

# *The Invention of Tradition*

*Edited by*

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and

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(1983) 1992

 **CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## I. Introduction: Inventing Traditions

ERIC HOBSBAWM

Nothing appears more ancient, and linked to an immemorial past, than the pageantry which surrounds British monarchy in its public ceremonial manifestations. Yet, as a chapter in this book establishes, in its modern form it is the product of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. 'Traditions' which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented. Anyone familiar with the colleges of ancient British universities will be able to think of the institution of such 'traditions' on a local scale, though some – like the annual Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols in the chapel of King's College, Cambridge on Christmas Eve – may become generalized through the modern mass medium of radio. This observation formed the starting-point of a conference organized by the historical journal *Past & Present*, which in turn forms the basis of the present book.

The term 'invented tradition' is used in a broad, but not imprecise sense. It includes both 'traditions' actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period – a matter of a few years perhaps – and establishing themselves with great rapidity. The royal Christmas broadcast in Britain (instituted in 1932) is an example of the first; the appearance and development of the practices associated with the Cup Final in British Association Football, of the second. It is evident that not all of them are equally permanent, but it is their appearance and establishment rather than their chances of survival which are our primary concern.

'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. A striking example is the deliberate choice of a Gothic style for the nineteenth-century

rebuilding of the British parliament, and the equally deliberate decision after World War II to rebuild the parliamentary chamber on exactly the same basic plan as before. The historic past into which the new tradition is inserted need not be lengthy, stretching back into the assumed mists of time. Revolutions and 'progressive movements' which break with the past, by definition, have their own relevant past, though it may be cut off at a certain date, such as 1789. However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of 'invented' traditions is that the continuity with it is largely factitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition. It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the 'invention of tradition' so interesting for historians of the past two centuries.

'Tradition' in this sense must be distinguished clearly from 'custom' which dominates so-called 'traditional' societies. The object and characteristic of 'traditions', including invented ones, is invariance. The past, real or invented, to which they refer imposes fixed (normally formalized) practices, such as repetition. 'Custom' in traditional societies has the double function of motor and fly-wheel. It does not preclude innovation and change up to a point, though evidently the requirement that it must appear compatible or even identical with precedent imposes substantial limitations on it. What it does is to give any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history. Students of peasant movements know that a village's claim to some common land or right 'by custom from time immemorial' often expresses not a historical fact, but the balance of forces in the constant struggle of village against lords or against other villages. Students of the British labour movement know that 'the custom of the trade' or of the shop may represent not ancient tradition, but whatever right the workers have established in practice, however recently, and which they now attempt to extend or defend by giving it the sanction of perpetuity. 'Custom' cannot afford to be invariant, because even in 'traditional' societies life is not so. Customary or common law still shows this combination of flexibility in substance and formal adherence to precedent. The difference between 'tradition' and 'custom' in our sense is indeed well illustrated here. 'Custom'

is what judges do; 'tradition' (in this instance invented tradition) is the wig, robe and other formal paraphernalia and ritualized practices surrounding their substantial action. The decline of 'custom' inevitably changes the 'tradition' with which it is habitually intertwined.

A second, less important, distinction that must be made is between 'tradition' in our sense and convention or routine, which has no significant ritual or symbolic function as such, though it may acquire it incidentally. It is evident that any social practice that needs to be carried out repeatedly will tend, for convenience and efficiency, to develop a set of such conventions and routines, which may be de facto or de jure formalized for the purposes of imparting the practice to new practitioners. This applies to unprecedented practices (such as the work of an aircraft pilot) as much as to long-familiar ones. Societies since the industrial revolution have naturally been obliged to invent, institute or develop new networks of such convention or routine more frequently than previous ones. Insofar as they function best when turned into habit, automatic procedure or even reflex action, they require invariance, which may get in the way of the other necessary requirement of practice, the capacity to deal with unforeseen or uninhabited contingencies. This is a well-known weakness of routinization or bureaucratization, particularly at the subaltern levels where invariant performance is generally considered the most efficient.

