

## 2. *The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland*

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Today, whenever Scotchmen gather together to celebrate their national identity, they assert it openly by certain distinctive national apparatus. They wear the kilt, woven in a tartan whose colour and pattern indicates their 'clan'; and if they indulge in music, their instrument is the bagpipe. This apparatus, to which they ascribe great antiquity, is in fact largely modern. It was developed after, sometimes long after, the Union with England against which it is, in a sense, a protest. Before the Union, it did indeed exist in vestigial form; but that form was regarded by the large majority of Scotchmen as a sign of barbarism: the badge of roguish, idle, predatory, blackmailing Highlanders who were more of a nuisance than a threat to civilized, historic Scotland. And even in the Highlands, even in that vestigial form, it was relatively new: it was not the original, or the distinguishing badge of Highland society.

Indeed, the whole concept of a distinct Highland culture and tradition is a retrospective invention. Before the later years of the seventeenth century, the Highlanders of Scotland did not form a distinct people. They were simply the overflow of Ireland. On that broken and inhospitable coast, in that archipelago of islands large and small, the sea unites rather than divides and from the late fifth century, when the Scots of Ulster landed in Argyll, until the mid-eighteenth century, when it was 'opened up' after the Jacobite revolts, the West of Scotland, cut off by mountains from the East, was always linked rather to Ireland than to the Saxon Lowlands. Racially and culturally, it was a colony of Ireland.

Even politically these two Celtic societies, of Ireland and the Western Highlands, merged into each other. The Scots of Dalriada retained, for a century, their foothold in Ulster. The Danes ruled equally over the Western Islands, the coasts of Ireland and the Isle of Man. And in the later Middle Ages the Macdonald Lords of the Isles were nearer and more effective rulers both in Western Scotland and in Northern Ireland than their nominal sovereigns, the kings of

Scotland and England. Under their rule, the Hebridean culture was purely Irish. Their hereditary bards, physicians, harpers (for their musical instrument was the harp, not the pipes) came from Ireland.<sup>1</sup> Even after the destruction of that lordship, the Macdonalds continued to be a force in both countries. It was not till the mid-seventeenth century that the Plantation of Ulster under English authority, and the rise of the Campbells to hegemony in the Western Highlands, broke that potential political unity. But the cultural unity, though weakened, continued. In the eighteenth century, the Western Islands were still essentially an Irish overflow, and the Gaelic language spoken there was regularly described, in the eighteenth century, as Irish.

Being a cultural dependency of Ireland under the 'foreign', and somewhat ineffective, rule of the Scottish crown, the Highlands and Islands of Scotland were culturally depressed. Their literature, such as it was, was a crude echo of Irish literature. The bards of the Scottish chieftains came from Ireland or went thither to learn their trade. Indeed, we are told by an early eighteenth-century writer – an Irishman – that the Scottish bards were the rubbish of Ireland periodically cleared out of Ireland and deposited in that convenient dump.<sup>2</sup> Even under the oppressive rule of England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Celtic Ireland remained, culturally, an historic nation while Celtic Scotland was, at best, its poor sister. It had – could have – no independent tradition.

The creation of an independent Highland tradition, and the imposition of that new tradition, with its outward badges, on the whole Scottish nation, was the work of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It occurred in three stages. First, there was the cultural revolt against Ireland: the usurpation of Irish culture and the re-writing of early Scottish history, culminating in the insolent claim that Scotland – Celtic Scotland – was the 'mother-nation' and Ireland the cultural dependency. Secondly, there was the artificial creation of new Highland traditions, presented as ancient, original and distinctive. Thirdly, there was the process by which these new traditions were offered to, and adopted by, historic Lowland Scotland: the Eastern Scotland of the Picts, the Saxons and the Normans.

The first of these stages was achieved in the eighteenth century. The claim that the Celtic, Irish-speaking Highlanders of Scotland

<sup>1</sup> See J. Bannerman, 'The Lordship of the Isles', in Jennifer Brown (ed.), *Scottish Society in the 15th Century* (1977).

<sup>2</sup> *A Collection of Several Pieces by Mr John Toland* (1726), i, pp. 25–9.

were not merely invaders from Ireland in the fifth century A.D., but had an ancient history in Scotland and were in fact the Caledonians who had resisted the Roman armies, was of course an old legend which had done good service in the past. It was effectively refuted in 1729 by the first and greatest of Scottish antiquaries, the Jacobite *émigré* priest, Thomas Innes. But it was reasserted in 1738 by David Malcolm<sup>3</sup> and, more effectively, in the 1760s, by two writers of the same surname: James Macpherson, the ‘translator’ of Ossian, and the Rev. John Macpherson, minister of Sleat in the island of Skye. These two Macphersons, though unrelated, were known to each other – James Macpherson had stayed with the minister on his visit to Skye in search of ‘Ossian’ in 1760, and the minister’s son, afterwards Sir John Macpherson, governor general of India, would be his close friend and accomplice later – and they worked in concert. Between them, by two distinct acts of bold forgery, they created an indigenous literature for Celtic Scotland and, as a necessary support to it, a new history. Both this literature and this history, in so far as they had any connection with reality, had been stolen from the Irish.

The sheer effrontery of the Macphersons must excite admiration. James Macpherson picked up Irish ballads in Scotland, wrote an ‘epic’ in which he transferred the whole scenario from Ireland to Scotland, and then dismissed the genuine ballads thus maltreated as debased modern compositions and the real Irish literature which they reflected as a mere reflection of them. The minister of Sleat then wrote a *Critical Dissertation* in which he provided the necessary context for ‘the Celtic Homer’ whom his namesake had ‘discovered’: he placed Irish-speaking Celts in Scotland four centuries before their historical arrival and explained away the genuine, native Irish literature as having been stolen, in the Dark Ages, by the unscrupulous Irish, from the innocent Scots. To complete the picture, James Macpherson himself, using the minister’s papers, wrote an ‘independent’ *Introduction to the History of Great Britain and Ireland* (1771) repeating the minister’s assertions. Of the success of the Macphersons no more need be said than that they seduced even the normally careful and critical Edward Gibbon, who acknowledged as his guides in early Scottish history those ‘two learned Highlanders’, James Macpherson and the Rev. John Macpherson, and thus perpetuated what has rightly been called ‘a chain of error in Scottish history’.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> David Malcolm, *Dissertations on the Celtic Languages* (1738).

<sup>4</sup> E. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Everyman edn, ii, p. 496; M. V. Hay, *A Chain of Error in Scottish History* (1927).



It took a full century to clear Scottish history – if it has ever been cleared – of the distorting and interdependent fabrications of the two Macphersons.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, these two insolent pretenders had achieved a lasting triumph: they had put the Scottish Highlanders on the map. Previously despised alike by the Lowland Scots, as disorderly savages, and by the Irish as their unlettered poor kinsmen, they were now celebrated throughout Europe as a *Kulturvolk* which, when England and Ireland had been sunk in primitive barbarism, had produced an epic poet of exquisite refinement and sensibility, equal (said Madame de Staël), superior (said F. A. Wolf), to Homer. Nor was it only in literature that they had thus drawn the attention of Europe. For once the links with Ireland had been cut, and the Scottish Highlands had acquired – however fraudulently – an independent ancient culture, the way was open to signalize that independence by peculiar traditions. The tradition which was now established was a peculiarity of dress.

