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A Scottish Yule Holiday

Scott Polar Research Institute  
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

We left Cambridge early on a dark, cheerless Tuesday morning for the 373 mile drive north to the ancient and historic city of Stirling, located almost in the center of Scotland. Before we had travelled two blocks the seemingly ever-present English fog closed in about us and stayed infuriatingly close for exactly 200 miles.

The only countryside we saw was some 10-20 yards of highway in front of us. As we crept along on A-1, the main north-south artery, through the Shires of Huntingdon, Nottingham, West Riding, York and North Riding, we constantly battled "lorries" for right of way, and with the fog in order to see the lorries.

At a junction in North Riding, appropriately called "Scotch Corner", we suddenly turned sharply to the west and began to climb across the Pennines. As we gained altitude we experienced a curious sensation. We kept imagining the sun shining through the enveloping fog, but we couldn't see it. As we continued the sensation became stronger and stronger with a strange light reflection of dispersed sunlight becoming evident. Then the sun appeared slowly and finally we were in the open sunshine. We almost cheered. It had taken us seven hours to travel 200 miles.

As we continued we became entranced with the lovely scenery. The panorama of the undulating Pennines, with the sun low on the horizon, was laid out before us. The area is sparsely populated and more hilly than mountainous. We drove through Penrith and Carlisle past the ancient Roman Wall of Hadrian. The wall, dating from about A.D. 120, is 20 feet high and 8 feet thick, extends right across England following the line of what was considered the greatest tactical strength. We then crossed the border to Gretna Green, the first settlement in Scotland.

Travelling north through Dumfries and Lanarkshire in the Scottish "lowlands" we passed through the so-called "industrial belt of Scotland." The latter is an area about 30 miles wide and runs from west to east including both Glasgow and Edinburgh. Although much of Scottish industry is centered here, the area is also a most charming agricultural region. The farms are neat and well kept - the buildings whitewashed hardly without exception. The scenery is not unlike that found in many areas of northeastern United States.

We finally rolled into Stirling after some 12 hours on the road. Surprisingly, we were not overly tired - open testimony to the worthiness of our car, a Borgward (German) station wagon. We had arranged a flooring of four-inch foam rubber in the back and the two boys (now aged 14 months and 3½ years) travelled in comfort with a built-in play and sleep area.

Our hosts in Stirling were Brian and Mamie Domminney, who had invited us up for the holidays. We had met Brian some eight years earlier on a Swedish ship during a voyage from Gothenburg to London. We had corresponded through the years, and, when Brian and Mamie were married in 1956, they joined us that summer in Paris where I was attending an international conference on the Antarctic. As that had been our only meeting during all these years, we were looking forward to this opportunity to spend some time with them.

Brian is a sales engineer attached to a composite of British firms dealing in heavy machinery, much of it used for the distillation of Scotch whiskey. He travels constantly throughout Scotland, England and Eire. Being interested in local custom and lore, he has managed to pick up an encyclopedic knowledge of Scotland - a fact that stood him in good store as I peppered him with all sorts of questions during our visit.

Although partly of Scottish origin, Brian has lived all his life in England except for a spell of naval duty during the war. Mamie, on the other hand, is a pure Scot from pretty head to toe ( a distance of only 60 inches - but packed with energy.) There is a great deal of good natured bantering between them, but it soon becomes evident that Brian's heart warmly straddles the border - especially as he familiarly recites Burns' verse on Scotland's greatest victory over the English:

Wha will be a traitor knave?  
Wha can fill a coward's grave?  
Wha sae base as be a slave?  
Let him turn and flee.

Wha for Scotland's King and Law  
Freedom's sword will strongly draw,  
Free-man stand, or free-man fa?  
Let him follow me.

By Oppression's woes and pains!  
By your sons in servile chains!  
We will drain our dearest veins,  
But they shall be free!

Lay the proud usurpers low!  
Tyrants fall in every foe!  
Liberty's in every blow!  
Let us do or die!

(From "Bruce before Bannockburn")

When moving to Scotland early in 1958 Brian and Mamie purposely selected Stirling as the location for their home. His home office is situated some 28 miles away, but Brian needs to come in only once a week to bring in his reports.

Stirling certainly has turned out to be a happy choice. Located midway between Glasgow and the Firth of Clyde on the west and Edinburgh and the Firth of Forth on the east Stirling, often described as "the very heart of Scotland," serves as the gateway to the highlands.

