



Photo: John Savin@designfolk.com

A little tartan colour and a bonnie balmoral

It would be hard to argue that the Scots have not punched above their weight in leaving a bold mark on the world. Given the relative size of the country it's inspiring to think of the remarkable contributions Scotland has given humanity. Golf, whisky and bagpipes aside, consider the telephone, TV, the threshing machine, Adam Smith, Ishbel MacAskill, Robert Burns and chicken tikka masala. Historian Arthur Herman underscored the Scottish impact in publishing his popular book, *How the Scots Invented the Modern World: The True Story of How Western Europe's Poorest Nation Created Our World & Everything in It* (2001).

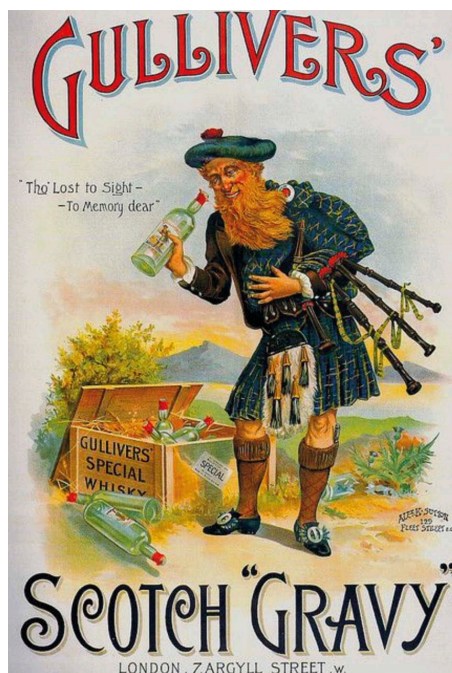
If Herman's thesis is correct then it's equally remarkable to consider the wide array of less-than-charitable stereotypes generally assigned to the Scot: always close to a pub, quick to anger and frugal to a fault. The cheap or mean Scot has to be one of the most widely-known of them all. I'd wager the origins of the uber-frugal Scot have deep roots in religion and a time when there was genuine scarcity of just about everything. When only a coin or two might be in hand it's not unreasonable to think of the fist as naturally tight. Whatever the origins, to many outsiders, the reputation of the cheap Scot holds.

Of course, when it comes to negative stereotypes, the Scots are not alone. As a preconceived idea about a group of people there's hardly a country – or people – on the planet not seen through the lens of an adverse assumption. But why? Is there any good that can come from oversimplified opinions of someone – or something?

People seem to have an instinctive need to put people and things into easily understood categories. The late Polish social psychologist Henri Tajfel said stereotypes can help make sense of the world: "They are a form of categorisation that helps to simplify and systematise information. In stereotypes information is more easily identified, recalled, predicted, and reacted to."

So, while stereotypes may serve to make what's going on around us easier to understand, they can lead to flawed assumptions. I can't think there is a huge lot of good that can come from stereotyping – or relying on a general assumption to make a sound decision. The beliefs and generalities around the stereotype are often rife with prejudice, racism, sexism and plain ugly callousness. Yes, not all stereotypes are negative. Canadians are overly polite is one that comes to mind. Women are nurturing. Italians are great cooks. Still, it strikes me there is more unfavourable than good in most examples of stereotypes.

I got to thinking about the stereotype when I came across an odd little story about the origins of 3M's "Scotch" brand adhesive tape (Sellotape). Evidently, the name comes straight from the cheap Scots trope. Apparently car painters using an early version of the tape told a 3M salesman to go back to his "Scotch



bosses" to put adhesive all over the tape (and not just in one area of the plastic) to make it stickier. The inference, of course, being the "Scotch bosses" were stingy with the glue.

In their advertising, 3M, like countless other companies made – and make – hay with Scots stereotypes. A little tartan colour, a bonnie balmoral and a bagpipe here or there and – boom – instant graphics for a "good value", economical angle to virtually any product.

The bagpipes, of course, are a grand marker among those many that make up the litany of Scottish stereotypes.

I've always said the Great Highland Bagpipe is great art. When it comes to the pipes there is no "meh" or shrugged middle ground. There is no indifference. A person either loves or hates the pipes – surely a defining feature of any great art. And so as something uncommonly noteworthy, it seems to me that there is no one stereotype attributed to the instrument.

There's a range of stereotypes: at one end of the spectrum is the instrument as cartoon joke and the other, equally real, is the bagpipe as something sacred. On one end we might see a perceived stereotype of the pipes in the cartoonish, say, The Simpsons' Groundskeeper Willie's pipes and at the other, the glory and valour of the pipes playing troops over the top of battlefield trenches. I can't think of another example of stereotype more unique or broadly interpreted.

We might plot the shortbread tin piper somewhere in the middle of our imagined flowing chart of bagpipe impressions. To some people I know, the clownish piper in Mike Myers' movie *So I Married an Axe Murderer* (remember: the piper playing Rod Stewart's *If You Want My Body?*) is what the bagpipe means to them. I think we'd plot him not far from Groundskeeper Willie on our stereotype spectrum.

We are all aware of the bagpipe-as-joke stereotype. But what about the other side? Consider the not uncommon impression of the pipes as something heroically noble – an instrument cherished if not revered. For every example of the bagpipe-as-joke stereotype, there are plenty that reflect positive realism.

For anyone who has seen the cartoon Finbarr Saunders piper on the cover of my recently published book of tunes (shameless plug alert), it might seem capricious for me to talk of a grand bagpipe allusion. I think the Great Highland Bagpipe occupies a complex environment of emotions, music and people. There's even a little room for the cartoon.

To so many the bagpipe is the instrument of the Tunes of Glory, irrevocably linked with long traditions and high occasion. The pipes regularly mark the most important times in the lives of people everywhere: weddings, funerals, wakes – and everything in between. Consider the Armistice/Remembrance service: the pipes are invariably the highlight, at once solemn and poignant.

At any November 11 ceremony, watch the faces in the crowd as the pipes sound *The Lament*. While they may not know *The Flowers of the Forest*, the solitary piper, playing slowly and with complete intention, well, to so many, this is the definitive bagpipe – one often charged with bestowing the highest honour.

So let the jokes fly. We can take it. We have the indescribable; the impossible to pigeonhole. The Scots may've invented the modern world but it's the bagpipe for which we're most thankful. I'd drink to that but it's MacLeod's round and the last time I saw him open his wallet the Queen blinked. ●