

*The Grassic Gibbon Centre
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Mither Tap

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I grew up in an insignificant settlement of Aberdeenshire named Blackburn: a cluster of houses huddled round a Co-Op. It lacks foibles or quirks which you can recount to people you meet across the years with nostalgia gleaming in your eyes. It is a commuter village to the one-time oil capital (of Scotland, Europe and beyond), Aberdeen. A commuter village: somewhere people live so that they can go somewhere else, but never a destination in its own right. There is something in the psychology of believing that about your home village which makes you terribly upset that you are there at all. Why could my parents not live somewhere exciting? Not even in the city centre? So I could walk to a bar not overflowing with bumpkins at least? Why Aberdeenshire – that county of Scotland which is remote to everywhere and close to nowhere? Scotland is more fields than people as it is, and here I found myself in the furthest field anyone could find. Or so it felt. I could have easily been living among the crofts of the West Coast, or on the Hebrides, or up a hill somewhere in the Highlands. Indeed, I might not have been in Scotland at all. While I wished that my parents would have found work in London or LA or somewhere with big theatres overflowing with musicals, I could just as easily have been born somewhere worse off. There are war zones in this world after all. So, it could have

been worse. But just try telling that to eighteen-year old me. I was not so agreeable then as I am now.

As far as I was concerned, the village and the people were boring and remote from anything exciting which happened. All the decisions about the country are made in the metropolis of London at the other end of the world, and here I was, stuck on a sleepy street in the back of nowhere, the stench of manure parading through my nostrils on account of the squadrons of tractors which gloried up the street next to my house. The worst thing was that so many of the locals were happy to be there. Get out, I used to think. Go explore the world. Go broaden your perspective. I hadn't explored even an inch myself, and my own perspective was narrow, though I didn't realise that then.

My compatriots loved the local, Doric dialect which lent them such fantastic phrases as 'Fit like i'day min?' and 'Chavvin' awa, yersel?' Eh? My mum was a 'local lass' but never taught me what all these sounds meant. I chose to scoff. Not the Queen's English. Not in the books I'm reading. What would you do if you were trying to talk from someone not from here? You'd be lost. What's the point speaking words most the world can't understand? Can you even call them words? No. No, you can't. Boy, I was a cynical teenager. In my opinion, the use of the local dialect positioned you as a tiny island, in the middle of a massive ocean, half the world away from the nearest civilisation, and thus all your opinions were void. I was a young dreamer who wanted to fill the world with my influence. I wanted to do work that would reach every heart and eye and ear the world over. People speaking Doric didn't get that, because if they tried to speak that way to an Australian they'd never get anywhere. You can't change the world speaking words (if words they are) that only Aberdeenshire 'fowk' can understand. Open your eyes, you numpties.

This resentment of the local language and traditions was always with me. I think it festered so much because I never felt like I could tell somebody about it, unless I had safely established that they felt the same way. I never really found someone who did. Maybe I was looking in the wrong places. I was on the school football teams and playing video games with all the thoughtless boys: an attempt to pretend that I didn't like books or the sweet music of Taylor Swift.

'Romeo, take me somewhere we can be alone.'

So she sings in a favourite song of mine. And wish for Romeo I did. Though I could only admit that in my bedroom with no-one else listening for a long time. A popular song with popular words and a popular tune, but it seemed to speak only to me. Funny how anything concerning my homeland made me feel disdain or indifference, but get a girl from Pennsylvania singing about love and I get a feeling of home brewing in my chest. I was looking for someone to emerge from the blue and whisk me off to a faraway land where my dreams could come true. Somewhere half the population didn't talk about pipes and rigs and drilling as though it were interesting. Of course, people don't just erupt into your life like that. I was part of a constant landscape. Mither Tap, the crowning peak on the hill of Bennachie, would watch me wherever I went. The most distinctive natural landmark for miles, it was automatically elected overseer of Aberdeenshire, or my neck of it anyway. No matter where you went, Mither Tap was there, watching, questioning, judging. She absorbed the dreams of all the people I knew, all the desires of these Shire folk who have never walked far enough away; maybe they're afraid it would make the hill angry to stray too far from her view. I looked at that bulb of rock and felt oppressed. I could see her from the windows of my classrooms and I could see her from the edge of my village. I could see her on the drive back from football practice and on the

school bus rides in the morning. I could see her when I closed my eyes, a dull shadow in the mist.

