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The Bottle Imp

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Jings, Crivvens an' Help Ma Boab

*O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!*

wrote Robert Burns, on seeing a louse on a lady's bonnet, in church in 1786.

*It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion:
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,
An' ev'n devotion!*

Scots today are in the happy position of, to a very large extent, being able to see ourselves as others see us. There is no shortage of caricatures, ancient and modern: the grasping miser, the aggressive drunk, the bare-legged sawney. Of course we play up to these. Marginalised ethnicities often do. Along with television, the telephone, antibiotics and most of the modern age, we invented copper wire, when two Scotsmen wrestled for ownership of a penny. And it was never very likely that Walt Disney would have countenanced a Jewish uncle for Donald Duck.

Alongside the negative, and largely exterior, stereotypes, however, there is a whole mass of other "Scottish" characteristics, quick and easy shorthand ways to mark one out as Caledonian. Kilts and shortbread, haggis, golf and whisky; Nessie in a tam o'shanter, and other Scotch myths. Walter-Scottishness. We conspire in the maintenance of a gigantic fake identity.

Robert Burns, born 250 years ago this year, has come to occupy a central place in this processed Scottishness. Burns Clubs and Societies dot the globe, charting the progress of the Scottish Diaspora; his statues look out over more cities than any other poet on earth; and all the world that follows the Gregorian Calendar sings his song, each year, in that fine old Scottish export, Hogmanay.

Other Scottish products stake out their claims, both physically and spiritually. Make-believe Scotland spreads a little further each year, digging itself into the fabric of the world, as nation after nation surrenders territory. There are more than seventeen million golfers, clothed in the tartans of Clans that never

were, striding forth on fragments of pseudo-Perthshire or ersatz Fife. Thus the Scottish mentality spreads, too, as world leaders and captains of industry participate in that most Calvinist of games where every single effort counts against you, as you navigate past all hazards to reach, with strict economy, your final, narrow and inevitable destination.

Scotland is not herself immune from the glamour of her own manufactured image. Originally it was a survival mechanism: a tartan lifeboat, launched by Macpherson and piloted by Scott, where Scottish nationality could take refuge as the Scottish nation sank beneath the British waves. But a fake identity, worn long enough, will gain a life, and a truth, of its own: now Lowlanders, whose ancestors reviled the wild and savage Gael, dress themselves as Highlanders for weddings, international football matches and other special occasions, and cry foul for Culloden, where their forefathers would have cheered on Butcher Cumberland, and drunk his health.

Consciously created, maintained in the teeth of North Britishness, preserved in poetry and song, in literature and sporting rivalries, the Scottish national identity is a curious beast. It is a mixture, an amalgam, formed of lumps and lights and broken pieces, spiced and dressed and crammed around inside itself, running around the bens and glens. It frolics in the world's imagination. Of course, it is not without its own internal conflicts. In this issue of *The Bottle Imp*, we open up the creature for a thorough investigation, warm-reekin, rich: Michael Newton's article "My Bard is in the Highlands: Burns 2009 and a National Scottish Literature", highlights the problems of a Gaelic Highland culture being swamped by a larger Scottishness. Fiona Douglas, in "Scots – a language for our time?", examines the role of language, and Leith Davis gives us a new perspective on the Scottish Diaspora. Suzanne Gilbert explores the ballads, while Alan Riach delves into the Scottish comic strip, both feverish hotbeds of hybridity from opposite ends of time.

Scotland is a state of mind: here begins the psychoanalysis!

The Unreliable Narrator



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