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Lochaber No More Los Angeles No More

AUTHOR SIMON STEPHENSON SPENDS A FASCINATING IF AT TIMES BEWILDERING DAY AT CALIFORNIA'S SCOTSFESTIVAL

ACCIDENTALLY admit to an American that you are Scottish and you can generally expect to hear either that they are Scottish, too, that it is their dream to visit Scotland, or that their forefathers came from a place called 'Glas-gow' and perhaps you have heard of it?

I am never prouder of our country than when I am away from it, but living amongst such unlearned devotion has often led me to wonder just what it is about our little nation that inspires such affection. Is it our renowned landscapes, our progressive politics or our mind-blowing array of world-changing inventions? Is it our whisky, our golf, our Andy Murray? Is it simply our legendary humility?

Fortunately, I knew where to look for the answer, because each summer many Americans demonstrate their affinity for our country by attending Scottish festivals. Here in California, the season kicks off early with the Scotsfestival, held aboard and alongside the Clydebank built RMS Queen Mary at its permanent mooring in the Los Angeles suburb of Long Beach.

I drove down to Scotsfestival – whose website, it may be worth noting, optimistically describes Clydebank as a quaint seaside town – on a sunny Saturday morning with AC throughout the car and the Queen Mary at the end of the pier. All the Scottish flowed away again, but the ocean to the second degree? I joined in full-throatedly, even though I myself have long since become that blood.

When I arrive at mid-morning, the Scotsfestival is in full swing and the Queen Mary looks resplendent in her black, red, and white Canard stripes. There is nowhere to buy anything resembling breakfast or coffee, but the bars are already doing a spectacular trade. Currently a month and a half into a dry 2020, I feel as if I am letting our national side down.

On a field enclosed by a white picket fence, the Highland Games are underway. A woman in a mini-skirt and Led Zepplin T-shirt launches a hammer with such power and back of direction that it almost decapitates a nearby judge; this being Southern California, his only reaction is to enthusiastically high-five her. The next event is an American invention that involves using a pitchfork to toss a burrap sack over a high bar. Lochaber, no more.

In an adjacent area of perfectly green grass, a half dozen immaculate sheep stand as if waiting for their close-up. I take it upon myself to educate their American shepherd, Ted Thompson: he wants his sheep to look authentically Scottish, he needs to muddy up their underbellies, spray paint them with a blue hieroglyphic and ideally set them wandering loose on a country road.

Ted politely explains that his sheep look this way because they are decorative sheep, but he'd not for wool nor meat but simply to look good with the pitchfork. Ted has that came from Scotland, but had ancestors that came from America. I keen to make up for my sheep fanpage, I inform him that Aphelie's Robert Burns' country. He is not familiar with 'A man's a man for a thair', but immediately gets the

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FEATURE

▼ sentiment, pointing out with a wry smile that he has a friend who is a Trump supporter, and yet they manage to find mutual ground.

I had next to the 'Clydebank Cross', a tented encampment of battle re-enactors. The website promised this would provide a taste of what it means to be Scottish through its 'woodwork and metalwork demonstrations'. Woodwork and metalwork have never felt a strong part of my Scottish identity, but the re-enactors are at least demonstrating another of our national characteristics that I can relate to: they feel that they have been treated unfairly, and consequently are morose.

Specifically, they are unhappy about the location they have been assigned. It is hard to blame them: next to the porridges and tucked behind a row of mock Tudor structures still covered in late snow from last season's Winter Wonderland, their encampment will not attract much foot traffic today. They dutifully clean their muskets like the good soldiers they are, but their hearts are not entirely in it, a situation they understand by frequently setting down their muskets to show each other YouTube videos of their favourite pop stars.

By the time I have wandered through the nearby 'Vendor Valley', my own heart is no longer entirely in it either. The concessions here sell clangeres, chain-mail and pipes. The website had claimed this Vendor Valley would 'take you back to a Scottish market', but it seems another outlandish hope. Perhaps you can pick up a clanger at the Barras if you know how to ask, but surely no self-respecting Glaswegian stallholder would ever post a sign in a medieval font that proclaims they accept 'Master of the Card' and 'Ladd Vias'.

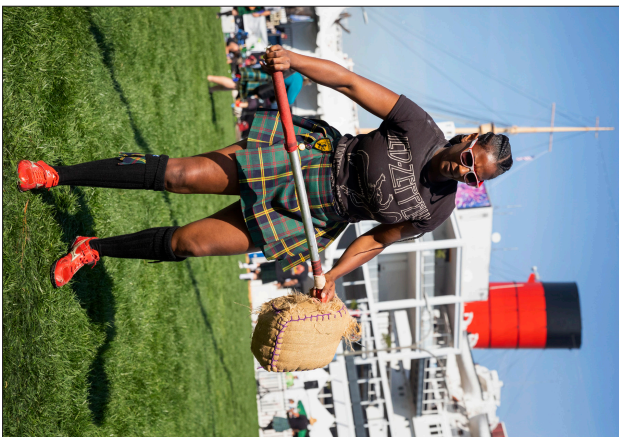
BEGIN to suspect that that our American cousins don't love Scotland at all, but simply Braveheart and Outlander. Yet if this is the case, I can hardly blame them. Mel Gibson showing for freedom while wearing blue face paint might be an absurd version of our country, but it mostly exists in an equally delusional version of theirs, one where Martin Sherm is President and acts on the scientific advice he gets from a wise-cracking Jeff Goldblum. This being Los Angeles, even the Queen Mary once starred in a movie, playing herself in the 1966 flop 'Assault on a Queen', in which Frank Sinatra uses a salvaged Nazi U-boat to conduct an improbable heist on the grand old dame.