From the earliest times the rugged security of Stirling Rock has attracted settlers as a place of refuge and point of vantage. Peat-bogs, succeeding the forest lands, surrounded the rock and accentuated its isolation. The scene changed with the centuries, however, for the mosses were transformed into fertile plains, while upon the impregnable crag was set a structure during the reign of Alexander I in the 12th Century, which became a residence and refuge for kings as well as a prison for recalcitrant subjects.

Of vital strategic importance, the fortress (Stirling Castle) changed hands more often than any other Scottish castle- with one of the most decisive battles of Scottish history being fought near it on the field of Bannockburn in 1314. This castle has, in its time, during the long struggle for independence, been witness to the murder of Douglas in 1452 and the coronation of Mary, Queen of Scots in 1543. The Castle last saw military action in 1746 during the siege of Prince Charles Edward and his Highlanders. It has since ceased to be the seat of royalty, and is occupied today by Army barracks.

In Scotland the term "Yule" has traditionally covered the period from Yule E'en or Christmas Eve to Up-halli-day or Twelfth Night (6th January) and therefore includes both Christmas Day and Hogmanay or New Year's Eve. In pre-Reformation Scotland Christmas Day was mainly a religious celebration, the fun and feasting concentrating on the subsidiary festival, Uphalieday. After the rise of Calvinism in Scotland during the middle of the 16th century, the celebration of both Christmas and Up-halli-day was banned. The story of this period of Scottish history, in defense of their new religious freedoms, is quite typical of the proud strong-minded Scot.

During the Regency of Mary of Lorraine (1542-1561) for her daughter Mary Stewart (who had been sent to France for safety) John Knox returned to Scotland from the many years of exile he had spent in Calvinist Geneva. Knox and his followers were instrumental in provoking a Scottish rebellion against the strongly Catholic Crown and the then corrupt Roman Church. Especially provocative had been the Regency action (under French influence) in deeming protestantism as unpatriotic.

With the military help of Queen Elizabeth I of England, who was anxious for the security of her Protestant realm, victory was won with the signing of the Treaty of Edinburgh in 1560. All ties with Rome were severed (Henry VIII of England had broken with the Pope in 1513), and the Franco-Scottish alliance, in effect since 1295, came to an end.

Following the Union of Crowns in 1603, when James VI of Scotland (Mary Stewart's son) became James I of England, English Episcopacy was gradually imposed upon the Scots. James was determined to control the new Reformation force in order to bring about a uniformity between the kirk in Scotland and the Church of England. He gradually succeeded in imposing bishops, nominated by himself, upon the kirk.

This policy was continued by his son Charles I (1625-1649). The Scots suspected him of re-introducing Roman Catholicism, and, in a fury of national indignation, signed a petition in 1638 called the "National Covenant", the subscribers roundly denouncing the ecclesiastical innovations.

Headed by the landed aristocracy (whom Charles had alienated) the Covenanters took up arms. This action, coinciding with the Parliamentary rebellion in England, forced the King to give way. During the ensuing Civil War the Scots sided with the Parliamentarians and insisted on a religious treaty, called the "Solemn League and Covenant", which was signed in 1643. In return for military aid the English bound themselves to respect Presbyterianism in Scotland, and to allow freely its spread through England and Ireland.

However, Scottish hopes for a Presbyterian Britain were soon frustrated by the rise of Oliver Cromwell and his followers, believers in the rights of separate congregations of worshippers, and to whom Presbyterians were as obnoxious as Episcopacy. Charles II (1649-1685), who was restored in 1660 after the fall of the Cromwellian regime, repudiated the Covenants and restored Episcopacy - causing considerable unrest in Scotland with many Presbyterians being exiled.

Finally, with the flight of James II (1685-1689) and the offer of the united Crown by both the Scots and the English to William of Orange and his wife Mary, the long and intense struggle against both Roman Catholicism and English Episcopacy came to an end. The terms of accession restored the Presbyterian Church in Scotland (virtually as it is today), and the century-old struggle between kirk and Crown finally ceased. With the Act of Union in 1707, both Parliaments were merged - with Scotland retaining her own church, educational system, and legal system. All three are still quite separate from the English, a fact which continues to keep alive the strength of Scottish national feeling.

The change of date of New Year's Day after 1600 to 1st January (it had been 25th March) brought it within the Yule period, with the result that much of the carnival spirit hitherto associated with Twelfth Night was transferred to New Year's Eve or Hogmanay. Thus the Yuletide merrymaking continued to center round "the hinner end o' Yule."

Many customs formerly associated with Yule E'en, such as "redding" (tidying) of the house and the baking of the Yule bread, became transferred to Hogmanay, and as the festival increased in popularity, it attracted to itself many of the rites hitherto associated with the old Celtic Quarter days, notably saining, divination and first-footing.

