

## Scotland

### *The Story of a Nation*

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The Story of a Nation. The notion of a nation is fairly recent, in fact the populist and romantic notion, including that of an ethnic identity is as we all know of a fairly recent vintage, in fact it sprung out the Romantic reaction at the end of the 18th century. In the case of Scotland it was to a large extent created by Walter Scott (what an appropriate name) who in a series of hugely popular historical novels, commonly known as the Waverley series, made vivid a heroic Scottish past. Scott, whose commercial success as a man of letters, was unprecedented<sup>1</sup>, made himself a shrine to Scotland in his beloved Abbotsford where he collected a lot of relics of the Scottish past. A Royal visit by George IV masterminded by the Scot *per excellence* further put Scottish identity at the forefront, as well as the concomitant retrieval of the Scottish royal regalia, hidden in a chest buried in the Edinburgh castle since the days of the Union a century or so before. A retrieval initiated by Scott. In addition at the end of his life, Scott wrote down, ostensibly for the benefit of a grandson, the story of the Nation, titled 'Tales of a Grandfather' which later was used as a basis for a more regular history of Scotland. The present author, the TV-personality Magnus Magnusson of original Icelandic heritage, takes Scott and his history as a basis for his own work. Although presenting some minor criticism of Scott, his attitude is one of reverence, concluding his book<sup>2</sup> with a chapter on the most Distinguished Scotsman ever - the Wizard of the North. Scott, according to the author and modern sensibilities, was on one hand a firm unionist as well as a Scottish Nationalist. The Union with England brought in addition to civilization also economic prosperity as an intellectual flowering<sup>3</sup>, while of course the history of the nation gave to the Scots a special identity, which could be reveled in as an exercise in living in the past, the purpose of his historical fiction, but never as a blueprint for the future.

As noted Magnusson is a Television personality, and the thick book is presented very much as a television documentary. There are constant references to the modern topography of Scotland, as presented by a Road Atlas, and the author gives plenty of pointers how to find this and that monument or remembrance plaque, replete with a National Scottish Trust information center (and Gift shop?). Those of course fits well into the modern format

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<sup>1</sup> It came to a sudden and sorry end. He found himself in severe pecuniary circumstances due to a crash, and was to avoid bankruptcy and the selling of his Abbotsford, only by pledging future earnings to his many creditors

<sup>2</sup> There is also an add-on in form of an epilogue describing the revival of the Scottish Parliament during the last decades of the 20th century.

<sup>3</sup> Names such as David Hume and Adam Smith are only mentioned in passing in connection with a reference to the Scottish Enlightenment, no mention of such scientists of note as James Watts

of a popular documentary, with Magnusson appearing at the crucial spots to add a presence as well as to make a tangible link between the present and the past. In short we are to be treated to a tourist itinerary of the Scottish past. Such an itinerary is invariably centered on Kings and Battles, the latter often supplemented with sketches of engagements, which may look impressive but will hardly add much to technical understanding when the layman is concerned (as well, one suspects, as that of the author himself.) Such an approach to history is traditional, and as such looked down upon; on the other hand traditions are usually in place for some good reasons, and traditional historical narratives have much to commend themselves, at least as an introduction. They may not probe deeply, but at least they provide the lay of the land. Battles, like sports events, are dramatic and speak to elemental instincts within us, as well as often having, unlike sports events, far-reaching ramifications. A succession of Kings in addition to providing a personal, human interest aspect to the story, naturally chops up the chronology into manageable bits and pieces, in fact a traditional way of referring to events is to use the year of the regent. As a young child I learned the list of Swedish regents starting with the founder of the modern Swedish state - Gustav Vasa; later on at school I came in contact with a medley of Medieval kings. That list, however, was far more confusing, and it has not stuck in my mind, except for a few kings and rulers that stand out. Naturally, I have had a certain curiosity to likewise learn other lists of regents, but here the going gets tougher. While Sweden did not acquire a monarchy based on heritage until Gustav Vasa (before that rulers, not always considered Kings in names, were elected, although of course not by a general electorate by any means), this tradition goes further back in other Western European countries, including England, Scotland and not to forget Denmark, a small country which has been a steady provider of Royalty through the centuries. Thus the list of kings go back much further, with little independent documentation, merging with legend. Most of the personalities are described in rather set ways and are thus liable to be forgotten as soon as put aside for the next in line. It is not until the 16th century, the rulers start to appear with far more detail and personality, providing characters of an on-going soap opera, which the reader and the tourist can savor at a safe distance, always being able to learn what happened next, giving him or her a comfortable sense of immortality.

