

# G18: Myths of Origin and Icons of Time

## Justifying the Present by the Past

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But the Highlands of Scotland and for that matter, all things Celtic in Britain had not always been seen through such rose-coloured glasses.

In 1850 Robert Knox MD, a London surgeon with a passion for comparative anatomy, published a rambling diatribe comparing the Saxons and the Celts in Great Britain<sup>1</sup>. He concluded that *The Celtic Race must be forced from this soil. England's safety requires it.*<sup>2</sup> Even as late as 1867, *The Times* ran a leader which stated in no uncertain terms:

*The Welsh language is the curse of Wales. Its prevalence, and the ignorance of English have excluded, and even now exclude, the Welsh people from the*

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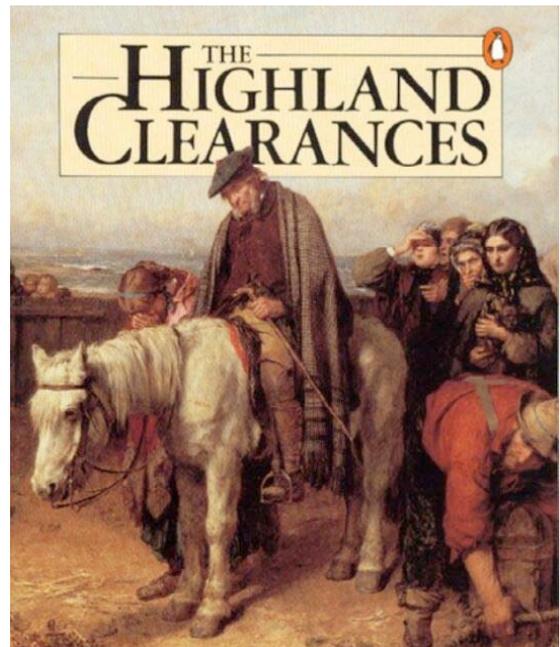
<sup>1</sup>Earlier in his career (1829), Knox was commonly believed to have bought the bodies from serial killers, Burke and Hare. A jingle of the time went: *Doon the close and up the stair/Butt and ben wi Burke and Hare/Burke's the butcher, Hare's the thief/And Knox the boy that buys the beef!*

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Sykes, B: *Blood of the Isles: Exploring the genetic roots of our tribal history*; Bantam Press, 2006, p. 40. I have taken much of the following from this book.

*civilisation of their English neighbours...The sooner all Welsh specialists disappear from the face of the earth, the better.*

To place this in the social and political context of the times, it is important to remember that the previous century had seen the bloody defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie's Jacobite rebellion at Culloden on April 16, 1746 and the brutal suppression of Highland language and culture which followed. The destruction of Highland — that is Goidelic or Gaelic — culture had begun even earlier following what is called *The Fifteen* or first Jacobite rising with the imposition of the Disarming Act and the Clan Act, the establishment of garrisons at Fort William, Fort Augustus and Fort George, and the construction of the so-called Wade roads<sup>3</sup> linking them and other barracks with the south. After 1746, with the passage of the Disarming Act, the wearing of traditional highland dress, including tartan, playing the pipes and other aspects of Highland life were banned in an attempt to destroy the clan system and with it, support for the Catholic and anti-Hanoverian factions in British society of the time.

There was another factor influencing the public disapproval of the Celtic people of Britain. From the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century landowners in Scotland began to force the population off their lands in what is known as "The Highland Clearances". This reached its peak in 1792, known infamously as the *Year of the Sheep*, when poor crofters were evicted from their homesteads and forced onto emigrant ships to take them to Nova Scotia or, among other destinations, the Carolinas in America. Not all crofters were replaced with sheep: in 1807, Elizabeth Gordon, 19th Countess of Sutherland, toured her lands with her husband, later the Duke of Sutherland, and recorded that *he is seized as much as I am with the rage of improvements, and we both turn our attention with the greatest of energy to turnips*<sup>4</sup>.



