

Letter from Scotland



Tam flees the witches – painting by Alexander Goudie courtesy of South Ayrshire Council

We are indeed being chased by demons. Alexander Goudie's wonderful series of 54 paintings inspired by Burns' "Tam O' Shanter" have gone on rare display in South Ayrshire and they capture splendidly the mad and scary spirit of our times. An angry populus has been whipped into a frenzy by Donald Trump and the Bexiteers and they now threaten us sensible Scots with a tumble over the cliff edge, back into the impoverished world of the 1950s.

Somehow, America and Britain are supposed to be setting out to be deal-makers in free trade world which will bring heavy manufacturing back to their respective rust belts. Do they honestly think Europe, Russia, China, India, Brazil etc will sit back and allow that to happen ? And why hasn't it happened already ?

This week the prime minister Theresa May finally made up her mind to go for a "hard Brexit", outside the Single European Market and outside the Customs Union. The immediate response from Scotland's first minister Nicola Sturgeon was that that would be "an economic catastrophe" and it made another bid for Scottish independence even more likely. True, she is pressing ahead with her compromise proposal of a special exemption for Scotland from the general British exit but there is now little hope that it can succeed.

The Scottish economy is already suffering from Brexit jitters. The unemployment figures took another leap upwards this week to 139,000 or 5.1 per cent and our growth figure for the last year was just 0.7 per cent (compared to 2.2 per cent in the UK as a whole). The Clydesdale Bank has just announced another

400 job losses and the Airdrie Savings Bank is to close with the loss of 70 jobs. It was founded in 1835 and is the last of the traditional local savings banks left in Scotland.

This week saw another twist in the perplexing issue of how Scotland deals with rape cases. A woman has just won a civil court hearing against two former Dundee United footballers who she claimed had raped her following a New Year night out in Bathgate in 2011. The Prosecution Service decided there was insufficient evidence to take the case to the criminal courts. But the judge in the civil court has now ruled that she was indeed raped because she was too drunk to have given her consent.

The two footballers have been ordered to pay her damages of £100,000. So a whole new solution has been opened up to the problem of Scotland's low conviction rate in rape cases. And a new warning has done out to men taking advantage of women who have had too much to drink.

On Monday, a colourful parade of anglers, pipers and curious tourists gathered on the banks of the River Tay for the traditional opening of the salmon season. All the talk was of how salmon stocks have risen since the new rule on catch-and-return came in two years ago. Last year 2,100 salmon were caught in the first four months of the year and 94 per cent of them were successfully returned to the water. That's an impressive instance of the fishing community's self-restraint. I just hope it isn't the same fish being caught over and over again.

Thousands of folk music fans have begun their annual pilgrimage to Glasgow for "Celtic Connections". This year there are over 2,000 singers, song-writers, pipers, fiddlers and guitar players performing at 300 formal concerts. The English songstress Laura Marling led the way with an opening night in the Glasgow Concert Hall. She's to be followed by Olivia Newton John and our own Evelyn Glennie. They are the

first in a long line of female musicians from all over the world who grace the programme this year – Karine Polwart, Cara Dillon, Aziza Brahim and Roberta Sa.



Robert Burns by
Alexander Nasmyth

No doubt the male songwriter Robert Burns will get a mention in Glasgow over the next few days.

No Burns Night (25th) would be complete without some new information emerging about this much scrutinised poet. This year we learnt that the famous Nasmyth portrait contains secret Masonic markings invisible to the naked eye. We learnt too that Glasgow University is carrying out a psychological study of Burns' writings to find out if he suffered from depression or bipolar disorder. And the National Library is to let the daylight in, briefly, on the original manuscript of "Ae Fond Kiss."

Who knows what we shall discover from that !