

**COMMENT ON 'THE CONFEDERATE
MEMORIAL TARTAN' (*SCOTTISH AFFAIRS*,
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Edward Sebesta's article 'The Confederate Memorial Tartan' (**Scottish Affairs**, no. 31, pp. 55-84) requires a response. As a graduate of the University of Edinburgh with an M.Sc. in Cultural Resource Management (focused on Scottish heritage and archaeology), and as an anthropologist who has studied Scottish-Americans in the American South for nine years, I found Sebesta's argument reductionistic and delusory. As one of the authors he misquotes to his own befuddled ends, I write to redress a few of his many gross inaccuracies.

A portion of Sebesta's essay critiques an article of mine in which I examine the celebration of Scottish heritage in the American South. My thesis was that southerners take to Scottish heritage so well because its present shape draws not on cultural continuities, but on parallel mythologies which underlie the construction of both Scottish and southern identities. It is to this section of his essay that I particularly address my comments.

Though he entitles his article 'The Confederate Memorial Tartan' he did not successfully identify the tartan's creators. This might stem from his heavy reliance on web pages in locating his 'evidence'. Perhaps claiming the tartan as the creation of a 'League of the South Chapter Chairman John Cripp' better fits his thesis; however Georgian Mike Bowen and Pennsylvanian Dr. Philip Smith respectively conceived and designed the tartan which an Alabama vendor of Scottish goods first marketed in 1997. The tartan is certainly worthy of an article. As I note in my own work, the creation of the tartan is

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an amazing blend of simplified visions of 'Highlandness' and 'southernness' through which a southern identity becomes an unproblematic outgrowth of Scottish origins to heritage enthusiasts rather than an identity chained to slavery and Jim Crow.

Ripping phrases out of context and splicing them together to produce a meaning all his own, Sebesta claims I 'mention' that participants at Highland Games (which I do not call 'Celtic events' as he does) 'burn crosses'. A newly-invented 'tradition' at several Highland Games in America involves members of clan societies gathering on the evening before multi-day games events and forming a St. Andrew's Cross on the games field. Participants toss a torch onto a central bonfire as they announce their clan's presence at the gathering and the places in Scotland from which their ancestors emigrated. They certainly do not 'burn crosses.'

Sebesta never claims to have attended even one of these events. His only 'support' for his theories (so popular with the Scottish media just now) that Scottish events are hotbeds of Klu Klux Klan and white supremacist activity is what he cites from the web pages and publications of said hate groups. Sebesta cites the Council of Conservative Citizens as reporting its members having handed out fliers at an event in Alexandria, Virginia and that these fliers were well received. Would such an organization report otherwise on their own activities? Sebesta is willing to give hate groups far more credit for honesty and success than I.

Another supposed criticism of my work is Sebesta's claim that 'the bibliography of Ray's article includes the neo-Confederate Celtic writings of Grady McWhiney' (p.76). Had Sebesta bothered to actually read the article, rather than just the bibliography, he would note that I cite this work to distance myself from it. While I have found the wacky claims of historian Grady McWhiney (that southerners have 'a character' inherited from the ancient Celts) to be popular with some Scottish-Americans, it did not follow that they had racist reasons for accepting his theory. I find it quite simplistic, if not inflammatory, to assume that thousands of people involved in the Scottish heritage movement (over 30,000 annually attend the Grandfather Mountain Highland Games in North Carolina) agree with the most tangential and bizarre ideas Sebesta claims knowledge of through second hand accounts.

Seeking conspiracy everywhere, Sebesta also claims the reason my article found publication was because one of the co-editors of the journal **Southern Cultures** is someone Sebesta casts as a closet-racist. Perhaps this

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'independent scholar' in unfamiliar with the process of peer review. Members from an editorial board of over 40 American and international scholars - chairs of departments of English, Folklore, History and the Social Sciences - review every article for **Southern Cultures** before the year-long process of editing and publication even begins.

Sebesta believes anyone writing about the Scottish heritage movement misleads their readers if they do not mention what Sebesta calls 'the neo-Confederate movement'. In seven years of ethnographic fieldwork prior to my 1998 publication I had not encountered it, but I was certainly curious as to whether I really could have missed such an unsavory element envisioned by Sebesta as systemic within the heritage movement! In view of the way southerners often combine the Jacobite and southern 'Lost Cause' mythologies, I was especially interested to see if this linkage in heritage lore played out in political convictions. I wondered if southern Scottish-Americans joined the League of the South (which advocates another southern secession) as Sebesta claims they do. Since 1998, I have asked about the Southern League at every Highland Games I have attended (and through the years I have attended 58 of them both in America and in Scotland). I have asked about the Southern League at every heritage event, at every church homecoming, and at all historical and genealogical society meetings with a Scottish focus that I have attended. In the past two years, I have encountered a grand total of 7 men who claimed membership in the Southern League. Twelve others knew what it was when I asked, but were alternately amused or disgusted by the idea. The Southern Poverty Law Center has recently labelled the League of the South a hate group with a membership of about 9,000. Even if a large percentage of the League claimed an interest in things Scottish, they would hardly be representative of the hundreds of thousands of participants involved in Scottish heritage events in the American South.

Far from 'sanitizing' accounts of Scottish-American activities, had I encountered the white supremacists Sebesta imagines, but does not claim to have encountered either, I would certainly have said so in my work. An anthropologist's role is to objectively study, describe, and interpret cultures to others. In investigating social organization, and the transmission and selection of tradition, our goal is neither to condemn nor defend cultural beliefs or practices. However we do have a duty to correct such crass misrepresentations of the cultures we study.

