

A Tale of Two Tallies

Brexit, the day after

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Outside Edinburgh Castle, William Wallace and Richard the

Bruce—the two greatest icons of Scottish nationalism—stand guard in bronze, larger than life, at the start of the city’s equally iconic Royal Mile. In their day—the thirteenth century—Scottish nationalism meant resistance to English domination, in particular the invasions of Edward I and his son and successor Edward II. After defeating the English forces in 1297 at the Battle of Stirling Bridge, Wallace became the Guardian of Scotland and leader of the Scottish War of Independence. Following Wallace’s defeat at the Battle of Falkirk, the baton was passed to Robert the Bruce, who continued to wage wars against the English invaders **until his death in 1329. Wallace paid heavily for his resistance.** He was hung, castrated, disemboweled while still alive, and then drawn and quartered. His limbs were displayed in four separate towns as a warning to future revolutionaries, his head dipped in tar and mounted on London Bridge.

Medieval wars between England and Scotland may be a thing of the past, but political antagonisms aren’t. Fast-forward almost a century to the vote over whether the United Kingdom should absolve its membership in the European Union, or “Brexit,” and stark divisions between the English and the Scots emerge again. In the June 23 referendum, England voted 53%-47% to leave, with only a few population centers in the Midlands and the south voicing a Remain majority. Meanwhile, every Scottish county voted Remain, and the 62% Remain vote countrywide was the highest among the four members of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland **also** went Scotland’s way, voting 55% Remain, while Wales sided with England, with 52% voting Leave. The Scots still seem bent upon separating themselves, if not from English rule, than from the rule in the United Kingdom.

Nestled along the River Aire in central Yorkshire, the heart of Leave territory, Leeds was an English exception. The city’s Remain vote squeaked out a 50.3% majority, and a brief stroll through the

city center helps explain why. With its Indian takeaways, falafel stands, and Asian noodle bars standing alongside neighborhood pubs and casual dessert cafes, Leeds better resembles central London than the local towns and villages 10 or 15 miles away.

“There’s much more multiculturalism here, the atmosphere is much more international. More people see the benefit of connecting to the outside world,” Priscilla, manning the desk at the tourist information office, told me.

Leeds is also a student city, hosting students both British and international at several universities, another factor that may have pushed Leeds in the Remain direction. “Young people have grown up with the EU,” Priscilla went on, “it’s normal for them to consider studying in Germany or Italy or France, and then coming back to the U.K. or staying abroad, and they don’t want to give that up.”

When I first asked about the local reaction to the Brexit vote she warned me, “we aren’t allowed to discuss politics,” but after a little casual talk politics found its way into the conversation. What about the loss of local industries that had sustained a town like Leeds for generations?

Priscilla was upbeat, as any representative charged with putting a good face on the city would have to be: “We now have many legal firms and international call centers that have opened offices here, and then there’s the retail industry. Leeds has become a shopping hub for the region. It’s much easier to get around than central London. And there are many new malls opening up.”

To prove her point, she pointed to a shaded area on a map of the city that had been slated for retail development, in the same way that entire districts in previous times had been handed over to factory owners.

“We also rely a great deal on tourism,” Priscilla went on, “not only from the U.K. but all over the world.”

If her claim needed substantiation, the TV screen a few feet away was running a video promotion on the attractions of Leeds—in

Chinese. But I weighed Priscilla's claims of economic fruition for a city long dependent on well-paying industrial jobs with a bit of doubt. Leeds was a snapshot of many transitional economies across the United Kingdom that were trying to replace "old economy" union-driven jobs with service-oriented employment and the spillover benefits of the consumer culture—which mainly benefitted those with money to spend.

One afternoon I spent a couple hours touring the Leeds City Museum, just up the street from the information center and a few minutes walk from Leeds' pedestrian, retail-dominated center. Display after display touted the economic success that the industrial revolution had brought to the city, when companies like Watson's & Sons Ltd., a soap manufacturer, and the Burton's clothing company provided lifetime employment for generations of the working class. But that was Leeds' history, and worthy of a display in the city's history museum. It was now 2016, and many of the derelict mills and factories along the River Aire had been bought by real estate developers to be converted into upscale apartments and condominiums.

