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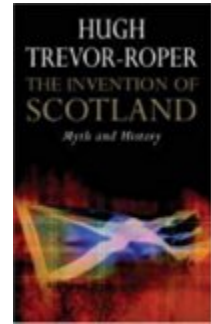
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Hugh Trevor-Roper. *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History*. Edited by Jeremy J. Cater. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. xxi + 282 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-13686-9.

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Inventing Scotland: The Reprise

Visions of the past are always partial, selective, and abstracted; hence Claude Levi-Strauss's often quoted line that "history is therefore never history, but history-for." [1] The posthumous publication of Hugh Trevor-Roper's *The Invention of Scotland* doubly validates this point. Trevor-Roper dismantles the manufacture of Scottish history for political ends, but it is from political objectives that his own argument derives. Trevor-Roper was a vocal and active unionist, speaking publicly and writing in both Scottish and English newspapers against the 1970s Labour Party push toward Scottish devolution. He began the current volume in that period. Shortly after her election as prime minister, Margaret Thatcher rewarded his polemical efforts with a peerage. He became Lord Dacre of Glanton in 1979. The work (though sophisticated, amusing, and well argued with impressively marshaled sources) is clearly "history-for."

Reviewing a posthumous book is in some ways unfair. Trevor-Roper did not choose to publish this book; in fact, he had set the project aside more than twenty years before he died in 2003. While he did publish excerpts from the work in the 1980s, we cannot know how he would have edited the volume in light of others' related scholarship in the decade prior to his death. The volume's editor, Jeremy J. Cater, gives flow to a book that lacks the truncations and disjunctures often found in posthumous publications, and also offers a commendable foreword. Trevor-Roper was a clever writer whose witty accounts are a pleasure to read whether one is sympathetic to his views or not. The volume demonstrates that

he was a talented interpreter and a fine storyteller with a range to which few scholars now aspire.

While boldly noting that "neither in prosperity, nor in defeat, did Anglo-Saxons, in their six-hundred-year rule in England, inspire a single work of myth or romance," Trevor-Roper's thesis is that "the whole history of Scotland has been coloured by myth; and that myth, in Scotland, is never driven out by reality, or by reason, but lingers on until another myth has been discovered, or elaborated, to replace it" (pp. xix- xx). Much of the volume has previously appeared in print. He had published the arguments of chapters 2 and 3 on George Buchanan in the *English Historical Review* in 1966; the substance of chapters 4 through 6, which consider James Macpherson's "Ossian," was summarized in a 1985 article in *The Spectator* magazine; and his well-known arguments about the "invention" of the kilt and clan tartans appeared in the influential 1983 volume edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

These separate works are best drawn together by the book's first chapter in which he discusses the pervasiveness of myth and sentiment in Scotland's cultural development and national identity. Labeled "the Scottish Discursive Unconscious" by Colin McArthur, this topic has attracted many scholars since Trevor-Roper shelved the book project.[2] Murray Pittock addresses similar ideas in two volumes, *The Invention of Scotland: The Stuart Myth and the Scottish Identity* (1991) and *Celtic Identity*

and the British Image (1999), as do Ian Donnachie and Christopher Whatley in their edited collection, *The Manufacture of Scottish History* (1992). Taking a contrary view to Trevor-Roper's assertions, Colin Kidd's volume, *Subverting Scotland's Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689-1830* (1993), argues that the Scottish Enlightenment undermined romantic nationalism and a patriotic reading of Scottish history.

Trevor-Roper states that the British Isles have a singular "common culture," and, using "race" in an antiquated fashion that allows him to elide mention of ethnic groups with distinctive cultures, he argues that to this shared culture "the several races" "contributed unequally" (p. 191). The Anglo-Saxons and Anglo-Normans, he suggests, contributed "political and intellectual initiative," while "the Celts" supplied only myth and fantasy. To add further insult, in the case of Scotland, even mythic contributions are simply "fraud"; Trevor-Roper argues that "in Scotland alone the Celts had no claims to a native civilization" (p. 192). Throughout the volume, Trevor-Roper presents Scots generally as irrational inventors of alternative realities. The author does not consider that the realities Scots faced drove particular visions of the past to instill dignity for a small nation that faced continual threats to sovereignty and its eventual loss in a Union that Trevor-Roper aggressively defended.

Scotland has indeed had myriad explanatory myths, like other colonized or defeated entities that became regions of conquering nations. Of the many, and sometimes competing, visions of Scottish pasts and regional cultures, Trevor-Roper selects three myths which he views as sequential and argues that these shaped Scottish historical self-consciousness and national identity from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. In such a survey of the centuries, one would wish for more commentary on the skepticism of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, but their impact on Scottish cultural development is readily dismissed as being overpowered by nationalist sentiment (in scattered references on less than eight pages). Some significant mythic visions of Scottish identity go unconsidered, including Kailyardism or Clydesideism, for example. The eight chapters of the volume consider "the political myth" (that of an ancient constitution of Scotland which Trevor-Roper states prevailed from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries), "the literary myth" (that of a body of ancient Scottish poetry that caught the imagination of Europe from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries), and "the sartorial myth" (that

of an ancient Scottish costume which Trevor-Roper dates to the early nineteenth century and which endures to the present).