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<sup>3</sup> Named after Major-General George Wade

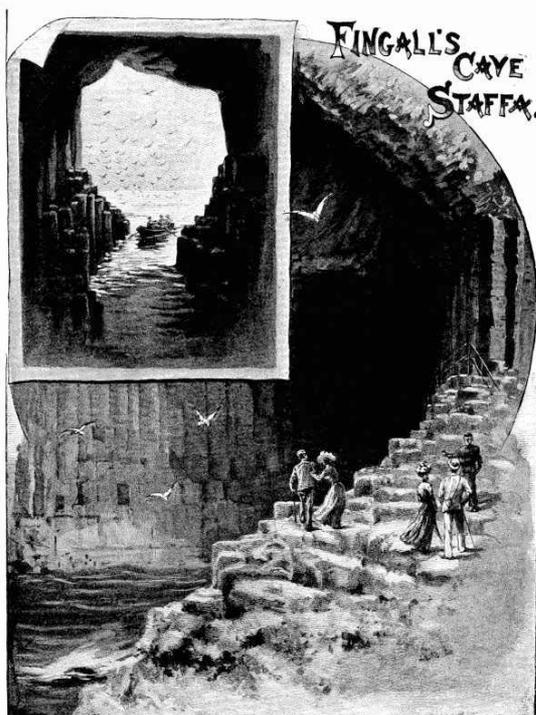
<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highland\\_Clearances](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Highland_Clearances)

On the other hand and running counter to the vilification of Britain's Celts was the rapidly growing pro-Celtic mythology in the context of the Romantic Movement then sweeping Europe.

The pantheistic worship of Nature and the recollection of lost innocence were features of the Romantic Movement which found resonance in the depopulated Highlands, in the Wilderness recreated by Lady Sutherland and her turnip-loving husband.



*Turner's interpretation of Staffa and Fingall's Cave.*



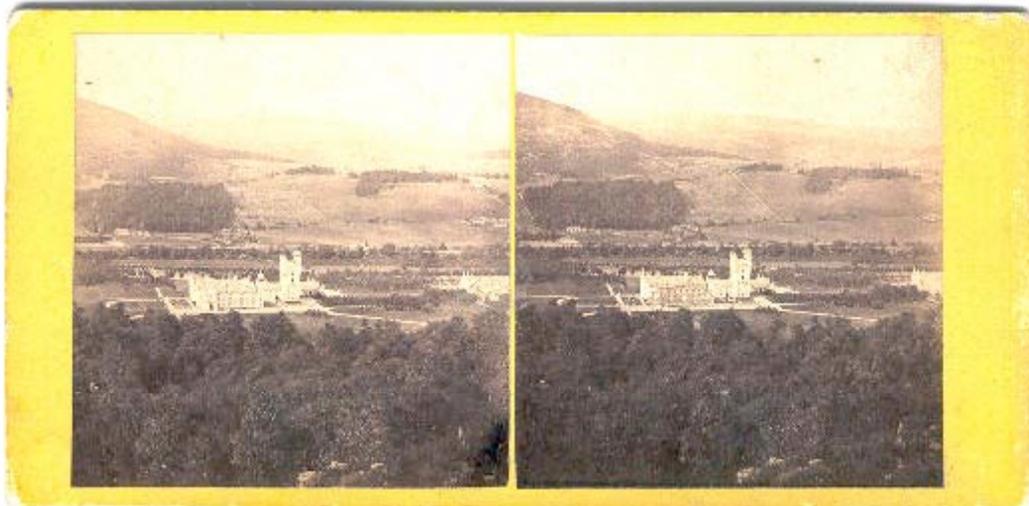
*Illustration to Fingall's Cave in magazine "Chatterbox"*

One of the first flowerings of this sentimental view of a mythic past was the publication in 1760 by James Macpherson of what he claimed were translations of the alleged "lost works" of an ancient Gaelic bard 'Ossian'. Although many, including the formidable Samuel Johnson contended that *The Poems of Ossian* were entirely the work of Macpherson himself, *Ossian* captured the imagination of Europe. Writers including *inter alia* Matthew Arnold, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, William Blake, George Byron, Henry Thoreau and even Sir Walter Scott as well as composers Johannes Brahms, Felix Mendelssohn and Franz Schubert were all inspired by the heroic, if bogus, tales.