The odd juxtaposition of an "old" and "new" economy could be seen elsewhere in Leeds. Along the river, the historic locks that had guided boats up- and downstream for two hundred years, linchpins of the economy of another era, were now for the most part tourist sights to be marketed on the city's promotional brochures. The shopping arcades in the Victorian District, built in the late nineteenth century to satisfy the desires of an emerging consumer society, had been beautifully restored to attract the ready spenders of today. Most of the city center was lined with brand-name stores, British, European, international—it no longer made any difference, as all had melded together to forge the new retail economy. But like the Brexit vote, the Victorian District posed more questions than answers: By refurbishing its shopping arcades, was Leeds clinging to its Victorian past or using it as a stepping-stone to the future, though a future based on service-sector employment? In the early evening,

the running, walking, biking path along the river became a commuting corridor, as Leeds' new professional class commuted via foot and pedal power to their semi-rural digs.

"People are moving up here from London who are just tired of the living costs and long commutes. I used to live in London myself and decided to move up here," Priscilla told me. "In London you have to drive twenty miles to get to the countryside," she continued, "and spend an hour fighting the city traffic. Here, it is just a few minutes away." All well and good. And I could appreciate her efforts at civic boosterism. But what she didn't acknowledge was that villages less than 20 miles away were a world away from central Leeds—socially, economically, and culturally. The people of rural Yorkshire regarded deeply abstract concepts such as "globalization" and "the new economy" as forces that had upended their lives, and the European Union was the Trojan horse that had let them in.

The Brexit decision reverberated around the world because the questions surrounding it were not solely British. If one of the factors in the vote was globalization and the changes it had brought, then Brexit was a toe in the water, testing the temperature of the tender topics of immigration, economic growth, and nationalism worldwide. But Britain was not alone. By raising these issues, the Brexit vote invited questions that had been simmering far beyond the shores of the United Kingdom.

After the Brexit results, common perception said that most young Britons voted Remain while many of their parents' generation opted for Leave. But such generalities can only be carried so far. Ann Tobin's strands of curly white hair hint that she is not one of the millennials who backed the Remain vote in order to preserve employment and educational opportunities abroad. Originally from Derbyshire, in southern Yorkshire, she teaches in the media program at Leeds-Beckett University. If the poll results were at all accurate, her views were at odds with most of her neighbors and generation.

“The working class *has* been forgotten by the government,” Ann told me, standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows on the fifth floor of the Rose Bowl, the landmark conference center at the heart of the university. “It *hasn’t* done anything for them. It’s like what you have in the U.S., where Donald Trump has gotten support from the working class and unemployed, everyone who has been left behind by all the changes in the global economy that have taken place, and so quickly. The old jobs were in mining, steel and coal, but they are *gone*. As much as people would like to believe, they’re not coming back.”

There was an ironic point here—that this relentless force called globalization had spread beyond economic ties to shape international politics—and one only needed to read the daily headlines to see that its greatest critics had become its greatest advocates. At the height of the U.S. presidential convention season Nigel Farage, former leader of the anti-immigrant, Britain-first United Kingdom Independence Party, jetted across the Atlantic to boost Trump’s campaign. Again, political ties were forged across national boundaries to argue for just the opposite—the preservation of national boundaries and resistance to outside influence.

Further irony was on display on the road connecting Leeds to Bradford International Airport. A sign reminded arrivals that Leeds had been the site of the Grand Depart, or starting line, of the 2014 Tour de France, the **annual** cycling race that ended on Paris’ Champs-Élysées, to symbolize the concept of a united Europe. That year the course wound through Leave-dominant Yorkshire and then headed south through Sheffield, Cambridge, and London before crossing the English Channel. Prince Harry, Prince William, and his wife Kate were on hand to cut the ribbon for the Grand Sendoff.

“It was all emotion that drove the Brexit campaign,” Ann continued, “and as in America the vote brought out people who hadn’t been part of the political process. When my husband and I went to vote, there was a long queue all the way down the block, and we had

never seen anything like it before. Right then we knew that the Leave campaign had won. But people in this part of Britain don't see that the old jobs are not going to return, and without the eastern Europeans we would even have fewer jobs."