To set up his discussion of these myths and his case that Scotland is just more "mythopoeic" than other nations, Trevor-Roper begins "by sketching the true outline of early Scottish history" in which he lays the groundwork for claiming that Scottish nationhood apart from England is based on fabrications (and hence, so is devolution in the present). He first considers the mythic remaking of Pictland into Scotland. To do so, he embarks in the late Iron Age and makes some problematic assumptions (much debated in the decade before his death) about the identity of the Iron Age Picts. For example, uncritically accepting the idea that Picts spoke a P-Celtic language, he assumes that those who could possibly speak a related language are the same people; inferring that although the Romans distinguished them in their ethnographic commentaries, and Bede distinguished them linguistically in the eighth century, the ancient Picts were really just "the same group of peoples as the south Britons" (p. 4).

The political myth occupies the volume's first three chapters and is the least consolidated of the arguments. Trevor-Roper considers the evolution of the lists of kings, which seems to have reached 113 kings in the early fourteenth century and later in that century John of Fordun, Scotland's first historian, proposed 45 Scottish kings (with 65 Pictish ones). By the sixteenth century, Hector Boece had refined the list to just 40 kings covering twenty-two generations, but supplied embellished biographies for the cast of characters. As elsewhere around the world, dynastic histories emerge with virtuous rulers who themselves, or whose successors, become corrupt and are replaced. Through the pen of Latin scholar, and onetime beneficiary of Queen Mary's patronage, George Buchanan, Boece's embroideries evolved into the revolutionary propaganda. Creating a philosophical and historical justification for the revolt against Mary, Buchanan argued that Scotland had an ancient and "peculiar" constitution through which the monarch ruled by the people's consent and through which tyrants could be deposed. Though the political myth is introduced as proceeding from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, its ongoing role in Scotland when the Stuarts inherited the throne of Elizabeth I is not clearly articulated and discussion of the Covenanters' challenges to royal authority is curiously lacking.

The second myth that Trevor-Roper asserts as central to a Scottish sense of nationhood is "the literary

myth,” by which he means the hoax of James Macpherson. Macpherson convinced much of literate Europe that he had found a lost epic, and other poems, of a third-century Celtic Bard named Ossian. (Thomas Jefferson even requested a copy in the original Gaelic, but received no reply.) While using the Macpherson fabrication to argue that Scotland lacked “ancient poetry” or a literary tradition (p. xx), Trevor-Roper nonetheless notes that actually, in addition to some creative publication, Macpherson was actively involved in collecting manuscripts from the Highlands and Islands, including the invaluable Book of the Dean of Lismore and manuscripts given to him in Benbecula by Clanranald and MacMhuirich, which contained clan histories and volumes of poems (pp. 96-101, 165). Many others besides Macpherson collected very much extant and distinctive Gaelic poetry and songs in the mid- to late eighteenth century. But rather than cast these developments as part of the literary, artistic, and intellectual movement of the romantic era that swept Europe at the time, Trevor-Roper interprets Scottish romanticism as an attempt primarily to establish an independent identity from England with the end of political independence.

Trevor-Roper argues that the literary myth replaced the political myth once the latter lost meaning following the 1707 Union and, particularly, with the end of Jacobite hopes in 1746. He claims that after these events, Scotland was “free from politics,” as if any society could be. He further notes that “when a society renounces politics, it can find other ways of expressing its identity,” as if the 1707 Union and the failure of the Jacobite Risings were not only the collective will of the people, but also that the politically motivated myths Trevor-Roper describes were actually accepted by (or even known to) the general populace (pp. 72, 75). To convincingly unite these first two myths (the works of the powerful elite and the intelligentsia) to national culture and identity, which Trevor-Roper claims they shaped, more discussion of the Scottish people, popular culture, and social history was needed, particularly as Trevor-Roper evoked folk memory as a method by which the proposed myths were transmitted.

Much clearer links with the general public and popular visions of national identity may be found in Trevor-Roper’s discussion of the third myth, “the sartorial myth.” Trevor-Roper, and others before him, credited the revamping of the kilt to English Quaker industrialist Thomas Rawlinson in the early 1730s. Rawlinson commissioned a tailor to “abridge” the garment and make it less cumbersome for workers in his iron smelting operations at Glengarry. The bottom half of the traditional

great kilt, also called the *féileadh mor* (which grew to seven or more yards of fabric in the sixteenth century), was gathered into pleats and belted in place while the top half could function as a cape against the weather and even be pulled over the head. The change to a philibeg, or small kilt, (with the removal of the top half or plaid, and sewing pleats permanently in place) was an innovation rather than an invention. Yet, because of this simplification, Trevor-Roper hyperbolically concludes that the kilt is thus “a purely modern costume” (p. 200).

