

Saltire Series No. 4

**MYTH & REALITY:
THE NATURE OF
SCOTTISH
IDENTITY**

By

Magnus Linklater



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- A champion of free speech on the issues that matter to the cultural life of every Scot
- A promoter of the best of what we are culturally, now and in the future
- A catalyst to ensure new ideas are considered and the best of them are made real

We believe we have an important and unique role to play, as an independent advocate and celebrant of all that is good and important about our cultural lives and achievements. The Society has played a crucial role over the last seventy five years, in recognising our cultural achievements. And while times have changed the need for that independent voice remains.

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Editorial Note

In the Saltire Series we have invited individuals to spark fresh thinking, ignite debate and challenge our orthodoxies, through the publication of short commissioned essays. The Editorial note from a pamphlet produced in 1942 is still a strong expression of the proposition.

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About Magnus Linklater

Writer and broadcaster. Born at Harray (Orkney), the son of author Eric Linklater (1899 - 1974). Linklater was brought up in Easter Ross and educated at Nigg, Dunbar, Eton and Cambridge, spending time in France and Germany. Making a career in journalism, he has worked for The Daily Express, Observer and Sunday Times and served as Editor of The Scotsman (1988-94). Linklater was appointed Chairman of the Scottish Arts Council (1996 - 2001). He continues to write for newspapers and has been the author of several books, including *The Falklands War* (1982), *Massacre - The Story of Glencoe* (1982), *Not With Honour - The Inside Story of the Westland Scandal* (1986), *For King and Conscience - John Graham of Claverhouse, Viscount Dundee* (1989), *Anatomy of Scotland* (1992), *Highland Wilderness* (1993) and *People in a Landscape - The New Highlanders* (1997). He holds honorary degrees from Napier University (1994) and the Universities of Aberdeen (1997) and Glasgow (2001), and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Magnus Linklater lives in Edinburgh.

MYTH & REALITY: THE NATURE OF SCOTTISH IDENTITY

By
Magnus Linklater

On being ‘Scottish’

In James Robertson’s novel *And the Land Lay Still*, two of the principal characters conduct a fierce argument about identity. One a Nationalist, sees a subservient Scotland in danger of losing the character that defines it.

“It’s time we stood up for ourselves for a change,” he says. “Or soon there won’t be anything Scottish about us.”

“Speak for yersel,” says the other. “I’m as Scottish as the next man. I’m nothing but Scottish, but I dinna need tae wrap masel in a kilt or play the bagpipes tae prove it.”

The argument is unresolved. What it means to be Scottish, what form Scottish identity takes, whether it is strong, weak, fading or growing, and whether it would be threatened or strengthened by remaining inside the Union, these are all questions that should lie at the heart of the independence debate, but have been surprisingly unexplored.

If Scots are genuinely contemplating the possibility of a future on their own – or of rejecting it -- they need surely to consider what kind of nation they belong to, and what they would like it to be. Do the traditional values that are said to define Scottishness still hold good, or do some of them, on analysis, turn out to be vapour-thin myths, endlessly repeated but barely sustainable? Have the milestones of Scottish history and tradition become so eroded through time that we can scarcely make out any longer what they tell us? And should we begin to challenge some of the assumptions handed down to us by our leaders because, when we come to tear the curtain aside, we may find a vacuous Wizard of Oz, with nothing to prate about

except political fantasies?

An ‘obsession with equality’

In the great debate over Scottish or British identity – one that has raged since devolution and beyond — the Scots have long thought they enjoyed the best of the argument. Their character, history, emblems and identity have been more widely recognised and appreciated than those of almost any other small nation on earth. Songs and stories of the past, battles and bagpipes, empire and industry, all swaying in the wake of what Tom Nairn memorably called “the tartan monster,” have cemented the image of the Scots across the world. Add to this a sense of history, nationhood, long struggles with a larger and more powerful neighbour, and a firm, if somewhat over-stated belief in a set of values that have set it apart, and you have the recipe at the heart of Scottish pride and self-belief.

Unlike the English, who have always assumed that Britain and England are more or less synonymous, the Scots have been almost aggressively confident about their own and separate identity.