Such networks of convention and routine are not 'invented traditions' since their functions, and therefore their justifications, are technical rather than ideological (in Marxian terms they belong to 'base' rather than 'superstructure'). They are designed to facilitate readily definable practical operations, and are readily modified or abandoned to meet changing practical needs, always allowing for the inertia which any practice acquires with time and the emotional resistance to any innovation by people who have become attached to it. The same applies to the recognized 'rules' of games or other patterns of social interaction, where these exist, or to any other pragmatically based norms. Where these exist in combination with 'tradition', the difference is readily observable. Wearing hard hats when riding makes practical sense, like wearing crash helmets for motor-cyclists or steel helmets for soldiers; wearing a particular type of hard hat in combination with hunting pink makes an entirely different kind of sense. If this were not so, it would be as easy to change the 'traditional' costume of fox-hunters as it is to substitute

a differently shaped helmet in armies – rather conservative institutions – if it can be shown to provide more effective protection. Indeed, it may be suggested that ‘traditions’ and pragmatic conventions or routines are inversely related. ‘Tradition’ shows weakness when, as among liberal Jews, dietary prohibitions are justified pragmatically, as by arguing that the ancient Hebrews banned pork on grounds of hygiene. Conversely, objects or practices are liberated for full symbolic and ritual use when no longer fettered by practical use. The spurs of Cavalry officers’ dress uniforms are more important for ‘tradition’ when there are no horses, the umbrellas of Guards officers in civilian dress lose their significance when not carried tightly furled (that is, useless), the wigs of lawyers could hardly acquire their modern significance until other people stopped wearing wigs.

Inventing traditions, it is assumed here, is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition. The actual process of creating such ritual and symbolic complexes has not been adequately studied by historians. Much of it is still rather obscure. It is presumably most clearly exemplified where a ‘tradition’ is deliberately invented and constructed by a single initiator, as for the Boy Scouts by Baden-Powell. Perhaps it is almost as easily traced in the case of officially instituted and planned ceremonies, since they are likely to be well documented, as in the case of the construction of Nazi symbolism and the Nuremberg party rallies. It is probably most difficult to trace where such traditions are partly invented, partly evolved in private groups (where the process is less likely to be bureaucratically recorded), or informally over a period of time as, say, in parliament and the legal profession. The difficulty is not only one of sources but also of techniques, though there are available both esoteric disciplines specializing in symbolism and ritual, such as heraldry and the study of liturgy, as well as Warburgian historic disciplines for the study of such subjects. Unfortunately neither are usually familiar to historians of the industrial era.

There is probably no time and place with which historians are concerned which has not seen the ‘invention’ of tradition in this sense. However, we should expect it to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they were not applicable, or when such old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators no longer prove

sufficiently adaptable and flexible, or are otherwise eliminated: in short, when there are sufficiently large and rapid changes on the demand or the supply side. Such changes have been particularly significant in the past 200 years, and it is therefore reasonable to expect these instant formalizations of new traditions to cluster during this period. This implies, incidentally, against both nineteenth-century liberalism and more recent ‘modernization’ theory that such formalizations are not confined to so-called ‘traditional’ societies, but also have their place, in one form or another, in ‘modern’ ones. Broadly speaking this is so, but one must beware of making the further assumptions, firstly that older forms of community and authority structure, and consequently the traditions associated with them, were unadaptable and became rapidly unviable, and secondly that ‘new’ traditions simply resulted from the inability to use or adapt old ones.

Adaptation took place for old uses in new conditions and by using old models for new purposes. Old institutions with established functions, references to the past and ritual idioms and practices might need to adapt in this way: the Catholic Church faced with new political and ideological challenges and major changes in the composition of the faithful (such as the notable feminization both of lay piety and of clerical personnel);<sup>1</sup> professional armies faced with conscription; ancient institutions such as law-courts now operating in a changed context and sometimes with changed functions in new contexts. So were institutions enjoying nominal continuity, but in fact turning into something very very different, such as universities. Thus Bahnson<sup>2</sup> has analysed the sudden decline, after 1848, of the traditional practice of mass student exodus from German universities (for reasons of conflict or demonstration) in terms of the changed academic character of universities, the rising age of the student population, its embourgeoisement which diminished town/gown tensions and student riotousness, the new institution of free mobility between universities, the consequent change in student associations and other factors.<sup>3</sup> In all such cases novelty is no less novel for being able to dress up easily as antiquity.

<sup>1</sup> See for instance G. Tihon, ‘Les religieuses en Belgique du XVIIIe au XXe siècle: Approche Statistique’, *Belgisch Tijdschrift v. Nieuwste Geschiedenis/Revue Belge d’Histoire Contemporaine*, vii (1976), pp. 1–54.

