

BROTHER SCOTS

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Brother Scots by Donald Carswell

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P R E F A C E

THE biographical studies that make up this book are ostensibly separate essays, each complete in itself. But they were not separately conceived. My idea in writing them was to give not only some account of a number of intrinsically interesting men but also a cultural picture of Scotland in the late years of the nineteenth century. The picture is neither complete nor, even in regard to the aspects of Scottish life with which it deals, very explicit, but it contains matter which I believe will be found interesting, especially by English readers.

The Scottish character is familiar enough and it adapts itself readily enough to English ways and institutions. Yet it is never quite assimilated. There remains always something unresolved, something alien, even hostile to the English genius. The Englishman feels it, but is at a loss to say what it is. The Scotsman cannot help him to define it, for he himself has never thought the matter out. He merely repeats a few patriotic *cliches*, and like most patriots he has not even an elementary knowledge of the history of his own country.

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There are two fundamental facts to be noted about Scotland. The first is racial. The Scots are a mixed race, made up of the same elements as the English, but in different proportions, the Anglo-Saxon element being much smaller. The fair-haired Germanic type common in England is rare in Scotland, except anomalously in the North Highlands, where it is of Norse origin. The dark pre-Celtic race is widely diffused though it is found in its purity only in the West Highlands. In the Lowlands this mixture of races has produced a people of exceptionally robust and acute intelligence and strong, even coarse, passions. In general, though extremely shrewd, they lack insight, and as compared with the English they may be described as more fantastic but less imaginative.

The other fact is historical. England, ever since it has been England, has been a relatively rich and populous country, and for more than eight centuries has enjoyed a settled government under a strong and vital central power. The people accept the rule of law as they accept the air they breathe. They are seasoned in civilisation. The case of Scotland is very different. During the greater part of their history the Scottish nation were like the conies, a feeble folk who made their houses in the rocks. Throughout the Middle Ages, and for long afterwards, their condition was one of direst misery. The English villein, wretched as he was, lived better

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than the Scottish freeman. The poverty was not altogether due to the barrenness of the soil, for Scotland, as Cromwell noted when he marched through the Lothians, has some of the finest agricultural land in Great Britain. Cromwell further noticed, with surprise and indignation, that this exceeding good land was occupied by an idle, ignorant and degraded peasantry who were literally starving in the midst of plenty. Yet these poor people were not to blame. Their misery was due to the political situation of their country. The Lowlands were at the mercy of a lawless and greedy feudalism which treated the Crown with contempt. They were menaced from the south by their rich and powerful neighbours of England, and from the north by a warlike people technically their fellow-citizens but alien in speech and culture, who regarded brigandage as the most honourable, indeed the only, profession for men of breeding. Such conditions do not make for good husbandry in any sense of the term.

These centuries of battle, murder, sudden death, pestilence and famine might well have sunk the Scottish people into a degradation from which no recovery was possible. Yet history presents few phenomena more remarkable than the rapid cultural development of Scotland after the Parliamentary Union of 1707. The Union gave Scotland not only economic freedom but, what was even more important, a strong settled govern-