

Scotland: The Sick Man of Europe

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Scotland is blessed with rugged green pastures and cold clear waters that provide ideal conditions for creating a variety of fresh ingredients. This fertile environment allowed the native tribes to forage provisions for generations. The productive nature of Scotland only increased with the agrarian revolution providing strategic farming methods for cereal fields, cattle herds, and fish stocks. Today, these foodstuff products are highly demanded across the world. In 2018, food and drink exports from Scotland were worth around £5.8 billion.¹ Although respected for exporting many fine quality food items, Scotland is not celebrated for using these products to create delectable national dishes or enlightening culinary experiences. Instead, the country is infamous for calorific horrors. The prevalence of munchy boxes and sausage suppers has cemented Scotland's reputation as the "sick man" of Europe.² While unhealthy consumption is a common occurrence among industrialized countries, the severity of insalubrious eating habits in Scotland is having disastrous effects. Because the Scottish population consumes absurd amounts of processed sugars and saturated fats, it is estimated that 65 percent of adults are overweight.³ Although many factors contribute to the nutritional lackluster of the Scottish diet, the industrial revolution prompted cultural reformation that continues to influence society by supporting a preference for unhealthy food.

In order to show the direct cause of the Scottish health crisis to be the industrial revolution, it is essential to establish how the problem historically progressed to appear as it does today. Ultimately, there is simply a lack of interest in healthy food among modern Scots.

Although there are vast resources of delicious and nutritious food within Scotland, the local

¹ Department for International Trade, "Scottish Food and Drink Exports on the Rise," GOV.UK, June 20, 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/scottish-food-and-drink-exports-on-the-rise>.

² "Unhealthy Living Almost Universal in Scotland," BBC News, June 11, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/10283469>.

³ "Scottish Health Survey 2018: Main Report - Revised 2020," Scottish Government, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-health-survey-2018-volume-1-main-report/pages/62/>.

people do not utilize them. This phenomenon was summarized by Miriam Macneill in *The Scots Kitchen*. The book attempts to revitalize the era before the cultural transformation of Scottish foodways that disrupted traditions of historical domestic life. Macneill wrote that “the means of sustenance were on the whole plentiful” in Scotland.⁴ The people used to utilize the bountiful nature of the landscape by making oatcakes, porridge, scones, soups, and stews from local ingredients. While the Scottish people had access to “forests abounded with game” and “seas temmed with fish,”⁵ Macneill feared that food heritage could be lost forever “in this age of standardization.”⁶ Regrettably, her prediction was correct.

At first, the abandonment of Scottish food culture only permeated the city. Discussing these alarming trends in her article *The Good Scots Diet*, Maisie Steven recounts the dietary decline in urban areas. In the 1920s, health workers reported malnutrition among city children that caused poor development and frequent rickets. Yet, the country youth remained “well-developed” and “rosy-cheeked.”⁷ The most shocking aspect of this story is that the agricultural children lived in households with less income, suggesting that some barrier kept those in the city from eating healthfully. During the 1960s, there was a disturbing wave of rickets in the city of Glasgow. To explain this outbreak, Steven described the daily menu for urban children. It consisted of potato chips for breakfast, followed by a sweet pastry or white roll at lunch. At supper, the kids were served a meat pasty or sausage roll, concluded by pie or trifle.⁸ While this insufficient and processed diet remained wholly a city standard for several decades, these eating habits slowly flowed into the countryside.

⁴ F. Marian McNeill, “The Scots Kitchen,” (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2006), 13.

⁵ McNeill, “The Scots Kitchen,” 14.

⁶ McNeill, “The Scots Kitchen,” iiix.

⁷ Katherine Czapp et al., “The Good Scots Diet,” The Weston A. Price Foundation, March 17, 2018, <https://www.westonaprice.org/health-topics/traditional-diets/the-good-scots-diet/>.

⁸ Czapp et al., “The Good Scots Diet.”

By the 1970s, farming regions had virtually abandoned the traditional food heritage of Scotland. Following an expedition through the countryside, Paul Stemann published *Across the Highlands* where he documented the problematic diet. While he greatly appreciated the people and scenery, “his comments on the food were less than complimentary.”⁹ Stemann noted that there was a general lack of household gardens and few quality vegetables in shops. He wondered why fresh food played such a small role in the mainstay diet, especially with the wide range of high-quality food available. He wrote that all through the Highlands “there were venison, salmon, lobster, crab, wild raspberries, rowanberries, chanterelles — all the most delectable foods. It was all around, but never put in front of you.”¹⁰ This change was also documented by Dr. Walter Yellowlees, who spent his life working in the Scottish county of Perthshire. While visiting patients at mealtimes, he was “repeatedly appalled at what was on the family table.”¹¹ The habitual meals consisted of tinned vegetables, white bread, and sugary drinks. In place of robust nutritious porridge, there were “ubiquitous sweetened breakfast cereals.”¹² These dietary choices slowly destroyed the health of the Scottish people.

