

For Auld Lang Syne—A Scottish Christmas

December 16 2013

Sixty years ago, I spent a year as a student in Scotland. The experience has stayed with me all these years, and looking back, I think it was the most educational year of my life. I went there, not because I chose to, but because the Rotary Club of Shawnee, Oklahoma, which had sponsored me for a fellowship abroad, thought I should go there. Being a student of English Literature, I had hoped to go to England, but Rotary International was paying the bill, and it had another idea. It wanted me to go to Scotland, because there were a number of Rotary clubs there, and it had an interest in promoting them. I knew nothing about the Scottish educational system until I got there, but I soon learned it rivaled any educational system in the world for the serious pursuit of knowledge. I was placed in the charge of a young Scottish tutor who would later become the Poet Laureate of Scotland, and who knew American literature better than I did. He was only a few years older than I was, but I had to do some hard reading just to keep up with him. I had an additional duty, to be “an ambassador of good will“ for Rotary, which meant I was to accept any invitation to visit Scottish Rotary clubs scattered all over Scotland, and to be ready to speak a few words when called on. That was an educational experience in its own right, because it enabled me to travel all over Scotland and be wined and dined at Rotary’s expense. So I accepted lots of invitations and got to know the country well. I did utter a few choice words when called on, which were appreciated in most cases, but on my first visit to the Glasgow club, the largest Rotary Club in the country, I made the mistake of saying I was eager to see Edinburgh, having heard what a beautiful city it was. Glasgow and Edinburgh, the largest cities in Scotland, are only fifty miles apart, but the emotional distance between them is vast. Glasgow is a working man’s city, centered on huge cranes looming over the River Clyde to service the

busy shipbuilding and steamboat trade, while Edinburgh is the political and cultural capital, with two royal residences, Edinburgh Castle perched high above one end of the Royal Mile, and Holyrood House down at the lower end, with Princes Street Gardens in the middle, handsomely planted and featuring a floral clock. I quickly discovered that the rivalry between the two cities is intense, so intense that to praise Edinburgh in Glasgow is like waving a red flag at a bull. On a later invitation to speak at the Edinburgh club, I was careful to give each city equal praise.

Cultural differences aside, both cities house great universities. I found that studying English literature in Scotland was every bit as rewarding as it might have been in England, and the English Department at the University of Glasgow was one of the best in the world. Adam Smith had taught Moral Philosophy at Glasgow before he wrote *The Wealth of Nation*, thereby founding the field of Economics, and James Boswell was a student at Glasgow before he went to London, joined the original Literary Club, and wrote the classic of all literary biographies, *The Life of Johnson*. I knew that Oxford and Cambridge were the oldest and most honored British universities, but I learned that there are four Ancient Scottish Universities, almost as old and honored as Oxford and Cambridge. They are, in order of founding, St. Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh. They enjoy equal respect in Scotland, but it was my good luck to study at the University of Glasgow, which, when I arrived there in the fall of 1951, was celebrating its 500th anniversary. That was one of my first lessons in Scotland, that age breeds wisdom. I knew that the oldest American university, Harvard, had been founded in 1636, a mere three hundred years ago, and I knew that Harvard had always been accorded first place among American universities. Oldest often means best, and history counts wherever you happen to live. A year in Scotland taught me a lot about history as well as about literature.

