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## Belittling Scotland Scottish travellers in France in the nineteenth century

The result of much British travel during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not to broaden the mind through contact with otherness but rather to heighten the traveller's patriotic appreciation of Britain and the British way of life. It appears that contact with the social and political systems of other countries could only convince British travellers of how much better off they were at home. This patriotic conclusion implied almost constant comparison, on the part of the traveller, between his home country and the country he was visiting as well as some discussion on how societies move from the primitive and barbaric to the refined and civilised. To gain maximum advantage in the comparison between home and abroad, barbaric and civilised, nineteenth-century Scots tended to choose Britain as home, the reference country, rather than Scotland. Throughout the nineteenth century, francophobic Scottish travellers were as eager as their English neighbours to establish the superiority of the British way of life over that of France: British inns were cleaner than French auberges; British stagecoaches faster than French diligences; British homes more comfortable than French homes; British women more virtuous than French women; British agriculture more advanced than French agriculture, etc. Given this chauvinistic context, it is somewhat surprising to find that in some contexts Scottish travel writers are willing to shift perspective and reinforce the notion of French backwardness in comparison to England by likening it to similar Scottish backwardness, voluntarily associating their own country with much maligned France and setting England apart in a position of superiority over both countries. On the face of it, this seems a curious manoeuvre given the eagerness of nineteenth-century

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Scotland to be accepted on an equal footing with England, especially in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars which had galvanised British national feeling. This article examines the forms that self-abasement through comparison takes in Scottish travel writing on France in the nineteenth century as well as its apparent motivations.

Several Scottish travellers during this period claim that they are struck by a remarkable similarity in the physical features of French and Scottish peasants. At a time when the whole of Europe was enthusiastic about the so-called sciences of phrenology and physiognomy which claimed that a person's character was reflected in his physical features, identifying and noting this likeness is not innocent; neither is it intended as a compliment. In 1814, Archibald Alison and Patrick Fraser Tytler, authors of *Travels in France during the Years 1814-15*, landed in Calais and, on their first day in France, noted that «the lower people appeared to bear a much stronger resemblance to some of the Highland clans and to the Welch [*sic*], than to any other inhabitant of the British Isles» (Alison and Tytler : Vol. 1, 8). One need only read the sentence that precedes this to see that pointing out this resemblance is not intended to flatter either the French or the Highland populace but rather their English counterparts : «all of the lower ranks of people, besides being much worse looking than the English, were much more coarsely clothed, and they seemed utterly indifferent about the appearance of their dress» (Alison and Tytler : Vol. 1, 7). This unflattering portrait can be contrasted with that drawn by the same authors, just a few pages earlier, of the Kentish peasants they had observed during their journey towards the south coast of England : «crowds of well-dressed peasantry going to and returning from church; the frank and cheerful countenances of the men, the beauty of the women – all presented a most pleasing spectacle» (Alison and Tyler : Vol. 1, 1-2). The message is plain : Scots and French peasants are similar in their miserable appearance, in their poor clothes and in their apathy; English peasants on the other hand are attractive, happy-looking and unthreatening.

What is less clear is why these young Scottish authors have chosen to highlight the similarity in this uncomplimentary analogy, drawing the reader's attention to traits they obviously see as being Scottish weaknesses, especially since they have previously declared themselves unwilling to compare Scotland

and England for fear of the great difference between the two countries they would be obliged to reveal. We can only imagine that by comparing the French peasantry to a people better known to the British reader, Alison and Tytler hope to bring the French, whom they are seeing for the first time, to life, and thus lend veracity to their descriptions. For although the majority of English readers would never have set foot in Scotland and certainly never in the Highlands, many would be familiar with the accounts of Johnson, Pennant, Burt and other eighteenth-century travellers and with the negative image of the Highlander that they had established. In other words, in order to drive home the impression of the miserable appearance of the French peasantry, these young Lowland Scots are willing to sacrifice the already tarnished image of Highland Scotland.

