



The Invention of Tradition

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2 - The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland

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By [Hugh Trevor-Roper](#)

Edited by [Eric Hobsbawm](#) and [Terence Ranger](#)



Chapter

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Summary

Today, whenever Scotchmen gather together to celebrate their national identity, they assert it openly by certain distinctive national apparatus. They wear the kilt, woven in a tartan whose colour and pattern indicates their 'clan'; and if they indulge in music, their instrument is the bagpipe. This apparatus, to which they ascribe great antiquity, is in fact

modern. It was developed after, sometimes long after, the Union with England against which it is, in a sense, a protest. Before the Union, it did indeed exist in vestigial form; but that form was regarded by the large majority of Scotchmen as a sign of barbarism: the badge of roguish, idle, predatory, blackmailing Highlanders who were more of a nuisance than a threat to civilized, historic Scotland. And even

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in the Highlands, even in that vestigial form, it was relatively new: it was not the original, or the distinguishing badge of Highland society.

Indeed, the whole concept of a distinct Highland culture and tradition is a retrospective invention. Before the later years of the seventeenth century, the Highlanders of Scotland did not form a distinct people. They were simply the overflow of Ireland. On that broken and inhospitable coast, in that archipelago of islands large and small, the sea unites rather than divides and from the late fifth century, when the Scots of Ulster landed in Argyll, until the mid-eighteenth century, when it was 'opened up' after the Jacobite revolts, the West of Scotland, cut off by mountains from the East, was always linked rather to Ireland than to the Saxon Lowlands. Racially and culturally, it was a colony of Ireland.

Information

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