Then, I would have given anything to not see that hill one day. But Mither Tap watched on defiantly, relentlessly, and muttering neighbours took her cue and peered over fences and between bricks in walls to watch beadily too. They reminded me that she commanded the land on which I walked, and I had better follow the Aberdeenshire rules that offend none yet castrate all. Go and get your job in oil. Find a girl; get her pregnant. Buy your house, your car, your garden fence. Don't move too far off. Put those books away. Where's your accent? You've been watching too much American TV, you turncoat.

The estrangement I felt from the hill, and the land from which it grew, made it clear to me that I wasn't Scottish. I mean, technically, I was – I am. But I never felt that. I felt more like just a person. A person of the world. Of Europe, of the Costa Coffee Club, of the dictionary.com 'Word of the Day' mailing list. Membership meant nothing. I did not feel Scottish. Haggis was disgusting. Irn Bru was just okay. I don't like ceilidhs. No, I do not want a 'baggie' with my shopping; I'd rather gather it all in my arms and drop half the stuff. I'd have been American. I'd have been English. I'd have been Anywhere-but-here-ian. But not Scottish. I didn't know the words to *Flower of Scotland* because the song wasn't mine and a thistle is really stretching the definition of 'flower'. I did not want to be a man of the countryside, emerging from the glens wearing a skirt shouting for freedom between mouthfuls of sheep liver and a letter opener shoved up my sock. Scottish meant small. It meant insignificant. It meant that the work you did was only ever going to be heard of by the sheep in the next field. America taught me that they are living the dream and Scotland isn't. *Friends* or *Glee* couldn't have happened here. The people here don't want the epic

kind of life which makes it into TV shows. They just want quiet. The most successful, famous people from Scotland – Ewan McGregor and the man who invented the telephone – don't want to live here anymore or they're dead.

One day I up and left. A promotion came up in Manchester, the big city where the bricks are red (not grey) and the people are not Scottish, so I leapt at the chance. I was going to get lost in the urban jungle. We don't have those in Scotland. We've just got woods and trees and sheep and farms and bagpipes. It was my first time away from Aberdeenshire. Mither Tap could only watch as I packed my bags; in Manchester, I would be well beyond the reach of her wily eye.

The move was unnerving and redefining. In this new place, I could decide from scratch the person I wanted to be. Nobody would know anything about me other than what I told them. I felt as though I had been bestowed with a tremendous power, strong enough to shape my life as I pleased it. Much better than at home, where I am not sure if I ever consciously decided who I was.

At the time I was there, Manchester was itself undergoing a redefinition. Its once unsafe city centre was awash with construction work and redevelopments. Every time I walked across the city I had to take a different route because a new combination of roads would be closed from the last time. The city was a shapeshifting mirage and its energy was contagious. I floated along the airwaves and enjoyed the absence of roots, the anonymity. I didn't know who I was, and nor did anyone else. I was just going to do or say whatever came into my mind, unfettered by national identities or local expectations, and then everyone I met could decide for themselves the sort of man I was. Eventually, I would decide on the character I wished to play long-term and that would be me. The possibility of presenting myself as a worldly man, one who had merely been based in

Aberdeenshire but explored the world extensively, came to me. The temptation to tell people I had moved to Manchester because I needed the city's beating heart as the lifeblood for my next masterpiece was hard to resist. I was largely honest in the end. I was too excited to lie convincingly. I decided to be wide-eyed and unbelieving of the wonders of the big city. I did things that I couldn't have done in that wretched hometown of mine and met people I had never met before.

I settled into a routine in my new city. I began to plan trips home to see my family, and when I went I breathed in the Scottish air like welcoming an old friend. I told the Mancunians about Scottish-isms which I was very proud to be the authority on. I began to preach to the uneducated English folk the joys of Irn Bru, and remonstrated with waiting staff who informed me that it was not available at their restaurants. I craved haggis when Burns Night swung round. I went to Brewdog and ensured everyone I was with knew of its Scottish origins. I then proceeded to sing *Flower of Scotland* at the top of my lungs because I deemed it to be the anthem of a bar owned by a Scottish company. I began to teach people Doric phrases and they looked at me with wonder while they tried to figure out what on earth I had just said. The fact that I was Scottish and red-haired and bearded became approximately seventy-five percent of my humour and was a daily feature in my conversations with colleagues and friends. Hearing the lilt of a Scot abroad, among the gaggle of Northerners, would warm my heart as I waded through the red-brick streets.

