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# The Invention of Scotland

The Stuart Myth and  
the Scottish Identity,  
1638 to the Present

Murray G. H. Pittock



## The Invention of Scotland

A dynasty of high ability and great charm, the Stuarts exerted a compelling fascination over their supporters and enemies alike. First published in 1991, this title assesses the influence of the Stuart mystique on the modern political and cultural identity of Scotland. Murray Pittock traces the Stuart myth from the days of Charles I to the modern Scottish National Party, and discusses both pro- and anti-Union propaganda. He provides a unique insight into the 'radicalism' of Scottish Jacobitism, contrasting this 'Jacobitism of the Left' with the sentimental image constructed by the Victorians. Dealing with a subject of great relevance to modern British society, this reissue provides an extensive analysis of Scottish nationhood, the Stuart cult and Jacobite ideology. It will be of great interest to students of literature, history, and Scottish culture and politics.

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To Ross

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Hic jacet Arthurus, Rex quondam rexque futurus.

Surpassing the story even of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, because more near, more real and historical, the romance of Prince Charlie and the Highland chiefs has taken a lasting hold of the popular imagination.

Magnus Maclean, *The Literature of the Celts*

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If these many made it possible to write the book, so did one, my wife Anne, who gave the time and peace to write it.

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# Introduction

Ancient traditions, when tested by the severe process of modern investigation, commonly enough fade away into mere dreams, but it is singular how often the dream turns out to have been a half-awake one, presaging reality.

T. H. Huxley

A people who lose their nationality create a legend to take its place.

Edwin Muir

Their lost realm has become our common heritage; and on the verge of despair we may find inspiration and comfort in the deep-seated conviction that sometime, somewhere, there will be a 'king over the water' to save the day if only we remain faithful to the noble dream of that lost dynasty which will live for ever in our hearts.

Pierre Joannon, writing in the *Royal Stuart Review*, 1988<sup>1</sup>

This is a book about the Stuart myth and its continuing power. It is not about tartan, whisky, or biscuit-tin depiction of the Stuarts, though these uses and abuses of the dynasty's image will be discussed. Rather it is about the unique fascination exerted by the Stuarts in their day and our own, and the contribution their propaganda, ideology, origin, and character has made to understanding the Scottish identity. Indeed, to enable that identity to understand itself the Stuart myth is one of the prime means of definition.

The British Isles are well-endowed with heroic legendary rulers, from Arthur to Cuchulainn to Fionn. It is said of many of these that they will return to lead their countries to victory at the time when they are most needed. Indeed, in the last hundred years, Irish nationalism has used such figures in support of its own claims. The statue of Cuchulainn in the GPO in Dublin bears witness to Patrick Pearse's supposed appeal to his spirit at the crisis of the 1916 Rising. Welsh nationalism makes use of the same kind of images, as the folk-song about Owain Glyndwr the Welsh hero makes clear:

Owain is again ready for the day.  
From his hideout in Snowdonia

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He will come with his faithful band  
To lead us at dawn to a free Wales.

In similar vein, poems are found among young people in Wales voicing sentiments such as 'I believe with all my heart that Arthur is alive.' The legend of the returned Deliverer, Owain or Arthur, is traditionally strong in Wales.<sup>2</sup>

The argument of this book will be that the Stuarts long occupied a similar role in much of Scottish consciousness. In this they were unique among the legendary kings of the British Isles, for they were figures of documented and recent history. A dynasty of high ability and noted charm (as well as poor judgement), they seemed unworldly, even through the eyes of many of their contemporaries: mythic figures living in history. Those who came after them further mythologized them, as I shall demonstrate in the later chapters of this book. As time went on, a divided vision of them, always present, was confirmed and ratified. British history (partly because it was, as I shall argue, written by the victors of the 1688 Revolution) tended to disparage the Stuarts. On the other hand, their supporters (and those who had lost by the 1688 Revolution, where these were not the same) continued to eulogize them. It is remarkable that the response to historical figures should continue to be charged with such mythological or theological overtones. This is J. M. Charles-Roux, writing of Charles I (still an Anglican saint) in 1986:

First, just like the Messiah who, from the beginning of his time on earth, as on several occasions He told His Disciples, knew that He would have to die the death of the Cross, so Charles I had a premonition of what his own end would be. . . . Indeed, for him, as in the case of the Redeemer, in his doom was his duty; since he was predestined to regenerate the faith in his realms and to manifest to his own people through his personal belief, example and sacrifice, the truth and value of Christian doctrines. . . . So like Christ sold to the Sanhedrin by one of His Disciples, was Charles sold to the Parliamentarians by the closest to him of his people, the Scots . . . the royal and anointed incarnation of Scotland, England and Ireland.<sup>3</sup>