In 1805 Sir Walter Scott wrote, for publication in the *Edinburgh Review*, an essay on Macpherson's Ossian. In it he showed, characteristically, sound scholarship and good sense. He decisively rejected the authenticity of the epic which the Scottish literary establishment in general, and the Highlanders in particular, continued to defend. But, in the same essay he remarked, parenthetically, that it was undeniable that the ancient Caledonian of the third century A.D. had worn 'a tartan philibeg'. In so rational and critical an essay, this confident assertion is surprising. Never before – as far as I know – had such a claim been made. Even Macpherson had never suggested it: his Ossian had always been represented in a flowing robe, and his instrument, incidentally, had been not the bagpipe but the harp. But then Macpherson was himself a Highlander and he was a generation older than Scott. This, in such a matter, made a great difference.

When did the 'tartan philibeg', the modern kilt, come to be the costume of the Highlander? The facts are not really in doubt, especially since the publication of Mr J. Telfer Dunbar's excellent work.<sup>6</sup> Whereas tartan – that is, cloth woven in a geometrical pattern

<sup>5</sup> Thus – as was pointed out by the most learned scholar in the subject, Ludwig Stern, in his important essay 'Die Ossianischen Heldenlieder', translated in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, xxii (1897–8) – the article on Macpherson in the *D.N.B.* 'homologates the views of imperfectly informed apologists' and the Albanogaelic lexicographers have damaged their work by taking part of their material from Macpherson's 'faulty and un-gaelic Ossian': i.e. the spurious Gaelic version of Ossian's poems published in 1807.

<sup>6</sup> J. Telfer Dunbar, *History of the Highland Dress* (1962).

of colours – was known in Scotland in the sixteenth century (it seems to have come from Flanders and reached the Highlands through the Lowlands), the philibeg – name and thing – is unknown before the eighteenth century. So far from being a traditional Highland dress, it was invented by an Englishman after the Union of 1707; and the differentiated ‘clan tartans’ are an even later invention. They were designed as part of a pageant devised by Sir Walter Scott in honour of a Hanoverian king; and owe their present form to two other Englishmen.

Since the Scottish Highlanders were, in origin, merely Irishmen who had crossed from one island to another, it is natural to suppose that originally their dress was the same as that of the Irish. And indeed this is what we find. It is not till the sixteenth century that any writer records any peculiarities of the Highland dress, but all the accounts of that time are in substantial agreement. They show that the ordinary dress of the Highlanders was a long ‘Irish’ shirt (in Gaelic, *leine*) which the higher classes – as in Ireland – dyed with saffron (*leine-croich*); a tunic or *failuin*; and a cloak or plaid which the higher classes had woven in many colours or stripes but which in general was of a russet or brown effect, as protective colouring in the heather. In addition, the Highlanders wore shoes with a single sole (the higher classes might wear buskins) and flat soft caps, generally blue. In battle, the leaders wore chain mail while the lower classes wore a padded linen shirt painted or daubed with pitch and covered with deer skins. Besides this normal dress, chieftains and great men who had contact with the more sophisticated inhabitants of the Lowlands might wear trews: a combination of breeches and stockings. Trews could only be worn out of doors in the Highlands by men who had attendants to protect or carry them: they were therefore a mark of social distinction. Both plaid and trews were probably of tartan.<sup>7</sup>

In the course of the seventeenth century – the century in which the link between the Highlands and Ireland was broken – the Highland costume was changed. The changes occurred irregularly over the century. First, the long shirt fell into disuse. In the islands it was replaced by the Lowland coat, waistcoat and breeches early in the century.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, a Scottish minister long afterwards

<sup>7</sup> These accounts came from John Major, *Historia Maioris Britanniae* (1521); James Leslie, *De Moribus et Gestis Scotorum* (1570); Lindsay of Pitscottie, *Chronicle* (1573); G. Buchanan, *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* (1583); Nicolay d’Arfeville, *La Navigation du Roy d’Escosse* (1583). The evidence is set out in D. W. Stewart, *Old and Rare Scottish Tartans* (Edinburgh, 1893), Introduction.

<sup>8</sup> M. Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1703).

recalled that the wild Highlanders in the Jacobite army which passed through his parish in 1715 wore 'neither plaid nor philibeg' but merely a home-made close-fitting coat of one colour, stretching below mid-leg, with a belt.<sup>9</sup> This is the latest evidence, as far as I know, of the survival of the *leine* in Scotland.

Throughout the seventeenth century, Highland armies fought in the civil wars of Britain, and, whenever they are described, we find that the officers wore trews while the common soldiers had their legs and thighs bare. Both officers and men wore the plaid, the former as an upper garment, the latter covering the whole body, belted round the waist so that the lower part, below the belt, formed a kind of skirt. In this form, it was known as the *breacan* or 'belted plaid'. The essential fact is that, as yet, there was no mention of the kilt, as we know it. The alternative was the gentlemanly trews or the 'servile' belted plaid.<sup>10</sup>

The name 'kilt' first appears twenty years after the Union. Edward Burt, an English officer posted to Scotland as chief surveyor under General Wade, then wrote a series of letters, mainly from Inverness, describing the character and customs of the country. In these he gives a careful description of the 'quelt', which, he explains, is not a distinct garment but simply a particular method of wearing the plaid, set in folds and girt round the waist to make of it a short petticoat that reaches half-way down the thigh, and the rest is brought over the shoulders and then fastened before... so that they make pretty near the appearance of the poor women in London when they bring their gowns over their heads to shelter them from the rain. This petticoat, Burt adds, was normally worn 'so very short that in a windy day, going up a hill, or stooping, the indecency of it is plainly discovered'. His description makes it clear that he is describing not the modern kilt but the belted plaid.

Burt was explicit about the Highland dress because already, in his time, it was the object of political controversy. After the Jacobite rebellion of 1715 the British parliament had considered banning it by law, as the Irish dress had been banned under Henry VIII: such

<sup>9</sup> John Pinkerton, *Literary Correspondence* (1830), i, p. 230. The minister was the father of the philosopher Adam Ferguson.

<sup>10</sup> This is shown by the evidence presented by Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 21. It is illustrated most graphically in the supporters of the arms of Skene of that Ilk – two Highlanders, one (a sword-bearing gentleman) wearing trews, the other in 'a servill habit', i.e. a belted plaid (*not* as Stewart supposes a kilt: on this see Dunbar, *op. cit.*, pp. 34–5).



a ban, it was thought, **would help to break up the distinct Highland way of life and integrate the Highlanders into modern society.** However, in the end the proposed law was not passed. The Highland dress, it was conceded, was convenient and necessary in a country where a traveller must 'skip over the rocks and bogs and lie all night in the hills'. It was also a necessity for the poor, for it was very cheap: 'a few shillings will buy this dress for an ordinary Highlander' who could never afford even the coarsest 'Lowland suit'.

It is ironical that if the Highland dress had been banned after 'the Fifteen' instead of after 'the Forty Five', the kilt, which is now regarded as one of the ancient traditions of Scotland, would probably never have come into existence. It came into existence a few years after Burt wrote, and very close to the area in which he wrote. Unknown in 1726, it suddenly appeared a few years later; and by 1746 it was sufficiently well established to be explicitly named in the act of parliament which then forbade the Highland dress. Its inventor was an English Quaker from Lancashire, Thomas Rawlinson.

