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## AN IDEA FOR EK

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THE HAPPIEST nations have no history, alleged Mary Ann Evans (who liked to be called George) in her mighty – and barely-readable – *Mill on the Floss*. Of course, she was referring to England. Scotland has never been that happy, or lucky.

The past isn't easily forgotten here. Just listen to the crowds sing when Scotland plays football or rugby against – well, England does come to mind, for some reason.

And sometimes history, and the cultural issues it enshrines, can be dangerous: a matter literally of life or death, or at least a matter of advanced personal hygiene.

Recall the case of the leader of the old Soviet composers' union. Back in the 'forties, Khrennikov, obituarised in the *Times* just last month, went for a meeting with Stalin. That senile old killer (and extremely accomplished childhood choirboy) gave the musician one of his famously dangerous looks and the composer – how shall we say this? – took the opportunity fully and frankly to relax his bowels.

But we don't do things that way in the Scottish Arts Council, and we may be sure that things won't be done that way either, when it and Scottish Screen are merged – as the Scottish Government intends them in due course to be - in the cultural super-quango of Creative Scotland.

But what exactly is Creative Scotland going to do with all its money? Certainly, we may be sure that much of it will go on big-budget projects, because cinema-quality film does cost lots and lots of money. But what about one or two small-budget project with long-lasting value in terms of Scottish culture and history?

Specifically, should not the architects of Creative Scotland begin now to plan the compilation of a fourth Statistical Account of Scotland – the first of this new century, the first of this new millennium, and the first of the reborn Scottish Parliament?

It would also be the first Statistical Account of the electronic age – and much, much cheaper to produce and publish than the three existing ones ever were. It would also be instantaneous, for it could be published online almost at once.

Certainly, a fourth account would be as important to the history of Scotland as any of the previous three – perhaps even more, given the huge social changes in Scottish society since the last began publication in the 1950s.

Each of three earlier Accounts provides a snapshot of Scotland, parish by parish, and is an essential reference tool for professional and amateur historians (and an important aid in terms of the current popular craze for genealogy).

The first 21-volume Account began publication in the 1790s, and comprises a report on his district by each of the 900-odd parish ministers throughout the country, while the second Account, in 15 volumes, was published in the 1830s and 1840s. Both series have been digitised by Edinburgh University's Edina programme, and can easily be accessed online on a free-to-use basis.

The third Account, though plagued with funding problems and the difficulty of finding a publisher, began publication in 1951 in 25 hefty volumes.

(Perhaps Creative Scotland could also consider the digitisation and online publication of this third Account. With low-cost and high-speed scanning, the job could be done for a few thousands pounds. I know: last year, I led the UHI project to publish online the Napier Commission as a contribution to Highland Year of Culture. It was astonishingly easy and cheap to do).

To these Accounts, a fourth, published online and free-to-use on a global basis, would add hugely. A fourth Statistical Account would represent an old idea for a new age, and a new world of technology and communication.

Perhaps under the auspices of a committee of senior historians and eminent clergymen, the individual parish accounts could be harvested by e-mail from Scotland's ministers.

Costs would be minimal. There would be next to no copy editing, for we may suppose that ministry and spell-check would find themselves in elegant alliance. The ministers would also have a ready-made template for their reports immediately to hand, in the form of the online first and second Accounts.

And what changes they would have to report! Scotland of the 1950s, after all, was a very different place to the Scotland of today, with deferent children, Tory MPs, church-going on a huge scale, and no thought anywhere (except for the cultural cranks) of a reborn Scottish parliament.

But today, we have that parliament – and teenagers, and television, and mobiles and gays and ecstasy and the Internet.

Some might object that the world of the future will be awash with online information – and it will be. But that is precisely the point of a fourth Account: it would be an accessible and manageable one-stop photo-shop of information concerning the Scotland of the first decade or so of the new millennium.

In all, what a wonderful (and wonderfully ambivalent) way to celebrate the tercentenary of the Treaty of Union. So over to you, quangoistas of Creative Scotland.

And over to you, First Minister Ek.