To illustrate her point, she told me about the Sports Direct controversy that had rocked Yorkshire. The national sportswear chain had bought land that was the former site of a Yorkshire mine to build a warehouse and distribution center. It would be staffed primarily by Lithuanians who, naturally, would be paid less than local residents, were the local residents ever to be offered the jobs. The symbolism of a retail distribution center being built on top of an abandoned mine could have only rankled local sentiment.

"Many people here say the Lithuanians are taking their jobs, but if it weren't for the Lithuanians there would be even fewer jobs. In this case, Sports Direct would have simply gone somewhere else, and the place will employ at least *some* Britons."

Even in Remain-leaning Leeds I knew there had to be some Leave voters ready to voice their views, and it didn't take long to find one. Stephen Curran is the mirror image of Ann Tobin—a Leave proponent from the largely Remain region of Dorset. He is neither a young millennial eyeing employment prospects in Germany or Italy, nor a near pensioner like Ann. As a university instructor at Brunel University London, he has no reason to fear Lithuanians taking his job.

"It's about sovereignty," he told me. "If the EU had stayed an economic bond tied to jobs and trade, people would have accepted it much better than they have. But when it exercised political control, that's when it went too far."

As with Ann, the United States became the point of comparison. "All this time we've had two governments," Stephen explained, "one in London and one in Brussels. Imagine something like this in the U.S., a Congress—Senate and House—and a president to decide American issues, but then there was another government somewhere else saying, 'No, you can't do that.' Would the American people put up with that?"

When the referendum was announced by former prime minister David Cameron, to be held on June 23, Brexit was expected to be defeated, but Conservative politicians, such as former London mayor Boris Johnson, became its cheerleaders. A wave of isolationist, nationalist frenzy was whipped up, and to almost everyone's surprise the proposal for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, the multinational organization it had helped establish, had passed. This prompted a question that still hovered, unanswered: What drove the Leave voters to the polls? If there was a change in sentiment, what was the tipping point?

"When Obama came here to lecture the British on how they should vote, that really angered a lot of people. Imagine a British politician going to the U.S. to tell Americans how to vote on anything—that Mexicans should have free passage across the border. There was an enormous backlash. Many people came out to vote who might have stayed home."

"There will never be a United States of Europe," Stephen mused. "The countries are too culturally diverse. The U.S. is a large multicultural society made up of people from an enormous number of ethnic and racial backgrounds, but when they face the flag they are all Americans, and they know what that means."

Given the divisions the American election season dramatizes, along lines of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, economics, law and order, gun and birth control and just about every other demographic imaginable that, we like to believe, was once embraced by the concept of an overarching American identity, Stephen's vision of American unity seemed fanciful. And when the national anthem is played at sporting events, some players place their hands over their hearts, others kneel in protest. But rather than challenge him on this, I asked—What's next? When would Article 50 of the EU charter be initiated, triggering a final Brexit? Would there be a revote once the terms of Brexit were clear? Could a revote prompt a re-think, and could a re-think prompt a return to the EU? Consider the after-shocks. Such a political earthquake could hardly fail to roll through

the entire continent without rattling a few cupboards. Could other countries flirt with the prospect of abandoning the EU?

“France could be next,” Stephen speculated. “They might not vote to leave but they could also call for a referendum.”

If there is anything that Britons do agree on is that they are willing to embrace the benefits of a borderless Europe when the winds from the Mediterranean blow north across the Iberian Peninsula, cross the English Channel (without so much as a passport check), to bring warm, sunny weather to the streets of London, Birmingham, and points north. And so it was throughout my stay in Leeds, and so it continued when I boarded a British Rail train for the three-hour ride to Edinburgh, Scotland. Along the way, the fields of oats and barley glowed in late-summer light. Below Dumbarton, the rail line skirted the pearly blue waters of the North Sea, and passengers on station platforms lingered in T-shirts and shorts, enjoying this last gift of summer, eager to forget the Brexit vote, at least for the time being, or at least as long as the sun shone.