It is hard to believe that such sentiments could be expressed about a king from any other historical British dynasty. Similarly, the kind of antipathy shown to the Stuarts by writers of opposing sympathies demonstrates that it is still difficult to evaluate them from a dispassionate viewpoint.<sup>4</sup>

The Stuarts themselves did much to bring this about. They were of the opinion that it was their manifest destiny to be kings of all Britain; and their ideology and propaganda after 1603 contained strong elements of mythic and sacred imagery intended to bolster both the claim to be all-British kings, and

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the idea that they were so by divine right, especially manifest in them. The images they adopted proved uniquely powerful and influential on posterity, as did the political analysis which went with them. Partly this was because the Stuart ideology was not decorative merely, to be abandoned in favour of *realpolitik* whenever that should prove necessary: it was an integral part of the dynasty's own faith in itself. For this reason, it had more impact on history than court ideologies usually do: the events of 1638 and 1688 can be directly linked to the ideals projected through Stuart politics.

The Tudors had previously adopted similar propaganda aims. Henry VII liked to stress his Welshness, and the manner in which he fulfilled Merlin's prophecy that a Welshman would wear the crown of England. Calling his eldest son Arthur was a sign of Tudor identification with Welsh mythology. Later, Elizabeth projected herself as the Virgin Queen of the English nation, a sign of the great destiny of Anglicanism: that church's own especial Virgin head. But Tudor symbolism, potent as it was, rarely expressed itself in political action or real belief: it was a facade, a celebration of the monarchy's aims and claims. There was no necessary correspondence with a real agenda. Henry may have been Arthur returned in an official capacity, but he and his successors were hard-headed politicians who appear to have used symbolism as a political tool, not as a means of self-expression.<sup>5</sup>

With the Stuarts, it was otherwise. They inherited some Tudor iconography, but from the beginning made more potent use of it:

Henry VII had declared that he was restoring the kingdom of Arthur, and the association was spontaneously made in James's favour: he was hailed in masques and pageants as the heir of Arthur or, as the climax to centuries of expectation, as Arthur's self returned.

From at least the beginning of the dynasty's reign in England, the Stuarts were strongly attracted to Messianic symbols of themselves at the Once and Future King, Arthur, or even Christ. Once they were exiled, their dispossession seemed a proof to some of heavenly support for this status:

By 1746 this vision . . . had matured into a mystical interpretation of the significance of the Jacobites . . . in terms of martyrdom and witness. The theological basis of this belief lay in Matthew v.10: 'Blessed are they which are persecuted for Righteousness sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'<sup>6</sup>

The idea of death and resurrection became linked to the idea of exile and return: Christ's Second Coming with Arthur's. The returning Stuart monarch would bring back true peace and a reign of perpetual righteousness over Great Britain, one country with two parliaments (England's and Scotland's).

The equation of British kingship with Arthurian status was made from the beginning by James VI and I:

The fact that, from his accession, England, Scotland and Wales were thenceforward called Great Britain was another reason for hailing James as Arthur. In April 1603, the Venetian Ambassador wrote that the King's naming the kingdoms 'Britain' was like the decision of 'the famous and ancient King Arthur to embrace under one name the entire kingdom'.

Subsequently, it was to be 'those who supported the Divine Right of Kings' who 'upheld the historicity of Arthur'; whereas those who did not turned instead 'to the laws and customs of the Anglo-Saxons'.<sup>7</sup> Arthur remained a figure central to Stuart propaganda. Stuart iconography celebrated the habits and beliefs of the ancient Britons. In particular, the Royal Oak, still a central symbol of the dynasty, was closely related to ideas about Celtic fertility ritual, and the king's power as an agent of renewal: 'The oak, the largest and strongest tree in the North, was venerated by the Celts as a symbol of the supreme Power.' It was thus fitting that an oak should protect Charles II from the Cromwellian troops who wished to strip the sacred new Arthur of his status. The story confirmed the king's mystical authority, and also his close friendship with nature. Long after 1688, the Stuart dynasty was to be closely linked with images of fertility. In literature, Arthurian images of the Stuarts persisted into the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> This 'Welsh messiah, the warrior who will come to overthrow the Saxons and Normans', was an icon of the Stuarts' claim to be kings of all Britain, both 'Political Hero' and 'National Messiah' in Arthurian mould.<sup>9</sup>