Others were inspired in other ways: Goethe translated parts into German, Ingres painted *The Dream of Ossian* for his patron, Napoleon who had taken a copy of the *Poems* on his ill-fated journey to Moscow, while Oscar Wilde and many German and Scandinavian princes were named *Oscar* in commemoration of Macpherson's great Celtic hero.

## The Resurrection of the Tartan

In 1782 the ban on the wearing of tartan was lifted but by then most of the old weavers had died out and with them, the knowledge of the traditional "setts" or patterns of the plaid. Then, in 1822 King George IV visited Edinburgh and commanded Clan Chiefs to attend formal functions dressed in their traditional tartans! Although most did not bother to accept the invitations, tartan became fashionable over-night, gentlemen began researching and collecting what tartans remained and others, failing any such inheritance, invented their own.



*Balmoral Castle from Craig-an-Gowan.<sup>5</sup>*

Thirty or so years on, Queen Victoria built Balmoral Castle and declared that only



those dressed in tartans would be invited to attend her dinners and other functions. It was at this time that Prince Albert designed the Balmoral Tartan and reserved it for himself and, as it is to this day, exclusively for members of the Royal Family.

*The Queen's Piper in Balmoral Tartan. He only wears this while the Royal Family is in Residence.*

Originally, tartans were plaid patterns woven with the natural colours of sheep's wool, including white, various greys and browns and what is commonly called "black". These plaids were the ancient heritage of Celtic speaking tribes throughout Europe before Julius Caesar destroyed their culture<sup>6</sup>. Other

<sup>5</sup> George Washington Wilson (1823 to 1893), appointed by Prince Albert to document the progress of the building of Balmoral. [www.worldofstereoviews.com/wilsonpage1.htm](http://www.worldofstereoviews.com/wilsonpage1.htm)

<sup>6</sup> You still find tartans — and bagpipes — in *inter alia*, Portugal, Galicia and parts of the Balkans.



colours — being mostly vegetable in origin — were naturally muted. From Victorian times on, the tartan revival has seen the invention of hundreds of patterns, most in colours far more vivid than ancient Celts would have enjoyed — or perhaps, even liked. My own tartan, that of Clan Hay<sup>7</sup>, is a gaudy case in point.

*Hay Clan Tartan WR1555*  
*Source: Vestiarium Scoticum*

So, you might ask, what have tartans got to do with genetic genealogy? Not much, actually, in a direct way but the history of tartan is a good illustration of the power of myth to separate or unite people according to the political, religious and economic interests of the day. Furthermore, the history of tartan has a lot to do with the great migrations of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, particularly the “*Celtic diaspora*” from the British Isles and the modern “*Celtic revival*”.

### **The enduring power of myth**

Back when Robert Knox was ranting against the Celts and *The Times* was wishing the Welsh were more like the English, the big dividing line was drawn between those who were descended from Teutonic or, mostly Anglo-Saxon, stock and those others whose ancestors were the indigenous Britons or *Celts*. By and large, this meant that people living in England, particularly in the east and southeast parts of the country, looked down upon and even vilified, those who lived in the west and north of the island. And that, of course was not forgetting those across the Irish Sea who were even more benighted in the eyes of the Anglo-Saxons than the Welsh or Scots.