Outlander centres around Claire Randall, a Second World War nurse mysteriously transported back to Jacobite times. With each hour I spend at Scottish festivals, I find myself sympathising with her plight. Most of the men here are wearing kilts, and those that are not are wearing kilts that pledge allegiance to a clan on the front while listing bloody battles on the back as if they were statistics on a rock tour. Patrick 1296, Adam 1461, Fraser 1503, Mack 1745.

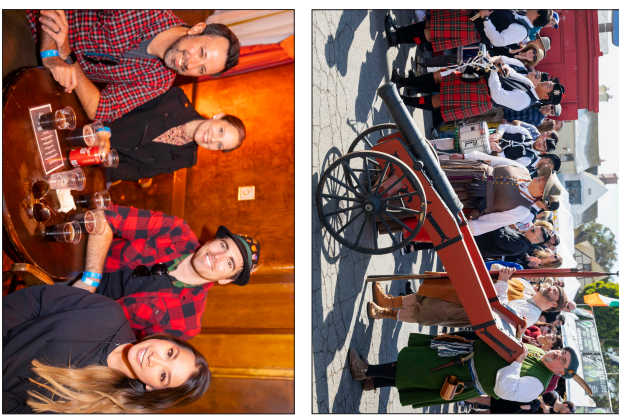
I call it a row of the 'kilt stunts', but they are Scottish. Why we do this, I am not sure. English names and two generations back on my mother's side, they were all Irish, so no lack there either. I am a Scotsman that has never had a clan, and a troubling thought



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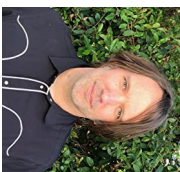
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now strikes me: is it possible that these Californians, with their Glenrorys and Jacobite shirts and their fence-Caledonian pride, are actually more Scottish than I am? Feeling suddenly homesick, I am fortunate to find myself wandering in to the tent of 'Clan Inebriated'. Styled as a clan for all those who do not have one, Clan Inebriated's motto is 'Go Deoch, Gu Cairdean, Gu Spor' - 'To drink, to friends, to fun'. Clan Inebriated's members pride themselves on traditional Scottish hospitality, and sure enough a whisky drink is quickly placed in my hand and I am offered a seat on a chair that turns out to also be for sale. Someone is playing the clarinet, and by the time I have finished my every sense: dry 2020, no more.

When I had my new kiltfolk farewell, they gave me another drink for the road. They assure me this is a long-standing Highland tradition, and who am I to argue? I find myself supremely Scottish - and more than a little drunk - I board the Queen Mary where the Los Angeles Scottish Country Dancing Display Team are about to commence a demonstration. The person standing next to me asks if I know Scottish dances and I - a proud veteran of many a kilted wedding strip at the Britton in the LASCDDP, I respond to her with a 'Yes, I do'. The music is so perfect, they Scotland record, it also seems like a Step in Willow Mechanics and String Theory. The dancers had all seemed to be genuine retirees, but

unleashed on a dancefloor they become the Harlem Globetrotters of Scottish Country Dancing. I have before anyone gets the idea of making me dance. Down the corridor, a bar has been converted to evoke a cosy pub in Edinburgh's old town. They have got it spot on, right down to the dingy lighting and the folk musicians annoyed at being talked over. The first item on the pub menu is Haggis, Neeps and Tatties and I cannot resist asking the barman if it is popular. "People love to hear about it," he begins, diplomatically. "And they even love to eat it, and usually end up going to the Starbucks on the next deck."

I slip discreetly away to Starbucks, order my iced oat milk latte and bagel. They are delicious, but I notice undertones of shame. Still, as I sit there, I hear the familiar rat-a-tat of a snare drum and then the first note of the pipes. And soon the sound hits me, the way it always does, right in my Scottish heart. I hurry back down to the dockside to see who is making this beautiful noise, and out which social regimenter band are visiting from Scotland. But they are not a regiment, nor soldiers, nor even draftees. They are the regiments of the local children's high school pipe band. They dress in kilts, and their bagpipes are the kilts' most perfect, their Scotland. The music is so perfect, they Scotland record, it also seems like a Step in Willow Mechanics and String Theory. The dancers had all seemed to be genuine retirees, but



Author Simon Stephenson, above, found Scottishness to be a fun and sometimes fantastical mesh up of battle re-enactments, Highland Games events and tartan. Lots of tartan.

