

August 7, 2009

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Keep Your Hands Off Our Haggis

By ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH

Edinburgh

THIS is very serious. Britain, as most readers of this newspaper know, has long been populated by three warlike tribes, the Scots, the English and the Welsh. Much of British history consists of disputes between these tribes, particularly between the Scots and the English. Since the middle of the 18th century, after Bonnie Prince Charlie made a vain attempt to reclaim the kingdom for the Scottish Stuart dynasty, an uneasy peace has prevailed, based, in part, on the understanding that Scottish pride and Scottish feathers will not be unduly ruffled. But then, every so often, somebody threatens this delicate understanding with an outrageous suggestion. This usually happens in August, when newspapers have nothing better to talk about. And it has happened again this August.

The insult to the Scots this year is that haggis, the Scottish national dish, is not really Scottish, but English. Now this may seem a matter of little consequence to Americans, but how would the United States react if apple pie and turkey with cranberry sauce were to be claimed as the products of, say, French cuisine? Or if somebody asserted that baseball was invented by the Romanians (which it was)? These things are a matter of national pride, and people should take great care when talking about them.

The basis of the current [claim](#) is that an English cookbook of the early 17th century contains a recipe for haggis. This, we are told, was well before any Scottish recipe book gives similar information. Well, now, this assertion is so patently flimsy that it hardly requires refutation. Of course there was no published Scottish recipe for haggis before then, for the simple reason that it would have been quite unnecessary for Scots to publish a recipe for something that everybody in Scotland knew how to make. Why state the obvious? It's as simple as that.

But if further proof is required, then it is there in abundance. English cuisine has always been very open to foreign influences, and still is. If one looks at contemporary English cookbook writers, what do they write about? French food, Indian food, Chinese food — anything but English food. And it was ever thus. So it is no surprise that early 17th-century English food writers should

have written about exotic Scottish dishes rather than English ones. This is what these people have always done.

The haggis, of course, has played an important role in the Scottish national psyche — not as food, but as an invention. Scots like to console themselves with the knowledge that even if today we are a small nation on the periphery of Europe, an adjunct to a defunct empire, and chronically unsuccessful at something we would love to be successful at (soccer), we nonetheless have a great past as inventors.

Scottish schoolchildren are indoctrinated with the history of Scottish inventions. Television, they are taught, was invented by John Logie Baird, a Scotsman, and not by Philo Taylor Farnsworth, an American. The Irish did not invent whisky, and Irish whiskey is not the real McCoy; McCoy himself, whoever he was, was clearly Scottish and definitely not Irish. And golf was not invented by the Dutch — as misguided Dutchmen have a habit of claiming — it was a product of the Scottish genius for hitting things with sticks and counting the hits.

So the haggis is clearly Scottish, as Robert Burns understood full well when he wrote his famous [poem](#) in its praise. If one's national bard writes a poem to a dish consisting of chopped-up offal cooked in a sheep's stomach together with oatmeal and spices and secured with a curious pin, then that dish must be authentically national.

Anyway, even if there were doubts about this — which of course no right-thinking person would entertain — why take an iconic dish away from a national cuisine that has so little else of distinction in it? Yes, we have salmon and porridge, and one or two other dishes, but Escoffier would surely have been very unfulfilled had he been born Scottish.

Blithely attributing our haggis to a people who already have lots and lots of dishes — most of them terribly stodgy — in their national cuisine seems, if nothing else, to be gratuitously cruel. It would be like eating a mockingbird, if I may be permitted a literary allusion.

Never heard of haggis? Never tasted it? Try it on your next visit to Scotland, or even England. It is best taken with mashed turnips, which, incidentally, were invented in Scotland, and with a shot of whisky. The whisky is to neutralize the taste of the haggis, and the turnips are there for health reasons. Highly recommended.

Alexander McCall Smith is the author, most recently, of “Tea Time for the Traditionally Built.”

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)