The same year, we find the same approach in John Scott's *A Visit to Paris in 1814*. This expatriate Aberdonian, editor of the *Champion* newspaper, also establishes a parallel between Scotland and France which is unfavourable for both countries, by comparing the physical characteristics of the inhabitants of small towns. Again, the Scots and the French are said to look more like each other than like the English and again the aim and result is to establish the superiority of England over both countries. The physical likeness triggers a whole series of juxtapositions in John Scott's mind :

France is still in a much earlier state [than England] : and hence there is a raciness about the manners in her provinces, as well as a marked distinction between her classes, which causes her peasantry and the inhabitants of her country towns, to bear a much nearer resemblance to those of Scotland, than to those of England. This resemblance in other respects struck me very forcibly, it exists strongly in point of dress, and the dishes which are presented at the inns have a very near relationship to Scotch cookery. In these instances the coincidence must be traced to the early connection between the two countries, of which every reader of history knows. But there is also a Scotch air about the inhabitants and the country of Normandy. The features of the former have much of the Scotch cast; and the short-coated, bare-headed girls, the thin-faced rigid-nerved men, the slovenly cottages, the irregularities of cultivation, the nondescript appearance of the people and animals that collect round the Diligence at the posthouses, all concurred to bring Scotland to my recollection. (J. Scott, 1815 : 33-34)

John Scott then, pushes the comparison further than Alison and Tytler, stating in a far less roundabout way that Scotland

and France are backward in comparison with England and he extends the likeness to include behavioural, culinary, topographic, domestic and agricultural factors. The similarity can, he says, in certain cases be attributed to the intercourse of the Auld Alliance, a subject which he is unwilling to develop, supposedly because anyone who knows anything about history is already well aware of the details. More probably, his reluctance to deal with the subject stems from the fact that in 1814 Britain was emerging from a long period of war against France and military alliances with her, however far in the past, were not the order of the day. Other parallels are, he admits, more difficult to explain and he does not attempt to do this, seemingly content with the conclusion that both countries are less developed than England and are therefore similar.

John Scott's reasons for belittling Scotland are more easily explained than those of Alison and Tytler. He is after all an expatriate Scot who chose to leave Scotland at the age of twenty-one, probably after an argument with his father over his entry into the family upholstery business in Aberdeen. By denigrating Scotland through comparison with France, John Scott is justifying his decision to leave Scotland. For him, Scotland is past history. He left Aberdeen because it couldn't offer him the career opportunities he sought, and found a better life in England which he embraced wholeheartedly as his home. His memories of Scotland are gloomy and negative: images of unattractive, badly-dressed country people, poor food, primitive agricultural methods and hard-faced men are dredged up as one rejected people reminds him of another. Flight from Scotland was also flight from his father – who judging from his portrait was one of those hollow-faced, nervous-looking Scots whose likeness John Scott sees, or imagines he sees, in France. Here one might invoke a transferential relationship between John Scott and France, a relationship through which, having rejected both *pater* and *patria*, he attributes the characteristics of his father's country to France which he also rejects. According to Denis Porter who identifies the possibility of this type of investment in *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing*.

... decisions concerning flight or exile from the «homeland» along with the embracing or rejection of the countries through which one travels, often derive from identifications dependent less on objective factors than on the projection of early prototypes onto

geographic space. The positive and negative transferences people make on countries are frequently just as powerful and just as «irrational» as those they make on individuals. (Porter : 11)

For John Scott, France clearly becomes the scapegoat for pent up, wholly subjective feelings of rejection that were originally directed against his father and Scotland and the catalyst for a whole series of associations with Scotland that he cannot even begin to justify.