Neal Ascherson, in his book *Stone Voices*, believes he can identify it by describing the most marked national characteristic as a commitment to society rather than the individual, an attitude that sets Scots apart from the English and will, in his view, lead sooner or later to independence. “I am speaking personally when I suggest that the Scots are communitarian rather than individualist, democratic in their obsession with equality, patriarchal rather than spontaneous in their respect for authority, Spartan in their insistence that solidarity matters more than free self-expression,” he writes.

Most Scottish politicians lean towards these views. The First Minister, Alex Salmond, set out the “purpose and direction” of his government, when he came to power, by pledging it

to “offer the people of this nation the opportunity to move forward to democracy and equality,” almost as if this was a unique Scottish prerogative.

His deputy, Nicola Sturgeon, put it more firmly, when she spoke of “a sense in Scotland, and a consensus in Scotland ... that we should be helping vulnerable people, not penalising vulnerable people, that equality is something to be pursued and progressed, that we help people out of poverty and out of disadvantage.”

The Scottish Labour leader, Johann Lamont, echoed it: “Our political beliefs are predicated on fairness, equality, justice and solidarity,” she said recently.

And the former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, speaking passionately for the Union, said that there was no question of abandoning Scottish values if the nation stayed within the UK:

“Was Keir Hardie wrong, stupid, naïve?” he asked. “Were all these early trade union leaders seduced by the English establishment? Were they conned? Were they brainwashed? No, they understood a belief in equality of opportunity and a belief — therefore that we had Scottish values that could be best realised inside the UK.”

A flaw in the argument

By this token, Scots have long remained clear about their core values, and these have endured, irrespective of whether they belonged to a united kingdom. Indeed, some historians have argued that Scottishness has actually been emphasised by the experience of unionism. As the historian Professor Tom Devine wrote in *The Scottish Nation* (1999), Scotland may have lost its parliament in 1707, but that did not mean abandoning its sense of a separate identity:

“[The Union] made the Scots élite even more aware of

their Scottishness. They were gradually developing a dual allegiance, a political loyalty to Britain which not even the most vitriolic abuse from the south could undermine, and at the same time they were maintaining a continuing sense of identity with their native land.”

Professor Christopher Smout agrees, but went further, when he wrote — in his essay on identity (Scottish Affairs, 1994) — about the contrast between English and Scottish attitudes:

“[Scotland] has learned to live in the last three hundred years with [the loss of its parliament], and to discover that union does not mean that national identity disappears. England, however, has been riven since 1991 with fears that if Britain surrenders any of her sovereignty to a federal Europe, her identity will go as well: her history has given her no experience of the loss of sovereignty, or of the possibility of survival of identity.”

Most modern commentators argue that this strong sense of egalitarianism rests on the equally strong tradition of a democratic education system, which in turn can be traced back to the Reformation and John Knox. In his history of the Reformation, Harry Reid states:

“The Scots reformers, led by Knox, had a visionary determination to place education at the very heart of their revolution. This education was to be democratic; the sons of the laird’s servants were to receive just as good and thorough a schooling as the sons of the laird.”

By this token, the foundations of the 18th century Enlightenment were laid in the 16th century, a seamless record of intellectual attainment linking the manse to the cottar’s bothy, building a nation of high achievers, who went on to win the admiration of the rational world.

It is a nice conceit, given wings by Arthur Herman in

his popular book *The Scottish Enlightenment: The Scots' Invention of the Modern World*. "Today we recognise that literacy and its mathematical counterpart, numeracy, are fundamental skills for living in a complex modern society," he writes. "In that sense, no other society in Europe was as broadly prepared for 'take-off' into the modern age as was eighteenth century Scotland.

There is, however, a flaw in this argument. The leading minds of the Enlightenment simply did not believe it. Professor Smout points out that neither David Hume nor William Robertson, whose two-volume *History of Scotland* was a seminal text, regarded Scotland's history pre-1707 as particularly interesting. Unlike England's, they said, which was about liberty, the creation of wealth, and securing the rights of property, Scotland's was "either a tale of anarchy and poverty, albeit flavoured by heroism (before 1707) or more or less the same as English history (after 1707)."

Quoting the thesis of historian Colin Kidd (1993) Professor Smout says: "The Enlightenment thus bade to construct the Scots as a historyless people: they were partly rescued from this fate by Walter Scott, who made use of popular culture as well as scholarship to reconstruct selected episodes of Scottish history as a series of tales."

The net result, however, was to pass on a history which was based on romance rather than factual evidence.