Scottish universities have their part to play in the British educational system, which differs from the American educational system primarily in the way it treats its students. American education treats its students as if they are all full of promise, each a potential candidate for president. It is the virtue of the American system to personalize education, deal subjectively with students, and inspire confidence in them, setting them on their way to fulfill their fondest dreams. The British system is less indulgent and less personal. It sees students as more or less capable of learning, but needing to be challenged to achieve anything at all worthwhile in their lives. It starts by selecting the most talented students (far fewer than in American universities), and then expecting them to work hard to improve their minds. That means to compete, not just for degrees, but for honors. First class honors is the goal of every Scottish student, but it is rarely attained; the majority of students graduate with second or third class honors, and are glad to get them, or with an ordinary degree, which is no more than a consolation prize. The basic grading scale in the Scottish university system is intimidating. American professors grade on a five point scale, running from A to F, with minuses and pluses to indicate the degree of promise--or lack of it--shown by any given student. Scottish professors grade on a 100 point scale--in principle, but in practice they use only a third of it. A grade below 40 is considered failing, and a grade above 70 is considered impossible. There are no A pluses in the Scottish system. No one, however brilliant, gets more than 70 points on an exam. I learned that lesson the hard way at the end of my first term at the University of Glasgow. It was the Michaelmas term--the fall term to us. (The winter term is Candlemas, and the spring term is Trinity, all three being named for religious holidays. The Scots don't let you forget that all universities were originally Christian, and that Christianity was supreme when the first Scottish universities were founded.) A Scottish university course consisted of large formal lectures and small informal tutorials, an arrangement

I found effective in getting you to learn as much as possible about any given subject. The formal lectures were given by senior professors, and Scottish students on the whole respected them, but woe to the lecturer who made even a slight mistake. Students would hiss at him in unison, If, on the other hand, the lecturer made an especially noteworthy point, students stamped their feet loudly in appreciation. It was instant student evaluation, and I wasn't used to it, but when I asked my tutor about it, he told me that students behaved exactly the same way when he was one of them. I came to see that you can get a certain amount of cathartic pleasure from hissing loudly or stamping your feet enthusiastically.

My first course at Glasgow was in Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, a required subject for English majors. In the formal lectures by the Professor of English Language, I learned about the history of English as a blend of Teutonic dialects brought in by invading German tribes, heavily infused with French after the Norman Conquest, and in the tutorials, conducted by a young instructor, I learned how to pronounce Old English with a Scottish accent and to read the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* of King Alfred the Great, which were compiled in the 9th century. At the end of the Michaelmas term I sat for examination in Old English in a cavernous room in Kelvin Hall, the neo-Gothic edifice of grey stone which towers over the university. We wrote our exams under the watchful eyes of black-robed monitors who paced about, peeking over our shoulders to be sure no one was cheating. That in itself was intimidating enough. But when I was told that the exam papers were going to be read, not in Scotland, but in England, to provide more objective results, I waited nervously for them. After a week or so, they came back, and I was humiliated. My grade on the Anglo-Saxon exam was 67. I had studied hard for that exam, and there I was, faced with the equivalent of a D+ on the comparable American 100 point scale. I was given the news by the Professor—there was only one full professor in any department, and he

was the ultimate authority. When he saw my look of dismay, he added that no one ever scored higher than 70. He congratulated me on my achievement,

I experienced a shock of revelation. I realized that in the Scottish system no illusion of perfection was possible. 70 points out of 100 was the best you could get, no matter how hard you tried. It was a lesson in academic standards which lasted the rest of my professional career.

The differences in the Scottish and American educational systems were the first things I learned in Scotland. I had yet to learn the difference between Christmas and New Year's. In my innocence, I thought they were the beginning and end of a glorious week of vacation from school, in which you gave and received gifts and went to holiday parties that ended with a spirited toast to the New Year. I learned that instead, Christmas was a religious holiday, literally a "holy day," while New Year's Eve was a secular festival. Christmas traditions had evolved over two millennia. They were connected with a definite historical figure. New Year's on the other hand is as old as mankind. The Scots don't even call it by an English name. They call it Hogmanay, a Celtic name whose origin is lost in the mists of time. Hogmanay to Scots is the real holiday. It is more important than Christmas because no one knows where or when it started, and it is loaded with traditions and superstitions older than recorded history. One such custom is for groups of people to go from house to house on Hogmanay, singing carols and begging for presents. People vie to be the first to knock on a door and so to have the honor of becoming the first visitor of the New Year. Another very old custom is to carry a shovelful of live coals from the fireplace in your house to your neighbor's house on New Year's Eve, to start the fires for the coming year. This custom is practiced more often in rural Scotland than in the cities, because people who live in the moors and mountains still keep a peat fire burning to heat their houses, scorning the refinements of electricity and central heating. And always at

