

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*The Last King of Scotland*]

A King Without a Kilt

By Steve Sailer

THE HOTTEST TREND on the London stage has been political drama offering fictionalized surmises about recent matters of state. Now playwright Peter Morgan's two fly-on-the-wall historical screenplays have brought this genre to the Oscar races, with Helen Mirren and Forrest Whitaker winning most of the early acting awards for, respectively, "The Queen" and "The Last King of Scotland."

Whitaker first made his mark in a brief scene in Martin Scorsese's 1986 pool shark movie, "The Color of Money," as a gentle giant who out-hustles (and out-acts) Paul Newman and Tom Cruise. He later starred as doomed saxophonist Charlie Parker in Clint Eastwood's "Bird" and directed the hit "Waiting to Exhale" but has been largely relegated to supporting roles too small for him.

The superstars who emerged in the 1930s, such as John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, Gary Cooper, Cary Grant, and Clark Gable, tended to be imposing six-footers (when that was an unusual height). Yet even though the average American has gotten taller and fatter, leading men, such as Cruise, are now typically energetic little welterweights.

Whitaker finally enjoys a suitably beefy role in "Last King of Scotland" as

the 1970s Ugandan dictator with the surrealist name, Idi Amin Dada. At a self-proclaimed 6'2" and 220 pounds, Whitaker is still smaller than the real Amin, who was the most entertaining of all the monsters of the 20th century, a megalomaniacal cross between Joseph Stalin and Muhammad Ali. Sure, Idi was a semiliterate cannibal, but he was a likeable one.

Amin reveled in such self-bestowed titles as Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea and Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular. An admirer of his former Scottish officers in the King's African Rifles—"I love *everything* about Scotland! ... Apart from red hair, which your women may find attractive but which in Africa is quite disgusting"—Amin saw himself as the natural leader of a Caledonian independence uprising: "the Last Rightful King of Scotland."

Although Whitaker is the frontrunner for the Best Actor Oscar, Amin technically is a supporting character. The fictional antihero protagonist—played well by young James McAvoy, who must be seven inches shorter and 80 pounds lighter than Whitaker—is a callow Scottish intern, who, like so many of his ancestors who built the British Empire, flees dour Presbyterian boredom for some fun in the tropical sun. While working in Uganda in 1971 as a mission doctor, idly trying to seduce his boss's wife, he's called to bandage the injured presidential wrist.

In Giles Foden's 1998 source novel, the Scottish doctor recalls, "I couldn't help feeling awed by the sheer size of him and the way ... he radiated a barely restrained energy. ... I felt—far from being the healer—that some kind of ele-

mental force was seeping into me." The doctor accepts Amin's impetuous offer to become his personal physician. He is soon advising Amin on policy, while trying to ignore the reports of political opponents being fed to the crocodiles, too mesmerized by the Big Man's outlandish charisma to flee.

"The Last King of Scotland" may be the best exploration yet of the Big Man syndrome, which, while most notorious for afflicting Africa, is hardly restricted to that continent. A Big Man's grandiose sense of entitlement assures him that he deserves to run things. What's odd is how often the rest of us, like McAvoy's doctor, agree with him, sometimes against our better instincts.

Big Men tend to be more masculine in physical and emotional traits like muscularity, self-confidence, and aggressiveness. But as the film illustrates, one of the strangest paradoxes about Big Men is how feminine their minds can be. Whitaker's Amin displays what would be called female intuition in anyone who's not such a mountain of a man. He can read the doctor's secrets off his face and then use his mercurial personality and verbal suppleness to charm and terrify him into obeying his sinister will rather than simply going home to sane Scotland.

Scottish director Kevin MacDonald, best known for the documentary "Touching the Void" about a mountain climber who saved himself by cutting the rope from which his friend dangled, shot "Last King" on location in Uganda to look like a slightly cheesy '70s blaxploitation flick. It's not a great film, but it is a memorable one. ■

Rated R for some strong violence and gruesome images, sexual content, and language.

