

# The Invention of Scotland

*Myth and History*

H. Trevor-Roper

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Scotland is something of a mythological country thinking of itself apart from England in a way Wales has never been able to do. Wales were incorporated into Britain at an early stage and cannot boast of any independent foreign policy as can Scotland. In fact Scotland has a history and a sequence of kings and wars, mostly disastrous, with England. It all came to an end with the demise of Queen Elizabeth, who left no issue, and the throne was given to the son of her arch-rival - Mary Queen of Scots - by name of James VI (I). The Tudors, foes of Scotland, were succeeded by a Stuart, in one of those ironies of which history abounds. By the Scottish King swallowing England, England in its turn swallowed Scotland, a state of affairs which was formally confirmed with the Union of 1707. But Scottish nationalism has not died down, in fact it was never really extirpated, instead the later 18th and beginning 19th century saw a revival, which is the topic of this slight, but entertaining book, by that historian, who in spite of initial promise never really delivered, there being too many other sweet distractions in life (which incidentally is the lot of most of us, it is the exceptions we honor and observe, at least in retrospect). The cause for the author to reach for his pen, was the recent revival of Scottish nationalism and the concomitant attempts to dissolve the union, which he wanted to debunk. Much of what the Scots saw as their special character was bogus, recent inventions. Somehow, the author did not get his act together, the various ms were never collected and published during his life time, maybe the issue of Scottish Nationalism lost some of its urgency for him (he would die some ten years before there would be a referendum on the issue of Scottish independence, a referendum that might have settled the question as unrealistic maybe for generations to come). So what we have is the editing of papers from the *Nachlaß* with the inevitable drawbacks such have, in terms of presentation and lack of authority. Maybe the author did not want to have it published after all, or if so, in a very different form. But readers are hungry for more, and being survivors they tend to have the last word (which after all is the purpose of survival).

The book is divided into three parts, the middle one, being by far the longest and most thorough. The first one deals with historical mythology, in which a nation retroactively creates a glorious past. The second with literary mythology, and the last with the mythology of ancient customs, in this case the kilt and the tartan. The object of the author is to make short shrift will all of them, although to some extent this has been done before, so the exercise is more in the nature of kicking a dead horse, but apparently not a superfluous one.

When it comes to Scottish pre-history it has been elucidated by the toil of generations of scholars, doing away with fanciful obfuscation at the end of the Middle-Ages and the beginning of the Modern. The fact is of course that the British Isles were inhabited by

Celts up to Roman Conquest, which of course was not total, as testified by the Hadrian Wall. Then a few centuries later came the Anglo-Saxon invasion establishing the present Germanic population with its Germanic tongue, shoving the original tribes to the fringes, as well as interbreeding with them. Viking invasions a few centuries later only confirmed the Germanic character, and the Norman invasion of 1066, introduced to the language and the country a definite Roman character, with which the language was to become intertwined in a linguistic interbreeding. Incidentally the Norman invaders were of Norse stock (after all the province is called 'Normandie'), but already after a century that had become irrelevant, as they were totally latinized. During all of this, some people from Ireland settled in what is now Western Scotland around the time of Charlemagne. The rest of nowadays Scotland was peopled by another Celtic tribe - the Picts - and eventually the Western invaders took over. Later on there was political pressure to establish long term Scottish tenure on the lands, predating that of the Picts, in effect writing them out of history. In order to do so, extended royal genealogies were concocted, with no basis on facts. In fact we are dealing with pure fabrications, the purpose of which we not only to base a claim but, as all narratives, impart moral lessons. Some of the kings were good, others were bad, and were disposed, thus giving the legitimacy to regicide. Among the major perpetrators were Hector Boece (1465-36) and George Buchanan (1506-82) both educated abroad and winning their laurels as distinguished Latin stylists, which at the time, was considered the pinnacle of humanistic education and endeavor, not critical scholarship. One may wonder how much was due to intentional fraud and how much was due to simple credulity and wishful thinking. The phenomenon is not unusual, in Sweden there were also fraudulent genealogies around, flattering to the state. The king Erik, called himself the XIV, although there had of course been precedents, there were never that many. One is reminded of the notorious horror of the vacuous, which impels people to interpolate and extrapolate where ignorance reigns. Yet, those fake stories did not escape contemporary criticism, especially the Welshman Humphrey Llwyd (1527-68), took a skeptical stand. Eventually people such as Thomas Innes (1662-44) effectively dismantled those narratives, yet they did provide an inspiration for future myth making.

However, the most spectacular fraud did not concern history as such as literature, be it that both were invariably intertwine. We are talking about the fraud perpetrated by James Macpherson (1736-96) in presenting to an altogether too willing and receptive world, the 'Songs of Ossian'. As with all successful frauds it had a basis in fact, namely an existent oral tradition of Gaelic songs, out of which it was ostensible a compilation. Macpherson had tried his hand at poetry as a young man, but without any noticeable success, so he did have some skills as a versifier. It might very well have been the case that his first translations were actually honest ones, meaning based on recited songs or manuscripts. He showed it to some Scottish intellectual notables, such as John Home (1722-08, a friend of David Hume) and Hugh Blair (1718-00), and encouraged by the favorable reception, he succumbed to the all too human temptation of making up for what did not exist. The times were ripe for it. There were already in the mid 18th century a romantic reaction to the Enlightenment, even if it would not become full-blown until the end of that century, with an idealization of the past. As one says: 'If God does not exist, one would have to invent him'. The Greek Homer was of course well-known, but if

