The fin-de-siècle Scots Renascence: the roles of decadence in the development of Scottish cultural nationalism, c.1880-1914


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Abstract

This thesis offers a cultural history of the Scots Renascence, a revival of Scottish identity and culture between 1880 and 1914, and demonstrates how heavily Scottish cultural nationalism in this period drew from, and was defined by, fin-de-siècle Decadence. Few cultural historians have taken the notion of a Scots Renascence seriously, and many literary critics have styled the period as a low point in the health of Scottish culture – a narrative which is deeply flawed. Others have portrayed Decadence as antithetical to nationalism (and to Scotland itself). The thesis challenges these characterisations and argues that there was a revival of Scottish identity in the period which drew from, and contributed to, Decadent critiques of ‘civilisation’ and ‘progress’.

The thesis considers literature alongside visual art, which were so interdependent around the 1890s. It focuses on three main cultural groups in Scotland (the circle that surrounded Patrick Geddes, the Glasgow School and writers of the Scottish Romance Revival) but it speaks to an even wider cultural trend. Together, the various figures treated here formed a loose movement concerned with reviving Scottish identity by returning to the past and challenging notions of improvement, utilitarianism and stadialism.

The first chapter considers the cultural and historical background to the Scots Renascence and reveals how the writings of the Scottish Romance Revival critiqued stadialist narratives in order to lay the ground for a more unified national self. The second chapter demonstrates how important japonisme and the Belgian cultural revival were to the Scots Renascence: Scottish cultural nationalists looked to Japan and Belgium, amongst other nations, to gain inspiration and form a particular counter-hegemony.

The final three chapters of the thesis explore how a unifying myth of origin was developed through neo-Paganism, how connections to an ancestral self were activated through occultism, and how such ideas of mythic origin and continuation were disseminated to wide audiences through pageantry. In doing so, the thesis charts the development and dissemination of the Scots Renascence, while situating it within its historical and international contexts.