

Patrick Geddes

The Scots Renaissance

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I have scanned this paper by Geddes, the pioneering human ecologist, on account of its moving description of the quasi-state funeral of John Stuart Blackie in Edinburgh in March 1895. To me it speaks deeply to the Spirit of Scottish culture - around which we must seek continued "renascence" not just for Scotland, but in the spirit of Scots Internationalism, for (and in part, informed by) the world. While much of Blackie's work was specific to his time and written sometimes in the roundabout manner of his times, some of what he said continues to speak powerfully to cultural renaissance in a way that remains pressing to us in the 21st century. That's why I've scanned 2 of his papers, this third making up a kind of triptych retrospective. This particular paper was reprinted in a special edition of the *Edinburgh Review* on Geddes edited by Murdo MacDonald (now professor of Scottish Art History at Dundee). For further material on Geddes there see on the web, including Mike Small's site at: <http://patrickgeddes.co.uk/>. The other 2 Blackie items I've scanned are:

J.S. Blackie's "On the Advancement of Learning in Scotland," at:
www.alastairmcintosh.com/general/resources/2010-Blackie-Learning.pdf

J.S. Blackie's Inaugural Lecture, "Classical Literature in its Relation to the Nineteenth Century and Scottish University Education," at:
www.alastairmcintosh.com/general/resources/2010-Blackie-Inaugural.pdf

A listing of other rare 3rd party scholarly resources I've posted is at:
www.alastairmcintosh.com/general/resources.htm

Alastair McIntosh, April 2010.

The Scots Renaissance

I
BLACKIE* was buried yesterday. At the High Kirk, as he would have wished it, his old friend and comrade Walter Smith shared the service with Cameron Lees, Flint and the Moderators - Free Kirk and Auld Kirk uniting in the historic Kirk, as this merged into that communion of multitudinous sorrow, that reverent throng amid which the broad Cathedral was but the sounding chancel, the square and street the silent transept and nave. Psalm and prayer, choir and organ rolled their deepest, yet the service had a climax beyond the Hallelujah - the pipes, as they led the procession slowly out, giving the 'Land o' the Leal' a new pathos, and stirring the multitude with a penetrating and vibrating intensity which is surely in no other music. The big man beside me broke down, and sobbed like a child; the lump comes back to one's own throat, the eyes dim again, as one remembers it. It was a new and strange instrument, strangest perhaps even to those who knew well its Mænad call to dance, its demonic scream and thrill of war. For here were inter-pulsating all the wildness with all the majesty of Celtic sorrow, the eerie song of northern winds and the roar of western tides. The sigh and wail of women, the pride and lament of chiefs, gathered of old into bardic monologue and chorus, were all in this weirdest, wildest, most elemental music. So again pealed forth the chant of Ossian over an unreturning hero amid the undying moan of Merlin for a passing world.

In front went a long procession of Societies headed by kilt and plaid; behind came the mourning kinsmen, with the Advocates, the Senate, the Students, and the Town Council, in their varied robes; then the interminable carriages of personal friends.

But better than all these, the Town itself was out; the working people in their thousands and tens of thousands lined the way from St Giles' to the Dean; the very windows and balconies were white with faces. Coming down the Mound, in full mid-amphitheatre of Edinburgh, filled as perhaps never before, with hushed assemblage of city and nation, the pipes suddenly changed their song, ceased their lament, and 'Scots Wha Hae' rang out in strenuous blast; the anthem of a Renascent - ever renascent - unconquerably renascent people. 'If Blackie himself could have heard that,' 'could have seen this' - the whisper went through crowd and procession, when the music changed again.

*Professor of Greek at the University of Edinburgh.

