

# A Scottish Scientist Looks at His Keyboard...



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When I first began to write this article, I initially balked at the idea and was uncertain what to write about, particularly when I heard of some of the more weighty topics that other people were covering. Combine this with the fact that in the past I have jokingly described my nationality as Scientist first and maybe Scottish second; I worried what I would talk about. Maybe my description of myself is correct; there's something about being a scientist that transcends cultural and geographic boundaries. We speak a universal language of equations, reactions, interactions, common names of organisms, molecules, phenomena and whether we hail from regions of biology, chemistry, physics or mathematics, there is a shared culture and kinship between us all. But is that all there is to me? Should I define myself solely as a Scientist or go to the other extreme and embrace my Scottish roots overwhelmingly? After

15 years in the U.S., my accent is still so strong that it only takes a few sentences for someone to ask where I am from. So there is no way I'm ever going to just pass for American, but should I go the other way and adopt the Mike Myers of *Saturday Night Live* philosophy: "If it's not Scottish, it's crap!"? The latter seems an unreasonable way to go, too, and not just because having to wear a kilt everyday--especially when the wind is hitting 40 below -- seems a particularly chilling experience. So I decided to use this article to reflect a wee bit on what it means to me to be Scottish. This year marks my 7th year in Fargo which means this is the longest I have lived in a single place since leaving to attend University. So do I now consider Fargo to be home or do I long for the plaintive wail of bagpipes across a misty Scottish glen?

It's perhaps timely to personally reflect on this as well. 2009 marked the 250th anniversary of Scotland's national poet Robert Burns. To celebrate this, the powers that be in Scotland commissioned what was described as Homecoming Scotland 2009. And I recently received a 1972 book called *Understanding the Scots* by Moray McLaren, which purports to be a guide for the English and other foreigners to allow them to understand the unusual ways of the native Scot. But these both focus on the past, the former event attempting to reconnect with the country's sons and daughters who now live far from home and the latter playing up a stereotype that may have faded into the mists of history. Last year also saw the publication of a 200-page document, describing the potential directions in the process for Scottish Independence, which seems almost contrary to the attempts at a unified Europe. So does being Scottish simply consist of looking back at past glories and histories or is it possible to look forward as well? With the rise of a unified Europe, is being Scottish still relevant or is it just a label? Am I instead a citizen of the United Kingdom, a denizen of Great Britain, a European? Or am I becoming ... an American? After all, it says United Kingdom on my passport and Scotland is not even an option in the post office country codes when sending letters airmail. With the internet connecting all corners of the globe and national boundaries fading slowly in so many ways, how do I define my Scottishness?

Almost instantly, I find myself doing what I talked of above and lapsing into past stories. Scotland is steeped in history and it has colored so much of the culture I grew up in. To some, it seems the

history of Scotland is about fighting, especially against our southern neighbors. We fought the English a lot and we did not do very well in most of these wee scuffles. One which shaped the modern Scot the most was the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 to 1746. We lost badly! At the same time, the 18th and 19th centuries saw the Highland Clearances where many of the native Scots left by choice or often against their will, emptying the land and making it available for farming. The efforts of Walter Scott in the 1820s and the predilection of Queen Victoria for a romanticized figure of the Scottish Highlander were key in shaping the stereotype of the kilted Scotsman that still exists today, but is this still a relevant image or has it dated badly? What does it mean to be Scottish in the 21st century?

I may throw terms like “national pride” into this piece, but is that simply a blanket term related to geographical origin? Just because I was born in the country, is that all that defines me or is the accent simply all I need? To me, my Scottish identity is in part the legacy of my country and its inhabitants. There is a wealth of material in the sciences, the arts and so much more that ties into my national pride. Another title on my bookshelf is *How the Scots Invented the Modern World*, and I could spend pages here regurgitating how so many of the things we take for granted were created by Scots. But should I reduce the legacy to simply wandering around pointing at TVs and telephones saying ‘Aye, we came up with that’? Or is there more to it than that? National pride arises from the whole culture and that means the good and the bad: the achievements, the arts and the sciences together. Not just the works of the past but also those in the present and those to come, too.