The Rawlinsons were a long-established family of Quaker iron-masters in Furness. By the early eighteenth century, in association with other prominent Quaker families – Fords, Crosfields, Back-houses – they controlled 'a wide meshwork of furnaces and forges' in Lancashire. But their supplies of charcoal had run low and they needed wood for fuel. Fortunately, after the suppression of the rebellion, the Highlands were being opened up, and the forests in the north could be exploited by the industry of the south. So in 1727 Thomas Rawlinson made an agreement with Ian MacDonell, chief of the MacDonells of Glengarry near Inverness, for a thirty-one year lease of a wooded area at Invergarry. There he built a furnace and smelted the iron-ore which he shipped specially from Lancashire. The enterprise was not an economic success: it was wound up after seven years; but during those seven years, Rawlinson came to know the area, established regular relations with the MacDonells of Glengarry, and of course employed 'a throng of Highlanders' to fell the timber and work the furnace.<sup>11</sup>

During his stay at Glengarry, Rawlinson became interested in the Highland costume but he also became aware of its inconvenience. The belted plaid might be appropriate to the idle life of the

<sup>11</sup> On Rawlinson's Scottish venture see Alfred Fell, *The Early Iron Industry of Furness and District* (Ulverston, 1908), pp. 346ff.; Arthur Raistrick, *Quakers in Science and Industry* (1950), pp. 95–102.

Highlanders – for sleeping in the hills or lying hidden in the heather. It was also conveniently cheap, since all agreed on the fact that the lower class could not afford the expense of trousers or breeches. But for men who had to fell trees or tend furnaces it was ‘a cumbrous, unwieldy habit’. Therefore, being ‘a man of genius and quick parts’, Rawlinson sent for the tailor of the regiment stationed at Inverness and, with him, set out ‘to abridge the dress and make it handy and convenient for his workmen’. The result was the *felie beg*, philibeg, or ‘small kilt’, which was achieved by separating the skirt from the plaid and converting it into a distinct garment, with pleats already sewn. Rawlinson himself wore this new garment, and his example was followed by his associate, Ian MacDonell of Glengarry. After that, the clansmen, as always, obediently followed their chief, and the innovation, we are told, ‘was found so handy and convenient that in the shortest space the use of it became frequent in all the Highland countries and in many of the Northern Lowland countries also’.

This account of the origin of the kilt was first given in 1768 by a Highland gentleman who had known Rawlinson personally. It was published in 1785 and excited no dissent.<sup>12</sup> It was confirmed by the two greatest authorities on Scottish customs then living,<sup>13</sup> and by independent testimony, from the Glengarry family.<sup>14</sup> It was not challenged for another forty years. It has never been refuted. All the evidence that has since been accumulated is consistent with it. Pictorial evidence also comes to its aid, for the first person to be painted wearing a recognizable modern kilt, not a belted plaid, appears in a portrait of Alexander MacDonell of Glengarry, the son of the chief who was Rawlinson’s friend. It is interesting to note that, in that portrait, the kilt is worn not by the chief but by his servant – thus emphasizing, once again, its ‘servile’ status.<sup>15</sup> On all this evidence, the best modern authorities accept the story as true.<sup>16</sup> We may thus conclude that the kilt is a purely modern costume, first designed, and first worn, by an English Quaker industrialist, and that it was bestowed by him on the Highlanders in order not to preserve their traditional way of life but to ease its transformation: to bring them out of the heather and into the factory.

<sup>12</sup> The account is by Ivan Baillie of Abereachen, and it was published in the *Edinburgh Magazine*, March 1785 (vol. I, p. 235).

<sup>13</sup> I refer to Sir John Sinclair and John Pinkerton. See below p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> I refer to the evidence of the Sobieski Stuarts. See below p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> For the portrait see Dunbar, *op. cit.*, pp. 69–70. It appears to have been painted about 1747.

<sup>16</sup> Dunbar, *loc. cit.*



But if this was the origin of the kilt, another question immediately forces itself on our mind. What tartan did the kilted Quaker wear? Was a distinctive 'sett' or pattern of colours devised for a Lancashire Rawlinson, or did he become an honorary member of the clan of MacDonell? Were there, indeed, any such 'setts' in the eighteenth century? When did the differentiation of patterns by clans begin?

The sixteenth-century writers who first noticed the Highland dress clearly did not know any such differentiation. They describe the plaids of the chiefs as coloured, those of their followers as brown, so that any differentiation of colour, in their time, was by social status, not by clan. The earliest evidence which has been adduced in support of differentiation by clan is a remark by Martin Martin, who visited the Western Islands at the end of the seventeenth century. But Martin merely assigns different patterns to different localities: he does not differentiate them by clans; and in fact the evidence against differentiation by clans is strong. Thus, a carefully painted series of portraits of the different members of the Grant family by Richard Waitt in the eighteenth century shows all of them in different tartans; the portraits of the Macdonalds of Armadale show 'at least six distinct setts of tartan'; and contemporary evidence concerning the rebellion of 1745 – whether pictorial, sartorial or literary – shows no differentiation of clans, no continuity of setts. The only way in which a Highlander's loyalty could be discerned was not by his tartan but by the cockade in his bonnet. Tartans were a matter of private taste, or necessity, only.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in October 1745, when the Young Chevalier was in Edinburgh with his army, the *Caledonian Mercury* advertised a 'great choice of tartans, the newest patterns'. As D. W. Stewart reluctantly admits,

this is a great stumbling-block in the way of those who argue for the antiquity of the patterns; for it seems peculiar that, when the city was filled with Highlanders of all ranks and many clans, they should be offered not their ancient setts but 'a great choice of the newest patterns'.

Thus when the great rebellion of 1745 broke out, the kilt, as we know it, was a recent English invention and 'clan' tartans did not exist. However, that rebellion marked a change in the sartorial as well as in the social and economic history of Scotland. After the rebellion had been crushed, the British government decided at last to do what

<sup>17</sup> The evidence on this point is set out conclusively by H. F. McClintock, *Old Highland Dress and Tartans*, 2nd edn (Dundalk, 1940) and Dunbar, *op. cit.*

had been considered in 1715 (and indeed before) and to destroy finally the independent Highland way of life. By the various acts of parliament which followed the victory at Culloden not only were the Highlanders disarmed and their chiefs deprived of their hereditary jurisdictions, but the wearing of Highland costume – ‘plaid, philibeg, trews, shoulder-belts . . . tartans or parti-coloured plaid or stuff’ – was forbidden throughout Scotland under pain of imprisonment without bail for six months and, for a second offence, transportation for seven years.<sup>18</sup> This draconian law remained in force for thirty-five years, during which the whole Highland way of life quickly crumbled. In 1773, when Johnson and Boswell made their famous tour, they found that they were already too late to see what they had expected, ‘a people of peculiar appearance and a system of antiquated life’. In the whole of their tour, Johnson recorded, they had never seen the tartan worn. The law (of which he disapproved) had everywhere been enforced. Even the bagpipe, he noted, ‘begins to be forgotten’. By 1780 the Highland dress seemed extinct, and no rational man would have speculated on its revival.

However, history is not rational: or at least it is rational only in parts. The Highland costume did indeed die out among those who had been accustomed to wear it. After a generation in trousers, the simple peasantry of the Highlands saw no reason to resume the belted plaid or the tartan which they had once found so cheap and serviceable. They did not even turn to the ‘handy and convenient’ new kilt. On the other hand, the upper and middle classes, who had previously despised the ‘servile’ costume, now picked up with enthusiasm the garb which its traditional wearers had finally discarded.<sup>19</sup> In the years when it had been banned, some Highland noblemen had taken pleasure in wearing it, and being portrayed in it, in the safety of their homes. Now that the ban was lifted, the fashion spread. Anglicized Scottish peers, improving gentry, well-educated Edinburgh lawyers and prudent merchants of Aberdeen – men who were not constrained by poverty and who would never have to skip over rocks and bogs or lie all night in the hills – would exhibit themselves publicly not in the historic trews, the traditional costume

<sup>18</sup> 19 Geo. II c. 39; 20 Geo. II c. 51; 21 Geo. II c. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Thus John Hay Allan (see below p. 32), in his *Bridal of Caölchairn*, pp. 308–9, remarks that, at Highland weddings, of the unfashionable tartan ‘little or nothing is to be seen’. This was published in 1822, the year when King George IV’s visit caused tartan to envelope the limbs of the higher classes in Edinburgh.

of their class, nor in the cumbrous belted plaid, but in a costly and fanciful version of that recent innovation, the philibeg or small kilt.

