



THE CHEVIOT, THE STAG AND THE BLACK, BLACK OIL — STUDY GUIDE

Author: John McGrath

First performed: 1973 (7:84 Theatre Company Scotland)

Genre: Political Theatre / Documentary Drama / Ceilidh Theatre

Setting: Scottish Highlands from 1746 to the 1970s

Why it's studied: Iconic piece of Scottish theatre blending history, politics, music, humour, and community participation. Critiques exploitation from the Clearances to the oil boom.

[\[scottishst...dpress.com\]](#)

1. Introduction

John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* is considered one of the most influential works in Scottish theatre history. First staged by the socialist company **7:84**, the play uses ceilidh-style performance — songs, sketches, satire, direct address — to dramatise the repeated economic exploitation of the Highlands:

- **Cheviot sheep** (Clearances)
 - **Stags** (elite sporting estates)
 - **Black, black oil** (North Sea boom)
- [\[everything...ined.today\]](#), [\[scottishst...dpress.com\]](#)

The play is deliberately entertaining *and* political, designed to give working people “a good night out” while teaching hidden or suppressed Scottish history.

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2. Plot Summary

Overview

A musical documentary-style drama chronicling 200+ years of Highland exploitation, combining narration, historical reenactments, comedy, Gaelic song, and direct audience interaction.

Key Narrative Stages

1. The Highland Clearances (1746–19th century)

- Begins after **Culloden** when Gaelic culture and dress were suppressed.
[\[kids.kiddle.co\]](#)
- Shows brutal evictions by estate owners like the Duke of Sutherland and his factor **Patrick Sellar**, representing the violence of the Clearances.
[\[kids.kiddle.co\]](#)
- Crofters forced off the land for **Cheviot sheep farming**, which was more profitable for landlords.

2. Sporting Estates (Victorian to 20th century)

- Land becomes playground for aristocrats and rich industrialists.
- Locals excluded from land they lived on for centuries.
- Symbolised by **the stag**, representing leisure for the wealthy and dispossession for Highlanders.
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3. North Sea Oil Boom (1960s–70s)

- Modern exploitation: American oil companies and UK elites profit from Scottish resources.
[\[everything...ined.today\]](#)
- Interviews with people affected by oil industry highlight contemporary injustice.
- The pattern mirrors earlier exploitation: wealthy outsiders profit, locals see few benefits.

Structure

The play constantly switches between:

- live performance
- historical sketches
- songs (including Gaelic pieces)
- documentary narration
- humour and political satire
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3. Setting & Context

Political Context

- Written amid rising industrial militancy and socialist politics in 1970s Scotland.
- Reflects anger at corporate exploitation of North Sea oil.
[\[scottishst...dpress.com\]](#)

Historical Context

- Many Scots first learned about the Highland Clearances from this play; the subject had rarely been taught in schools.
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Cultural Context

- Introduced *ceilidh theatre*: mixing music, community participation, humour, and activism.
 - Included Gaelic songs and poetry, contributing to the Gaelic cultural revival.
[\[ijosts.glasgow.ac.uk\]](#)
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4. Characters

The play uses **ensemble playing** — actors multi-role and represent groups rather than individual psychological portraits.

Key Character Types

Narrator / Storyteller

- Guides audience through 200 years of history with facts, statistics, and commentary.
[\[everything...ined.today\]](#)

Highlanders / Crofters

- Victims of Clearances; represent resilience, community, cultural identity.

Landowners / Factors

- Patrick Sellar (Duke of Sutherland's factor): symbol of brutality and greed.
[\[kids.kiddle.co\]](#)

American Oil Executives

- Represent modern corporate exploitation in the North Sea.

Gaelic Singers & Community Figures

- Offer cultural resistance and continuity; music becomes political voice.
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5. Themes

1. Exploitation of Land & People

Clearances → sporting estates → oil industry = repeating pattern of capitalist extraction.
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2. Class Struggle

Shows how wealth and land are concentrated in the hands of the few (7% owning 84%).
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3. Cultural Erasure vs Survival

Gaelic repression after Culloden; revival through song and community storytelling.
[\[ijosts.glasgow.ac.uk\]](#)

4. Resistance & Solidarity

Play encourages collective action — a political call to arms.