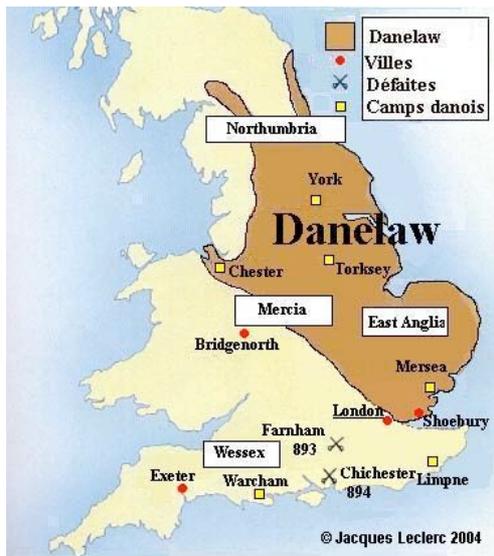
Although there is a dispute which we have already noted as to when and how the Anglo-Saxon-Jute genes came to Britain, it seems fairly clear that at least after the Romans withdrew from Britannica, these Teutonic peoples came in fair numbers and forcibly settled themselves in what became known as the Danelaw and adjoining parts of eastern Britain.

Some genetic genealogists, such as Oppenheimer<sup>8</sup>, argue that the area known as the Saxon Coast had been settled by newcomers from the North Sea/Baltic coast of Friesland and west to Denmark. He also argues that there had been an influx of Haplogroup I1b (to use the older nomenclature) during the flooding of Doggerland

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<sup>7</sup> It dates from a famous book of tartans *Vestiarium Scoticum* compiled in 1842 by the Sobieski Stuart brothers.

<sup>8</sup> Oppenheimer, S: *The Origins of the British: A Genetic Detective Story*, Carroll & Graf, 2006, see Part 3, *Men from the North*.



when perhaps many refugees fled to the west into the British high ground as well as to the east, into what was to become Friesland.

### *The Danelaw*<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the source of this genetic mix, the majority of the population in the "Anglo-Saxon" part of Britain remained British with the basic genetic signature of the Atlantic Modal Haplotype and Haplogroup R1b (again using the old nomenclature for convenience' sake). However, those Britons who remained in their traditional territory clearly adopted the language and much of the culture of the new

power élite and either drove the others into the west of the country (as the traditional history maintained) or simply isolated the non-Germanic speakers to the west and north where the Celtic languages still prevailed.

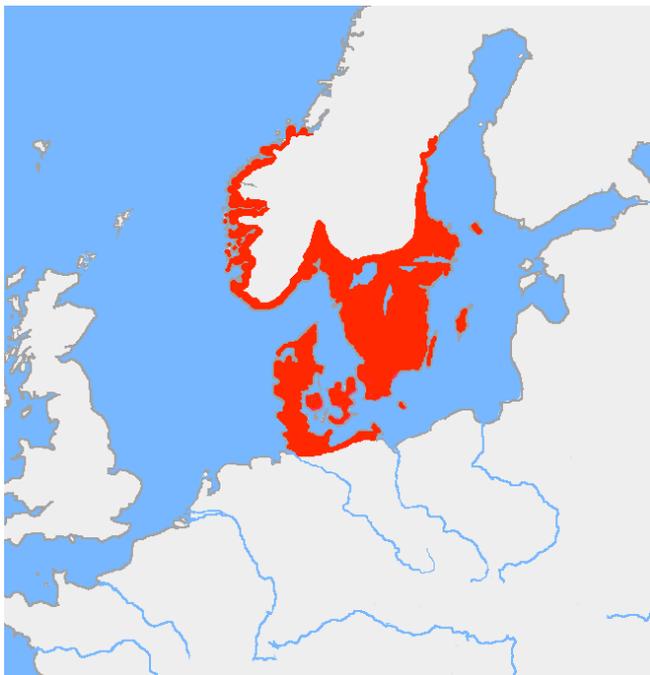
So, by the time we get to Robert Knox and others of his ilk, "Teutonic" had a value that "Celtic" did not. It was the culture of the conqueror despite the fact the Saxon "invasion" was superseded by the Norman Conquest in 1066. Although the Normans certainly were a power élite and greatly changed Britain after their occupation, they did little to alter the genetics of the land. The Normans were originally Vikings with Duke Rollo and much his band coming from much the same territory as the Anglo-Saxons<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, they had been in France for generations by the time they took control of Britain. Inter-marriage during that time meant that many Norman lineages were converted to Atlantic Celtic ones while it is also known that y-Haplogroup R1b (R-269 and subclades) occurs in what were once Viking homelands.

