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## „Gaelic Identity in Alasdair Campbell's *The Nessman*"

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*He is gone on a long voyage over perilous seas, Colin, son of Angus, son of Alexander, son of young Murdo. Where he lisped in infant numbers, had his first fitful erection, grew to pimply young manhood, knows him no more. Long shall the brown bog lament, long the black eye of creation bubble in molten sorrow. The sure shank of him, the keen nostril, the screwed-up eyes and the tickler-sucking mouth. Blow, wind from the west, bringing all the smells to him and all the sounds; and rain from the west, fall gently on him, in the grey granite city where he lies.*

— Alasdair Campbell, *The Nessman* 183

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# 1    Introduction

'Son of a Gael. Going to walk it.'
— Alasdair Campbell, *The Nessman* 169

As the novel's title, *The Nessman*, anticipates, its main character, Colin Murray, is a 'Nessman', a Gael, the 'son of a Gael'; but he is also Scottish, British, a juggler of languages, tester of boundaries. Colin is on a journey, and he is 'going to walk it' – despite all odds and outcomes. The author, Alasdair Campbell, stems from a Hebridean family of writers. Although he is widely acknowledged for his contribution to Scottish Gaelic literature in the form of plays, short stories and novels in Gaelic, his only English-language novel to date, *The Nessman*, which carries strong underlying Highland themes, seems to live in the shadow of both Gaelic and Anglophone Scottish literary traditions. This state of in-betweenness appears to be reflected in the protagonist's own struggles with the reasons for, as well as the consequences of the stages of in-betweenness meandering through his life, resulting in a quest for his self, and culminating in a seemingly inescapable transition into exile. This paper seeks to examine the portrayal of Gaelic identity in this exceptional example of coming-of-age fiction by analysing the motifs thus employed.

Evidently, language seems to be the obvious candidate as a marker of Gaelic identity. While far from the only distinctive indicator of communal belonging, it becomes a vital instrument for contrasting inclusion with estrangement – or exclusion, in this context. The motifs of Gaelic identity apparent in *The Nessman* are, in addition to that, manifold. They include narratives of belonging, discernible in the importance of heritage, ancestry, genealogy, and an abundant portrayal of the Gaelic storytelling tradition. The significance of locality and, consequently, rootedness in the *Gàidhealtachd* is perceptible in the main character's transition from the Outer Hebrides to Aberdeen on the mainland, and, ultimately, to his uncertain whereabouts, presumably in England, by the end. The motif of journeys consolidates movements through space and time, thus allowing for references to history and – particularly meaningful for group identification – a common myth history. Along the lines of Scotland's eventful past and present, especially in reference to its changeable history of dependence and independence in a British context, as well as regarding the complex issue of Scottish national identity, Campbell's *The Nessman* displays a

preoccupation with the theme of fragmentation. Experiences of marginalisation within the British Empire, as well as within Scotland's pluralistic society, suggest a (critical) postcolonial look at the concept of Gaelic identity. The manifestation of varying degrees of fragmentation is also relevant considering the closely interrelated motifs of alcoholism, death, and religion, which are frequently used in the novel under discussion in order to depict the protagonist's inner turmoil accompanying his quest for identity.

As this paper intends to discuss the portrayal of Gaelic identity in Campbell's novel, a preceding discussion of the rather elusive notion of identity will prove essential. Whereas the term 'identity' is a rarely questioned part of everyone's everyday language routine, it certainly remains scientifically disputed, thus contributing many benefits, and grievances, respectively, to scientific discourse. Its multidisciplinary qualities can, on the one hand, be an invitation for vagueness; on the other hand, they offer the exciting opportunity for interdisciplinary approaches by being reliant on an open-minded view beyond one's nose.

The existing state of research concerned with Scottish national identity appears to be blossoming, and it will, inevitably, gain further impetus due to the pending Brexit, with another vote for Scottish independence presently being denied by a British government anxious to seek union in exile (metaphorically speaking). The conclusion of the Brexit process, in any case, will exceed the completion of this paper. The Brexit deal, meanwhile, has been signed by all parties involved, and the separation will, in all likelihood, take its course, with 31 January 2020 being the date of execution of the transition into this new era, accompanied by far-reaching and rather unpredictable consequences. Irrespective of present political developments, Scottish studies are a relatively young discipline in comparison to the – in certain aspects – closely related field of Irish studies, for example. Their upswing, however, is an unerring sign of the heightened self-confidence regarding Scottish prerequisites and self-awareness. In consideration of Scotland's eventful past and present, it seems a challenging task to contextualise a Gaelic author's only English-language novel within the scope of a multi-faceted, yet arguably English-language-focused recent literary tradition. It is the plurality at Scotland's disposal, however, that aptly illustrates the zest of Scottish literary expressiveness.

For the purpose of discussing the motifs of the construction (and deconstruction) of Gaelic identity in Alasdair Campbell's *The Nessman* in the form of a literary analysis, it, nevertheless, seems almost unavoidable to bear in mind sociological, historical,

psychological, cultural, political, and many more colours to this flag. Hence, a culturally-critical approach to the interpretation of the motifs thus employed presents itself as advantageously. The motifs will be discussed concerning their linguistic, structural, and thematic content and expressiveness, as well as regarding extratextual reference points. In order to comment on the theme of Gaelic identity in the novel under discussion, it is, moreover, revealing to take a closer look at its position within the framework of a – not only linguistically – multi-faceted Scottish literary tradition.

In chapter 2, an attempt will be made to establish the theoretical basis for the subsequent analysis of the motifs of Gaelic identity in *The Nessman*. The complex concept of Gaelic identity – with a focus on communal identification – will be discussed in view of the significance of history, Scottish national identity, and language in this context. Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities and the importance of narratives of belonging shall be considered in this regard, as well as a postcolonial approach to the definition of Gaelic and Scottish identities. A newly-found emphasis on regionalism will be discussed in due course. The plurality attributable to Scottish society is, not least, manifest in the versatility of its linguistic landscape. The profound significance of language for the expression of personal and communal identification and, moreover, the present situation of Gaelic as a minority language and the thus resulting bilingual language reality and potential experiences of marginalisation for native speakers of Gaelic suggest a closer look at Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia in a literary context. Chapter 3 intends to position the novel under consideration within the pluralistic framework of contemporary Scottish literature. The 'growing-up' of Scottish literature in relation to the umbrella term of English literature seems of utter importance in this context. The question whether the multicultural influences apparent in contemporary Scottish literature, not least noticeable in the coexistence of, for example, English, Gaelic, and Scots literatures, presuppose the idea of Scottish literature*s* rather than *a* Scottish literature, will be addressed below. The transgression of boundaries and states of in-betweenness discernible in contemporary Scottish literature, as well as in the 'Nessman's' quest for identity, is of relevance in this context. Chapter 4, then, will be dedicated to the predicament of the author in-between languages. Alasdair Campbell, a writer usually publishing in Gaelic, chose to write this novel, which is thematically strongly preoccupied with Gaelic identity, in English, thereby making it accessible to a wider audience. Its position within Scottish literature and especially within the scope of literary

criticism, however, is not a straight-forward matter. The issue of language choice as a conscious statement, or as a (non-)question in bilingual circumstances, will be addressed consequently. Language choice and, indeed, the switching between languages within a single text are able to fulfil various purposes within and beyond the text, which shall be addressed regarding Campbell's frequent use of untranslated Gaelic words, phrases and passages throughout the novel. The tightrope walk oftentimes performed by bilingual writers – not uncommonly accompanied by feelings of guilt and in-betweenness – shall be examined along the lines of an essay by acclaimed writer Iain Crichton Smith relating to this issue. In chapter 5, then, the motifs of Gaelic identity discernible in Campbell's novel, namely the motifs of language, storytelling, religion, journeys, alcoholism, and death, will be analysed regarding their relevance to the theme of Gaelic identity as constructed (and eventually fragmented) in this coming-of-age novel. Underlying themes like alienation and estrangement experienced by the novel's main character, Colin Murray, are recurrent threads in the narration of the protagonist's journey into exile, and allow for an analysis of the motifs on a scale between belonging and exile, the self and the other. The motifs under consideration are closely interrelated; they are, in addition to that, common themes in Scottish literature in general, and in Gaelic and Highland-based literature in particular. As such, they shall be examined on an intratextual level, but also regarding the theoretical framework established in the preceding chapters. The conclusion given in chapter 6 is intended to offer final observations on the connection between the theoretical prerequisites and the analysis of the motifs of Gaelic identity in the novel under discussion, as well as on its relevance to Scottish literature.

This paper's aim is to come up with a definition of Gaelic identity applicable to the discussion of Alasdair Campbell's *The Nessman* regarding the construction of Gaelic identity and the protagonist's estrangement from his rootedness in the *Gàidhealtachd* evident in the course of this novel. An attempt to show the relevance of this less well-known (or rather less talked-about) piece of fiction within the context of contemporary, post-devolution Scottish literature shall be ventured. Its rather unconventional and experimental nature, especially on a structural level, as well as the partly idyllic, partly cataclysmic motifs of Gaelic identity offer rich material for interpretation. Furthermore, the considerable relevance of Gaelic and, in this case, Highland-based fiction for the self-conception of a pluralistic Scottish literature shall be highlighted. After all, one of the greatest strengths of Scottish literature is, without

doubt, its diversity on multiple levels. The well-being of Gaelic language and literature, therefore, is strongly reliant on the recognition and acceptance of Gaelic contributions to the genesis of the Scottish netting. Scottish literature owes parts of its versatility to its heterogeneity. While the acceptance of a multicultural and – due to reasons of immigration, globalisation and the thus resulting cosmopolitanism – even multilingual social reality may be perceived as a threat by nationalists and, indeed, by language purists, it accentuates the adaptability and openness of the concept of Scottish national identity. The well-being of Scottish literature has, in fact, many faces. And they all deserve to be considered closely. This paper shall be but a small contribution to this end.

## 2    Gaelic Identity

The term identity has been influential and commonly used in a variety of contexts and disciplines, from humanities and social sciences to psychology, politics, and beyond. This concept, however, proves to be somewhat resistant to unambiguous, even undisputed, definitions on a scientific level. While literature in general, and the novel in particular, seem to be straight-forward candidates for the exploration of and elaboration on such an elusive theme by employing the full force of artistic licence, the reader and, indeed, the critic might still feel the need to distinguish between the means by which identity is constructed, struggled with, or lost in a specific literary context. In the case of Alasdair Campbell's *The Nessman*, themes and motifs of identity gained and lost, especially when the protagonist's journey to and from exile takes a perhaps irreversible turn, impose themselves upon the recipient and create an intriguing and simultaneously daunting imagery.

In their article "Beyond Identity", Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argue that "the social sciences and humanities have surrendered to the word 'identity'; that this has both intellectual and political costs; and that we can do better" (1). It is not a concept to be dropped altogether for fear of vagueness – instead, it may prove useful to sustain its applicability by defining its relevance and its boundaries, or even further its relevance by introducing alternative terms and thus avoid being trapped in an 'identity crisis'[1]. Brubaker and Cooper name key uses of identity as an analytical concept (see Brubaker, and Cooper 6-8) that highlight its "multivalent, even contradictory theoretical burden" (8). While sameness and inclusion in a group prove to be important indicators of belonging, personal identity, or the identification of the self, may rest on several contextual pillars. It is noteworthy, in this regard, to distinguish between two "different and often contradictory views of identity. On the one hand, identity is seen as having some *essential* core which marks out one group. On the other hand, identity is seen as *contingent*; that is, as the product of an intersection of different components, of political and cultural discourses and particular histories" (Woodward 28). There is a certain dichotomy between these perceptions of identity, which often results in conflicts and experiences of fragmentation, and which becomes apparent,

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[1] A further connotation of the idea of an 'identity crisis' is discussed by Kathryn Woodward. As argued by some writers, 'identity crises' are noticeable in the changing parameters of identification following the disruptions triggered by the break-up of the Eastern European bloc and the USSR; those parameters are a manifestation of the massive upsurge of capitalism and globalisation accompanied by the transformation of social, political, and cultural structures, and the thus resulting changes in identity positions (see Woodward 16-17).

for example, in the course of the 'Nessman's' quest for identity in the novel and the thus resulting state of inner turmoil he has to undergo.

When considering the implications of a Gaelic identity in a Scottish context, difference and belonging are key factors of communal identification. The Gael would not define themselves, or be defined, respectively, Gaelic if they were a singularity in time and space. They are members of a group – or groups, even, often overlapping – that justify their common identity on the grounds of shared components like language, history, ancestry and territory, which distinguish them from the *other*. Identities can also "rely explicitly on active processes of identification, for example membership of a club or religion, and may include a conscious counter-identification against institutionally and socially assigned identities, and the meanings and values that they are seen to represent" (Weedon 7). The notion of counter-identification appears to be profoundly significant for a community that has seen a major decline in the speakers of its native language, with only approximately 1.1 percent of the Scottish population claiming to be Gaelic speakers according to the 2011 Census (see *Scotland's Census: Shaping our future*). While the *Gàidhealtachd*, the area consisting mainly of the Highlands and Western Islands, still remains a stronghold for the Gaelic language and community, a larger number of Gaelic speakers now live in other, urban areas of Scotland. Socio-economic structures and traditions might be subject to change, "[t]he symbolic and cultural significance of Gaelic, however, is wider than simple language use" (Bechhofer, and McCrone 118).

In their survey on Gaelic identity, Frank Bechhofer and David McCrone observe that language – although generally considered a potent marker of identity – is most powerful in combination with other prerequisites like living in the *Gàidhealtachd*, or having Gaelic ancestry (see Bechhofer, and McCrone 119). By asking the respondents to indicate not only their own linguistic and national identities, but to additionally assess their opinion on what makes a Gael, they find that "[a]ncestry plus language gives 83% acceptance; without ancestry, language *and* Scottish birth only gets 59% acceptance. […] It also seems a priori likely that ancestry plus language plus residence in the *Gàidhealtachd* would raise the 83% to close to 100%" (Bechhofer, and McCrone 124-125).

The importance of ancestry, closely connected to notions like heritage, genealogy and tradition, is evident in the context of belonging to a specific group, especially regarding Scottish Gaeldom. A common history, or, as shall be discussed below, the creation of a

common narrative of history by means of mythologisation, is a vital marker of group identity, which becomes particularly evident in a nationalist discourse. Indeed, although the *Gàidhealtachd* is "a territory whose culture and language – Gaelic – arguably has a claim to 'founding' status," it does not have national status (Bechhofer, and McCrone 115). This leads to other facets constituting a Gaelic identity which need to be understood in a national (Scottish), a British, and a European context, even on a level of multiculturalism and globalisation. To quote Murray G. H. Pittock, "one of the major features of Celticism today is its internationalism and Europeanism, in Ireland's case achieved, in Scotland aspirational. To some extent this new dimension of experience and identity is based on the realities of underlying history and experience: to some it is projected and imagined" (141). In addition to that, multiple sub-levels of ethnic, ideological and cultural belonging appear to surface. Furthermore, changes in Gaelic language use and politics, for example the fact that almost all speakers of Gaelic are now bilingual, appear to be highly influential in processes of identification, and shall be addressed in due course. As reported by Colin H. Williams, "[t]he so-called ethnic revival of Western Europe involves the reassertion of the rights and obligations of long-submerged identities in an increasingly uniform world order" (267). Identity can be associated with many forms of cultural expression, with language being just one among them; "[h]owever, there is a profound need for an indigenous language as a means of communicating shared ideas, values, significant experiences, and literature, and this is why so much of the effort of the Celtic revivalists has concerned language and linguistics" (Williams 268).

In summary, the lights and shadows of identity as a subject of analysis are manifold. A number of aspects providing insights into the shallows of Gaelic identity shall be discussed below. Even though identity presents itself as an elusive, multifaceted conception, everyone seems to have an inherent understanding of the self and the other at their disposal, even "'repertoires' of identities," as expressed by John E. Joseph in *Language and Identity* (9), depending on, for example, the (social) circumstances and the vis-à-vis. After all, "there are as many versions of 'you' out there as there are people whose mental space you inhabit" (Joseph, *Language and Identity* 8).

## 2.1    A broken History?

Most Scottish symbols of identification like kilts, bagpipes and ceilidhs originate from Highland traditions, therefore creating a 'Gaelic vision', as described by David McCrone: "[t]he irony was that the part of Scotland which had been reviled as barbarian, backward and savage found itself extolled as the 'real' Scotland – land of tartan, kilts, heather. Scotland as 'country' is, then, a landscape of the mind, a place of the imagination" (17). This observation fits in well with Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities that describes the nation as an imagined community whose members will never meet or know the majority of their fellow members, but who are united with them in the communal imagery they share (see Anderson 6). As Anderson notes, "[a]ll profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives" (204). Albeit the concept of imagined communities is most prominently employed in the studies of nation-building and national identity, it might provide useful insights into processes of mythologisation within communities on a smaller scale, too – like the Gaelic community in Scotland, for example – as well as their coping mechanisms and strategies in the context of an arguably broken history. According to Kathryn Woodward, "[c]ontestation in the present may seek justification for the forging of new, and future, national identities by bringing up past origins, traditions, mythologies and boundaries. Current conflicts are often focused on these boundaries […]" (18). Where the meaning of communal identification is contested, a symbolic return to the past seems to be an effective means for approaching present and future issues of group identity.

Until the emergence of the Scottish Kingdom, "[…] Scotland should be thought of as a complex of interlocking lordships, some small, some great, based on military might and command of a system of contractual loyalties […]" (Houston, and Knox 29), with an emphasis on kinship as a major ingredient to the production of communal entities, similar to the importance of kinship and genealogy still identifiable in the *Gàidhealtachd* today. A conglomerate of tribes of diverse origins – Angles, Norwegians, Gaels, Britons and Picts, among others – saw the genesis of diverse patterns of hegemony throughout the early Middle Ages. Power struggles within the territory now known as Scotland came along with an ever-increasing divide between the Highlands and the Lowlands. In *Celtic Identity and the*

*British Image*, Murray G. H. Pittock states that this divide, "evident from the late fourteenth century and exacerbated through the Reformation, widened further as Enlightenment Scotland increasingly subscribed to a historiography and cultural theory which sought to align Lowland Scotland with a Germanic and Teutonic version of English identity […]" (54-55). The Union of Crowns in 1603 and the Union of Parliaments in 1707, respectively, heralded the end of the traditionally powerful Celtic clan system, and the new power structures also weakened the significance and influence of Gaelic language and culture in other than private circumstances.

Not only encountering a decrease in influence and prestige, Gaeldom had eventually grown to become associated with images of backwardness and barbarism – a process that took a remarkable turn, when, after the Highland Clearances and especially in the course of the Victorian period, Gaelic symbols and Highland traditions were adopted by the Crown and embraced by the wider public. Highland narratives came to fulfil the purpose of compensation for a perceived loss of cultural identity and political self-determination (see Ryan 97). "Through 'Ossian', Macpherson and then Sir Walter Scott, a Romantic image of the Highlands became indelibly stamped on the wider cultural imagination and the temptation ever since has been for Scots – including Highland Scots – to play to the stereotype rather than the reality" (D. Smith 49). This highly romanticised version of the heroic *Gàidhealtachd* became known as Tartanry, and its kitsch-ridden offshoots are observable to this day, in the tourist industry, for instance, or even on screen – much credit owed to the well-known epic movie *Braveheart*.

"The idea of Scotland ethnically divided between Celt and Teuton, or more complicatedly, Celt, Pict (or Picto-German) and Teuton, still has an afterlife in internal and external perceptions of the country: it has been very influential in demarcations of Scottish identity in the last two hundred years," as stated by Pittock (58), who also sees a psychological split in every Scot: "a convenient internal division between conformity and escapism which has left a profound legacy in the literature and culture of Scotland, in notions such as the Caledonian Antisyzygy […]" (60). While not undisputed, the concept of the Caledonian Antisyzygy does indicate a certain state of in-betweenness prominent in many examples of Scottish writing, as, for instance, recognisable in Alasdair Campbell's *The Nessman.* According to Ian Brown and Alan Riach, "[t]his conception has become such a cliché of Scottish critical discourse it is surely due for abandonment. A truth it does embody, however, is the protean, multivalent,

multilingual and multiform nature of Scottish culture, most evident in its literature" (10). Is, however, the premise or conception of a broken history to be blamed for the prevalence of disruptions, inner conflicts, or states of in-betweenness observable not only in Scottish literature, but also in discourses on national identity?

