The identity business is booming

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

I HAVE never known a time when there seemed to be so much talk as there is now about Scottish (and Gaelic, and British, and English, and Celtic, and European) identity. What a muddle we're in. I suppose it has something to do with the football. "England fans riot in France, 200 arrested" is beginning to have the same ring as "Redcoats go on rampage after Culloden". We don't want to be associated with that, do we?

My own awareness of such things begins with a moment in 1953, the year of the Coronation. I was seven years old. Walking along under the trees in Langside Avenue in Glasgow with my hand in my father's, as we approached a once red and lovely pillar-box I saw to my utter amazement that it was like a dead creature, ribcage showing, buckled in body and black around the mouth. "Why is it like that?" I said.

"Because, look, it says EIIR on it and some people don't like that," my Dad pointed out. He didn't sound too keen on it himself.

I don't know when exactly it was that Scottish fans switched away from England as their team of second choice. Certainly for most of my lifetime there was a universal assumption, shared by the media and the fans, that if you couldn't support Scotland you supported England. It had always seemed disturbing to me, personally, that an underdog should be expected to support an overdog against other underdogs. It lacked a sense of international brotherhood, and in any case I'd always been partial to a bit of lateral thinking. Wasn't I was belted over and over for that kind of thinking at school?

Now, all of a sudden it seems to me, everyone is doing it. Except Andrew Neil that is, who told us in 'The Scotsman' the other week that if we don't support England we are racists. He got a pretty sharp reply, from the BBC's Gavin Esler among others.

Another 'Scotsman' writer, the always-very-sensible-and-witty Iain MacWhirter, turned on its head the usual assumption that a win for Scotland against Brazil, Norway or Morocco was worth a few percentage points in the polls for the SNP. No, he said, we've got beyond that. We're so rotten at football that we're learning to express national pride through politics instead.

Now before the Editor tells me I'm straying way off my remit here, I have to say that facts and figures about national (and especially linguistic) identity are part of my job. And it's a part that looms ever larger. Recently Radio nan Gaidheal asked me to talk about one of the earliest works on Scottish history, now issued in a full translation from the Latin, Walter Bower's 'Scotichronicon'. Soon (not here) I have to review a book called 'Image and Identity: The Making and Re-Making of Scotland through the Ages', edited by Dauvit Broun, R J Finlay and Michael Lynch for John Donald Ltd of Edinburgh. And before I have even got around to that I see that Edinburgh University Press has published one by William Ferguson called 'The Identity of the Scottish Nation'. Talk about a growth industry.

The reason for this growth industry is that Scottish identity is genuinely rich and complex, as well as poorly understood. The evidence for it is stamped all over our country and our people in the form of placenames, personal names, languages and dialects, as well as in historical documents and literature of all kinds. It has a 'bottom line', which I used to think everyone knew, but I now realise that such is not the case. The 'bottom line' consists of five paragraphs plus a postscript, and here they are.

The Romans were in what they called Caledonia from around the time of Christ to 400 AD. In their day the island of Britain consisted of two peoples. Everywhere **south** of Forth and Clyde were the **Britons**, who spoke a Celtic language called British (or Brythonic or Cumbric) whose modern descendants are Welsh, Cornish and Breton. In Gaelic they are the *Breatannaich*, and their northern capital was Alcluid, 'Clyde Rock', or what we now call *Dùn Bhreatann*, Dumbarton, the Fortress of the Britons. Other examples of British placenames in Scotland are Glasgow and Lanark.

Everywhere **north** of Forth and Clyde were the **Picts**, whom the Romans never conquered. They are a mystery in many ways because they were ultimately overrun by the Gael and their language disappeared without being written down, but it seems to have been akin to British, so they may certainly be regarded as Celts. (A Celt is best defined as 'a speaker of a Celtic language or the descendant of such a person'.) The Picts left fascinating symbols and pictures carved in stone. Most of the surviving evidence for them is to be found in the east of the country. In Gaelic they are the *Cruithnich*. Examples of Pictish placenames are Aberdeen, Dundee, and the element Pit-, which, because of the Gaelic takeover, is usually followed in surviving examples by a Gaelic element, as for example Pitlochry, which is in Gaelic *Baile Chloichridh* or *Both Chloichridh*, 'Stony Settlement'.

