

Scottish “Independence”

The more democratic we get, the further from political reality. In public debates the question of Scottish independence exclusively concerns the management of economies. Would Scotland be better off on its own? What would happen to North Sea oil? Would the Royal Bank of Scotland move south (much good may that do anybody)? and so on. This is much like the questions about the best size and shape of local authorities or where to put the third London airport.

The consequent demands of the Scottish National Party are so modest that they are hardly for independence at all. Some of the ordinary marks of independence are in any case superseded by membership of the EU, which the SNP wishes to continue, such as control of immigration (uncontrolled immigration was the end of the Roman Empire), supremacy of national law, and the refusal to recognise the authority of any external power in internal affairs. But nor does the SNP intend to gain the economic control represented by an independent currency. The proposal is not to enter the Eurozone but to keep the pound sterling. The Queen would remain head of state. (Her Majesty’s own view has, so far as we know, and very strangely, not been made public, nor whether she would accept the post.)

The real question is not heard in “the media”. That is: whether Scotland is a nation different enough from England to make independence a recognition of reality. It is a good question, because after more than two hundred years of parliamentary union there are still noticeable differences. Scots law and practice is not the same as English law. The seventeenth-century (Stuart) efforts to impose episcopacy on the Church of Scotland are long abandoned. The ancient Scottish universities have somewhat different traditions from Oxford or Cambridge.

It is noticeable, however, that the debates are conducted in English, London English, with or without a Scottish accent, not Lallans. The latter, no longer the common speech of Edinburgh or Glasgow, is itself a dialect of English, with a descent from the Northumbrian dialect of Old English more pure than the descent of London English from King Alfred’s. When King James I of England and VI of Scotland made the journey south that unified the kingdom, he had (unlike his successors the German Georges) no language problem and could address the Hampton Court Conference—which led to the same English Bible both sides of the border—in English.

The deeply different Scotland of Gaelic and the clans has all but vanished. When the Scot Boswell toured the Western Isles with the English Johnson they really were visiting people quite different from the English—and from Boswell’s kind of Scot.

Scottish literature (in English) flourished greatly in the early nineteenth century, but the prodigious sales of Sir Walter Scott’s poems and Waverley novels were mostly in England, where the most influential journal was the *Edinburgh Review*. Thomas Carlyle did, however, make his way to London for the sake of his literary career, though he never lost what Froude called the accent of an Annandale peasant. Carlyle referred to the United Kingdom as “England” without at all renouncing his Scottishness.

Readers will have noticed the repetition of the word *real*. Language, national consciousness, national history are much more real than oil (including in Russia, the Ukraine, Belarus. The American description of the recent Russian annexation of the Crimea as unprovoked aggression against a sovereign state simply ignores what is real.) Are the differences of Scotland and England great enough to make separation a recognition of reality?

Where does *love* come in? “Some of peculiar genius, All touched by a common genius”. Take England in Carlyle’s large sense and the question before the electorate of Scotland is whether the common genius is only of Scotland, or of the whole of England.

The debate actually going on is in terms that make the identity of Scotland and England in the age of democracy a depressing fact, but one not much worth bothering about. Who could love either? Is either Scotland or the UK still a nation?