years. The road was built for the simple purpose of improving travel across his island of Raasay, in the Inner Hebrides, with hope that the improved living conditions would encourage people to remain living on the island. The director, Gerry Mulgrew, described Calum's story as one of epic proportions and one of ironic failures: 'The story is full of ironies, of course, and Calum himself seems somewhat reminiscent of Don Quixote taking on the world, but there is no denying the sheer chutzpah of the man who was crofter, fisherman, knitter, lighthouse keeper, writer and solo road engineer' (Raasay Community Association, 2011, n.p.). Mulgrew's statement encapsulates the essence of Calum's journey—it was one fraught with failure and disappointment, but ultimately was the story of a hero, and it is through his heroism and ultimate defeat that audiences across Scotland were re-introduced to a new type of heritage, one that has been brushed aside in favour of romanticised visions of island life.

## **Post-devolution theatre**

Since the establishment of a devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999, arts organizations have made it a greater imperative to present accurate representations of Scottish life on stage. Before devolution, many Scottish plays toyed with realism

by utilising location-specific dialects, such as the gritty Glaswegian as compared to the softer lowland dialect common in Edinburgh (Hutchinson, 1996, p.225). Working-class and political theatre became popular in the 1970s and pushed the envelope with the tours of theatre group 7:84<sup>1</sup> (Smith, 1996, p.277). All of these changes in stage portrayals of Scottish life paved the way for the stage depictions of a devolved Scotland. Gaelic plays even found a short renaissance, as Gaelic theatre thrived in the early 1980s (Smith, 1996, p.286). Shortly after the referendum leading to devolution passed in 1997, David Harrower, along with fellow playwright David Greig, wrote an article in *The Scotsman* arguing for art that challenges the vision of contemporary Scotland; 'To redefine ourselves we need to understand ourselves, exchange ideas and aspirations, confront enduring myths, expose injustices, and explore our past' (Reid, 2012, p.82). The emphasis in Greig and Harrower's op-ed is on redefining the Scottish nation in a way that is actively chosen by the people. *Calum's Road* specifically 'brings to mind the community-oriented performances of 7:84 and reflects the competing and often fusing discourse of the age of globalization' (Śledzińska, 2013, p.131). The theatre must be in dialogue with the people in terms of fresh ideas and goals of the nation as Scotland continues to be established as a politically independent entity. The theatre itself is not a solo agent of change, but can be the locus for conversation and visions of complex national identities, especially those removed from the global eye. Plays like *Calum's Road*, though seemingly innocent, seek to explore the history of a nation that is so fraught with tension.

*Calum's Road* serves as an ideal example of how theatre can work to represent those often excluded from the national image created and propagated by the elites. The audience is introduced to real life in the Western Isles, from rides on the ferries to the use of Gaelic and the eating of cormorant sandwiches. Life is not depicted as romantic and exciting,

but instead hard and tedious. In this way the play ‘confronts enduring myths’ of the rural life, and seeks to clarify the role of Raasay in relation to mainland Scotland (Reid, 2012, p.82). The kailyard<sup>2</sup> approach of sentimentalising rural life is an easy way to depict a certain subset of Scots that to city dwellers is quaint, charming and an escape from the trials of city life. However, this type of depiction does nothing to celebrate the various cultures that actually exist across Scotland, but instead ‘evidence a destructive false consciousness, a neurotic and infantilised national psyche’ (Reid, 2012, p.7).

In lieu of romanticising the existence of Calum MacLeod, the NTS chose to depict the realistic life of one man, and to challenge visions of the Highlands and Western Isles. ‘Through the questioning of old national iconographies and long-established discourses, the National Theatre of Scotland is making a crucial and largely innovative step in the (still very recent) process of internalisation of the long-mythologized Highland “Other”’ (Śledzińska, 2013, p.135). Projections used throughout the show help to shatter this false consciousness by depicting the actual island. The audience is given a picture of the brutality of the island as well as its beauty. These images help to emphasise the amount of work that living on the islands takes. The projected images of Calum’s Road on Raasay used in the NTS production are especially important, for it shows the sharp incline and winding curves as the road disappears over a hill. By grounding the play within the physical world the projections help to dispel the sentimental and quaint view of island life. The very story of Calum and his road works to ‘exchange ideas and aspirations’ (Reid, 2012, p.7) as the audience learns some Gaelic and sees Calum fight for what many mainlanders take for granted. Giving the perspective of an islander who loves his home produces sympathy for Calum’s plight and respect for his work.