John Scott's use of the adjective «nondescript» to describe the people who crowd around the diligence and who remind him so forcefully of his compatriots, is also revealing. These people appear grey and characterless because for him they are ghosts, ghosts from his Scottish past who have no reality in his London present and ghosts from a collective, rural past that progressive nineteenth-century Britain is striving to leave behind. He clearly rejects both personal and collective pasts, the first having no bearing on his career in journalism and his new non-Scottish family, the second being an embarrassing hangover from pre-industrial Britain. This rural side of Scotland has no role to play in modern Britain and must either improve or fade into the background as a nondescript region peopled by nondescript ghosts, a handy scapegoat fit only to be called up as being comparable to rural France : far enough away from the hegemonic centre of London to avoid causing offence to the English reader but familiar enough to provide a meaningful comparison for France.

Alison and Tytler and John Scott are adopting a tactic used by English travellers who to find familiar parallels for France, push anything primitive and revolting as far away from the centre as possible into Highland Scotland, Wales or Ireland. Lowland Scots are able to imitate this attitude because they can dissociate themselves from the Celtic fringe almost as easily as their English neighbours. This tactic can be seen both as the result and an exacerbation of the anglicisation of Scottish thinking, «the conscious rationale behind anglicisation among the peripheral élite» being, in the words of Michael Hechter «to dissociate themselves as much as possible from the mass of the countrymen, who were so strongly deprecated by the English culture» (Hechter, 117).

During their journeys through France, Scottish travellers were also naturally curious about the dwellings and living conditions of the French – their conclusions on houses and

domestic habits are just as damning as their descriptions of the rural population's physical appearance. According to Alison and Tytler, French cottages are «generally very dirty and inhabited by a very motley and promiscuous set of beings; the men women, children, indeed pigs, fowls etc; all huddled together» (Alison and Tytler: Vol.2, 2). John Scott finds Brittany particularly miserable: «Brittany is famous for the dirty habits of its people. Amidst this fine country, the cottages are wretched and filthy beyond description. They have holes in the sides for windows, and holes in the roof for chimneys» (J. Scott, 1821: 29). And once again, these authors, usually so eager to establish the inferiority of France in comparison with Britain as a whole, are nevertheless willing to liken living conditions in rural France to those prevalent in the Scottish Highlands. Alison and Tytler remark that in Picardy, «the peasantry seem to live chiefly in villages, through which the road passes, and the cottages composing which resemble those of Scotland more than of England. They are generally built in rows; many of them are white-washed but they are very dirty, and have generally no gardens attached to them; and a great number of the inhabitants seem oppressed with poverty to a degree unknown in any part of Britain.» (Alison and Tytler: Vol.1, 16) The Englishman, Fred Johnson who knew Scotland well having studied medicine in Edinburgh, is even more damning in his criticism, claiming that «The rude dwellings of the peasantry at once strike the English eye, but will yet bear favourable comparison with most of the huts of our Scotch and Irish Highlands» (Johnson: 137-138).

However Angus Reach, a journalist on the *Morning Chronicle*, originally from Inverness, is willing to admit that these «wretched, rickety, and unwholesome hovels» are not uniquely French or Scottish but can be found in all mountainous regions:

In fact, poor huts, and a mountain country, go almost invariably together. In German Switzerland, the cottages are miserable: and every body knows what an unwindowed stye is a Highland turf-built bothy. (Reach: 139)

Reach doesn't even need to describe a Highland bothy, British readers would be familiar with its sordid reputation, and if not the very word «Highland» would be enough to call up images of squalid, primitive conditions. In the same way, Scottish travellers do not need to take the time to detail the

supposed lazy, listless character of the people who live in these huts and whose congenital apathy is the supposed cause of the sorry state of their houses. In Scotland this state of mind is known as «celtic indolence»; in France it is just «indolence». As he crosses the muddy neglected courtyard of a farmhouse in Normandy, one of the characters in W.F. Campbell's *Life in Normandy* complains: «Talk of French civilisation, ... I will be hanged if this does not beat Celtic indolence. You may see the same sort of carelessness among the lowest orders of the Welsh, Irish and Scottish Highlanders, but not among the better class.» (Campbell: Vol. 1, 122)