<sup>2</sup> Karsten Bahnson, *Akademische Auszüge aus deutschen Universitäts und Hochschulorten* (Saarbrücken, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Seventeen such exoduses are recorded in the eighteenth century, fifty in 1800–48, but only six from 1848 to 1973.

must be novel, whatever the historic continuities of Jews or Middle Eastern Muslims, since the very concept of territorial states of the currently standard type in their region was barely thought of a century ago, and hardly became a serious prospect before the end of World War I. Standard national languages, to be learned in schools and written, let alone spoken, by more than a smallish elite, are largely constructs of varying, but often brief, age. As a French historian of Flemish language observed, quite correctly, the Flemish taught in Belgium today is not the language which the mothers and grandmothers of Flanders spoke to their children: in short, it is only metaphorically but not literally a 'mother-tongue'. We should not be misled by a curious, but understandable, paradox: modern nations and all their impedimenta generally claim to be the opposite of novel, namely rooted in the remotest antiquity, and the opposite of constructed, namely human communities so 'natural' as to require no definition other than self-assertion. Whatever the historic or other continuities embedded in the modern concept of 'France' and 'the French'—and which nobody would seek to deny—these very concepts themselves must include a constructed or 'invented' component. And just because so much of what subjectively makes up the modern 'nation' consists of such constructs and is associated with appropriate and, in general, fairly recent symbols or suitably tailored discourse (such as 'national history'), the national phenomenon cannot be adequately investigated without careful attention to the 'invention of tradition'.

Finally, the study of the invention of tradition is interdisciplinary. It is a field of study which brings together historians, social anthropologists and a variety of other workers in the human sciences, and cannot adequately be pursued without such collaboration. The present book brings together, in the main, contributions by historians. It is to be hoped that others will also find it useful.

## 2. *The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland*

HUGH TREVOR-ROPER

Today, whenever Scotchmen gather together to celebrate their national identity, they assert it openly by certain distinctive national apparatus. They wear the kilt, woven in a tartan whose colour and pattern indicates their 'clan'; and if they indulge in music, their instrument is the bagpipe. This apparatus, to which they ascribe great antiquity, is in fact largely modern. It was developed after, sometimes long after, the Union with England against which it is, in a sense, a protest. Before the Union, it did indeed exist in vestigial form; but that form was regarded by the large majority of Scotchmen as a sign of barbarism: the badge of roguish, idle, predatory, blackmailing Highlanders who were more of a nuisance than a threat to civilized, historic Scotland. And even in the Highlands, even in that vestigial form, it was relatively new: it was not the original, or the distinguishing badge of Highland society.

Indeed, the whole concept of a distinct Highland culture and tradition is a retrospective invention. Before the later years of the seventeenth century, the Highlanders of Scotland did not form a distinct people. They were simply the overflow of Ireland. On that broken and inhospitable coast, in that archipelago of islands large and small, the sea unites rather than divides and from the late fifth century, when the Scots of Ulster landed in Argyll, until the mid-eighteenth century, when it was 'opened up' after the Jacobite revolts, the West of Scotland, cut off by mountains from the East, was always linked rather to Ireland than to the Saxon Lowlands. Racially and culturally, it was a colony of Ireland.

Even politically these two Celtic societies, of Ireland and the Western Highlands, merged into each other. The Scots of Dalriada retained, for a century, their foothold in Ulster. The Danes ruled equally over the Western Islands, the coasts of Ireland and the Isle of Man. And in the later Middle Ages the Macdonald Lords of the Isles were nearer and more effective rulers both in Western Scotland and in Northern Ireland than their nominal sovereigns, the kings of

It took a full century to clear Scottish history – if it has ever been cleared – of the distorting and interdependent fabrications of the two Macphersons.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, these two insolent pretenders had achieved a lasting triumph: they had put the Scottish Highlander on the map. Previously despised alike by the Lowland Scots, a disorderly savages, and by the Irish as their unlettered poor kinsmen they were now celebrated throughout Europe as a *Kulturvolk* which when England and Ireland had been sunk in primitive barbarism, had produced an epic poet of exquisite refinement and sensibility, equal (said Madame de Staël), superior (said F. A. Wolf), to Homer. Now was it only in literature that they had thus drawn the attention of Europe. For once the links with Ireland had been cut, and the Scottish Highlands had acquired – however fraudulently – an independent ancient culture, the way was open to signalize that independence by peculiar traditions. The tradition which was now established was a peculiarity of dress.

