

## **REVIEW: THE THISTLE AND THE ROSE**

*Ross Bond*

Alan Massie, **The Thistle and the Rose: Six Centuries of Love and Hate between the Scots and the English**, London: John Murray, 2005, 326 + ix pp, hb, £20, ISBN: 0719559995; pb, 2006, £8.99, ISBN: 0719565960.

Alan Massie's **The Thistle and the Rose** is, ostensibly, concerned with '... the relations between Scotland and England, Scots and English, and the varieties of British experience – what indeed being British has meant ...'. The book is divided into two parts. The first (shorter) part takes the form of a fairly conventional chronological narrative outlining the history of Scotland and England from around the beginning of the sixteenth century until 1745. While doubtless this provides useful background, much of the material will be familiar to the more historically informed reader and scarcely represents a novel approach to the book's subject matter. The sense of familiarity is heightened in that it is also, for the most part, an historical account concerned with royalty, military conflict and the church.

The second part of the book takes a quite different form. The structure (such as it is) is principally thematic rather than chronological. The chapters often read like a series of disconnected essays rather than a sustained and coherent attempt to explore the relationship between the Scots and the English. The themes tackled reflect (both explicitly and implicitly) the author's existing knowledge, preoccupations and prejudices. While one is consistently impressed by the breadth of Massie's erudition, as one journeys through the book there is a feeling of being left in the dark as to the route, purpose and ultimate destination, a feeling enhanced by the frequent (and sometimes lengthy) diversions into areas that appear to bear little relation to the book's principal concern.

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The focus on elite affairs at the expense of demotic experience, evident in part one of the book, extends to part two. Its pages are populated by figures of renown: writers, historians, politicians, royalty. Sometimes, such figures (Boswell and Johnson, Macaulay and Carlyle, Buchan and Mackenzie) commandeer entire chapters. It seems that relations between the Scots and English are to be measured through the lives of their respective great and good. While it is perfectly legitimate (and more straightforward) to base argument on those whose lives are well-documented, a fuller and more engaging account would have included more consideration of how the man on the Clapham omnibus or the woman on Sauchiehall Street might have related to their cross-border counterpart.

Nevertheless, with regard to the one notable who takes up a chapter of his own, few would quibble. Massie acknowledges early on that Walter Scott ‘permeates’ the book. Scott, of course, for many represents the archetypal Scots disposition: ‘His sentiments were hostile to the Union; his reason assented to it’. Scott it was whose romanticisation of Scotland encouraged English affection for their partners in the Union. Massie has little time for those who would question the foundation of this affection as being based on an excessively twee conception of Scotland and the Scots, infused with more than a little condescension. For him the only alternative to Scott’s ‘tartanising’ of Scotland would have been full scale Anglicisation, a view which seems to neglect to acknowledge the wider institutional bases of Scottishness, or its robustness in geographical regions that have been largely free of tartanry.

The significance of Scott also reflects another important overall feature of the book. As Massie himself concedes in the very first sentence, it is, as much as anything, a book about Britain and Britishness. Of course it would be a curious book which explored the relationship between the Scots and the English without giving great consideration to the wider British context, but the extent to which the author consistently considers his evidence through the lens of Britishness is also notable. For him this shared state/national context both reflects and engenders the essential similarities between the Scots and the English, similarities which Massie takes every opportunity to emphasise. The book may be subtitled ‘Six Centuries of Love and Hate between the Scots and the English’, but in truth there is little love or hate in evidence and it could just as easily have been subtitled ‘Six Centuries of the Scots and the English having quite a lot in common’.

From the outset, Massie uses his own biography as an epitome of the argument

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that it is pointless to try to understand either the Scots or the English without reference to Britain. He is, he tells us, '... a typical Scot, a child of the British empire', having been born in Singapore. But should the reader be moved to doubt the author's Scottish credentials on the grounds of his unusual (or, as Massie would have it, not so unusual) birthplace, he offers us an impeccable pedigree: 'I can name my eight great-grandparents, who were all Scots, born and passing their whole lives in the north-east, in Aberdeenshire and Banffshire'. This, on the very first page, establishes a fascination with pedigree and ancestry which he extends to descriptions of politicians, writers, the Scots of the eastern lowlands (who are, apparently, of 'Anglo-Saxon stock'), and even his classmates at Cambridge.

This preoccupation also represents a curious contrast to some of the other arguments that Massie puts forward concerning Scots, English and British identities. Most notably, he is surely correct to argue that any notion that the Scots (and Welsh and Irish) are 'racially' different from the English is erroneous. This is an issue he explores in some length in employing (as a chapter title) the now familiar designation of 'Mongrels': the Scots and the English, more often than not, tend to be of mixed national heritage. But if heritage is thus rather redundant as a means of determining nationality, why does Massie often establish the nationalities of the figures who people his book (including himself) through reference to their ancestry? Similarly, he is once more on sure ground in pointing out that it is difficult to say to what degree ancestry, birth, upbringing, or residence determine nationality in these islands, and that we have no recourse to legal definitions of nationality in the constituent nations of the UK. But the conclusion this leads him to seems excessively rigid and unsatisfactory: 'We are all British, citizens of the United Kingdom, subjects of Her Majesty, whether we like it or not.' Not only does this seem to conflate at least two (perhaps three) different statuses, more crucially, it wholly disregards the subjective foundations of national identity, which we know to be very important.

It comes as something of a surprise then, when by the chapter's end Massie appears to perform a volte-face in highlighting '... the degree to which personal choice determines nationality'. It becomes evident, though, that when such subjectivity rejects Britishness it is an exercise in false consciousness rather than personal agency: 'The same personal choice may also lead some to deny that they have any British identity at all, no matter in how many ways the reality of a common British culture manifests itself in their way of life or habit of thought'. Those who would deny their Britishness, it seems, are merely in

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denial.

Nevertheless, I have a lot of sympathy with Massie's insistence that 'British culture' is real and thus to a degree inescapable for Scots and English alike. His book also effectively punctures excessive complaints about Anglicisation in Scotland by highlighting the great many influential Scots who have occupied, and continue to occupy, prominent roles in British institutions, and through those roles shape the cultural life of the English as well as the Scots. He also recognises that Scots' antipathy towards 'the English' rarely extends to specific individuals, and is based as much on social class as it is on nationality. The problem is that Massie's conception of the Britain that the Scots and English currently inhabit seems excessively conservative and gazing towards the past rather than the future. In Britain where one may look to one's ancestors to secure one's identity, where the empire 'may be seen as a staging-post on the road to the realization of the aims of the Enlightenment', and where devolution represents an 'implicit denial of Britishness', the current constitutional status of Scotland represents nothing less than an example of the 'Scottish cringe', an opinion that this reviewer found rather curious given the existence of similar political arrangements among many of our European neighbours as the author's assertion that, unlike the English, the Scots are not very good at laughing at themselves. Maybe by the end of the book I had lost my sense of humour.

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