"The point to establish here," he adds, "is that, in popular culture, Scottish history today appears as the stuff of heritage industry, colourful and episodic, but basically not serious. It is a poor foundation on which to identify a Scottish nation with a confident and empowered Scottish state."

Already, then, there seems to be some shakiness about this allegedly embedded theory of Scottish values and the perceptions we hold about them. And for all the talk about equality and justice, there is little today to sustain the idea that the Scots have

an exceptional claim to them. I doubt if any English politician would be any less forthright in subscribing to precisely these ideas.

David Cameron, for instance, proclaims: “We want a fairer society, and will use every lever to tear down barriers that prevent equality.” Ed Miliband agrees: “Our values of equality, social justice, dignity at work, should drive what we do,” he told union bosses recently.

The myth of ‘superiority’

Is Scotland, then, more diligent in its pursuit of these ideals, and more successful in realising them? Little in the grim statistics of social equality, educational achievement, or social opportunity suggests it. As elsewhere in Britain – indeed the West in general – the gap between rich and poor Scots is growing. A recent report suggests that the wealthiest households in Scotland are now 273 times better off than the most deprived. The number of employed people who live in poverty has risen from 255,000 to 280,000 since 2008. As Judith Robertson, head of Oxfam Scotland, which issued the report, puts it: “Despite decades of economic growth and a myriad of anti-poverty policies, the reality for too many Scots is a cocktail of high mortality, economic inactivity, mental and physical ill-health, poor educational attainment and exclusion from the decisions that affect them.”

Nationalists argue, naturally, that this is because economic policy is driven by Westminster not Holyrood. They claim that it is the rich South East of England which benefits from tax and investment decisions taken by a UK government, and that until Scotland has wrested the levers of power from London, the balance will not be restored. A recent SNP government statement summed it up in this way:

“The paradox we face is that despite all of [our]

strengths, we are not as successful as we should be. The one-size fits all policies implemented by the Westminster based UK Government are not generating the growth or delivering the social cohesion that Scotland should be enjoying.” If, however, that proposition was widely held amongst the Scottish electorate, there should be evidence in the polls of emerging support for independence, with surveys reflecting the view that a separate Scotland would restore social equality. That proposition falls well short of proof. It is a political claim, no more than that.

What then of education? The idea that the Scottish education system is innately superior to that of others, not just in the UK but in Europe, is certainly held widely, both north and south of the border. The reality is that Scottish results are no worse, but rarely better than the UK average. Levels of literacy and numeracy are measured assiduously every year, and come out round about the middle of expectations. The last one showed that three-quarters of Scottish children had “appropriate” levels of literacy, with the rest either facing “constrained” opportunities or “serious challenges” because they could not read properly. One survey suggested that one in six left school “functionally illiterate,” though there is little agreement about what precisely that means.

Maths results are not much better, with concerns about the numbers who leave school unable to add or subtract without a calculator. In most world leagues which rank numeracy levels, Scotland is falling behind. Language teaching is abysmal. Only seven schools in Scotland teach Russian. None teach Arabic. Chinese teaching is limited, with one third of it confined to one school – St George’s in Edinburgh. Miss Jean Brodie would be shocked. Much hinges on whether the newly-introduced curriculum for excellence will tackle all this, but on that, as on so much else, the jury is out. For the moment, the much-vaunted

Scottish education system can boast little more than “could do better if tried.”

The English Question

Then there is the English Question – the well-worn tradition that Scottishness is accentuated when under threat from its overbearing neighbour to the south. We do not need to go back to the Wars of Independence, the Reformation, the Covenanters, the fierce resentment against English trading restrictions in the 17th century, or hostility to the Act of Union in the aftermath of 1707, to understand how important England has been in forming and cementing Scottish attitudes.

Just for example, the creation of an independent Scottish press in the 18th and early 19th century was a reaction against London-dominated news, or what the prospectus for *The Scotsman* in 1816 described as “the conductors of the Edinburgh Prints [who] act editorially as if they dreaded nothing so much as the idea of being thought independent.” The creation of a Scottish Secretary was designed to give Scotland a voice in the corridors of power to head off trouble in the North; the fall and rise of the Scottish National Party can be measured against frustration with a Westminster agenda; and no political development boosted Scottish antipathy more than the era of Margaret Thatcher. Even today we see a UK government “saving” the Govan shipyards at the expense of Portsmouth, with some commentators claiming that this is a clear attempt to buy off pro-independence votes.