Two causes explain this remarkable change. One is general and European and can be briefly summarized. It was the romantic movement, the cult of the noble savage whom civilization threatened to destroy. Before 1745 the Highlanders had been despised as idle predatory barbarians. In 1745 they had been feared as dangerous rebels. But after 1746, when their distinct society crumbled so easily, they combined the romance of a primitive people with the charm of an endangered species. It was in this climate of opinion that Ossian enjoyed his easy triumph. The second cause was more particular and deserves closer examination. It was the formation, by the British government, of the Highland regiments.

The formation of the Highland regiments had begun before 1745 – indeed, the first such regiment, the Black Watch, afterwards the 43rd and then the 42nd line regiment, had fought at Fontenoy in 1745. But it was in the years 1757–60 that the elder Pitt systematically sought to divert the martial spirit of the Highlanders from Jacobite adventure to imperial war. As he would afterwards claim:

I sought for merit wherever it was to be found; it is my boast that I was the first minister who looked for it, and found it, in the mountains of the North. I called it forth and drew into your service a hardy and intrepid race of men.

These Highland regiments would soon cover themselves with glory in India and America. They also established a new sartorial tradition. For by the 'Disarming Act' of 1747 they were explicitly exempted from the ban on Highland dress, and so, in the thirty-five years during which the Celtic peasantry took permanently to the Saxon trousers, and the Celtic Homer was portrayed in the bardic robe, it was the Highland regiments alone which kept the tartan industry alive and gave permanence to the most recent innovation of all, the Lancashire kilt.

Originally, the Highland regiments wore as their uniform the belted plaid; but once the kilt had been invented, and its convenience had made it popular, it was adopted by them. Moreover, it was probably their use of it which gave birth to the idea of differentiating tartan by clans; for as the Highland regiments were multiplied to meet the needs of war, so their tartan uniforms were differentiated; and when the wearing of tartan by civilians was resumed, and the



romantic movement encouraged the cult of the clan, the same principle of differentiation was easily transferred from regiment to clan. That, however, was in the future. For the moment, we are concerned only with the kilt which, having been invented by an English Quaker industrialist, was saved from extinction by an English imperialist statesman. The next stage was the invention of a Scottish pedigree. This stage, at least, was undertaken by the Scots.

It began with an important step taken in 1778. This was the foundation, in London, of the Highland Society: a society whose main function was the encouragement of ancient Highland virtues and the preservation of ancient Highland traditions. Its members were mainly Highland noblemen and officers, but its secretary, 'to whose zeal for its success the society seems to have been peculiarly indebted', was John Mackenzie, a lawyer of the Temple who was the 'most intimate and confidential friend', the accomplice, general man of affairs, and afterwards executor of James Macpherson. Both James Macpherson and Sir John Macpherson were original members of the Society, one of whose expressed aims was the preservation of ancient Gaelic literature, and whose greatest achievement, in the eyes of its historian Sir John Sinclair, was the publication, in 1807, of the 'original' Gaelic text of Ossian. This text was supplied by Mackenzie from Macpherson's papers and edited, with a dissertation proving its authenticity (it is in fact a demonstrable fake), by Sinclair himself. In view of Mackenzie's double function and the Society's preoccupation with Gaelic literature (almost all of it produced or inspired by Macpherson), the whole venture can be seen as one of the operations of the Macpherson mafia in London.

A second and no less important aim of the Society was to secure the repeal of the law forbidding the wearing of the Highland dress in Scotland. For this purpose the members of the Society undertook themselves to meet (as they legally could in London)

in that garb so celebrated as having been the dress of their Celtic ancestors, and on such occasions at least to speak the emphatic language, to listen to the delightful music, to recite the ancient poetry, and to observe the peculiar customs of their country.

But it may be observed that the Highland dress, even now, did not include the kilt: it was defined in the Society's rules as the trews and the belted plaid ('plaid and philibeg in one piece').<sup>20</sup> This aim was achieved in 1782, when the marquis of Graham, at the request of a

<sup>20</sup> Sir J. Sinclair, *An Account of the Highland Society of London* (1813).

committee of the Highland Society, successfully moved the repeal of the act in the house of commons. Its repeal occasioned great rejoicing in Scotland, and Gaelic poets celebrated the victory of the Celtic belted plaid over the Saxon trousers. From this date the triumph of the newly re-defined Highland dress can be said to have begun.

This triumph was not entirely unresisted. At least one Scotchman, from the beginning, raised his voice against the whole process whereby the Celtic Highlanders, so recently despised as outer barbarians, were claiming to be the sole representatives of Scottish history and culture. This was John Pinkerton, a man whose undoubted eccentricity and violent prejudices cannot rob him of his claim to be the greatest Scottish antiquary since Thomas Innes. For Pinkerton was the first scholar to establish something like the true history of Scotland in the Dark Ages. He was an implacable enemy of the historical and literary falsification of the two Macphersons. He was also the first scholar to document the history of the Highland dress. He did indeed make one grave error: he believed that the Picts were racially distinct from the Scots: that the Picts (whom he admired) were not Celts (whom he despised) but Goths. But this error did not invalidate his conclusions, which were that the early Caledonians had been distinguished by wearing not kilts, nor belted plaids, but trousers; that the tartan was an early modern importation; and that the kilt was more modern still.

Pinkerton had a ready listener in Sir John Sinclair himself. In 1794 Sinclair had raised a local military force – the Rothesay and Caithness Fencibles – to serve against France, and after careful research had decided to dress his troops not in the kilt (he knew all about the Quaker Rawlinson) but in tartan trews. Next year he decided to appear at court in Highland dress, including trousers of a tartan specially designed by himself. But before committing himself, he consulted Pinkerton. Pinkerton expressed his delight that Sinclair had substituted ‘trousers or pantaloons for the philibeg’, for that supposed ancient dress (he wrote) ‘is in fact quite modern, and any improvement may be made without violating antiquity. Nay, the trousers are far more ancient than the philibeg’. Even the plaid and the tartan, he added, were not ancient. Having thus disposed of the antiquity of the whole outfit ascribed to ‘our Celtic ancestors’, Pinkerton turned to its intrinsic merit. The philibeg, he declared ‘is not only grossly indecent, but is filthy, as it admits dust to the skin and emits the foetor of perspiration’; it is absurd, because while the

breast is twice covered by vest and plaid, 'the parts concealed by all other nations are but loosely covered'; it is also effeminate, beggarly and ugly: for 'nothing can reconcile the tasteless regularity and vulgar glow of tartan to the eye of fashion, and every attempt to introduce it has failed'. Sir John's own private tartan, Pinkerton hastened to add, had 'avoided all such objections' and by using only two very mild colours had secured 'a very pleasing general effect'.<sup>21</sup>

So wrote 'the celebrated antiquary Mr Pinkerton'. He wrote in vain. For by now the Highland regiments had taken over the philibeg and their officers had easily convinced themselves that this short kilt had been the national dress of Scotland since time immemorial. Against a firm military order the tremulous voice of mere scholarship protests in vain, and any denial received short shrift. In 1804, the War Office – perhaps influenced by Sir John Sinclair – contemplated replacing the kilt by the trews, and duly sounded serving officers. Colonel Cameron, of the 79th regiment, was outraged. Was the High Command, he asked, really proposing to stop 'that free circulation of pure wholesome air' under the kilt which 'so peculiarly fitted the Highlander for *activity*'? 'I sincerely hope', protested the gallant colonel, 'that His Royal Highness will never acquiesce in so painful and degrading an idea... as to strip us of our native garb and stuff us into a harlequin tartan pantaloon.'<sup>22</sup> Before this spirited charge, the War Office retreated, and it was kilted Highlanders who, after the final victory of 1815, captured the imagination, and inspired the curiosity, of Paris. In the following years, the *Waverley Novels* combined with the Highland regiments to spread the fashion for kilts and tartans throughout Europe.