Because the Scots were “eating themselves to death” with convenience food,¹³ Dr. Yellowlees encountered many diseases related to poor nutrition such as disordered bowel function, high blood pressure, coronary heart disease, varicose veins, peptic ulcer, diabetes, obesity, and cancer. The consistency and severity of these ailments shocked medically qualified

⁹ Czapp et al., “The Good Scots Diet.”

¹⁰ Czapp et al., “The Good Scots Diet.”

¹¹ W.W. Yellowlees, “Food & Health in the Scottish Highlands: Four Lectures from a Rural Practice,” July 1985, http://journeytoforever.org/farm_library/medtest/medtest_yelsl.html.

¹² Yellowlees, “Food & Health.”

¹³ David Marshall et al., “Eat your greens: the Scottish consumer’s perspective on fruit and vegetables,” Pennsylvania State University, May, 18, 2016, <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.957.555&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

visitors. After gazing upon the “superb harmony of fields, rivers, mountains, and lochs” at Perthshire, they would exclaim “surely there is no need for a doctor in a place like this.”¹⁴ Regardless, Dr. Yellowless expressed that “Alas, this is not so. These diseases are common in the modern Highlander. Here is no haven of health. The people appear to be plagued by modern diseases no less than town dwellers.”¹⁵ The extensive lack of health is a great irony considering the marvelous landscape filled with fresh succulent food, prompting the question of why this long-lived trend continues its prevalence to this day.

Despite healthy food being widely available, the industrial revolution was responsible for the widespread cultural departure from ancestral foodways. Although the traditional Scottish diet was not acclaimed for vibrant flavors, it was excellent at providing sustenance. The native people had the skills to prepare meals from ingredients gathered through moderate cultivation and constant scavenging.¹⁶ The list of regularly consumed foods was fairly restricted, with oats and meat competing to be the main source of aliment. It was this nutrient-dense diet that allowed the Scottish population to develop beyond the average physical conventions.¹⁷ Scots became legendary for being the largest of the European people, with men regularly growing up to seven feet tall.¹⁸ Many foreign nobility were so taken by this mighty size that they attempted to recruit the Scotsmen as personal guards. Visitors that had traveled within Scotland spread tales about the extraordinary stamina and brawn of the local clans. It was reported that Highlanders could “scale

¹⁴ Yellowless, “Food & Health.”

¹⁵ Yellowless, “Food & Health.”

¹⁶ Scott, “Radicalizing The Ancestral Scottish Diet,” Calilleach’s Herbarium, August 9, 2018, <https://cailleachs-herbarium.com/2018/03/radicalising-ancestral-scottish-dietary-traditions/>.

¹⁷ Kimberly Hartke, “Scottish Highlanders Traditional Diet,” Hartke Is Online, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://hartkeisonline.com/2012/02/01/scottish-highlanders-traditional-diet/>.

¹⁸ Lenathehyena's Blog, “Scotland's Big and Burly Men Have Shrunk,” May 7, 2020, <https://lenathehyena.wordpress.com/2017/09/15/scotlands-big-and-burly-men-have-shrunk/>.

mountains all day upon a diet of oatmeal.”¹⁹ The wholesome quality of Scottish food made it “no great wonder” that the Scots could withstand “greater journeys than other people.”²⁰

By the nineteenth century, the industrial revolution caused a sharp decline in the food culture of Scotland. As farming innovations reduced the economy of country villages, the working class migrated into urban areas.²¹ The city folk were reliant on buying food transported from the countryside, which was often not fresh once sold. To remedy food shortages, the Scots began to embrace the preserved and processed. The introduction of new machinery allowed the steady invasion of mass-produced artificial foods.²² Additionally, the rise of globalization gave imported products a pivotal role in the Scottish economy. These two factors boosted the popularity of convenience food in kitchens across the nation. Soon the Scottish diet became nutritionally limited to various flour and sugar products, along with canned goods. Within only a few decades, many households lost respect for traditional food preparation that generations of hearty Scots once thrived upon. This change in diet was reflected by the stature and health of the population.

Even though the Scots had thrived on customary food practices for generations, the industrial revolution induced a dietary conversion that ended in the physical decline of the Scottish people. The broad traditional Scot diet throughout the ages consisted mainly of vegetables, oatcakes, porridge, cheese, brose, milk, and fruit supplemented by small amounts of meat.²³ Meanwhile, the industrial revolution normalized foods high in sugar, salt, and fat that were previously eaten as mere delicacies.²⁴ The excessive consumption of these nutrients shrunk

¹⁹ Czapp et al., “The Good Scots Diet.”

²⁰ R.A. Houston and I.D. Whyte, *Scottish Society 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989), 61.

²¹ Hanlon, Michael. “Scotland's Dreadful Diet.” Daily Mail Online. Associated Newspapers, November 4, 2011. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2057034/Scotlands-dreadful-diet.html>.