First-footing, in the loose sense of the term, means visiting in the "wee sma' hours" of New Year's morning. The "first-foot" is, strictly speaking, the first person who crosses the threshold after midnight.

The appearance of the first-foot is held to indicate the character of the luck that will attend the household throughout the year, and it is a matter of concern that he (or she) should be well-favored. A handsome, dark man is the prime favorite, and next to him a comely fair woman.

It is important, too, that they should be persons of good repute. As an empty-handed first-foot signifies poverty and privation, the first-footers invariably carry something. It may be anything from an orange to a bottle of whiskey. In practice, the male head of the family in many Scottish homes will go out the front door just before midnight, gather up a hunk of coal, and, as the chimes ring in the New Year, will cross the threshold into the house.

Traditionally, the first-foot, after greeting the family, will produce his bottle of whiskey and pour out a glassfull. This must be drunk by the head of the house, who, in turn, pours out a glass for each of his guests. Thus a liquid evening is had by one and all.

Just before midnight the fire has been well-banked and the table spread with the traditional Hogmanay fare, over which the wife will have worked for many days. The most important item will be the two customary cakes - a large round cake of shortbread, and Black Bun, a rich mixture of fruits, almonds, and spices moistened in brandy and enclosed in a pastry crust. Not forgotten is an ample supply of port, sherry and always whiskey.

The first-footers must eat as well as drink, and frequently stay on for music and dancing. The first-footer visits only those families to whom he desires goodwill, and the attention is always welcome. The greater the number of first-footers, the more highly honored the household.

Today, after some 300 years of indifference, during which Christmas for "kirk and country" was thought of as an ill-favored relic of popery, the Scots are changing rapidly and have finally caught up with the rest of Christendom as celebrants of Christmas. Typically enough the Scots are bringing an excessive dedicated enthusiasm to their belated observance of the season.

The Christmas trade has grown steadily since 1946 and the number of Christmas trees lit in tenement windows has multiplied ceaselessly. This year, even with some 100,000 unemployed in the Glasgow area alone, it is estimated that the five million Scots are spending some five pounds per head on purely seasonal purchases - this from a nation which also faces up to the traditional burden of its Hogmanay revelry. The New Year, indeed, is no longer the first favorite, although far from totally eliminated from the affections.

Though many offices and factories remained open this Christmas Day - as they have always done - a single action conclusively demonstrates the changing times: some 120,000 Clydeside shipyard and engineering workers went this season on holiday this Christmas Day for the first time ever.

One day, together with the Domminneys, we loaded up the station wagon with all the children and sufficient provisions, and took off for Loch Lomond and the highlands. After a most pleasant drive through very rich farming country we arrived at the Loch, perhaps the most celebrated lake in Europe, and certainly one of the most beautiful.

It was a fine windless, sunny day with the temperature in the 50's, perfect for our lakeside picnic in splendid isolation. Not another human being disturbed us. With snow-capped Ben Lomond looming up across the Loch, and with drainage waterfalls streaming down the hills behind us we spent a most pleasant hour. We then headed north into the highlands for a four hour trip through some of the most fascinating country we have ever seen.

Another day was spent wandering about Edinburgh, reputed to be one of the loveliest cities in Europe. The dominating feature of the city is its castle, which stands upon a ridge of rock that falls a sheer 270 feet into the gardens below. Typical of Scottish history is the story of the Earl of Moray, who with 30 followers scaled the rock on its steepest side in 1313, astonished the English garrison, and captured the Castle in the name of King Robert the Bruce - the now almost legendary hero of Scotland.

It was with much reluctance that we took our departure from the "clan Domminney" on a dismal rainy morning. We were to miss them and the other Scots we had met during our all-to-brief visit. All had been extremely hospitable and friendly. None had shown that lofty mocking reaction about the United States, occasionally found

in England, and everyone had been anxious to learn more about the U.S. Mutual misconceptions were easily laid aside. We learned that not all Scots were dour, penny-pinching, unsmiling, unfriendly haters of the English (although there must be some to fit this almost-archetype picture so frequently painted of the Scot, we met nary a one.) Though the proud Scots have never forgotten their battle-studded past, and have fiercely maintained their personal freedoms, they are very much integrated into Britain and are extremely proud of their great contribution to the growth of Britain - out of all proportion to their numbers.

As we drove away we were reminded of those lines, attributed to Robert of Bruce, from the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320:

"We fight not for glory nor for wealth  
nor honor, but for that freedom which  
no good man surrenders but with his life."

There is nothing further that one can say of Scotland or its people.

Yours sincerely,

  
John Hanessian, Jr.

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