Meanwhile the myth of their antiquity was being pressed by another military man. Colonel David Stewart of Garth, who had joined the original 42nd Highlanders at the age of sixteen, had spent his entire adult life in the army, most of it abroad. As a half-pay officer after 1815, he devoted himself to the study first of the Highland regiments, then of Highland life and traditions: traditions which he had discovered more often, perhaps, in the officers' mess than in the straths and glens of Scotland. These traditions by now included the kilt and the clan tartans, both of which were accepted without question by the colonel. The notion that the kilt had been invented

<sup>21</sup> Pinkerton, *Literary Correspondence*, i, p. 404; Sir John Sinclair, *Correspondence* (1831), pp. 471–3.

<sup>22</sup> Dunbar, *op. cit.*, pp. 161–2.



by an Englishman had indeed come to his ears, but he declined to entertain it for a minute: it was, he said, refuted by 'the universal belief of the people that the philibeg had been part of their garb as far back as tradition reaches'. He also declared, with equal assurance, that tartans had always been woven 'in distinctive patterns (or setts, as they were called) of the different clans, tribes, families and districts'. For neither of these statements did he give any evidence. They were published in 1822, in a book entitled *Sketches of the Character, Manners and Present State of the Highlanders of Scotland*. This book, we are told, became 'the foundation of all subsequent works on the clans'.<sup>23</sup>

It was not only through literature that Stewart pushed the new Highland cause. In January 1820 he founded the Celtic Society of Edinburgh: a society of young civilians whose first object was 'to promote the general use of the ancient Highland dress in the Highlands', and to do so by wearing it themselves in Edinburgh. The president of the Society was Sir Walter Scott, a Lowlander. The members dined together regularly, 'kilted and bonneted in the old fashion, and armed to the teeth'. Scott himself, on these occasions, wore trews, but he declared himself 'very much pleased with the extreme enthusiasm of the Gael when liberated from the thraldom of breeches'. 'Such jumping, skipping and screaming' he wrote after one such dinner, 'you never saw.'<sup>24</sup> Such was the effect, even in decorous Edinburgh, of the free circulation of wholesome air under the Highlander's kilt.

Thus by 1822, thanks largely to the work of Sir Walter Scott and Colonel Stewart, the Highland takeover had already begun. It was given emphatic publicity in that year by George IV's state visit to Edinburgh. This was the first time that a Hanoverian monarch had ever appeared in the capital of Scotland, and elaborate preparations were made to ensure that the occasion was a success. What interests us is the persons who were charged with these preparations. For the master of ceremonies entrusted with all practical arrangements was Sir Walter Scott; Scott named as his assistant – his 'dictator' in all matters of ceremony and dress – Colonel Stewart of Garth; and the guards of honour which Scott and Stewart assigned to the protection of the king, the officers of state, and the regalia of Scotland were drawn

<sup>23</sup> *D.N.B.*, s.v. Stewart, David 1772–1829.

<sup>24</sup> *Letters of Sir W. Scott*, ed. H. C. Grierson (1932–7), vi, pp. 338–43, 452; J. G. Lockhart, *Life of Scott* (1850), pp. 443, 481–2.

from those ‘enthusiasts for the philibeg’, the members of the Celtic Club, ‘dressed in proper costume’. The result was a bizarre travesty of Scottish history, Scottish reality. Imprisoned by his fanatical Celtic friends, carried away by his own romantic Celtic fantasies, Scott seemed determined to forget historic Scotland, his own Lowland Scotland, altogether. The royal visit, he declared, was to be ‘a gathering of the Gael’. So he pressed the Highland chiefs to come with their ‘tail’ of followers and pay homage to their king. ‘Do come and bring half-a-dozen or half-a-score of clansmen’, he wrote to one such chief, ‘so as to look like an island chief, as you are . . . Highlanders are what he will best like to see.’<sup>25</sup>

The Highlanders duly came. But what tartan should they wear? The idea of differentiated clan tartans, which had now been publicized by Stewart, seems to have originated with the resourceful manufacturers who, for thirty-five years, had had no clients except the Highland regiments but who now, since the repeal of 1782, saw the prospect of a far larger market. The greatest of these firms was that of William Wilson and Son of Bannockburn, whose vast records are an invaluable source for historians. Messrs Wilson and Son saw the advantage of building up a repertoire of differentiated clan tartans, and thus stimulating tribal competition, and for this purpose they entered into alliance with the Highland Society of London, which threw, over their commercial project, a cloak, or plaid, of historical respectability. In 1819, when the royal visit was first suggested, the firm prepared a ‘Key Pattern Book’ and sent samples of the various tartans up to London, where the Society duly ‘certified’ them as belonging to this or that clan. However, when the visit was confirmed, the time for such pedantic consistency had passed. The spate of orders was now such that ‘every piece of tartan was sold as it came off the loom’. In these circumstances, the first duty of the firm was to keep up the supply and ensure that the Highland chiefs were able to buy what they needed. So Cluny Macpherson, heir to the chief of the discoverer of Ossian, was given a tartan from the peg. For him it was now labelled ‘Macpherson’, but previously, having been sold in bulk to a Mr Kidd to clothe his West Indian slaves, it had been labelled ‘Kidd’, and before that it had been simply ‘No. 155’. Thanks to such mercantile resourcefulness, the chiefs were able to respond to Sir Walter’s summons, and the citizens of Edinburgh were able to admire Sir Evan Macgregor of Macgregor ‘in his proper

<sup>25</sup> *Letters of Sir W. Scott*, vii, p. 213.

Highland tartan, with his tail, banner and pipers', and Colonel MacDonell of Glengarry, heir – after Rawlinson – to the oldest kilt in Scotland, now doubtless sophisticated for the occasion.

Thus was the capital of Scotland 'tartanized' to receive its king, who himself came in the same costume, played his part in the Celtic pageant, and at the climax of the visit solemnly invited the assembled dignitaries to drink a toast not to the actual or historic élite but to 'the chieftains and clans of Scotland'. Even Scott's devoted son-in-law and biographer, J. G. Lockhart, was taken aback by this collective 'hallucination' in which, as he put it, 'the marking and crowning glory' of Scotland was identified with the Celtic tribes which 'always constituted a small and almost always an unimportant part of the Scottish population'. Lord Macaulay, himself a Highlander by origin, was more outspoken. Writing in the 1850s, he did not doubt the antiquity of the Highland dress, but his historical sense was outraged by the retrospective extension of these 'striped petticoats' to the civilized races of Scotland. At length, he wrote, this absurd modern fashion had

reached a point beyond which it was not easy to proceed. The last British king who held a court in Holyrood thought that he could not give a more striking proof of his respect for the usages which had prevailed in Scotland before the Union, than by disguising himself in what, before the Union, was considered by nine Scotchmen out of ten as the dress of a thief.<sup>26</sup>

'Beyond which it was not easy to proceed...' Macaulay underestimated the strength of an 'hallucination' which is sustained by an economic interest. Scott might regain his balance – he quickly did – but the farce of 1822 had given a new momentum to the tartan industry, and inspired a new fantasy to serve that industry. So we come to the last stage in the creation of the Highland myth: the reconstruction and extension, in ghostly and sartorial form, of that clan system whose reality had been destroyed after 1745. The essential figures in this episode were two of the most elusive and most seductive characters who have ever ridden the Celtic hobby-horse or aerial broomstick: the brothers Allen.

