SCOTTISH SERIOUSNESS

A. O. MACRAE

WE were discussing Scotland and Scotsmen in our Club a few evenings ago. It was just a group of three, sitting in the large general room. Naturally we drifted round to the Scotsman's slowness in seeing a joke. As a Scotsman, I freely admitted this national idiosyncrasy, but I ventured a reason for it,—a reason that goes to the very essence of the racial character. A Caledonian, I said, is a serious-minded being. Speaking of life, he could never say in Rabelaisian fashion "Pull down the curtains; the farce is over." Much less could he ever utter this, as did Rabelais, on his dying bed, and as his last words.

By nature he is too concerned about life to treat it lightly or flippantly. He cannot even fleet the *time* carelessly. There is too great a moral and religious background, potential it may be, but none the less potent. It is as easy to say that the Scotsman produced his religion as that his religion resulted in the Scotsman. But it is probably nearer the mark, and much more precise psychologically, to believe that religion and the Scotsman met together, that Christianity and Caledonia kissed each other.

When I left Edinburgh University some years ago, and journeyed to a German gymnasium of learning, a keen intellectual native of Edina accompanied me. We studied together, walked together, and ate together. I counted myself a fair, not to say a good, *raconteur*, and frequently attempted to regale my friend with what I considered capital stories. But as fast as I approached the point of my facetious fancy, instead of companionable cachinnation, my friend would turn a cold eye on me and earnestly enquire if my story were true. What a trial for a *raconteur*! In considerable exasperation I generally retorted:—"A plague upon its truth, reality, actuality, or what you will. Is it not a joyous narrative? Does it not deserve to be true, if truth you must have?" And that was just the rub. It had no place in this Scotsman's content unless it was real. His metaphysical judgment of value demanded not *posse* but *esse*.

This led me to speculate as to the special sort of personality with which I was daily communing. I soon learned that for him there was no separation of the intellect, the emotions, and the moral nature,—to quote the title of a book very familiar to old Dalhousians

who sat under that poetic soul, the late Dr. Lyall. Kant's distinction between the pure and the practical reason might be useful enough to the psychologist for purposes of analysis. But it was simply void of meaning for my Scottish friend.

The exaggeration so characteristic of American humour left him cold. It took, for him, a turn too quick and too unreal. A couple of well known American stories may illustrate what I mean. An American tourist was traversing India in search for the strange and the unique. On one occasion he visited a famous temple, where he was shown much that was curious. At the end of the visit the guide offered to exhibit a phenomenon altogether unusual. Leading the way to the farthest end of the temple, he pointed to a small flame. "That," said the native, with some note of triumph, "is a fire that has not been out for two thousand years." "How," quoth the Yankee, "not been out for two thousand years? Well, I guess it's out now"—and, suiting the action to the word, he promptly blew out the jet of flame. My friend did not laugh outright, as I did the first time I heard this tale. He smiled grimly, and at once questioned whether it were an historical fact. Had it truly occurred, and—if so—when and where?

Another incident I related was of an Old Countryman who was touring the New England States. He happened upon a railway station where a long freight train stood, with a few passenger cars at the rear end. Quite a considerable number of people were engaged loading the train with household goods. The stranger entered into conversation with one of the guiding spirits, and asked to know what it was all about. He learned of a big prospective trek to the west: "We are going out to start a new town, the biggest all firedest place you ever heard of. We got everything we want, and nothing we don't want. See?" The Englishman hoped he saw, and as he sought to confirm his sight he noticed an old gentleman leaning out of a car window, with an aspect that betokened the coming end of life's pilgrimage. Turning to his informant, he said: "You have everything you want, and nothing you don't want. If that is so, what are you doing with *him*?" "Him?" retorted the lanky New Englander; "that's my father. What we're doing with him? Taking him out to start our new cemetery." The unexpected nature of this forethought in enterprise did not stir the risibility of my friend. When I recounted the tale he looked at me along his nose, as a European proverb has it, in a very sceptical fashion. The intense earnestness of his inner being was affected by the apparent flippancy and disrespect of the son. His unconscious mind had suddenly brought above the threshhold for

this Scotsman the outraged Fifth Commandment. If the story were true, it was condemned by his conscience; if it were false, it had been better left untold. Here was conscience inherited, and trained till it had become responsive and delicate like the needle in the compass. Laughter was simply precluded.

My friend, in truth, had been following my narratives with serious attention. But when they turned the corner suddenly into the ridiculous, the absurd, the exaggerated, he was still moving along on the lines of the real. Life was too earnest, too serious, to permit of such sudden descent into the fantastic, the merely diverting, the unlikely. I could but conclude that he had too much conscience for abrupt leaps and *lacunae*. The Scot is a sober, a serious, even a severe man in his outlook upon human existence. His humour is in consequence oft-times pawky, and—to those that know him not—perhaps awkward. It is never jerky, never too unexpected. It does not leap chasms, or caper with no footing but the air.

When the late Ian Maclaren was lecturing in Edinburgh many years ago, an Irishman went to hear him. Afterwards the Hibernian told the present writer how his laugh at the speaker's rich jokes was commonly over before a laugh in the Scottish audience began. Maclaren knew his people, and one could have counted ten—said this son of Ireland—after each sally ere the reverend lecturer continued his speech. Scotsmen were there to enjoy themselves, yet ever too cautious to be led aside readily.

But when he does catch up with a speaker's swift witticism, the Scotsman enjoys it as a sweet morsel not to be too quickly cast away. In consequence he takes more prolonged enjoyment out of a humorous anecdote than either the Irishman or the Englishman. He will be found chuckling longer, and at various intervals, after men of another race have passed from the incident. Perhaps it may even be fairly contended that such pertinacious people, just because they are pertinacious, have a richer and deeper appreciation of humour than other folk. The man who has a solid background of existence, the man for whom truth and reality are primal, has a finer contrast than others when brought face to face with quips and quiddities, the witty and the farcical. Such deeper sense of reality, while it means a painful and painstaking conscience, affords also a larger canvas and the possibility of a broader handling than are within the reach of those not similarly equipped. The Scot is probably slow in appreciating types of humour not his own, and I have furnished some evidence to show why this should be. But there is such a thing as a fullness of understanding that comes

from the same appreciation exercised on the conscientious attitude towards men and things in the daily struggle for existence. He that can enjoy life is he that sees it steadily and sees it whole. The reward to such is a larger joy and a more self-satisfying laughter than belongs to other men.

Scotsmen need no laboured defence of their idiosyncrasies, and it is in no spirit of defence that I have here discussed them. This is simply an attempt to indicate how the average Scotsman sees the infinite variety, the light and shade, of that which we call Life. Being men of "pregnant pairts", and people that pray God may give them "a guid conceit of themselves", they estimate subtle humour more highly than broad farce or obvious exaggeration. In a word, may we not say that this people demands of humour a satisfaction to the Real as well as to the Rational and the Imaginative?