Viewing the movement as merely a vehicle for the celebration of 'whiteness', Sebesta claims 'Ms Ray tries to redeem it all by showing Creek Chief Chinnubbie who is a Native American wearing a Native American Headdress

combined with a Tartan [sic] because he is both Scottish and Native American' (p.76). Chinnubie McIntosh is one of many men who attend Scottish events in a combination of Native American and Highland attire. Other participants I have met and corresponded with over the years claim Shawnee, Seminole, or Cherokee descent. Many families who travel the Highland Games circuit so that their children might participate in Highland Dancing competitions also attend Native American powwows.

The Scottish heritage movement across America, and within the South, is far more diverse in both expression and participants than Sebesta and many British journalists would guess. Mexican-Scottish-Americans occasionally attend events in kilts and sombreros, playfully referring to themselves as 'Taco-tartans.' Sebesta concludes his article by suggesting (without any supporting evidence) that 'The image of Scottish cultural themes being that of white supremacy surely is developing in the consciousness of persons of African ancestry' (p.82), however many African-Americans also have Scottish ancestry. African-Americans attend events, compete in Scottish athletics, play in bagpipe bands and, though more rarely, sit behind clan society information tents. The 1990s growth of 'Afro-Celt' music is quite popular among the younger participants at Scottish events.

Culture and heritage movements are rarely as 'black and white' as Sebesta seems eager to portray them. Of the seven men whom I met who discussed their membership in the League of the South, two of those displaying Confederate flags also spoke of their participation in and support of, the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Clearly symbols have many levels of meaning to many different people, but one cannot deconstruct their employment from afar. I mention this not to 'redeem it all' as Sebesta suggests, but to reveal the great complexity of culture which he fails to recognize.

Sebesta wrongly condemns and dismisses Scottish heritage celebration as racial rather than cultural, and fails to acknowledge a centuries-old and persistent awareness of Scottish identity in southern communities. In North Carolina's Cape Fear Valley, where more Scots settled during the American Colonial period than in any other state, Scottish-Americans attend Presbyterian churches their ancestors founded in the eighteenth-century, farm land purchased by the same ancestors, and may trace their genealogies back to Colonial times with few exceptions to Scottish and Scots-Irish names in their family trees. Even elsewhere in the national Scottish-American community where the pattern of ethnic marriages was not so consistent or long-lived, community members stress a continuing sense of Scottish

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ethnicity by focusing on the Scottish branches of their genealogies. Whether the primacy granted to these ancestors and their customs has itself been a traditional family emphasis, or they have recently rediscovered 'roots,' Scottish-Americans claim a Scottish and/or Celtic identity partly to distinguish themselves from the stereotype of a 'racist, southern WASP'.

In accusing those who romanticize the Old South, Sebesta forgets that they do romanticize the Old South. What they choose to remember, and celebrate, has little to do with the reality of the plantation era. They might be accused of reinventing traditions and history, but they generally embrace a polished vision of 'the past', not one which applauds slavery. Heritage is a rhapsody on history. We strike the chords we wish to hear. The value of heritage lies in its perennial flexibility and the strength of emotions it evokes. Celebratory and commemorative reflections on ancestral experience merge historical incidents, folk memories, invented traditions and often sheer fantasy, to interpret a past in a form meaningful for a particular group or individual at a particular point in time. The bits of the past that seem most significant continuously change relative to the present.

What we call heritage communicates our sense of self, as groups and as individuals, and often corresponds to what shapes ethnic identity. We mark ourselves off as ethnic through music, dress, foodways, linguistic styles and particular expressions of religious faiths; the same assemblages through which we celebrate heritage. In the United States, we take for granted that generation upon generation has merged intellectual, cultural and historical legacies in the making of an American heritage, but increasingly Americans of the latter twentieth century have attempted to sort out and reclaim particular cultural memories which they feel makes them unique and hyphenate their identity to reflect this belief. As a nation, Americans seem somewhat confused about demanding individualism, yet facing alienation; challenging conformity, yet decrying our lack of community. We want to embrace difference, but want to do so in groups: so that communities based on difference, ease of transportation, the Internet, etc., fill in for our lack of 'good neighbours'. Claiming particular dress or food customs as an inheritance provides the feeling of uniqueness, but not aloneness.

Much to the hilarity of the rest of the world, Americans hyphenate their names to reflect their often quite distant origins. Africans hardly consider Americans 'African-Americans', Koreans hardly consider Americans 'Korean-Americans' (even native Irish that have lived in America long enough become thought of as 'Yanks' back home). It is perhaps a symptom of our super-powerdom that we co-opt the nice bits of others' cultures - the

expressive forms such as art, music, dance, clothing, cuisine - and claim them (or reclaim them) as our own.

Celebration of a particular identity does not mechanically lead to supremacist ideologies; or what have we set ourselves up for with our well-meaning multiculturalism? Undoubtedly the celebration of any heritage can foster hatred of any 'other', but the vast majority of Scottish-Americans are not celebrating 'whiteness.'. That white supremacists would be attracted to the heritage of people who happen to be white is obvious, but such creatures are not the organizers of Scottish heritage events nor are they representative of the Scottish heritage movement.

One of Sebesta's own sources, Euan Hague, whom he thanks profusely for 'moral support' in the construction of his essay raises a similar point. Delivering a paper at Ontario's University of Guelph in October 1999 Scottish Geographer Dr. Euan Hague stated that 'The representation of Scottish-Americans per se as white supremacists in the British media enables "us" to look at "them" and "their" prejudices without facing up to our own'. About studies on the subject of 'Scottishness' in North America, Hague also notes that while 'it is very easy to dismiss enthusiasts as romantic buffoons and/or white supremacists. The Scottish diaspora community is very real and very important to millions of people.'

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