The brothers Allen came from a well-connected naval family. Their grandfather, John Carter Allen, had been Admiral of the White. His son, their father, had served briefly in the navy; their mother was the daughter of a learned clergyman in Surrey. Their father is a shadowy

<sup>26</sup> Macaulay, *History of England*, ch. XIII.



person, and his life is mysterious. He seems to have lived mainly abroad, especially in Italy. The early life of the two sons is undocumented. All that we can say of them is that they were both talented artists in many fields. They wrote romantic poems in the style of Scott; they were learned, though evidently self-taught, in many languages; they were skilful draughtsmen, wood-carvers, furniture makers. They had persuasive manners and great social charm, which enabled them to move at ease in the best society. Whatever they did, they did thoroughly and with flair. The exact occasion of their first appearance in Scotland is unknown, but they were evidently there with their father during the royal visit in 1822, and they may have been there as early as 1819. 1819–22 was the period of preparation for the Royal visit. It was also the period in which the firm of Wilson and Son of Bannockburn was contemplating a systematic plan of Highland clan tartans, and the Highland Society of London, no doubt in collusion with them, was considering the publication of a lavishly illustrated book on Highland clan tartans.<sup>27</sup> There is some reason to think that the Allen family was in touch with Wilson and Son at this time.

In the following years the brothers may have spent some time abroad, but they also appeared occasionally in great Scottish houses or at fashionable functions, dressed (as one English observer put it) ‘in all the extravagance of which the Highland costume is capable – every kind of tag and rag, false orders and tinsel ornaments’.<sup>28</sup> A visiting Russian aristocrat observed them, resplendent with orders and knighthoods, at Altyre, the house of the Gordon Cuming family. They had now Scotitized their name, first as Allan, then, via Hay Allan, as Hay; and they encouraged the belief that they were descended from the last Hay, earl of Errol. As he had been a bachelor, they presumably credited him with a secret marriage; but their claims were never weakened by explicit assertion. Sir Walter Scott recalled seeing the elder of them wearing the badge of the high constable of Scotland – an office hereditary in the house of Errol – ‘which he could have no more right to wear than the Crown’.<sup>29</sup> No more, the wearer might have replied, and no less.

<sup>27</sup> Part of the proposal is among the MSS. of the Highland Society of London, National Library of Scotland, Deposit 268, Box 15. Undated, but watermark of 1818.

<sup>28</sup> *Letters and Journals of Lady Eastlake* (1895), i, pp. 54–5.

<sup>29</sup> It is fair to say that the brothers did not themselves originate their claim to be the heirs of the Earls of Errol. When their grandfather, Admiral John Carter Allen, died in 1800, his obituarist wrote that ‘he was not only related to the Marchioness

Much of the brothers' time was spent in the far north, where the earl of Moray gave them the run of Darnaway Forest, and they became expert deer hunters. They never lacked aristocratic patrons. Hard-headed Lowland 'improvers' fell for them too. Such was Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, whose wife had an estate in Elgin. To him, in 1829, they revealed that they had in their possession an important historical document. This was a manuscript which (they said) had once belonged to John Leslie, bishop of Ross, the confidant of Mary Queen of Scots, and which had been given to their father by none other than the Young Chevalier, Bonny Prince Charlie. The manuscript was entitled *Vestiarium Scoticum*, or *The Garde-robe of Scotland*, and was a depiction of the clan tartans of Scottish families, declaring itself to be the work of one Sir Richard Urquhart, knight. Bishop Leslie had inserted his date – 1571 – but the manuscript could of course be much earlier. The brothers explained that the original document was with their father in London, but they showed to Dick Lauder a 'crude copy' which they had acquired, and which had evidently come ultimately from the Urquhart family of Cromarty. Sir Thomas was very excited by this discovery. Not only was the document important in itself, it also provided an authentic ancient authority for distinct clan tartans, and it showed that such tartans had been used by Lowlanders as well as Highlanders: a fact very gratifying to Lowland families eager to scramble in on the act.<sup>30</sup> So Sir Thomas made a transcript of the text, which the younger brother obligingly illustrated for him. He then wrote to Sir Walter Scott, as the oracle on all such matters, urging that the document be published to correct the numerous 'uncouth, spurious, modern tartans which are every day manufactured, christened after particular names, and worn as genuine'.

Scott's Augustan self had now reasserted itself, and he was not taken in. The history and content of the manuscript, and the character of the brothers, all seemed to him suspicious. He did not believe that

of Salisbury and the Marquis of Devonshire [*recte* Downshire], but Lord Hillsborough gave it as his opinion that the title of Erroll belonged to him as being descended from the old Earl Hay in the male line.' (*Gentleman's Magazine* (1800), p. 1021). The Marchioness of Salisbury, Lord Downshire and Lord Hillsborough were all members of the Hill family.

<sup>30</sup> Thus the marquis of Douglas, about 1800, applied to the Highland Society of London to discover whether his family had 'any particular kind of tartan'. He admitted that 'it is so long since they used any that it must now be difficult to discover'; but he had hopes... (MSS. of the Highland Society of London, Box 1, no. 10).

Lowlanders had ever worn clan tartans, and he suspected a tartan weavers' ramp. At the very least he insisted that the original manuscript be submitted to experts at the British Museum. Sir Thomas followed up this suggestion and the elder brother very readily agreed; but that line of research was blocked when he produced a letter from his father, signed 'J. T. Stuart Hay', firmly reprimanding him for even mentioning the document, which (he said) – apart from the futility of seeking to revive a world now irrecoverably lost – could never be exhibited to profane eyes on account of certain 'private memorandums on the blank leaves'. 'As to the opinion of Sir Walter Scott,' said the writer of the letter, 'inasmuch as I have never heard it respected among antiquaries as of the least value, it is quite indifferent to me'.<sup>31</sup> That put the oracle of Abbotsford in his place.

Defeated by the authority of Scott, the brothers retired again to the north and gradually perfected their image, their expertise and their manuscript. They had now found a new patron, Lord Lovat, the Catholic head of the Fraser family, whose ancestor had died on the scaffold in 1747. They also adopted a new religious loyalty, declaring themselves Roman Catholics, and a new and grander identity. They dropped the name of Hay and assumed the royal name of Stuart. The elder brother called himself John Sobieski Stuart (John Sobieski, the hero-king of Poland, was the maternal great-grandfather of the Young Chevalier); the younger became, like the Young Chevalier himself, Charles Edward Stuart. From Lord Lovat they now obtained the grant of Eilean Aigas, a romantic lodge in an islet of the Beaulieu River in Inverness, and there they set up a miniature court. They were known as 'the Princes', sat on thrones, maintained a rigorous etiquette, and received royal honours from visitors, to whom they showed Stuart relics and hinted at mysterious documents in their locked charter chest. The royal arms were set up above the doorway of the house; when they were rowed upstream to the Catholic church at Eskdale, the royal pennant flew above their boat; their seal was a crown.

