

TRANSACTIONS, &c.

An Inquiry into the Origin of the Name of the Scottish Nation, presented to the Society of Antiquaries, at Edinburgh, December 1780.

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TO a Society, the purpose of whose institution is to investigate the antiquities of their nation, any reasonable attempt to account for the name of that nation, cannot be unacceptable; and this subject seems naturally to present itself, as a proper introduction to their future inquiries.

I know not from what odd propensity, in the composition of human nature, arises a desire in mankind to carry the account of their nation or family into as remote antiquity as they can. Some person, possessed of this unaccountable passion, has endeavoured to deduce the origin of the Scots from an Egyptian princess, foster-mother to the Hebrew legislator. As I know no other authority for this story than a fond desire of the inventor to impose it for truth, I shall pass it over, and let it remain as I found it. Some chuse to derive the name of *Scot* from *Sceot*, an old word that signifies a Shield, and from whence probably comes the Latin word *Scutum*. So they suppose the

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people were called *Scots*, quasi *Scutati*. Had the Scots been the only *Scutati*, this might very probably have been the reason for others to give, and them to assume that name. But when the name of *Scot* first prevailed, all nations used shields; so that no probable reason can be assigned why that name should be affixed to any one people, from a custom that was common to all. Some other accounts are given of the origin of this name, which are all so evidently ill-founded, that it is needless to refute them. But the conjectures of the author of the history of Manchester seem to require a more particular consideration, as he has investigated British antiquities with great acuteness and ability, and has marked out, in part, why the Scots were called by that name. His account, in short, is this—

The Belgæ expelled from several parts of England the former inhabitants, who fled to Ireland, and took possession of the sea-coasts. The Belgæ, pursuing them thither, compelled them to leave the sea-coast, and seek for refuge among the lakes and forests in the internal parts of that island. So far he copies from history, and adds, as his own conjecture, that the fugitives, thus twice reduced to the necessity of shifting their place of residence, were upon that account called *Scuit*, which we now write and pronounce *Scot*. This word signifies *Wanderers*; and Mr Whitaker supposes that the Belgæ gave them that name by way of insult: But if this had been the reason of calling them *Wanderers*, that title, or epithet, was equally as applicable to the Belgæ themselves, who had wandered every foot as far as the others; consequently that name could have been no proper mark of distinction. Besides, as we know from history that a body of Germans had very early got possession of a considerable part of Belgia, it is very probable that the Belgæ, who invaded England, were not of Celtic, but Teutonic origin. In this case, they could never have given the appellation of *Scuit*, to the people whom they had driven away, as there is no dialect of the Teutonic language in which that

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word denotes a *Wanderer*. The Teutonic word that comes nearest it denotes *Swiftness*. If any person should alledge that the Belgæ gave that name to the others for running away, still the name could not have been a proper distinction, since, for any thing we can perceive, the Belgæ ran as fast, and as far after them. Mr Whitaker indeed maintains that these invading Belgæ were Celts, because he finds that the names of the rivers and mountains in their English territories were all Celtic; but he did not reflect that rivers and mountains generally retain the names imposed by the first possessors. New incomers give new names only to towns, villages, canals, and such other things as are of their own making. In consequence of his way of arguing on this point, it would follow that the Saxons and Normans, who afterwards became masters of those territories, were also Celts, because they also continued to call rivers and mountains by the old Celtic names, and by which they are known at this day. But, whatever these Belgæ may have been, there does not appear in Mr Whitaker's account of the matter any sufficient reason why the name of *Scuit*, that is, *Wanderers*, should be given to the Irish, and yet by that name they were certainly once called. Now, let us consider his account of the manner in which he supposes the name of *Scuit* to have been transferred to the people by whom this very ancient title has been preserved and continued.

Taking the poems of Ossian as his principal guide, he gives us the following relation: The king of the Creones, who possessed the north-west part of Caledonia, placed one of his family on the throne of Ireland: The reigning family of the Creones becoming extinct by the death of Ossian, was succeeded by an Irish prince, of a collateral branch. This prince, as Mr Whitaker supposes, gave to his new subjects the name of *Scuit*, which he had brought with him from his father's kingdom.

