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# OBSERVATIONS

ON THE PROPRIETY OF PRESERVING THE  
DRESS, THE LANGUAGE, THE POETRY,  
THE MUSIC, AND THE CUSTOMS,  
OF THE  
ANCIENT INHABITANTS OF SCOTLAND.

ADDRESSED TO THE  
HIGHLAND SOCIETIES OF LONDON  
AND OF SCOTLAND.

BY SIR JOHN SINCLAIR, BART. M. P.

TOGETHER WITH THE  
RESOLUTIONS OF THE GENERAL COMMITTEE OF  
THE HIGHLAND SOCIETY OF LONDON,  
REGARDING THOSE SUBJECTS,

*On Thursday, June 28, 1804.*

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———"The Muse,  
" High hovering o'er the broad cerulean scene,  
" Sees Caledonia in romantic view :  
" Her airy mountains, from the waving main,  
" Invested with a keen diffusive sky,  
" BREATHING THE SOUL ACUTE."

THOMSON.

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## OBSERVATIONS, &c.

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SCOTLAND, considering its population and extent, has made a distinguished figure in history. No country in modern times, has produced characters more remarkable for genius, valour, or ability, or for knowledge in the most important arts both of peace and of war; and though the natives of that formerly independent, and hitherto unconquered kingdom, have reason to be proud of the name of *Britons*, which they have acquired since the Union in 1707, yet surely, they ought not to relinquish on that account, all remembrance of the characteristic dress, language, music, or customs of their ancestors. If in these respects they become totally assimilated to the English, Scotland becomes completely confounded in England, whilst its inhabitants at the same

time, can claim no peculiar merit from old English valour, virtue, literature, or fame; whereas, if they consider themselves not only as Britons, *but as Scotchmen*, there are many circumstances, connected with the more remote, and even the modern periods of their history, *which they can recollect with enthusiasm*; as the songs of their ancient Bards;—the tales of former times, when Fingal conquered, and when Ossian sung his praises;—their brave resistance to the Roman arms;—their reiterated victories over the Danes, formerly the terror of the North;—the renowned achievements of a Wallace, a Douglas, and a Bruce, and other celebrated names, in contests with the most warlike nation then existing;—their valour in the service of France, of Holland, and of other Powers;—the share they had in the immortal victories of the great Gustavus;—the manner in which they have distinguished themselves in more recent times, at Fontenoy, at Quebec, on the banks of the Ganges and of the Nile, and on many other important occasions;—their contributing in so material a degree to the revival of learning in Europe;—their having been the means

of establishing some of the most famous universities on the Continent;—the many celebrated authors\* and artists which Scotland has successively produced;—in short, in the words of a distinguished modern poet, the Scots may be accounted

“—————a manly race,  
 “ Of unsubmitting spirit, wise, and brave;  
 “—————thence of unequal bounds  
 “ Impatient, and by tempting glory borne  
 “ O'er every land, for every land their life  
 “ Has flow'd profuse, their piercing genius plann'd,  
 “ And swell'd the pomp of Peace, their faithful toil.” †

or, if less partial authority is required than the testimony of a Scottish poet, let us recollect that the celebrated Earl of Chatham, on the 14th of January, 1766, delivered himself in the British senate, (when alluding to the military services of the Scots), in the following terms: “ I sought for merit wherever it was to

\* The famous Scaliger, alluding to Buchanan, addressed the following elegant compliment to that author, and to his country:

“ Imperii fuerat Romani Scotia fines,  
 “ Romani eloquii Scotia finis erat.”

† Thomson's Seasons. Autumn, line 808.

“ be found. *It is my boast*, that I was the first  
 “ Minister who looked for it, and found it in  
 “ the mountains of the North. I called it forth,  
 “ and drew into your service, an hardy and  
 “ intrepid race of men! men who, when left  
 “ by your jealousy, became a prey to the arti-  
 “ fices of your enemies, and had gone nigh to  
 “ have overturned the state in the war before  
 “ last. These men, in the last war, were brought  
 “ to combat on your side; *they served with*  
 “ *fidelity, as they fought with valour, and conquered*  
 “ *for you in every part of the world.*”

Perhaps the best mode of keeping up that national spirit, which was formerly so conspicuous, that “*fer comme un Ecossois*” became proverbial on the Continent, is occasionally to meet in that garb, which was the ancient dress of their Celtic ancestors, and on such occasions at least, to speak the national language, to listen to the national music and poetry, and to keep up the old customs of the country. With that view, the formation of the Highland Society of London, and of those Societies established in Scotland, cannot be too much commended, more especially as their meetings are intended, not merely

for the sake of social intercourse,\* but to relieve distressed objects, to distribute honorary rewards for public services ; and likewise for the purpose of carrying on such measures as might have a tendency, not only to elevate the character, and to keep up the spirit of their countrymen, but also to promote the improvement and the prosperity of that part of the United kingdom with which they are so peculiarly connected.

