

## Chapter 3

### CHAN EIL DAD NAS ALBANNAICH

### NA AN UILEBHEIST LOCH NIS

One Sunday evening the BBC television programme, *The Antique Roadshow*, broadcast from Edinburgh.<sup>1</sup> One of the experts was studying a collection of antique snuff-boxes. The treasure-trove belonged to an Edinburgh woman who spoke in an ordinary Edinburgh voice, similar to that of the majority of Edinburgh people. One snuff-box had a lid featuring the elongated neck of a beast, an imagined “Loch Ness Monster”. Given that such a creature continues to remain mythological, such a beast couldn’t be other than imagined. The expert studied the snuff-box and deliberated, then declared solemnly: “There is nothing more Scottish than the Loch Ness Monster.”

This is what BBC expert advised the Edinburgh woman with her ordinary Edinburgh voice standing there in the middle of Edinburgh, capital of the country of Scotland: there was nothing more Scottish than an imaginary creature. This particular expert is a knowledgeable fellow and outwith his own field can quote sections of the writings of Beatrice Potter by heart. He delivered his observation respectfully and he is a likeable and modest fellow, as most BBC experts are.

Not only did he propose that an imaginary creature was the summation of the culture of the country in which he was visiting on a temporary work assignment, he assumed he was

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<sup>1</sup> I know the programme and the name of the expert but I don't want to say. He's a decent guy and I think he would be embarrassed beyond reason.

delivering a statement of fact; one known to all Scottish people, possibly a first principle of Scottishness, and that he felt privileged in so doing.

I was hoping a child might have called out in Gaidhlig: Mummy what is the man saying? But if one had I wouldn't have understood, nor would 99% of the Edinburgh folk who had gathered there to provide the audience. I fantasized a conversation in which a Scottish adult was to question if there was not such a thing as Scottish culture. But who was there to ask? By this time the BBC production team had left the scene.

As it was, I cannot remember how the Edinburgh woman responded to the man but I think she nodded. This could have been in simulated agreement. Whatever is stated by a representative of the BBC is treated as though incontrovertible. This is the tacit understanding between BBC expert and citizen-suppliant. Aside from that, she would not want to make a fuss, or appear huffy, nor embarrass the man. Perhaps she agreed with him. Subject people are accustomed to hearing nonsense and seeing nonsense in regard to what 'makes them tick'. In this case the essence of our otherness is 'Scottishness'. Each one of us 'has this' and all of us share in whatever it is, from the topmost rung of society to the bottom. Maybe it could be bottled and sold, wrapped in a tartan. This is what is known is stereotyping.

The existence of such these fundamental elements is a useful tool in distinguishing difference, integral to racist ideologies. Upper-middle class Brits often appear in kilts, tweed jackets and buckled shoes when visiting Scotland, and I include the landowners. The British Royalty usually dress in this this. Especially we see it when the media are present.

Natives smile at their japes, accustomed to the aping, the mimicry and other tomfooleries practised by establishment figures.

A few visitors journey north into the Land that Time Forgot to present one-off editions of magazine-style television programmes. Some describe themselves as 'proud Scots', in humorous accents they refer to as 'the Scottish voice'. They beam into the camera, resplendent in dress-tunics and dirks, poking fun at their own knees. If they fail so to dress the locals will be offended. This is joke the locals are to accept. It is assumed that the brash confidence of the BBC presenters will gladden the heart of the people. We are in on the joke and know "it is not their fault," they are merely cheeky folk with naive grins, and "if they didn't do it somebody else will." Often we recognize lower-order variations of ourselves, transformed into the class of faithful retainer, a bunch of Uncle Toms cracking jokes about 'our' idiosyncracies for the amusement of the same powerful white people. I began a book of 'our indiosyncracies' forty years ago but caved in after the first story, and reduced the proposed book to a footnote.<sup>2</sup>

