



Scottish History: The Culture and the Folk

EDWARD J. COWAN

The restoration of the Scottish Parliament in 1999 after an absence of almost three hundred years represented one of the biggest constitutional upheavals in British history. Yet, remarkably, it was accomplished purely by means of the ballot box, without resort to bullets or bloodshed. The stateless nation acquired a devolved assembly with powers somewhat analogous to those of an American state legislature. Scotland had contrived, against the odds, to keep alive a sense of nationhood after the Union of the Crowns in 1603, when James of Scotland succeeded Elizabeth I, and after 1707, when the Scots surrendered their parliament in return for free trade to create the United Kingdom of Great Britain. Separated from England by a border of mountains and rivers, Scotland has always been a small country, poor in resources and population but rich in history and self-mythologization, which, through time, has forged a strong sense of national identity. That formulation of Scottishness has always been staunchly populist and anti-authoritarian, placing a high value upon freedom and the dignity of the individual, as well as nurturing a communitarian spirit that takes care of its own while defying external interference. Or so we like to think.

The Romans came and saw, but declined to conquer. Although they penetrated far to the north, they cut their losses by erecting an elaborate rampart, Hadrian's Wall, across the north of England, effectively dividing the island of Britannia. When the invaders withdrew in the 4th and 5th centuries, the northern half, which was to become Scotland, was occupied by a multicultural population. The southwest was held by the Britons, Welsh-speakers whose kinsfolk extended all the way to the English Channel. A group of newcomers, the Angles, were pushing westwards up the valleys of the Eastern Borders. Originally hired by Rome as mercenaries, they abandoned their coastal settlements as global warming elevated sea levels. Eastern Scotland, including the northern islands of Orkney and Shetland, was inhabited by the Picts, a people with a rich stone-carving tradition that has bequeathed to posterity portraits of Picts at war and peace, iconographic fragments splicing together pagan and Christian beliefs, and, in the form of bewildering abstract symbols, eloquent messages that so far no one has been able to interpret. To the west and out to the isles were the Scots, whose sway extended over northern Ireland.

The first millennium of Scottish history was, in effect, a crucible in which each of those peoples strove with the others for ultimate domination. When the Vikings arrived from Norway to scourge the clans and tribes for over a century, a common identity was somehow forged, and from the chaos the Scots emerged triumphant, in charge (if not in control) of a largely Celtic nation. During the 12th and 13th centuries, under the aegis of a powerful dynasty, the kingdom continued to develop; unlike England, it was spared a Norman Conquest, but it nevertheless was able to import the more desirable elements of contemporary European culture. New institutions of government and law accompanied the growth of commerce and the creation of towns, or burghs as

(Facing page) Founded in 1451, the University of Glasgow has played a distinguished role in British education for centuries.

Photo by Nancy Groce

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we call them. Kings fostered strong links with a vibrant and revitalized church, which gradually displaced that of the old Celtic saints such as Ninian, Kentigern, and Columba; however attractive as personalities, they were little more than the venerated objects of local cults. The new fad was for St Andrew, authenticated by Scripture as his rivals were not and adopted as Scotland's patron saint. As surely as it rejected the Celtic saints, Scotland turned its back on its Gaelic-speaking inhabitants; in C.E.1000 they were to be found on the banks of the Tweed, but during the next millennium they would gradually but surely be pushed out to the west coast and the Hebrides. This Highland/Lowland dichotomy constitutes one of the great themes of Scottish history.

Calamity struck in the late 13th century when Scots were forced to resist English imperialistic aggression. William Wallace (*ca.* 1270–1305) led the

resistance against English occupation. Demonized as a commoner and regarded by friend and foe alike as a “man from nowhere,” he turned the aristocratic world of Scotland upside down. He offended the nobility and scandalized the enemy, whom he devastatingly defeated at Stirling Bridge in 1297. Eventually betrayed to the English and executed, he died a martyr to the freedom of his nation, but he was a warning to future kings that if they failed in their duty, the Scottish common man would intervene.

The cause of nationhood was continued by Robert Bruce, whose heroic efforts resulted in victory at Bannockburn (1314). He orchestrated the finest and most inspirational statement to emerge from the wars, the Declaration of Arbroath (1320), which in 1998 the United States Senate declared to have been a model for the American Declaration of Independence. The Arbroath

document was a letter written by the Scottish nobility, barons, and commoners urging the pope to recognize the legality of Robert's kingship. So intent were the Scots upon independence, the Declaration states, that if Bruce should ever transgress as king, the signers would remove him and set up another, better able to govern, in his place. They were thus the first in Europe to enunciate not only the contractual, or elective, theory of monarchy that lies at the root of all modern constitutionalism, but also the principle of the sovereignty of the people. They went on to vow that so long as a hundred remained alive, they would never yield. “It is not for glory, nor riches, nor honors that we are fighting but for freedom alone, which no honest person will lose but with life itself.” Such were the legacies of the Wars of Independence, ideas that were to pervade the learned and folk literatures of Scotland.