Arthur's status as a legendary huntsman ('the figure of the Wild Huntsman is sometimes identified with Arthur') was also significant. The Stuarts made much of hunting: it helped to confirm their heroic status as stewards of nature and the land. In doing this, they identified themselves not only with Arthur but also with Fionn, the legendary Gaelic warlord who was in the eighteenth century to be the subject of James Macpherson's pro-Stuart Ossian poems. Fionn, legends of whom abound in Scotland, was also, like Arthur, scheduled to wake and deliver the nation when danger threatened. In identifying with both figures, the Stuarts were able to simultaneously present themselves as Gaelic and British monarchs.<sup>10</sup>

This symbolism was used with peculiar adroitness in Ireland, where the Stuarts were almost never identified with Arthur, but rather with Fionn and heroes from Fionn's own time. Charles Edward was compared to Fergus, Conall, Conroy, and Aongus Oge, while his grandfather became for some a symbol of Ireland itself, a Fenian hero in the making, a foreshadower of the sacrificial politics of such as Pearse: '*Righ Shemus*, King James, represented the faith of Erin, and so became her comrade in martyrdom.'<sup>11</sup> In famous eighteenth-century songs like 'The Blackbird', Ireland was presented as an

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abandoned woman, waiting for the return of her hero-king. The same symbolism was used in Scotland. 'The Gaelic messianic tradition' of Fionn suggested that the Stuart king would one day return to bring light and fecundity to the land. In the Highlands of Scotland, the events of Jacobitism themselves passed into folklore, like the older stories to which they were related.<sup>12</sup> More educated Jacobite sympathizers compared the Stuarts to the heroes of the Roman Republic, to Aeneas, or to the saints. But the view of them as sacred monarchs of folkloric tradition and power was one which endured among all ranks.

There is of necessity a gap here between history and the perceptions of the Stuarts which grew up, fostered by the dynasty's propaganda. But undeniably, the loss of the Stuart dynasty heralded a major constitutional change the effects of which are still with us. I will argue that the loss of Scottish independence was seen at the time as being closely bound up with the loss of the Stuarts, while in Ireland, songs about William, James, and 1689–90 are still common political currency. So the loss of the Stuarts was more than a dynastic upheaval: it was the occasion for lasting constitutional change, and the submergence or loss of national identities. Their loss was also accompanied by the sense, true or false, that an older, antiquarian, sacred, and mythic set of values had gone for ever. As Yeats was to put it: 'In 1690 the Battle of the Boyne . . . overwhelmed a civilisation full of religion and myth and brought in its place intelligible laws planned out upon a great blackboard.'<sup>13</sup> The Stuarts represented this lost heritage in political action. I will argue that in Scotland, if not in Ireland (where the case is more complex), their politicized mystique helped to preserve the identity of a nation struggling against considerable pressure to conform to the new British norms. Perhaps the legacy of the Stuart myth can also be seen in the mythopoeic faculty of the Scottish imagination, so often (for example, in the literature of the twentieth century) creating pasts to mourn the loss of. Noteworthy also is the Scottish concern with myth in anthropological study: 'The list of Scottish contributions to the rise of folklore, social anthropology, and sociology in the second half of the nineteenth century is formidable.' Perhaps even J. G. Frazer's dying king in *The Golden Bough* carries in him some echo of Stuart ideology and symbolism.<sup>14</sup>

The Stuart myth and the Scottish identity are closely linked through the loss of Scottish independence and its relationship to the loss of the Stuart dynasty. Mythology can be a kind of history favoured by the dispossessed; and it helps to read influence of the Stuart myth in such a light. Lack of independence goes along with a lack of independent means of securing one's own history. In such circumstances, in the eighteenth century and afterwards, the mythology and ideology of the Stuart cause became a kind of protest history, a self-expression of identity on behalf of those whose identity was under threat. In this underground history, many of the ideas still current today concerning Scotland's place in the Union came into being. Like Fionn

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and Arthur, the Stuart myth belongs in some respects to a glorious past. But like them also, its analyses did and do not fail to suggest that there might be some kind of reawakening, no longer of the Stuart kings, but of their mythical values, like Fionn's heritage to the Fenians:

Gaelic popular tradition has it that they [the Fianna] are not dead, but sleeping under great green knolls somewhere in the Highlands, and that one day they will awake to restore the Gael to his ancient power, just as the Cymri look for the return of Arthur.

Just as, indeed, the British National Anthem betrays its origin as a Jacobite song in the phrase 'Send her/him victorious'.<sup>15</sup> Sent, that is, home from exile to victory.