It was from Eilean Aigas, in 1842, that the brothers at last

<sup>31</sup> The correspondence of Dick Lauder and Scott, together with Dick Lauder's transcript of the *Vestiarium*, is now in The Royal Archives at Windsor, having been presented to Queen Mary by its owner, Miss Greta Morritt, Dick Lauder's great-granddaughter, in 1936. It has been published partially in the *Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. D. Douglas, 2nd edn (1891), pp. 710–13; more fully in Stewart, *Old and Rare Scottish Tartans*. The documents, and those cited below on p. 40, are quoted by gracious permission of H.M. the Queen.



published their famous manuscript, *Vestiarium Scoticum*. It appeared in a sumptuous edition limited to fifty copies. The series of coloured illustrations of tartans was the first ever to be published and was a triumph over technical difficulties. These illustrations were executed by a new process of 'machine printing' and, in the words of a scholar writing fifty years later, 'for beauty of execution and exactness of detail have not been excelled by any method of colour-printing subsequently invented'. John Sobieski Stuart, as editor, supplied a learned commentary and new proofs of the authenticity of the manuscript: a 'traced facsimile' of Bishop Leslie's autograph in it and a 'transcript' of his receipt for it. The manuscript itself, he said, had been 'carefully collated' with a second manuscript recently discovered by an unnamed Irish monk in a Spanish monastery, unfortunately since dissolved; and another manuscript, recently in the possession of Lord Lovat, was also cited, although it had unfortunately been carried to America and there lost; but it was being actively sought...

The *Vestiarium Scoticum*, being of such limited distribution, was little noticed on its publication. Scott was now dead, and Dick Lauder, though he had remained 'a believer', held his peace. Had he scrutinized the printed setts, he might have noted, with surprise, that they had been considerably revised since they had been copied by the younger brother into his own transcript. But the published *Vestiarium*, it soon appeared, was only a preliminary *pièce justificative* for a far more wide-ranging original work. Two years later, the two brothers published an even more sumptuous volume, the result, clearly, of years of study. This stupendous folio, lavishly illustrated by the authors, was dedicated to Ludwig I, king of Bavaria, as 'the restorer of the Catholic arts of Europe' and contained a high-flown address, in both Gaelic and English, to 'the Highlanders'. According to the title-page, it was published in Edinburgh, London, Paris and Prague. It was entitled *The Costume of the Clans*.

*The Costume of the Clans* is an extraordinary work. For sheer erudition it makes all previous work on the subject seem thin and trivial. It cites the most arcane sources, Scottish and European, written and oral, manuscript and printed. It draws on art and archaeology as well as on literature. Half a century later a careful and scholarly Scottish antiquary described it as 'a perfect marvel of industry and ability',<sup>32</sup> and the best modern writer on the subject

<sup>32</sup> Stewart, *Old and Rare Scottish Tartans*.

describes it as ‘a monumental work . . . one of the foundation-stones on which any history of the Highland dress is built’.<sup>33</sup> It is intelligent and critical. The authors admit the modern invention of the kilt (they had, after all, stayed with the MacDonells of Glengarry). Nothing that they say can be immediately discounted. On the other hand, nothing can be taken on trust. The book is shot through with pure fantasy and bare-faced forgery. Literary ghosts are gravely called in evidence as authorities. The poems of Ossian are used as a source, and elusive manuscripts are cited. These include ‘a large copy of the original poems of Ossian and many other valuable Gaelic manuscripts’ obtained from Douay by the late chevalier Watson but now, alas, invisible; a Latin manuscript of the fourteenth century found, with other manuscripts, in that Spanish monastery now so unfortunately dissolved; and, of course, the *Vestiarius Scoticum* itself, now firmly ascribed, ‘on internal evidence’, to the end of the fifteenth century. The hand-coloured illustrations represented monumental sculpture and ancient portraits. A portrait of the Young Chevalier in Highland costume was taken from ‘the original in the possession of the authors’.

*The Costume of the Clans* was not only a work of antiquarian erudition, it also had a thesis. That thesis is that the peculiar Highland dress was the fossil relic of the universal dress of the Middle Ages, which had been replaced throughout the rest of Europe in the sixteenth century but which had survived, debased indeed but still recognizable, in that forgotten corner of the world. For in the Middle Ages (according to these authors) Celtic Scotland had been a flourishing part of cosmopolitan Catholic Europe: a rich, polished society in which the splendid courts of the tribal chiefs were nourished – thanks to the advanced Hebridean manufactures – by the luxuries and the enlightenment of the continent. Unfortunately, that rich civilization had not lasted: by the close of the Middle Ages those humming Hebridean looms, those brilliant island courts, that ‘high intellectual sophistication’ of Mull, Islay and Skye had declined; the Highlands had been cut off from the world; their society had become impoverished and introverted and their costume drab and mean. Only the *Vestiarius* – that great discovery of the two brothers – by revealing the brilliance of the original tartan setts, opened a narrow window on to that splendid culture which had now gone for ever. For the authors professed no interest in the modern

<sup>33</sup> Dunbar, *History of the Highland Dress*, p. 111.

attempt to revive the costume alone, divorced from the Catholic Celtic culture of which it was a part. That was to convert it into mere fancy dress. The only true revival was one in which the whole past lived again – as it was lived by the Stuart brothers, writing poetry, hunting the deer, maintaining their own tribal court on an island in the Beaulieu river. Like Pugin, who sought to revive not merely Gothic architecture but a whole imaginary civilization behind it, so ‘the Sobieski Stuarts’ (as they were generally called) sought to revive not merely the Highland costume but a whole imaginary Highland civilization; and they did so by a fiction as bold, and an historical revision as outrageous, as that of ‘Ossian’.

Unfortunately, *The Costume of the Clans* never received the criticism, or even the notice, of the learned world. Before that could happen, the authors had made a grave tactical error. In 1846 they went as near as they would ever go towards explicitly claiming royal blood. They did this in a series of short stories which, under romantic but transparent names, professed to reveal historical truth. The work was entitled *Tales of a Century*: the century from 1745 to 1845. The burden of these tales was that the Stuart line was not extinct; that a legitimate son had been born to the wife of the Young Chevalier in Florence; that this infant, through fear of assassination by Hanoverian agents, had been entrusted to the care of an English admiral who had brought him up as his own son; and that in due course he had become the legitimate father of two sons who, having fought for Napoleon at Dresden, Leipzig and Waterloo, and been personally decorated by him for bravery, had then retired to await their destiny in their ancestral country, and were now seeking to restore its ancient society, customs, costumes. Learned footnotes citing the still uncatalogued Stuart papers, unverifiable German and Polish documents, and ‘manuscripts in our possession’ supplied evidence to support this history.

At this point a hidden enemy struck. Under the cloak of a belated review of the *Vestiarium*, an anonymous writer published in the *Quarterly Review* a devastating exposure of the royal claims of the two brothers.<sup>34</sup> The elder brother attempted to reply. The reply was

<sup>34</sup> ‘The Heirs of the Stuarts’, *Quarterly Review*, lxxxii (1847). The article was ascribed at the time, and often confidently, to J. G. Lockhart, to J. W. Croker, to Lord Stanhope and to James Dennistoun; and perhaps to others. In fact it was by George Skene, Professor at Glasgow University, the elder brother of the Celtic scholar W. F. Skene.



olympian in tone, but weak in substance.<sup>35</sup> The scholarly work of the two brothers was now fatally compromised; the household at Eilean Aigas suddenly broke up; and for the next twenty years the two brothers maintained abroad, in Prague and Pressburg, the royal pretensions which had been fatally damaged at home. In the same year Queen Victoria bought Balmoral, and the real Hanoverian court replaced the vanished, illusory Jacobite court in the Highlands of Scotland.