As Ray Ryan suggests, the oeuvre of renowned poet and novelist Iain Crichton Smith, for example, frequently broaches the issue of a brokenness of history closely associated with cataclysmic events of Scotland's past (see Ryan 92). The Union of Parliaments, the Disruption of 1843, the Highland Clearances and resulting social agitations, as well as waves of famine and migration, to name just a few prominent examples, have had a strong influence on both personal and collective memories and remain focal points in Scottish culture, literature, and debates on Scotland's national status. In fact, the issue of national identity – usually strongly connected to movements demanding full independence – has gained fresh impetus in the course of today's perpetual Brexit-dilemma. The historically complex relation between England and Scotland shall be addressed in the following chapter with a focus on Scottish national identity.

The Highland Clearances of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have proven a particularly traumatic experience for the population of the *Gàidhealtachd.* Since intensive sheep farming turned out to be more profitable than letting land to peasants, landlords forced their tenants to leave their ancestral homes and move to conglomerations at the coasts – Gaelic language and culture being thus relocated to the country's fringes. A growing discontent with the established Church of Scotland's stance on the Clearances – or the lack of counteractions against the responsible authorities, respectively – eventually led to the Disruption of 1843 and the establishment of the Free Church, which came to be identified as closely associated with the Highlands (see MacKinnon 65-67, Houston, and Knox 357-360). This disruption, as well as the rigid role oftentimes occupied by religion in society, should also prove to be a formative cultural theme, not least in modern Highland-based literature: "[i]f the Free Church was founded as an act of fearless challenge to existing society, it was also a step into a fearful future guided by a return to a fearful God who continued to brood over the Scottish imagination and accorded fearlessness only to those who were elected to His grace" (Craig, *Modern Scottish Novel* 53). Although poverty had existed before these events, "it was the poorest who suffered most of all. […] The Highland Clearances were in some ways as much a consequence as a cause of the relative deprivation of the Gaelic-

speaking population" (Houston, and Knox 295). The inflicted traumas resulted in the destruction of traditional and communal structures, protests, and waves of emigration (see Houston, and Knox 295).

The Scottish writer Iain Crichton Smith, who, like Alasdair Campbell, had a Hebridean background and used to publish in both Gaelic and English, explores this traumatic (Gaelic) experience in his well-known 1968 novel *Consider the Lilies*, in which he depicts an elderly widow's struggle before the imminent eviction from her ancestral home. Let down by the minister and village elders, she is offered unsuspected support by her neighbour, an educated craftsman and publisher of pamphlets against the social upheavals:

> 'There was something I meant to say, Mrs Scott. When I was coming home I heard stories that they intend to have us put out of our houses sooner than we think. I saw a good many flocks of sheep. You've never seen so many sheep before. The land is white with them south of us. They'll go through with it. Oh, they'll go through with it all right, Patrick Sellar and the rest of them. You see, Mrs Scott,' he went on, weighing his words carefully, 'to them we're not people. That's what we've got to understand. They don't think of us as people. When I go through to Edinburgh I learn it. Whenever they hear my Highland tongue they half-smile as if I were a fool and they could cheat me as a matter of course. It is this I hate above all.' (96)

The Highland tongue here is a marker of group membership, in this case, membership of a Highland community living in less prosperous conditions than their perceived suppressors – the *others*. In addition to that, it represents a marker of differentiation and alienation from the latter.

Where subaltern perceptions of history surface, the notion of brokenness seems to be at hand in order to explain and consolidate the past. In this regard, Stefanie Lehner explicates that "[d]erived from the cultural theorising of Antonio Gramsci, the term 'subaltern' describes social groups that have been subjugated and excluded by the dominant power, in particular peasants and the lower working classes, but also women and other minority groups" (293). A Highland dweller's experience, in the scenario of the Clearances and many others, might have varied greatly from that of someone belonging to a more prosperous stratum of Scottish society employed in and taking advantage of the power structures imposed by the English Crown, or the British Empire, respectively. Or, as Tom Nairn puts it, "[i]f there is one thing that the Scots in particular do know all about, it is self-colonisation. They lived with it for three hundred years after the Treaty of Union in 1707" (29). In a postcolonial context, therefore, it has to be kept in mind that while the reality of being colonised by the English might have been many a Scot's experience, many others

successfully participated in, and took positions of power within the Imperial apparatus in colonies elsewhere: "in Scotland as in India, the 'elite' and the 'subaltern classes' had significantly different experiences of the impact of the British Imperial project" (Mack 1).

Narratives and myths have sprung from Scotland's history and have been reflected in national, communal and personal experiences and traditions, falling on fertile ground in the Gaelic storytelling tradition. The motif of storytelling is frequently and very effectively employed in Campbell's *The Nessman*; narratives of belonging represent a faithful companion in the protagonist's quest for identity. In *Storytelling Scotland*, Donald Smith describes these stories as not time-bound sequences in time, "because they encapsulate memory and memory is the human faculty which works constantly to instil emotion, meaning and value into the sequence of happenings" (1). They can function as coping mechanisms available to groups and communities in order to process overwhelming experiences, past or present. According to Cairns Craig, many Scottish traditions "were, once, part of the institutional processes – from Church or education to fiddle music and storytelling – by which a Scottish identity was recognised and (re)produced. Such traditions are constantly remade as they encounter new historical circumstances […]" (*Intending Scotland* 61). Such new circumstances were, for instance, established in the course of the Union with England, which saw a decline in local self-determination and traditional clan systems, as well as the implementation of "policies designed to subdue the 'barbaric' Gaels of the Highlands and bring them under the influence of 'civilised' authority" (McGuire 119). As a result, the Gaelic language's transition from being a prestigious means of communication in various social and formal circumstances to serving as a language spoken primarily at home or within the boundaries of the community ensued, with the number of its native speakers decreasing ever since, and bilingualism becoming the norm of Gaelic linguistic practice. In Scotland's growing Anglicisation and the Lowlands' "adoption of the iconography of a Highland Celtic identity" (Craig, *Intending Scotland* 52), Cairns Craig, however, finds "evidence of a nation which has grasped that its real resources are generated by its capacity for cultural export, translation and assimilation" (*Intending Scotland* 52). In any case, the benefits of a vibrant, multifaceted and open-minded culture are not self-evidently synonymous with a harmoniously distributed balance of emphases – no matter if being created wilfully or the result of more natural processes.

To borrow Chris Weedon's words, "[i]n societies where there is more than one ethnic group and/or tradition in play, dominant versions of history and culture and the forms of identity that they encourage often function to exclude, silence, stereotype or render invisible those who do not fit within hegemonic narratives" (24). Scotland's steep path towards to a national identity has been a result of nationalist tendencies from the Enlightenment onwards, and its manifestations have grown in force throughout the twentieth century, culminating in the devolution of 1999. The gears at work during this (still ongoing) process, as well as the reciprocal influences between nationalistic ideas and Scottish culture and literature, have been of great interest to scientists of various disciplines throughout the last couple of decades. The discipline of Scottish studies, however, is still a comparatively young one. In *Out of History*, Cairns Craig suggests a critical reading of perspectives of core and periphery in the Scottish context, not only in relation to 'outer' core cultures, but also within the nation:

> Particularly here in Scotland, where the pressure of a decrepit core is asserted to maintain the last vestiges of power, we should learn ways of reading our cultural past that do not make of it simply a botched version of English culture. We need to escape from the bloated digestive tract of a conception of English studies and 'British' history that falsifies both itself and its related cultures in an effort to see them as branches on a single rooted tree whose leaves exist to contribute to the strengthening of the trunk. (30)

## 2.2    Being a Gael – a Scot, a Brit: National Identity

In their 2014 survey on Gaelic identity, Bechhofer and McCrone found that with regard to their self-identification, 24 per cent of respondents gave priority to being a Gael, 34 per cent saw themselves Scottish and 41 per cent felt equally Gaelic and Scottish (see Bechhofer, and McCrone 120). This result of a majority of participants apparently discerning no personal obstruction in defining themselves both Gaelic and Scottish seems to highlight the plurality within the Scottish nation. In addition to that, layers of personal, communal, institutional, or national identification do not stop there, with Scotland being part of the United Kingdom, which is (at least at the time this paper was produced) still a member of the European Union, which, then, is just one of many global players in an era of ever-progressing globalisation, not only in cultural and economic terms, but also in terms of personal mobility and

migration. Nationalistic movements have, however, regained strong impetus in several European countries, posing a threat to the idea of a strong European community. Considering the aforementioned prerequisites - what are, then, the ingredients to the Scottish national recipe?

In his much-quoted and fundamental reflections on nationalism in *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson suggests "the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (5-6). Nations are imagined, he continues, "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6). While in smaller communal structures like villages or church parishes, for instance, everyday personal contact and exchange is possible and indeed common practice, mutuality on a larger scale demands a medium through which common grounds can be asserted. The eighteenth century saw the emergence of an effective print industry that facilitated the long-distance distribution of information and ideas. "What, in a positive sense, made the new communities imaginable was a half-fortuitous, but explosive, interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communication (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity" (Anderson 42-43). The latter point, a pan-European urge and tendency towards state-vernaculars, cannot, however, be applied to the Scottish case indiscriminately, for most of the predicaments leading to a downward spiral in the use, spread and prestige of Scottish Gaelic had been set in motion even before the emergence of nationalist ambitions, with power structures already operating mostly in English and the institutionalisation of cooperation between English-speaking landlords, the Scottish intelligentsia, and London (see Anderson 90). Moreover, it has to be kept in mind that with Gaelic and Scots, "[…] English confronted not one but two contenders as the authentic 'voice of the people' […]" (Craig, *Modern Scottish Novel* 75). Some of the nation's favourite writers, Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott, for example, found artistic expression in the Scots vernacular. What becomes discernible here is a certain dichotomy between efforts towards unification in a national context on the basis of the creation of a pool of shared imagery on the one hand, and manifold, culturally diverse contributions to this aim on the other. With literature in general, and the novel in particular, being excellent means for carrying and

dispersing social meaning, a closer look at the apparent heterogeneity (or, perhaps, unity) of Scottish literature shall be ventured later on.

Following Anderson, McCrone emphasises that "[t]raditions and myths provide meaningful though partial interpretations of social reality and social change" (30). Depending on the narrator, communal narratives vary and fulfil different purposes, potentially highlighting the 'we' in contrast to the 'other', and serving the purpose of defending common interests against whomsoever might endanger them. When it comes to the application of a theoretical framework to the currents of Scottish self-identification, however, Ray Ryan, among others, suggests "[t]he need […] for more alternative analyses and comparisons, histories and causalities, than can be produced under a single methodology like post-colonialism or a single notion like identity" (10-11). He thus stresses the importance of regionalism in a Celtic context, with kinship being the glue to social bonding: "[w]ithin Ireland and Scotland, regions were so culturally insulated that the concept of a national history is, it is often claimed, an invalid descriptive category. Irish and Scottish social history, in this reading, then becomes the aggregate and the interaction of these regional histories, rather than the product of all-encompassing national movements" (Ryan 19-20).

The crucial role regionalism occupies concerning the issue of Scottish national identity, which is also highly relevant to the discussion of Gaelic identity in Alasdair Campbell's *The Nessman*, can, following Kathryn Woodward, be interpreted as one of the different consequences for identity produced by globalisation: "[t]he cultural homogeneity promoted by global marketing could lead to the detachment of identity from community and place. Alternatively, it could also lead to resistance, which could strengthen and reaffirm some national and local identities or lead to the emergence of new identity positions" (16). Regarding a postcolonial reading of the genesis of Scottish national identity, it has to be kept in mind that experiences with the 'coloniser', the English, may have varied greatly among the strata of Scottish society, creating subaltern strands of oppression even within Scotland. A conglomerate of differing regional perceptions may point to the importance of space not only in the context of (self-)identification, but also in a social and cultural context, as is, for example, observable in the considerable relevance of themes like rootedness and exile in Gaelic folk narratives and literature:

> In post-colonial Europe and the United States, both peoples who have been colonized and those who colonized have responded to the diversity of multiculturalism by a renewed search for ethnic certainties. Whether through religious movements or cultural exclusivity, some previously marginalized ethnic groups have resisted their marginalization within the 'host' societies by reasserting vigorously their identities of origin. (Woodward 17)

This observation holds true, to some degree, for several levels in the Scottish case: for the justification of a national identity, as well as for the substantiation of Gaelic identity within the Scottish nation, for example, which are united in their emphasis on Highland traditions and symbols for the purpose of communal identification.

In *Ireland and Scotland*, Ray Ryan refers to the sociologist Henri Lefebvre's notion of 'the social production of space': "Lefebvre showed how space is not just invaded and occupied by a society, as under colonialism, but also something that could be produced at will by and within a society" (23). The importance of a firmly rooted toolbox of collective memories, images, narratives and traditions for the purpose of fabricating communal identity seems at hand. As Ryan observes:

> This profound association between place, memory, and identity repudiates two very powerful theories of communal attachment. One, given by Benedict Anderson, claims that communities and places are to be distinguished only in the realm of discourse; not by their falsity or genuineness but by the style in which they are imagined. The other treats any attachment to the particularity of a local space as a myopic, politically delusory fantasy. (59)

The so-called 'Celtic fringe', namely the areas of Western Europe where Celtic traditions and languages have survived to this day and that are, with the exception of Brittany, situated mainly on the British Isles, present special cases in terms of their experiences within the British Empire; and even within a nation, Scotland in this case, regional perceptions of colonialism and the post-colonial situation can be discerned differently, with the divide between Lowlands and Highlands remaining a crucial boundary. Silke Stroh describes the situation of the Scottish Highlands as "being one of the former British colonizer's 'internal' peripheries 'at home'" (255), where "Celtic-speaking populations were often textualized – and marginalized – as 'internal barbarian Others' in a British nation-state aiming simultaneously at internal homogenization and external colonial expansion overseas" (256). This fraction, regarded in historical, social, and linguistic terms, remains a major marker of Gaelic identity. And while firmly grounded in the past, justified on the grounds of a common (myth-)history, ancestry and fostered traditions, and at the same time strongly orientated

towards the future – as observable in language preservation policies, for example –, identity is still very much a parameter of the present. The notion of identity and its rather elusive quality regarding its definition can appear to be a somewhat hybrid concept, with the processes of identification and self-identification being closely interwoven, and identity thus prone to adjustment depending on the circumstances it is created in, by occupying a social role, or partaking in a certain discourse, for instance.

The term hybridity, commonly used in postcolonial discourses to describe the influences colonisation can have on culture and identity in a colonised area, may also cross one's mind in the Scottish case. "A postcolonial rereading of Scotland's history reveals longstanding tensions that inevitably interrupt simplistic accounts of Scottish victimhood and English villainy" (McGuire 130). To quote, in this regard, Mark Renton, the protagonist in Irvine Welsh's famous Edinburgh-based novel *Trainspotting*: "Fuckin failures in a country ay failures. It's nae good blamin it oan the English fir colonising us. Ah don't hate the English. They're just wankers. We are colonised by wankers. We can't even pick a decent, vibrant, healthy culture to be colonised by" (Welsh 78). This poignantly-sarcastic statement offered by Renton can be read as an example of inferiorisation of Scottish culture (see McGuire 123) – in this case coming from within the 'inferior' community itself – on the one hand, and as an attempt of differentiation from the 'wankers', the *others*, so to say, on the other. In Matt McGuire's words, "[h]ybridity becomes part of a strategy of resistance by which the colonised native can undermine and expose the contingency of imperial cultural authority" (123). Hence, hybridity, or – expressed in a slightly different manner – cultural, social, and linguistic diversity, can be employed to the 'underdog's' advantage, in contrast to nationalistic views in which heterogeneity is perceived to undermine the purpose of national communion. Where these ingredients to a multifaceted society may be interpreted as conflicts of interest by some, Homi K. Bhabha "envisages a world in which cultures dissolve, deliquesce and lose their boundaries: the 'hybrid', produced by the mutual incorporation of previously separate cultures into something distinct from either of its origins is, for Bhabha, the truly creative and, indeed, the culturally procreative location of culture in the modern world" (Craig, *Intending Scotland* 221). Bhabha describes the "historical movement of hybridity as camouflage, as a contesting, antagonistic agency functioning in the time-lag of sign/symbol, which is a space in-between the rules of engagement" (Bhabha 277). Hybridity,

diversity and, indeed, plurality can, following this interpretation, be read as a secret weapon – the strength, and not the demise of Scottish culture, and Scottish literature in particular.

What results, though, is a certain degree of in-betweenness if considered in a postmodern light: "[t]he postmodern predicament is […] connected to a paradoxical situation whereby, on the one hand, there is a continual need by, for example, cultural nationalists, to view cultures and nations as 'entities' in some coherent sense, yet, on the other, where belonging and organic association are now fundamentally in question" (Bell 29). By questioning the entity of the nation, the way is cleared for a sense of fragmentation in the form of the issue that a national identity does not bear the same meaning and connotations for everyone, as is, indeed, the case with all kinds of layers of communal identification. It is, therefore, not surprising that themes like exile and estrangement are common traits in Gaelic literature, as exemplified in the novel under discussion. Whether the Scottish predicament can be viewed as a singularity in this vein at all, or it should rather be seen in a more open and global context, may remain a matter of debate. It is argued, though, that in postmodern terms, identity is no longer a given anyway because of the rigorous effects of globalisation and cosmopolitanism (see Bell 137), and might possibly be better off receiving some leeway for its interpretation.

With Scottish Devolution finally accomplished in 1999, after a failed referendum in 1979 and the movement for self-government regaining momentum during the economically challenging Thatcherite years, a certain degree of emancipation and political self-determination has been re-established. According to Tom Nairn, "[t]hrough devolution, the deficit in democracy has been partly remedied. But this has in turn unavoidably created a deficit in leadership, largely responsible for the uncertainty of the present moment" (32). The 'present moment' in Nairn's words being around 2004, Scotland has, since then, experienced a referendum on independence in 2014, with a majority of voters opting for staying in the United Kingdom. Only recently, there have been calls for another referendum on independence because of the pending Brexit-procedures that will, eventually (if finally implemented) end the UK's, and thereby Scotland's, EU-membership all in one go. It has to be kept in mind, in any case, that in 2016's Brexit-referendum, a majority of Scottish voters were against leaving the EU. What path, then, lies ahead for the Scottish nation, only time will tell.

### 2.3    The Highland Tongue: Language and Identity

Language is a vital and powerful means for communicating who and what we consider ourselves to be, and who we are not. We receive a name, as is customary, at birth, which is also acknowledged as our legal identity. "There are, then, two basic aspects to a person's identity: their name, which serves first of all to single them out from other people, and then that deeper, intangible something that constitutes who one really is, and for which we do not have a precise word" (Joseph, *Language and Identity* 1-2). Whatever expression is chosen to convey this meaning of 'who one really is' – and modes of designation tend to vary depending on the additional meaning resonating with it, or in which discourse it is addressed –, it is probably the term identity that sounds most familiar and applicable to the average person's ear. Whether for the purpose of certain scientific discourses the notion of identity is insufficient or too ambiguous, remains another matter.

Although it is a changeable, flexible and elusive parameter, personal identity is most effortlessly conveyed, first of all, in the language of initiation – a mother tongue, spoken by a group of people to which membership is acquired by birth.[2] This is where personal identity and group identity intersect; where – among other attributes – knowledge, values, and even prejudices against others are shared. "Your 'deep' personal identity is made up in part of the various group identities to which you stake a claim, though you no doubt believe there is still a part of you that transcends the sum of these parts," as Joseph remarks in *Language and Identity* (5). Indeed, it could even be argued that for each identity a person claims for themselves, there are countless other, different versions in the minds of others, "because everyone brings their own experience of life and of reading other people to bear in this work of interpreting the identity of those we meet" (Joseph, "Indexing" 144). In this regard, personal identity can be understood as a continuous and dynamic process, that is, as the interaction between a sense of self and the respective images provided by others.

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[2] Regarding the formation of the self, or the ego, a reference to Lacan's concept of the mirror stage is noteworthy. From the age of six months, the infant is able to recognise its own image in a mirror, yet comes to feel alienation, or fragmentation, in consideration of its own physical dependence on the other – the caring mother –, and, ultimately, regarding its awareness of its separateness from the latter:

> Die jubilatorische Aufnahme seines Spiegelbildes durch ein Wesen, das noch eingetaucht ist in motorische Ohnmacht und Abhängigkeit von Pflege, wie es der Säugling in diesem *infans*-Stadium ist, wird von nun an – wie uns scheint – in einer exemplarischen Situation die symbolische Matrix darstellen, an der das *Ich* (je) in einer ursprünglichen Form sich niederschlägt, bevor es sich objektiviert in der Dialektik der Identifikation mit dem andern und bevor ihm die Sprache im Allgemeinen die Funktion eines Subjektes wiedergibt. (Lacan 64)

Poststructuralist linguistics, according to Sally M. Silk, "sees the signifying act as one of continual displacement, and, as such, signification itself can be understood as an exercise in travel. Meaning threatens to escape control because the dynamics between signifier and signified are understood as unstable, if not antagonistic" (168). In her opinion, reading, writing, and signification can all be considered tropes of travel (see Silk 167), which suggests a parallel between the idea of the self as a continuum and the continuous transition at work in its linguistic representation. The motif of travelling apparent in Campbell's *The Nessman* thus not only illustrates movement through time and space, but also the continuous processes of linguistic expression and self-awareness and, indeed, the switching between languages according to discursive circumstances.