The re-discovery of their Teutonic ancestry by the English takes us on another journey which begins, this time, back with the historians of antiquity. The Germanic or Teutonic tribes had their origins in Southern Scandinavia and Schleswig (the Danish peninsula) in the Nordic Bronze Age around 1000–500 BC. They later expanded south into northern Germany, eventually displacing some of the neighbouring Celtic tribes in their drive for new lands.

This southward migration was probably caused by a rapid deterioration in the Scandinavian climate between the years 850 – 750 BC and yet another cold spell around 650 BC. During this period they learned to extract iron from the ore found in peat bogs, giving them a technological advantage which no doubt aided their

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.tlfq.ulaval.ca/axl/monde/anglais2.OE.htm>

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that the Saxons came, not from Saxony in Germany, but from Schleswig-Holstein which is Danish.



expansion into the southeast and southwest.

*Nordic Bronze Age*

By the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC, Roman authors record that Gaul and parts of Italy and Hispania had been invaded by the Germanic tribes, a threat which later — so he said — justified Julius Caesar's annexation of Gaul. Even though they were sometimes at war with Rome, *Germania* as the Romans collectively labelled these tribes also traded and formed complex alliances

with Rome. Generally speaking, the Romans seem to have thought more highly of the people of Germania than they did of the Gauls, furthered no doubt by the events of 9 AD when Arminius, a German tribesman who had served in the Roman army, returned home and found the Roman Governor, Publius Quinctilius Varus, exploiting his people. He led a revolt and decisively defeated Varus at the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest, forcing Rome to withdraw its frontier back to the Rhine.

*“Who,” asks Seneca, “is braver than the German?”*  
*Sidonius replies, “Death alone subdues them.”*

By the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD, two Roman provinces had been established west of the Rhine, *Germania inferior* and *Germania superior* where important cities such as Aachen, Cologne, Trier, Mainz, and Worms were founded. However, from the 5<sup>th</sup> Century onwards the Germanii eventually occupied more and more of Europe, their expansion motivated by population pressures within their own territories and Asian advances from the East.

By this time the Western Roman Empire had lost most of its military and political strength and so there was little to constrain the tribes we know from our history books as the Goths, Visigoths, Ostrogoths and Vandals who made their way into all corners of Europe and even, on occasion, sacked Rome herself. It was at this time too that the Jutes, Angles and Saxons were invited, according to the xenophobic Gildas, to help Vortigen defeat his enemies and thus precipitated the "ruin of Britain".

The next chapter in the battle between the Anglo-Saxons and the native Britons was written in 1138 AD by Geoffrey of Monmouth. It is in his *The History of the Kings of Britain* that the legendary King Arthur makes his appearance. While

Arthur probably never existed, it is worth noting that the magician, Merlin, was a real person and a king-maker and political figure to be reckoned with in his turbulent times.



However, Geoffrey's *History* never really made it clear that King Arthur was properly dead<sup>11</sup>. This became a worry for the Plantagenet kings of England who, in order to justify their right to rule, had aligned themselves with the



legend of Arthur. Concerned with what might happen if Arthur miraculously re-appeared, King Henry II arranged for the bodies of Arthur and Guinevere to be "discovered" and accorded Christian burial in Glastonbury Abbey. Later, Edward I ("Hammer of the Scots") claimed he was fulfilling the ancient prophecy when he, as the reincarnation of Arthur, invaded Wales even though, on the other side, the Welsh leader, Llywelyn ap Gruffydd boasted he too was Arthur returned!

Henry Tudor, later Henry VII, emphasised his Welsh connections and even campaigned for the throne under the banner of the Red Dragon. He named his eldest son "Arthur" who, as we all know, died of tuberculosis only a few months after marrying Catherine of Aragon. Rather than waste a good political alliance, Catherine was then married off to the younger brother, later Henry VIII.

