



## WHY OUR MYTHS ARE A WORLDWIDE HIT

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The Holy Grail is buried beneath a private family church in Midlothian, the stone used as a pillow by Jacob in the Old Testament is under lock and key in Edinburgh Castle, Pontius Pilate was born in Perthshire, and the Arc of the Covenant is in Freemasons' Hall.

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Is there something in the Scotch mist that feeds and supports this view of the country? There may not be a precise answer, but the connection goes deep, and plenty of authors, film-makers and other creative thinkers have chosen Scotland as the setting of their stories and films, knowing audiences will immediately understand that the country is a kind of artistic shorthand for a land of mist and mythology, where every castle has a ghost and every tree a legend.

Many outsiders have projected their fantasies on this small country on the margin of Europe, conferring arcane knowledge or a peculiar spirit of place on its hills and glens. The Carbonari, for example, members of secret revolutionary societies in early-nineteenth-century Italy, included Scotland in their ritual. Members of the Knights Templar, when making a toast, said: "Next year in Jerusalem", indicating confidence in their goal of capturing the city for Christendom; the Carbonari said: "Next year in Scotland", with no thoughts of journeying to the actual heather-strewn mountains of Caledonia. Rather, they viewed it as a mythical place, worthy of their aspirations.

The myths and mysteries of Freemasonry, which originated in Scotland, were transported around the world through lodges affiliated with the Grand Lodge of Scotland, as Scots conquered

and then administered foreign lands under the aegis of the British Empire. There are still Scottish lodges on every continent except the Antarctic. This contributed to the idea of Scotland as the repository of hidden knowledge. Each order of Freemasonry has a number of so-called degrees, or levels through which members pass; French Freemasons drew on visions of Scotland as an ancient mystical land when creating the Ecossais degrees in the eighteenth century, which expanded to become the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite. This is now established around the world, with at least a million members in the US alone.

Scots, of course, have helped to popularise the country's landscape and people as somehow fey and otherworldly. In verse, the Border Ballads have been hugely influential in creating an image of medieval minstrelsy and chivalrous conduct, and the Freemason, Sir Walter Scott (1771 – 1832) continued some of these themes in his *Lady of the Lake* and other poems. In poetry and fiction, the trio of Scott, James Hogg (1770 – 1835) (also a Freemason) and Robert Louis Stevenson (not a Freemason) - each steeped in the ballads and the oral storytelling traditions of the Borders and central Scotland - reworked traditional material and brought their own imaginations to bear on tales of murder, mystery and the supernatural.

Scott's most important contribution to the mythologising of Scottish history was to take the figure of the kilted Highlander, reviled as treacherous and uneducated after the defeat of the Jacobite insurgents at Culloden in 1746, and within one generation re-present him as a Romantic figure representing the authentic Scotland. Those twin classics of the Gothic genre, *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, have strong Scottish connections: Slains Castle in Cruden Bay was the inspiration for Count Dracula's Transylvanian hideout, while the Edinburgh-born and -trained Dr James Lind, who had a deep interest in the use of electricity to reanimate corpses, was the inspiration for Dr

Frankenstein. Maybe it is no surprise that the Harry Potter novels were conceived by JK Rowling in Scotland.

It is not only books that have fuelled this Romantic view. The depiction of this mythical Scotland in film began in 1954 with *Brigadoon*, the surreal tale of a Scottish village that materialises for one day every hundred years, and continued through to *Loch Ness* (1996), in which a scientist searches for the monster. Both films were made by American studios, and feature US citizens confronting Scottish stereotypes. As ever, the modernists of the New World are baffled by the quaint ways of the Old. The film *Hotel Caledonia*, based on the myth of Sawney Bean and his cannibal clan in southern Ayrshire, will be released next year, indicating that there is plenty of new life in the old myths.