In 1805 Sir Walter Scott wrote, for publication in the *Edinburgh Review*, an essay on Macpherson's Ossian. In it he showed, characteristically, sound scholarship and good sense. He decisively rejected the authenticity of the epic which the Scottish literary establishment in general, and the Highlanders in particular, continued to defend. But, in the same essay he remarked, parenthetically, that it was undeniable that the ancient Caledonian of the third century A.D. had worn 'a tartan philibeg'. In so rational and critical an essay, this confident assertion is surprising. Never before – as far as I know – has such a claim been made. Even Macpherson had never suggested it; his Ossian had always been represented in a flowing robe, and his instrument, incidentally, had been not the bagpipe but the harp. But then Macpherson was himself a Highlander and he was a generation older than Scott. This, in such a matter, made a great difference.

When did the 'tartan philibeg', the modern kilt, come to be the costume of the Highlander? The facts are not really in doubt, especially since the publication of Mr J. Telfer Dunbar's excellent work.<sup>6</sup> Whereas tartan – that is, cloth woven in a geometrical pattern

<sup>5</sup> Thus – as was pointed out by the most learned scholar in the subject, Ludwig Stern, in his important essay 'Die Ossianischen Heldenlieder', translated in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, xxii (1897–8) – the article on Macpherson in the *D.N.B.* 'homologates the views of imperfectly informed apologists' and the Albanogaelic lexicographers have damaged their work by taking part of their material from Macpherson's 'faulty and un-gaelic Ossian', i.e. the spurious Gaelic version of Ossian's poems published in 1807.

<sup>6</sup> J. Telfer Dunbar, *History of the Highland Dress* (1962).

of colours – was known in Scotland in the sixteenth century (it seems to have come from Flanders and reached the Highlands through the Lowlands), the philibeg – name and thing – is unknown before the eighteenth century. So far from being a traditional Highland dress, it was invented by an Englishman after the Union of 1707; and the differentiated 'clan tartans' are an even later invention. They were designed as part of a pageant devised by Sir Walter Scott in honour of a Hanoverian king; and owe their present form to two other Englishmen.

Since the Scottish Highlanders were, in origin, merely Irishmen who had crossed from one island to another, it is natural to suppose that originally their dress was the same as that of the Irish. And indeed this is what we find. It is not till the sixteenth century that any writer records any peculiarities of the Highland dress, but all the accounts of that time are in substantial agreement. They show that the ordinary dress of the Highlanders was a long 'Irish' shirt (in Gaelic, *leine*) which the higher classes – as in Ireland – dyed with saffron (*leine-croich*); a tunic or *faithin*; and a cloak or plaid which the higher classes had woven in many colours or stripes but which in general was of a russet or brown effect, as protective colouring in the heather. In addition, the Highlanders wore shoes with a single sole (the higher classes might wear buskins) and flat soft caps, generally blue. In battle, the leaders wore chain mail while the lower classes wore a padded linen shirt painted or daubed with pitch and covered with deer skins. Besides this normal dress, chieftains and great men who had contact with the more sophisticated inhabitants of the Lowlands might wear trews: a combination of breeches and stockings. Trews could only be worn out of doors in the Highlands by men who had attendants to protect or carry them: they were therefore a mark of social distinction. Both plaid and trews were probably of tartan.<sup>7</sup>

In the course of the seventeenth century – the century in which the link between the Highlands and Ireland was broken – the Highland costume was changed. The changes occurred irregularly over the century. First, the long shirt fell into disuse. In the islands it was replaced by the Lowland coat, waistcoat and breeches early in the century.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, a Scottish minister long afterwards

<sup>7</sup> These accounts came from John Major, *Historia Maioris Britanniae* (1521); James Leslie, *De Moribus et Gestis Scotorum* (1570); Lindsay of Pitcottie, *Chronicle* (1573); G. Buchanan, *Rerum Scotticarum Historia* (1583); Nicolay d'Arville, *La Navigation du Roy d'Escoce* (1583). The evidence is set out in D. W. Stewart, *Old and Rare Scottish Tartans* (Edinburgh, 1893), Introduction.

<sup>8</sup> M. Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland* (1703).

recalled that the wild Highlanders in the Jacobite army which passed through his parish in 1715 wore 'neither plaid nor philibeg' but merely a home-made close-fitting coat of one colour, stretching below mid-leg, with a belt.<sup>9</sup> This is the latest evidence, as far as I know, of the survival of the *leine* in Scotland.