BOOKS

[*The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins, Houghton Mifflin, 406 pages & *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Daniel Dennett, Viking, 448 pages]

The God Gene

By Patrick McNamara

RICHARD DAWKINS'S *The God Delusion* and Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* argue that religion is a delusion or, at best, a misfiring of basic cognitive systems evolved for other more useful purposes like "agent detection" and placebo responding. But the authors do not believe that the delusion is harmless. Instead, they make clear that they see religion as a major source of evil in the world and go so far as to say that the religious instruction of children is "child abuse" when unaccompanied by countervailing scientific instruction.

If Dawkins and Dennett really believe that raising a child in a religious tradition is abusive, then they are morally bound to call for the protection of children subject to such abuse. Theoretically, abusers should be subject to legal penalties and perhaps even jailed. The state, in such cases, should use its coercive powers to restrain abusive parents and require them to undergo some sort of psychiatric treatment or thought-retraining program to cure their delusory illness.

Given the widespread nature of the delusion—both authors cite statistics showing that better than 64 percent of the U.S. population believes in God—America's psychiatric system will have to be expanded. It may be necessary to build retraining camps similar to those used throughout the Communist world to free recalcitrant religionists from their delusional devotion to God and

their irritating resistance to the state. Too bad we can't all be "brights," as the merry band of Dawkins- and Dennett-inspired atheists has dubbed itself. If only everyone were as emancipated as the brights from religion's dangerous spell, the world would be a better place!

Why can't religionists see the error of their ways, especially when the bright brights point this out to them? It must be that they are stupid. Dawkins is so convinced of the religion-as-delusion equation that he seems to endorse the long discredited notion of a correlation between high religiosity and low intelligence.

Yet no convincing data exist to warrant such a claim. There is, however, a well-attested inverse correlation in many Western cultures between years of education (not I.Q.) and religiosity, but most scientists who study religion believe that the correlation simply indexes one's level of exposure to the secular culture regnant in most Western universities. It simply demonstrates, in short, one's level of servility toward and indoctrination in that culture.

Dennett, to his credit, forthrightly raises the issue of who should teach the children about religion and very carefully treads the issue's thorny ethical undergrowth. At first, he seems to suggest that rules of informed consent should apply, but then in the spirit of the robust and kind-hearted tolerance he wishes to advance, he very magnanimously proposes that parents "may teach their children whatever religious doctrines they like" as long as they "don't teach their children anything that is likely to close their minds 1) through fear or hatred or 2) by disabling them from inquiry (by denying them an education, for instance, or keeping them entirely isolated from the world)."

Is Dennett blind to the potentially enormous implications of these proposed rules? Who decides when a child is being taught to hate or fear? Who decides when a child's mind is closed? Perhaps a specially educated elite of informed intellectuals should make such decisions; perhaps properly certified guardians; perhaps ministers of the state.

But Dawkins and Dennett should not be tarnished as a pair of unwitting fore-runners of a new set of thought-control programs. Dawkins is an evolutionary biologist who holds the Charles Simonyi Chair in the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, and Dennett is a philosopher and Director of the Center for Cognitive Science at Tufts University. The two men have often been allies in the fight to defend Darwinian evolutionary science against the so-called creationists and the intelligent-design people. Dawkins first came to prominence in the 1970s on the strength of his book *The Selfish Gene*, which led to a more gene-centered view of evolutionary change. In such a perspective, organisms exist to propagate genes—not the other way around. He also later suggested that the basic units of cultural evolution might be called "memes," which can be thought of as sets of basic ideas that use the minds of humans as vehicles to proliferate and immortalize themselves. Both Dawkins and Dennett tend to see religion as a set of virulent and harmful memes, but little or no scientific evidence supports this view.

Dennett has made a number of important contributions to the philosophy of mind. His 1992 book, *Consciousness Explained*, debunked theories of consciousness in which a little observing man or homunculus sat somewhere at the back of the mind of the individual and did all of the hard work of being conscious. Dennett's 1996 book, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, advocated extending Darwin's idea of the mechanism of natural selection to virtually all human experience.

Dawkins and Dennett's intellectual honesty and dedication to liberty of thought preclude their endorsement of the state's use of coercion to combat religious delusion. But their belief that religion is delusion appears to have led them into a position inimical to liberty of thought. A fair reading of the science of religion suggests in any case that religion is not mere delusion or cognitive error but a complex suite of biocultural