The Romans withdrew about 400 AD and that opened the floodgates of Britain to settlement from east and west. From the **east**, across the North Sea from what is now Denmark and north Germany (Jutland and Saxony), came tribes called the Angles, Saxons and Jutes. They were at home in low-lying flood-plains and had the technology to cultivate them. So they penetrated west into Britain from points on the coast all the way from Kent up to Northumberland, stopping short usually at hill country, but going all the way to the west coast at the more accessible bits like Bristol, Liverpool, and, interestingly, Prestwick, which is a particularly good example of an Anglian name ('Priest's Farm'). Collectively these tribes were the people we now call the **English**, who spoke a Germanic language and were therefore not Celts. Thanks to geography, their westward advance broke Britain (the land of the Britons) into bits: Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, and Britanny, to where many Britons fled from the south of England, giving it their own name in the process. In Gaelic the English are *Sasannaich*, literally Saxons; with regard to placenames and everything else they did to the Britons what the Gael did to the Picts, namely chewed them up and spat them out, leaving names that are Celtic or pre-

Celtic like Dover and London, part-Celtic like Edinburgh and Manchester, or English like Bristol and Liverpool.

From Ireland to the **west** came the **Gael**, establishing settlements in Cornwall, Wales and Scotland. It wasn't so easy for them to get a permanent foothold, given that the Britons of the west were less of a pushover than the Britons of the east, but they managed it in Galloway and Argyll, because the crossing was short, the main power centres were further east, and Calum Cille threw his immense spiritual and political influence into the ring. They spoke a Celtic language called Gaelic. As well as being *Gaidhil* they were called 'Scotti', *Sguit*, *Sgotaich* or 'Scots', thought to be from a Celtic root *scuit* meaning to rove or wander. It took a long time, but thanks to the Anglo-Saxon break-up of Britain they were able to overrun the Picts, incorporate the British kingdom of Strathclyde and defeat the Northumbrian English at Carham on the Tweed in 1018 to establish the kingdom of 'Scotland' with its borders essentially where they remain today. Their placenames can be found in every part of modern Scotland, except that they are thin on the ground in low-lying parts of Lothian and the Borders, while in Orkney and Shetland they consist only of traces of Gaelic saints.

So we have two peoples who were already here at the dawn of history, and two who arrived about 400 AD. The last of the 'fab five' are the **Norsemen** who arrived from Scandinavia about 800 AD and occupied Orkney, Shetland, Caithness and the Western Isles, overrunning or mingling with the Picts and Gaels in those places. Like the English, they spoke a Germanic language, so they were not Celts. In Gaelic they are the *Lochlannaich* or indeed *ùigich* (vikings). Typical Norse placenames are Stornoway and Lerwick. The Gaelic Kingdom of the Isles was built on Norse sea-power, but Gaelic and Norse power alike succumbed in the long run to the centralised, multicultural Scottish monarchy.

Which brings me to what I call my postscript. The Gaels may have united the Scottish kingdom, but it was a large and diverse one, and in any case native Gaelic political structures were devolutionary in nature and would not have held it together. From that crucial eleventh century onwards, in came the Normans and the Flemings with the burghs, the trading structures, the feudal hierarchy and the international religious orders to provide the cement. That added French, Flemish (a first cousin of English) and a lot more Latin to the linguistic mix. The Normans were the original spin-doctors: under their leadership and guidance the English adopted the powerful Arthurian legends of their enemies the British, while the Gaels elevated the northern dialect of English to national status and called it Scots.

No wonder, then, if those of us in the identity business are being worked off our feet. I was asked the other day if Robert Bruce would have been a Gaelic speaker, and had to admit that I was a bit surprised at the question, because I had never doubted it, and I thought it was just commonly accepted that he would have been. (It's a bit like asking if El Cid could speak Spanish.) Scotland would have been well over 50 per cent Gaelic-speaking in Bruce's day, and as Earl of Carrick he belonged to one of the most Gaelic parts of the country. For long parts of his life he could scarcely have contrived to live from day to day without the language, and I'm not at all sure that he could have won the title of King of Scots, and the love and respect of the nation, without it. Is that enough?

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