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But, before we can adopt this opinion as an undeniable truth, we must first take the liberty to examine its probability, by comparing it with similar cases. William of Nassau, a Dutchman, became king of Britain, but the people did not acquire the name of Nassawians, or Dutchmen; George of Hanover, a German, became king of Britain, yet its name was neither changed to Hanover nor Germany; Philip, a Frenchman, became king of all the Spains, yet Spain on that account was not called New France. I will even venture to say, that if Philip had attempted to change the word Spain for that of France, the whole body of the Spanish nation would probably have opposed him, more successfully than the various powers of Europe, that were allied against his succession. By parity of reason, the Irish prince, who became king of the Creones, would find himself under the absolute necessity of doing as William, George, and Philip afterwards did, that is, of taking his title from the people over whom he reigned, not from the people among whom he was born. Perhaps it may be alledged that the Irish prince brought with him so powerful a colony of *Scuit*, that the name insensibly became common to the whole nation. But, in this case, where could he have settled them, or wherewith could he have fed them? The more fertile parts of Caledonia, that could well receive an increase of the number of inhabitants, were an acquisition made to Scotland long after his days. The north-west part of our country, which constituted the whole of his kingdom, is mountainous and unfertile. Nor can we suppose that the Creones of those days would have been more willing to have given up their herds and mountains to their new guests, than our fathers would have been to have delivered over their estates to William's Dutchmen, or George's Hanoverians. The kingdom of Scotland too was elective till towards the end of the tenth century, with this only restriction, that the electors were obliged to chuse one of the royal family. Now, as this foreign prince was called to reign in another island, where his best title to the crown arose from the good will

will of his constituents, we can scarcely suppose that he would have attempted a measure, in which, considering the force of national prejudices, he must have been opposed by the unanimous voice of his subjects. An idle measure too, from the success of which he could have reaped no advantage, but from its failure he might have felt the worst of consequences.

Having, as appears to me, sufficiently proved that the reasons above assigned for giving the name of *Scuit* to one people and transferring it to another are insufficient, I will venture to produce my own conjectures, and hope to give as convincing proofs of their probability as the nature of the subject can admit.

Mankind was early divided into two distinct professions, one that lived by agriculture, and the other that trusted for subsistence to hunting and the increase of their cattle. The first would naturally, and almost necessarily, settle upon the spots where they had cleared away the woods, and drained the marshes; the other ranged from place to place, as fresh pasture sprung up, or new game was started. These last were in reality *Scuit*, or *Wanderers*, and received that appellation. The coincidence of the language and the manners, where the customs of the people are expressed in the idea conveyed by the word, seems to be a proof of its propriety similar to our knowing the portraits of our friends by their having a striking resemblance of the originals. As the Celtic language once extended over an immense tract, I have not the least doubt that this was the true origin of the name of the people whom the Greeks called *Σκυθαι*. *Quorum plaustra vagas rite trabunt domos*; the opposition of the way of living of those people to that of the Romans was so striking, that the Poet has here expressed, and indeed, without knowing it, has properly translated the word *Scuit* by *Vagas*. And, if an old Scot was to translate the *Vagas Domos* of Horace, he would call them *Tigh-Scuit*, which in modern

dern English means *Scottish Houses*. Though the Greeks, according to their constant manner, turned the word to suit the idiom of their own language, the *σκυθαί* were in reality the *Scuit*, behind the *Palus Moeotis*, and the *Scuit* in Ireland and Caledonia were the *σκυθαί* in this other remote corner of the then known world. Accordingly, in the few fragments of their poems that have reached us, we find frequent mention of, and allusion to hunting, and herds of cattle, without the least mention of agriculture; a strong proof of the agreement of manners between the *Scuit* and *σκυθαί*. This appellation may seem to us a term of reproach, but to people habituated to this way of life, it would appear an honourable distinction. They would even look with contempt on the inhabitants of cities, as many of the Tartars and Arabs do at this day; and, in comparing the opposite manners of living, they would say most sincerely, and more from the heart than Horace did, *quanto melius Scythae*. Even at this hour, it is the custom in the mountains of Scotland, and in some parts of Ireland, that people in summer remove to feed their cattle on the hills, dwelling, during that season, in huts, called *Sheelings* among us, and in winter retire to their warmer habitations in the vallies*. So the Irish prince, when he came to Caledonia, found his people were *Scuit*, and he left them *Scuit*. Nor is it hard to find the reasons for the name's being lost in the one country, while it flourished and spread wider in the other. The Firbolgs, the Faolans, the Tuathals, and others had conquered and peopled the greatest part of Ireland, so that the original *Scuit* were reduced to small numbers, and narrow bounds. The different invaders by degrees forgot their former distinctions, till at last the custom prevailed of