For those who were not there the scene is well-nigh as easy to picture as for us to recall: the wavy lane, close-walled with drawn and deepened faces, the long black procession marching slow, sprinkled with plaid and plume, crowded with College cap and gown, with civic scarlet and ermine, marshalled by black draped maces. In the midst the Black Watch pipers marching their slowest and stateliest – then the four tall black-maned horses – the open bier, with plain unpolished oaken coffin high upon a pyramid of flowers, a mound of tossing lilies, with Henry Irving's lyre of violets 'To the Beloved Professor,' its silence fragrant, at its foot. Upon the coffin lay the Skye women's plaid, above his brows the Prime Minister's wreath, but on his breast a little mound of heather opening into bloom.

II

From this pageant of Edinburgh it is but one step in thought to that solitary Samoan hill, up which dusky chiefs and clansmen, henceforth also brethren of ours, as he of theirs, were so lately bearing our other greatest dead – the foremost son of Edinburgh and Scotland. The leader of nationality in ripest age, the leader of literature in fullest prime, have alike left us. Each was in his own way 'Ultimus Scotorum'; each in his own way the link with our best days of nationality and genius. What then – save 'Finis Scotiae!' – can remain for us to say?

'Finis Scotiae' indeed: yet in what generation has not this been said? What land, alas! has had oftener cause to say it? For whoso has read her Sagas may well ask if Scotland, rather than even her sister- and mother-isle, be not that 'most distressful country that ever yet was seen.' And yet, though age pass away at evening and manhood be reft from us at noon, new dawn ever comes, and with it new youth. To the baser spirits the Saga of their fathers is nought – is as if it never was; to the narrower it is all, but ended; yet to others it is much, and in no wise closed!

We will not boast overmuch of that incessant, oftentimes too depleting, efflux of astute yet fiery Scots adventurers who since the Union of the Crowns have mainly carried out their careers in England, as erstwhile on the Continent, heading her senates or ruling her empires, leading her commerce or moulding her thought. Nor need we here speak of those who think that because we would not quarrel with brother Bull, nor abandon our part in the larger responsibilities of united nationality and race, we must needs also sink the older loves and kinships, the smaller nationality wholly. Never before indeed, not even in the interregnum of the War of Independence, not after the Union of the Crowns or Parliaments, not after Culloden, has there been so large a proportion of Scotsmen

conscientiously educating their children outside every main element of that local and popular culture, that racial aptitude and national tradition, upon which full effectiveness at home, and even individual success elsewhere, have always depended, and must continue to depend. But to this spoiling of what might be good Scots to make indifferent Englishmen, natural selection will always continue to oppose some limit. Nor need we analyse the current forms of dull prosperity, of soul-deep hypocrisy so rife among us – in this 'east-windy, west-endy town' above others – that routine-fixed intellect and frozen heart against which Blackie's very extravagances were part of his testimony. There are signs that some reaction in all these matters is at hand; and it is after all the narrower, not the baser view of nationality that is the danger. For we have gone on increasing our libations and orations every St Andrew's Day, the same for St Robbie's and now for St Walter's, till all the world perforce must join our revels. But all this while the history we boast of has become well-nigh unknown among us, the education we boast of (despite University and school 'Commissions' and the like) steadily falls behind that of other European countries and even of Canada and the Colonies. Science and law go dormant, literature disappears, medicine even makes money; and so on. Yet from patriotism to fool's paradise, as between all extremes, there is but one step, and few there be who do not find it.

Where then lies the true patriotism? As in olden warfare, primarily in energy for the living; only secondarily in honours to the dead, fit though these be. Living Scotland – living Greece – living Samoa, – these were the loves and cares of those two men whom we have been honouring; the traditions and heroes of these in full measure afterwards. What then is this Scotland of ours? What life does it actually show? What ideas and what aims are nascent among its youth? What manner of history will they make; what literature will they write? And we – what counsel in thought, what initiative in action, can we offer them? Here are questions (as our Scottish manner is) to ask rather than answer, but to which at some other season we may well return. But may we not learn something of these deeper organic factors of national life and possible renaissance by their existing fruit? What of current literature, of every-day places and people? To the observant pessimist the impression is depressing enough. The vacant place of native literature supplied with twaddle and garbage in varying proportion, settled by the fluctuation of newsagents' imports; cities corresponding medleys of the squalid and the dull; people in keeping – mean or intemperate in mind, when not also in body, canny to one fault, fanatical to another, – even the few wise timidly discreet, the few noble indiscreetly valiant.

