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*Scottishness in the Tartan Army*

Joseph M. Bradley

Academics have demonstrated how politics, religion, national identities and ethnicity have resonance in the football environment of various countries. In Scotland, a society where football has for over one hundred years existed as the most popular team sport, it has been recognised that these are also varyingly meaningful to numerous football histories and supporters' traditional or contemporary identities.

Previous research resulting from a questionnaire conducted amongst Scotland's international body of supporters known as the Tartan Army demonstrates an understanding of not only its make-up, but also the symbolic boundaries and markers of Scottishness which these supporters bring to the sports environment.<sup>1</sup> This research advances the initial study through a process of focus groups interviews involving almost one hundred members of the Tartan Army across the country. This investigation takes the initial study further by exploring some of these boundaries and markers specifically in relation to religion, Britishness and Irish ethnicity in Scotland.

These particular boundaries and markers are historically and contemporaneously important to the construction of Scottishness. Religious identities for example form some of the dominant discourses within Scottish football. This is not surprising given that for almost four hundred years religion had a pervading and profound influence in the country: so much so that one author states that since the 16th century Reformation until very recently, Presbyterianism largely defined the Scots to one another and to the rest of the world. In addition, due to the influx of Irish Catholic immigrants from the mid 19th century, and notwithstanding it being a minority faith, Catholicism as well as Irish ethnicity have also contributed much

to Scotland's contemporary multi-cultural religious history and social and political composition, including within football.

## Religion & the Tartan Army

Despite Scotland becoming increasingly secular, religious self-identification and individual and community labelling remain important and relevant. Nonetheless, or indeed, in the face of religion's significance in Scotland, it is indicative that it is largely seen as private and a matter only for home or Church by many within the Tartan Army: in essence, religion and religious identities are consciously marginalised by many Scotland supporters. Indicative of Tartan Army thinking, a member viewed the Scottish international support as a potentially positive metaphor for an ideal country not hampered by religion or religious distinctions. Another concurred with the idea that supporting Scotland in football is a concept that brings people together, ignoring, or at least not being handicapped by, the religious (as well as cultural and national) distinctions and differences that otherwise exist in Scotland. He believed supporting the Scotland team united 'Catholics and Protestants [and] it's a really good club [where] nobody's bothered about religion or anything'. An east of Scotland based supporter said that 'we are all there as Scots, the bigotry and clubs and all that is left behind, you are there as a Scot and that is foremost'.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, despite this religious marginalisation or hostility, a fan from West Lothian was more revealing and cautious in expressing the concept of Tartan Army unity regarding religion. This supporter said, 'There is still a great divide but in the Tartan Army it is swept under the carpet quite well'. Yet another fan from Perthshire also mentioned the conditional nature of the togetherness of the Tartan Army: 'if you just wore your own club colours (which sometimes indicate religious identification) and went somewhere [with Scotland], folk would think twice about speaking to you'.

A Tartan Army member from the east of the country developed this argument saying that many fans do not divulge which club team they support to fellow Scotland associates, lest it offer an indication of other aspects of identity, including ethnic and religious background and political and cultural affinities. These latter comments indicate how the Tartan Army manages some of Scotland's diverse identities.

For a number of interviewees the unity experienced amongst Tartan Army fans is frequently expressed and framed in terms that

invoke religion as oppositional and an unwelcome divisive element. As far as supporting Scotland is concerned it is a significant standpoint amongst contemporary Tartan Army membership that religious identity, heritage or 'talk' is irrelevant but importantly and indicatively should not be introduced into conversations or Tartan Army relationships. The overwhelmingly dominant perspective is that, like society itself, supporting Scotland should be built upon secular foundations. Further, this secular, even anti-religious Scottish identity is constructed as oppositional to the relevance of religion to historical, cultural and contemporary club and supporter narratives.

### **British identity & the Tartan Army**

A strand of discourse that characterised most of this study's focus groups was antipathy towards Scottishness being diluted by, or being confused or conflated with, English identity or Britishness. Despite being previously strong and widely esteemed until around the 1970s, in recent decades there has been a weakening of Britishness in Scotland. Until the 1970s it was not uncommon for the Union flag to be displayed amongst the Scotland support. University of Stirling based academics Grant Jarvie and Irene Reid note that in the Scottish international football environment, 'it was in the early 1970s that God Save the Queen was first jeered by many fans at Hampden before internationals'.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting these changes many focus group participants considered themselves 'Scottish only' as opposed to British or Scottish-British.

Nevertheless, against many strong assertions of a singular and dominant Scottish identity the research also demonstrated that Britishness remains significant for other Tartan Army members. A Motherwell fan adhered to a dual identity describing himself as "Scottish and British". Another said that although he was Scottish, he did not see as problematic his also being British. A Glasgow Rangers fan corresponded: 'I'm certainly British but first and foremost Scottish ... British by birth, Scottish by the grace of God'. An Airdrie Tartan Army member was also comfortable being British, so long as it did not diminish his Scottishness.

Scottish fans are adamant that they are not mistaken for being English. They endeavour to project their Scottishness and for recognition of their nation/nationalism/community/support as distinctive. However, although a singular more prominent and emphasised Scottishness is highly visible and the most favoured identity, this distinctiveness is not uniformly, entirely or

solely Scottish, and for a significant number of the membership of the Tartan Army, Britishness has resonance and remains important.

Regardless of a distinct lack of attachment to Britishness amongst many members of the Tartan Army, as a major part of the identity of Rangers, and to a lesser extent also, the identity of numerous fans from amongst other Scottish clubs such as Hearts, Falkirk, Airdrie and Motherwell in particular, Britishness continues to permeate the Scottish international support. This is akin to the fact that Britishness remains varyingly favourable to a significant number of Scots. Although being hostile to or disavouring Britishness is an attitude and identity that is well established, as is the concept of Scottishness, Britishness as an identity does endure and a substantial number of Tartan Army members continue to look towards Britishness for various fundamental aspects of their identity, and are comfortable calling themselves British although a majority desire to be called Scottish first and foremost.