Similar assumptions informed the popular revolt that led to Protestant Reformation in Scotland in 1560. To overthrow the medieval Church, John Knox fostered sentiments that later generations would characterize as democratic and egalitarian. There were undoubtedly benefits for the population at large in the form of school and university education, literacy, numeracy, moral welfare, and the provision of relief for the poor. But the claw



Stirling Castle in central Scotland has stood as a gateway between Scottish Highland and Lowland cultures for centuries. Photo © VisitScotland/ScottishViewpoint



Much of contemporary Scottish tradition grew from the everyday lives of its people as seen in this detail of the early 19th-century painting, *Harvest at Auchendinny*, artist unknown. Photo © National Museums of Scotland

of Presbyterianism was to seize the throat of the Scottish people in its grasp for almost three hundred years.

Long before the Reformation, the Kirk (Church) had attacked popular culture, but after 1560, anything that savored of superstition was deemed to harbor latent sympathy for Rome; hence, all folk and popular beliefs were anathema and had to be destroyed. Scotland's notorious witch-hunts, in which hundreds, mainly women, were executed, can be seen as a metaphor for the assault on folk culture in general. Trial testimony contains much detail about music, song, dance, drinking, sex, and vengeance on neighbors. Beliefs about childbirth, courtship, marriage, death, folk healing, fairies, and ghosts were condemned, as well as witches, conjurors, bards, and balladeers. The most intensely religious period in Scottish history was thus ironically also the most superstitious, as a kind of mania seized the populace irrespective of social class or position. Indeed, in this period Scotland witnessed the European phenomenon of the cultivation of manners, as the wealthy and the upwardly mobile gradually distinguished themselves from the rabble through designed culture, education, literacy, language, and conspicuous consumption, ranging from

housing and clothing to food, drink, and the provision of sports equipment.

What saved folk culture was, again ironically, the Kirk, with help from the Enlightenment. In order to fend off what many ministers believed to be the hellish legions of atheism and to support the existence of God, some of them wrote tracts purporting to demonstrate the reality of fairies, spirits, demons, etcetera—the very entities that had only recently led many a poor woman to the stake. Folk beliefs became matters of study and investigation rather than foibles to be rooted out. The Devil was a long time a-dying in Scotland, but from the early 18th century, ballads and songs with which he had once been associated were actually sought out by collectors and published. Enlightenment historians became fascinated by the phenomenon of manners. In writing conjectural history—that for which no evidence had survived—they turned to current anthropological theory, such as that used to interpret the Native peoples of America, who were thought to display characteristics typical of earlier generations of humanity. Thus it was that in some minds Gaels and Indians became identified.



Piper to the Laird of Grant,
William Cumming, 1714. Photo
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Prominent in recovering the folk culture of his people was Robert Burns (1759–96), whose life and works were to become uniquely traditionalized. Another collector was the novelist Walter Scott (1771–1832). In his finer novels, he celebrated the role played by the subordinate classes in historical processes, though in his heart of hearts he believed that rabid Presbyterians and barbarous clansmen alike must inevitably be consigned to the trashcan of history. Scott, like many people, was trapped between regret for the loss of some aspects of the past and despair about some trends in his own lifetime that were supposedly equated with progress—one of the reasons, presumably, why he attracted so many readers in the American South. At a moment of anguish, this supreme patriot cried, “Little by little, whatever your wishes may be, you will destroy and undermine until nothing of what makes Scotland Scotland, shall remain.” In 1822, his own attempts at halting the march of time included inventing the notion that all Scots of the same surname should wear kilts of a uniform tartan on the occasion when George IV became the first reigning monarch to visit Scotland in 181 years. Some Scots liked the idea, but others still believe that kilts symbolize bogus anachronism. Scott thus invented new traditions while ultimately rejecting those of the folk who, during the horrors of industrialization in places such as Glasgow and the west of Scotland, went on singing about a Brigadoon-like Neverland. It was perhaps no accident that the inventor of Peter Pan was a Scot, J. M. Barrie (1860–1937). By the late 19th century, when hundreds of Scots were in the forefront of scientific, medical, and engineering breakthroughs, inflicting the telephone, television, and, among Scottish emigrants, *telaesthesia* (perception from afar) on the world, thousands of their fellow countrymen convinced themselves that they were living in a tartan phantasmagoria.

Scots who betook themselves to the farthest edges of the British Empire consoled themselves with Burns Suppers and St Andrew’s Day dinners, playing bagpipes and bellowing “Auld Lang Syne.” When the imperial adventure ended, they scrutinized their native land and found it wanting, culturally, commercially, and constitutionally. Disillusionment with a political system that seemed to favor London and southern England operated to the advantage of the Scottish National Party, though the Labour and Liberal parties similarly benefited. Meanwhile a cultural renaissance was underway, reflected in historiography, literature, music, art, drama, the folk revival, and the arts in general, all of which debated Scottish identity and the role of Scots in the modern world. In that heady dialectic a new Scottish confidence was discovered, of which the restoration of the Scottish Parliament was a result and not a cause.

In the modern world of multinationals and the so-called global economy, political independence is a phantom, but Scots believe they can make a difference. They are the Folk, after all, who so long ago declared their devotion to freedom alone, which no honest person would ever surrender save with life itself. The small nations still have something to teach the large ones. Or so we like to think. ■