

The BS Historian

Sceptical Commentary on Pseudohistory and the Paranormal

The Invention of the Invention of Tradition

👤 bshistorian 📁 Medieval History, Myths, World history ⌚ July 26, 2008 July 26, 2008 ⌵ 6 Minutes

This is something a little different – not pseudo or “BS” history, not mythology, and certainly not paranormality. I’m writing this time about debunking – debunking that I, for once, feel goes too far and may be too deep a delve into the politics of nationhood. After 30-something years, historian Hugh Trevor-Roper has (posthumously) released a book entitled “*The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History*”. The section on the kilt is published as an extract by The Times [here](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article3953025.ece) (http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article3953025.ece).



(<https://bshistorian.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/mackays-reg.jpg>) **Highland dress in the 1630s.**
Look like a kilt to you?

Sizable chunks of this book have been in the public domain for some time, however, and the piece on the Times website is little different to a chapter entitled *The Highland Tradition of Scotland* in the 1992 book “The Invention of Tradition”. As I have read only this article, and the extracts and reviews of the “new” book online, I will comment here only on Trevor-Roper’s assault on the kilt. That older book chapter is already referenced (and rightly so) in [various](http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/history/material_culture/rmclean/html/trad.htm) (http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/history/material_culture/rmclean/html/trad.htm) spots online, and in that myth-strewn internet environment is a much-needed reality check, as no doubt will be the full tome. You only have to walk down Edinburgh’s Royal Mile to experience the wider world of tartan tat and outright pseudohistory that’s sold in modern Scotland, beholden as it (and the rest of the UK) is to the tourist industry.

But, I’m afraid when I see Scots referred to as “the Scotch”, or “Scotchmen” out of quotation marks, I assume an agenda. The epithet appears not only in the original chapter, but in the online article trailing the new book. The author must have been aware that is in a cultural sense, at best archaic, and at worst xenophobic.

Let me state that I have no problem with Trevor-Roper's facts. They can indeed be used to support an argument of cultural invention. But I would argue that they just as easily back a more moderate interpretation. In light of the below, I hope, "**re-invention**" would seem a more accurate word to use.

The accusation levelled at the early Scots of obliterating their cultural antecedents and rivals and bigging up their own achievement, could be made of virtually any people, especially the English. Historical accuracy was not highly prized at that time, and the history of a nation was usually a traditional (i.e. invented) one, with snippets of reality amongst grand poetry, art, chronicles, and so on. Look at King Arthur. Robin Hood. It didn't matter what was true, what had evidence. Now, of course, it does, and it's great to explore the myth and reality of history. But to imply that this is a Scottish phenomenon seems unfair, as does the direct comparison with England – by far the bigger country in terms of population, military strength, and political power. History is written by the winners, remember?

Perhaps it's out of context without reference to modern claims, but much of the argument appears as a strawman for Trevor-Roper to set up and then knock down. Why does he even search for medieval origins of the highland dress as it appears in its current form? It would be remarkable if a piece of clothing had remained unchanged in design over a millennium. What English, Welsh, Irish or any other nationally identifying garments have histories anywhere near that long? None. Because fashions change – sometimes gradually, sometimes in bounds. I would suggest the latter is what occurred with the kilt.

Trevor-Roper describes two distinct pieces of clothing to make his point that the kilt was "invented by an Englishman". He states that there was no evolution, just invention, implying that the kilt lacks historical basis, continuity, and even validity as a national dress for highlanders, let alone Scotsmen at large.

For me, this argument falls apart as soon as he points out that the "quelt" described by an English officer as "the common habit of the ordinary highlands" was actually one way of wearing what was a much older garment – the belted plaid. The plaid, if not the "quelt" mode of wear, he places well back into the 16th century on hard evidence. Available evidence (<http://s93583130.onlinehome.us/kiltedlife/history2.html>) suggests a belted form of plaid by around 1600.