The account starts from the very beginning with Scotland as a mere geological entity. This has of course nothing to do with Scotland as a nation but seems merely to be added as a form of bravado and duty, done tongue in cheek as we are being made privy to a piece of future real estate being tossed by tectonic activity hither and thither on the globe. Likewise the early pre-historic accounts have little relevance to the modern emergence of historic Scotland. That the British Isles were inhabited by Celts during Roman times is of course well-known, the Anglo-Saxon invasion and thus the introduction of the Germanic tongue came after the collapse of Roman Britain. Of course the crucial question is whether the Celts simply fused with the invaders and adopted their language, or whether they were expelled to the fringes in a sustained act of ethnic cleansing. And like all such questions the most likely answer is both yes and no. Clear is though that Celtic languages, such as Welsh were not entirely wiped out, it has in recent decades experienced a revival<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> I recall fondly a trip to Wales in the autumn of 1982, in which I and my companion overheard small children holding forth in an incomprehensible tongue.

Equally clear is that in Scotland there were Gaelic speaking remnants, descendants of the legendary Picts and Scots, mostly eking out a precarious living in the Highlands of the North West. However, this split of the Scottish Nation is not really considered in the book, which makes for some confusion. During the Viking Age England as well as Scotland were invaded by Scandinavian forces. In the North they claimed in addition to the Hebrides also the Orkneys and Shetland islands. How strong is the Norse influence on Northern lands? We all learn that in Scottish there are Norse words that have not survived in Standard English (such as 'bairn' for 'barn' (children) ). During the ninth and tenth century there were Scottish Kings with names such as Duncan and Donald and Malcolm. In fact the whole of the British Isles were split into smaller Kingdoms on the pattern of continental feudal life. As the author reminds us, the notion of nation did not really exist at the time, yet it is of course applied retroactively, which is of course very convenient. The first of the kings whose name you may commit to memory is of course Macbeth. Without the eponymous play by Shakespeare, his too would just be a name among others. Shakespeare's rendition of Macbeth is of course far from historically accurate, which was never its purpose; yet it lives on, just as other historical characters of his plays are made vivid without the authority of truth. Not much is of course known by a character that far into the deep past (he ruled 1040-1057, thus before the Norman Conquest) but by all accounts he appears to have been a much more capable ruler than suggested by Shakespeare and the chronicles which no doubt inspired him.

The Norman Conquest in 1066 is of course a momentous event in English history, in fact a list of English Kings usually starts from William the Conqueror. It stands to reason that it should likewise do so in Scotland. Norman aristocracy usurped much of Anglo-Saxon, and this process clearly involved the lowlands of Scotland as well, after all the standard Scottish dialect does not differ that much from standard English, in particular the same influence of French words. Thus from a more intrinsic point of view, one would surmise that the real division in the Isles were not the much fought over boundary between England and Scotland, but between the Lowlanders and the Highlanders. One would surmise that the latter were Gaelic speakers, tantalizing hints of which are made but never really corroborated in the book. As noted Nation was not a concept at the time, the different strong men were vassals to even stronger men, ultimately paying homage to the King. Just as today multi-national corporations do not respect national borders, in the past landowners may pay fealty to their superiors, but they may have holdings of different kinds, just as nobility in Scandinavia, whose interest it was to form a union<sup>5</sup>. In fact the notion of a separate Scottish path only makes sense when claiming that they had a different succession of kings. The moot question is of course to what extent those kings were really independent and not just vassals of the English. Many of the English kings actually assumed not, and considered Scotland as part of their realm, occasionally providing impetus to make the point by force.