In order to explain more fully the ideas which have occurred to me regarding this subject, I shall make a few observations, on the propriety of keeping up the Highland dress, and of rescuing from oblivion the Gaelic language, and the poetry, the music, and customs of the ancient inhabitants of Scotland.

## I. DRESS.

It certainly would be desirable, at the

\* *The feast of Shells* held the first place among the amusements of the ancient Caledonians. It was a sanction which rendered private friendship inviolable ; and by stimulating the mind to the noblest energies, gave rise to events of the greatest national importance.

meetings of Highland Societies, that the greater part of the members should appear in the ancient garb of their country.\* It is unnecessary to tie down all who may attend on such occasions, to one particular uniform, as persons in an advanced period of life, or who are engaged in grave professions, may not think it proper to appear wholly in so unusual a dress, though they may have no objection to wear some particular parts of it; but the generality of the members may feel both a pride and a pleasure in putting on that garb, as it would recal to their remembrance, the high character, and renowned achievements of their ancestors.

There are many disputes regarding the ancient Highland dress, and probably it varied in different ages, and in different districts of Scotland. The following description of it, is the result of the best information I have been able to collect.

The bonnet was not, according to the present style, loaded with innumerable feathers,

\* It would also be proper to use the ancient garb and language at county meetings, and other local assemblies of the inhabitants, in the several districts of the Highlands.

but, when worn by chieftains and other persons of distinction, was, in general, simply ornamented with plumes from the wing of the eagle. The bonnets of the inferior ranks had tufts, or sprigs of trees or shrubs, which distinguished the different clans, as heather by the Macdonalds, holly by the Macfarlanes, fir by the Macgregors, &c.

The coat, or jacket, had short skirts, and was fitted close to the body, so as to display the shape to the best advantage. It was not made of scarlet cloth, but of some plain colour, particularly of dark blue, or dark grass green, or even black,\* with silver or white buttons, and other ornaments. Tartan jackets, also, were common, with gold and other ornaments, as suited the colours used; there being above 100 different sorts of tartan appropriated to the different clans or families in the kingdom.

Though the belted plaid, sometimes of larger and sometimes of smaller dimensions, was very usually worn, particularly during summer, and when persons walked on foot, yet the *trews* were also very common, more especially in the dreary

\* The black cloth was often manufactured in the family, and called *kilt*.

seasons of the year, and among the higher orders, and those who rode on horseback.\*

The trews and stockings were formerly made of the same piece, but the separation of them, and the use of *hose*, is a useful, though probably a modern improvement. The hose, which the French in Egypt called *painted stockings*, (and it is said they felt a peculiar dread of those who wore them), are short checquered stockings, and are suited to every description of the Highland dress.

The shoes were called *brogues*, and were tied with thongs. They were imperfectly tanned, and instead of being tight, so improper for long marches, were made quite easy. It was usual, indeed, for a Highlander, when he was about commencing a journey, to moisten them in the first pool he could find. The half boot and shoe in one, resembling the Roman buskin, was also worn by the Scots.

\* Whether the *philibeg*, or short petticoat, is an old part of the dress, or a modern alteration, is disputed. Many contend, that it was first substituted, on account of its lightness, for the belted plaid, by Highland wood-cutters employed by English companies in Argyle-shire and Lochaber, about the year 1730. The tiews had the seam behind, and a variety of ornaments, which gave it an elegant appearance.

In regard to the plaid, it was made of the *set* or pattern of tartan belonging to the clan of the individual who wore it. The plaid was sometimes worn loose, and sometimes tied round the body with a belt, a part of which, being fixed by a pin to the shoulder, gave it an elegant appearance. The belted plaid was frequently adopted in war, as an easy mode of carrying that part of the dress, and as it could be so quickly thrown off, if found cumbersome in battle. At night it answered the purpose of a blanket.

The dress was considered to be complete, when the person who wore it had a purse and a durk, and sometimes a sword and pistol; for it was not unusual, in those martial ages, to appear at all times, with the instruments of war, which rendered them less tremendous, and preserved a manly and warlike spirit even in peace.

If therefore a dress were to be fixed upon, as a uniform to be worn at the meetings of Highland Societies, or on particular great occasions, I would beg to recommend, a bonnet adorned with the plumes of the eagle, or any feathers of the same sort; the coat or jacket to

be either of tartan, or of dark blue, or dark grass green cloth, or even black, with silver or gold buttons, and other ornaments, fitted close to the body, with short skirts; either the trews, or the belted plaid to be worn as might be most agreeable; also hose, shoes tied with thongs, a durk, a purse, and a plaid. Persons who might not be inclined to go the whole length, to wear such parts of the above dress as they may prefer.

