

ON THE SCOTCH CHARACTER.*

(A Fragment.)

THE Scotch nation are a body-corporate. They hang together like a swarm of bees. I do not know how it may be among themselves, but with us they are all united as one man. They are not straggling individuals, but embodied, formidable abstractions—determined personifications of the land they come from. A Scotchman gets on in the world, because he is not one, but many. He moves in himself a host, drawn up in battle-array, and armed at all points against all impugnors. He is a double existence—he stands for himself and his country. Every Scotchman is bond and surety for every other Scotchman—he thinks nothing Scotch foreign to him. If you see a Scotchman in the street, you may be almost sure it is another Scotchman he is arm in arm with; and what is more, you may be sure they are talking of Scotchmen. Begin at the Arctic Circle, and they take Scotland in their way back. Plant the foot of the compasses in the meridian, and they turn it by degrees to “Edina’s darling seat”¹—true as the needle to the Pole. If you happen to say it is a high wind, they say there are high winds in Edinburgh. Should you mention Hampstead² or Highgate,³ they smile at this as a local prejudice, and remind you of the Calton Hill.⁴ The conversation wanders and is impertinent, unless it hangs by this loop. It “runs the great circle, and is still at home.”⁵ You would think there was no other place in the world but Scotland, but that they strive to convince

* Author: William Hazlitt / Transcribed and annotated by Franca Dellarosa.

you at every turn of its superiority to all other places. Nothing goes down but Scotch Magazines and Reviews, Scotch airs, Scotch bravery, Scotch hospitality, Scotch novels, and Scotch logic. Some one the other day at a literary dinner in Scotland apologized for alluding to the name of Shakespear⁶ so often, because he was not a Scotchman. What a blessing that the Duke of Wellington⁷ was not a Scotchman, or we should never have heard the last of him! Even Sir Walter Scott,⁸ I understand, talks of the Scotch Novels in all companies; and by waving the title of the author, is at liberty to repeat the subject *ad infinitum*.

Lismahago⁹ in Smollett is a striking and laughable picture of this national propensity. He maintained with good discretion and method that oat-cakes were better than wheaten bread, and that the air of the old town of Edinburgh was sweet and salubrious. He was a favourable specimen of the class—acute though pertinacious, pleasant but wrong.* In general, his countrymen only plod on with the national character fastened behind them, looking round with wary eye and warning voice to those who would pick out a single article of their precious charge; and are as drawling and troublesome as if they were hired by the hour to disclaim and exemplify all the vices of which they stand accused. Is this repulsive egotism peculiar to them merely in their travelling capacity, when they have to make their way among strangers, and are jealous of the honour of the parent-country, on which they have ungraciously turned their backs? So Lord Erskine,¹⁰ after an absence of fifty years, made an appropriate eulogy on the place of his birth, and having traced the feeling of patriotism in himself to its source in that habitual

* Some persons have asserted that the Scotch have no humour. It is in vain to set up this plea, since Smollett was a Scotchman.

attachment which all wandering tribes have to their places of fixed residence, turned his horses' heads towards England—and farewell sentiment!

The Irish and others, who come and stay among us, however full they may be of the same prejudice, keep it in a great measure to themselves, and do not vent it in all companies and on all occasions, proper or improper. The natives of the sister-kingdom in particular rather cut their country like a poor relation, are shy of being seen in one another's company, and try to soften down the *brogue* into a natural gentility of expression. A Scotchman, on the contrary, is never easy but when his favourite subject is started, treats it with unqualified breadth of accent, and seems assured that every one else must be as fond of talking of Scotland and Scotchmen as he is.

Is it a relic of the ancient system of *clanship*? And are the Scotch pitted against all the rest of the world, on the same principle that they formerly herded and banded together under some chosen leader, and *harried* the neighbouring district? This seems to be the most likely solution. A feeling of antipathy and partisanship, of offensive and defensive warfare, may be considered as necessary to the mind of a Scotchman. He is nothing in himself but as he is opposed to or in league with others. He must be for or against somebody. He must have a cause to fight for; a point to carry in argument. He is not an unit, but an aggregate; he is not a link, but a chain. He belongs to the regiment. I should hardly call a Scotchman *conceited*, though there is often something that borders strongly on the appearance of it. He has (speaking in the lump) no personal or individual pretensions. He is not proud of himself, but of being a Scotchman. He has no existence or excellence except what he derives from some external accident, or shares with some body of men. He is a