Thus a large part of Scottish history up to the final Union in 1707 is made up by the

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<sup>5</sup> Which was duly made back in 1397 by the initiative of the Danish queen Margarethe, and signed in Kalmar. However, Denmark was not sufficiently dominant to entirely quench the Swedes who wavered and eventually broke out after the Danes had made forceful attempts at establishing their authority - the Bloodbath of Stockholm in 1520

efforts of maintaining their independence and to fight off English invasions. Scotland also invaded the English, but due to the loop-sided nature of the conflicts, England being four to five times as populous as Scotland, and as to economic muscle much more and growing, the latter were seldom of any consequence beyond the immediate border, whose exact location gently fluctuated. Thus history will be formed by battles, the description of which may entertain the reader always routing for the underdogs. Such a story, or succession of stories weaving in and out in a Brownian dance, invariably produces various heroic figures, such as William Wallace (the famous outlaw) and Robert Bruce (eventually a King). Figures that invariably catch the popular imagination. As to Robert Bruce, the author is eager to make a point. The Declaration of Arbroath in connection with the ascent of Bruce involves a stipulation that clearly points to the ruler being ultimately answerable to the people he rules instead of to God. There is no explicit mention of this in the history as narrated by Scott, the standard modern explanation being that Scott was a Tory a conservative, who viewed the emergence of democracy with suspicion not to say horror and disgust. To modern sensibilities the situation is of course very different, now a source of pride, as each nation vies with the other of being the most democratically perfect and sound.

The successive recollections of past kings tend to be tedious. Some are good and strong, others are weak and ineffective, short of being total disasters. The natural question is why are such close disasters accepted? The overwhelming problem is that of legitimacy of a ruler. This is an important problem, the solution of which is still not satisfactorily solved. In modern democracies it is decided by popular vote. The legitimacy of the popular vote can also be questioned, apart from cases of regular cheating, which seems rampant in many pseudo-democratic societies, there is the notion of buying votes which many modern politicians have thought of as merely expedient. In close races the decision seems more like that of tossing a coin than a measured one<sup>6</sup>. The problem is of course to provide an objective principle to invoke in order to prevent the mere right of might, which leads to chaos and the everyones war against everyone else according to Hobbes. This principle which seems to have been hold almost as sacred explains a lot of European history. Kings are deposed, but less often dynasties, such events are really considered disruptive. Hence this pre-occupation of protection against pretenders. In short the important question about a Monarch is not his or her factual effectiveness as such, but its legality.

When does the list of Sottish Monarchs become interesting? Constituting the stuff out of which not only legends can be spun but also factual biographies? A natural starting point would be the James', starting with James I becoming an infant king in 1406 and ending with James V dying in 1542. Thus encompassing the 15th century and the first half of the sixteenth, coinciding roughly with the high Renaissance. James I was the son of Robert III and started out as a captive of the English. He was not released until the early 1420's after handsome ransom money had been paid. During his captivity, which one assumes was rather gentle, allowing him to pay court to Joan Beaufort of English Royal descent, a dalliance which resulted in marriage. His first actions after his release was to enact vengeance on those powerful nobles who had blighted his early life. Actions whose

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<sup>6</sup> The by now classical case of Bush versus Gore in 2000, when apart from deliberate miscounting of votes, the race was so close, as to make the outcome a matter of fortuity. In fact Gore had the popular majority but due to the constitutional technicalities of involving delegates, this was not enough.