Seeing personal identity as the sum of various aspects of group identities and a – potentially divergent – self-identification can epitomise inner conflicts arising from this 'dilemma'. In-betweenness proves to be a common feature of Scottish Gaelic literature. In his essay "The Double Man", Iain Crichton Smith describes the inner conflict he felt as a writer publishing both in Gaelic, his native language, and in English, the language promising – not least due to a considerably wider potential readership – more professional recognition. Smith, a native of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, a Gaelic stronghold, writes about his first bilingual experiences:

> Though I have written much in English, in both poetry and prose and to a limited extent in drama, my native language is Gaelic. I did not learn to speak English till the age of five, when I went to school, and when I had to learn all my other subjects in English. I cannot now remember the actual process but that I did learn to speak English is evidenced among other things by this paper. In school I spoke English, in the playground I spoke Gaelic. And of course, I spoke Gaelic at home. […] It must, I think, be remembered that there was a social content here as well. To speak English to someone from the village which I grew up in was to make this person into a stranger, to make oneself in some significant way superior to him. The very fact that I had to learn English when I went to school was probably registered in some obscure corner of my psyche as an indication that English was superior to Gaelic. (136)

This glimpse into Smith's childhood memories already evokes a sense of disruption. As a speaker of a so-called minority language, he soon experiences the relative social value of the English language and, in contrast to this, the perceived devaluation of his native language. Furthermore, due to their relatively small number, as well as due to social and economic circumstances, speakers of Scottish Gaelic are nowadays almost exclusively bilingual, and – with the exception of strongholds like the Western Isles – they are not necessarily

inhabitants of the *Gàidhealtachd* anymore. Nonetheless, at this point it has to be kept in mind that "*Gàidhealtachd* identities tend to be maintained even when most of a person's life takes place elsewhere, and individual Gaelic language ability is again not the most important factor for belonging" (K. McLeod 199), as has already been argued above.

While this reflects the historically grown diversity in Scotland's linguistic landscape, with English, Scots, Gaelic, and other (minority) languages being spoken today, issues like linguistic emancipation and self-confidence, language death and language preservation policies surface – themes that are not only prevalent in political, but also in cultural and literary discourses. In the case of Gaelic, the language is not only spoken by a minority of people regarding Scotland's total population, but Gaelic speakers nowadays also tend to live in urban areas more and more frequently, where they are an even tinier minority and find limited opportunities to use their first language (see W. McLeod 144). Nevertheless, as Ian Brown suggests, "however diminished the native-speaker population has become, estimates of a quarter of a million learners do not suggest a language seen as culturally negligible or uninteresting" ("Entering the Twenty-first century" 215). The historical, cultural and symbolic value of the Gaelic language has meanwhile been recognised and paid tribute during the past decades, and measures to ensure its well-being as well as its spread and usage have been taken. "The movement to increase the extent to which Gaelic is used was strengthened by the setting up of the Scottish parliament in 1999, which legislated in 2005 for a new agency, Bòrd na Gàidhlig, to promote the acquisition and use of the language" (Paterson, and O'Hanlon 256). After devolution, a nationalist view of Gaelic has gained momentum, with tendencies towards seeing Gaelic as a symbolic national language of inherited merit, and ensuing measures to strengthen its position and public perception (see McEwan-Fujita 57). Nonetheless, in order to grasp the basics, it needs to be established and further explicated how the concept of Gaelic identity can be understood in linguistic terms.

Referring to John Edwards, "[t]he essence of identity is similarity: things that are identical are the same, after all, and the word stems from the Latin *idem*. And this most basic sense is exactly what underpins the notion of identity as it applies to personality. It signifies […] the fact that a person is oneself and not someone else" (19). Uniqueness somehow stems from differentiation, comparison and belonging; while certain personality traits are shared – within a community or coincidentally –, others are not. Uniqueness, in this regard, is inevitable. Because, howsoever, human beings are social beings and usually interact with

one another on a regular basis, "the source of personal identity is social. Identities are not formed *ex nihilo*, or through some kind of parthenogenesis" (Riley 16). Or, in other words, "[d]iscussing social identity as if it were an intrinsic quality of one person makes about as much sense as discussing the sound of one hand clapping" (Riley 87). Albeit a sense of self implies numerous, at least partly intrinsic variables depending, for instance, on the discipline of interest, the primary focus of this paper is concerned with the above-mentioned social, or communal, identity. The construction and representation of Gaelic identity in Campbell's *The Nessman* presupposes structures of membership and exclusion, shared images and estrangement, the 'we' versus the 'other'. As John Edwards suggests, "the importance of language as an identity marker at a group level is much more readily evident […]: everyone is used to accent, dialect and language variations that reveal speakers' memberships in particular speech communities, social classes, ethnic and national groups" (21).

While far from being the only distinctive marker of belonging to a group, language becomes a vital instrument of contrasting inclusion with exclusion. According to Philip Riley, "[t]he main areas of ethnolinguistics include the relationship between language and culture, communicative practices, and cognitive models of language and thought" (11). Thus, discourse becomes a major point of relevance in the study of linguistic identity. Meaning is created not only by conveying content, but also through the participants of communication, through the kinds of languages or varieties that are used, and also through the social circumstances in which discourse takes place. In this respect, it seems fitting to regard language not as a given, but as vibrant and very much alive: just as languages undergo changes in the course of time, they are able to convey a seemingly infinite number of meanings depending on discursive circumstances. As John E. Joseph emphasises, differences can also fulfil functions: "[r]esearchers have been analysing how people's choice of languages, and ways of speaking, do not simply *reflect* who they are, but *make* them who they are – and, in turn, how the languages themselves are made and remade in the process" ("Indexing" 140). Bi- or even plurilingualism are widespread phenomena not only in the Scottish case, and acts of code-switching occur frequently; they can "be used strategically by individuals for a variety of identity-related purposes: as an identity claim; to membership an interlocutor; for the inclusion or exclusion of others in or from a group; as an affirmation of group identity, and so on" (Riley 117). In this context, the term heteroglossia proves a useful concept and means of interpretation:

> This term, which we owe to Mikaïl Bakhtin (1981), refers to the coexistence within a single text of a multiplicity of language varieties or registers. In Bakhtinian stylistics, interlinguistic difference (i.e. differences between two languages) and intralinguistic difference (between genres and sociolects, for example) are relatively unimportant when compared to intertextual relations, of which heteroglossia and code-switching are major manifestations. (Riley 65)

According to Cairns Craig, hybridity in Bakhtin's definition of the term, which also represents a basis for Bhabha's idea of the hybrid, is a key concept in the language of the novel (see Craig, *Intending Scotland* 221), and proves useful in a Scottish (literary) context. Hybridization, for Bakhtin, "is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor" (Bakhtin 358). Hybridity and plurality, conceived in this vein, are not hindrances, but rather advantages in historical, social and cultural contexts, and allow for the translation and transition of meaning in a more diversified way. "Instead of being a weakness, the division of Scotland's literary heritage between a variety of languages and cultural traditions can be presented as its strength […]" (Craig, *Intending Scotland* 221-222). This reading's fundamental importance to Scottish literary criticism appears self-evident and will be addressed below in due course.

Exclusive membership of a single speech community is not the rule anymore. Bi- or plurilingualism have become the prevalent experience for a considerable proportion of people, with English as a lingua franca, for historical reasons, still on the rise. Linguistic identities may vary, or, to a certain degree, be chosen consciously according to social and professional circumstances, dialogue partner, and/or custom. Overlaps in collective identification are not at all anomalous: a native speaker of Scottish Gaelic may predominantly speak Gaelic at home, but resort to Scots or English if necessary or more fitting. Indeed, a wider choice of means of expression seems to be at the bilingual's disposal. But it may also impose a certain degree of restriction upon Gaelic speakers if they cannot use their language in circumstances important to them, or if they are forced to fall back to English for most of their official errands. According to Joshua A. Fishman, "[t]hus when use of one's ethnically associated language is restricted or denigrated, the users who identify with it are more likely to use it among themselves (and to organize in order to have it accepted and recognized by others) than if no such grievance existed" (154). This does not, however, imply that linguistic self-identification needs to be indicated by clear-cut

boundaries at all costs; a fluctuating continuum seems to be a more appropriate image. Indeed, reality shows the very reverse. "At both informal and empirical levels, there is ample evidence for speech *mobility*, whereby speakers select from their repertoire according to perceptions of situational constraints and demands. This is obvious among people who are bilingual or multilingual, but *all* people possess a range of speaking styles" (Edwards 27).

A plurality of languages, varieties and voices, or what could be called "the multilinguistic resources of Scotland" (Crawford 161), support the application of Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia in a Scottish context:

> Bakhtin's thinking on heteroglossia may provide a useful intellectual framework in which to view these contentions, for if language is normally made up of languages – if discourse is always a blend of discourses (scientific, demotic, jargons, dialects) – then, like Caribbean or Australian writing, Scottish writing, in which this blending is frequently explicit, becomes typical rather than eccentric. (Crawford 7)

Following this thought, Scottish culture in general, and Scottish literature in particular, can be understood as rich and diverse not only in the use of languages, varieties and styles, but also in the convergence of multi-faceted approaches to complex Scottish identities. This has been explicated rather poetically by Cairns Craig in *The Modern Scottish Novel*. "A Scottish culture which has regularly been described as 'schizophrenic' because of its inner divisions is not necessarily sick: it is engaged in the dialogue with the other, a conversation in different dialects, a dialectic that is the foundation not only of persons but of nations" (115). Moving freely and, indeed, purposefully between languages and discourses has become the norm rather than the exception. According to Ian Brown and Alan Riach, twentieth-century Scottish literature can be characterised as concerned for and playful with languages, as well as ready to transgress boundaries and genres, indeed as "stravaiging between fixed identities" (3), with the "[r]esistance to monolingualism [being] a key creative strand in Scottish literature" (5).

The aim of this paper is to analyse the portrayal of Gaelic identity in Alasdair Campbell's novel *The Nessman*. But can this concept, in all its complexity, actually be applied to fictitious characters in a fictional setting and framework? As John E. Joseph importantly reminds the reader, identities are, after all, constructed: "whether group or individual, [they] are not 'natural facts' about us, but are things we construct – fictions, in effect" (*Language and Identity* 6). Whether this construction is implemented more consciously, for example in institutionalised circumstances like religious communities, or it happens almost unperceived

in everyday social encounters – identity seems to build on multiple components that are in fact prone to change. It seems useful here to distinguish between an essentialist approach to language and identity, which presumes categories like nationality, class and gender as given, and a constructionist one that focuses on identity as a process, and in which individual belonging to any such categories is constructed (see Joseph, *Language and Identity* 83-84). By allowing for the generating and regenerating of meaning depending on the context, the notion of a process of identification illustrates the often blurred boundaries between categories of belonging that represent valuable focal points, but might oftentimes prove to be in flux. Although in a fictional setting there is no chance to interview the protagonist about who and what they think they are, the building blocks or layers of (linguistic) identity can be manifold and readily discernible to the reader. Gaelic identity is a principal theme in the novel under consideration; the way in which it is constructed, and what themes and motifs are employed to this end, shall be discussed below.

## 3 Scottish Literature(s)

Contemporary Scottish literature is characterised by a multitude of influences, genres, and voices, and has been of global interest not least since the publication of Irvine Welsh's infamous and acclaimed novel *Trainspotting* in 1993. Especially after 1980 (bearing in mind the watershed of 1979's first Devolution referendum), "fiction attempts a more positive vision of Scotland, increasingly working in new genres, mingling these in a determined contemporary eclecticism which simultaneously exploits older Scottish cultural and fictional traditions and breaks with them" (Gifford 237). The publication of groundbreaking novels like Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* in 1981 illustrates the willingness, if not necessity, to leave the path of essentialist realism behind, and hence to embrace so-called alternative 'otherworlds': "[a]s though in defiance of the historical reality in which it is trapped, the Scottish novel of the 1980s and 90s drew its energy from discovering a variety of routes into alternative ontologies where the imaginary can become real […]" (Craig, "Otherworlds" 268). Following Douglas Gifford, "[a]rguably, indeed, [Alasdair Gray] in particular moved Scottish fiction from dystopian despair and modernity to postmodernity and contemporaneity" (Gifford 245). By showcasing this newly found, eclectic confidence, Scottish literature has seemingly stepped out from the shadow of its more universally acknowledged big cousin, English literature – a shadow that it arguably used to inhabit due to a lack of recognition of its independence and, indeed, of its capability of representing a discipline of interest in its own right. While English literature denotes either all literature written in English, or focuses on the literature of England, Scottish literature "must be, if it is to make any sense as a term, the literature of Scotland as a geographical and political unit. That being so, it falls heir to, at the very least, three vernacular languages (Gaelic, Scots and English) […]" (Clancy 13-14). The prerequisites differ from those attributed to English literature, and Scottish literature therefore deserves, and indeed requires, to be considered in its own discourse, according to parameters fit for this purpose.

As Matt McGuire observes, "[i]n the literary life of the nation, recent Scottish writing can be seen as marking a definite break with the past" (3), a past that saw the achievements of outstanding Scottish writers as merely ornamental to the English canonical jigsaw puzzle. Berthold Schoene, however, poses the question "whether after devolution 'Scottishness' still remains a useful quality marker, viable identity descriptor, or suitable criterion for gauging

the canonical eligibility of an author or text" (8). After all, in postmodern, highly globalised, and multicultural times, the notion of Scottishness as a descriptive property of individuals or cultural categories might come with an outdated aftertaste for some; the concept of postnationalism has been suggested as a more suitable way to go beyond the limiting nature of national ideals. According to Eleanor Bell, "[i]n their depictions of Scottish literature and culture, […] many prominent critics have tended to generalise about nationhood and 'its' characteristics. Yet such notions are often limiting; they perpetuate stereotypes, odd overstatements, which have the ability to become accepted by many as national 'truths'" (51), bearing in mind Benedict Anderson's conception of the nation as an imagined community. But even if the national idea has already reached its sell-by-date (which, in the Scottish case, is – arguably – not likely, as suggested earlier in this paper), understanding the forces at work in Scotland's quest for a national identity remains relevant to the study of Scottish literature. In addition to that, it needs to be considered whether the term 'Scottishness' has kept – or even increased – its meaningfulness and eligibility in the context of literary criticism.

Berthold Schoene stresses the advantageous nature of Scottish culture in devolutionary times, and in the spotlight of postmodern and postcolonial debates: "[u]nder the aegis of a new zeitgeist not only suspicious of neat unities and entitative truths, but deeply responsive to processes of apparent cultural disintegration as conducive to democratic diversification, Scottish culture and politics came significantly to benefit and prosper" (9). In other words: "[d]iscontinuity and adaptability have become Scotland's cultural trademarks" (Schoene 9). What might readily be discerned as discontinuity, fragmentation, even brokenness in the nation's coming-of-age, seems to contribute to its openness to plurality and multiculturalism, indeed its ability to adapt to the challenges of a so-called postmodern society, especially in its contact with other cultural experiences. Along these lines, it seems beneficial not to despair in view of the sheer diversity within Scottish fiction, but to keep in mind that broad categorisations of geographical, cultural and social boundaries in the Scottish context might simply be unsustainable (see Gifford 237). An open mind, in this and every other context, might come in handy.

Accompanying a broader acceptance of the plurality of Scotland's language landscape, the transgression of linguistic boundaries is sought by authors like James Kelman or Irvine Welsh, who reproduce discursive and social reality by, for example, allowing the Scots

variety, urban dialect, or other sociolects to inhabit their rightful space in their writing. As Duncan Petrie observes:

> Following Kelman, Welsh reaffirms both the validity and necessity of the vernacular to convey both first-person subjectivity and third-person narration as a means of challenging the hegemony of standard English – the language of a political and cultural establishment from which his characters are estranged. This strategy also asserts a declaration of independence and equality, the right to convey ideas, emotions and interactions in the language through and in which these are experienced and lived. (90)

These changes in the perception of Scottish literature, or what could be called an "explosion of creative and critical energy within Scotland" (McGuire 9), were brought about by political, social and economic circumstances, accompanied by a newly found emphasis on the local publishing industry, with one of the most important among these circumstances still being the national question (see McGuire 9). Even so, it might also be argued that the diverse cultural and literary achievements of the twentieth century have, in fact, paved the way for a new national self-confidence. It has to be kept in mind, though, that not all contemporary writing is created in order to burden itself with "the ideological baggage and theoretical wranglings of cultural nationalism" (McGuire 11).

For Cairns Craig, who sees the application of the term tradition in the field of literature as debilitating for the writer in a pluralistic Scottish literary context, but as invaluable for the nation's self-identification (see Craig, *Modern Scottish Novel* 22), the tradition of the modern Scottish novel "is a space of debate, a dialogue between the interacting possibilities of a medium shaped by the conditions of those living in Scotland – its languages and its economic and social circumstances – and within the institutions which give shape to its national imagining" (*Modern Scottish Novel* 33). In Craig's opinion, "[i]t is the mixture of languages in dialogue with each other in Scottish writing that has made Bakhtin such a favoured resource for recent Scottish criticism. Bakhtin's conception of 'heteroglossia' can be deployed effectively as a challenge to those who see in the mixed dialects of Scottish writing an unavoidable weakness […]" (*Modern Scottish Novel* 88-89). In James Kelman's *The Busconductor Hines* and Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, to name just a couple of distinguished examples, heteroglossia carries meaning beyond the apparent intra- and intertextual levels; it even achieves to accentuate expressions of the self and the other, (linguistic) belonging and alienation. Bakhtin states the following about heteroglossia in the novel:

> The novelist does not acknowledge any unitary, singular, naively (or conditionally) indisputable or sacrosanct language. Language is present to the novelist only as something stratified and heteroglot. […] Thus heteroglossia either enters the novel in person (so to speak) and assumes material form within it in the images of speaking persons, or it determines, as a dialogizing background, the special resonance of novelistic discourse. (332)

Representations of linguistic diversity in the novel, such as the convergence of different patterns of discourse, styles, dialects, or even languages, mirror the complexity of Scotland's linguistic reality, and allow ample scope for debate on the repercussions of the diglossic experience. Following Robert Crawford, territorial identity, and poetic identity, respectively, are determined by what he calls a 'debatable land' – a dynamic border territory (11). Interaction with the other on many a level thus proves indispensable in the process of literary self-identification, and effectively ensures the well-being of a vibrant, multi-faceted culture that has seemingly been able to embrace the importance of cultural exchange. Scotland is not, after all, and surely cannot see itself as a lonely island in the face of cosmopolitanism and globalisation.

Whether Scotland's literary tradition can be described as an uninterrupted, homogeneous one, is, then, in fact a controversial question. Considering the great variety of languages, dialects and voices in the context on hand, it might even prove enticing to talk about Scottish literature*s* rather than *a* Scottish literature. Moreover, keeping in mind apparent fragmentations addressed in historical, social, and geographical discourses – like the Highland-Lowland divide, for example –, Christopher Cairney argues that "[t]he essentialist view of Scottish literature as a holistic product of a single literary tradition based largely on borders, once a commonplace of literary studies, has increasingly been called into question by Scottish cultural historians working especially on the twentieth century Scottish novel" (101). He thus assumes the location of problems of history and geography within ideology and reception (see Cairney 101). Matt McGuire, on the other hand, challenges the latter reasoning by highlighting the globalising modernity at work here: "[t]he insistence by Scotland's writers on moving between various traditions is what constitutes the specific intellectual and artistic space of the nation" (27). In this respect, in-betweenness not only loses its paralysing qualities, but also allows for the exploitation of the resulting creative benefits of plurality. Indeed, as Kirsty A. Macdonald suggests in connection with late twentieth-century Scottish fiction, "[e]xclusive perception would only provide misrepresentation, and instead heterogeneous possibilities are offered. Ambiguity,

interrogation and unsatisfied desire, rather than knowledge and resolution, become the motivation for reading" (153).