* It appears from the *Collectanea de Rebus Hibernicis*, that numbers of the northern Irish, who contend that they are also Scots, were in the constant practice of driving their cattle to pasture in the neighbouring counties; and this custom continued till about the middle of last century, at which time laws were made to regulate and restrain them.

of the whole being denominated from the island they inhabited. On the contrary, the asperity of their mountains defended the Caledonian *Scuit* from foreign arms, so that there was no reason for changing their former name. Their king, Kenneth Macalpin, having, by a long and bloody war, made good his claim to the Pictish crown, the custom prevailed to call all his dominions by his former title.

That the Romans mention not the *Scoti* at their first acquaintance with Britain, is no reason to conclude that there was no such people in it. They at that time knew little of the island; and their own historians tell us, that they were uncertain whether it was an island or not till the days of Vespasian. Besides, the Romans despised every language but their own. Rome had stood some hundreds of years before they would condescend even to learn Greek. Thus they could have but a very imperfect knowledge of all the distinctions among a people with whom they had so short an acquaintance, as they had with those of the north of Scotland. Were I to mark out the time when the Romans came at length to learn the name of *Scoti*, I would conclude that it was when their chains were so fast riveted on the Britons, that these unhappy islanders found themselves under, what would be to them, a very disagreeable necessity, of learning the language of their oppressors; when those polite and humane conquerors had scourged the mothers, and ravished the daughters.

Mr Whitaker attempts to support the truth of his suppositions, from the name of *Argyle-shire*, and from our calling the language *Erse*. But these two words require only to be explained in order to shew that they give no support to his hypothesis. As all the original inhabitants of Britain were *Gaël*, *Argyle* was naturally distinguished by the appellation of *Jar-gaël*, that is, *Western Gaëls*, being situated

situated in the most western division of that part of Britain, and indeed in the most westerly part of the whole island, except the narrow promontory of the land's end in Cornwall. If we call the language *Erse*, it is because in the lowlands of Scotland we use the Anglo-Saxon dialect, which began among us from the multitudes of the English Saxons, who found a refuge in North Britain from the lash of Norman tyranny, and we use the word that was in use among them who had been more acquainted with the Irish.

As to the two passages that Mr Whitaker has quoted from Claudian, they are scarcely worth animadversion; as they contribute nothing either to his purpose or mine; whether the *Scoti*, mentioned by the Poet, were the *Scoti* of Hibernia or Caledonia. But perhaps, after having been so long wandering with our ancestors, it may not be disagreeable to find some flowers from the classics scattered in the desert. I will, with a truly christian spirit, pardon the Poet who trespassed against us by singing a song of triumph over our country, and, returning good for evil, I will clear his words from the false interpretations that have been put upon them, and shew that he knew very well how to express his own meaning, to all but such as were determined to misunderstand him.

The first passage I shall take notice of is,

Scotorum cumulos flevit glacialis Ierne.

Where shall we find the Roman historian who says his countrymen ever invaded Ireland? Yet such an invasion is absolutely necessary to make any sense of this line, to those who think those *Scoti* were Hibernians. For the Poet here places before our eyes the Goddess or Nymph Ierne as present on the spot, and weeping over the heaps of her slaughtered friends, who lay before her. For it is well known that

that these local Genii very rarely, if ever, travelled out of their own country: So we must look for this *Ierne* somewhere else. If any one should suspect that I am biased by national vanity to affirm that this was a picture of the dismal fate of my own countrymen, he is certainly little acquainted with the feelings of the human heart. I cannot think it an honour to any nation to be defeated: And, even at the distance of 1400 years, I feel the natural partiality of my country suggesting a wish, that these *cumuli* had been *cumuli* of Romans, or of any other people, rather than of Caledonian Scots. But, however unwilling, the love of truth, and the honour of the Poet, whom I am defending from misrepresentations, compel me to acknowledge, that the *Ierne* he mentions is the river known by the name of the Water of *Erne*, in *Strath-Erne*. The Poet seems to have been well acquainted with the map of the country, since he does not at random mention any river in Scotland, where there are some others more considerable, but, with a particular propriety, points out to us the water of *Erne*, which the Romans could meet with in the first days march beyond their own walls, and which it was necessary for them to pass, to enable them to carry their hostilities farther north; and which, on that account, would be strongly defended by the assembled Caledonians. I am sorry they had so ill success in their attempts to defend their country from so powerful invaders. I know it will be alledged, that *Strath-Erne* is but a very small part of Scotland; but it has been already shown to be a pass of great importance in that contest; and it is quite familiar to poets to name a part for the whole. This is a figure so well known, even to school boys, that it would be trifling to produce particular examples. A learned, a profound, and acute dissertator, might say, on occasion, 'I have left England, and am going to Italy;' a poet would perhaps express himself in some such way as this,