brutality cost him his popularity and eventually his life through assassination in 1437. The conspirators gained access to his bedchamber, and although he had tried to escape through a duct, he found the end of it barred, and was dragged out by his assassins, while his queen, bleeding and scantily clad managed to escape in the confusion. He was a typical prince of the Renaissance, combining a ruthless tyrannical rule with great appreciation of the arts. Obviously he has had bad press, but always as with such victims, there is always the possibility and temptation of redress, James I being no exception. His son James II, another minor, came to a sorry, almost trago-comical end while firing a big cannon during a siege in 1460 during an invading campaign in England. As the shot was fired, the casting burst and he was hit by debris. He too left a son a minor on the throne - James III, who through his marriage to a Danish Princess (under age by any count) received the Orkneys and Shetland as part of the dowry. He too became very unpopular with his subjects and died under mysterious circumstances after a battle, not unlikely murdered, by a rebellion using his infant son as a figure head. With the latter as James IV Scotland was ushered into the high Renaissance. His reign has been approvingly viewed by posterity. He was passionately interested not only in the arts but also incipient science. He founded the Kings College in Aberdeen, with its emphasis on medicine. He lavishly upgraded royal palaces. He also had ambitions of being a great warrior, what King at the times, did not nourish such vain ambitions? He tried to build a large Navy and conducted an aggressive policy towards the English, which led into a battle, an unnecessary one, more of a skirmish going out of hand, which cut his life short. His young son James V, would eventually come to power and proved himself to be a royal patron of architecture on an unprecedented scale. Like all the James' he had a powerful sexual appetite, going through a hoist of mistresses, while finally marrying Marie de Guise of French Royalty. Not a surprising choice, on the principle of my enemy's enemy is my friend. Both Scotland and France were joined together in an 'auld alliance' caused by their common foe - England. An alliance in which the French expected more of the Scots than they were willing to contribute themselves. The reign of James V was complicated by the event of the Reformation, which in Scotland took the course of Calvinism (no doubt imported from France and Holland); and the aggressiveness of Henry VIII in England. James died suddenly, just six days before the birth of his daughter - Mary the Queen of Scots. And with her we reach a personality which is generally known outside Scotland. Hers was a fate which has stimulated the imagination of writers, not only English, as the play - Maria Stuart by Schiller is a testimony to.

Maria Stuart was an exceptionally tall lady. She spent her minority at the French Court while her mother acted as regent. During her stay in France she was married to what would become the young French King Franchoise II and she briefly enjoyed being Queen of France as well, until her sickly consort succumbed. Eventually she returned to Scotland. Scotland had by then become a stringent Calvinist country, and the reformer John Know played a prominent role. The fact that the Queen had been brought up Catholic made of course for tension. However, the real problem turned out to be more frivolous. Being lusty herself in addition to inspiring lust in men, she embroiled herself unwisely into sexual affairs, one with a cousin of hers, which resulted in marriage and an issue - the future James VI. The young husband turned out to be a spoiled good-for-nothing, not living up to her expectations. His life was soon ended in a big explosion, and later she took on

another lover, who was suspected of foul play in regards to the death of her husband. This rash act threw suspicion of complicity on herself, her popularity already tested plummeted, as did her political support. Her situation became untenable, but instead of escaping to France, she sought out the protection of her distant relative Elizabeth. This turned out to be a big mistake. From having been a guest, she became a captive, and would be so for the remaining sixteen years or so of her life. The situation was delicate for the English Queen. From the Papal point of view the divorce of her father Henry VIII from his first wife was never legal, hence Elizabeth was a bastard, and Mary was actually a more legitimate heir. Trumped up charges were brought against the latter to the effect that she had instigated attempts at the life of the Queen and hence should be sentenced death on the grounds of high treason. She rightly refuted the views on the basis of not being a subject of the Queen. To Elizabeth the situation was indeed delicate, explaining why she wavered for so long before she sent her rival to the scaffold<sup>7</sup>. As we all know Elizabeth died without issue and the throne went to Mary's son James VI of Scotland to become James I of England brought up as a Protestant.