## **Building a Scottish tragic hero**

David Harrower utilises multiple narrators to create a chorus-type commentary on Calum's actions. The narrators are unreliable, in the sense that not all of them agree on the specific details surrounding Calum's building of his road. In one way the absence of consistent facts allows for the physical road to take priority over the many extant stories surrounding the building of the road. The production emphasized preserving the memory of the road, and the manual labour it still represents. The symbiotic relationship depicted between the vernacular surrounding the building process and the physical road emphasises a key element in the formation of contemporary, nationally conscious societies. The constant presence of the physical road throughout the play helps to maintain the identity of Raasay, evidencing Claval's assertion that '[i]n order to keep alive the vernacular forms of identities, people try to preserve the material environments of the past, giving newfound importance to the role of heritage' (2012, p.87). Calum's physical road serves as a constant reminder of the life and legacy of Calum MacLeod. The preserved material environment is the backdrop of Harrower's play, which allows for the exploration of the narrative surrounding its construction. By building the road, and improving transportation across Raasay, the Calum MacLeod of the play hopes to rekindle a connection to the island amongst his fellow islanders. Throughout the play the act of preservation, both in terms of the maintenance of the material road and the re-construction of Calum's narrative, connect to an associated melancholy, for it represents a breaking-up of an older culture through the use of a homogenous national identity.

Harrower's narrators toy with the inconsistencies of the remembered past, by emphasising the lack of concrete details surrounding the building of the road. The timeline for construction is never solidified, though it took 10–15 years depending on the start date, anywhere from 1963–





artistic director of the NTS, emphasised the direction of the NTS was 'more about future work rather than about heritage' (Reinelt, 2008, p.236). Though *Calum's Road* celebrates a hero of the past, it is constantly looking forward to how his legacy impacts the lives of people today throughout Scotland. National theatres in Europe often act as an avatar for the nation-state, the assembled audience represent the nation as a whole and it is that assemblage that often is the most important. Loren Kruger (2008, p.39) suggests it is the 'national assembly, rather than the linguistic or cultural consistency of the repertoire, [that] is the essential point of theatrical nationhood'. This builds on the fact that cultural national narratives often blur history and folklore (Wilmer, 2008, p.17). Each audience member watching the play lays a stone in the foundation of the future of the NTS and works to create a more realistic vision of the national image created and propagated by the people it actually represents.

*Calum's Road*, as it was produced in 2013 by the NTS, seeks to connect the experiences of Raasay (and by extension the Western Isles) within the world of the Scottish mainland. This connection is done primarily through the use of Gaelic throughout the show and the connection of Gaelic to young people like Alex. The character of Alex, a young man who once met Calum as a child, serves as a surrogate of the audience. His curiosity about Calum guides him throughout Raasay, and ignites his passion for re-connecting to his heritage. Only a little over 1 percent of the population of Scotland speaks Gaelic, as of the 2011 census (National Records of Scotland, 2015, *Gaelic Language*). The last census in 2011 indicated that Gaelic's decline has started to slow, and though Gaelic is not yet gaining ground, the loss is not as rapid as it once was. The first full staging of the play coincided with the 2011 census, which later indicated an increased interest in learning Gaelic with younger generations (National Records of Scotland, 2015, *Gaelic Language*). Though neither Harrower nor the NTS have

addressed the connections with the census, the inclusion of a young man, Alex, with an interest in Gaelic language and culture aligns with the beginnings of a Gaelic resurgence, and highlights a connection between the cultures of the Islands and the mainland. However, with only 1 percent of the population speaking Gaelic, one must question whether a single play can really make a difference in inspiring that interest, or is Gaelic doomed to be a dying language spoken in only the remotest regions of the nation?

The literal building of Calum's road thematises the construction of a nation throughout the play. On one level the road is literally built, on stage with acting blocks and a bit of the audience's imagination, but on another level the road represents the slow work done toward building a nation. Calum first digs out the road, then adds gravel and finally the road is tarmacked. The construction of the road is a process and each step overlays the next, and even though we cannot see the cutout soil and the markings in the turf done by Calum's shovel it is through his foundation that the final road is able to be produced. The layering of the road is mirrored in the way the audience is taught about the road's construction through formal layers within the script. These moments are identified as Calum's Road 1, Calum's Road 2, etc., and introduce the audience to the mythology and specific challenges Calum faced while building the road, and simultaneously introduce a different virtue of Calum, the hero. These formal layers emphasise Calum's connection to the land and to his own construction process. His alterations to that land come in small chunks, and little by little he changes the landscape through his building process.