Farewel to Thames, all hail to Tyber's stream.

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There is an epithet in the line I have been treating of, that pointedly shows Ireland not to have been intended here by the word *Ierne*. I dare say nobody will deny this proposition, that Claudian either did understand, or did not understand, the subject of which he was writing. If he understood it not, his words must pass for nothing; if he did understand it, he could never call Ireland *Glacialis*, since it is certainly the part of Europe, to the north of the Alps and Pyrenees, that suffers least from the severity of frost. Oſſian, whose authority is admitted by Mr Whitaker, and who certainly visited it much oftener than Claudian, calls it *Green-Erin*. Several plants, which, when imported to Britain, are often cut off by the frost in the gardens of England, are indigenous in Ireland, and flourish spontaneously in the forests. I travelled through more than two-thirds of its length in winter. The snow, which melted as it fell, discovered as fresh a verdure as ever I saw in England in April: As it was then in the middle of December, I soon felt how the frost bit, when, after a short passage of three hours, I landed in the island of which the Caledonian *Ierne* makes a part. It may even be doubted whether the Poet did not insert the word *Glacialis* intentionally, to prevent that line from being applied to Ireland, as the ambiguous word *Ierne* might otherwise have led people into a mistake.

A few words will suffice for the other passage of Claudian:

—Totam cum Scotus Iernem
Movit, et infesto spumavit remige Tethys.

The Poet could not have told us more distinctly that the Caledonians had stirred up all Ireland, who came to assist them with so numerous an army, that it took a multitude of *curachs* to carry them. Who could understand this otherwise? Could any man doubt my meaning, if I should say, that North America has stirred up France and Spain,

who

who now send their fleets to the British Channel? In the lines quoted, the *Scotus* and the *Ierne* are as opposite, and as distinct from one another, as America is from France and Spain in the prose.

Having been obliged, in this disquisition, to overthrow an opinion that had a powerful supporter, it has run out to a greater length than I expected; yet, as the doubt about the ancient name of the *Scots* has arisen from the silence of the Latin writers of a certain period, I cannot help remarking, that there is something very unaccountable in the names that one nation gives to another; of which I will trouble you only with a few striking examples, though I could make out a long list of them.

Egypt and *Nile* are words unknown to the Egyptians.

The word *Graecus* was scarcely known to the Greeks.

The *Morlachi*, subject to an Italian state, knew not the word *Italian*.

The people whom we call *Dutch*, know not themselves by that name.

The nation whom we call *Bohemians*, acknowledge not that name.

I purposely leave out some of the true names of nations, as it more evidently shows how people may be easily misled, and misguided, in that point. But there are other instances more immediately to the present purpose. Few Englishmen know that the true name of the *Welsh* is *Cymri*; thousands of the *Cymri* never heard of the *English*, though living under the same government, and ruled by the same laws. We need therefore be the less surprised if Latin authors have

led us into mistakes and ambiguities, by not marking distinctly the proper appellations of the different people of the British Isles, since every nation of Europe falls into similar blunders every day.

1st, Mr Whitaker seems to me to be mistaken when he calls the Caledonian Scots by the name of *Greones*; but I chose to use the same name he gave them, that the question might not be perplexed by a geographical discussion.

2^d, *Pol moi* is Gaelic for *the miry place in the plains*; or, if we take it in another way, *pol moi t-ir*, *the miry place of the watery plain*. Those who have read the account of the manner in which that palus meotis is formed, may judge whether there does not appear some connection of the language of the Gaelic with that of the Scythians.

3^d, The affecting story of the afflicted, but heroic Queen, who was forced, by the oppression of the Romans, to take up arms against them, is so well known, that it would be needless to repeat it here.