Central Edinburgh is also a snapshot, not only of the twenty-first-century United Kingdom but of its history over the last four hundred years. Edinburgh Castle, which dates to the twelfth century, still looms over the wynds and closes of the Old Town, now crammed with tourists from the castle all the way to Holyrood Palace, at the opposite end of the Royal Mile. Outside St. Giles Cathedral, larger-than-life replicas of the economist Adam Smith and philosopher David Hume stand in bronze castings, eyeing the tourists that pass under their gaze. On the other side of the Princes’ Gardens (formerly Loch Noch and for several hundred years the city’s notoriously fetid water supply), Edinburgh’s New Town spreads out in chessboard squares, a product of eighteenth-century urban planning that was designed to accommodate the growth of the city once the Old Town was filled to bursting. Georgian townhouses sprang up to house the expanding middle class, and today the streets are lined with international brand-name stores to satisfy the material appetites of a greatly

expanded consumer class.

But neither gentrification nor hyper-globalization have changed one thing: the Scots penchant for blunt talk. In the Stockbridge Pub, just outside the New Town, I asked Paul, sipping a happy-hour pint of beer, about local sentiment toward the Brexit vote.

“Well—,” and he paused, “there’s a wide range of views on this.”

And what were they?

“Well, they range from acceptance to, well—thinking it’s bloody fucking stupid.”

I asked him where he fell on the spectrum.

“Me?? I think it’s *beyond* bloody fucking stupid,” he shot back.

“The whole thing was pushed by politicians who used the issue for political gain. They never thought it would pass. They thought it would fail and they would be seen as standing up for the common man. Now they don’t know what to do. They’re totally lost. All the arguments they used had nothing to do with being a part of the European Union. Take immigration. ‘Control our borders?’ Leaving the EU isn’t going to stop that.”

A snapshot of Edinburgh 2016 suggested that the toothpaste could not be put back in the tube. Over 20 years of EU membership and open borders could not be reversed. The wait staff in pubs and restaurants hailed from Poland and Lithuania. Bus drivers spoke English with Italian accents. The late-hour convenience stores and grocery shops were operated by Indians and Pakistanis. The helpful attendant at the city’s tourist information center had migrated to Edinburgh not from Glasgow or Inverness but Salonika, Greece. Ironically, however, nothing had really changed. These were not the jobs “Scots didn’t want to do.” There were also Scottish wait staff and bus drivers. Fish and chips were still sold by the bucketful. Room-temperature beer was still drawn from pub taps. Letter drops and telephone boxes (wherever they could be found) **still glowed bright red**. Scotland had not become a borough of Europe. But more of Europe had come to Scotland.

During the industrial revolution, rural dwellers fallen on tough

times sought opportunities in cities. In the twenty-first century's "new economy," citizens of countries fallen on hard times are moving to where opportunities can be had, and this means migration to places that offer a hope of prosperity. Seen another way, the dynamics of the village economy have simply been stretched to the dimensions of a global village. Over the decades, the European Union has gradually but inevitably rewoven the social fabric of Scotland, bringing Europe to Scotland and Scotland closer to the rest of Europe. So it is not so much a babel of languages that one hears in twenty-first-century Edinburgh as a babel of accents. English is the common denominator, but the accents are no longer Welsh, Irish, English, or even Scottish.

At the Mitre pub along the Royal Mile one evening I met Jasmine, whose curly red hair and fair complexion marked her as quintessentially Scottish. Like most of the millennial generation, she had voted Remain, but I asked her if Scotland might mount another referendum to break from the United Kingdom—a replay of the 2014 vote.

"I'd hate to see that happen," she said. "They've been together for such a long time it would be a shame for the Brexit decision to lead to that."

I noted her use of "they" rather than "we" in referring to Scotland and England. As we talked, it emerged that Jasmine was French but had lived in Scotland for four years. In that time she had taken on the role of a concerned relative of a long-wed couple on the verge of divorce, hoping it wouldn't happen for the "good of the family." But now the "family" was all of Europe. Brexit, or a Scottish revote, wasn't only a British affair but a European one. National decisions had international impact, as an exploding volcano spews ash wherever the wind may carry it, ignoring national borders. "Internal affairs" were no longer internal.

The question still hovered, like an annoying mosquito: Would the Scots vote again on leaving the United Kingdom?