Yet even this totem of identity has been weakened over the past decade. Devolution and the creation of a Scottish Parliament in 1999, which put decision-making in the hands of Scottish politicians, has drawn much of the sting of anti-English resentment. When things go wrong in Scotland these days, it is the Scottish government, rather than Westminster, that takes the

blame. And though the SNP continues to blame London ministers for failing to give Scotland the freedom to make its own choices, there is little evidence to show that it is fuelling Scottish antagonism.

If, then, those icons of Scottish distinctiveness – more equality, better education, greater opportunities, an emphasis on the “democratic intellect,” resentment against an imperialist neighbour — no longer have the force they once did, what exactly sustains the idea of a separate identity, or a genuine belief that the Scots are different?

The mist of distant history

Might it, perhaps, lie in a greater sense of the nation’s past, its history and mythology?

Professor Tom Devine, who co-edited a book called *Being Scottish in 2002*, thinks there may be some truth in this. Despite what he describes as a steady convergence between the two nations of England and Scotland in terms of occupation, income and social inequality, “many modern Scots still feel themselves more egalitarian, more committed to social justice and more supportive of the traditional welfare state than the so-called neo-liberal English ... this gulf between subjective and objective realities can only be explained by the power of memory, history and myth which have fashioned Scottish identities today.” By this token, harking back to past glories is enough to stiffen the sinews of national identity. Which, if true, is odd. The collective memory of Scottish history has surely weakened over the past generation. Professor Devine himself is on record as saying that “the Scots until recently have been historically illiterate” with the blame placed on education and not individuals. The history curriculum was too often been obsessed, he says, with “people who are not all that important”, like Charles Edward Stuart and Mary Queen of Scots, meaning that the real issues were side-

lined; and though Scots history teaching is today much improved, it is a relatively recent development.

Academics may point to a surge in books about weightier issues, such as the role of Scots in expanding trade abroad — including the use of slavery — building the British Empire, forging an industrial revolution, and contributing to victory in two world wars; but how far that impinges on national culture today is questionable.

Taken together, such arguments suggest that the sharp edges of Scottish identity have been worn away, eroded by a softening of attitudes towards the English, and an increasingly blurred recollection of national history.

The decline of Britishness

But here is the surprising thing. Far from the idea of Scottishness declining amongst the present population, it appears to be stronger than ever.

In the immediate aftermath of the introduction of a Scottish Parliament, social surveys began to notice a distinct swing away from the concept of “Britishness.” Asked whether they felt more Scottish than British, polls recorded a surge towards the most pronounced response: “Scottish not British,” which recorded its highest ever level at almost 40 per cent. The latest census (2011) puts it even higher, suggesting that no fewer than 62 per cent claimed that they were Scottish and nothing else, while only just over a quarter acknowledged being British.

As Professor John Curtice, Scotland’s polling “guru” points out, this needs to be judged with a little caution – the framing of the census question tends to nudge the Scots towards a “Scottish only” answer, and the English response is almost identical. Nevertheless, when the question was put in a more even-handed way (with multiple response options) the latest British Social Attitudes Survey indicated that 85 per cent of

those asked said that they were Scottish, either alone or in combination with another identity – very similar to the 83 per cent who identified themselves similarly as Scottish on the census. A study of the graph, post 1999, shows the “British not Scottish” line stubbornly immobile at the very bottom. These are deep waters, but what is being recorded here, seems to be a different form of Scottishness – less strident, less anglophobic, more outward-looking and self-aware – but no less fervent for all that. Perhaps the most striking way it has changed can be found on the cultural battlefield.

When the Saltire Society was founded in 1936, the so-called Scottish Renaissance was beginning its gentle decline. Generally recognised throughout Europe as a modernist movement, it had run through the arts, architecture, music, and found its shape in fierce debate, mostly centered round the cantankerous head of the poet Hugh MacDiarmid. Although MacDiarmid was once memorably described by Norman MacCaig as “a torchlight procession of one,” no one could deny the power of his argument.