Brunonian,¹¹ a Cameronian,¹² a Jacobite,¹³ a Covenanter;¹⁴ he is of some party, he espouses some creed, he is great in some controversy, he was bred in some University, has attended a certain course of lectures, understands Gaelic, and upon occasion wears the Highland dress. An Englishman is satisfied with the character of his country, and proceeds to set up for himself; an Irishman despairs of that of his, and leaves it to shift for itself; a Scotchman pretends to respectability as such, and owes it to his country to make you hate the very name by his ceaseless importunity and intolerance in its behalf. An Irishman is mostly vain of his person, an Englishman of his understanding, a Frenchman of his politeness—a Scotchman thanks God for the place of his birth. The face of a Scotchman is to him accordingly the face of a friend. It is enough for him to let you know that he speaks the dialect that Wilkie¹⁵ speaks, that he has sat in company with the Author of Waverley.¹⁶ He does not endeavour to put forward his own notions so much as to inform you of the school in politics, in morals, in physic, in which he is an adept; nor does he attempt to overpower you by wit, by reason, by eloquence, but to tire you out by dint of verbal logic; and in common-places it must be confessed that he is invincible. There he is *teres et rotundus*.¹⁷ He fortifies himself in these, circumvallation within circumvallation, till his strong-hold is impregnable by art and nature. I never knew a Scotchman give up an argument but once. It was a very learned man, the Editor of an Encyclopedia,—not my friend, Mr. Macvey Napier.¹⁸ On some one's proposing the question why Greek should not be printed in the Roman type, this gentleman answered, that in that case it would be impossible to distinguish the two languages. Every one stared, and it was asked how at this rate we distinguished French from English? It was the for-

lorn hope. Any one else would have laughed, and confessed the blunder. But the Editor was a grave man—made an obstinate defence (the best his situation allowed of) and yielded in the forms and with the honours of war.

A Scotchman is generally a dealer in staple-propositions, and not in rarities and curiosities of the understanding. He does not like an idea the worse for its coming to him from a reputable, well-authenticated source, as I conceive he might feel more respect for a son of Burns¹⁹ than for Burns himself, on the same hereditary or genealogical principle. He swears (of course) by the Edinburgh Review,²⁰ and thinks Blackwood²¹ not easily put down. He takes the word of a Professor in the University-chair in a point of philosophy as he formerly took the Laird's²² word in a matter of life and death; and has the names of the Says, the Bentham's, the Mills, the Malthuses,²³ in his mouth, instead of the Montroses, the Gordons, and the Macullamores.²⁴ He follows in a train; he enlists under some standard; he comes under some collateral description. He is of the tribe of Issachar, and not of Judah. He stickles for no higher distinction than that of his clan, or vicinage.* In a word, the Scotch are the creatures of inveterate habit. They pin their faith on example and authority. All their ideas are cast in a previous mould, and rivetted to those of others. It is not a single blow, but a repetition of blows, that leaves an impression on them. They are strong only in the strength²⁵ of prejudice and numbers.

* This may be in part the reason of the blunder they have made in laying so much stress on what they call the *Cockney School in Poetry*²⁶—as if the people in London were proud of that distinction, and really thought it a particular honour to get their living in the metropolis, as the Scottish “Kernes and Gallowglasses”²⁷ think it a wonderful step in their progress through life to be able to hire a lodging and pay *scot and lot*²⁸ in the good town of Edinburgh.

The genius of their greatest living writer is the genius of national tradition. He has “damnable iteration in him;”²⁹ but hardly one grain of sheer invention. His mind is turned instinctively backward on the past—he cannot project it forward to the future. He has not the faculty of imagining any thing, either in individual or general truth, different from what has been handed down to him for such. Give him *costume*, dialect, manners, popular superstitions, grotesque characters, supernatural events, and local scenery, and he is a prodigy, a man-monster among writers—take these actually embodied and endless materials from him, and he is a common man, with as little original power of mind as he has (unfortunately) independence or boldness of spirit!—

The Scotch, with all their mechanical, wholesale attachment to names and parties, are venal in politics,* and cowardly in friendship. They crouch to power; and would be more disposed to fall upon and crush, than come forward to the support of, a sinking individual. They are not like La Fleur³⁰ in the Sentimental Journey, who advanced three steps forward to his master when the *Gens-d’Armes* arrested him: they are like the *Maitre d’Hotel*, who retired three paces backwards on the same occasion. They will support a generic denomination, where they have numbers to support them again: they make a great gulp, and swallow down a feudal lord with all the retinue he can muster—the more, the merrier—but of a single unprotected straggler they are shy, jealous, scrupulous in the extreme as to character, inquisitive as to connections, curious in all the particulars of birth, parentage and education. Setting his prejudices of

