

THE GATHERING 1822

By Alasdair McNaughton

The recent Clan Gathering in Edinburgh, part of the Homecoming celebration, was the largest event of its kind in the last three hundred years. The only comparable event was the gathering organised, for George IV, by Sir Walter Scott. I thought it might be interesting to write a little about the original Gathering.

Figure 1: Portrait of Sir Walter Scott by Raeburn in 1822



The idea behind the proposed Gathering was to show that the Highlanders were no longer a threat to the British state in general, and to the Hanoverian dynasty in particular. In the 1820s the Hanoverians were, like so many times in the past, were not popular, and George IV was particularly disliked by many. Sir Walter Scott, like so many of his contemporaries and like many later Scots and English, was a “romantic Jacobite”. That is, while they considered the Union of 1707 to have been a good thing for Scotland, they recognised that much had been lost. This was especially true in the Highlands where the collapse of the clan system and the aftershocks of the Highland Clearances had resulted in many people being cut adrift and lost. The idea was to simultaneously show the governing classes that the loyalty of the clans was something that could be admired and used to the benefit of the state, and that the governing classes – especially the king – could be shown to, and seen by, the clans. Of course, the event would be very much stage-managed to show a version of Highlanders and clan life that would appeal to the sensibilities of the times.

The presence of George IV would, in fact, have more to do with European politics than any other reason. At the time of the proposed visit there was going to be a meeting of major European powers, and George IV was adamant that he was not only going to attend but also play a major role in the discussions. This was something that the British government simply would not permit to happen. To divert the king from his planned attendance at the Congress of Vienna, the government turned to Sir Walter Scott to implement his idea. In fact, Scott was given very little time to plan everything, and so he turned to other people and formed an organising committee. His principal assistant would be his friend Major-General David Stewart of Garth who had recently written a history of the Highlanders. Other people to whom Scott turned to for help included the actor-manager William Henry Murray who advised on the more theatrical elements of the event such as the pageants and costumes. Other aides included James Loch who was notorious for his role in the Sutherland Clearances. The catering for the event was organised by Ebenezer Scroggie whose misread gravestone would provide the inspiration for Dickens’ character Scrooge in “A Christmas Carol”. The organisation was not wholly without dissent as some chiefs – including Alasdair MacDonell of Glengarry – were not happy that so many lowlanders were being involved in something that was being presented as a Highland event. Other people were concerned about etiquette and procedure. This was especially true for the Highland chiefs, and so Sir Walter produced a booklet, which listed planned events with detailed advice about clothing and behaviour. This prompted many chiefs and Lowland lairds to try to find appropriate clothing, and led not only to many “traditional” clan tartans being produced, but also to the acceptance, by society and the governing classes, of Highland dress which had – only a few generations before – been banned by law.

The first of the pageants organised by Scott took place on the king’s birthday. A procession of coaches – guarded by the Midlothian Yeomanry and Highland men – carried the Regalia of Scotland and various VIPs from the castle to Holyrood. The procession gathered on the Mound to go to the castle but, within minutes, the procession was halted by the appearance of an extravagantly dressed Glengarry on horseback who announced that he had the right to ride at the head of the procession. After some time, Glengarry was persuaded to go away, and the procession got going again back to the Mound and from there down Princes Street to Holyrood. On the 14th of August, the king’s ship arrived but his landing was postponed due to bad weather. The next day, the king stepped ashore at Leith where proceedings were once more interrupted by the incorrigible Glengarry. He galloped up to the king, swept off his bonnet and

loudly proclaimed “Your Majesty is welcome to Scotland”. The king good humouredly laughed off this unscheduled departure from the programme of events, but one gets the idea that the organisers must have been heartily sick of Glengarry by now. A procession of Lowland and Highland regiments now led the king on the three miles to Edinburgh where he was cheered on the way and presented with the keys to the city. The next day was spent at Dalkeith but entertainments were provided for the city’s inhabitants. On the 17th of August, a ball was held at Holyroodhouse where the most important people were greeted by the king who was wearing full Highland costume together with a pair of pink pantaloons – designed to prevent too much of the king being seen. However, the tights may not have worked to their intended design as someone complained that the kingly kilt was too short for decency. One aristocratic guest wittily remarked that “Since he is to be among us for so short a time, the more we see of him the better.” The next public event was a series of addresses from the Church of Scotland, the Episcopal Church, the universities, the burghs, counties and the Highland society. The next day featured 457 ladies being presented to the king who – custom dictated – had to kiss each one on the cheek. This took over two hours, and it was reported that some ladies were missed out. The rest of the royal visit was taken up with another procession, a review of volunteer cavalymen held on Portobello sands, another ball, a banquet, another church service, and a private visit by George to the apartments in the Palace of Holyroodhouse once occupied by his ancestor Mary, Queen of Scots. On Tuesday, 27th of August the king attended a theatrical performance of Sir Walter Scott’s “Rob Roy” adapted by William Henry Murray. On the Thursday, the king made a visit to Hopetoun House. He then joined his ship at South Queensferry and departed for the south.

It is hard to determine the lasting importance of the royal visit of George IV. It is true that it brought the Highlands back into being considered as a part of the British state, and the Highlanders as loyal subjects of that state rather than potential traitors or rebels. However, it is important to remember that at the same time Highlanders and Highland culture were being lauded in Edinburgh, the Highland Clearances were still happening. Indeed, many of the chiefs who were so proud to be seen swathed in tartan in the presence of their king had no compunction in evicting their tenants from their ancestral lands with little care whether their people lived or died. Perhaps the most important thing is what it represented. The clans were no longer pariahs in the eyes of the ruling classes of England. It was now acceptable to be Highland once more. This new found acceptability – almost fashionableness - would reach its zenith in the reign of George IV’s niece – Queen Victoria. She would build a life long romance with Scotland from George’s brief flirtation.

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