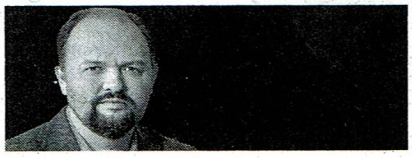
In Britain, still living as if it's 1745



Ross Douthat

OPINION

Drive northward in the United Kingdom, as I did with my family this past month, and beyond a certain latitude it becomes impossible to escape the Jacobites.

Not to be confused, as sometimes happens, with the rather different *Jacobins,* the Jacobites were the supporters of the exiled Stuart dynasty during its failed attempts at restoration, the sequence of unsuccessful "risings" that followed James II's ejection from the British throne by the Glorious Revolution in 1688.

Tour Lyme Park, the gracious estate just southeast of Manchester that stood in for Jane Austen's Pemberley in the Colin Firth version of "Pride and Prejudice," and you will note that one of its owners, the 12th Peter Legh, was imprisoned in the Tower of London in the 1690s for allegedly conspiring to restore James II to the throne. Sweep northeast to Bamburgh Castle, a splendid bastion overlooking the Northumbrian beaches, and you will note that the family that held the castle in the 18th century produced a Jacobite general in the 1715 rebellion, as well as the sister who helped him escape from Newgate Prison after his military efforts came to grief.

How the 18th-century Jacobite era foreshadowed the divisions of our times.

Continue on to Edinburgh and a tour of Holyroodhouse, the royal family's Scottish palace, will quite overwhelm you with Stuart memorabilia — including a well-placed Victorian painting, "Bonnie Prince Charlie Entering the Ballroom at Holyroodhouse," a romanticized portrayal of Charles Edward Stuart's 1745 almost-successful rebellion, now proudly displayed by the descendants of the very royal family that he was attempting to displace.

Then the Highlands — well, the Highlands are a vast monument to Jacobite defeat, their gorgeous emptiness partly a creation of the ruthless late-18th- and early-19th-century "clearances," which drove out small farmers, finished off the clan culture of the region and replaced many of the restive Scots who rose for the Stuarts with a more tractable population of, well, sheep.

Among a certain kind of conservative nerd the Stuart cause has long been a

DOUTHAT, PAGE 11

The New York Times publishes opinion from a wide range of perspectives in hopes of promoting constructive debate about consequential questions.

DOUTHAT, FROM PAGE 1

secret handshake or an inside joke. But the normal way to discuss the Jacobites is to portray them as a political anachronism, royal absolutists backing a Catholic king in a Protestant and liberalizing Britain, whose rebellion became a cultural phenomenon as soon as its political chances went extinct. Doomed but glamorous, the Jacobites were destined to be rediscovered by romantics in every generation, from Sir Walter Scott's novels in the early 19th century to the "Outlander" saga in the early 21st.

But nowadays the Jacobite era should feel a bit less distantly romantic and a bit more relevant to our own divisions and disturbances. This is true in a straightforward way for Britain itself, where the 17th and 18th century's religious and ideological conflicts are long gone, but the not-entirely-United Kingdom finds itself once more divided along the geographic and cultural fault lines of the Stuart era.

In England proper, as Niall Gooch notes in a recent essay for The Critic, "the particular circumstances of the Industrial Revolution gave the north two centuries of unaccustomed economic power." But now globalization and financialization have restored a more early modern landscape, with a wealthy south and southeast, a super-wealthy London, and disappointment and stagnation north and west, in regions where Jacobite sympathies once ran strong.

Meanwhile, the British exit from the European Union has widened the gulf between England and the rest of the United Kingdom, with both Scotland and Northern Ireland tilting more toward Europe just as their independent or rebellious ancestors once sought continental allies against London. In the long term there's a real possibility of disunion: Between the ambitions of Scottish nationalism and the slow demographic shift toward a Catholic majority in Ulster, the next few decades could see the Whig consolidations of the 18th century undermined or undone, in an effective reversal of the Jacobite defeats in Scotland and Ireland three hundred years ago.

This specifically British story, in turn, is a type of the larger pattern of politics in Europe and the United States, where the gap between thriving capitals and struggling peripheries, between a metropolitan meritocracy and a nostalgic hinterland, has forged a right-wing politics that sometimes resembles Jacobitism more than it does the mainstream conservatisms of the late 20th century.

It's not that today's populists (a few intellectuals aside) favor the restoration of an absolute or Catholic monarchy. (Donald Trump's mother was born in the Outer Hebrides, the Scottish isles where Bonnie Prince Charlie fled after his defeat, but the British crown is one title to which Trump does not pretend.) Rather, like the original Jacobites, they represent a hodgepodge of somewhat disparate causes, unified mostly by their oppositional and outsider status, their distance from and defiance of the Whiggish metropole.

As Frank McLynn points out in his history of the Jacobites, whatever specific designs the Stuarts had in mind, their movement always included a variety of competing ideological and religious tendencies. There were English Jacobites who wanted to see the Stuarts enthroned over all the British Isles. There were Scottish and Irish nationalists who wanted their nations severed and independent. There were Irish republicans as well as divine-right true believers. There were Catholics seeking toleration and Anglicans seeking religious uniformity. There were deep-dyed reactionaries and modernizers, mystics and partisans of the Enlightenment.

There were also plenty of opportunists, familiar from the grifter politics of our own day — smugglers and privateers seeking relief from a centralizing British state, bankrupt gentry seeking relief for their accumulated debts. But at the same time there were many sincere adherents of what came to be called the Country ideology — defined by opposition to high taxes, a soaring national debt, a standing army and various corruptions associated with the swamp and the deep state (if you will) of early-18th-century London.

You did not need to be a Jacobite outright to be a member of the Country party. Rather, the Stuart cause existed in a dynamic and ambiguous relationship with the more respectable and non-treasonous conservatism of the early-18th-century Tories — again, much like populist parties interacting with the center-right establishment in Western Europe, albeit with armed insurrection as a more consistent aspect of the dance.

A contemporary liberal might take a certain comfort in this analogy, given the eventual fate of Jacobitism; perhaps populism is just another foredoomed