

REVIEW: CURIOUS SCOTLAND

Brian Taylor

George Rosie, **Curious Scotland: Tales from a Hidden History**, London: Granta Books, 2004, 244 pp, hb, £14.99, ISBN 1862075336.

Stand with me, if you will, in the High Street of Edinburgh. Let us pick our way over the cobbled street, through the detritus of fag packets and theatre flyers. (OK, city council, before you complain, I know that the street is scrupulously and frequently swept clean. Allow me a little licence.) Let us stand at the side of the road, in front of St Giles Cathedral (or High Kirk, if you are feeling especially Presbyterian.) Glance down. A symbol is sculpted in the street stone. The Heart of Midlothian, no less. But what is that faint sheen, that globulous glisten upon the stony surface? The mystery is speedily solved. A capital citizen passes by – and spits, copiously, upon the Heart. Another passes. Same result. There is no venom in the act – unless, of course, the average Edinburghian saliva is especially toxic. Rather, it is casual, common, everyday.

What is happening here? Disaffected Hibernian fans, angry at their team's performance in the latest footballing derby? Would they really take out their anger in this fashion at a cobbled symbol, adopted by their Edinburgh rivals? Certainly, that is a theory I have heard expressed. And it is eminently possible that some locals, particularly those from the environs of Leith or Easter Road, have that in mind when they expectorate. As it happens, I know the origins of this ancient, if unhygienic, custom. But George Rosie tells the tale rather well in his volume, **Curious Scotland**. The public spitting, he explains, does indeed mark entrenched popular disgust: but not with a football team nor with the Heart itself but with the construction which used to stand there, the Tolbooth or prison.

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Rosie says that the grim Tolbooth was ‘the black heart of Midlothian’ and, as such, ‘deserves to be spat upon’. In particular, he claims that the liquid protest recalls ancient anger at the execution of Thomas Aitkenhead, a 21 year old Edinburgh student who lost his life for the crime of blasphemy in the troubled year of 1697. Aitkenhead had condemned Christianity as nonsense. In commenting on the case, Rosie offers the now familiar observation that such an attitude compares with today’s Islamic fundamentalism. With that, it is on to the next historical anecdote with scarcely a pause for breath, indignant or otherwise.

Which is both the joy and the faint frustration of this book. This is not history, but episodic narrative. ‘Do you know the one about?’, ‘Stop me if you’ve heard ...’ To be absolutely fair to George Rosie, who is a delightful guy and a magnificent journalist, the book makes no other pretensions. He opens with the theory that all journalists are gadflies, experts for an hour on whatever they are writing about. Rosie notes that his work ‘is a book of random histories: an autodidact’s anthology of neglected episodes in Scottish history’.

Indeed, one of the tales in **Curious Scotland** began as a conversation overheard on the Glasgow to Edinburgh train. Intriguingly, Lord Fraser’s inquiry disclosed that the choice of Holyrood for the Scottish Parliament followed just such a brief encounter on that very line. I feel the social and economic relevance of central Scotland train shuttling should be examined further. Perhaps a distinguished academic could obtain a grant for the purpose.

But back to Mr Rosie. A couple of little caveats. Firstly, I do not believe the title helps. ‘Curious’ would lead me to expect completely off-beat stories, maverick, bohemian, even gothic or grotesque. There are several of that character: Midge Wars or The Glasgow Frankenstein come to mind. ‘Hidden’ would lead me to expect novelty, stories that have been suppressed or ignored. Instead, the book features insight into the Reformation, the Jacobites, Jardine Matheson and their origins, Scotland and the Klan, the Stone of Destiny. Misunderstood, perhaps. In need of revision, certainly. But ‘hidden’? Hardly. Secondly, I frankly loathe the cover. It shows a stalwart chap in full kilted rig standing proudly by a loch. The ‘curious’ bit is that his head is that of a notably hairy Highland cow. Probably it is post-modern irony – but, if it is, it loses me.

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Enough, Brian, enough. Enough cavilling. This book is a damn good read, a cheerful, glorious panopticon. Umpteen little tales: Defoe the secret agent, Burns and his bairns, the later life of Bonnie Prince Charlie when, apparently, his ‘belching and farting were a constant source of embarrassment’. Then there are the stories which, plainly, are Rosie obsessions. Of John Knox, he has much to say. Apparently, the ‘sentimental Left’ in Scotland has transformed the radicalism of Knox, his advanced educational policies, his support for social welfare, into ‘reactionary, ecclesiastical’ bullying. ‘It could reasonably be argued,’ he adds, ‘that John Knox was the greatest man Scotland ever produced’. That seminar I would love to attend.

Then another, the linguistic history of Scotland. Rosie is irritated by occasional suggestions that Gaelic is Scotland’s original language. By contrast, he describes it as a ‘relative latecomer’ from Ireland and launches the Campaign for Real Welsh. Rosie regales us with the story of the ancient kingdom sited on Traprain Law in East Lothian. Celts, he says, but not Gaels. Known to the Romans as the Votadini – and speaking Brythonic, ‘the language that evolved into Welsh’. Theirs was the tongue of **Y Gododdin**, the epic poem chronicling the disastrous venture of a gallant band of Edinburgh bravehearts against a much larger southern army.

I confess I know little of **Y Gododdin**, except that it is revered by contemporary Welsh speakers – and openly attributed by them to Scotland (or, more accurately, the spot that is now Scotland’s capital). I even saw it in a recent volume, anthologising Scottish verse. But Rosie turns these few facts into a quite splendid polemic. King Arthur, he says, featured first in **Y Gododdin**. The legend, he argues, was linguistically exported to Wales and Cornwall, then pinched by others. The conclusion? ‘There is a decent chance that the legendary Arthur was an Edinburgh man’. Well, ‘Arthur’s Seat’ is a bit of a clue that such a theory has been heard before but, still, Rosie’s rumination is grand.

Let me close with a little tale of my own. Not overheard on a train but offered as an observation at a literary reception in Holyrood’s garden lobby. It was suggested to me by a Labour MSP that devolution had the potential to change the way we viewed Scottish history. The theory was that Labour thinkers previously had to pretend that the Union between Scotland and England was ineluctably advantageous. This for fear of offering a political gift to the SNP at a time when the core fault line in Scottish politics was simplistically Unionist vs Nationalist.

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Now those who endorsed the Union could argue that self-government had remedied not just contemporary, pragmatic problems but centuries-old flaws in the Union settlement. They could take, in other words, a longer, more complex view of Scottish history, both pre and post Union. Ditto the challenge to Nationalists, beset by the problem of redefining independence in an inter-dependent world. Ditto the evidence of Tory revisionism, as the party, especially in Holyrood, rediscovers its ancient Scottish patriotism.

Not my thoughts, you understand. Just the meanderings of an observant gadfly. Like George Rosie. Dip into his book and see what curious musings occur.

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