* It was not always so. But by knocking on the head the Jacobite loyalty of the Scotch, their political integrity of principle has been destroyed and dissipated to all the winds of Heaven.

country, religion, or party aside, you have no hold of a Scotchman but by his self-interest. If it is for his credit or advantage to stand by you, he will do it: otherwise, it will go very much against both his stomach and his conscience to do so, and you must e'en shift for yourself. You may trust something to the generosity or magnanimity of an Englishman or an Irishman; they act from an impulse of the blood or from a sense of justice: a Scotchman (the exceptions are splendid indeed) uniformly calculates the consequences to himself. He is naturally faithful to a leader, as I said before, that is, to a powerful head; but his fidelity amounts to little more than servility. He is a bigot to the shadow of power and authority, a slave to prejudice and custom, and a coward in every thing else. He has not a particle of mental courage. Cæsar's wife was not to be suspected; and it is the same with a Scotchman's friend. If a word is said against your moral character, they shun you like a plague-spot. They are not only afraid of a charge being proved true against you, but they dare not disprove it, lest by clearing you of it they should be supposed a party to what had no existence or foundation. They thus imbibe a bad opinion of you from hearsay, and conceal the good they know of you both from themselves and the world. If your political orthodoxy is called in question, they take the alarm as much as if they were apprehensive of being involved in a charge of high treason. One would think that the whole country laboured, as they did SIXTY YEARS SINCE,³¹ under an imputation of disaffection, and were exposed to the utmost vigilance of the police, so that each person had too little character for loyalty himself to run any additional risk by his neighbour's bad name. This is not the case at present: but they carry their precautions and circumspection in this respect to such an idle and stupid excess, as can only be accounted for from

local circumstances and history—that is to say, from the effects of that long system of suspicion, persecution and *surveillance*,³² to which they were exposed during a century of ridiculous (at least of unsuccessful) wars and rebellions, in favour of the House of Stuart.³³ They suffered much for King James³⁴ and the *Good Cause*;³⁵ but since that time their self-love must be excused to look at home. On my once complaining to a Scotchman of what I thought a direliction³⁶ of his client's cause by the counsel for the defendant in a prosecution for libel, I received for answer—That “Mr.—had defended the accused as far as he could, *consistently with his character*,”—though the only character the Learned Gentleman could boast, had been acquired by his skill, if not his courage, in resisting prosecutions of this kind.

The delicate sensibility (not to say soreness) of the Scotch in matters of moral reputation, may in like manner be accounted for (indirectly) from their domiciliary system of church-government, of Kirk-assemblies, and Ruling Elders: and in the unprincipled assurance with which aspersions of this sort are thrown out, and the panic-terror which they strike into the timid or hypocritical, one may see the remaining effects of Penance-Sheets³⁷ and Cutty-Stools!³⁸ Poor Burns! he called up the ghost of Dr. Hornbook,³⁹ but did not lay the spirit of cant and lying in the cunning North! —

Something however, it must be confessed, has been done; a change has been effected. Extremes meet; and the Saint has been (in some instances) merged in the Sinner. The essential character of the Scotch is determined self-will, the driving at a purpose; so that whatever they undertake, they make thorough-stitch work, and carry as far as it will go. This is the case in the pretensions some of their writers have lately set up to a contempt for Cutty-Stools, and to all the freedom of wit and humour. They have been so long under

interdict that they break out with double violence, and stop at nothing. Of all *blackguards* (I use the term for want of any other) a Scotch blackguard is for this reason the worst.⁴⁰ First, the character sits ill upon him for want of use, and is sure to be most outrageously caricatured. He is only just broke loose from the shackles of regularity and restraint, and is forced to play strange antics to be convinced that they are not still clinging to his heels. Secondly, formality, hypocrisy, and a deference to opinion, are the “sins that most easily beset him.”⁴¹ When therefore he has once made up his mind to disregard appearances, he becomes totally reckless of character, and “at one bound high overleaps all bound”⁴² of decency and common sense. Again, there is perhaps a natural hardness and want of nervous sensibility about the Scotch, which renders them (rules and the consideration of consequences apart) not very nice or scrupulous in their proceedings. If they are not withheld by conscience or prudence, they have no *mauvaise honte*,⁴³ no involuntary qualms or tremors, to qualify their effrontery and disregard of principle. Their impudence is extreme, their malice is cold-blooded, covert, crawling, deliberate, without the frailty or excuse of passion. They club their vices and their venality together, and by the help of both together are invincible. The choice spirits who have lately figured in a much-talked-of publication,⁴⁴ with “old Sylvanus at their head,”—