In spite of all plurality, as well as the artistic and linguistic innovation at display, however, the space inhabited by Gaelic literature within Scottish literature could actually be read as a rather unwieldy facet of the existing diversity. Notwithstanding the fact that Gaelic language, traditions, and symbols – indeed, a whole weaponry of imagery apparently unifying the Scottish nation and its mythologised roots – continue to play a vital role in a collective consciousness, the critical attention given to Gaelic literature seems stepmotherly to some extent. "There is a sense in which, similar to urban dialect, writing in Gaelic suffers from a form of double marginalisation, existing as part of a minority culture within the already marginalised field of Scottish literary studies" (McGuire 56-57). To a certain degree, this is hardly surprising due to the relatively small number of potential readers, even though there has been an upsurge in Gaelic publishing, not least on account of the efforts of local publishers like Ùr-sgeul, Canongate and Polygon, magazines like Gairm, and the Gaelic Books Council to emphasise and support Gaelic poetry and prose. It is, perhaps, even less surprising that linguistic marginalisation and language-related issues in general are prevalent themes in Gaelic writing. According to Máire Ní Annracháin, "[l]esser-used languages are frequently stereotyped as ethnocentric, provincial, and closed to any cultural alterity other than their own in relation to the dominant culture out of whose shadow they wish to escape" (89). She goes on to question this denial of authenticity ascribed to "all those aspects of a minority culture which it shares with the wider world" (Ní Annracháin 90). Again, this illustrates a certain degree of double marginalisation concerning Gaelic literature in relation to its assigned space within Scottish, and English literatures, respectively. In a postcolonial reading, there seem to be more than one subaltern strand at work within Scotland, as has been argued above; even within the Scottish nation, experiences with colonisation and dependence have been diverse, and their evaluation likewise ambiguous.

Despite the traditional emphasis on oral storytelling, songs, and poems in the *Gàidhealtachd*, Gaelic drama and prose fiction have been able to flourish, especially in the course of the twentieth century. What is most telling about its reception, though, is, as Moray Watson observes in his *Introduction to Gaelic Fiction*, "the lack of writing about [Gaelic] fiction" (*Introduction* 1). He continues to explicate:

> Culturally, linguistically, or practically, in fact, it may be preferable in many cases to write separately about Lowland and Gaelic literature. Difficulties arise, however, when authors forget that there is also non-Gaelic Highland-based literature (and that they are calling this 'Lowland Scottish') or when authors imply that there is no contradiction in suggesting inclusion or comprehensiveness in a Scottish context while energetically excluding and, in some cases, dismissing Gaelic or Highland literature. This is a form of cultural imperialism, a dismissive casualness to which Scots are already much-accustomed, albeit more commonly from a different direction. (Watson, *Introduction* 7-8)

Following this argument, the Gaelic author publishing in English on a Highland theme (or, conversely, the non-native speaker publishing in a language that is not his 'own', namely Gaelic) may effectively be in danger of falling through the cracks of literary reviews on either side of the story, as is probably the case with the novel under consideration, Alasdair Campbell's *The Nessman*. Even though his Gaelic work is considered in *Anglophone* research on Gaelic literature, his two books published in English are – if mentioned at all – mostly dealt with only in passing. It has to be stressed, though, that because the creator of this paper is not competent in the Gaelic language, no Gaelic sources were consulted for the purpose of this paper, and the respective perspective in Gaelic-language research can, unfortunately, not be considered here. Importantly, Watson suggests that "[s]pecifically, my instinct is that, while there are useful tools and techniques in many modern approaches to literature, there are none that entirely suit the Gaelic situation and this is because these methods have themselves arisen out of a need to explain and empower other literatures that share only some features with Gaelic" ("Gaelic Writer" 138). It is a somewhat double-edged sword, though, to attempt to consider Scottish literature in its entirety, on the one hand, while creating a theoretical framework suitable for the study of Gaelic literature, on the other. Beyond doubt, there are still debates to be had, and voids to be filled within this particular area of Scottish studies.

By the end of the twentieth century, Scottish Gaelic literature has experienced a perceptible upsurge in creative energy, as well as in its critical reception, not least owing to augmented publishing efforts and public attention. This move towards the mainstream, however, meant that authors from a Gaelic background were still faced with tensions created by the burning issues of language choice, or self-translation, respectively: "volumes were produced with facing translations, by the authors themselves. Moving onto a national stage demanded these authors compromise with their other tongue, a compromise that continues to be controversial" (Gardiner 191). In order to reach a wider audience, and to

make their literary work accessible to readers outside Gaelic-speaking communities, many Gaelic poets choose self-translation for these purposes – surely a daunting task, considering the diverging linguistic properties of English and Gaelic. On the other hand, as Corinna Krause puts it, "translations into the neighbouring majority language of English have been perceived as playing an important part in raising the awareness and profile of the literatures in question" (125). Other writers resort to including English texts in their oeuvre, and the reasons for such decision might be manifold. For many an author, however, such predicaments might lead to feelings of in-betweenness, fragmentation, or even remorse – an atypical symptom of a literary culture seemingly embracing linguistic diversity with enthusiasm?

## 4    The Author in-between Languages

Alasdair Campbell, born in 1941 in Ness on the Isle of Lewis and also known as Alasdair Caimbeul (but to whom shall be referred as Alasdair Campbell throughout this paper, for the simple reason of this being the name under which the novel *The Nessman* was published in 2000), stems from a Hebridean family of poets and writers – a dynasty, well-nigh. His father, Aonghas Caimbeul, nicknamed *Am Bocsair* (the Boxer), was a poet, as was his uncle, who was also named Aonghas, with the nickname of *Am Puilean.* Perhaps the most widely-known family member was Alasdair's brother, the novelist, poet, and author of children's literature Tormod Caimbeul, known as *Tormod a' Bhocsair* (Son of the Boxer) – a nickname that he shared with his elder brother. Alasdair Campbell's niece, Catrìona Lexy Chaimbeul, publishes in fiction, poetry and drama.

In addition to writing plays, short stories and fiction in Gaelic, Campbell also published the novel *The Nessman*, as well as *Visiting the Bard*, a collection of short stories, in English. While he might not be a critically acknowledged Gaelic-English author outside Gaelic circles, his importance within the Gaelic literary community is undisputed. The importance of locality, that is, rootedness, is a prominent theme in his English-language fiction and becomes even more apparent in the significance of transition – in the form of travelling, of switching between languages, even between islands and the mainland, as well as between strands of belonging –, which is itself a widely-used topic, especially in Highland literature. Whereas bi- and multilingualism are, nowadays, readily acknowledged as valuable economic and social assets in a polyglossic conjuncture, the situation might prove not quite as straightforward for an author primarily writing in a minority language. The choice of a language of publication, in such a case, may have a multitude of reasons, including political and cultural statements, the desire to reach a wider audience,[3] public acknowledgement, linguistic eligibility, or, simply, artistic freedom – a quality surely highly esteemed in a pluralistic society like the Scottish. "While bilingual publishing is the norm for Gaelic poetry, thus increasing its readership considerably, this is not the case for prose," as Macleod and

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[3] In his essay „The Double Man", Iain Crichton Smith mentions, among other reasons, the economic necessity for a full-time writer to publish more and more in English: "For myself, the solution I have taken is to write in two languages but less and less in Gaelic, and this for a reason which may appear to you naïve. It is a fact that I am a full-time professional writer, and that there are too few openings in Gaelic for me to make a living from writing exclusively in that language. Economic factors govern cultural ones to an extent greater than we often dream of. And thus I am a double man riddled with guilt" (140).

Watson observe in this regard ("In the Shadow of the Bard" 273). With a clear-cut answer to the question of language choice seeming impertinent if not answered by the authors themselves, such premises can, as a matter of course, expose writers to considerable pressure, as well as to experiences of ambivalence and in-betweenness. As a result, even feelings of guilt might surface, as expressed by acclaimed Gaelic and English author Iain Crichton Smith in *Towards the Human: Selected Essays* in 1986:

> To write in English becomes a form of treachery and this is so because Gaelic does not have the strength to allow explorations into another language beyond itself. If Gaelic had that strength then for someone from within to write in another language would appear the most sublime form of self-confidence; to introduce new ideas, new concepts, would be a service which would be analogous to the introduction into English of foreign words, fresh philosophies. (qtd. in Watson, "Gaelic Writer" 140)

It is an interesting thought to bind a literature's (linguistic) strength to its ability to welcome and include new ideas, and, in effect, works in a differing language; yet, other than in the context of public reception, this tends to prove rather challenging considering the traditionally institutionalised means of interpretation applied in the field of Scottish literary criticism.

Being able to express the Gaelic experience in their favoured mode of linguistic expression has become essential to most writers from a similar background. Or, in Moray Watson's words:

> To commit ourselves to treating Gaelic as if it were an entirely unique phenomenon is as much a mistake is [sic] it would be to commit ourselves to treating it as entirely analysable along pre-existing paradigms. As Smith might have put it, Gaelic literature is a real literature in a real culture. And, as he might also have put it, part of that cultural content extends far beyond the imagined boundaries of the Gàidhealtachd. Part of that extended cultural context is the Anglophone Highlands and part of it is the rest of Scotland. ("Gaelic Writer" 153)

While the quote above illustrates the wide-ranging influence of Gaelic culture within the *Gàidhealtachd*, as well as beyond its 'imagined boundaries', and thus depicts its apparently unifying quality, the profound significance of locality for the understanding of the complex notion of Gaelic identity can actually produce further impressions of estrangement, of doubleness, or in-betweenness. Considering the fact that most Gaelic-speakers nowadays live outside of the traditionally Gaelic Highlands and Islands, which holds true for many writers as well – the term 'diasporic literature' springs to mind in the context of several waves of emigration throughout Scottish history –, the prevalence of themes like exile in so-called Highland literature does not come as a surprise. In his essay on alienation and

community, Alex Thomson identifies two contrary critical approaches to this characteristic of contemporary Scottish fiction. While some commentators understand negativity and alienation in this literary context as merely reflecting social reality, others believe the so-called literature of alienation to be challenging political communitarianism (see Thomson 161-162). Whereas such debates on estrangement and exile are often characterised by a negative bias, examples of ensuing quests in fiction – even if eventually unfulfilled, or taking a dystopian turn – can, in the figurative sense, serve as individual coping strategies, and thus acquire a more positive meaning. A quest can, for example, imply an active effort to find, albeit not always specifically targeted, one's place within a changing society. For Thomson, "the loss of community – meaning something like the sense of common belonging that guarantees mutual co-operation – is a prior historical and social fact. Literature can either merely reflect this loss, or by giving it expression can help to combat it" (162). Contemporary Scottish fiction is surely engaged in this combat, as many examples show, even if this means leaving behind outdated, purposefully created visions of tradition, long believed to be carved in stone, thereby allowing for diversity to generate meaning. According to Eleanor Bell, "[t]he aim of contemporary Scottish literature is to emphasise individuality and intra-communal difference rather than to construct dubious all-in-one myths of a nationalist quality" (144).

In Alasdair Campbell's only English-language novel to date, the main character's journey of alienation plays a central role. With the protagonist being torn between his Gaelic roots growing up in a tight-knit island community in the Outer Hebrides and his cataclysmic experiences at Aberdeen University on the Scottish east coast, the reader learns about Colin's quest for and, indeed, struggle with coming to terms with his individual self, his place within a community and culture, and, perhaps, the potentially destructive nature of such a lifelong undertaking. Although comparably detailed and frank insights into Gaelic communities are rare in Scottish English-language literature (see Macleod, "Gaelic Prose Fiction" 149), Campbell's *The Nessman* is, thematically and stylistically, relatively similar to his Gaelic works insofar as it is "imbued by a strong quintessential 'Gaelicness'" (Macleod, "Gaelic Prose Fiction" 149-150). Markers of Gaelic identity are well-represented on a thematic level throughout the novel, as well as on a linguistic one. The (oftentimes almost

self-referentially critical)[4] use of Gaelic references, phrases, and even longer passages that remain without translation into English leave the reader without Gaelic language skills in a position between familiarity and exclusion, thus hinting at the protagonist's growing up in-between two languages.

As Campbell's style can be described as "unorthodox, informal and avant-garde" (Macleod, "Gaelic Prose Fiction" 150), with the novel's structure and narrative becoming increasingly agitated and interruptive towards the end – analogous to the main character's growing alienation and inner conflicts –, *The Nessman* can be seen as a postmodern coming-of-age narrative. Although the first chapters introduce a rather stereotypical Gaelic insular village setting, the narrative gradually moves away from what could be seen as the makings of a straight-forward and easy-going 'story'; due to increasing disruptions, identity has to be redefined constantly. Michelle Macleod reminds us that "albeit solidly anchored in one small, relatively remote community, Campbell's […] writing must not be regarded as parochial: the themes they tackle are at once locally unique and universally relevant" ("Gaelic Prose Fiction" 156). Like his brother Tormod Caimbeul's, Alasdair Campbell's Gaelic works[5] are usually characterised by a humorous and ironic tone; they are rooted in a Lewis background, to some extent potentially semi-autobiographical, and they could, in a way, be subsumed under the label of 'village fiction' (see Macleod, and Watson 275). In a review of Campbell's Gaelic novel *Am Fear Meadhanach*, the author was accused of having

> […] deliberately based some of his characters on real people from the Ness community, including other writers and teachers, and [of showing] these in an unfavourable light. It would be difficult for anyone from outside the community to verify whether [the critic] MacThòmais was correct in his identification of real local people or to guess where Caimbeul's inspiration for characters came from, but MacThòmais is right in suggesting that the characters are rounded, lifelike, and interesting. (Watson, *Introduction* 102)

Though the term 'village fiction' might hold true for some of his writing in Gaelic, his English novel *The Nessman* offers quite postmodern traits in addition to well-tried qualities of

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[4] In a short subchapter entitled 'LANGUAGES', the reader learns about Colin's first experiences with Latin in secondary school in Stornoway, and about his humorous attempts to introduce his family back home to the particulars and opportunities of this – yet another – language. After an episode of digressions, everyone finally agrees about the uselessness of Gaelic for Colin's future career, as first suggested by his mother:

> 'Gaelic!' she exclaimed. 'What good is Gaelic to him anyway? What good did Gaelic ever do any of *us?*'
> 'You're right there, Mary,' said John the Battler.
> 'I remember what old Thomas used to say. "Gaelic?" he used to say. "Leave her behind you on the quayside the day you leave the island" …' (Campbell, *Nessman* 119)

[5] For an overview of Alasdair Campbell's Gaelic oeuvre, see Watson's *An Introduction to Gaelic Fiction*.

'village literature', which makes the term only partly fitting in this case. Based on the theoretical framework established above, the following chapters intend to identify the motifs of Gaelic identity in Alasdair Campbell's *The Nessman* in order to analyse their construction within the novel, as well as their wider socio-cultural significance*.*

## 5    Motifs of Gaelic Identity in *The Nessman*

This paper is intended to examine the portrayal of Gaelic identity in Campbell's *The Nessman* by analysing the motifs employed to this end. While in the course of the following chapters Gaelic identity shall be regarded as the superordinate theme, it is indeed sustained by, and intertwined with, other themes common in Gaelic, or Highland-based literature, respectively – first and foremost, the themes of alienation and exile. As has been suggested by Alex Thomson, "the stylistic and critical distinction of the new Scottish fiction of alienation rests not simply on its ethical orientation towards individual rather than community, or its rejection of the Romantic model in which literature is conceived as the imaginative recreation of community, but on its specific forms of equivocation on this issue" (162-163). In this respect, Campbell's *The Nessman* represents a particularly yielding object of investigation, considering its powerful portrayal of a young man's rite of passage, and the thus resulting quest for his self that requires the constant checking, crossing, and renegotiating of boundaries of belonging. The obvious discrepancy between his rootedness within an insular community customary associated with rather idyllic images and the protagonist's gradual journey into estrangement is reflected in the form of certain motifs in the novel that are essential for the construction and deconstruction of Gaelic identity. Effects of brokenness and in-betweenness of varying degrees are easily discernible in the narrative, and as such they appear to be symptomatic of the issue's afore-quoted equivocation.

The significance of recurring motifs creating such meaning will be analysed in respect of their linguistic potency, as well as their expressiveness in form and content within the scope of the text. Their relevance considering the social, historical, political, and cultural contexts introduced earlier shall be elaborated on in due course, allowing for a view on Gaelic identity based on the novel, but also beyond the text. The aim of a rudimentarily interdisciplinary, culturally-critical approach to the literary analysis of *The Nessman* is not only to identify and scrutinise the motifs of Gaelic identity, but also to highlight their prevailing relevance to various aspects of contemporary Scottish society and culture, thus mirroring the interdisciplinary, and, actually, likewise personal, universal, and ungraspable nature of the notion of identity. Due to the comparatively limited number of secondary sources referring directly to the novel under investigation, the principal focus pursued in the subsequent

literary analysis will be on the intratextual analysis of motifs of Gaelic identity, with reference to the theoretical prerequisites established earlier in this paper.

In his short story *Visiting the Bard*, Alasdair Campbell introduces a Gaelic poet who is being interviewed by a student of Celtic studies. The bard's soliloquy unearths a rather defeatist view of Gaelic identity:

> A Gaelic proverb just came into my head. Better a patch than a hole. Ancient wisdom of the Gael. No, leave the top off. Look at that hand. Steady as a rock, cut finger or no cut finger. Doctors? Stay away from them. Start hanging around doctors' waiting rooms, lawyers' offices, Gaelic colleges, you're done for. Teachers! Jesus! Lecturers! But then, you're already in the Gaelic world. Saoghal nan Gaidheal.[6] You'll end up a professor. Why not? You can't speak the language. Which gives you a good headstart. A poet, then. A nua-bhard.[7] Everyone in the Gaelic world – all these smooth commentators, leeches, salaried termites – are poets. It's a poetic language. They write about feelings. Perhaps a novel? Unbearably cute people who never were talking interminably about nothing in an idyllic landscape that never existed. Or a commissioned, quintessentially Gaelic play, wittily entertaining yet serious, which explores questions about faith and identity, the second sight, the Clearances, language and culture, the herring fishing, Presbyterianism, alcoholism, traditional song and story, the mischievous spirit present in every modern Gael and the music of the great bagpipe. […] Slaint'![8] Gaelic's done for. Is the tape on? (Campbell, *Visiting* 113)

In this extract, Gaelic – the 'poetic language' – seems to serve, or, actually, is accused of being abused to serve multiple stereotypes. And, indeed, it is of utmost importance not to *reduce* Highland literature to a handful of well-known and easily attributed features. There are, on the other hand, several motifs that consistently reappear in Gaelic and Highland literature – apparently for a reason. They certainly deserve as much critical attention as other, more generally occurring motifs in Scottish literature, since they are telling arguments for the complexity of Gaelic identity. That 'Gaelic is done for' is a symptomatic and reflective statement, perhaps delivered in a fictional context in order to encourage the, mind you, English-speaking reader to question their maybe to some extent gridlocked opinions on, and expectations about, Highland-based literature. Language, idyllic landscapes, faith, alcoholism, storytelling, the Clearances, or herring fishing – the unknown bard's choice of examples anticipates many of the motifs prominent in *The Nessman*. Consequently, the chapters below will address the motifs of language, storytelling, journeys, death, religion,

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[6] "World of the Gaels" (my translation).
[7] "A new poet" (my translation).
[8] "To your health!" (my translation).

and alcoholism, respectively, for the purpose of an examination of the construction of Gaelic identity in the novel under consideration.

Supposedly growing up around the same time (see Galbraith 295) in the same remote insular environment,[9] the author Alasdair Campbell and his protagonist Colin probably share similar experiences with linguistic initiation and identification. While Gaelic is his mother tongue – the language he uses to communicate with his family and community of origin –, Colin soon finds out that the language of learning, of bettering one's economic situation, is English. The resulting in-betweenness, especially when he leaves the island in order to try his luck at Aberdeen University on the mainland, becomes glaringly apparent in the novel's form and content, as well as in numerous untranslated Gaelic-language inserts in the otherwise English-language narration. "It is perhaps not surprising […] that issues relating to language – language loyalty, language death, language shift and the relationship between language and identity and language and location – are common in modern Gaelic poetry" (Macleod, "Language and Identity" 167). The same holds true, as can certainly be argued, for Gaelic and Highland-based fiction.