Calum's inherent connection to and knowledge of his island paints him as a lad o'pairts whose seemingly banal observances set him apart from the common man. In 'Calum's Road 1', Calum references Thomas Aitken's *Road making and maintenance: a practical treatise for engineers*,

*surveyors and others*<sup>4</sup> (Harrower, 2013, p.8). The manual becomes key to the building of the road, for at times Calum follows the advice religiously and at other times completely rejects the advice in favor of more practical means. In 'Calum's Road 1', the audience learns how Calum laid out the plan for the road and see the first time Calum rejects the advice of the manual. The text suggested that most practical route should immediately be obvious upon viewing, but fails to take into account the layout of the land. The guide does not consider the hilly and steep terrain of the islands, for often the entire view of the landscape is obstructed by a hill or crest. Calum weighs this advice and chooses to go with a more pragmatic method. Ceit Kearney, as Julia, and Lewis Howden, as a narrator, describe Calum's methodology;

JULIA. To begin his road my father deviated slightly from Aitken's advice. He scared the sheep. And noted how, as the sheep scattered and fled, they unfailingly took the shortest route between two points.

LEWIS. With this ascertained, Calum marked and pegged the full length of the road, day after day, his postbag over his shoulder, using a trowel, two miles of reel, and hundreds of silver fish hooks.

By using the sheep, Calum is able to really adhere to the formation of the land. By trusting his own eyes, Calum may overlook a small hillock or a grade that was invisible to the naked eye but difficult to traverse. The sheep are familiar with the stretch of the path, and since sheep are naturally lazy creatures they take the path of least resistance. Calum is contending with the geological fabric of the island, and by respecting the natural shape of the land he is able to craft a road that is less of a new addition to an ancient island, and more of a re-shaping of a natural track. He is only one man, yet he is receiving assistance from the land and its fauna in order to build this road. He is a hero for his efforts, but we as the audience clearly see that he is not enough to build the

nation. Calum is a hero larger than life at this moment, for he is so fully connected to the land that he can anticipate its needs better than a professional builder, but he alone cannot keep Raasay's heritage alive and thriving.

The portrayal of Calum's struggle with the natural environment of mud, roots and rocks likens him to a warrior and battle-worn hero. He fights these natural elements while he is trying to preserve the landscape. His campaign to build a road creates a tension between the past and the future, as well as between the ease of staying and leaving. Julia describes her father's challenge: 'And more mud and hundred year old trees and deep buried roots. It was a fight my father had. A battle. A *campaign*. Buried roots and rocks and rocks. Thousands of years of Lewiston and Torridonian rocks. Nothing to him. Nothing stood in his way. No-one. He would not let them' (Harrower, 2013, p.3). Julia uses language of war to describe her father's actions, he has to *fight* the terrain and to tame it to his will, and Calum is clearly the warrior hero before our eyes. It is an uphill *battle*, as he hacks away at old trees and moves rocks from place to place. The land that he loves so much has become his enemy. It is preventing people from staying on the island, so he has to choose sides for this battle and the land lost to the people.

Calum not only battles the landscape, but also battles the infrastructure on the island and the oppressive past that it represents. In the scene 'Calum's Road 3', Calum goes about the task of destroying a wall that separated the crofting grazing lands from the private hunting grounds of the last landlord of Raasay, George Rainy. Calum MacLeod and the majority of the farmers on Raasay are crofters. The last laird of the island, John MacLeod, emigrated and left the Raasay estate in 1843. Due to extreme levels of debt, the estate was sold to an English merchant, George Rainy (MacLeod, 2003, p.95). Rainy spent a good deal of money on the estate, and

much of that went directly to the people, but his commitment to the island could not make up for the fact that during his tenure over 330 people were forced to leave Raasay for Skye or the mainland<sup>5</sup> (MacLeod, 2003, p.100). Rainy continued to try and reduce the population, and banned the tenants from allowing cottars<sup>6</sup> on their land and banned marriages without his permission. When marriages occurred without Rainy's permission the couple's property was destroyed, and sometimes their livestock taken, and anyone who sheltered the couple could suffer the same (MacLeod, 2003, pp.100–101). The play explains about Rainy, calling him the infamous Raasay landlord, and describing his wall that was six-feet-high and ran 'across the narrowest stretch of the island and was where Rainy herded the entire population of South Raasay so he could hunt and shoot and graze his animals in peace' (Harrower, 2013, p.49). The taking down of Rainy's wall is emblematic of Calum's heroic struggle. The wall must be removed, at least in part, for the road to be completed. Calum is assisted by the Crown when it comes to destroying his island, for the Department of Agriculture supplies him with a compressor, explosives, a driller and blaster so he can 'create aggregate and gravel for the road's foundations and surfacing' (Harrower, 2013, p.49). The same government that refuses to invest time, money or manpower to build the road between Arnish and South Arnish is all too willing to supply tools '[t]o blow up those parts of Raasay which Calum required blowing up' (Harrower, 2013, p.49). Calum decides that he would not simply blow up the wall, for in some way that seemed too easy to defeat such a large presence in the island's history, 'Instead he dismantled it by hand, stone by stone. To this day no one knows how he celebrated the toppling of Rainy's wall' (Harrower, 2013, p.49).