The feeling came over me quickly, like I had forgotten you're supposed to drink whisky in drams, but being Scottish became something that, presented with a blank canvas on which I was invited to paint a picture of who I was, I wanted at my very core. Maybe it was because I wasn't there every day, so I forgot its vices, but I began to look back on the patriotic hallmarks of the country fondly. I would tell

people of my hometown, the Granite City, the Silver City, the Pearl by the Sea (that one is my own invention). They would tell me about how lovely I made Aberdeen sound, and I would chuckle to myself when I realised that perhaps I had exaggerated one or two points, but only out of a dear love of the place.

I had discovered my national pride. It had only taken me until the age of twenty-one to find it. I think I was tethered to the place my whole life by an umbilical cord. Living there, I didn't even realise I was attached, because, being so close to the point where I was anchored, the cord was loose and abundant. Moving away, the cord was stretched taut and I felt its tug: the first sign I had ever had that it was there at all.

It was more than pride I discovered; it was identity. Where before I had considered myself a citizen of the world – what a grandiose thought – I now realised that I was foremost a man of Aberdeenshire; a product of that reserved, flawed, but ultimately beautiful, county. I didn't realise the satisfaction of allowing myself roots in the place I had spent most of my life.

Deciding to go and get the degree I had avoided since school, I left the world of mundane work I had slipped into in Manchester for the University of Aberdeen, where I could study something I actually cared about. In Scotland, higher education is free for natives, and that kindness seemed to symbolise the benevolence of the land which called me back. Manchester was a nice city, but it was not sewn in my skin as Scotland is.

I was between Aberdeen and Edinburgh, but in the end family ties swung me back to Aberdeen. I write from there now. I look out at the city which I have spent much of my life despising and think what a privilege it is to spend time here. It will not be forever. I will collect my degree and then explore the world again, and hopefully

travel will once more teach me something spectacular, but I am in no rush. Where before it seemed the whole place was small-mindedly local, I realise now that is true of only a few. The city is a collision of cultures and nationalities as much as any other urban space. And to be a Scotsman – an Aberdonian no less – among all of that, is breathtakingly special.

Mither Tap watches my movements again but her eyes do not seem to patrol the land so much as fondly reach out to welcome me. She calls out to me to go and climb upon her rocky head and look out at the land with her. I haven't dared to venture so close since the sanguine days of hiking with the family in my childhood. If I dare to embrace her, I think she will stay with me, on the periphery of my vision, even should I leave again. I will wear Bennachie like a sporran round my waist, so I can carry the memory of the land which made me. Without it, I would not know what I know. Born somewhere else, I might have known something else. But I am content being the man that Aberdeenshire has made me.

When I set out to explore the world again, once the degree is under my belt and another place calls me, that sporran will be with me. I like American literature, and I'm hoping one day that I will be a professor of that in one of the world's great institutions. That is the current dream anyway. Something I have realised is that even if I were to be that American literature professor, or if the novel I've written were to make an author of me, or if I go into publishing or journalism or whatever it will be; I will be Scottish. This is an unshakeable fact which provides me comfort in some way. It is no achievement I suppose; it is only a matter of parentage and heritage. But it is a foundation. I would be a Scottish American Literature Professor, or a Scottish world-famous author (allow me the dream), or a Scottish publishing magnate, or a Scottish New York Times reporter.

And I would be better off for that.

I climbed the Mither Tap and I saw nothing because the mist was so thick. The mist held me like a lover and I stood atop that mighty rock and thought that there was an odd warmth around me. I thought that you could not possibly tell that she was so beautiful from so close. I thought of how where I was standing was the heart of the country I knew to be home, and I was not sad for the missed chance to see the views.

I climbed down and the misty vapours still clung to my shirt, though I could barely see the hill from the car park.

It was some time later that I was strolling by the side of Loch Melfort on a holiday when I saw that bulb of rock in the reflection on the surface of the water. I turned to look but the mist had swallowed her up. I should try and climb her again, if the weather ever clears.

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