Now with the advent of the personal Union between England and Scotland, Scotland became further marginalized. After leaving his home country for London, James I became foremost an English Monarch, only returning to Scotland once. The story of the last Stewarts became an English story not a Scottish one. James I turned out to be a fairly competent King of some intellectual distinction. Maybe to posterity he is chiefly known through the King James Bible. What made him suspicious to his contemporaries, we would now recognize as a virtue, namely tolerance for the Catholic persuasion. James also had exalted ideas about the divinity of Kings, as being only answerable to God. Of course we tend to think of this as a mere license for despondency, which it often turned out to be, but if taken seriously and literally, it meant nothing more than being beholden to transcendent moral principles, of being committed to doing the right thing, regardless of fickle popular opinion. A scientist is accountable only to truth, not to his sponsors. Of course there are very severe problems of implementing this principle in practice, hence the rise of democracy, which is not divinely inspired but reflect human shortcomings<sup>8</sup>. Charles I, the younger brother never meant to ascend the throne, took his fathers precepts seriously, but lacking the common sense of the latter he run into severe difficulties, embroiled himself in confrontations with the Parliament, not the least because of his Catholic leanings. The result is history, a Civil War ensued, and as the result the most ruthless of the combatants - Cromwell, prevailed. Charles the I was sent to the scaffold charged with treason and beheaded. The poor man composed himself admirably as he was confronted with the axe, inspiring sympathy and making the Scots furious and resentful. In spite of all his

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<sup>7</sup> Schiller's play 'Maria Stuart' revolves around the last stage of the Mary's life. She is shown as proud and headstrong, and requests a meeting with Elizabeth. A meeting that is arranged (whether this accords with historical truth is quite another thing) but degenerates due to mutual recriminations. A bungled attempt is made to engender her escape. The Queen is agonizing over the decision to have her beheaded, a document is finally signed, and only after the beheading, which is not shown in the play, evidence comes to light that the case against the Scottish Queen had been doctored due to false testimony. Elizabeth is made to regret her decision.

<sup>8</sup> As Churchill remarked. Democracy is fraught with defects, but the alternatives are worse.

shortcomings, he was after all their King. What right had the English to behead him? In Scotland he was immediately replaced by his son Charles, whose ascendancy to the English throne would have to wait a decade for the short-lived Cromwellian dynasty to run its course and be followed by the Restoration. After the death of the pleasure loving Charles II, who failed to produce a legitimate heir in spite of fathering countless issue outside the marital confines, there was the debacle of James II, whose open Catholic preferences once again became too much to bear. Then there was William III and Mary, to be followed by the fat Queen Anne, during whose reign the Union of crowns was replaced by a real political Union, which involved the dissolution of the Scottish Parliament on its own accord, the Nationalist party being too internally split to effect any opposition. In a way that was the end of Scotland as a nation. It was never conquered by the English, only absorbed.

And here we may end the story had it not been for a romantic epilogue. Catholicism was not popular in Scotland either, but the Stewarts were after all their Kings. There was an Old Pretender, a son of James II, and later a Young Pretender, a son of the latter - Bonnie Prince Charles. He managed by his charisma and prevalent nostalgia, chiefly to be found among the Highlanders, to lead a short insurrection, involving an invasion of England. His army went as far south as Derby before he got cold feet (there was promised assistance from the French, always eager to procure troubles for the English but it did not seem to materialize) and met with its crushing defeat back in Scotland, in fact at Culloden in February 1746.

The Union brought Scotland prosperity, an intellectual awakening, and becoming part of an enterprising Empire. For the individual there was only gain. And maybe Scottish nationalism would simply have petered out. Admittedly Walter Scott did much to revive it, but his ambition was more antiquarian than political, as we initially pointed out. To him the Union with England was the culmination, not the end. Still resentment against the English did prevail, making possible the spectacle of the Scottish National Party in the last decades of the 20th century, which eventually resulted in the revival of the Scottish Parliament in 1997. To what extent this signifies the prelude to a real separation, or whether it is merely a window dressing and does not entail any real authority is an interesting question on which the author typically does not really touch,