As anticipated in the quote above, a close interrelation between language and the motif of death becomes evident in *The Nessman*. In addition to that, death has a profound significance within the religious framework of the Free Church, ever-anticipating and fearing the wrath of a just God, as portrayed in the novel. His uncle, the minister, takes every opportunity to remind young Colin of what awaits the disobedient and the self-centred – those who do not believe, but question. While throughout the narrative, the young protagonist encounters death in a very literal sense on many occasions – the death of his father, the slaughtering of a wether, the funeral of a distant relative –, he is also confronted with more figurative meanings of death: the 'death' of his native language, the 'death' of his Gaelic identity, the end of relationships and communal belonging, the finite but desirably deep alcohol-induced slumber. The destructive social and personal effects associated with alcoholism are oftentimes addressed by contemporary Scottish writers. In her 2004 novel *Paradise*, to name just one prominent example, A. L. Kennedy describes the promise of a utopian standstill that drunkenness offers to her protagonist Hannah (see Lehner 296-297). Hannah reflects on what makes instances of drunken forgetfulness so desirable: "[t]he trouble is, you can't ever know this condition personally, because, more deeply than any

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[9] Alasdair Campbell was born on 27 May 1941 in Ness on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides.

other drunkenness, it makes you go away. I assume that its bliss comes mainly from this absence of yourself – it burns you up completely and grants you the grace of a temporary death while it curls up and rejoices in your soul" (Kennedy 247). In *The Nessman*, Colin struggles with comparable demons, and the psychosocial consequences of alcohol abuse are reflected in the novel's increasingly fragmented narrative structure and its constantly alternating point of view. This welcome dissolution of the torn and unresolved self prompted by drinking becomes an integral part of his journeys.

Travelling as a motif allows for a variety of interpretations: it can stand for a transition between languages, a journey through time, the constant quest for, and renegotiation of, identity, as well as the act of travelling between places. In the case of *The Nessman*, the Isle of Lewis, Colin's first experience of communal belonging, becomes a *Sehnsuchtsort* while, at the same time, eluding his return in the course of his journey of alienation. In his essay on "The Lonely Island", Timothy C. Baker elaborates on this topic:

> Islands, as many critics have noted, are places of shifting relationships, whether it is between ideas of centre and periphery, land and sea, or insider and outsider; they navigate the space between exile and belonging, between modes of expression and languages, and even between genres. Islands, in this formalist and aesthetic conception, present a way of rethinking the relationship between the individual and the community, and between differing views of history and cultural memory. (25)

If the quest for one's personal identity is considered a continuum and therefore an abiding journey, places of identification become fluctuating, but meaningful parameters in the process of self-identification. The island, in this reading, gains additional meaning by contrast. Belonging might outweigh exclusion, or vice versa. When considering that this process of navigating between exile and belonging described in the quote above might be meaningful, prolific, and destructive at the same time, categorising the representation of Gaelic identity in Campbell's *The Nessman* turns into a daunting, yet fruitful task for the reader. As Iain Galbraith asserts in his epilogue to the novel's 2018 German edition, *Der Junge aus Ness*, "'[n]iemand ist eine Insel, in sich ganz; jeder Mensch ist ein Stück des Kontinents, ein Teil des Festlandes', schrieb der Dichter John Donne zu Beginn des 17. Jahrhunderts. Doch eine Insel ist genau das, was aus Colin wird, getrennt von seiner Insel und einer Gemeinschaft, in der er die Ordnung der Dinge kennenlernte" (298).

The "localisation of significance" (Watson, "Idea of Island" 2) in the *Gàidhealtachd*, that is, the importance of Gaelic tradition in the form of, for example, ancestry, genealogy, the "shared heritage of storytelling" (D. MacDonald 280), as well as a common myth history, is

apparent throughout *The Nessman*. It is a close-knit insular community that Colin is born into, and where he acquires a first understanding of 'the order of things'[10], as referred to by Iain Galbraith in the quote above. His formative years are characterised by what for some might constitute the core essence of Gaelic identity: tight communal bonds that are strengthened through a social and cultural emphasis on heritage, tradition, history, myths, storytelling, and "die auf den Hebriden und im schottischen Hochland weitverbreitete Obsession mit der Genealogie im küchensoziologischen Sinne" (Galbraith 291). While these bonds can be positively powerful forces in the process of identity formation, they can also have a smothering effect on a juvenile's quest for who and what they really are, as becomes apparent in Colin's resulting journey of alienation.

## 5.1 Language

On one of the rare occasions of an encounter between young Colin and his terminally ill father depicted at the beginning of *The Nessman*, the two of them share a moment of reflection and almost silent understanding. As if intending to bequeath his legacy upon his son, Colin's father wishes the latter to remember a specific Gaelic term for a natural phenomenon they experience together:

> 'Dad, why is the top of the ben moving like that? Where it meets the sky?'
> 'That's a heat shimmer,' his father said.
> Together they looked out at the ben.
> 'It's like … at the edge of a bonfire. When you look at the edge of a bonfire.'
> 'There's a Gaelic name for that,' his father said. 'Na luin.' He said it very softly. 'Now you say it.'
> 'Na luin.'
> 'Will you remember it?'
> 'Yes.' (Campbell, *Nessman* 7-8)

Metaphorically speaking, his father's impending death foreshadows the very real threat of language extinction; this seemingly casual chat, however, also conveys reason for optimism by trusting the next generation with taking care of their Gaelic heritage.

It is Gaelic – his mother tongue, the language of his parents and ancestors, his language of initiation – that apparently has such a prolific effect on the protagonist's journey of self-identification, indeed his quest for finding his place within the so-called 'order of things' in

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[10] In reference to Michel Foucault's *Die Ordnung der Dinge*.

the course of the novel. Because the language of publication is English, the instances in which Gaelic is integrated into the text in the form of shorter or longer insertions, mostly untranslated, but oftentimes self-explanatory in context, have a profound effect on the reader's perception of Colin's origins and development. They prove essential for a grasp of the linguistic situation not only within the *Gàidhealtachd*, but also for those who consider Gaelic their first language and live elsewhere. "Although the amount of Gaelic in the [novel] is in no way prohibitive of a non-Gaelic speaker reading and understanding them, its presence could be perceived awkward or intrusive," as Michelle Macleod observes ("Gaelic Prose Fiction" 150-151). Even though the possibility of the author thereby addressing an intended readership (see Macleod, "Gaelic Prose Fiction" 150) cannot be excluded, it is, however, rather likely that instead of implying exclusion, Gaelic language is employed as a conscious stylistic feature, thus mirroring the dichotomy between inclusion and exclusion – indeed, a certain degree of in-betweenness – often associated with the theme of Gaelic identity. The notions of language and identity are not static entities on their own (*islands* as such), but they vary depending on their social and cultural context, for instance, and they are prone to change over time. The insertion of untranslated terms, phrases, as well as references to traditional Gaelic songs and poems is not interruptive, but rather highlights the situationally changeable nature of linguistic identity. Just as Colin notices at some point in a rather absurd, but very humorous chat with his class mates about the misreading of a certain word in the lyrics of a Fats Domino song, resulting in the boys' transferring the song's setting to a fishing boat in Hebridian waters, sometimes one simply has to resort to Gaelic:

> '"I found my sked, on Blueberry Hill".'
> 'She would have to be called The Blueberry Hill,' said Looper.
> 'Then it wouldn't rhyme,' said Angie Brommy. 'Hui!' he asked. 'Where are you going?'
> 'Out of here,' said Colin. He turned at the door to deliver an opinion. He had to revert to Gaelic.
> 'Cuiseachan-chac[11],' he said. (Campbell, *Nessman* 162)

In any case, evidences of bi- or multilingualism are the norm rather than an exception in so-called Highland-based literature, as is notably exemplified by the linguistic composition of the novel under discussion.

Growing up in the Outer Hebrides, a Gaelic-language stronghold to this day, Colin becomes aware that his mother tongue is not the one to be used in school regardless, and it

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[11] "Beschissenes Zeug" (trans. in Campbell, *Junge aus Ness* 300).

is not the language to guarantee academic success and social bettering, either. Poignantly, he is thus reminded by John the Battler, a neighbour, when he presents the Latin workbook he is equipped with in secondary school in Stornoway, the largest settlement in the Outer Hebrides, back at home in Ness: "'Forget about Gaelic from now on, scholar,' he said. 'This is the lingo for you.'" (Campbell, *Nessman* 119). The further he distances himself from his place of birth – emotionally as well as physically –, the more aware he seems to become of his linguistic heritage, and the in-betweenness he is exposed to during his adventures on the mainland, respectively. Despite the language's unofficial status as national language and symbol of national identification, Gaelic is a minority language spoken by a relatively minute proportion of Scotland's total population. Consequently, issues of value, self-confidence, or in- versus exclusion might not be unknown to its native speakers, who might find it impossible to express themselves in their first language in many a social, professional, or administrative situation. At Aberdeen University, Colin and a fellow student witness a rather pretentious argument between a couple of students of Moral Philosophy:

> 'Now *that*,' said Donald Angus Graham, 'is what *I* call a conversation!'
> He shook his head irritably.
> 'That's what we came to university to do. To learn new things. To learn to speak like that.'
> 'We'd get off with the beautiful blonde too,' said Colin, glancing at the next table. He turned back to Donald Angus Graham's pouting, irritated face. 'Anyway, why worry?' he said. 'It's not your language.'
> 'What do you mean, cove?'
> 'What?'
> '*Your* language, you said.' Donald Angus Graham's face had gone dark red with anger.
> 'What do you mean, *your* language?'
> '*Our* language, then.'
> 'That's not what you said. You said *your* language.'
> 'I meant *our* language.'
> 'No, you didn't. You meant me, *my* language. Gaelic-speaking plodder. That's what you meant.'
> 'I didn't, Beefy.'
> 'You didn't mean yourself. You didn't include yourself. English is your language, not Gaelic, and you're so good at it.'
> 'Gaelic is my language too.' (Campbell, *Nessman* 189)

In addition to personal issues of self-esteem, deep-rooted prejudices against members of the Gaelic community are stirred up in this conversation; the stereotype of the 'Gaelic-speaking plodder' and Gaelic island-dwellers being predestined to earn their living as comparatively uneducated crofters is thus mirrored within the marginalised group itself in terms of a

(forced) sense of self. As has been mentioned above, personal and group identities can overlap; moreover, one's personal identity is affected by the sum of group identities one relates and belongs to. And just as communal interests can overlap, they can also sometimes clash in their contrasting characteristics. Memberships of differing language communities might lead to inner conflicts if the respective emphases are not balanced for whatever reason. In this way, Gaelic identity is, almost naturally, confronted with disruptions caused by the contrast with the social and cultural prevalence of the English language, as is illustrated in *The Nessman*.

Boundaries between categories of belonging are not always clear-cut; meaning is generated and re-generated constantly as a result of changing contextual variables. A multitude of potential group memberships, linguistic ways of expression, as well as the opportunities offered by language choice and code-switching render the question of linguistic identity particularly interesting in the Scottish case. Although the polyglossic Scottish situation with English, Scots, and Gaelic, as well as a multitude of other minority languages of migratory backgrounds being in use alongside various sociolects and dialects comes along with a certain imbalance between the languages and vernaculars as employed in particular contexts, the available linguistic plurality, then again, proves advantageous to a modern, multifaceted, and cosmopolitan society. This diversity is reflected prominently in Scottish literature; especially Gaelic and Highland-based literary texts are rich in examples of heteroglossia according to Bakhtin's definition. In a chapter tellingly entitled 'The student calendar' in the last third of the novel, it becomes more and more obvious to the reader that the main character, the 'Nessman' Colin, is already quite far along in his journey of alienation. This is illustrated not least by the – to some extent – unconventional typography and fractured nature of the passage's narrative structure: diary entries intermingle with letters and short authorial narratives in a seemingly random way – chances of a complete overview are slim for the first-time (and even for the more experienced) reader. During the depiction of this phase of Colin's seriously disrupted life as a student, he describes his Aberdonian host family in a letter to his brother in the following manner:

> Bruce is Bob (known as Aal Bob) and Margaret (Meg). We communicate. Me: Well … I'm off now. Meg: Fessen the pints o' yir sheen, loon. Me: Pardon? Meg: Yir pints is lowsed. Me: What? Aal Bob *(at window):* It's fair abeen. Me *(wary):* Aye … Enter Watty, husband of Maud, son-in-law of Meg and Aal Bob, they live upstairs, a mechanical genius. Watty *(holding aloft right hand dripping with blood, thumb sticking out at obtuse angle)*: [sic] Far's the aye-a-deen? Aal Bob: Michty begod,

> Watty min, fit's adee? Watty: I wis knypin' on atat Fordie, ken, an' gied it a richt yark. *(howls at ceiling)* Maad! Me *(exiting discreetly):* Well … cheerie the now … *(tripping over shoelace in doorway)* Jesus! … (Campbell, *Nessman* 184-185)

This slapstick-like, rather entertaining episode epitomises the semantic and textual value of heteroglossia, especially, but not exclusively, in a literary discourse. In this very case, the clash between a Gael's English and his hosts' Aberdonian/Scots dialect leads to a failure of mutual intelligibility, and results in a shoelace-induced accident. Inter- and intratextual difference creates ample space for debate, and thereby reveals that language, by its social nature, is very much alive at all times, and as such open to, and, indeed, dependent on change. The same, as could be argued, holds true for linguistic identity – Gaelic identity, in the case of the 'Nessman' Colin Murray.

While language diversity can result in humorous occurrences, it also allows for realistic reflection on, and depiction of, such serious concerns as language marginalisation and language death, which are, as has been discussed above, oftentimes prominent themes in Gaelic and Highland-based literature. The narrative's first two thirds are set on the Isle of Lewis, and the close connection between locality and language in this *Gàidhealtachd-*environment is perceptible throughout these passages, as becomes obvious, for example, whenever songs, poems, and stories are told, or history is conjured. There is no way of reproducing these moments of shared tradition without resorting to quotes, place names, utterances, or genealogical identification in Gaelic – even in an English-language text. Yet as the plot progresses, Gaelic language employed in the text becomes increasingly linked to Colin's cataclysmic experiences, mostly related to alcohol misuse; it turns into the language of his longing, but, at the same time, into the harbinger of the implausibility of his return to his *Sehnsuchtsort* – his island.

In the chapter 'The student calendar' that precedes the last two shorter chapters, the reader stumbles across Colin's last diary entry headed 'September'. This is a very confusing, almost dreamlike, sequence of memories occurring to Colin while he is hitting the bottle, apparently at home in Ness – even though the degree of reliability granted to the author of these diary entries has become questionable by this point in the narration. With the point of view alternating between authorial and first person narrator without any clear indication, the protagonist's memories and dreams are intertwined and follow no particular order. They are what they appear to be: trains of thoughts hastily brought to paper. His thoughts sweep from his first crushes at school, the songs they had to learn, his dying father being angry

about all the singing in the house – "[h]is dying father is astir" (Campbell, *Nessman* 233) – to his relatives dying in World War I, the story of the first wireless in the village, and episodes of his student life in Aberdeen. He reminisces about beginnings and ends, about youth and death, his apparent estrangement from the community he grew up in, that is the island that provided him with stability, whilst simultaneously making him question the very idea of community (see Baker 27). In his student calendar, Colin takes the following notes for the month of September:

> Rain rained through the roof of the old barn. Shiny pools of it formed on the black earth floor. Wind whined through the gap in the end wall, wrinkled the pools, flailed among the rafters. He unscrewed the top of the whisky bottle and took a swig.
>
> 'S fhada, 's fhada thall tha mi …[12]
>
> 'Why are you sitting there?' a little girl asked him in English.
> 'I don't know.'
> 'Are you tired?'
> 'Tired, yes.'
> 'Are you *very* tired?'
> 'Yes, very tired.' (Campbell, *Nessman* 232)

Here, the reader witnesses a 'very tired' Colin, indeed. Although his mother urges him to climb down from the barn he has manoeuvred himself up to, he is reluctant. He seems unable to return to the fold – he is already 'too far away'. He is woken from his slumber and dreams, and discovers that he has wet himself. Childlike, yet haunted by his past choices, the protagonist ends up, and remains, where he finds himself to be: "[h]e lay on his back. Sang dumb" (Campbell, Nessman 240). He has already distanced himself too far from the safe harbour of belonging in the course of his quest for who he really is, or rather wants to be, respectively. In this context, the notion of 'discursive homelessness' suggested by Sally M. Silk, whereby she understands "the process by which the narrative voice seeks representation of its own fragmentation" (168), seems noteworthy. The narrative voice – in this case that of Colin, a frequent writer of diaries and letters – allows for an insight into the main character's inner turmoil and disruption, and for an idea of the apparent inevitability of his departure from home, his journey into exile. A hero[13] vanishes gradually, just as his language – his means of expressing his thoughts and innermost feelings – is in danger of vanishing, little by little. Again, neither for the first, nor for the last time in the novel under

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[12] "Weit weg, weit weg bin ich …" (trans. in Campbell, *Junge aus Ness* 301).
[13] Referring to the previous chapter's title, 'Heroes', which narrates Colin's adventurous hitchhike from Stornoway to Ness.

consideration, Colin has to resort to Gaelic: "'[s] fhada, 's fhada thall tha mi …"[14] (Campbell, *Nessman* 232).


## 5.2   Storytelling: Narratives of Belonging

As discussed earlier, language is not the only effective marker of Gaelic identity, especially in a sociological context; ancestry and residence in the Scottish *Gàidhealtachd* are usually considered equally significant. The affirmation of Gaelic identity is, as research shows, most potent in a combination of these parameters. The importance of concepts like kinship, genealogy, ancestry, heritage and storytelling, which are subsumed under the broad topic of narratives of belonging in this chapter, for self- and group identification appears rather obvious. These notions are often closely connected to a romantic image of Gaeldom, perhaps even prone to the perpetuation of stereotypes. They are, in any case, factors of considerable significance in Gaelic communities to this day, and as such common motifs in Gaelic and Highland-based literature.

The novel *The Nessman* can be considered a challenging read for several reasons, one of them being the abundance of genealogical references from the very beginning. The collective emphasis on family and kinship becomes obvious in the introduction of a multitude of side characters and the recital of names merely in passing – the term name-dropping comes to mind in this regard. "Ness writers, in particular, have had a major impact on recent Gaelic writing, to the extent that much of their work almost assumes a universal knowledge and understanding of Ness frames of reference," as Moray Watson observes in this regard (*Introduction* 105). This is why the text under consideration might present a challenge to the non-Gaelic reader who is unfamiliar, for example, with Gaelic naming patterns. In *An Introduction to Gaelic* Fiction, Watson explains their significance, as well as their structure, as follows:

> A *sloinneadh* is a version of a person's name which also describes aspects of his/her background, especially in terms of the family: a kind of genealogical nickname that is a shorthand way for people to explain their family and kinship connections when they meet. Although not used to the same extent today as it was in the past, it is still common for people to be known by a *sloinneadh* that would include the names of father and grandfather [...]. Because of the small stock of first names and surnames in

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[14] "Weit weg, weit weg bin ich …" (trans. in Campbell, *Junge aus Ness* 301).

many Gaelic communities, this *sloinneadh* often gives people a more accurate identification than using their full, registered name. (*Introduction* 191)

It is evident in Campbell's novel that these nicknames are not limited to genealogical matters; they can be descriptive of physical features, places of origin, professions, or simply particular skills. At some point, Colin introduces himself as one of the Boxer's sons[15] from Dell, which is a part of Ness (see Campbell, *Nessman* 172). Thus, the act of naming someone becomes more than merely a legal arrangement; by its social nature, a *sloinneadh* can reveal additional information about someone's blood relationships and group affiliations. Therefore, the keen interest in genealogy, which is especially common in the Western Isles, does not come as a surprise, and becomes apparent in *The Nessman* when Colin's extended family assembles to brood over his question about a possible kinship with his favourite primary school teacher, with whom he happens to share a surname:

> Colin wanted Miss Murray to be related to him, because her surname was the same as his father's, but when he asked in his granny's house one afternoon if she was, they all started talking at once, aunty Annie at the stove, his granny at the dresser, uncle John in the doorway that connected the house and the barn, aunty Isobel (unseen) from the livingroom, arguing and putting one another right, raising their voices, […], and they were still at it when Colin went home for his tea, but he gathered amid the hullaballoo that he wasn't related to Miss Murray at all, or if he was it was far removed, and likelier to be on Miss Murray's mother's side than the Murrays [sic], or his own great-grandmother's people in Eoropie, if they were the same Macleans. (Campbell, *Nessman* 76-77)

The issue of sharing on a small, familiar scale gains further impetus when considered on a communal level. The sharing of ancestry, heritage, traditions, values, and even traumatic experiences like, for instance, the Highland Clearances, serves the purpose of group identification, and thereby strengthens the feeling of belonging among its members by highlighting the 'we' in contrast to the 'other'. Memory thus gives important grounds for upholding the community's merits, albeit it needs to be kept in mind that the boundaries between memories, history and so-called myths are usually not clear-cut. While Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities is usually applied in discourses on national identities, it can also prove meaningful in the discussion of smaller units, like Gaelic communities, or communities in a village setting, as he suggests: "[i]n fact, all communities

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[15] Interestingly, Alasdair Campbell's father was known as Am Bocsair (the Boxer), and both he and his brother are called a' Bhocsair (Son of the Boxer) – a potentially autobiographical parallel between author and text.

larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even they) are imagined"
(6).