5. Ownership of Scotland's Resources

Critique of outsiders profiting from Highlands and North Sea oil.
[\[hmjournals.com\]](#)

6. Form, Structure & Language

Form

- Blends documentary theatre, songs, satire, audience participation.
- Brechtian techniques: direct address, episodic structure, political clarity.
[\[hmjournals.com\]](#)

Structure

- Non-linear timeline (1746–1970s).
- Skits, reenactments, music-hall comedy, interviews.

Language

- Mix of English, Scots, and Gaelic.
 - Popular, accessible humour and songs to engage broad audiences.
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7. Key Quotations

- "A good night out" — McGrath's philosophy of political entertainment.
[\[scottishst...dpress.com\]](http://scottishst...dpress.com)
 - "Culloden and all that" — ironic narration of repression.
[\[kids.kiddle.co\]](http://kids.kiddle.co)
 - "More money to buy more land." — summarising capitalist logic behind the Clearances.
[\[everything...ined.today\]](http://everything...ined.today)
 - "Let the people sing." — significance of Gaelic song as resistance.
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8. Important Scenes

- Eviction scene with Patrick Sellar
 - Reenactments of historical testimonies and statistics
 - The stag-shooting aristocrats sketch
 - Oil company salesman persuading locals
 - Ceilidh-style gatherings with Gaelic songs
[\[everything...ined.today\]](http://everything...ined.today), [\[kids.kiddle.co\]](http://kids.kiddle.co)
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9. Symbolism & Motifs

The Cheviot Sheep

- Symbol of early capitalist exploitation.

The Stag

- Symbol of aristocratic privilege; land used for elite leisure.

Black, Black Oil

- Modern extractive capitalism; new wealth that bypasses local communities.

Gaelic Songs

- Cultural survival; reclaiming suppressed identity.
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10. Writer's Purpose

John McGrath aims to:

- Expose patterns of historical exploitation in the Highlands.
 - Give working-class communities a political voice.
 - Teach hidden Scottish history in an engaging format.
 - Inspire political awareness and action.
[\[scottishstudies.dpress.com\]](http://scottishstudies.dpress.com), [\[hmjournals.com\]](http://hmjournals.com)
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11. Sample Essay Questions

- **Theme:** How does McGrath show recurring exploitation in the Highlands across centuries?
 - **Structure:** How does the play use songs and sketches to deliver political arguments?
 - **Character/Caricature:** Analyse how landowners are portrayed satirically.
 - **Politics:** In what ways is the play an example of socialist theatre?
 - **Setting:** How does the Highland landscape function symbolically?
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12. Model PEA Paragraph

Point: McGrath uses the Clearances to show how economic power repeatedly destroys Highland communities.

Evidence: The play reenacts "systemised evictions" carried out by Patrick Sellar, representing the brutality of landowners who cleared crofters to make way for profitable sheep.

Analysis: By presenting these events with factual narration and satirical performance, McGrath exposes the structural nature of exploitation. The audience sees these injustices not as isolated events but as part of a continuous pattern that extends into the 1970s oil boom. [\[kids.kiddle.co\]](http://kids.kiddle.co)

13. Quick-Revision Checklist

- **Main idea:** history of Highland exploitation told through ceilidh theatre
 - **Time period:** 1746–1970s
 - **Three stages:** Cheviot → Stag → Oil
 - **Key themes:** class, land ownership, capitalism, culture, resistance
 - **Techniques:** songs, satire, Brechtian narration, community interaction
 - **Important groups:** crofters, landowners, oil companies, Gaelic community
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DRAMA — SQA-style Model Mini-Essay

The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil (John McGrath) — Theme: Exploitation, history, and community power

McGrath's ceilidh-theatre fuses song, satire, and documentary to map a **continuum of extraction**: sheep, sport, and oil. Brechtian devices—direct address, slides, audience participation—swap passive spectators for political agents. Landlords, factors, and multinationals are caricatured with music-hall bite not to trivialise pain but to make complex economics legible and actionable. Gaelic song and local testimony honour cultural survival against clearance, eviction, and corporate capture. Crucially, McGrath promises **no saviours**: the final call locates hope in collective organisation, not heroic individuals. By turning history into a good night out, the play insists that enjoyment and education can coincide—and that laughter is a weapon communities can wield together.