In economic history we often witness the ruin of the bold, imaginative, sometimes fantastic pioneer whose work is then taken over and carried to success by a more pedestrian entrepreneur. The Sobieski Stuarts never recovered from the exposure of 1847. Although their personal charm, their good nature and their dignified, inoffensive behaviour ensured that they never lacked believers, always that fatal article in the *Quarterly Review* was cited against them. But their work was not wasted. The *Vestiarium* might be discredited, *The Costume of the Clans* ignored, but the spurious clan tartans devised by them were taken up, without their damaged names, by the Highland Society of London, and became the means of the continuing prosperity of the Scottish tartan industry. The pedestrian successor of the high-flying Sobieski Stuarts who achieved this more lasting triumph was James Logan.

James Logan was an Aberdonian who, in his youth, suffered what he called an ‘appalling wound’ while attending Highland games. At the throwing of the hammer, the missile, weighing 17 lb, accidentally landed on his head, as a result of which, as he afterwards explained (in order to extenuate some unspecified misconduct), ‘my skull was literally shattered’, and four square inches of it had to be replaced by a metal plate.<sup>36</sup> In spite of this discouragement, Logan became an enthusiast for Highland traditions, and in 1831, after an extensive walking tour through Scotland, he published a book entitled *The Scottish Gael* which he dedicated to King William IV. In this work he repeated all the recent Highland mythology: the authenticity of the poems of Ossian, the antiquity of the kilt, the differentiation of clan tartans; and he announced that he was himself ‘preparing a

<sup>35</sup> The reply was published by Blackwood & Sons (Edinburgh, 1848). Both the attack and the reply were afterwards republished together, without date, by Lorimer and Gillies, Edinburgh. The volume was privately printed, apparently by, or in the interest of, the Sobieski Stuarts.

<sup>36</sup> MSS. of the Highland Society of London, Box 5, Logan to the committee of directors of the Society (n.d.).

work expressly on tartans and badges, with illustrative plates'. By this time Logan had established himself in London, and the Highland Society, in recognition of his book, promptly elected him as its president and undertook to sponsor his promised work on tartans. This work ultimately appeared in 1843 – the year after the publication of the *Vestiarium*. It was called the *Clans of the Scottish Highlands*, and was lavishly illustrated, with seventy-two paintings of clansmen in their distinctive tartans, by R. R. MacIan.

It is unlikely that there were any direct relations between the Sobieski Stuarts, with their genuine erudition and not altogether bogus aristocratic airs, and the uncritical, plebeian James Logan. But the Sobieski Stuarts were undoubtedly in touch with the tartan manufacturers and had been advising both them and the clan chieftains on their tartans, perhaps as early as 1819. We know, too, that the greatest of the manufacturers, Messrs Wilson and Son, were in touch with Logan, whom they treated as a mere agent, sometimes correcting his work from their own superior knowledge; so they evidently had at their disposal what they considered better authority. It seems likely therefore that Logan's work was nourished throughout, directly or indirectly, by the fantasies of the Sobieski Stuarts. In the event, the Sobieski Stuarts' *Vestiarium* was published first. In his text, Logan paid tribute to 'the recent splendid work of John Sobieski Stuart' on which it clearly drew – though with occasional differences of detail, sufficient to justify a separate publication. In fact, as a later scholar has written, many of Logan's tartans were 'unacknowledged reproductions from the designs in the *Vestiarium Scoticum*'.<sup>37</sup>

Logan was fortunate in his timing. The exposure of the royal claims of the Sobieski Stuarts – the real inventors of the clan tartans – destroyed the credit of his rivals just at the moment when Queen Victoria's cult of the Highlands gave a new impulse to clan tartans, as to Highland scenery, Highland cattle, Sir Edwin Landseer and the ghillie John Brown. In 1850 no less than three works on clan tartans were published, all of them visibly but silently indebted to the discredited *Vestiarium* whose 'editors' had vainly sought to publish a cheap edition. One of them – General James Browne's *History of the Highlands and the Highland Clans*, which became the standard work – contained twenty-two lithographic plates of tartan in colour, taken without commentary from the *Vestiarium*.<sup>38</sup> For the rest of the century, numerous books of clan tartans were regularly

<sup>37</sup> Stewart, *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> Stewart, *op. cit.*

published. All of them were heavily dependent – directly or indirectly – on the *Vestiarium*.

This must have been mortifying to the Sobieski Stuarts, who returned to Britain in 1868. They were now desperately poor, but as always they continued their chosen role. They lived in London, went into society wearing their questionable orders and decorations, and were well known in the British Museum reading room, where a table was reserved for their use, and ‘their pens, paper-knives, paper-weights, etc. were surmounted with miniature coronets, in gold’.<sup>39</sup> In 1872 an appeal was made to Queen Victoria to relieve the poverty of these supposed kinsmen, but the review in the *Quarterly* was cited against them and it failed.<sup>40</sup> In 1877 the younger brother, who alone survived, sought anonymously to recall their titles, but was silenced, once again, by a reference to the *Quarterly*.<sup>41</sup> As of John Keats, it could be said of them that they were killed by the *Quarterly*: indeed, many thought that they were killed by the same hand.<sup>42</sup> But they never lacked believers; their friends championed them to the end; and after their death Lord Lovat caused them to be buried at Eskdale by the church which they had once attended from their romantic island home at Eilean Aigas. Their effects were then sold, and Queen Victoria showed an interest in the sale; but no Stuart relics, paintings, miniatures, title deeds or manuscripts were found among them. Nor has anyone ever seen the original text of the *Vestiarium Scoticum*, with its annotation by Bishop Leslie, and its interesting private memorandums – presumably inscribed by its previous owner, the Young Chevalier, when he passed it on to his son ‘J. T. Stuart Hay’, alias ‘James Stuart, comte d’Albanie’, the even more elusive father of our elusive heroes.<sup>43</sup>

This essay began with reference to James Macpherson. It ends with the Sobieski Stuarts. Between these makers of Highland tradition there are many resemblances. Both imagined a golden age

<sup>39</sup> *D.N.B.*, *art cit.*

<sup>40</sup> Windsor Castle MSS. P.P. 1/79.

<sup>41</sup> *Notes and Queries* (July–Dec. 1877), pp. 92, 158, 214, 351, 397. The letters signed ‘RIP’ and ‘Requiescat in Pace’ are clearly by Charles Edward Stuart.

<sup>42</sup> J. G. Lockhart, who had written the notorious attack on Keats, was supposed by some – but wrongly – to be the author of the exposure of the Sobieski Stuarts.

<sup>43</sup> Nothing seems discoverable about Thomas Allen, Lieut R.N. retired, the father of the Sobieski Stuarts. His later names and titles are recorded only in the writings or forgeries of his sons, to whom they were a genealogical necessity. It is not known whether the father played any part in the pretence. He was evidently a recluse. He died in Clerkenwell in 1839 (not, as stated in *D.N.B.*, 1852), after which the elder son (and after his death, the younger) called himself Comte d’Albanie.



in the past of the Celtic Highlands. Both declared that they possessed documentary evidence. Both created literary ghosts, forged texts and falsified history in support of their theories. Both began an industry which would thrive in Scotland long after their death. Both were soon exposed, but ignored their exposure and turned calmly to other pursuits: Macpherson to Indian politics, the Sobieski Stuarts to an unreal life abroad.

But there were also great differences. Macpherson was a sensual bully whose aim, whether in literature or in politics, was wealth and power and who pursued that aim with ruthless determination and ultimate success. The Sobieski Stuarts were amiable, scholarly men who won converts by their transpicuous innocence; they were *fantaisistes* rather than forgers. They were also genuine in the sense that they lived their own fantasies. Unlike Macpherson, they died poor. The wealth which they generated went to the manufacturers of the differentiated clan tartans now worn, with tribal enthusiasm, by Scots and supposed Scots from Texas to Tokyo.

