

A Nation without a National Anthem

With a date of origin of AD 843, Scotland is one of the oldest continuously surviving nations in the world. At least two parts of that sentence, the date of origin and the phrase "continuously surviving" are open to argument, but for the moment let's just take it as read that Scotland has been around for over twelve-and-a-half centuries. And as a nation it can boast one of the oldest flags in the world, The Saltire, which actually predates the nation it represents. It comes as something of a surprise, therefore, to discover that Scotland is a nation without a national anthem: though even this is arguable.

The problem is that while flags were a very early sign of nationhood, the idea of a national anthem is a relatively recent one. The earliest was the Dutch national anthem "*Het Wilhelmus*", written around 1570. The United Kingdom followed with "*God Save the King (or Queen)*", which was first performed in 1745. Spain came next, with the "*Marcha Real*" in 1770. "*La Marseillaise*" was first performed in 1792 and was adopted as the French National Anthem in 1795. Pretty much everyone else followed in the 1800s.

Scotland's problem stems from the fact that the period of the growth in anthems was also the period of lowest ebb in the fortunes of Scotland's nationhood. In 1707 the Scottish Parliament voted itself out of existence by approving the Act of Union with England, and for the next two centuries there seemed every chance that Scotland would lose even its name in favor of "North Britain". Few imagined the possibility of the re-emergence of Scotland as a nation in need of an anthem.

So for many people, Scotland does have a national anthem: the UK national anthem, "*God Save the King (or Queen)*". There are two problems with this. The first is that the anthem is a deeply uninspiring dirge: but you only have to listen to anthems from around the world to realize that arguments of taste have little to do with their selection.

The second is a more serious problem. The UK national anthem first came to prominence during the 1745 Jacobite uprising. The uprising had nothing to do with nations or nationality: it was simply one ex-dynasty based on the continent trying to displace the then current dynasty, also primarily based on the continent, from the thrones of England and Scotland. But neither that, nor the fact that the Government forces had more Scots in their ranks than did the Jacobites, has stopped many peddling the myth that the 1745 uprising was a war between England and Scotland. Perhaps it is an understandable myth when you consider that the UK National Anthem, which first appeared during the uprising, contains a - now seldom sung - verse which runs: *Lord, grant that Marshal Wade, May by thy mighty aid, Victory bring. May he sedition hush and like a torrent rush, Rebellious Scots to crush, God save the King.*

The idea that Scots, however tepid their views on nationhood, could ever embrace as an anthem a song with an explicitly (and historically inaccurate) anti-Scottish verse was ridiculous: and remains ridiculous, however rarely the verse in question gets an outing.

The question of what the Scottish national anthem ought to be is one that has increasingly been argued about since the early 1970s. In 2006 the Royal Scottish National Orchestra conducted an online poll that attracted 10,000 votes. Most popular candidate, by a significant margin, was "*Flower of Scotland*" written by Roy Williamson of The Corries in 1967. This has for many years been the anthem used by Scotland supporters at international rugby and football matches, and the 2006 vote revealed that 41% of Scots felt it should become the Scottish National Anthem.

There are, perhaps inevitably, problems with the idea. The first is that it is as explicitly anti-English as the full version of the UK anthem is anti-Scottish. The song harks back to the victory of Robert the Bruce over the English at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 and the first verse runs: "*O Flower of Scotland, When will we see, Your like again, That fought and died for, Your wee bit Hill and Glen, And stood against him, Proud Edward's Army, And sent him homeward, Tae think again.*" This makes it ideal as a sporting anthem, but perhaps not so good as an all-round representation of a mature, grown-up nation, that for the first time in over a thousand years tends not to feel the need to see itself as anyone's poor neighbor.

There are two further problems with "*Flower of Scotland*". The first is that it is very easy to sing very badly, as Scottish sporting crowds have often proved. And the second is that there is a note in the last line (the note accompanying the word "think") which is impossible to play correctly on Scotland's national instrument, the Great Highland Bagpipe or A' Phìob Mhòr.

Second place in the 2006 poll fell to "*Scotland the Brave*" with 29% of the votes; while "*Highland Cathedral*" polled 16%; "*A Man's A Man for A' That*" polled 7%; and "*Scots Wha Hae*" polled 6%.

It seems that whichever candidate you choose, there will always be more people against it than for it, and yet this is an argument as unlikely to go away as it is to be resolved. Perhaps the best bet is to make a virtue out of a problem, and promote the fact that one of the defining characteristics of one of the world's oldest nations is that it has no need for a national anthem: because in the bagpipes it has a national instrument that can give almost any tune a uniquely Scottish character.