Then, in his article and presumably his new book, he describes the modern "kilt" as having been invented from scratch in the early 18th century. Gleefully invoking the hugely apt "True Scotsman (<http://www.logicalfallacies.info/notruescotsman.html>)" fallacy, he informs us that it was an *Englishman* that did so! As if that makes the garment itself any less culturally Scottish. And yet, in his own quote from the inventor, he shows that this was done *to the existing belted plaid*, in order to "abridge the dress and make it handy and convenient for his workmen". If this was a wholesale invention, there wouldn't be a dress to abridge!

Another argument used is that the plaid was the dress of the "common soldier, or peasant". So what, you might well ask? This assumes that the only valid tradition is that of the upper classes, which is totally counter to the (post)modern historical approach, and ignores the majority of the population. The phenomenon of the rehabilitation of the highland dress and its adoption by the upper classes is a fascinating addition to Scottish history, not an indictment of it.

The writer is quite right that lowland Scots and other Britons were prejudiced against the strange highlanders, attributing crime and laziness to them due to their very different cultural perspective and economic set-up. This shows that neither the plaid nor the true kilt were, prior to the 19th century, garments worn outside the highlands, but again, it does not detract from the fact that highlanders themselves had been wearing a version of this dress for at least 200 years by the time it was banned by the British government. Far from being "ironical" that the kilt as we

know it came about due to a late banning of its predecessor, this is actually more evidence that the “kilt” of 1745 was seen then as being just a permutation of the belted plaid, and most certainly part of the “highland dress”. Trevor-Roper seems to go to extraordinary lengths to separate the two things.

The thrust of Trevor-Roper’s argument seems to me to be a sort of reverse argument from antiquity (http://www.jeqq.com/The_Argument_from_Antiquity.html), wherein a piece of culture is only worthy if it’s subjectively ancient. Now, to be fair, this is a reaction to frequent usage of this fallacy – that aspects of Scottish heritage are ancient, and are therefore valid. But two wrongs don’t make a right. The fair thing to do would be to debunk, and then to reassure the reader that there’s really no need to make exaggerated claims for one’s nation. Instead the effect of reading Trevor-Roper is that of deflation – the older highland culture was an inferior copy of Irish culture, and the latter version was wholesale and worthless invention. And again I suggest the political agenda behind this shows itself. This is rallying call to unionists who feel that the only worthwhile Scottish culture is that developed under Union and Empire, the flirtation with “highland” culture just a silly diversion.

Perhaps I’ve missed the point. In case I haven’t though, I’d stress that It’s important to be realistic in setting out to debunk the myths of history. Education as to the true origins of a thing is fantastic, but we must recognise that the cat, as it were, is out of the bag. Academics increasingly do not own culture, high or low. Kilts in whatever form are a long-established part of modern and future Scottish identity, for better or worse – they’re at least 200 years old even in their present form. Older than just about any “national dress” you care to think of. And if people think they’re more ancient, that’s at least in part because they don’t see or care for the difference between one strip of tartan fabric worn like a skirt, and another. If they think they’re really old, they might have read Scott, but more likely, they’ve probably just seen Braveheart once too often. That can be remedied without ridiculing and belittling their culture, and their ignorance certainly doesn’t make their clothing any less of an identifier for being Scottish. Is a London executive who doesn’t know the history of the three-piece suit any less a businessman?

Tagged:

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9 thoughts on “The Invention of the Invention of Tradition”

Ross says:

August 21, 2009 at 12:39 pm

I agree with your conclusions, but I should point out that the German woodcut in the article refers to ‘Irrlander’ – those are Renaissance Irishmen, not Scots.

↳ Reply

bshistorian says:

August 21, 2009 at 6:29 pm

Not so – those are Scots soldiers in the army of Gustavus Adolphus. Even in English, ‘Irish’/‘Irish’ was interchangeable with ‘highland scots’. For example the highland basket-hilt being referred to as ‘ane Irish hilt’. This is a result of their (then) recent common cultural history, but as time passed became more like the common mistake of calling Britain ‘England’. Or in a closer parallel, it’s like later artwork that depicts British Scottish highland soldiers and calls them ‘English’. Doesn’t change what’s depicted.