The layering of the road is then reinforced through the format of the play. The scenes are episodic, and take place in both the past and the present. Each major scene, such as the actual building of the road, the memory of a blizzard, Iain

and Alex's visit to the croft, and the personal history of the MacLeods gives the audience only part of the story, and with each revisit the audience is given a little more information. Some scenes simply continue where they left off, but others repeat and expand upon the original information given. All of the different storylines layer onto of one another and eventually work toward the conclusion, where each storyline finally comes together to create the full narrative. The set reinforces this layering technique by being made up of many differently sized blocks that could be shifted and re-arranged much like the turf around the road. The smaller blocks are used as props, thrown into Calum's wheelbarrow or used to create stairs.

The music throughout the play parallels Calum's task of single-handedly building a road. A single musician, Alasdair Macrae, played all the music live, and was situated on the side of the stage during the action of the play. For most of the musical numbers Macrae would utilise live-looping to create a fuller sound, and to give the impression of more musicians when it was him alone. To do this, Macrae would record live a short section of a song, playing his guitar or singing, and then loop this short section whilst recording another layer on top. Each layer featured a different texture, or vocal harmony. By utilising live looping Macrae was able to build the music, just as Calum built his road, layer by layer, and all alone. The work would have been easier with a band, for each person could play their own part and the song would be complete from beginning until the end. Macrae had to work harder than if he was one player with a band. He needed to be proficient on the guitar, with his vocals (and all the given harmonies), and needed to time his playing perfectly in order to produce the complex sound. The process of building the song with each performance reflected back clearly to the repetitive labour Calum endured.

## Concluding remarks

Though the design of the 2013 NTS production celebrates the ingenuity and dedication of a single man, it does not end on this sentimental note about the life and accomplishments of Calum MacLeod. The final scene is a call to action for the audience to do as Calum did. It started with one man, but ultimately the island and the road needed a community. Scene 42 'It ends' catalogues all of the troubles and strife that have kept the Scottish nation down for hundreds of years and declares them over, and calls the community to come together to force that change. The narrators mirror the opening, and tell of a man who fought for his island, but this time they emphasize that the work must be done by someone new. As the play ends we are told, 'Let's hear your song', as Calum's heroic lineage is passed on, not to his daughter, but to each and every audience member. The final scene emphasises the dualism of community and isolation. *Calum's Road* celebrates his isolation by connecting it back to a shared experience. The play may be about one man and one road, but his experience is much like those of many people who have worked hard and have been defeated. There is a futility to Calum's building project, as his road ultimately only serves three people, but it is still a road worth having. The NTS emphasises that the problems on the local level are the problems of the nation, and that the two are always connected—by people, by experiences, and by a certain level of shared cultural heritage.

## Notes

1. The theatre company 7:84 specifically worked to level the audience through their highly political, pro-Scottish tours of *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973).

2. Kailyard addresses the 'prodigious array of *Kitsch* symbols, slogans, ornaments, banners, sayings and sentiments (not a few of them "pithy") which have for so long resolutely defended the name of "Scotland" to the world' (Nairn, 1977, p.162). These images tend to represent a romanticised and nostalgic vision of Scotland, while failing to take into account the often grim realities of Scottish life.

3. In Paula Śledzińska's 'Revisiting the Other: National Theatre of Scotland and the Mythologization of the Highlands and Islands' she cites Peter Womak's assertion that the Highlands, and by extension the Islands, are simply accepted as 'Romantic' locations without debate.

4. President of the Road Surveyors' Association of Scotland (Harrower, 2013, p.8).

5. Though most of these clearances are recorded as mutually agreed upon, or were undertaken with fair compensation, the clearances mark the start of Rainy's unfair level of control over the people of Raasay.

6. Sometimes spelled 'cotters', these were peasant farmers who would rent small farm space to grow crops and lived in small cottages. These were different from crofters who owned their own houses, but only rented crofting land.

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