Such blanket statements as “Scottish culture had always been sustained by forgery” can strain an anthropologist’s, ethnologist’s, or folklorist’s productive reading of the text (p. 204). Particularly strange is his assertion that in Scotland not only was “there ... no ancient poetry,” but also there was “no distinctive ancient dress,” which would make Scots one of the exceptions to nations, tribal peoples, and ethnic groups worldwide (p. xx). Similar comments about the lack of expressive culture could never be written about pre-conquest Mexicans or precolonial Igbo without evoking outrage today. To downgrade the offensiveness of his arguments, Trevor-Roper hides behind his “Scotch wife” (and a “Scotch nanny” and “Scotch governess”),[3] much like comedian Jeff Foxworthy can evoke laughs with the racial epithet “Redneck” only by claiming to be one. On Scottish fashion, Trevor-Roper seems to sympathize with John Pinkerton whom he calls “the ablest of Scottish antiquaries after Thomas Innes” and whose disdain for the kilt he cites at length: it “is not only grossly indecent, but is filthy, as it admits dust to the skin and emits the *foetor* of perspiration ... it is also effeminate, beggarly, and generally disreputable. As for the colours used, nothing can reconcile the tasteless regularity and vulgar glow of tartan to the eye of fashion” (p. 210). This seems a bit supercilious given that Trevor-Roper’s “Scotch wife,” Alexandra the eldest daughter of Field Marshal Douglas Haig, was so famous for her patronage of couture (as a particular devotee of Jacques Fath) that her clothes are now part of the Victoria and Albert collection.

Trevor-Roper is most successful in documenting the creation of clan tartans. As he notes, earlier travelers’ accounts, such as that of Martin Martin (1616) tell us of tartan patterns being clearly associated with locations. However, associating tartan pattern (or sett) with clan name is a legacy of Highlandism (that romanticism peculiar to Scotland that transformed a regional Highland identity and material culture to that of the Scottish nation generally). Even Sir Walter Scott, who orchestrated the triumph of Highlandism with George IV’s 1822 visit to a

tartanised Edinburgh, decried the validity of clan tartans (p. 222). Trevor-Roper soft-pedals criticism of Scott's own inventions since he worked to cement the Union by romantically bridging the traditional Highland/Lowland cultural divide and advancing a new image of the loyal Scot. He does not hold back however, in his entertaining description of the Allen brothers' amazing charade. In 1842, John and Charles Allen published what they claimed to be a sixteenth-century manuscript illustrating all "authentic" clan tartans. They said Bonnie Prince Charlie had given the work, entitled *Vestiarium Scoticum*, to their father. Accounting for the gift led them to intimate their own descent from Prince Charles and, after several permutations of their surname, to settle on "Sobieski Stuart." They attracted a small court and though eventually discredited, their work set the standard for the still-thriving tartan industry. Having noted that myths endure until replaced, Trevor-Roper ends with the sartorial myth, which, despite the devolution Trevor-Roper scorned, has indeed yet to be toppled.

In a decade, Scots have not done much with devolution beyond erecting a monstrous Parliament building originally budgeted at forty million pounds, but eventually costing taxpayers over four hundred million pounds, and which suffered a partial roof collapse two years after opening. Now that the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) has formed a government in Scotland, its "First Minister" Alex Salmond is mostly known for releasing from prison the only convicted mass murderer in the Lockerbie bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, which ended the lives of 270 people.

Has devolution reinvented Scotland? A decade later, Scotland hosted a year of "Homecoming" events in 2009 to appeal to the global Scottish diaspora. Playing on the themes of Highlandism, "Homecoming" was opened by the First Minister Salmond, and financed not only by the Scottish government, but also by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund. The new Scottish Parliament building was the venue chosen for a convention of clan chiefs. The "world's largest" Highland Games and Clan Gathering, which took place in Edinburgh's Holyrood Park in late July, attracted forty-seven thousand participants (eight thousand of whom strode the length of the Royal Mile in a clan tartan parade). In terms of attracting visitors and their deep-pouched sporrans, the year was successful. In what organizers are already calling "the Homecoming Effect," the year's events brought in over forty million pounds of extra tourist revenue during a recession. Twenty-first century Scotland, even under SNP leadership, is nowhere near done with myths or "history-for."

Notes

[1]. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 257.

[2]. Colin McArthur, "Transatlantic Scots, Their Interlocutors, and the Scottish Discursive Unconscious," in *Transatlantic Scots*, ed. Celeste Ray (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 339-356.

[3]. Trevor-Roper preferred to use "Scotch" although Scottish people had discouraged being referred to as whisky since at least the 1920s.

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