Hogmanay you drink a toast to the New Year with a wee dram of scotch—just “whisky” to the Scots, from “usquebaugh” a Gaelic word for the “Water of Life.” And ever since the 18th century, they have sung the song composed by the Scottish national poet, Robert Burns, to celebrate Hogmanay: “For Auld Lang Syne,” The words are Lowland Scots dialect, but everyone understands them. They mean “For Old Time’s Sake,” The song is sung today by people around the world, holding hands to celebrate friendship and fellowship on New Year’s Eve. The song is familiar anytime and anywhere it is sung, but to hear the Scots sing “For Auld Lang Syne? on Hogmanay can bring tears to your eyes. Singing it after partaking of a wee dram of scotch will kindle a warm feeling in the coldest of hearts.

Hogmanay is the national holiday, the day most eagerly awaited and celebrated in Scotland, but Christmas comes a week earlier and is not neglected. If Hogmanay is a tribal rite, Christmas is a time for going to church. The church you go to will certainly be Christian, and will most likely be the Church of Scotland, called the Presbyterian Church in other countries. I had been a Methodist in Oklahoma, but I became a Presbyterian in Scotland without changing my religion a bit. Most Scots go to a midnight communion service on Christmas Eve, participate in the ceremony of worship, hear a sermon on the Nativity, wish each other a Merry Christmas, and then go to bed late, to rise early on Christmas day, ready for an exchange of gifts around the family Christmas tree. All during the holiday week there are Christmas parties, and when I was there sixty years ago, the parties were always formal: white tie and tails or dress kilts for the men, and evening dresses for the ladies. The entertainments included singing familiar hymns, “Adeste, Fideles” and “Silent Night” and many others, along with favorite love songs by Robert Burns such as “My Luve is like a Red Red Rose,” or “The Banks and Braes o’ Bonnie Doon,” or “Comin’ Through the Rye” or the national anthem, “Scots wha hae wi’

Wallace bled.” The soloist would be quite professional, usually a good looking young lassie with a heavenly voice. And there would always be dances--not the customary sedate foxtrot, but Scottish Country Dances, with live bands playing Scottish tunes on fiddles and bagpipes blaring accompaniment. You dressed in evening clothes but you danced country dances. Everyone danced. I was not a good dancer, but I learned the right steps, so that I could follow along, hand in hand or twirling about in couples. My hosts were generous enough to urge me to join them in a round of “The Gay Gordons” (“gay” that is in the old-fashioned sense of “merry”) or “The Dashing White Sergeant,” or “The Eightsome Reel,” which I recognized immediately as the ancestor of the American square dance I had learned a long time ago at home. A night of Scottish Country Dancing can be exercise enough for a week. You leave the party feeling exhausted, but you know you have had a jolly good time filled with gales of laughter. You easily forget the familiar stereotype of Scottish character when you are at a Christmas party. I don’t remember meeting a single dour or a stingy Scot; anywhere. I found them all warm-hearted, generous, and extraordinarily kind to strangers.

The Christmas traditions in Scotland were less peculiar than the traditions of Hogmanay. However, there was one Christmas dinner in Scotland which I will never forget. . I had made friends with a family near Glasgow who invited me to spend occasional weekends at their house in Helensburgh, a handsome town on the Firth of Clyde north of Glasgow. They knew I was far from my home and family, and so they invited me to join them for the Christmas holidays with their cousins, who lived at Lochside House, a country estate in the hills south of Glasgow. We drove down there on Christmas Eve, and I was welcomed into the family. I went happily with them to the midnight service in the nearby Church of Scotland, an intimate and moving ceremony, attended by friends and neighbors who knew each other well. Next day, on