The pejorative connotations not only of the term «lower orders» but also of «Highland» are evident in this outburst. The Highlander is an inactive, lethargic ne'er-do-weel who simply doesn't fit into the image that nineteenth-century Britain aims to project, so his part of the world is set apart as being different and somehow detached from mainstream Britain. This contemptuous attitude towards the Celtic fringe can be traced back as far as the second half of the twelfth century when English society began to see itself as having progressed from barbarism to civilisation — paradoxically through contact with the more civilised French. At this point the «Anglo-French world was beginning to despise the Welsh, Scots, and Irish as barbarians and brutish creatures without a history.» (Gillingham: 116) To speak of the Highlander as Campbell and his contemporaries do is to dissociate oneself from his way of life in the same way and to inscribe oneself within someone else's imperialism, joining the victors rather than the vanquished. Peter France in an article on the European attitude to mountain barbarians writes that «For the European, the savage and the barbarian are the Other — like the madman» (France: 297) The nineteenth century was a time of intense progress and modernisation: all previous modes of living were considered obsolete, inconvenient remnants of another less enlightened age. In Scotland, plain culture was pushing mountain culture back further and further and increasingly the Highlander was that Other. The holding up of Scottish Highlanders as suitable likenesses for supposedly retrograde French peasants is symptomatic of generalised nineteenth-century disdain for peripheral unprogressive peoples and hardly surprising really when others were comparing Highlanders to Aborigines and Hottentots: the

very lowest beings they could conceive of in their racist hierarchy of human life.

However some Scots were working to improve the Highlanders' lot by ameliorating communications, diversifying commercial activity, demanding government grants, and initiating reform. W.F. Campbell took all of these measures on Islay, which he owned from 1816 to 1847, finally going bankrupt through throwing money into the bottomless pit that the island eventually became. He came to Normandy not as a privileged tourist but as a financial refugee. But even in Campbell, the evocation of squalid living conditions in Normandy and in the Highlands is associated with an implicit accusation of moral failing and religious inadequacy. He accuses the people of Normandy, whom he has just likened to Celts, of not recognizing the moral import of their sluggishness and of their inability to improve their conditions: «we must wait a while before we see the capital expended here which would be necessary to drain the bottom and build houses fit for English Christians to live in» (Campbell: Vol.1, 119), he says as he negotiates the muddy Norman courtyard. The assumption is that the Norman, and by association the Highlander, lives in these lamentable conditions because he lacks the religious fervour necessary to act and to improve his habitat. The suffering in the miserable houses of both countries is in large part seen as being attributable to the moral failings of their inhabitants.

The begging encountered in France offers another opportunity to compare France and Scotland and to set England apart as being superior. John Scott continues the passage quoted above in this way:

... all concurred to bring Scotland to my recollection. The beggars assisted to do this: many of them were idiots [*sic*]; many paralytics; – every variety of human infirmity and distortion made its appeal to compassion. Most of these in England would have been confined in the parochial receptacles for such sufferers, – but in Scotland as in France, we perpetually meet with them in the roads and streets. I do not mean to say, that mendicity is not to be found in the southern division of the United Kingdom; – it is shamefully common, and the beggars there are of the worst class, being the idle rather than the incapacitated, the profligate young, rather than the exhausted old. Disease in England, however, is seldom seen soliciting relief; it speedily becomes the object of regular provision; whereas in Scotland you are not often

importuned but by bodily or mental derangement. The spectacle is, consequently, more shocking, but the national character suffers less in consequence. (J. Scott, 1815 : 33-34)

In the eyes of John Scott, French and Scottish beggars are similar in that they are always more severely debilitated than English beggars. In England, the old, the ill and the infirm are never seen in the streets because the English Poor Law provides Work Houses for them; in Scotland and in France welfare is less formally organised and public charity apparently less generous<sup>1</sup>. In Scotland, before 1845, poor relief was organised by the Church of Scotland Kirk sessions who often found it difficult to reconcile the Protestant work ethic and the notion of handing out money for no return. Moral causes were often attributed to poverty and welfare kept to a basic, often insufficient minimum. It is not quite clear what conclusion John Scott hopes the reader will draw from his comparison : that it is better not to have a poor law and thus limit begging to the really needy, or that it is preferable to have a system that hides handicap from public view ?