“Leaning on cypress stadle stout,”—⁴⁵

in their “pious orgies”⁴⁶ resemble a troop of Yahoos,⁴⁷ or a herd of Satyrs—

“And with their horned feet they beat the ground!”—⁴⁸

that is to say, the floor of Mr. Blackwood’s shop! There is one other publication, a match for this in flagrant impudence and dauntless dulness, which is the John Bull.⁴⁹ The

Editor is supposed, for the honour of Scotland, to be an Irishman. What the BEACON⁵⁰ might have proved, there is no saying; but it would have been curious to have seen some articles of Sir Walter's undoubted hand proceeding from this quarter, as it has been always contended that Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine was too low and scurrilous a publication for him to have any share in it. The adventure of the BEACON has perhaps discovered to Sir Walter's admirers and the friends of humanity in general, that

"Entire affection scorneth nicer hands!"⁵¹

Old Dr. Burney,⁵² about the middle of the last century, called one morning on Thomson,⁵³ the Author of *The Seasons*, at a late hour, and on expressing his surprise at the poet's not having risen sooner, received for answer,—“I had no motive, young man!” A Scotchman acts always from a motive, and on due consideration; and if he does not act right or with a view to honest ends, is more dangerous than any one else. Others may plead the vices of their blood in extenuation of their errors; but a Scotchman is a machine, and should be constructed on sound moral, and philosophical principles, or should be put a stop to altogether.

[N. B. *A Defence of the Scotch, shortly.*]

EDITORIAL NOTES

¹ Robert Burns, *Address to Edinburgh* (1786): “Edina! Scotia’s darling seat! | All hail thy palaces and tow’rs, | Where once beneath a Monarch’s feet, | Sat Legislation’s sov’reign pow’rs!”

² Hampstead, wealthy area located in the northwest part of London.

³ Highgate, suburban area in northwest London.

⁴ Calton Hill, a hill rising in the centre of Edinburgh, Scotland.

⁵ William Cowper, *The Task* (1785), bk. 4, “The Winter Evening”, ll. 118-119: “While fancy, like the finger of a clock, | Runs the great circuit, and is still at home”.

⁶ A recurring spelling for Shakespeare at the time of writing.

⁷ Arthur Wellesley (1759-1852), first Duke of Wellington.

⁸ Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), Scottish novelist, poet and historian.

⁹ Lieutenant Obadiah Lismahago, a character in the epistolary novel *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), by Scottish satirical novelist Tobias Smollett (1721-71).

¹⁰ Thomas Erskine, 1st Baron Erskine (1750-1823) was an Edinburgh-born British Whig lawyer and politician. In the course of his professional career, he defended politicians and reformers on charges of treason, during the phase of repressive home policy carried out by the British government in the aftermath of the French revolution. He served as Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain between 1806 and 1807. As P.P. Howe’s edition of the Hazlitt essay reports, “Lord Erskine was entertained at a banquet in Edinburgh on Feb. 21, 1820. He had not been in Scotland for more than fifty years.” (Hazlitt 1933, 17:397n).

¹¹ Brunonian, of or relating to John Brown (1735-88), a Scottish physician who theorised that disease was caused by either excessive or inadequate stimulation.

¹² Cameronian, name given to the Scottish Covenanters who followed Presbyterian leader Richard Cameron (1648-80).

¹³ Jacobite, supporter of the exiled Stuart King James II (1633-1701) after the Glorious Revolution and of the restoration of the Catholic House of Stuart to the British throne.

¹⁴ Covenanter, name given to Scottish Presbyterians across the seventeenth century, who subscribed to the 1638 National Covenant and the 1643 Solemn League and Covenant, intended to defend their form of church government and worship practices.

¹⁵ Sir David Wilkie (1785-1841), Scottish genre and portrait painter.

¹⁶ Sir Walter Scott.

¹⁷ Horace, *Satires* (II.vii.86): “smooth and round”.

¹⁸ Macvey Napier (1776-1847), Scottish lawyer, professor of conveyancing at the University of Edinburgh, and chief editor of the 7th edition of *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. He became Francis Jeffrey’s successor as editor of *The Edinburgh Review* in 1829.

¹⁹ Robert Burns (1759-96), Scottish poet and lyricist, considered the national poet of Scotland.