The festival website describes Clydebank as a 'quaint seaside town'

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all heritages, and they are playing our music as well as I have ever heard even though I grew up within earshot of the Edinburgh folk. A proud parent tells me the band have been invited to the world championships in Glasgow this summer (now sadly cancelled) if they can raise the funds for accommodation. Before they have finished the first tune, I text my mother to ask if she has room for an entire pipe band.

EBBLING hatter and more proudly Scottish than I have all day, I tour the stalls of the Clan societies. As far as I can tell, none of these are groups which allow Americans with Scottish names to fraternise with their fellow MacDoos, MacWilliams and MacInneses, as if sharing a surname with a stranger was a bond rather than a mild inconvenience. Clan McPherson have the best branding - an emblem of a wildcat, and the motto 'Touch not the cat but with a glove' - and I am therefore disappointed to see that I cannot even claim any of the affiliated surnames listed on their stand. Still, I note that it includes 'Smith', and so I diplomatically suggest to the two American women running the stand that including the most common surname in Britain suggests that Clan McPherson are perhaps affiliated to Scotland, which they could readily affirm. I am wrong. They explain to me how in 1566 the McPhersons arranged a 30-man battle with their comrades the Davidsonsons over the issue of who would

stand where during the forthcoming battle with their actual enemy, the Camerons. When the McPhersons arrived a man short for this spectator-sport turned a man short backsmen in the audience stepped in, sportingly killed more than his allocation of Davidsonsons, and hence to this day McPhersons consider all Smiths kin. This, I tell them, is undoubtedly the most Scottish thing I have ever heard.

Both women are regulars on the Scottish Festival circuit - Santa Rosa is next in the calendar, followed by Sacramento - and so I ask them just what the attraction is. They describe the exact feeling that all strikes the dockside earlier: "I want to cry when I hear them. I can't even explain it, it strikes something so deep of longing and loss." They then go on to talk about the continuation of the festival's themselves provide: "It's like finding lost and lots of us that wants us to feel connected with something that is larger than our own history here in America. Not for the first time today, I feel a little Christian for ever having found such eternal-sounding affection among other than profound.

At five to clock, the Pipes and Drums are playing their final tune, and the Grenada High School Pipe Band finish the Highland Games with a flourish. I am wrong. They explain to me how in 1566 the McPhersons arranged a 30-man battle with their comrades the Davidsonsons over the issue of who would stand where during the forthcoming battle with their actual enemy, the Camerons. When the McPhersons arrived a man short for this spectator-sport turned a man short backsmen in the audience stepped in, sportingly killed more than his allocation of Davidsonsons, and hence to this day McPhersons consider all Smiths kin. This, I tell them, is undoubtedly the most Scottish thing I have ever heard.

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taken matters into their own hands and wheeled their camions out to perform their final display of musket and cannon fire where they can be properly appreciated. The location they have selected is the entrance to the bagpiper's staging area, and the rammy that results would make our own country proud. Killed pipers yell at muskewielding soldiers, and for a while it seems like a minor war might break out. "Master" mingle with more modern and less printable ones. It all feels wonderfully Scottish, nobody provokes us with impunity, and we do love a good stamash.

ACK at the pen, Ted Thompson's sheepherding display is in full flow, his border collie bringing out the best in his Hollywood-ready sheep. He asks the audience to consider 'this dog is not just enjoying it, but undoubtedly enjoying his work, we see that Ted's dog is grinning. Ted then talks about the herding instinct and how some border collies are born with it, and some are not. It is, he says, as simple as that. If you want to herd sheep, you need to keep going, and if you don't stop to bend sheep, you are not a sheepdog. If occurs to me that perhaps this is what it is to be Scottish for: an instinct, and if you feel that instinct, if the spirit of the pipes stirs your blood, you are Scottish. We are, by heritage and by choice, an inclusive people, so it seems fitting that being Scottish should not be much to do with being born in Scotland or having Scottish parents or even ancestors, and perhaps not even much to do with ever having lived there. Maybe being Scottish is a choice, and one that all the best-killed Californians wandering around Scottishfest today have got right.

Now the sun begins to set, behind the RMS Queen Mary in golden light. Children battle their siblings with plastic claymores, the Scotch Egg concession posts a sign saying 'Everything Sold Completely Out and the impudently good-looking sheep are loaded on to their tractor trailer. On a stage, the singer of a folk-rock band talks about how he and the Queen Mary were both born in Glasgow, but have somehow washed up here together, and then he launches into the Skye Boat Song.

Initially, I draw a loud cheer from the crowd, but they are quickly transported in to a reverie, and so am I. I am thinking of long-ago childhood holidays, trying to spot dolphins on the CalMac ferry and a pet fire in a dairy cottage in Lanarkshire. They, presumably, are mostly thinking about Claire Randall, because the Skye Boat Song also happens to be the theme music for Outlander. Skye no more, then, and yet it does not matter: the song was angry when a century after the events it claims to depict, and the lyrics were subsequently rewritten by Robert Louis Stevenson before being adapted to better fit Claire Randall's Highland, though, I think, the original lyrics were good and as wild as any I have ever heard, and so wild as it is now more inclusive. Who's to blame? Everybody that wants to be. We are, after all, all Jack Tamson's

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