One Scottish traveller in France, William Pultney Alison, was in no doubt. He became the instigator of reform in the Poor Law for Scotland with his pamphlet *Observations on the Management of the Poor in Scotland and its Effect on the Health of the Great Towns*. But Alison was only twenty-four when he came to France and his ideas on poor relief were as yet unformed<sup>2</sup>.

Occasionally, disparaging parallels are drawn between the architecture and hygiene of Scottish and French towns. At Vitré, John Scott observes that «The shops in the market-place are under a sort of piazza, formed by the projecting first stories of the houses, which are supported on wooden pillars; like those I have seen in some of the old towns of Scotland, having a primitive venerable air with them.» (J. Scott, 1821 : 77) The reader is left wondering which adjective is most meaningful – primitive or venerable ? It is clear that the common features of French and Scottish architecture are hangovers from the past and therefore further evidence of the backward state of both countries in comparison to England. John Scott notes the same similarity in Dieppe :

The Scotchman who first touches the continent at Dieppe, will not be so much affected by its aspect, inasmuch as Edinburgh, and other towns of Scotland, have many of these features; but they are considerably more marked in the former place. (J. Scott, 1815 : 24)

1. According to T. Steel, «Whereas in England Poor Relief could mean anything up to seven shillings and sixpence a week, in Scotland grants rarely exceeded one shilling and sixpence» (Steel : 269).

2. See I. Levitt's article on «Welfare, Government and the Working Class». He points out that welfare management before the reform of the Poor Law in 1845 was largely controlled by the Kirk session, ie. «the local trades and middle-classes, respectable workers and prosperous, but not necessarily wealthy, local professionals, tenant farmers and the like.» The 1845 reform removed control from this body and put it in the hands of the large property owner. (Levitt : 110).

Scott is writing just after his arrival in France and hasn't quite got into the full swing of his condemnation of all things French. He is even willing to admit that the town is picturesque. J.B. Murdoch's disapproval is more explicit. His aim is not to highlight the curious architecture of French and Scottish towns but the filthy, cramped conditions found in the towns of both countries :

Of the beauty of Dinan itself, a great deal more has been said than it deserves. It is a close-built and dirty town, and how the English have taken to it, is unaccountable to me. The steep street, of which so much has been written, is, in many respects, very like some of the steep streets of the Old Town of Edinburgh – Leith Wynd, for instance. (Murdoch : 71)

Travellers who point out the similarity between French and Scottish town are certainly not wrong, the French influence on Scottish architecture is well documented. Again however the fact that Scottish travellers choose to highlight the least noble aspects of the shared features is interesting : the narrowness of the streets, the overcrowded houses, the tall tenements overshadowing dark streets and above all the indescribable filth. For English travellers, this last aspect lends itself particularly well to comparisons with Scotland. When he steps off the boat in Dieppe, William Hazlitt is immediately olfactively reminded of Scotland : «In walking the streets, one must take one's nose with one and that sense is apt to be offended in France as well as in Scotland» (Hazlitt : 92). Perhaps the Scottish travellers in France were so well accustomed to the «Flowers of Edinburgh» that they didn't even notice those of Paris and other French towns, or perhaps they were so ashamed of Edinburgh's smells that they drew the line at comparisons in this area. Whatever the case, comparisons to Scotland are rarer in descriptions of towns than in descriptions of the country. A. Tytler limits himself to this comparison :