In other parts of the world BBC experts are what they appear, powerful white people representative of an imperialist power who have assumed the right to broadcast programmes in which televisual images of their conceptualization of the aboriginals are beamed back to upper-order folk like themselves. It is as though the BBC controllers are still unable to grasp the significance of such 'gestures'. They appear to believe these are a mark of respect to the legitimacy of indigenous culture. Instead they are a mark of its inferiority, revealing the general opinion of its

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<sup>2</sup> See the story *Roofsliding*, published around 1980.

value. The idea that an imaginary monster from the deep epitomizes 'Scotland'" is consistent, for this is an imagined country. The only people who consider it an actual country, 'in real life', are those who live in the place, and sentimental folk in the diaspora.

There is a recognized phenomenon discovered by travel agents of tourists who cut short their visits to Scotland due to an overwhelming attack of pathos. It suffocates many. Some of the indigeneity also experience this phenomenon. These overly-sensitive tourists have gained their knowledge of the country from the stuff of Hollywood legend, plus the BBC and copy writers who work for the Scotshire Tourist Board.

The pathos does not derive from their encounter with the horrible 'reality' but from the horrible insight that the majority population of Scottish appear to rely for knowledge of their own country from the same informational outlets.

The Loch Ness Monster is the summation of Scottish culture is a metaphor for Scottish education. We are taught obedience. We learn to submit to the voice of authority, our betters, the folk with knowledge: we learn who we are from those who govern. The average person gives up on education. The average schoolteacher uses the threat of 'reading a book' as a means to maintaining order. Weans are punished by having to sit still and look at one. Older yins are punished by being sent to the library. Scottish people regard it as an honour to the country when a new Hollywood movie appears. In city pubs drinkers argue the merits of the past performances of the actors who have portrayed Scottish heroes. No no no, David Niven was the best Bonnie Prince Charlie, Vanessa Redgrave the one and only Mary Queen of Scots; Liam Neeson the best Rob Roy while we don't need to

leave Scotland for the part of dopey big thingwi, the collie-dug ghillie guy who served Queen Victoria so faithfully.

Sceptics and others who question authority are described as "bolshie". No one knows quite what the word means and why it is used in the first place; probably it has to do with religion' the Masonic Lodge or the Knights of St Columba might have something to do with it, especially the latter, given what history tells us about Columba and the first sighting. Those who check it out online wonder why a major revolution in Russia a hundred years ago provides a name for somebody found guilty of asking a question.

Members of the tourist industry have wanted to celebrate the 14th century Declaration of Arbroath in the offchance it might earn a few quid in foreign exchange but a number of politicians blocked the initiative which was seen as sectarian. They worried about losing the Orange vote. While Roman Catholics would appreciate such a commemoration, Protestants might take an oppositional stance, as one politician argued, "that Braveheart thing about 'freedom', was it not just a letter to the Pope?"

The greatest mystery in Scotland is the history of the people. This is not a national peculiarity. In most any country in the world the people's history is the basis of radical history, marginalized or suppressed. It makes sense that Scottish children are more liable to accept the BBC expert opinion on the Loch Ness Monster, than they are someone who speaks in any Scottish accent. The Isla historian Domhnal na Maceacharna<sup>3</sup> tells of the time he suggested to the education authorities in Perth that they should commemorate the Declaration of Perth. The local education authority there did not know what he was talking about. One suggested it might

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<sup>3</sup> The Lands of the Lordship (Argyll Reproductions Ltd. 1976)

be a good thing to give the schoolchildren a day off to celebrate the Magna Carta.

My grannie from Lewis had her own opinions of that. There was a good old guy who went her messages but she made fun of him behind his back, because he had a strawberry beak twice the size W C Fields'. She used to nudge me in the ribs when she had loaded him up with message bags. She called him the Loch Ness Monster, always in broad English which as a boy I found of interest.

So there ye are, that's the story of good old an Uilebheist Loch Nis.