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A COUNTRY IN WANT OF A GRIEVANCE?

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FROM THE top of the tower the views are magnificent. As the river twists and curls in its valley below, Ben Lomond and the Trossachs lie out to the north and west, while the sleeping lion of the Pentlands can be spied in tumbling cloud to the south-east. Far below is the old bridge where Stevenson's Davie Balfour and the Jacobite fugitive Alan Breac Stewart outflanked a Redcoat sentry to get themselves over the Forth and into the Lothians.

But it is earlier events, historical rather than fictional, and at an older upstream bridge, that are commemorated today by the tower on the Abbey Craig above Stirling. For it was here at the site of that older bridge that William Wallace destroyed the English army of Cressingham and Surrey one September day in 1297. By any standards it was a dreadful defeat for the English, with Wallace taking enough of Cressingham's flayed skin for a new sword-belt.

But commemoration of the victory took a long time in coming. James VI took the English crown in 1603, and nothing was heard then of Wallace or Stirling Bridge. The English parliament absorbed the Scottish in 1707, and still nothing was heard. Nor was celebration of past victories proper when the hungry and hunted clansmen of Tearlach Og came through Stirling in the early weeks of 1746, en route to their catastrophe at Culloden Moor.

Not till the middle of the following century was the proposal first raised for a statue to William Wallace on the Abbey Craig, looking down on the site of his famous victory.

By then, much of Europe was ablaze with nationalist sentiment. The Greeks, with Lord Byron's limpingly romantic assistance, had fought for their independence from the Ottoman empire, and the Hungarians for their own wee bit of devolution within the Austro-Hungarian one.

The Irish heart - Ireland's own ancient parliament had been absorbed into the London one in 1801 - was never far from nationalist agitation and open rebellion against the British empire.

The 1850s saw publication of the Finnish nationalist epic the Kalevala, which has since been translated into every European language (except Scottish Gaelic), and which helped inspire later Finnish independence from the Russian empire.

Every few decades in the 19th century, the Poles rose in heroic and doomed rebellion against that same Russian empire: for the dismemberment of their country had begun at the First Partition, when Rousseau had famously counselled them: "Vous ne sauriez empêcher qu'ils ne vous engloutissent, faites au moins qu'ils ne puissent vous digérer". (A sturdy translation: you won't stop them swallowing you, but make damn sure they can't digest you).

But in Scotland? Scotland had certainly been swallowed into the Union of 1707: but how well Scotland had been digested was another matter. In 1856, the degree of that digestion – and the degree of Scotland's inclination in its favour - was to be one of bitter derision and dispute.

The professor of Greek at Edinburgh University at the time was John Stuart Blackie. Blackie had travelled widely throughout Europe, and was well aware of the nationalist aspirations that surged across it.

As a Scottish contribution to those aspirations, he proposed that a statue to William Wallace be built overlooking the site of the battle of Stirling Bridge – and all Hell broke loose.

An editorial in the Times newspaper took a distinctly dim view of the idea – and the very idea of the promotion of a distinctive Scottish identity. For Scotland, it said, was a country manifestly in want of a grievance, which laboured under the weariness of attained wishes and the curse of granted prayers.

“Never was a territory north of latitude 55 degrees so favoured before. Good fortune has joined her inseparably to the richest and most enterprising nation of modern times – but nothing will suffice them but to believe that they are ill-treated or in danger from some cause or another. A monument to Wallace is to be forthwith erected on the Abbey Craig, near Stirling”.

And there was more to come from the Times. England bloomed while Scotland withered, it said, because Englishmen had thrown away, “those confined notions of nationality” which still prevailed in Scotland: “we south of the Tweed have risen to the conception of a United Kingdom, nay, more, of a British Empire”.

In Edinburgh, however, the cry was still Scotland for the Scotch. The more Scotland had striven to be a nation, however, the more she had sunk to be a province; “and now, so far as taking offence at being compared to Lancashire, she would do well to be careful that Lancashire does not become in all respects a more important part of the world than herself”.

Scotchmen, the editorial concluded, should, “try to fit their society and their educational institutions to the requirement of the age, and that will erect a more enduring monument to their country’s honour than any that can be raised in bronze or granite”.

This thunderous and scornful denunciation of the proposed monument – and all it was deemed to represent - might be thought to have a resonance for political and cultural debate in present-day Scotland, (and might also repay what our literary colleagues call close textual analysis).

In any case, Blackie won his monument – if not in all quarters his argument – and the 67-metre column was opened in 1869. For by 1856, whatever this paper or anyone else thought or wanted, Scotland had not been digested.

Not has it since then, as the last ten or twenty or thirty years of political events and cultural discourse in Scotland would tend to demonstrate. The persistency of that national consciousness in conditions of derision is itself a pretty one.

Meantime, however we need to find – or devise – one single word which encompasses the meaning of the phrase, the persistency of national consciousness in unfavourable conditions. Can readers come up with one?

There certainly is none in English. Might the young Poles who have come to Scotland in recent years have any suggestions to make? After all, it was in Poland during the long years of dismemberment and occupation that, in Julian Tuwim’s memorable phrase, the Polish language was indeed the homeland.

Then again, perhaps these are considerations best left to the older members of society. The young don’t seem to have any trouble with the matter. Here is the last paragraph of a first-year schoolboy essay on the

battle of Stirling Bridge which I recently saw pinned to the wall of a Scottish classroom.

“So after the battle Wallace cut the skin off the Englishman and made a new belt for his sword. That will teach them to meddle with us. Yesssssssss!”

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