

Letter from Scotland



Monarch of the Glen by Sir
Edwin Landseer 1851

Does he represent nationalism or patriotism or – in view of the terrorist attack in Westminster – defiant democracy? The proud stag of Victorian imagination looks down on us with a quizzical eye from his Highland estate. It's a great painting. It stopped me in my tracks as soon as I walked into the National Gallery in Edinburgh just the day after it was bought for the nation last weekend.

Right now the "Monarch of the Glen" represents freedom, peace, order, and the other underlying principles of democracy. He's a constitutional monarch, there to reassure us that our better nature will prevail against any evil that comes to do battle with us.

So it was altogether fitting and proper that our democratic leaders put aside their differences and united to condemn the London terrorist and declare that we shall not be moved. In this Holyrood echoed Westminster, with Nicola Sturgeon agreeing with Theresa May that "we stand united in our core values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law – those values are strong and they will endure."

So, for the moment, nationalism and a new referendum on Scottish independence was set aside. Holyrood suspended its referendum debate as news of the London attack filtered through on Wednesday afternoon and will return to it on Tuesday next week. Then the SNP will, with the support of the Greens, win a majority and a formal request for a second referendum on independence will go to the Westminster government.

But getting back to Landseer's painting. It was bought by the National Gallery for £4m from the drinks firm Diageo. It had come into its hands through the purchase of the Glenfiddich whisky distillers John Dewar & Sons who were the latest in a long line of owners stretching back to 1851 when the House of Lords, the original commissioners, failed to pay Sir Edwin for his work.



The National Galleries launched the fundraising last month with an animated version of the Monarch of the Glen.

Diageo had been lending the painting to the Gallery for several years but last November it put it on the market for £8m. It offered to cut this to £4m, if the Gallery succeeded in raising the funds...which it duly did, with the assistance of a £2.6m grant from the National Lottery. I'm still debating whether Diageo has been extremely generous or whether it should have given the painting to the nation for nothing as a patriotic gesture.

Which brings us to patriotism. Queen Victoria no doubt saw the "Monarch of the Glen" as the "biscuit tin" image of Scotland, wild and romantic but fiercely loyal to her United Kingdom and indeed her Empire. Patriotic but not nationalist. It is however an awkward boundary. Looking at the picture, we don't know which way the mighty stag will leap next. And Scotland stands at just such a juncture.

A great debate is beginning to swirl in the media around which Union is more important to us, the European Union or the Union with the rest of the United Kingdom. And in 2019 we might have to make that choice. It means the second referendum will be different from the one in 2016, because both options will be seas of uncertainty, Brexit Britain or an independent Scotland hoping to get back into the EU on decent terms.

One man who straddled that border line between nationalism and patriotism was the Irish nationalist Martin McGuinness who died on Monday. He began as a terrorist, then became a nationalist and ended as a patriot. Nicola Sturgeon said of him; "He grew up in Northern Ireland's troubled past but without his hard and brave work to bridge the divide, peace would not have been achieved."

It is one of the blessings of Scotland that we are not plagued with violent nationalism like Northern Ireland (though we sometimes share its sectarianism). But as we enter another divisive referendum campaign, we need to remember that we are all democrats and all patriots – nationalists, unionists, federalists, Europhobes and Europhiles.

Let's end by talking about a safer subject – the weather. It's been bitterly cold this week, despite the spring equinox. A smattering of snow hit the Highlands on Tuesday and reached parts of West Lothian and Lanarkshire. Snow even peppered the Pentland Hills for a time. By the end of the week we were back in springtime and the daffodils could smile at us again.

I wonder if such climate changes are causing the increasing number of whales and dolphins we are seeing around our coasts. The latest survey from the Seawatch Foundation has found that sightings have reached record levels all around the UK.

There were 374 recorded sightings in Scottish waters in just nine days last July involving nearly 2,000 individual animals. Among them were unusual sightings of striped dolphins and a humpback whale. Are there just more people looking for whales these days? Or is there more to eat in our Scottish waters than we imagine? Maybe nature, like our Highland stag, is standing defiant against the evils of our times.