Common narratives of mythological, historical, social, or artistic origins are important means for communicating tradition. In this manner, the tradition of storytelling, deep-rooted in the Highlands and Islands, represents a vital marker of Gaelic identity to this day, even if a growing interest in the *céilidh* house has found new impetus only in recent years. As Donald Smith suggests in *Storytelling Scotland*, "[s]tories are sequences in time but they are not time-bound. This is because they encapsulate memory and memory is the human faculty which works constantly to instil emotion, meaning and value into the sequence of happenings" (1). In this regard, shared memories represent a powerful opportunity to strengthen a sense of belonging, and storytelling can be seen as a key ingredient to Gaelic identity.

In contrast to the more common definition of the *céilidh* as a get-together for socialising and dancing, the Hebridean *céilidh* house is a place for the sharing of stories, songs and poems in its original sense. In this spirit, stories fulfil a crucial role in Alasdair Campbell's *The Nessman*; they are recurring motifs throughout the novel, they illustrate the historical importance of shared oral narratives in Gaelic communities, and they sometimes present themselves as coping mechanisms and benchmarks in times of discontinuity and disorientation. In the chapter 'Christmas Eve', young Colin's family assembles on a stormy night, and stories are being told, retold, and questioned; by cherishing this tradition, family bonds appear to be strengthened. No topic is misplaced; among the more popular themes[16], a certain fascination with the supernatural world is noticeable – some ghost story or other always seems to be at hand:

> 'What's that?' their mother asked. 'What did you say?'
> 'Ghosts,' cousin Dolly muttered. 'Don't hear much about ghosts these days.'
> 'True,' said John the Battler. 'At one time in this village itself, dammit, there were ghosts at every turn of the road – you couldn't set foot outside the house for fear of them. Where have they all gone to? That's what I'd like to know.' (Campbell, *Nessman* 35)

Whilst the local ghosts appear to have exceeded their prime, they are still very much immanent in the stories conveyed. Just as they are accused of haunting their victims in a past long gone, Campbell's protagonist seems to be haunted repeatedly by the ghosts of his

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[16] For more detailed information on common topics, themes, and motifs of storytelling, compare Donald Smith's *Storytelling Scotland: A Nation in Narrative*.

past as the narrative progresses – by the ghosts of a collective memory that he finds, in the course of his journey, increasingly difficult to incorporate into his sense of self.

Throughout the novel, Colin seems very conscious of – at times even preoccupied with – established emblems allocated to the purposes of Gaelic and Scottish national identification, with the latter being, to a large proportion, of Highland origin. Especially in the course of an advanced stage of estrangement, he is concerned with the potentially ambivalent nature of Gaelic symbolism, which mirrors his own inner conflict in a stage of transition (that is, his relocation to urban Aberdeen on the mainland). In a letter to his younger brother included in the agitating chapter 'A student calendar', Colin devises the outline for a short and rather absurd play accompanied by quite stupefying stage directions possibly intended to take the idea of Gaelic symbols of identification ad absurdum by establishing a confused myriad of associations with Gaelic identity. He thereby succeeds in satirising the discrepancy between the role of Highland culture as Scotland's national heritage and the actual fate of those living in the *Gàidhealtachd*, having themselves been experiencing marginalisation – in fact, double-marginalisation within Scotland within the British Empire – in the course of the past centuries. His conscious exaggeration of prevalent stereotypes might even serve as some kind of coping strategy in his current state of disruption. Although Colin's thoughts seem to skitter away in the form of letters, soliloquies and diary entries in this ambitious chapter, which can probably be attributed to his mental crisis and a critical level of alcohol consumption particularly noticeable towards the end of the narration, his acute awareness of the stereotypical connotations inherent in his enumeration of symbols of Gaeldom remains striking to the reader:[17]

> He is dressed in a white, double-breasted suit of many buttons, with the following Gaelic symbols – a peat, a swede turnip, a black wellington with the top folded down, a Hattersley loom, a peatiron, a tractor, a headscarf, a swagger coat, a pair of bootees, a bunch of bogcotton, a sprig of heather, an English stranger, a butterdish (Present from Yarmouth), a tin of sheep dip, a packet of size, a distemper brush, a tweed bonnet from Buth Allan Martin, a bobban stocking, a Bible, a wireless accumulator, a dynamo and three-speed, a pair of Lybro dungarees, a poke of bachelor buttons, a canister of black striped balls, a tea caddy, a tin tray, Mac an t-Sronaich's cave in the Bens of Uig, a screwtop of MacEwan's Pale Ale, a half-bottle of

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[17] This passage, among several others in the chapter 'The student calendar', appears to contain references to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and its so-called 'Cyclops' episode in particular (see Joyce 280-330). The latter exhibits a preoccupation with the faces of nationalism; enumerations of nationalistic and religious elements, as well as of symbols of Irish tradition, are amply employed. Campbell, like Joyce, seems to be taking the excrescences of nationalistic symbolism ad absurdum by letting monotonous streams of associations carry arguments (and perhaps meaning) away.

> Spey-Royal, a hairless dog, a headless hag, a half-sleeping hero up on one elbow, a tobacco knife, a Port Line gansey, an Ayrshire cow, a black hat, a Sunday suit, a chamberpot, a pan loaf from J. & E., an Albion van minus the wheels sitting on concrete blocks and converted into a henhouse, a bottle of M&B tablets, a Kerr's pink potato, a sack of drowned kittens, a stob, a strainpost, a can of 3-in-1 oil, a *Shorter Catechism*, a split haddock, a salt herring, a three-legged pot of crotal dye, a tilley, a battery torch, a waterbutt and a necklace of limpet shells – deftly sewn into the fabric by nimble, needle-threading fingers. (Campbell, *Nessman* 196-197)

The passage above is being quoted in full length because of its force of poetic expression, as well as its relevance to its creator's agitation. This composition of very seizable, reproducible and common symbols of Gaeldom, abreast rather abstract and even disturbing images usually attributed to Gaelic identity, contrasts Colin's self-image with attributes apparently imposed upon him, hence portraying the contrast in perception between the self and the other. The symbols listed above can be allocated to categories like items for every-day use ('a peatiron'), stereotypical ('a salt herring') and even humorous, seemingly random objects ('a sack of drowned kittens', 'an Albion van minus the wheels sitting on concrete blocks and converted into a henhouse'), as well as artefacts emblematic of motifs of Gaelic identity as interpreted in this paper ('a Bible', 'a half-bottle of Spey Royal'). The 'English stranger' seems to stand out in this list; he nevertheless serves as a means of communal identification by exclusion of the outsider: the Englishman, oftentimes pigeonholed as socially and economically favoured for historical reasons, who uses his advantages to buy land and move to his idyllic *Sehnsuchtsort* in the Highlands and Islands, for example, is recurrently portrayed as a badly integrated and disruptive factor in Highland-based literature, thus evoking lingering memories of colonization[18].

This unfinished revenge play, as described by the fictional author himself, is supposed to produce "a great deal of blood later on" (Campbell, *Nessman* 199), thus arguably foreshadowing the protagonist's creeping breakdown of some sort. In fact, Colin is adamant that "[t]hese are the first two scenes of a play [he] shall never finish" (Campbell, *Nessman* 198). In this way, he seemingly makes concessions to the – to him – somehow unfinished

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[18] As is the case in Kevin MacNeil's original, island-based 2005 novel *The Stornoway Way*, for example:

> Maybe it's appropriate. Like Native Africans and Native North Americans and Aboriginal Australasians, we Gaidheals were stripped of the rights to our own land, our own heritage. In our case – most humiliatingly – we were rounded up like sheep to make way *for* sheep. Treated like the scum that scum wipe off their boots so that other scum can look down on them. Our language, code of dress, social structure, customs and land all stolen from us. (Legally, according to laws that had nothing to do with the laws we already lived by.)
>
> Nowadays, colonized by a nation of shopkeepers, we're a nation of shopkeepers' assistants. (128)

business of his Gaelic identity. A couple of characters are introduced in this text fragment, among them a sad Descartes and a certain Alex Dan "dressed in a white, double-breasted suit of many buttons and Gaelic symbols" (Campbell, *Nessman* 197-198), a feature that cannot possibly go unnoticed since it is repeatedly referred to within the play. Two minimalist scenes conjure up Alex Dan's struggle and ensuing defeat, upon which he continues to reflect. The striking evocation of Gaelic identity on several meta-levels – in a play reproduced in a student calendar included in a novel[19] – supports the idea of the protagonist's somehow ambivalent condition on the one hand, as well as the impression of Alasdair Campbell's own preoccupation with Gaelic identity on the other. Authorship seems to be employed as a motif in its own right to this end.

In his essay on contemporary Scottish fiction of alienation, Alex Thomson reflects on the role of tradition in this context:

> The concept of tradition is predicated on an understanding of community – of the consciousness of shared cultural characteristics which relate the members of a social group in more than merely pragmatic ways. When tradition is under stress, the precarious tie between aesthetics and community may fracture in ways which expose the fragility of the claims of either as resistance to modernisation processes." (165)

One of the symptoms of Colin Murray's journey of alienation can be identified as estrangement from his rootedness in the *Gàidhealtachd*, the place of his communal initiation. Just as coming of age is an underlying theme in *The Nessman*, the 'coming of age of tradition' is evident in the novel, in the figurative sense of tradition being prone to change over time as a matter of inevitability, in the same way as identity is not an irrevocably specified given per se, but rather prone to change itself. When tradition is under stress, a community might feel the pressure of loss of group identity. Fractures might surface in previously tied bonds that are nothing less than essential for group membership. It is no surprise, then, that measures have been taken to revive Gaelic traditions like storytelling (analogue to efforts in Gaelic language preservation policies, for instance) by providing ample support and fruitful environments for their well-being.

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[19] Compare James Joyce's 'Circe' episode in *Ulysses* (408-565). Set in a brothel, Bloom's delirious escapade is depicted in the form of a play. Allusions to Joyce's text in Campbell's *The Nessman*, especially in the chapter 'The student calendar' that describes the protagonist's alcohol-fuelled student days, are likely.

## 5.3    Religion

Religion is a strong, recurring motif in the novel under discussion. The concept of a wrathful, but just God puzzles Colin as a boy, haunts him as an adolescent, and in the novel's wonderfully constructed last chapter entitled 'The letter', the reader learns that Colin has finally disappeared into exile – his whereabouts being only vaguely known to his relatives –, yet he still inhabits a place in his granny's prayers. Religion is a powerful example of institutionalised group membership. Not only does it represent a frame for communal identification through the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, through events like confirmations, weddings and funerals, but it also oftentimes plays an important part in family life and education. At his granny's house, the protagonist once encounters a congregation of relatives and friends in devotion: "[i]t was the Communions time; the kitchen was full of cooking smells and Christians," as he observes pragmatically (Campbell, *Nessman* 84). In the case of the Isle of Lewis, as well as the Highlands in general, the establishment of the Free Church in the course of the Disruption of 1843 still resonates in collective memory, and it is to this day closely associated with these areas. The Disruption meant "a secession away from the Church of Scotland on the part of many of its Highland congregations and ministers," as a consequence of growing unease with the nobility's and established church authorities' sanctioning of the Clearances (MacKinnon 66-67). Whilst the introduction of the Free Church thus serves as a symbol of defiance and Gaelic communal identification, the *modi operandi* within ecclesiastical structures have repeatedly been addressed critically in so-called Highland fiction.

According to Houston and Knox, the 1940s and 1950s (presumably Colin's childhood years) saw an actual rise in church involvement, with 59 per cent of Scottish adults being church members as late as 1951, as opposed to 23 per cent in England and Wales (see Houston, and Knox xli). This indicates the church's profound influence on everyday life in Scotland at that time, particularly in rural areas, like in the Free-Church stronghold of Lewis. As mentioned earlier, tangible items like the Bible or the *Shorter Catechism* have become symbols of Gaelic identity for Colin Murray, possibly also owing to early indoctrination at school. On several occasions in the novel, hymns are recited, and biblical stories are quoted, especially in a school environment. Alasdair Campbell, in a number of instances, acutely describes the *Befremdung* triggered in young Colin by depictions of an almighty God acting

according to his strict rules, which leaves the boy in fear of expressing his own reflections on the topic. In primary school, Colin is told by his teacher that "[…] God is good, He made you, and He can do what He likes with you, visit you with boils or scrips if He wants, out of His mere good pleasure, and just as your father and mother and even your teachers sometimes do things to you which you think are bad and cruel, but are really for your own good, so it is with God […]" (Campbell, *Nessman* 87). The reader here witnesses notions of fear and the urge for obedience – the fear of turning into an outcast because of failing to comply with everybody else's conception of a truly Christian life. Presumably, the continuous exposure to, as well as the demanded overwhelming subservience to a concept as complex and difficult to grasp as religion, can have a profound effect on a child's sense of self.

After all, "[c]ommunity, largely associated with a traditional agricultural way of life whose members live in small towns or villages, is held together and functions on the basis of historical and affective ties with as its foci, the family, the church and the neighbours" (Riley 181). Functioning in accordance with these parameters can, indeed, prove challenging for a young person's quest for self-identification. In Colin's case, religious influence is present on many levels that are, moreover, closely intertwined. The reader learns about the protagonist's family's religious ties, with one of his uncles being a missionary in South America, the other a minister of the Free Church, in addition to the apparent ubiquity of religious devotion practised in school – a place of utter importance, not least due to the large amount of time therein spent, in a person's formative years. In a tragicomic account of Colin's personal crusade against the ordinary tomato and his teacher – the Lisper – in boarding school in Stornoway featured in the tellingly and at the same time ambiguously named chapter 'Growing pains', a certain discrepancy between moral support and the oppression of individuality seems to surface:

> The Lisper closed his eyes. 'Your grandfather was a missionary,' he said. His voice suddenly sounded weary. 'Your uncle is a minister of the gospel. Your father, before his passing, was a godly man. And you! … You! … How many poor creatures in the world this minute,' he asked, opening his eyes, 'would be glad of that tomato? How many poor creatures in the world this minute would raise their hands to heaven and make a joyful noise at the sight of that tomato? And you! … You! …' He handed Colin the fork. 'Take it!' he said urgently. 'This minute!' Colin took the fork. 'Now,' the Lisper pointed at the three remaining segments of tomato on the plate. 'That is a tomato. But it is not any tomato. That is God's tomato. God's gift, to you, of a tomato. What does God want you to do with that tomato? Answer me, Murray!'
> 'I don't know, sir.'

'He wants you to eat that tomato. Eat it, and be glad.' (Campbell, *Nessman* 130-131)

His defiance of 'God's tomato' gets young Murray into quite a bit of trouble. As a consequence, he is punished by detention and arduous household tasks; in addition to that, he can no longer attend the same church as his fellow students, but from now on has to go to his forefathers' and father's church, the Free Church, twice every Sunday, thereby learning to value tradition, belonging – and obedience.

While the novel's rather traditional structure of a coming-of-age story, narrated in a third-person point of view, has, up to this point, seen only occasional 'interruptions' in the form of shorter anecdotal interludes that are separated from the main text by the use of italics, the ensuing section of this chapter, 'PENANCE', introduces a rather different, rather avant-garde style that heralds the main character's 'growing pains' and disruptions in his journey of alienation. Indeed, Alasdair Campbell's unorthodox and often informal style epitomises the character's inner turmoil (see Macleod, "Gaelic Prose Fiction" 150). In this almost delirious episode, Colin's interior monologue recounts a visit to his uncle's church, characterised by an elliptical, adjectival and metaphorical style. His meandering thoughts, the use of the personal pronouns 'I' and 'you', as well as the lack of accentuation of direct and indirect speech, epitomise this erratic stream of consciousness evoked by his church attendance. This sequence of digressions comments not only on the protagonist's perception of the church's and its visitors' peculiarities, as well as on other, school-related thoughts, but it also highlights his feelings of being out of his element:

> *And and and is this the Reverend Murray's nephew?* The Lisper, behind me, riding shotgun: Yeth. *Is that so? Well well. Well well.* Long grampus stare into my phizog. You'll know me the next time. I hate this. I hate this more than anything. Dried bloodspot on his collar, permanent tight knot in the shiny black tie. For Sabbaths and funerals. He hangs it on the wing mirror of the dressing table, slips it over his head like a noose. *And and is he … are we … a blessed boy?* The Lisper: No. Faces of the members turn to gaze on you in passing: feel my own face reddening. The adherents. (Campbell, *Nessman* 135)

Colin's distancing himself from this practice of affirmation of communal belonging is sure to cause further, even more disturbing trouble further on. When he and his elder brother Alan, both at that time residents in student accommodation in Stornoway, are summoned to attend the funeral of a distant relative, they are not only unwilling to go, but also have to face their minister-uncle's anger at the funeral gathering for disclosing a lack of faith in public. This is the more noteworthy because uncle Myles himself used to suffer from a crisis

of faith due to his brother's (that is, Colin's father's) serious illness and premature death, of which the reader becomes aware in a previous chapter of the novel. Now, he holds his nephews accountable for their failure to attend church on a regular basis, as would be decent for them, or, as he chooses to put it, for not being "holy boy[s]" (Campbell, *Nessman* 151). Uncle Myles cries out and addresses the boys, "'[w]ho must – in their own words – *sometimes* – go to church. What a penance –' he turned to Alan and Colin '– what an *ordeal* – that must be for you! To have to go, against your will, to God's house, on God's day, among God's people, to hear God's word[']" (Campbell, *Nessman* 152). He goes on to paint a dark picture of the boys' future endeavours:

> [']Go your ways; follow the road of your choosing. Find and keep fast to a like-minded company; mock God's people; play the freethinking swaggerer, the violent atheist, and let the laughter of fools be your sanctuary and solace. Be sure to keep in the daylight, you will be brave as a lion there. Do not waken in your bed at midnight, in the dark, alone; for your boldness will desert you then, and your quick tongue cleave to the roof of your mouth in terror. And I, your father's brother and least of God's servants, bear witness against you in this, as I shall bear witness against you on that final day, when he comes, no longer God the all-forgiving, no longer God the all-merciful and forbearing, no longer the God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life, but God omnipotent, God almighty, the God of justice and of vengeance, provoked and offended deity […'] (Campbell, *Nessman* 155)

And indeed, sleep will steer clear of Colin that night.

Closely connected to the motif of death that will be discussed later on, the notion of fear – in this particular case the fear of the wrath of God, as well as the fear of turning into an outsider because of failing to comply with the community's rules – becomes a formative experience for the novel's protagonist. "The intense, inescapable structure of the conflict of the fearful and the fearless in the Scottish novel negates any notion of progressive history: humanity lives under the curse of the unending repetition of the same inescapable dialectic," as Cairns Craig observes in this regard (*Modern Scottish Novel* 57). The recurring motif of fear proves to be a powerful and disruptive force, and plays a crucial role in Colin's journey into isolation. Albeit humans are, by their very nature, social beings, the deep-rooted need for conformity and acceptance can be outweighed by the irresistible urge for individual expression. His upbringing in a – to him – paralysingly strict religious environment has a considerable influence on his Gaelic identity, yet it sees him off on his quest for his own, individual, sense of self.

## 5.4    Journeys

Beyond doubt, Ness on the Isle of Lewis[20], eponymous to the novel's title and the starting point for Colin's journeys, has had a substantial impact upon the formation of the latter's sense of self. The place's remarkableness has been passed down for generations in the form of songs and stories of old, as the reader witnesses, for example, when on Christmas Eve, young Colin's family and neighbours gather around the fire and have an animated discussion about Ness's most exciting past:

> 'It must have been a nerve-racking stage of the journey, this village, in the old days, when you think of it,' uncle Dan said. 'Sentinelled by ghosts at both ends. Hardly were you over the shock of not seeing the Old Woman, coming *into* the village, before you'd be getting keyed up again at the prospect of not seeing the Old Man, less than half a mile *out* of it.'
> 'There wasn't another village in the island like it,' said uncle John. 'The *island?* No, nor anywhere else in the … *world!*' (Campbell, *Nessman* 44)

This tongue-in-cheek account of the place's ghost-ridden past is revealing in many aspects: it highlights the vital importance of Gaelic tradition, shared experience, as well as a common myth-history within the community, while, on a rather more interpretive level, it also foreshadows Colin's own adventurous quest, haunted (or not haunted?) by the cunning ghosts of the past.