Of course, I may not be a typical Scot either when it comes down to it. My perspectives are skewed by a somewhat outsider status arising in part from the fact that my increase in cultural awareness developed significantly after leaving the country. Do I have a heightened sense of nationality arising from my geographical remoteness or was this something that would have developed with age regardless? My increase in cultural awareness admittedly did grow once I moved to the U.S. but would that have happened if I had stayed? In secondary school, we were not exposed to many significant cultural markers. We were taught English history, and literature ranged from Orwell to Shakespeare. The only significantly Scottish work was *Sunset Song* by Lewis Grassie Gibbon, which I will admit I did not get. Robert Burns was dredged up now and again but dismissed quickly, his main legacy being required recitations every year in January. It felt like rote memorization and there was none of the feeling, the passion that I now see in his work. As far as other Scottish poets...were there any?

It was during my undergraduate that I first started to develop a better sense of what it meant to be Scottish. It may have been the academic locale or the unavoidable sense of history of the town of St. Andrews (oldest University in Scotland, more than just a golf course you know),

it may have been the chance to interact with students from other disciplines or some combination of these, but slowly over those 4 years, I began to understand the culture and history I was born into. And then graduate school beckoned and somehow I was enticed stateside to Notre Dame. Instant culture shock and I spent my years in the lab since stepping outside that safe environment meant denying that I was Irish on a daily basis, since to most American ears, the Celtic burr sounds no different whether the speaker hails from Scotland or Ireland. At Notre Dame, everything Irish was championed and a characteristic Scottish contrariness or homesickness encouraged me to further delve into my own culture. One thing I have found amusing over the past years since I moved to the U.S., though, has been the cultural markers that the average American (if there is such a thing) will raise when they find out my country of origin. It's varied from *Braveheart* to Groundskeeper Willie from *The Simpsons*, to most recently Susan Boyle (no, I don't know her just because she's Scottish).

So now I sit trying to define how I consider my nationality. It's not an easy thing to do. The scientist part of me wants to quantify, to create a scale, a measurement system, develop tests and calculate standard deviations to arrive at an answer but it's more than just numbers on a spreadsheet, an answer on a calculator. So what is Scottish nationalism then to me? Perhaps the way I think of it is pride tied into a cultural awareness. There is a legacy to being a Scot that is more than just a geographical point of origin and that is what I take pride in. It's not the blind support of the Scottish team in events like the Soccer World Cup (and not just because we are not very good and once again failed to qualify) and it's not cheering for the U.S. in the same event just because they are playing England. (Go U.S.A!) It does not mean anything Scottish is automatically good. And I don't say that

just because I'm that one Scotsman who does not drink whisky, play bagpipes, and golf every day.

The positive aspects to being “not from around here,” as my colleagues describe me, include being informed and educated about my culture and sharing that. In the lab here on campus, whilst I may make the effort of emphasizing relevant historical work by Scottish chemists, that does not mean I disparage chemists of other nationality. I can demonstrate this pride in my nationality, be a cultural ambassador and educate those around me about my country, stand up and be proud about my background instead of trying to hide it like I did at times in the past. And where does that leave me today? My office displays a few traces of my nationality, from two small flags atop my computer to a calendar of Scottish cows. And while you may hear the faint sounds of bagpipes from my playlist, it's only a small percentage of the total tracks. I maintain my efforts to remain current on events in Scotland; the internet lets me read newspapers from back home and I try to stay current with contemporary Scottish authors but I also continue to try and fill in gaps in the historical works. I went back to *Sunset Song* this past year and now see the importance of the work.

And so to Robert Burns. In Scottish culture, he is one of the most important figures. He is our national poet, and while his legacy may have been debated in countless academic studies, his work to me does evoke a certain nationalistic passion. To many, his legacy may simply be as the bloke who wrote “Auld Lang Syne,” a work butchered by the tipsy across the world every New Year, but there is more. To most his work is all but incomprehensible, written in Old Scots, a dated dialect. I'll admit there are even some bits I have to look at the translations to get. Yet the shadow he casts over the culture is immense. But should Burns be the be-all and end-all that defines my sense of nationality? He was voted the greatest Scot ever in a recent poll so he seems like

a good iconic figure. But whilst Burns still occupies a lofty spot in the poetry I read, it does not end with him. Another work I find particularly relevant is a longer piece by Hugh MacDiarmid, “A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle.” It is more contemporary and a scathing take on Scottish nationalism, scorning those so bound to just blindly following traditions with no means nor intent to change or evolve. And in part, it is through this work written less than a century ago that I find resonance and define myself all the more. It is a modern take on the Scottish national identity that rings true for me; cynical in parts, yes, but realistic, grounded and not mired irreversibly in the past. Aware of and respecting the traditions and history but not hopelessly bound by them. Just like a scientist digesting the research which has been done and looking to push back the boundaries at the same time. And that to me, at least, is what it means to be Scottish.