Because the Pope would not let him divorce Catherine when he wanted to marry Anne Bolyn, Henry VIII turned Protestant and nationalised the church in England. As Bryan Sykes<sup>12</sup> unfolds the tale, Henry's ambassador at the Papal Court, the Duke of Norfolk, who had to argue Henry's case for divorce,

*...used the genealogical claims to the ancient line of kings to assert Henry's supreme jurisdiction in his own realm and to back the claim that he did not need Rome's permission for anything. Norfolk told the bemused court that the History recorded how a British king, Brennius, had once conquered Rome, that the Roman Emperor Constantine himself was also on the list of kings, and that Arthur had been Emperor of Britain, Gaul and Germany.*

<sup>11</sup> Remember, Arthur was wounded and taken to the mysterious Isle of Avalon but what happened after that was not made clear!

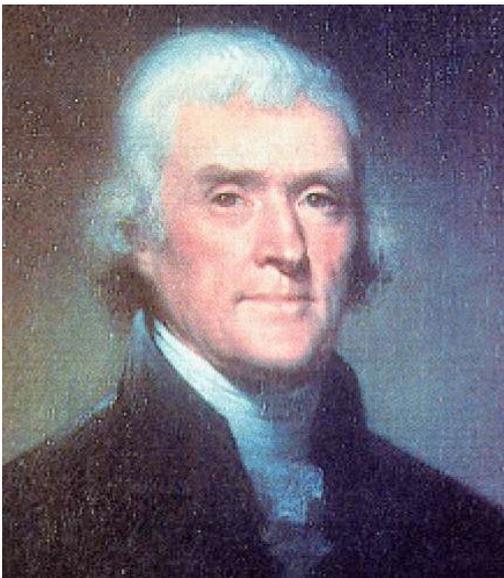
<sup>12</sup> Sykes, *ibid.* p. 33

Although Geoffrey of Monmouth's list of English kings cut no ice with Rome, it continued to inspire people like Edmund Spenser who associated Elizabeth I with Arthur in the *Faerie Queene*, and Shakespeare whose *King Lear* was one of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *dramatis personae*.

However, it was our old friend, the venomous Gildas who ultimately dealt the fatal blow to the cult of Arthur and the myth of a united, powerful Celtic kingdom. The newly established Church of England needed to established its historical credentials to set it apart from the Roman Catholic Church. A remark by Gildas in his 6<sup>th</sup> Century *The Ruin of Britain* that the Britons had been completely eliminated by the Saxons left open the conclusion that the English were the descendants of the victorious Saxons, not the defeated Celts. As a corollary, the spin doctors of the Reformation in Britain replaced the Celtic Arthur with the 9<sup>th</sup> Century Saxon king, Alfred.

Although no great harm seems to have been done by resurrecting Alfred as a Saxon hero, the whole myth-making process now took a nasty turn. In Germany, Martin Luther and other Protestant scholars were also making myths to under-pin their position and some turned to the Roman historian, Tacitus. They took his comment written in *Germania* in 98 AD that:

*For myself I accept the view that the people of Germany have never been tainted by intermarriage with other peoples and stand out as a nation peculiar, pure and unique of its kind.*<sup>13</sup>



The myth grew in strength. James VI of Scotland swapped sides when he became James I of Britain having first claimed descent from Arthur but later opting for the Saxon line. Although there were a few dissenting voices (Daniel Defoe among them), Englishmen everywhere espoused the myth, especially when the slave trade began to net huge profits and the mythical superiority of the Anglo-Saxon neatly justified the slavers' bottom line. By now, this was an international, not just a local myth, believed by those who ruled empires and even by their subject peoples themselves. Even Thomas Jefferson, third

president of the United States, wrote in 1774 that

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<sup>13</sup> Sykes, *ibid* p. 37.