The journey as a motif, as indicated earlier, allows for several, partly more abstract connotations; it epitomises the transition between languages and between identities, and it stands for movement in time and space, as well as, in the present case, the transition from boyhood to manhood. Indeed, as Duncan Petrie suggests, "[w]hile Scotland clearly has no necessary cultural affinity with such a universal concept as childhood, the problematic relationship between the identities of 'child' and 'adult' in films and novels inevitably assume [sic] a particular resonance in the context of Scotland's own uncertain status as a nation" (162). Thus, narratives of childhood and, in the present case, narratives of coming-of-age, offer the opportunity to draw parallels between the theme of growing up – the difficult issue of finding one's place in the world –, and the wider subjects of national, communal, or individual identities. The theme of a child being let down, in whatever way, by

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[20] Actually, the island is called Lewis and Harris; it is, however, commonly separated into two regions, perhaps for topographical reasons. Ness is the northernmost community of Lewis and consists of a number of villages. As is apparent in the *The Nessman*, there seems to be a strong sense of belonging to either Lewis or Harris displayed by their respective inhabitants, thus the expression Isle of Lewis is in use, although technically imprecise.

their family or community, frequently results in an often heroic, often desperate, process of struggle for coming to terms with the world, as well as for opportunities for improvement (see Petrie 182). Just as a real-life journey may be delayed, detoured, or redirected, the 'Nessman's' quest for identity represents a work in progress, a continuum that symbolises his commute in-between communities, according to circumstantially changing parameters of identification. Conflicts of interest seem inevitable when the concept of belonging is put to the test as Colin navigates between his Gaelic roots and his Scottish national identity as a student on the mainland, where he, among other subjects, studies British history, ultimately ending up in exile somewhere in England (presumably Southampton), having lost touch with his family and community of origin.

In recent Scottish island writing, "[t]he island can […] be seen as both the ground of community and as a space in which the very idea of community can be questioned," to borrow Timothy C. Baker's words (27). The discrepancy between romantically idealised visions of island life and social realities of changing communal structures, population ageing, unemployment and thus resulting work-related migration to urban areas, the pending 'death' of a traditional Gaelic way of life – all in all, a rather desolate representation of changing social structures as often depicted in Scottish literature –, is mirrored in a discourse on island writing which tends to emphasise binary oppositions (see Baker 27). Indeed, the island as a place of identification gains additional meaning by its contrast to the mainland. In the epitaph-like introduction to Colin's aforementioned student calendar (which is, in itself, yet another allusion to the frequently employed motif of death), on the other hand, the island is evoked as his place of (be)longing, in contrast to Aberdeen on the Scottish east coast, "*the grey granite city where he lies*" (Campbell, *Nessman* 183):

> *He is gone on a long voyage over perilous seas, Colin, son of Angus, son of Alexander, son of young Murdo. Where he lisped in infant numbers, had his first fitful erection, grew to pimply young manhood, knows him no more. Long shall the brown bog lament, long the black eye of creation bubble in molten sorrow. The sure shank of him, the keen nostril, the screwed-up eyes and the tickler-sucking mouth. Blow, wind from the west, bringing all the smells to him and all the sounds; and rain from the west, fall gently on him, in the grey granite city where he lies.* (Campbell, *Nessman* 183)

Wind and rain, the untameable, inescapable, and reliable companions to island life, are called upon to bring solace to Colin Murray, who has abandoned his home, and, in a way, his Gaelic identity in order to pursue his fortunes in the big city, the oil capital of the north, and

thus a different, more modern way of life. Leaving behind his island – or, what Moray Watson refers to as a "Gaelic 'first environment'" ("Idea of Island" 1) – even results in the protagonist's own isolation and alienation from both his community of origin and his current place of residence, where he seems to fail to gain a foothold. His disrupted condition even takes form in a potentially psychological crisis, presumably being met with a critical level of alcohol consumption as a means of self-medication. According to Baker, the idea of the island can, per se, be viewed as a location of in-betweenness – "between land and sea, but also between myth and modernity, and between varying notions of time" (29). He continues to observe that "[e]specially within a Scottish literary tradition, however, there is a linked and opposed perspective in which the island stands for a unified culture that is either unsustainable or must be left behind" (Baker 29). Communal bonds have become too tight for Colin's individual development, thereby arguably rendering his return after exile impossible.

While the importance of regionalism and *Gàidhealtachd* communities to the concept of Gaelic identity is undisputable, in the case of *The Nessman*, the island gradually turns into a source and, consequently, a symbol of the fragmentation experienced by the protagonist. Colin is familiar with travelling, in its basic sense, from a young age – running errands for his family and discovering his surroundings in the way children are wont to do. He gets used to journeys to and from boarding school in Stornoway, a town some distance away from his home, but still a familiar, Gaelic-speaking environment on the same island. In the chapter 'Heroes', the novel's hero spends his holidays – supposedly his last holidays before leaving for university – at home in Ness, where he enthusiastically engages in leisure activities. Late one night, after a boozy escapade with a comrade in Stornoway, Colin really feels like an all-conquering hero when he decides to walk the twenty-four miles back to Ness – after all, the chances of a lift appear slim to him. Cheerfully, he embarks on his proud adventure:

> Later, they were in the Black Glen.
> 'We must take positive action,' MacDougall said, sitting on a low wall and unscrewing the vodka bottle.
> Later – out at the Water House – he said:
> 'Start hitching from here.'
> 'Going to walk it,' said Colin. 'Son of a Gael.'
> 'Heesht …'
> 'Son of a Gael. Going to walk it.'
> […]

He set off at a great pace, swinging his arms. This was the thing to do, by God! By God, yes! The road stretched out before him, into the moor, a faint grey ribbon. There it was. He couldn't see it very well. Never mind. On both sides of the road was black night. He strode on, the wind in his face, swerving violently back into the centre of the road whenever his foot hit against one or other of the verges. He was walking home! Twenty-four miles! Twelve to Barvas, twelve after that to Ness. Nothing to it! His granduncle Norman used to do it all the time, in the old days. (Campbell, *Nessman* 169)

Fuelled by the keenness of youth, the bravado of drunkenness, and driven by the juvenile urge to redraw boundaries, the 'son of a Gael' knows no fear. The act of travelling, to him, at this moment, becomes an end in itself. Even though everything around him is concealed in pitch darkness, he is familiar with his surroundings, knows the smell and noises of the moor by heart, just as he is aware of the fact that this path has been followed by his ancestors before him. His undertaking, in a way, holds symbolic value beyond the liberating properties of travelling: he, the 'son of a Gael', is used to defiance, the same way that the Gaels have had to get used to resistance (or resignation, respectively) in the face of historical experiences of colonisation and marginalisation.

His adventure, then, takes an abrupt turn when Colin is, after all, offered a lift by Black Dan, a former local footballer and as such one of the protagonist's childhood heroes. All heroism becomes questionable in consideration of the circumstances of this curious ride: for the glimpse of an eye, the obviously inebriated driver occupies the role of a fatherly figure in place of Colin's own father, whom he lost years ago. After the exchange of pleasantries (that is, genealogical details), what unfolds is a conversation in itself riddled with such binary oppositions as mentioned above. Black Dan first shows a kind of 'paternal' interest in Colin's adventures at school, his prospects of entering university, and the latter's experiences with girls; he also advises the young man to stay away from boozers like the friend with whom he was seen earlier. The driver's reliability, however, soon becomes doubtful, considering his mood swings, their unexpected detour to Borve, the disturbing stories he shares – not to forget about the fair bit of drunk driving, of course. The island, as Colin learns, denied Black Dan a further education. The islander waffles about ghosts, and he does not want to let go of his newly-found drinking companion. When they stop just a short distance from Colin's home, the driver randomly relates the story about him and his mate once raping a girl in this very village – disturbingly introduced by the phrase "I'll give you a laugh" (Campbell, *Nessman* 180). In contrast to this rather agitating incident, what awaits the young

protagonist on the mainland are, allegedly, fresh opportunities. While the village, the whole island, are asleep, Colin is eager to stay awake and move on:

> At the gate of the house, he stopped and leaned weakly against a gatepost. He didn't want to go in yet. The village was asleep. On the windows of all the houses in Dell facing him, the blinds were down. In Aird, too, on all the windows that he could see, the white blinds were down. But the morning was coming; out from the Butt, as he watched, a faint pencil line of grey appeared between the sea and the sky. He did not look again in the direction of the van. […] Opening the gate of their house, he felt a truth enter (where she had not been sought) and touch his heart lightly, with cold, light fingers. (Campbell, *Nessman* 182)

The 'truth' has been felt, and departure has become inevitable; the cornerstone for his continual journey into exile is laid.

At each step of his nomadic journey, "a part of Colin's original sense of identity is eroded as a new sense of self demands to be adopted," as Michelle Macleod observes about the 'Nessman's' endeavours ("Gaelic Prose Fiction" 153). His roots are, in a way, left behind in Dell on the Isle of Lewis, his time at boarding school in Stornoway has become a mere shadow of the past, his studies at Aberdeen University are long abandoned, when, in the novel's very last chapter entitled 'The letter', the main focus shifts away from Colin to his aunty Annie. As the reader learns by and by, the protagonist has actually (metaphysically and physically) disappeared into exile, his exact whereabouts being unknown even to his family, except for a random and brief encounter between a couple of young sailors from the district and the 'lost son' in Southampton – an incident that is, naturally, related in all its details to the latter's relatives. Apparently, Colin Murray is a bus driver in England now, and refused to have a drink with the fellows from back home as he was in a hurry – so, no further details were shared between the young men. "But he looked well, they said – the same as ever. No change at all in him, that they could see" (Campbell, *Nessman* 255).

The novel's ultimate chapter is remarkably artful in its narrative structure; it is, at the same time, very different from, and rather similar to previous parts of *The Nessman*. As is the case with Colin's student calendar, a major part of this chapter's plot is furthered in the form of a letter that aunty Annie, a rather untrained user of pen and paper, composes for her nephew. The narrative tone, however, is calmer and more conciliatory than Colin's accounts of his inner turmoil. The letter is carefully framed by a portrayal of the letter's genesis. Its writer is determined to keep it a secret from the rest of the family; because she does not have the recipient's address, but only his supposed city of residence, she is

determined to post it at the big post office in Stornoway, where people would not laugh at her for this attempt. Annie, not much of a traveller herself, combines this task with her very own big journey – she is going to have her remaining bottom teeth pulled out by the dentist there. In a very endearing manner, but rather clumsily, and without many concessions to punctuation, the letter reports on important news from home (a new dog; more bad weather; some lost sheep; some deaths, marriages, drunk episodes, and whatnot), where everyone is well, Colin is well prayed for, and all quarrels with his younger brother are long forgotten. As long as he keeps away from drink, Annie is sure, her nephew will be fine, and she closes her letter in the following, even more endearing, delightfully ambiguous way: *"Well dear Ill close now so goodnight dear please write to me and may God keep you from your loving aunty Annie"* (Campbell, *Nessman* 263).

According to Moray Watson, "[i]n the writing of both Tormod and Alasdair Caimbeul, we see the damage and hurt that can be caused both to individuals and to communities by […] hybridising processes: characters strive to hold onto a sense of identity, relationships suffer and wither, and everywhere there is a lack of self-confidence or self-belief" (*Introduction*, 122). Albeit exile, for reasons already discussed, is an important theme in Gaelic and Highland-based literature, not all is gloomy, not all is lost. Rather, it seems sensible to allow for parallel interpretations of the literary examination of estrangement, for example as a coping mechanism facilitated by the act of writing – indeed, a positive approach towards coming to terms with open wounds. In a feverish dream after her dental procedure, in the novel's very last paragraph, aunty Annie finally meets Colin again, and she is eventually able to see him off on his further voyages:

> He was standing high above her on the prow of a great ship, among a crowd of people, and she was down below on the quay, among herring barrels and Calor Gas cylinders, looking up at him. It took him ages to notice her, but at long last he did, and he asked her what on earth she was doing down there, all alone, so far from home, and he said he was glad to see her. He told her that he was getting on very well now, and that he would soon be coming home. […] And when she looked up again he was no longer there, there was no sign of him, or of anyone, there was only the great ship leaving, going farther and farther away, and she saw the name on her stern, in high, white letters, and she knew then what ship it was; it was the greatest ship in the world, it was the *Queen Mary.* (Campbell, *Nessman* 265-266)

## 5.5 Alcoholism

The motif perhaps exerting the strongest discernible influence on the novel's composition and structure is alcoholism. Whilst the first two thirds of *The Nessman* are narrated in the form of a rather traditional coming-of-age novel[21], with the respective chapters depicting certain episodes and stages of the protagonist's childhood and adolescence, the last third of the book, introduced by the already often-quoted chapter 'The student calendar', heralds a new chapter in Colin's life and, consequently, a noticeable difference in the novel's narrative structure. The apparent dichotomy between alcohol becoming Colin's 'reliable companion' – irrespective of his current whereabouts – and his resulting social unreliability, as well as a presumed degree of unreliability relatable to the author of the letters given within the framework of his student calendar, are reflected in the novel's fragmented nature and its increasingly agitated, erratic, and elliptic style of speech. Nonsensical words and phrases are a frequent reminder of the protagonist's apparent identity crisis and instability. To the reader, it is not always clear whether the protagonist's student calendar is a diary, a collection of letters, or indeed both. Boundaries between the genres are often blurred, the point of view varies, the narrator digresses repeatedly and abruptly, and a letter is sometimes only identifiable as such because the alleged recipient of the letters – his younger brother John – is being addressed or saluted directly. The letters in particular often bear more resemblance to streams of consciousness rather than to mere examples of news exchange, as is observable, for instance, in a letter telling "[t]he story of the stag party, the wedding and the piles" (Campbell, *Nessman* 228). Before his friend's wedding reception in Stornoway, Colin treats himself to a head start at the Criterion Bar, in order to mingle with the illustrious wedding guests at the Town Hall eventually, where he meets again his drinking buddy from Uist, whose acquaintance he made in Aberdeen:

> In the queue outside the Town Hall I spoke to faces I had spoken to at the stag party – 'O yes, O tha, bha, bha 'm party math dha-rireabh, bha-bha …'[22] Something happened, somebody coming, slowly, easily, along narrow Point street. O miracle! O maragan dubha![23] It's the Uistman! 'Ancient acquaintance of the doorjambs, is it

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[21] There are, though, passages in the first part of the novel that stand out due to their already somewhat disruptive nature; the numerous anecdotal interludes, for example, or the aforementioned sequence entitled 'PENANCE' (see Campbell, *Nessman* 134-138).

[22] "Oh ja, oh ja, ja, war eine wahrhaft großartige Party, ja – war …" (trans. in Campbell, *Junge aus Ness* 301).

[23] "O Blutwürste!" (trans. in Campbell, *Junge aus Ness* 301). This might be an allusion to Colin's witnessing of the slaughter of a wether as a boy. In the course of the respective chapter entitled 'The Borve wedder' (the eponymous farm animal and Colin, as the reader learns, share a desire for freedom, as well as a strong

really you?' 'Dia, Dia, a Leodhasaich ...'[24] Back to the Criterion and more whisky. 'Woke up this morning, said to myself, "Murdo Angus's wedding." Got the plane to Stornoway and staying in the Lewis hotel. When I comes, a Leodhasaich, I comes.' Chicken soup, chicken, peas, peaches and cream, whisky. Whisky. Slaint'[25]. Here's how. Over 250 guests. After the food, speeches, reading of telegrams etc., the lights go dim. I can remember finishing bottles of whisky in a corner of the Town Hall with the Uistman, the cousins, the bride's brother and a few others. I can vaguely remember going with the Uistman and one of the bridesmaids to the Carlton – 'everybody is in the Carlton' – and nothing else until six or seven in the morning, when I am found in Shader again, arguing with the bride's brother about God knows what – something to do with football, Lewis football and the football brain of my brother Alan. (Campbell, *Nessman* 230)

Whether the aforementioned 'piles', by the way, are a result of Colin's spending the dewy night in question outside sleeping on a park bench in Stornoway, is a medical issue that must go unanswered here. Evidently, however, this extract displays a certain degree of volatility on syntactic, discursive, and narrative levels. The style is elliptic, erratic, almost fragmented; instances of code-switching occur frequently and are symbolic of the main character's current state of mind – a state of in-betweenness symptomatic of his individual journey of alienation. Such instances of heteroglossic discourse are powerful examples of the reproduction of a complex and pluralistic linguistic reality.

In connection with the theme of exile prevalent in Gaelic and Highland-based literature, Michelle Macleod observes that "home is not exclusively portrayed in terms of the experience of being 'away', but also in its own right in terms of an authentic and gritty portrayal of island life, encompassing issues of historiography, and social commentary as well as other prominent themes, such as religion, death and alcoholism" ("Gaelic Prose Fiction" 155). Alcohol abuse and dependency, in this context, serve as a means for forgetting failure and loneliness (see Macleod, "Gaelic Prose Fiction" 156). While it is important to distinguish between the mere application of stereotypes commonly attributed to alcohol misuse and the actual depiction of social reality, it is, in any case, noteworthy that alcoholism is such a frequent motif in contemporary Scottish literature. Rather than serving stale stereotypes, the novel under consideration addresses the full force of one man's crisis

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connection to their roots), the manufacture of black puddings is described to an almost poetic degree; the memories of this execution of an age-old tradition might have burnt into the protagonist's grasp of his ancestry, and his vocabulary, respectively (see Campbell, *Nessman* 11-27).

[24] "Ach Gottchen, ein Mensch von Lewis ..." (trans. in Campbell, *Junge aus Ness* 301).
[25] "To your health" (my translation).

in a strikingly honest manner; if not rehabilitation, reconciliation with such substantial grievances appears to be of major importance.

In addition to the topic's social factors and consequences, it also represents a symptom of – as well as a cause for – inner turmoil, thus acquiring a more individual, psychological dimension[26]. Colin's critical level of alcohol consumption facilitates the dissolution of his torn and unresolved self, and it likewise necessitates his journey into exile. Struggling with his demons, the protagonist seems to apply alcohol as some form of self-medication. His identity crisis and the disruption caused by the perceived incompatibility of sentiments of belonging with feelings of exclusion are a source of great suffering for Colin, gradually leading him into isolation:

> First of all, then (plunging in at the deep end) I loathe my body. It lets me down all the time, mirrors all my repulsiveness and vileness, and discloses a weakling, a coward. Twitching, quivering inadequacy. That is why I don't like to visit people (as you know) and why I find arrangements, appointments, introductions, social functions etc. unnerving. I have suffered much because of this (e.g. at meals, interviews). Now, when I have to meet people, the whole business of preparation – the scrubbing under the armpits, the powdering of the testicles, the polishing of the teeth – not to mention the swallowing of large whiskies beforehand to placate me, and the subsequent sucking of Polo mints in order to delude whoever I'm meeting that strong drink has not passed my lips – strikes me as painfully ridiculous and pathetic. Especially the latter. (Campbell, *Nessman* 226)

He is, indeed, very much aware of the extent of his agitation, as he tries to explain to his brother in one of his letters: "The sort of bloody depressions I suffer from are contagious, and I should bear with them and work through them on my own, smoking my ticklers, looking at the wall. If I am depressed in company, then, like it or not, this is another way of imposing myself" (Campbell, *Nessman* 227). As a consequence, the novel's hero finds his only way out in retreat. As the reader learns, Colin attempts to refrain from drinking on numerous occasions. "My last drink, and this time I mean it. Lochaber no more. Otherwise I'm kaput, and here endeth the lesson," he promises after another merry escapade (Campbell, *Nessman* 203). All good intentions, though, are ultimately abandoned again. As a consequence, the islander, metaphorically speaking, turns into an island himself, far away from home, his whereabouts – his coordinates, as it were – virtually unknown to his loved ones in the end. Community has, arguably, failed him, and vice versa.

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[26] Again, parallels to James Joyce's 'Circe' episode in *Ulysses* spring to mind (see Joyce 408-565). Just as alcohol-induced stupor produces hallucinations and fantastic digressions in Joyce's characters, Campbell's protagonist Colin experiences similar instances of deviation from reality.

