Scotching the myth

The story of how a Highland tradition became the badge of Scotland’s national identity is full of paradox and misconceptions.

Mary Miers considers the warp and weft of tartan’s complex history

From Princes Street to Piccadilly, the sight of a kilted figure conjures a plethora of images: a Highland chief, a Jacobite, a Scottish soldier; Ossian on a mist-wreathed mountain, a character from a Walter Scott novel; a Scotch Barrauld’s tartan, his ghillie; a toff dacing an Eightsome in an antlered hall, a pipe-ARCHMA plays a Piper at a grave—side; Lochaber no more. Donald down from the Isle of Skye’, lasses performing a competitive Highland Fling; Harry Lauder, Andy Stewart, Malcolm McLaren in punk-rock gear; a guest at a Rotary Club or Burns Night supper, a bridegroom in hired tartan; Shand & His Band, the Bay City Rollers, the White Heather Club; Jimmy Flinn; Harry Lauder, Andy Stewart, performing a competitive Highland Fling; Harry Lauder, Andy Stewart, Malcom McLaren in punk-rock gear; a guest at a Rotary Club or Burns Night supper, a bridegroom in hired regalia, a Tartan Army football fan, young, cool, contemporary urban Scots bristling with machismo. No other country has a surfeit of tartan images more democratic and universal. The popular view is that it’s all a Victorian charade, that tartan dress—an Englishman invented the kilt. Over the years, this argument has been perpetuated by leading historians, notably in recent decades Eric Hoehnsm and Hugh Trevor-Roper, whose persuasive essays claim that Scotland’s culture has always been sustained by forgery. Floundering from earlier writers in recycling 18th-century notions of Gaels as primitive philistines, Trevor-Roper’s provocative The Invention of Scotland stokes up old rivalries while ignoring a wealth of evidence to the contrary. The counterargument has not, beyond Scottish academia, been widely enough aired. One authority who has written extensively on this subject is Hugh Cheape, a Gaelic-speaking historian with an intimate knowledge of the tradition. (Photo: Courtesy of the National Museums of Scotland Collection)

The Highland Habit provides an excellent overview, is Hugh Cheape, a Gaelic-speaking historian with an intimate knowledge of the tradition. (Photo: Courtesy of the National Museums of Scotland Collection)
The sophisticated Enlightenment figure of Sir Alexander MacDonald of Sleat, bedecked in tartan in a formal statement of his dynastic prestige as Chief of Clan Sleat, looms over a view of his hereditary seat, Dunstan Castle on Skye. In 1749, the Edinburgh lawyer and banker John Campbell of Ardmaddie had himself painted by William Mosman in a belted plaid against the vantage of his ancestral lands—a cosmopolitan businessman portrayed as a traditional Highland laird. But the ultimate paradigm, in the history of tartan’s assimilation into the national iconography was its appropriation by the British army. The Black Watch was the first kilted regiment, formed in 1799 to police the Highlands. From 1757 to 1760, Pitt the Elder formed a series of Highland regiments whose fierce reputation on the battlefields of Europe transformed the image of the Gael into a national warrior willing to fight and die for the Empire. In an age of Whig Enlightenment, Highland soldiers were now Romantic heroes—newly designed and worn with all the regalia of tassled sporrans, dirks and shoulder pouches—universally recognised as a mark of social prestige. Tartan was now standardised as a badge of identity. Highland dress had become a formal costume associated with ceremony and ritual, sparking quarrels as to who should wear what and where. Simultaneously, it symbolised the Romantic image of the Highlands as created by Scott. The King’s jaunt and the tartan pageant staged at Taymouth in honour of Queen Victoria were key moments in tartan’s romantic endowment by Marquess of Breadalbane’s clanmen ‘plaided and plumed in their tartan array’. Victoria and Albert adopted all the trappings of Tartanry. Albert put on a Royal Stuart kilt with a deep green plaid, his pouch & dirk & his Garter over his stocking, looking so handsome, as my dear Treasure ever does. I was the scarlet occasionally for particular designs, based on dubious evidence. Tartan was now standardised as a badge of identity. Highland dress had become a formal costume associated with ceremony and ritual, sparking quarrels as to who should wear what and where. Simultaneously, it symbolised the Romantic image of the Highlands as created by Scott. The King’s jaunt and the tartan pageant staged at Taymouth in honour of Queen Victoria were key moments in tartan’s romantic endowment by Marquess of Breadalbane’s clanmen ‘plaided and plumed in their tartan array’. Victoria and Albert adopted all the trappings of Tartanry. Albert put on a Royal Stuart kilt with a deep green plaid, his pouch & dirk & his Garter over his stock. Tartan has always been associated with fashion, and since the 18th century, an element of the masquerade. Over the past century, its popularity has broadened under a range of new influences, from music-hall comedy to punk rock. But its chief significance is still its role as a badge of Scottish identity, a comfort for displaced Scots, a statement of clan solidarity. In the present climate, has the kilt, once a symbol of rebellion, assumed a new political edge? Duncan Lowe, managing director of bespoke tailor Stewart Christie & Co, thinks not. His firm has been making kilts and trews for more than 200 years and is as busy as ever, but ‘they’re being bought by Scotsmen and people with Scottish connections for the same reasons as before— as a statement of identity without any overt political message.’