He and Lewis Grassic Gibbon insisted, amongst other things, that no author could be counted truly Scottish who did not write in the Scots language, even if that needed reinvention (by, of course, MacDiarmid.) They influenced a generation of poets, and set off a debate that became a kind of literary slide-rule of Scottish identity – whichever side of the argument you were on, you measured yourself against it. In the post-war years it began to run dry, though there was a splendid flourish at the 1962 Edinburgh writer’s festival, when MacDiarmid denounced Alexander Trocchi as “cosmopolitan scum,” and Trocchi responded drily that he thought sodomy a more important influence than Lallans. For a time, in the period between the failed 1979 referendum and the creation of a Scottish parliament, it was possible to detect an image of it through the grittily urban

prism of James Kelman, William McIlvanney, Alasdair Gray and Irvine Welsh, all of whom have voiced strong and eloquent views on what it means to be Scottish. Their Scotland is a country that requires to be in opposition, wrestling free of colonial influence, the Scotland of the dispossessed, famously summed up by Mark “Rent-boy” Renton in *Trainspotting*: “It’s SHITE being Scottish! We’re the lowest of the low. The scum of the fucking Earth! The most wretched, miserable, servile, pathetic trash that was ever shat into civilization.” It would be impossible to re-ignite that scale of resentment – however ironically expressed – amongst today’s crop of Scottish writers and artists. Their view of the world is, almost by definition, cosmopolitan; their outlook is the opposite of insular; their connections are international; they do not have a need to wear their nationality on their sleeve; nevertheless, they feel themselves irredeemably Scottish – and are excited about it.

Interviewed last year by *The List*, three young writers, Alan Bissett, Helen Fitzgerald and Allan Wilson, expressed separate views, which all nevertheless emphasised the intensity they felt as Scots. Alan Bissett, who once wrote that “Scottishness was something dusted off and brought out from the cupboard for football matches or Hogmanay,” said the independence issue had reignited his enthusiasm: “History has just given us a gift,” he said. “We are the generation who might see this nation finally become independent. It’s an extraordinary time to be a Scottish writer.”

Helen Fitzgerald agreed: “It’s a grand time – not only for our confidence, but for the way we’re heard... So I’m done with negativity and arguments about what’s literary and what’s Scottish. I refuse to feel anything other than excited.” And Allan Wilson voices much the same thought: “There’s writing about just now that makes me feel excited and, to me, that’s what’s important. I don’t care if the writer is from Scotland or

not. It just so happens that at the moment there is important work from here being written and sometimes published. We'd be stupid not to embrace that." All three spoke of the extraordinary success of "Tartan Noir," the crime writing that seems to have become a Scottish specialty, whose godfather is McIlvanney, and whose prophet on earth is Ian Rankin. It expresses, perhaps, the famous duality of the Scottish character – a fascination with the dark side of the nation.

A sturdy sub-culture

And here is another clue to national identity – the great Scottish tradition that relishes the grim side of life, but with a strong sense of self-mockery thrown in. The poet Alastair Reid caught it in his poem *Scotland*, where the woman in the fish-shop reacts to a glorious summer's day: "Her brow grew bleak, her ancestors raged in their graves as she spoke with their ancient misery: 'We'll pay for it, we'll pay for it, we'll pay for it!'" Billy Connolly built a career on it: "The great thing about Glasgow is that if there is a nuclear attack it'll look exactly the same afterwards;" Ian Rankin follows suit: "It seemed to him a very Edinburgh thing. Welcoming, but not very." Self-mockery, the ability to love and insult your country at the same time is another throwback to MacDiarmid, the man kicked out of the communist party because he was too nationalist, and exiled from the nationalist movement because of his communism. He summed up the divided self of the Scottish writer – the Caledonian Antisyzygy, defined as the idea of polarities fighting each other within one entity.

In crime-writing, Scots writers can create a grim caricature of the mean streets of Scotland's cities, while never once losing sight of their visceral attachment to the country they represent.

It runs through other aspects of Scottish life: the way Scots love

comedians who poke merciless fun at their own country's idiosyncrasies, but resent it when anyone else does it; Scottish football fans, who ridicule the performance of their national team, but defend it to the death; the way a rugby crowd will hurl insults at their opponents in the visitors' stand at Murrayfield, and drink happily with them afterwards; a pride in the performance of great Scottish individuals, but disapproval of anyone who seeks to rise above his own station; and the mixture of derision and affection that most Scots express when they are exposed to those totems of popular culture – tartan, the bagpipes and all aspects of romantic Highland culture.