### **Irish ethnicity & the Tartan Army**

Distinct from antagonisms towards England and ideas about Britishness another focus for otherness is also important to the make-up of the Scotland support. As evidenced within the Tartan Army focus groups, Irishness in Scotland is antagonistically considered, although unlike Britishness, there are no dissenting voices or assortment of opinions with regards this hostility which is largely homogeneous.

Almost all public displays of Irishness in Scottish football (indeed, in much popular Scottish life) are associated with Celtic Football Club and its support as an historical and contemporary reflection and representation of the Irish diaspora in Scotland. In this vein numerous Tartan Army members problematised Irishness and Irish ethnicity.

A Tartan Army fan from Armadale commented on the Scotland versus Ireland game at Hampden in 2003 when several thousand members of Scotland's ethnic Irish community turned out to support Ireland: 'what got me was the amount of Scottish supporters that were walking right by the Scotland end and going in to the Irish and supporting Ireland'. Another added a similar sentiment: 'people were really getting miffed, the fact that the Irish support was all speaking with Scottish accents'.

Hostility towards Irishness in Scotland also pervades Scottish football culture generally and the Tartan Army simply reflects this. At club level such references are recurrent show-

ing how widespread these attitudes and identities are within football as well as how they intertwine with and crosscut attitudes, identities and other cultural features beyond Scottish football. Referring to the ethnic Irishness of many Celtic supporters, Dundee United fans sing 'can you sing a Scottish song', while Aberdeen fans frequently taunt them by singing, 'You're in the wrong country'. In 2006 Rangers fans held a banner up to Celtic supporters with the slogan, 'This is our city, where in Ireland is Glasgow'? In 2010 a relevant comment on a magazine website said: 'The problem with a large section of the Celtic support is that they do not think of themselves as Scots. They will tell you that they are Irish or Scots-Irish, whatever that's supposed to be'. A dominant figure in the Scottish sports media added to this narrative talking about what he termed 'this fixation with Ireland which so many Scots have makes my blood boil'. In recent years several Members of the Scottish and British Parliaments have tabled questions or motions challenging hostility towards Irishness in Scottish football.

### 'One Scotland, Many Cultures'

Football does not exist in a social and cultural vacuum and it is in such a context that the Scottish international football environment can be seen as a location and space for the collection of shared social, cultural, national, religious and sometimes political ideas, emotions, allegiances and identities. As a place for concomitant collective antagonisms, hostilities, resentments, rivalries and prejudices, this environment is also an arena for the contestation of identities that help constitute modern Scottish society.

The Tartan Army focus groups, alongside several other observations, reflect an intertwining of ethnicity, religion and national identity within football in Scotland. Like all imagined communities, and as with the wider society, there are dominant narratives involving personal, community, ideological and symbolic Scottishness. As a popular mass institution, the Scottish international football followers significantly 'participate in the idea of the [Scottish] nation ... and symbolic community'.<sup>4</sup>

Reflecting how the Tartan Army constructs and imagines itself, its purpose is not surprisingly to be Scottish and to support the Scottish international football team. As with all such identities, this entails processes of assimilation, inclusion, exclusion, production and performance: cross-cutting a number of these is the process of 'othering'. This research dem-

onstrates that although Scottishness is a consciousness and identity that is shared by many – almost certainly the vast majority – of Scotland's inhabitants, particularly those who 'like' football, it also shows that this Scottishness has been, and is continually being, constructed partly in relation and opposition to several other important ethnic, national and cultural identities and communities. In this way, the dominant notion of Scottishness in the football environment reveals and obscures historical discords, social strains and relations based on notions of ethnic, religious, social and cultural power and powerlessness.

### Dr Joseph M. Bradley

Senior Lecturer, School of Sport, University of Stirling, Scotland.

### Notes

- 1 Joseph M Bradley, "The Patriot Game: Football's Famous Tartan Army" in *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 2002 (vol. 37, no. 2) pp. 177–197.
- 2 All fan quotes arise from a series of focus group interviews with the following collections of Tartan Army supporters; Armadale Sons of Wallace (Armadale & West Lothian), BASTA (Badenoch & Strathspey), EASTA (Dundee & East Coast), KTA (Kircaldy & South Fife), LTA (Lanarkshire), NOSTA (North of Scotland), PTA (Perthshire), LOBTA (North Ayrshire), WESTA (Glasgow & Strathclyde), WEBTA (West End Bar, Airdrie Tartan Army) and Sporrans Legion (West Lothian). As well as being Scotland supporters the groups also constituted a sample of representatives of sixteen of Scotland's leading soccer clubs that in turn are supported by approximately ninety per cent of fans of Scottish professional football. Apart from asking how they became Scotland fans, the media's treatment of the Tartan Army, views on England supporters, support for 'other' club teams from Scotland when playing in Europe, perceptions of change in the composition of the Tartan Army over time, specific and follow-up questions also explored thoughts on issues to do with ethnic and religious identities in Scottish football and beyond. In all groups discussions and answers emerged that allowed explorations of issues of nationalism, the Tartan Army's sense of Scottishness and thoughts on Scottishness, Britishness and Irishness in football. The issues discussed often characterise the popular social and cultural discourses within and around Scottish football.
- 3 Grant Jarvie and Irene Reid, "Nationalism and Culture in Scotland" in *The Sports Historian* 1999 (vol. 19, no. 1) pp. 97–124.
- 4 Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity" in Stuart Hall & Don Hubert eds., *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, (Blackwell, 1996) pp. 595–634.



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