"Oh yes, they will," said Jack, tending the bar at the Mitre, with a bit of swagger. The ghost of Robert the Bruce still lived: The swashbuckling hero envisioned a pan-Scottish-Gaelic union discarding English

rule, and Scotland and Northern Ireland were united in voting to remain in the European Union.

Paul, at the Stockbridge Pub, was more circumspect, a spokesman for Scottish pragmatism who recognized that the heroic era of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce had passed: “We will have to see what the terms of Brexit will be,” he said. “But even if they aren’t good it would be hard for Scotland to leave the U.K. What’s our population, five million? As an independent country where does that put us? Maybe on par with Estonia or Slovenia? What’s our economic strength if we have to stand on our own? Oil from the North Sea isn’t going to last forever.”

For Scots, exit from the European Union on unfavorable terms on trade and other economic matters would present a Hobson’s choice: remain in the United Kingdom without Europe or reapply for E.U. membership without the economic might of the United Kingdom. Would there be a Scottish revote? The answer was as unpredictable as the Scottish weather.

And the weather had turned. After days of puffy clouds and sparkling sun, a northeast wind filled the streets of the Old Town with dense fog and mist. The spires of St. Giles Cathedral and the gothic spires of the monument to Sir Walter Scott along Princes Street were barely visible. On the Royal Mile, Hume and Smith became ghostly silhouettes. It was a good day to spend in the National Museum of Scotland to explore “The Scottish Story,” as the six floors of the modern wing are called. The displays trace the history of the rocky, windswept land from the time of the ancient Celts and the Roman occupation through the medieval era, the Scottish renaissance—which brought achievements in art, literature, architecture, and technology—and the post-world War II exodus of Scots seeking better opportunities in the English-speaking world outside the British Isles: the United States, Canada, and Australia.

I spent most of the day climbing the six floors, hoping to get a broader perspective on the recent crisis, or conundrum, in Scottish history. Brexit and the question of a Scottish revote were twenty-

first-century matters involving globalization and the increasing unification of a continent that had been torn by internal wars for at least a thousand years. Scottish history, as rich as complex as it was, offered little to help navigate this new era.

It was almost five o'clock when Laurinda, one of the security staff, appeared to tell me that my visit had come to an end. Her accent was distinctly British but not Scottish, and as we chatted she revealed that she had been born in Ireland, not the loyalist north but the republican south. Her parents had migrated to Scotland in the early 1990s, and it had been her home from the age of four months. As a naturalized Scot she, too, had voted Remain, for reasons similar to most of her generation: "It's so much easier to travel, find career opportunities."

Did the immigration question concern her? Did Britain need to secure its borders, to "take its country back?"

"It's a good thing, all these people from different parts of Europe and even the world coming here," she replied. "It brings more freedom and openness."

Then the shadow of history lengthened, and in this case the gloom covered decades and began before Laurinda had been born.

"In Ireland, I know what it was like back in the days of the borders. I hear the stories from the people who lived through it. I wouldn't want to go back to that."

Back out on the streets of the Old Town the fog and mist had grown thicker. The spires of St. Giles Cathedral had been absorbed by the evening damp. The Royal Mile ended in murky haze a hundred meters in either direction. This suggested not so much an ominous future as one that was, well—more than a little opaque. This was Scotland after all, where historical clarity has been as rare as the clarity of the ale drawn from pub taps.

The next morning the sunshine returned. The view from Arthur's Seat, the promontory that towers majestically over the eastern side of the Old Town, was an unbroken arc of sky all the way to Edinburgh Castle, at the western end of the Royal Mile. Shoppers

again strolled along Princes' Street and throughout the New Town grid, umbrellas and the nagging concerns of politics put away for the time being. Weather and politics are ever in flux in Scotland, and as every Scot knows, fair weather and a break from the storms has to be enjoyed whenever the opportunity arises.

But in Scotland political debates cannot be silenced for long. Sometime in the night, a prankster had fitted the head of the bronze David Hume with an orange and white traffic cone, and there it sat, a plastic dunce cap atop the head of the great philosopher, throughout the afternoon. As political commentary it was trenchant but perhaps not quite fair. **Scotland may have voted Remain, but no one knows in which direction the Scotsman skeptical of all habits of thought might have leaned.**