The symbolic dimension inherent in the motif of alcoholism in Alasdair Campbell's *The Nessman* is clearly significant. Colin Murray's continuous quest for identity is repeatedly disrupted by his inner turmoil, his apparent state of in-betweenness, his incessant striving for a sense of self, and the impending loss of communal identification. This disruption is mirrored by the destructive effects of alcoholism on many a level. Markers of Gaelic identity, although by their nature strong indicators of belonging, are frequently challenged in his experience. Bearing in mind that the story presumably unfolds in the 1950s and 1960s, traditional village life in the *Gàidhealtachd* is questioned due to changing social realities, and city life promises an improvement in economic status. A common (myth) history and shared memories of oppression are constant reminders of the protagonist's roots, yet they are not the ultimate tool to weld together realities apart. Education seems to be the key to social bettering, but it must be acquired in another language. Marginalisation and inferiorisation are, in a way, part of his everyday life, and he is conscious of the Gaelic language's 'negligible' role within Scottish society. In this sense, Colin finds himself in a state of in-betweenness – as a Gael in Scotland, as a Scot in the UK. Coming to terms with the reconcilability of these parameters proves a daunting task for the novel's main character.

The lines between the manifold aspects of identity are often blurred – it is, after all, a concept somewhat resistant to indisputable definition. At some point, Colin experiences a similar vagueness in the mist of drunkenness after his sherry bottle is confiscated by his mother (which cannot unnerve him, though, since he has secret stock):

> Dounchadh Ban made a song in praise of whisky. She wouldn't be so ready to put her hand in Donnchadh Ban's pocket and confiscate his bottle. So did Uilleam Ross. Burns couldn't take it. All mouth. Who else? He sat up, trying to remember. The rain had stopped; turned to mist. He uncapped the bottle. Drank. All was grey before his eyes – land, sea and sky blurred and coalesced to one neutral colour. He couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. The same weather conditions prevailed inside his head. (Campbell, *Nessman* 238)

By the end of the novel under discussion, Colin has, evidently, become 'a serious case'[27]. The quoted 'weather conditions' in his head are evocative of his tormented state of mind: just as his quest for identity knows no rest, the addiction to the relief promised by alcohol-induced forgetfulness and slumber might be his most durable companion. The image of everything

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[27] The penultimate chapter, 'A serious case' (see Campbell, *Nessman* 241-251), describes Colin's last encounter with his director of studies, who advises him to seek medical attention before considering a return to university. Thus far, Colin's academic career has been outstanding only due to his absence, as well as a lapse at a student reception at his advisor's home. Following this meeting, he vanishes into a bar and, ultimately, into exile.

being grey instead of black and white before his eyes might argue for the validity of the theme of identity as a continuum, as well as the significance of transition for the understanding of one's sense of self. And there is, maybe, no transition more nerve-wracking, fascinating, and uncharted than the passage between life and death. To quote Alasdair Campbell, "[t]he bottles are empty. The heroes have departed" (*Nessman* 192).

## 5.6   Death

Colin is confronted with his father's terminal illness and untimely death at a very young age. While known as 'the Boxer' – a nickname that carries connotations of strength, feistiness and power of resistance –, his son experiences him as a mere shadow of his former self that spends most of his time in sickbed. Just as childhood narratives are common themes in Scottish film and literature, the loss of a father figure is oftentimes employed as a literary motif. Following Duncan Petrie, "[t]he scope of the life narrative also affords writers the opportunity to reflect on wider issues in a more concerted way, including the relationship between the fortunes of the central protagonist to some kind of wider national predicament" (173-174). In this context, parallels between becoming an orphan and being let down by some wider, more abstract entity – a community, a nation – can be drawn. The absence of a father, thus, can stand for Scotland's being "historically orphaned from its own past" (see Petrie 182). Along these lines, not only Scotland's complicated self-conception as a nation, but also the role of Gaelic identity within the netting of Scotland's pluralistic society, are issues of great interest and concern, and therefore frequently addressed in a literary context.

Analogous to a certain brokenness arguably assumed to be characteristic of the Scottish national experience, the loss of his father must have been a dramatic and disruptive event in young Colin's life. Albeit the consequences of his exposure to such a cataclysmic event are not depicted directly within the scope of the novel, the central protagonist frequently concerns himself with – and will be confronted with, respectively – the notion of death. To him, the idea of nothingness is a puzzling, but worthwhile thought:

> If there was no world, there would be nothing. No earth, no people. There would be nothing. He tried to think what nothing would be like. The thought was too big for his head to contain. It fretted him, like a vague pain. And if the world had never been,

nothing would ever have been. There would have been nothing, ever. The thought almost took his breath away. But God made the world, and all that therein is. But where did God come from? What was there before God? (Campbell, *Nessman* 71)

It is, indeed, a perplexing and almost ungraspable idea that once, there might have been nothing, and once, there will be nothing. In contrast to the conception of death as the transgression of the boundary between life and the nothingness thereafter, death as the trial before eternal life (or eternal damnation, respectively) plays a crucial role in Christian exegesis. Alongside the permanent presence of religion at home and at school, Colin's minister-uncle Myles, whose own faith is put to the test when his brother – Colin's father – fades away, acts as a persistent reminder of the immediacy of death. Religious rites, sermons and education are a constant in the formation of Colin's rootedness within a Gaelic island community. The threatening immediacy of death, however, is not powerful enough to unsettle a young lad in pursuit of his own place in the world, even when, in one of his sermons, his uncle preaches the necessity of piousness. "But I am Myles Murray's nephew. Here I am. In a side balcony of the Free Church, Kenneth Street, Stornoway, one Sunday evening (present), between the hour of my birth (past) and the hour of my death (never)" (Campbell, *Nessman* 135). His rite of passage, although a continuum, is mainly a matter of the present in Colin's perception. The disruptive force of fear, however, is noticeable when, on the occasion of a distant relative's funeral, his uncle's reprimands following his nephews' indifference about their lack of reverence for death creeps in on the novel's main character:

> 'The afternoon light is fading,' he turned his face back on Alan and Colin, 'this sad day is almost at an end. Soon it will be night. And I would be failing in my duty as your father's brother and my greater duty as God's poor servant if, in the little time left to us together, I did not put one question to you. For who knows where we shall meet again, or when, or in what circumstances. My question to you is this. What if this coming night were to be your last on earth? Our cousin Norman was alive three days ago. Now he is in his grave. Death the great leveller comes without warning, draws no distinction, is no respecter of persons; young and old, strong and weak, proud and humble, the mightiest monarch and the meanest beggar – Death puts his hand on all alike, all are equal in his sight, and all go down before him to the darkness of the grave.['] (Campbell, *Nessman* 153-154)

Death, the 'great leveller', remains – in its literal, as well as a figurative sense – Colin's faithful companion in his quest for identity.

The motif of death, as has been argued earlier, is closely connected to other motifs of Gaelic identity discernible in Alasdair Campbell's *The Nessman*. Alongside its strong association with religion, there are also more abstract parallels with the impending 'death'

of a language – Scottish Gaelic, in the present case –, as well as with the destructive force of the motif of alcoholism. Colin's gradual collapse into ever-increasing states of agitation and a resulting (mental) crisis are met by a critical level of alcohol consumption, and the thus generated episodes of deep slumber to the point of unconsciousness, as well as the ability to forget, are, to him, desirable side effects of his hedonistic adventures. Considering the risks to his health, death does not only remain a metaphorical menace to the novel's hero. In any case, a sense of self is in danger of being lost. The threatening death of a Gaelic way of life due to changing social realities, accompanied by the disappearance of Gaelic traditions like storytelling as practised in the *céilidh* house, contributes to impressions of the deconstruction of Colin's Gaelic identity in the course of his journey of alienation. In a tight-knit community based very much on shared traditions, as well as on shared conceptions of its past, present and future, it is hardly surprising that a certain preoccupation with the well-being and status of its members is of utter importance, as Colin observes during one of his holidays from university:

> I had quite a good holiday this time, in spite of aggravations like (supra). White wind, flying sun and rain. The Atlantic roaring, the earth stirring. People there are well – eating, sleeping, answering the postman's whistle. And in the evening, nodding by the peat fire and you don't need to put that light on yet. Much of the conversation has to do with death – how they died, what they said. Lambing at present – soon the plough and the peatcutting. (Campbell, *Nessman* 205)

When such strong bonds are, for whatever reason, shaken, however, the approaching storm becomes inevitable, as foretold by Colin himself immediately before his disappearance into exile: "[a]h, but the storm that was coming …" (Campbell, *Nessman* 251).

Death as a motif is also emblematic of notions of the end as such; in the novel under consideration, it epitomises the end of relationships and the end of communal belonging. In a way, the impending dissolution of Colin's Gaelic identity is heralded by images of death portrayed throughout *The Nessman*. His descent into exile can be interpreted as a necessary result of his relentless quest to assign meaning to his self, as well as the effect of an ongoing struggle with his unresolved Gaelic identity. Ends, however, also bear potential for new beginnings. While Colin's fate and whereabouts are uncertain by the end of the novel under consideration, there certainly is room for a positive reading of the process of coming to terms with dire predicaments; an active preoccupation with such adversities in the form of literary treatment, for instance, leaves room for hope for the protagonist's future well-being. After all, after a storm comes a calm, as foreshadowed by aunty Annie's calming routine

after she has finished her letter of heart-felt wishes addressed to her nephew somewhere far away – may the storm carry them all the way:

> Carefully, she cleaned the nib of the pen with a torn-off piece of the *Daily Express*, and made sure the lid of the ink bottle was screwed on tight. She put the writing pad, the pen and the bottle of ink away, into the left hand drawer of the dresser. The gale was still blowing as hard as ever. But it would die down by the morning, the forecast had said.
>
> She put the light out and went to bed. (Campbell, *Nessman* 265)

## 6 Conclusion

> 'S fhada, 's fhada thall tha mi …[28]
> — Alasdair Campbell, *The Nessman* 232

In the course of Alasdair Campbell's novel *The Nessman*, the protagonist Colin Murray covers quite some distance – geographically, chronologically, and metaphorically speaking. By the end of the narration, he is, according to all of these readings, quite far away from his starting point. Regardless of his current whereabouts and status at the time the story fades out, he has, in due course, grown up, tried to find his place in the world, broken boundaries, and achieved to be more than a passenger on his quest for identity – by all means, he has *achieved*, against all odds. The success of a quest is most commonly measured in terms of its outcome, but sometimes the quest in itself, bearing in mind its potentially revealing value, is already a result worth noticing. The persuasiveness and potency of the motif of journeys, in this light, represent key ingredients to the depiction of Gaelic identity in the novel under discussion.

The initial research question considered for the purpose of this paper is how Gaelic identity is constructed in Alasdair Campbell's novel *The Nessman*, leading to an analysis of the motifs thus employed, and a discussion of how the protagonist's journey of alienation becomes manifest in this coming-of-age novel. The theme of Gaelic identity, fundamental for the aim of this paper, is by definition and considering its rather elusive qualities very much dependent on context and research issues. While, yet again, a fixed definition of the notion of identity has not been achieved in the course of this paper, an attempt was made to discuss its undeniable significance for the representation of processes of identification apparent in the novel under consideration. Rather than seeing it as a singularity in time and space, it might prove rewarding to allow for the idea of Gaelic identity (as is the case with all claims to a specific identity) as a process rather than a completed entity. This process of identification, however, is composed of multiple parameters, and their respective individual emphases are, accordingly, diverse. In addition to that, individual and, indeed, group identification are prone to overlaps, as is the case, for example and broadly speaking, for a Gael who is also a Scot and a Brit and a cosmopolitan. What may result from this

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[28] "Weit weg, weit weg bin ich …" (trans. in Campbell, *Junge aus Ness* 301).

predicament are experiences of fragmentation and in-betweenness that are, for instance, observable in the premises of Scotland's changeable history, national identity and linguistic landscape. These research fields are crucial for the interpretation of the motifs of Gaelic identity in the novel under discussion.

First of all, this paper attempted to establish a suitable theoretical framework for the discussion of the motifs of Gaelic identity in *The Nessman*. Based on the main character's identity crisis in the novel, a parallel can be drawn with the notion of brokenness in Scotland's turbulent history and its hard-fought struggle for independence. In order to justify alike claims for communal self-confidence, strategies of falling back on a common myth history, as suggested by Benedict Anderson in his concept of the imagined community, are of major importance. There has to be kept in mind, though, a historically grown disruption between the current status of Gaelic language, symbols and traditions as major contributors to the Scottish national recipe and the somewhat marginalised position Gaelic identity is exposed to in a contemporary Scottish context. The motifs of storytelling and religion, in this context, show the main protagonist's preoccupation with such symbolic values und discrepancies. Scottish national identity, if seen from a postcolonial point of view, seems to be in dire need of confirmation of its unity in diversity in view of an ever-advancing progress of globalisation. A return to past origins and a common (myth) history does not come without perceptions of ambiguity due to the diverging values attributed to Gaelic and the English language in contemporary Scottish society. An emphasis on regionalism, in this regard, can be understood as a coping mechanism to face such discrepancies.

Themes of marginalisation, fragmentation and in-betweenness are of major relevance in a discourse on Gaelic identity in a Scottish context, and they are, on a smaller scale, mirrored by various motifs in Alasdair Campbell's novel. Their impact becomes readily apparent in such intrinsically destructive and powerful motifs like alcoholism and death. Especially relating to the status of the Gaelic language as a so-called minority language, there is a close link to the motif of language in *The Nessman*. Since bilingualism is the linguistic reality for practically all native speakers of Scottish Gaelic, issues like linguistic self-confidence, language preservation and language death are omnipresent problems that find literary representation in the main character's inner conflicts concerning the role of his mother tongue – the Highland tongue – in his life. The opposition between inclusion and exclusion is of key importance here, which is epitomised by the untranslated Gaelic-language inserts in

the English-language text that are invaluable for the representation of Gaelic identity, but potentially exclude the reader for a short moment. Many instances of code-switching and the encounter between different languages, varieties and sociolects are recognisable in *The Nessman*, and they highlight the value of Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia in view of the novel under consideration, as well as Scottish literature in general. If Colin's quest for linguistic identity is indeed seen as a continuum rather than an essentialist given, several layers of belonging, overlapping group identifications, and instances of situational variation emerge.

The motifs of Gaelic identity analysed in this paper – language, storytelling, religion, journeys, alcoholism and death – were discussed by means of a culturally-critical approach regarding their linguistic, structural and thematic content, bearing in mind extratextual references. Campbell's novel can, among other reasons, be considered exceptional because of its rather extraordinary position in the framework of Scottish literature: it is an English-language piece of fiction, produced by a predominantly Gaelic writer. This raises the difficult issue of the author in-between languages. While multilingualism is generally considered an advantageous trait in many discursive, social, cultural and economic circumstances, it seems to bestow additional pressure on the native speaker of Gaelic, who might find the use of his language restricted to the use in private or familial circumstances. Similarly, it might create a dilemma for the writers who are facing the difficult task of choosing a language of publication, which necessitates the evaluation of the freedom of literary expression versus the constraints imposed upon them by a perhaps limited readership and the lack of wider critical acclaim – oftentimes, again, leading to feelings of guilt and fragmentation experienced by the authors. This issue was addressed using the example of the acclaimed writer Iain Crichton Smith's thoughts on his awkward position as a 'double man' in this regard. Discussing the (arguably) double marginalisation of Gaelic and, not least, Highland-based English language literature in Scottish literary criticism certainly is a project worthwhile.

In any case, the preoccupation of many Scottish writers with language(s), varieties and sociolects can be seen as indicative of the multifaceted nature of Scottish literature which had – and to some extent still has – to respond to considerable challenges in its efforts to step out of the shadow of English literature by asserting its place as a discipline in its own right. Its refusal of being trapped in past routines, achieved by the following of new paths

and the embracing of new genres, has led the way to postmodernity and suggested the possibility of unity in diversity. While nationalist movements and a renewed self-confidence in the nation's own literary tradition appear to go hand in hand, the question has been raised whether Scottishness is already an outdated concept in the face of progressing globalisation. Although the characteristics of nationalism need to be seen in a critical light and the application of stereotypes for this purpose avoided, the notion of national identity has proven to be influential especially in devolutionary and post-devolution Scottish literature, and it is likely to continue to be important considering current political developments. This paper tried to ascertain that openness to plurality and the multifaceted contributions to its fortunes are of major significance for Scottish literature. Whilst in-betweenness and fragmentation are frequent themes in Scottish literature, they might have lost their paralysing qualities in exchange for the creative potential thus produced. After all, boundaries are there to be crossed.

Considering the discussion of motifs of Gaelic identity in this paper, it needs to be stressed again that there is only a limited number of secondary sources on Alasdair Campbell and his novel *The Nessman* available in English. This appears to be symptomatic of the somewhat in-between status of English-language Highland-based literature in Scottish literary discourses – an example of repeated marginalisation yet again. That there is more to Campbell's novel than an easily attached label of being just another example of Hebridean village fiction would allow for has, hopefully, been pointed out in the course of this treatise. The inclusion of further, especially Gaelic primary sources in the analysis of Gaelic identity in Scottish fiction is likely to prove to be an insightful project; the comparison of respective approaches to this theme might offer illuminating insights into the equivalence of all of Scotland's diverse literary faces. Furthermore, a closer look at other bilingual writers' experiences with in-betweenness in this context might be worth pursuing. The poignancy of Gaelic identity as a theme in Scottish literature is, in any case, a subject that deserves further research, and resulting findings might contribute to a better understanding of the pluralistic nature of Scottish literature.

[30,595 words]

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**Abstract**

The object of research discussed in the scope of this diploma thesis is the representation of Gaelic identity in the Scottish-Gaelic author Alasdair Campbell's 2000 novel *The Nessman* regarding the thus employed motifs of language, storytelling, religion, journeys, alcoholism and death. The question of how the construction and deconstruction of Gaelic identity is achieved by use of these motifs in the course of this coming-of-age novel will be considered. The significance of the closely associated themes of fragmentation and alienation shall be illustrated – for the novel under discussion, as well as for other examples of Scottish literature in general, and so-called Highland-based literature in particular. For this purpose, theoretical prerequisites for the concept of Gaelic identity will be discussed in the first part of this treatise. Among them are the somewhat elusive notion of identity as such, historical strands of nation building, the controversial issue of Scottish national identity, as well as the substantial question of the Gaelic language's value as a minority language in the midst of Scotland's linguistic framework. An attempt will be made to highlight the validity of all aforementioned elements with respect to processes of identification on an individual, as well as on a communal level. Furthermore, the special case of Gaelic authors publishing in English, their second language rather than their mother tongue, and their localisation within a multi-faceted Scottish literary tradition shall be addressed in due course. This paper's analysis section aims at a consideration of the identified motifs of Gaelic identity regarding their structural, thematic, and linguistic significance, keeping in mind the previously established theoretical foundation. This critical discussion of the Hebridean writer Alasdair Campbell's only English-language novel to date is intended to make but a small contribution to the acknowledgement and appreciation of Scotland's cultural and linguistic diversity.

## Zusammenfassung

Gegenstand vorliegender Diplomarbeit ist die Untersuchung des Themas der gälischen Identität im 2000 erschienenen Roman *The Nessman* des schottisch-gälischen Autors Alasdair Campbell anhand der Motive Sprache, *Storytelling*, Religion, Reisen, Alkoholismus und Tod. Es wird der Frage nachgegangen, wie die Konstruktion und Dekonstruktion des Themas durch den Einsatz dieser Motive im Verlauf des Entwicklungsromans erreicht wird. Die Signifikanz damit einhergehender Themen wie Zerrissenheit und Entfremdung soll verdeutlicht werden, im Roman selbst, wie auch in zahlreichen anderen Beispielen schottischer Literatur im Allgemeinen, und sogenannter Highland-Literatur im Besonderen. Zu diesem Zwecke werden im ersten Teil dieser Arbeit theoretische Grundlagen erörtert, die prägend sind für den Begriff der gälischen Identität. Dazu zählen der schwierig zu fassende Identitätsbegriff selbst, die historischen Stränge der Nationswerdung sowie die umstrittene Frage der schottischen nationalen Identität, ebenso wie die gewichtige Frage des Stellenwerts der gälischen Sprache als Minderheitensprache im schottischen Gefüge. Es wird versucht, die Aussagekraft all dieser Elemente in Bezug auf den Identifikationsprozess in individueller wie auch kommunaler Hinsicht hervorzuheben. Darüber hinaus soll auch die besondere Lage des gälischen Autors, der auf Englisch schreibt, also nicht in seiner Muttersprache, erläutert werden, ebenso wie dessen Verortung innerhalb der facettenreichen schottischen Literatur. Im Analyseteil werden die oben genannten Motive gälischer Identität unter strukturellen, thematischen und sprachlichen Gesichtspunkten betrachtet; ein Bezug zu den zuvor dargelegten theoretischen Voraussetzungen soll hergestellt werden. Diese kritische Auseinandersetzung mit dem Roman *The Nessman* des von den Äußeren Hebriden stammenden Autors Alasdair Campbell möge einen kleinen Beitrag dazu leisten, Schottlands Reichtum an kultureller und sprachlicher Vielfalt zu würdigen.