It is more than 30 years since Tom Nairn's book *The Break-Up of Britain* was published, but his splendid definition of what he called "tartantry" still holds good. It was, he said "an insanely sturdy sub-culture [which] will not wither away, if only because it possesses the force of its own vulgarity – immunity from doubt and higher culture. Whatever form of self-rule Scotland acquires, this is a substantial part of the real inheritance bequeathed to it. Prayers to the country's 'essential socialist' or democratic Geist will not make it turn a hair."

It still has the capacity to stir Scottish blood – whether on the terraces or the streets. When, ten years ago, Professor Devine and the Irish peace worker, Paddy Logue, compiled their edited collection of interviews called *Being Scottish*, they found an immensely diverse range of views – but it was striking how many of those who contributed confessed to the deep emotional attachment they felt to Scottish music, and particularly the pipes. The success of Scottish folk and popular culture – expressed notably each year at the Celtic Connections concerts in Glasgow, and in festivals across the country, show that the Scots' enthusiasm for their own music remains undiminished.

As does their devotion to the areas from which they come. Indeed, if the social attitudes survey had included “More Borders” or “More Highland” than Scottish there might have been a different spike in the graph. It was the late Bill McLaren who famously coined the phrase “a day out of Hawick is a day wasted,” and in rural Scotland particularly that attachment to place continues.

Richard Holloway, whose autobiography *Leaving Alexandria* is about his formative childhood in the West of Scotland, says:

“As far as individuals go there have been multiple identities: Borderer, Gael, Glaswegian, Bourgeois Edinburgh, Doric, Aberdonian, Fifer - though there's a difference between Lochgelly and St Andrews - and so on. And regions make a difference politically: Red Clydeside yes, but it was in the 1950s when more than 50 per cent of the vote was for the Tories.” He believes the expanding economy in the South East of England has unbalanced the whole of the UK, and not just Scotland.

“I think that much of our recent distinctiveness of political outlook has been in reaction to that increasingly strange and overheated area and if it continues the way it's going it could have a profound effect on what happens in 2014.” If that is true, then what happens in the privacy of the voting booth next year, when Scots finally decide which direction they want their nation to take, may well be guided by forces stronger than the merely political.

Most of the argument hitherto has revolved around the things that everybody worries about: the future of the environment, jobs, crime, energy prices, the education of young people, the defense of the nation, the security of the economy, and whether folk will be able to get through life without being saddled by debt.

Burning convictions

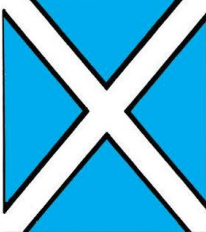
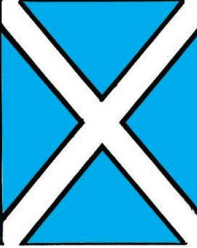
But there is another, and deeper, theme running through this debate which has neither been properly assessed nor explored – perhaps because, by its nature, it is unexplorable. That is the visceral attachment so many Scots have to the notion of being Scottish – an attachment acquired, as one of the characters in *Sunshine on Leith* puts it “somewhere between puberty and the pub.” It is partly a political question: will an independent, left-of-centre Scotland better reflect the political mood of the nation? But it is, too, a matter of personal choice: “Will my Scottish identity feel more at home in an independent nation, or in one that belongs to a Union which has served the nation reasonably well for the past 300 years?”

As we have seen, this identity – so hard to pin down – cannot be sustained by worn-out myths. The idea that the Scottish social or education system is innately superior; that there exists an equality of opportunity unrivalled elsewhere; or even that the Scots have a stronger sense of their own history than anyone else, no longer stands up to scrutiny. And yet the sense of a separate identity remains indelible; the ghosts of those ideas cannot easily be chased away; the memories of past achievements die hard.

As Robert Louis Stevenson put it in *Weir of Hermiston*: “For that is the mark of the Scot of all classes, that he stands in an attitude towards the past unthinkable to Englishmen, and remembers and cherishes the memory of his forebears, good and bad; and there burns alive in him a sense of identity with the dead even to the twentieth generation.” Whether the present generation is the twentieth – or, as would be more appropriate, the twenty-first – there is a lot of burning still going on. It could yet be the factor that determines the future of the nation in September 2014.

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