²⁰ *The Edinburgh Review*, or *The Critical Journal*, an eminent Scottish political and literary magazine, founded by Francis Jeffrey, Sydney Smith, and Henry Brougham, and published between 1802 and 1929.

²¹ *Blackwood’s Magazine* was a Tory British magazine and miscellany (1817-1980), founded by the Scottish publisher and bookseller William Blackwood (1776-1834). Formerly called *Edinburgh Monthly Magazine*, it was soon known as *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, featuring a typically fierce and controversial tone. The magazine was at the centre of the Cockney School controversy (see below).

²² *Laird*: “A member of the Scottish landed gentry; an owner of an estate” (*OED*).

²³ *the Says ... the Malthuses*: a list of eighteenth-century thinkers and economists, including Jean-Baptiste Say (1767-1842); Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832); James Mill (1773-1836); and Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834). Hazlitt would take up the point in *Characteristics* (1823), an essay in the form of a series of aphorisms “in the manner of Rochefoucault’s *Maxims*”, as reads the subtitle. See Hazlitt 1932, 9:227 and Hazlitt 1933, 17:397n.

²⁴ All Scottish clans: the Grahams of Montrose, and Clans Gordon and Macullamore.

²⁵ *strength*: obsolete spelling of *strength*.

EDITORIAL NOTES

²⁶ “Cockney School” was the scornful name coined in 1817 by the *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* to identify and revile the circle of London writers and intellectuals gathering around Leigh Hunt. The group included John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, William Hazlitt, and painter Benjamin Robert Haydon.

²⁷ Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (I.ii.13). ‘Kernes’ were light-armed Irish or Scottish foot-soldiers. ‘Gallowglasses’ were a class of elite soldiers who served primarily as bodyguards to Celtic chieftains.

²⁸ Duty paid towards municipal expenses; a local or municipal tax (*OED*).

²⁹ Shakespeare, *Henry IV*, Part I, I.ii.101. The quote is also in Hazlitt’s essay “On the Character of Cobbett”, contained in *Table Talks, Essays on Men and Manners* (1822).

³⁰ A character in Laurence Sterne’s comic novel *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768), which recounts the journey through France of a sensitive young man named Yorick and his servant La Fleur.

³¹ Subtitle of Walter Scott’s novel *Waverley; or ‘Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814).

³² Misspelling of *surveillance*.

³³ House of Stuart, royal house of Scotland from 1371 and of England from 1603. It was interrupted in 1649 by the establishment of the Commonwealth but was restored in 1660. It ended in 1714 when the British crown passed to the house of Hanover.

³⁴ King James VI of Scotland (1567-1625) and I of England (1603-1625).

³⁵ The restoration of the Catholic House of Stuart to the British throne.

³⁶ *direliction*: misprint for *dereliction*.

³⁷ *Penance-Sheets*: a form of public chastisement or atonement, consisting in wearing a white sheet, and still practiced across the eighteenth century.

³⁸ *Cutty-Stools*: stools or seats formerly placed in a conspicuous position in some Scottish churches, intended to seat a person who was required to make a public penance in church (*OED*).

³⁹ See Robert Burns’s poem *Death and Doctor Hornbook* (1785).

⁴⁰ *blackguard*: “A person, esp. a man, who behaves in a dishonourable or contemptible way; someone worthless or despicable; a villain” (*OED*).

⁴¹ See *Hebrews*, 12:1.

⁴² John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667), IV.181: “At one slight bound high overleap’d all bound.” *mauvaise honte*: false shame or modesty (*OED*).

⁴³ *Blackwood’s Magazine*.

⁴⁴ Cf. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590), I.vi.8-15. The same passage is the source for the line that follows below.

⁴⁵ See the oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus* (1746) composed by Georg Friedrich Handel on a libretto written by Thomas Morell.

⁴⁶ In Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), the Yahoos are a humanoid race of brutes, tamed into submission by the Houyhnhnms, a race of intelligent horses.

⁴⁷ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, I.vi.15.

⁴⁸ *John Bull*, a Sunday newspaper founded in December 1820 by Englishman Theodore Hook (1788-1841).

⁴⁹ *The Beacon* was a short-lived, staunchly conservative Edinburgh publication. It was established in 1820, and Walter Scott was involved both as an investor and contributor, and harshly criticized for this reason. Cf. Wu 2007, 2:90.

⁵⁰ Cf. *The Faerie Queene*, I.viii.40.

⁵¹ Charles Burney (1726-1814), English music historian, musician and composer.

⁵² James Thomson (1700-48), Scottish poet. He published the series of four poems *The Seasons* in 1730.