Besides the want of pavement to protect us from the carriages, and to keep our feet dry, we have to encounter the mass of filth and dirt, which the nastiness of the inhabitants deposits, and which the police suffers to remain. The state of Edinburgh in its worst days, as described by our English neighbours, was never worse than what you meet with in France. The danger of walking in the streets at night is very great and the perfumes of Arabia do not prevail in the morning. (Alison and Tytler : Vol. 2, 200)

The comparison is tempered by being placed in the past, and the cautious phrase «was never worse than this», which, however, still suggests that Scottish urban hygiene was just as poor as French urban hygiene, albeit not worse.

It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that Edinburgh could be favourably compared to French towns, most notably by the publisher and overseer of improvements in the Old Town, William Chambers, who as Lord Provost pushed through the Edinburgh City Improvement Act in 1867 and set in motion a vast programme of demolition and reconstruction. The Mediterranean town of Menton to which he retires the following winter with its «steep and crowded lanes» reminds this convalescent of pre-face-lift Edinburgh. He yearns to do to Menton what he has already done to Edinburgh's Old Town – demolish it:

Wandering through the sinuosities of this ancient town, we are apt to be destructively inclined. In one sense it would be a pity to tear down what long ages have spared. To the archaeologist, the whole cluster of buildings is a curiosity which he would consider it a species of sacrilege to destroy. Sanitary reformers, though not devoid of respect for antiquity, are forced to be less scrupulous. Knowing the evils that had ensued in Edinburgh from overcrowding in tall buildings closely packed together, I thought a clearance here and there would be pardonable. (Chambers : 83)

Most of these comparisons in the fields of physical appearance, domestic habits, housing, begging, architecture and urban hygiene are undoubtedly made in good faith. There were very real similarities between the problems and weaknesses of Scotland and France and very real disparities within Great Britain. Scottish and French peasants did work and live in deplorable conditions, Scottish and French poor relief was inadequate, the weather-beaten faces of country people were probably quite alike, cooking was probably fairly similar, the nasty smells from the open drains were undoubtedly comparable. However the simple existence of these similarities is not sufficient explanation of why these Scottish authors specifically choose to draw attention to them in their otherwise chauvinistic travel books. That these Scots are eager to establish the superiority of Britain over France from all points of view is clear, but why should they choose to distinguish between parts of Scotland and the rest of Great Britain in highlighting similarities that could quite simply have

been glossed over, as they glossed over so many other British failings? Possible motivating factors include the following. 1) The travellers attract attention to the Scottish situation in order to encourage or justify improvement at home. 2) Scottish problems are so well known that not to compare them to their French equivalents would have been remarkable. 3) By using the better known Scottish case for comparison, the travellers seek to make their damning descriptions of France more vivid and credible for the British reader. 4) By criticising the Highlands, the predominantly Lowland authors hope to dissociate themselves from the poorest, most primitive part of their country and thus gain acceptance in anglo-centric Britain. 5) Those who have chosen to leave Scotland and to live in England, highlight Scottish problems in order to justify their removal to the South.

All of these factors play a role in the critical position adopted by certain Scots. The Highland/Lowland dichotomy and the dissociation of the supposedly civilised part of the country from the barbaric north are evident. The problems of the Highlands are much more openly exposed than those of the southern towns: the travellers are much less willing to highlight the dirtiness of Edinburgh streets than the squalor of a Highlander's cottage. Similarly the problems and weaknesses of what the travellers term «the lower orders» in France and Scotland are easily compared while issues relating to the travellers' own social classes are not considered comparable. The Scotland of these disparaging comparisons with France is belittled – cut down in size – in more ways than one. The frontiers of civilised society are pushed back to behind the Highland line (anything north of that line is called Scotland, anything south is Britain or very often England), and the population considered suitable for comparison to France reduced to only the least well-off and therefore furthest removed from the travellers themselves.

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