Architecture and landscape design, too, have contributed to romantic and picturesque views of Scotland. The aristocracy built fantasy structures such as the fairy-tale castle of Dunrobin, created for the second Duke of Sutherland in 1850 by Sir Charles Barry, and Mount Stuart, the Gothic pile near Rothesay concocted by John Patrick Crichton-Stuart, third Marquis of Bute, and the architect Sir Robert Rowand Anderson in 1880. These impressive buildings and their carefully landscaped settings, on which their owners lavished endless time and effort, both reflect and represent a vision of Scotland that is not deeply rooted in reality.

The effect of this can be circular and self-perpetuating, not to mention lucrative. For example, VisitScotland works closely with the film industry to promote the country to tourists who have an interest in traveling to film locations. The tourism agency says the theme of *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), for instance, "fits well with a broader motivating theme of Scotland as a land of mystery and legends", and hopes the film will bring in at least as much tourism income as *Braveheart* (1997) and *Rob Roy* (1995), which generated £15m. VisitScotland is also working with Sony to make the most of *The Water Horse* (about a monster in a loch

- sound familiar?), from 2007. The publicity blurb stated: "The movie will build on the existing worldwide interest in the myth of the Loch Ness monster, as well as giving an opportunity to promote the wealth of other myths and legends across Scotland."

Dr Karen Thompson, a lecturer in tourism at the Strathclyde Business School, points out that visitors who relish the myths and legends of Scotland are not disappointed by their experiences while here. "Research in 2000-01 found three themes to be dominant in overseas visitors' images of Scotland," she says. "These were labelled as enduring, representing Scotland's heritage and tradition; dramatic, relating to the rugged scenery and weather; and human, being the image of the proud Scot. Interestingly, the research also revealed a sense that there was nothing artificial about Scotland in terms of its visitor offering. In other words, there was a sense of the authentic in its heritage and culture, which may be lacking in other destinations.

"Visitors appear to perceive the Scottish natural, built and human heritage as authentic products, not synthetically concocted by the tourist board. Think about the kilt, for example. Even if it's not widely worn, one at least has a good chance of bumping into a few guys in the centre of Glasgow or Edinburgh in kilts on a Saturday afternoon or evening, especially if there is an international football or rugby match on."

## TALL TALES AND THEIR TELLERS

- Sir Walter Scott

Scott collected and re-interpreted the Border Ballads and folk tales before producing a prodigious number of historical novels. Not only did he invent that genre, he became the first European best-seller and many of his works were adapted for the stage, as plays and operas, in his lifetime. This distributed Scott's particular view of Scotland across a wide audience, shaping the perceptions of the country both at home and around the world.

- James Hogg

Like Scott, a collector and re-worker of traditional songs and stories, and also the creator of fiction read around the world. His outstanding work is *The Private Confessions and Memoirs of a Justified Sinner*, a supernatural tale of murder and madness set in Edinburgh.

- Robert Louis Stevenson

*Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, like Hogg's main work, portrayed a man split into two opposing personalities. The story was based on Deacon William Brodie, respected Edinburgh town councillor by day but housebreaker by night.

- John Francis Campbell

Inspired by the Grimm Brothers in Germany, Campbell sought out and published material from the oral tradition in *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* in 1861. Many of the stories feature supernatural topics such as the second sight, Celtic warriors and the fairy folk.

- Angus Mackay

Mackay, Queen Victoria's personal piper, might not be remembered, but the myth he manufactured about the MacCrimmons, a famed bagpiping dynasty on the Isle of Skye, and their supposed piping school is still a staple among stories of traditional musical heritage.

- John and Charles Stewart

The brothers wrote the *Vestiarium Scoticum* in 1842, which purported to show the ancient lineage of more than 50 tartans (actually first manufactured in the nineteenth century) and their associations with the great landed families of Scotland. Long disproved, but still widely accepted as genuine.

- The Loch Ness Monster

The earliest report dates from 565AD, when St Columba, according to his biographer, saved the life of a Pict from a "ferocious monster" by making the sign of the cross and commanding the beast to withdraw. The modern sightings began in 1933, when George Spicer saw "a most extraordinary form of animal" at the side of the loch.

- Dan Brown  
Rosslyn Chapel and the Knights Templar etc., etc...