Throughout the seventeenth century, Highland armies fought in the civil wars of Britain, and, whenever they are described, we find that the officers wore trews while the common soldiers had their legs and thighs bare. Both officers and men wore the plaid, the former as an upper garment, the latter covering the whole body, belted round the waist so that the lower part, below the belt, formed a kind of skirt. In this form, it was known as the *breacan* or 'belted plaid'. The essential fact is that, as yet, there was no mention of the kilt, as we know it. The alternative was the gentlemanly trews or the 'servile' belted plaid.<sup>10</sup>

The name 'kilt' first appears twenty years after the Union. Edward Burt, an English officer posted to Scotland as chief surveyor under General Wade, then wrote a series of letters, mainly from Inverness, describing the character and customs of the country. In these he gives a careful description of the 'quelt', which, he explains, is not a distinct garment but simply a particular method of wearing the plaid, set in folds and girt round the waist to make of it a short petticoat that reaches half-way down the thigh, and the rest is brought over the shoulders and then fastened before... so that they make pretty near the appearance of the poor women in London when they bring their gowns over their heads to shelter them from the rain. This petticoat, Burt adds, was normally worn 'so very short that in a windy day, going up a hill, or stooping, the indecency of it is plainly discovered'. His description makes it clear that he is describing not the modern kilt but the belted plaid.

Burt was explicit about the Highland dress because already, in his time, it was the object of political controversy. After the Jacobite rebellion of 1715 the British parliament had considered banning it by law, as the Irish dress had been banned under Henry VIII: such

<sup>9</sup> John Pinkerton, *Literary Correspondence* (1830), i, p. 230. The minister was the father of the philosopher Adam Ferguson.

<sup>10</sup> This is shown by the evidence presented by Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 21. It is illustrated most graphically in the supporters of the arms of Skene of that Ilk - two Highlanders, one (a sword-bearing gentleman) wearing trews, the other in 'a servill habit', i.e. a belted plaid (not as Stewart supposes a kilt: on this see Dunbar, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-5).

a ban, it was thought, would help to break up the distinct Highland way of life and integrate the Highlanders into modern society. However, in the end the proposed law was not passed. The Highland dress, it was conceded, was convenient and necessary in a country where a traveller must 'skip over the rocks and bogs and lie all night in the hills'. It was also a necessity for the poor, for it was very cheap: 'a few shillings will buy this dress for an ordinary Highlander' who could never afford even the coarsest 'Lowland suit'.

It is ironical that if the Highland dress had been banned after 'the Fifteen' instead of after 'the Forty Five', the kilt, which is now regarded as one of the ancient traditions of Scotland, would probably never have come into existence. It came into existence a few years after Burt wrote, and very close to the area in which he wrote. Unknown in 1726, it suddenly appeared a few years later; and by 1746 it was sufficiently well established to be explicitly named in the act of parliament which then forbade the Highland dress. Its inventor was an English Quaker from Lancashire, Thomas Rawlinson.

The Rawlinsons were a long-established family of Quaker iron-masters in Furness. By the early eighteenth century, in association with other prominent Quaker families - Fords, Crosfields, Backhouses - they controlled 'a wide meshwork of furnaces and forges' in Lancashire. But their supplies of charcoal had run low and they needed wood for fuel. Fortunately, after the suppression of the rebellion, the Highlands were being opened up, and the forests in the north could be exploited by the industry of the south. So in 1727 Thomas Rawlinson made an agreement with Ian MacDonell, chief of the MacDonells of Glengarry near Inverness, for a thirty-one year lease of a wooded area at Invergarry. There he built a furnace and smelted the iron-ore which he shipped specially from Lancashire. The enterprise was not an economic success: it was wound up after seven years; but during those seven years, Rawlinson came to know the area, established regular relations with the MacDonells of Glengarry, and of course employed 'a throng of Highlanders' to fell the timber and work the furnace.<sup>11</sup>

During his stay at Glengarry, Rawlinson became interested in the Highland costume but he also became aware of its inconvenience. The belted plaid might be appropriate to the idle life of the

<sup>11</sup> On Rawlinson's Scottish venture see Alfred Fell, *The Early Iron Industry of Furness and District* (Ulverston, 1908), pp. 346ff.; Arthur Raistrick, *Quakers in Science and Industry* (1950), pp. 95-102.