.... it was the Saxon ancestry of the American colonists that gave them the natural right to build for themselves a free and independent state, liberated from British colonial rule.<sup>14</sup>

Of course we have seen the abolition of slavery, the death of empires and the growth of globalisation, civil rights movements, mass media and international sporting contests, all of which — among other factors — have helped toll the knell for myths of racial superiority, even of the notion of race itself. But without doubt, the greatest blow of all to the myth of German — aka Aryan — purity and, in Britain, of Saxon superiority was dealt by the genocidal policies of the Nazi Reich. So repulsed has the world been by the holocaust and other Nazi atrocities, all in the name of racial purity, that today you use the word *Teutonic* — like *nigger* — at your peril.

### The Celtic Revival

While I was researching this course and Googling "Celt" or "Celtic", my computer screen was filled with offers of everything from Celtic brooches and other "Celtic-inspired" jewellery to my own little foot-square piece of Scotland, tartans in every hue, spurious heraldic devices, videos of Highland and Irish dancers, CDs of Celtic harp, fiddle and pipe music and coffee-table books of kilted men tossing cabers.... not to mention tours, calendars and paintings purporting to be of ancient Celtic heroes.... And for those of Scots descent no matter where they are, there are Clan Societies you can join for just about every clan, "noble family" and sept on the companies register; and provided you pronounce "Celtic" in the Latin manner, you can side with one of the most famous football clubs in the world. Or, if you wish, you can join one of thousands of Pipe Bands anywhere from the Black Stump to up country India.



These are all manifestations of the new Celtic Revival and what Sykes calls "The Celtic Brand."

*Scottish Tartans World Register: Australian National<sup>15</sup>* The White lines represent the stars of the Southern Cross. The Green and Gold is for the Australian National colours. The red is from the Union Jack on the flag as is the blue in the flag's background. Betty Johnston, House of Tartan, Canberra 2742

A prime example of the Celtic brand was announced in a press release in February 2007 by the committee of the Bundanoon Highland Gathering when they launched what they called an *Australian national tartan*. This was the brainchild of Mrs Betty Johnston of Canberra and supported by Mr. Kerry Morcombe from the

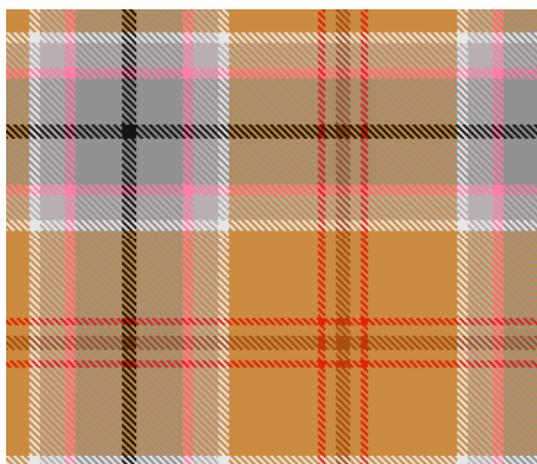
<sup>14</sup> Sykes, *ibid* p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> Tartans reproduced here were located at [http://www.tartans.scotland.net/find\\_tartan.cfm.htm](http://www.tartans.scotland.net/find_tartan.cfm.htm)

Federal Government's Department of Protocol. In the Press Release, Morecombe is quoted as saying:

*“European settlers to Australia looked for symbols to represent the spirit and attitudes of their new land and its colonial settlements. They desired new symbols as a way to bury their dark convict past and replace it with the promise of a bright future”.*

Of course that is 19<sup>th</sup> Century crap: Australians these days vie with each other to unearth convict ancestors. Even so, the new tartan, redolent with colours and stripes to remind us of our British colonial heritage has been registered # 2742 in the Scottish Tartans World Register



*Australian Donkey Tartan. Scottish Tartans World Register # 3165*

Such is the power now of the Celtic brand that even donkeys can have their own tartan. On 4<sup>th</sup> October 2006, on the feast of St Frances who is the patron saint of donkeys, the Australian Donkey Breeders released the Australian Donkey Tartan, they said, *to recognise all breeds of Donkeys and to commemorate their assistance with man throughout history*. We assume it is the breeders, not the donkeys who wear the kilts.