See – <http://tinyurl.com/m7enls>

And this comment – <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/albanach/message/4180>

↳ Reply

Dave Hardy says:

December 16, 2009 at 2:35 pm

A spot on analysis of Trevor-Roper’s attempt to de-Scot the kilt. It sums up much of my own reaction to T-R. I am astonished that an essay so burdened with un-scholarly snark (the Highlands are a crude copy of Ireland?), internal inconsistency (a “quelt” is authentic, a kilt isn’t), and basic wrong-headedness (T-R glosses the impact of the Dress Act, disregards the fact that the philabeg was made in Scotland for Scots, etc) got published, let alone managed to survive these many years.

↳ Reply

english13 says:

February 1, 2012 at 7:06 am

Thanks for this post – following which perhaps I should amend my own thoughts on this subject, which have been derived from reading Hobsbawm’s ‘Invention of Tradition’ – specifically the chapter on Scotland and discussion upon the kilt. I haven’t read Trevor-Roper’s book, but reading your article it appears that T-R took much from Hobsbawm. For me, that remains the definitive examination on the subject and yet you mention it not? Maybe Hobsawm is the person you should be critique-ing rather than Trevor-Roper?

↳ Reply

bshistorian says:

February 5, 2012 at 3:31 pm

I was writing in reaction to the ideas presented – in that sense the originator of the concept is almost irrelevant. But in terms of scholarly rigour, you’re right – a definite oversight.

↳ Reply

David says:

November 30, 2013 at 2:58 am

FWIW, Trevor-Roper’s essay appears in Hobsbawm’s collection, so untangling the ideas of one from the other might be hard, even if you wanted to.

http://faculty.washington.edu/ellingsn/Hobsbawm_Inventing_Traditions.pdf

However, to accuse either of considering Scottish culture “an inferior copy of Irish culture ... a wholesale and worthless invention” is distorting both the position of both historians.

For me, the realization that Irish-Scottish-English historical relations are much more complicated than my grandparents' simplistic fairy tales makes them much more intriguing.

I believe the lesson to take from them is that nationalist claims of uniqueness generally melt into a much more complicated and nuanced set of interacting relationships — a lesson worth remembering when looking at the effects on international relations of claims of a 'war of civilisations' between The West and The Islamic World.

It's worth noting, for example, that Islamist crazies indulge in the same sort of invention of tradition that Trevor-Roper and Hobsbawm describe in the much more benign context of the 19th Century British Isles.

↪ Reply

bshistorian says:

December 8, 2013 at 6:46 pm

Fair comment David; just my impression from reading what I had available (some five years ago), admittedly in isolation. If I came away feeling that Roper was seeking to undermine Scots history, you can be pretty sure that a lot of Scots would feel likewise! As I said originally – 'perhaps I'm wrong'.

↪ Reply

Dave Hardy says:

May 12, 2014 at 2:57 pm

Well, when T-R says things like "Their [Highlanders'] literature, such as it was, was a crude echo of Irish literature." He quotes an Irishman as saying Scots bards were Irish garbage dumped in Scotland, and winds up with, "It [Highland Scotland] had—could have—no independent tradition." Given his own words, and those he chose to quote, I get the impression that T-R did regard the Highlands as a cultural wasteland. The same could be said of Jacksonville, Florida (I know, I lived there), but that doesn't mean it is not a real place.

I'm all for complexity and nuance, but that is just bashing.

1adabums says:

October 12, 2015 at 5:36 pm

"....we must recognise that the cat, as it were, is out of the bag....Kilts in whatever form are a long-established part of modern and future Scottish identity, for better or worse – they're at least 200 years old even in their present form...." This is a great point. The relationship between myth and historic reality is truly complex. At some point, people tend to adopt an origin myths that speaks to them and deliberately set about living up to it. At that point it doesn't really matter whether or not it's a myth, because that story begins to drive reality in its own direction. The American myth of the cowboy is an excellent example of this. The heyday of the great cattle drives that gave rise to the myth didn't begin until after the US Civil War in 1865, but within a couple of decades westerners were consciously trying to live up to the legends contained in newspaper accounts and dime novels flooding the rest of the nation and Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show was touring as far as Europe.

↪ Reply

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