Christmas, after sharing a glass of sherry in the spacious living room, which had windows looking out on the loch, we sat down in the formal dining room to a feast such as I have never had before or since. It is the privilege enjoyed by owners of large estates in Scotland to hunt and fish legally for whatever they find on their property, which might be wild game such as deer or rabbits, or trout and salmon in the loch, but which, on that Christmas day in 1951, was wild swan and grouse. These two splendid fowl, well-roasted, were placed at opposite ends of the long dinner table. Swan, if you haven't eaten it, is larger than turkey and consists almost entirely of white meat, while grouse is about the size of a large chicken and is all dark meat. They were the centerpieces of our Christmas dinner, and accompanying them were roast potatoes, root vegetables and fruit compote, all served with a plentiful supply of good wine. Dessert was a blazing plum pudding liberally doused with hard sauce. Many of the dishes you might well eat at a Christmas dinner at home, but the swan and grouse were exceptional. Christmas dinner in Scotland remains in my mind, as vivid now as it was sixty years ago.

The following day was what they called Boxing Day, an occasion for a foxhunt, which we watched as it gathered outside Lochside House, in a colorful procession of riders dressed in "pink" (really bright red) coats, riding boots, and jockey caps. They were astride spirited horses and were ready to follow a pack of baying hounds, but before taking off, the riders were offered a stirrup cup of whiskey to warm them for the hunt. When they returned late that afternoon from the chase, they had been invigorated by the ride but had nothing to show for it, since they had not succeeded in flushing out a single fox. I watched the hunt from afar, but while the hunters were galloping over the fields, the rest of us observed the custom on Boxing Day of taking presents to all the servants and helpers who worked at the main house, those who did the cooking and serving and cleaning up. Thus ended my three-day Christmas at Lochside House, and on the

following day my friends drove me back to my student “digs,” a single room in a grey stone dwelling on Hillhead Street, near the University of Glasgow, where I began to study for the Candlemas term which would be starting soon after Hogmanay.

I remember Scotland as my first home abroad. It opened my eyes to a larger world than I had ever known. I realized for the first time how provincial I was, how much I needed to enlarge my range of experience and broaden my outlook. I had to make myself a citizen of the world, and learn how to feel at home in a foreign country. The Scots spoke the same language I spoke, but they spoke it with a different accent. I never could learn to speak Glaswegian, the native tongue, a variety of English that was a mostly foreign language to me. Sometimes I had to ask them to explain what they were saying. “She’s a bonnie wee lassie” was familiar enough to hear. as a good looking girl walked by, but when they said “She’s a wee bit of a smasher,” I had to think what they meant. I lived in what they called student “digs,” a rented room near the university, and ate kippers and porridge for breakfast every morning, and if I needed a bath—not more than once a week was the rule—I learned how to get my hot water from the “geezer.” The Scottish burr grew familiar to me, but in the process of trying to understand their dialect and be understood by those who spoke it, I found that I too had developed an accent. It hadn’t occurred to me before I went to Scotland that I spoke English with a Southwestern American accent, and so to make myself clear, I was soon forced to Scotify my English. When I got back home after a year in Scotland, my family told me I spoke with a Scottish accent, and no doubt I did. But they laughed when I told them they spoke with an Oklahoma accent. I knew what I was talking about, because I had gone to a performance of the popular musical, “Okahoma!” on the stage in Scotland and had winced at their imitation of cowboy English. My newly acquired Scottish accent went home with me, but it didn’t last long, Other, more subtle changes did. In one year, I

found I had grown to love Scotland as much as I loved my own country, and to feel completely at home there. I had become as used to the mountains and lakes, the cool damp climate and friendly people of Scotland as I had once been to the windy plains, hot dry climate, and equally friendly people of Oklahoma. Living abroad, I discovered, was a transformative experience. You became a different person without knowing it. I learned that traveling not only broadens but deepens you, making the world seem smaller as your perspective on it widens. The world is no longer so much outside you as inside you. I had gone to Scotland as a stranger to a foreign land; but I came back from it feeling no longer a stranger anywhere. I knew I would never be offered swan and grouse for Christmas dinner again, but I also knew I would never sit down to another Christmas dinner without picturing the swan at one end of the table and the grouse at the other end, reminding me once more of how much a year of studying in Scotland had meant to me.