the old Greeks had had an oral tradition, why not the Celts? After all there were Gaelic songs and even some old manuscripts that indicated, be it in a fragmentary way, a lost richness. Maybe the past of the Gaelic people was as illustrious as those of the Greek, maybe it contained in itself not only a rich culture but military prowess and heroic deeds? It was only a matter of systematically seeking out sources, collect old songs, looking for old manuscripts, and thus preserve for posterity, what otherwise may with the onslaught of the Modern Age get lost. A crucial event that puts everything into perspective was the Jacobite uprisings of 1745 which came to a definite end at the battle of Culloden in 1746. The Stuart monarchy had been replaced by the Hanoverian one, after the death of the childless Queen Anne in 1714. But there were of course still descendants from the Stuarts, one notably Charles Edward Stuart, a grandson of James II (VII), known as the young Pretender, who with the enthusiastic support of the King of France sought to reestablish the Stuarts on the throne and concomitantly, it was understood, reintroduce Catholicism<sup>1</sup>. After some initial success, the Saga of the Young Man came to an abrupt and brutal end as the predominantly Highland forces were defeated by Loyalist troops. The Highlanders had been persuaded to rally to his cause, which he fled ignominiously after his defeat, leaving his loyal supporters in the lurch. The Highlanders had been seen as barbarians by the Lowlanders, and afterwards there were a concerted effort to tame and civilize them, their wild country being crisscrossed by roads in an effort to subdue them to Hanoverian rule<sup>2</sup>. This forced attention on Highland society, out of which Macpherson grew up, although his command of Gaelic seems to have been short of perfect, naturally focused attention of what was on the verge of being lost<sup>3</sup>. Add to this that the epics Macpherson was able to manufacture fitted perfectly with the predominant taste of the time, and his reception was bound to be favorable. There were of course from the start dissenting and skeptical voices, although hardly surprising, if ironic, that a professional skeptic such as David Hume, at least initially was completely taken in. Gaelic scholars tended to be the most critical, and they were quick to point out inconsistencies and anachronisms. Furthermore it was noted that the epic was strikingly abstract, compared to the Homeric, and in particular concrete everyday details, which abound in Homer, were absent, so they provided no valuable source for the quotidian life of the old Celts. Furthermore the actual events were supposed to have taken place 1500 years ago, and how could they have survived such a long oral tradition. Dr. Johnson was most vocal, and even claimed that the Epic, genuine or not, lacked any redeeming literary value, being for one thing so repetitive. That it was in effect a hack-work, and a man, once he decides to do so, could easily churn out more of the same unendingly. He demanded that the original manuscripts be produced and submitted to the scrutiny of Gaelic experts. This was never properly done. Macpherson's attitude towards dissenters was arrogant, and he did not deign to respond to it. To

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<sup>1</sup> The choice of the distant cousins in Hanover was due to a repudiation of Catholicism, a British King had to be Protestant. Charles II supposedly converted back to Catholicism on his death-bed and James II had definite Catholic leanings

<sup>2</sup> In fact after the Glorious revolution monarchical power was severely curtailed, so it is unclear what a Jacobite revival really would have amounted too, unless the political system as such of Britain had been overthrown.

<sup>3</sup> as with vanishing species, who go extinct before even being noticed by man

doubt the authenticity of his translated Epics was tantamount to betrayal, or only to be expected of jealous Englishmen. Macpherson cashed in on his fame, became a member of Parliament and involved in business ventures in India (as he previously had spent time in Florida). But his aloofness could not be maintained indefinitely, as his support grew, there was even a Highland Society formed, which granted him funds to pursue his studies and once and for all establish authenticity, and thereby, no doubt to his dismay, forcing his hand to show his cards. He became evasive and defensive, he talked about manuscripts being lost or misplaced, and when actual manuscripts were produced, his deficiency as a Gaelic scholar became apparent. When it came to transcribing and publishing the few original and fragmentary mss which actually existed, he suggested to the exasperations of his supporters, that the Greek alphabet should be used. Although doubt grew, there never came to a show-down and when he died in 1796 and no manuscripts of interest were found in his *Nachlaß*, there was of course disappointment among his supporters, but his credibility could hardly have sank lower among his dissenters. By all accounts, Trevor-Roper asserts, Macpherson was singularly deficient in personal charm as well, and although he moved in the best of literary societies, nothing is reported on him, proving to be a morose and taciturn fellow at the table. Gradually a consensus was formed as to fraudulence of his work, but by that time it had already done its work, being even more enthusiastically received on the continent, especially Napoleon was a big fan<sup>4</sup>. But maybe more relevantly preparing for a Scottish revival, headed by the aptly named Walter Scott, who masterminded the pageantry accompanying the visit of George IV, the first Hanoverian King to visit Scotland ever. At that time the Kilt became to be seen as the traditional Highland garb, although it was the late invention of a British industrialist, and likewise the tartan, coded with the colors and patterns of the different clans, became an object of revival, although it too was a late invention. This is the third part of Trevor-Ropers attack on Scottish mythology, and the least interesting, but maybe the longest enduring, still surviving along with bag-pipe music in the way Scotland presents itself to tourists.

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<sup>4</sup> And one of his Field-Marschals would in 1799 name his eldest son Oscar, later to become King of Sweden and sire another Oscar to boot on the Swedish throne