## II. LANGUAGE AND POETRY.

As the Poems of Ossian are at last to be published in the original Gaelic, many individuals may be inclined to acquire that language, for the sake of relishing the beauties of that celebrated poet in his native tongue; and, at any rate, it is of importance, that the proprietors of Highland Estates, and their children, should learn it. It was well observed by a gallant veteran, who had returned to the Highlands after having assisted in the conquest of Egypt, when a stranger remarked to him, that his regiment had obtained great credit on that memorable occasion; “How could it be otherwise,” said he, “when

“ our officers told us *in Gaelic*, to remember the “ honour of our country.” This anecdote proves the advantage that may be derived, at least in a military point of view, by preserving the Gaelic language. For that purpose, and with a view of enabling all persons who may be desirous of acquiring it, to gratify their wishes in that respect, it certainly would be desirable, to recommend the sale of that valuable Gaelic grammar, published by the Rev. Mr. Stewart, and to have a Gaelic dictionary compiled and printed with as little delay as possible. It would be proper also, that all ancient poetry, and other works that may exist in that language, should be collected, and published both in the original, and with an English translation.

### III. MUSIC.

The music of Scotland has long been justly celebrated. It consists of three sorts, the music of war, of the dance, and of the song. In regard to the martial music, and the instrument on which it is played, namely the great Highland pipe, every necessary exertion has already been made, and with very great success, by the

London and the Scotch Societies, to preserve it from that oblivion to which it was fast hastening: and this was a fortunate circumstance, as there is certainly no music which a Highlander would so soon follow to battle, or which animates him so much to great achievements, as the sound of the pipe.\*—The dancing music of Scotland is universally preferred, *for quick steps*, in almost every part of the world, though the true style of playing it is not generally practised. The song, or plaintive music of Scotland, does not require any encouragement from public institutions, as it is so universally known, and stands unrivalled for the happiest possible combination of sound and melody: though it certainly would be advisable to collect any of the ancient song or plaintive music that could yet be discovered in Highland glens, hitherto, for that purpose, unexplored.

\* This has been proved on several critical occasions, when the sound of the pipes in an instant restored the exhausted strength and spirits of Highland corps, and conducted them to victory. The treatise, entitled, “A complete Theory of the Scots Highland Bagpipe,” by the late Mr. Joseph Macdonald, lately published, should be encouraged as much as possible, as it must greatly contribute to the permanent establishment of the national music.

Whether an academy for teaching the dancing music of Scotland, now principally confined to one family, would not be advisable, may be worthy of future consideration.

#### IV. CUSTOMS.

This head does not require any particular illustration, for now that the three kingdoms are happily united into one powerful empire, the preservation of old customs, to any great extent, might keep up national distinctions, which ought to be buried in oblivion. At the same time, when the natives of Scotland do occasionally assemble together, can any one object to eat the oat cake, to taste the whiskey, to circulate the shell, and to partake of the dishes in which the ancient Scots delighted? Indeed an entertainment where such customs are kept up, would be a more gratifying sight to a foreigner, or even to a native of England, than any feast, however luxurious, to which they could possibly be asked; transporting the spectator, as if it were by magic, among a new race of people; and giving him an idea of the manners and usages of times very remote from the present.

## CONCLUSION.

On the whole, by adopting such measures as have been hinted at in the preceding observations, with such improvements as may occur to the Societies to whom they are addressed, a national spirit would be excited and preserved, in a manner that could not fail to be peculiarly gratifying to the feelings of those who promoted it, and in the result would be highly creditable to the country they came from. Indeed if such plans were adopted, and if their ancient character is thus maintained, it can hardly be doubted, that the Scots would be considered the most respectable race of people, not forming a separate government, but incorporated with a greater, and more powerful nation, of any, in a similar predicament, that exists in Europe.

JOHN SINCLAIR.

*London,*  
27 June, 1804.

RESOLUTIONS  
OF THE  
GENERAL COMMITTEE  
OF THE  
HIGHLAND SOCIETY OF LONDON,  
ON THURSDAY, the 28th of JUNE, 1804.

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RESOLVED, I. That it is the opinion of this Committee, that the adoption of the Highland Dress, to be worn at the Meetings of the Society,\* would be a proper mark of respect to the memory of those great and distinguished characters, who formerly wore that garb; leaving it at the same time in the option of the members to wear either the whole or any part of that dress, as they may prefer.

\* Indeed any members of the Highland Societies of London, or of Scotland, would find the Highland Dress an excellent garb to wear at foreign courts, not only from its elegance, but as the Scotch character is so much respected in foreign countries.

RESOLVED, II. That in order to extend the knowledge of the ancient language of Scotland, the Gaelic Grammar, printed by the Rev. Mr. Stewart, be taken under the patronage of the Society, and that measures be also adopted, for having a Gaelic Dictionary published as soon as possible.

RESOLVED, III. That these Resolutions, together with the Paper drawn up by Sir John Sinclair, regarding the propriety of preserving the Dress and the ancient Language, Poetry, Music, and Customs of Scotland, be printed, and that copies thereof be transmitted to every Member of the Society, and to the Highland Societies of Scotland.