But even were such hard sayings fully warranted, a reply remains – that these are phenomena of Winter, not of Spring – of death, not life. The slush of winter concerns us little; when buds begin to swell and shoots to peep, it delays little though the decaying leaves to pierce be deep and many – in the long run it even helps. Shrewd and practical intelligence yet ardent imagination are not necessarily at variance; their co-existence has stamped our essential national virtue and genius, even as their dissociation has defined our besetting sins, our antithetic follies. Industrial initiative and artistic life are reappearing, and each where it was most needed, the first amid this ice-pack of frozen culture, the latter in our western inferno of industry. Architecture too is renascent; the work of the past dozen years will on the whole bear comparison with anything in English or Continental cities, in a few cases may even challenge it, and in at least one case, that of the noble Academic Aula of Edinburgh, carry the challenge back to the best days of the Renaissance. The current resuscitation of Old Edinburgh, more unnoticed just because more organic, is hence a still deeper sign. First came the opening up of the Cathedral, the rebuilding of the City Cross, then of the Castle Gates and Parliament Hall. Now the old courts and closes from Holyrood to Castlehill are slowly but steadily changing, and amid what was and is the most dense and dire confusion of material and human wreck and misery in Europe, we have every here and there some spark of art, some strenuous beginning of civic sanitation, some group of healthy homes of workman and student, of rich and poor, some slight but daily strengthening reunion of Democracy with Culture; and this in no parliamentary and abstract sense, but in the civic and concrete one. The Town House too is on plan, the Castle slums are doomed. Upon the surrounding hills rise the domes and towers of great observatories – this of stars and that of mind; on the nearer slope stands already the Institute of History. Through the old town, so oft aflame, the phoenix, which has long ‘lain among the pots,’ is once more fluttering; and year by year, the possibilities temporal and spiritual of the renascent capital return or appear. The architectural cycle will soon have turned to its ancient starting-point, and the doves rest once more on St Margaret’s chapel pinnacle.

The social and moral cycle also. When we remember how every movement – moral or social, industrial or spiritual – sooner or later takes architectural embodiment, we shall better understand the meaning both of the Old New Town and of this New Old one. We remember too how often architectural movements have accompanied and preceded literary ones. And as in things both social and natural, small types serve as well as great, and straws mark currents, a passing word may be said of our own small beginnings in these

pages. For not merely historic or picturesque sympathies, but practical if distant aims are bringing men back to Old Edinburgh to work and learn. Among the many traditions of the historic houses among which some of these are making their homes, none has been more inspiring, as none more persistently characteristic of Edinburgh than that of Allan Ramsay, who amid much other sowing and planting, edited and published an ‘Evergreen’ in 1724. This little collection of old-world verse, with its return at once to local tradition and living nature, was as little in harmony with the then existing fashion of the day in literature as its new namesake would hope to be with that of our own, – the all-pervading ‘Decadence.’ Yet it helped to urge succeeding writers to higher issues, among which even Percy’s ‘Reliques,’ and Scott’s ‘Border Minstrelsy’ are reckoned. So our new ‘Evergreen’ may here and there stimulate some new and younger writer, and hence beside the general interests common to all men of culture, it would fain now and then add a fresh page to that widely reviving Literature of Locality to which the kindly firesides of Thrum and Zummerzset, the wilder dreamlands of Galway and Caderidris, of Man and Arran and Galloway are ever adding their individual tinge and glow.