How — and why — have the once maligned Celt become a marketer's delight? Why has racist slur been replaced by commercial hype? In the short term, I personally believe we here, and others like us, are at least partly to blame. Over the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the exponential growth of interest in family history — the search for "roots" as the 1977 land-mark Afro-American documentary<sup>16</sup> termed it — has fuelled the commercialisation of a rather nostalgic, romantic view of history coupled with what seems to be a deep need for a sense of belonging among the descendents of the Insular Celtic diaspora of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

In the long term, however, the explanation is rather more complex. Although, as we have already seen, in ancient times the various Celtic tribes apparently had no sense of being a "nation" in the same way that many tribes in North America identified with a larger polity, the Celts did in fact share many cultural features in common. While their tribal chiefs might have warred with one another, betrayed each other to the Romans or other enemies, and cast greedy eyes on their

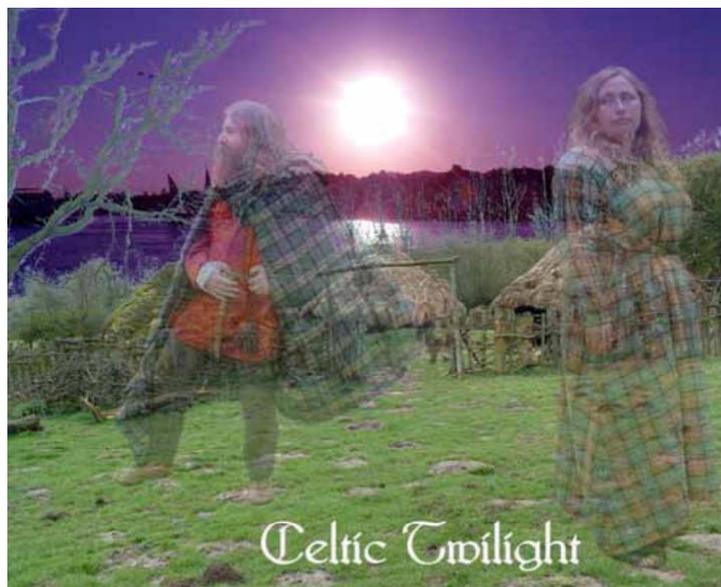
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<sup>16</sup> *Roots*, directed by Marvin J. Chomsky et al., 1977 based on Alex Haley's best-selling novel.

neighbour's territories, their learned or wise men, the Druids, provided an over-reaching and controlling influence. These people also spoke languages so similar that they could fairly readily understand their neighbours and even where there were larger differences — as those between P-Celtic and Q-Celtic — they seem not to have been so insurmountable that trade suffered. Further, although we tend to think of the Atlantic — or Insular — Celts as living in small groups isolated from each other by mountains and sea, these days we are beginning to understand that the sea, the Atlantic between western Iberia (Portugal and Galicia in particular) and the Irish Sea, in times past constituted a sea-road along which trade and cultural exchange flourished for millennia.

Around the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the Welsh-born director of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, Edward Llyud, began to notice similarities among the languages spoken in Wales, Cornwall, Ireland, Scotland and in Brittany. In 1707 he published *Archaeologia Britannica* in which he grouped these languages together and called them "Celtic", an anachronism because the ancient tribes of Europe never called themselves by this name<sup>17</sup>. Llyud it seems, invented a ghost.

So we have several forces coalescing by the time we reach our own age. There was the Romantic Movement which waxed lyrical — and often maudlin — about the wilderness created by the Clearances and the Potato Famine; the sun set on the British Empire and with it went the need for a superior race born to rule; and there was a diaspora of people from the British Isles who, no matter how many generations separate us from the old world, still feel we do not yet fully belong in the new.



*Album by Stormcrow, 2005*<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Llyud who labelled the harder-sounding speech of Cornwall, Wales and Brittany "P-Celtic" because they used the word *ap*, meaning "son of" in their system of naming people, and "Q-Celtic" for the softer form of the language spoken in Ireland and Scotland where the Gaelic "mac" meant the same.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.stormcrow-online.co.uk/albums.htm>