So, too, with its expression of youngest Scottish art, its revival of ancient Celtic design. All organic beginnings, to survive and grow, need fit time even more than fortunate place. Nor would we dare to be replanting the old poet’s unsunned hillside were not the Great Frost ended, the Spring gaining surely, however unsteadily, throughout the land, in face of all chill nights and sunless days. Our Flower, our Fruit of yesteryear lies buried; and as yet we have no other. Only here and there peeps and shivers some early bud. But in the dark the seed coat is straining, the chrysalid stirring. Spring is in the world; Spring is in the North.

III

Small signs of Renaissance all these, perhaps illusory ones, many may say – our own countrymen of course most convincingly of all. The Literature of Locality, we are told by many reviewers, has had its little day, and is subsiding into mere clash o’ kirkside, mere havers o’ kailyard; so doubtless the renewal of locality may polarise into slum and respectability once more. Be it so; this season also will have its term. One day noble traditions long forgot will rouse a mightier literature, nobler localities still unvisited bring forth more enduring labours for their crown. Though Charlie may no come back again, though the too knightly king, so long expected back from Flodden, lie for ever ‘mid the Flowers o’ the Forest, though Mary’s fair face still

rouse dispute as of old, the Wizard's magic book still waits unmouldering in his tomb. The prophetic Rhymer listens from Elfland, Arthur sits in the Eildon Hills, Merlin but sleeps in his thorn. For while a man can win power over nature, there is magic; while he can stoutly confront life and death, there is romance. Our recent and current writers have but touched a fringe of their possibilities. The songs of militant nationality may lose their power, the psalmody of Zion no more stir the sons as it was wont to do the fathers, yet gentler voices may reappear, older runes win a reading.

In Iona of my heart, Iona of my love,
 Instead of the voice of monks shall be lowing of cattle,
 But ere the world come to an end
 Iona shall be as it was.

A final picture by way of summary. From our modern perspective a little place like Grahamston on the Edinburgh-Glasgow line, if noticed at all, is only a place of tedious stop. At most here or there a student of Scots literature or local history may remember that it owes its name to that 'Good Grahame of truth and hardiment' who was to Wallace what in more fortunate days the Good Lord James became to Bruce, and whom he buried here after his last battle. Few, however, visit the actual tomb, still fewer with intelligent eyes, unless they have learned to read the concrete tide-marks of history, to interpret the strata laid down by each period, which are to the books called History, as the natural strata to the books of Geology.

But when we have seen the surviving memorials that crowd the Acropolis, and line the Sacred Way, and stand around the Dome of Aachen, we may stop by this little roadside, and find to set in our Schools of History no more noble, no more touching presentment of the indestructible sovereignty of the ever-returning past than a picture of these poor stones, whose very dust to us will then be dear. For when the knightly effigy that it was Wallace's last act of power to lay was trampled dim by unthinking feet, the village folk or their priest laid a new stone and carved its legend in their homely way. This, too, wore out as the centuries went by, but a new stone was laid; again, and yet again, till now four stones rest superposed, a great shrine of the rude modern ironwork of the place at length enclosing all. The monuments of victory in St Paul's, of glory in Westminster, of world-service in the Pantheon, of world-conquest in the Invalides, are each of course great in their way beside this poor tomb, which after all well-nigh fails to preserve from utter forgetfulness the dim hero of one of those innumerable defeats which mark Scottish, which make Celtic history. Yet here the teacher will some day bring his scholars and read them Blind Harry's verse. And so in some young

soul here and there the spirit of the hero and the poet may awaken, and press him onward into a life which can face defeat in turn. Such is our Scottish, our Celtic Renaissance – sadly set betwixt the Keening, the watching over our fathers dead, and the second-sight of shroud rising about each other. Yet this is the Resurrection and the Life, when to faithful love and memory their dead arise.



PATRICK GEDDES

ECOLOGIST EDUCATOR VISUAL THINKER

(Symbol) (Graphic Notations) (Mathematics) (Imagination)