²² Lenathehyena's Blog, “Scotland's Big and Burly Men.”

²³ Lenathehyena's Blog, “Scotland's Big and Burly Men.”

²⁴ Scott, “Radicalizing The Ancestral Scottish Diet.”

the Scottish men to a standard height of five feet and seven inches.²⁵ By the twentieth century, citizens were found to have increased cases of diseases related to faulty nutrition. Nowadays, improper eating continues to be facilitated by food made from machines and shipped into ports. It is estimated that diet-related health problems cost £6 billion a year, making it the largest financial burden on the National Healthcare Service in Scotland.²⁶ Even though the ancestral Scottish diet gave the people access to unmatched health, Scots continue to eat poorly without a glance at the boring nutritious foods that made their ancestors giants and warriors.

The malnutrition that began during the industrial revolution instituted cultural shifts that continue to uphold social structures that still promote unhealthy eating habits today. Glasgow has one of the highest poverty rates in Europe. Since malnutrition is a consequence of low wages and diet is a major factor in determining health, it is not unexpected that Glasgow residents have an increased mortality rate.²⁷ Citizens in Glasgow have a 30 percent higher risk of dying prematurely, with 65 percent of this mortality being caused by diseases associated with obesity.²⁸ The surprising dilemma posed by Glasgow is that poverty is not directly linked to mortality. Labeled the “Glasgow effect,” the phrase is used to describe excess mortality that can not be accounted for by deprivation alone.²⁹ Instead, health risks impact *everyone* in the city. Although poverty increases the chance of premature deaths, all social classes experience a 15 percent greater mortality rate in Glasgow.³⁰ This indicates that unhealthy diets are so ingrained in

²⁵ Lenathehyena's Blog, “Scotland's Big and Burly Men.”

²⁶ Anderson, Heather. *Field of Enquiry: A ten-day exploration of food in Scotland and how it impacts on our soil, our health, our livestock, our pockets and our communities*. PDF file. March, 2018.

²⁷ Jonny Ball, “The Scotland Effect: Why Is Life Expectancy Lower North of the Border?,” June 23, 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/spotlight/2019/06/scotland-effect-why-life-expectancy-lower-north-border>.

²⁸ Ball “The Scotland Effect.”

²⁹ “The Glasgow Effect: New Study Reveals Causes of City's High Mortality Rates.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, June 10, 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/jun/10/glasgow-effect-die-young-high-risk-premature-death>.

³⁰ Ball “The Scotland Effect.”

Scottish culture that even when increased wages allow a household to buy more nutritious food, the people elect not to.

Although the Scottish health crisis is commonly blamed on the failed willpower of people, this explanation is a gross simplification. Since the early nineteenth century, public health reform movements rapidly responded to the problems created by industrialization.³¹ However, there has been a recent interest in how environmental conditions and individual characteristics influence health behaviors. As previously mentioned, the common observation is that fitness tends to be worse in disadvantaged areas. The “deprivation amplification” is the idea that environmental factors in impoverished districts are often detrimental to healthy living, even after accounting for individual characteristics.³² While the theory does not deny the fact that people ultimately have a choice in deciding what to eat, it does attempt to provide context for how financial and societal factors can sway individuals to consume unhealthy food. As displayed by the Glasgow effect, the decisions people make concerning eating are influenced by environmental conditions and individual characteristics that were largely created during the industrial revolution.

In response to the rising population and brisk urban lifestyle during the nineteenth century, the food distribution system was designed for profit maximization and customer convenience. Globalized trade advanced these goals by making world resources more efficient and benefiting consumers with price competition. Nevertheless, there were unintended consequences to a trade formula that solely rewarded financial gain. Because monoculture lowers production costs, farmers are currently incentivized to grow commodity foods that sell

³¹ Sally Macintyre et al., “Do Poorer People Have Poorer Access to Local Resources and Facilities? The Distribution of Local Resources by Area Deprivation in Glasgow, Scotland,” *Social Science & Medicine*, 2008, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2570170/>.

³² Sally Macintyre et al., “Do Poorer People Have.”

abroad. This decreases the motivation for producers to grow a diverse selection of crops to sell within Scotland. Even though there is a rising consumer demand for local goods, the modest 20 percent retail price is not enough to incite farmers to stock the market.³³ The lack of nutritional diversity causes grocery stores to slightly raise produce prices, making a feedback loop that forces people to invest in cheap processed food. It is estimated that for every 1000kcal, there is a £5.00 cost increase to buy food that is not overtly rich in sugar, salt, and fat.³⁴ Along with the biological propensity for these nutrients, it is this pervasiveness of cheap, delicious food that generates an inclination for unhealthy eating in Scotland.

To explain the Scottish health crisis, some individuals may claim that the Scots are compelled to eat harmful imported goods because the environment is unable to adequately support the population by growing nutritious food. To support this argument, critics point out that 85 percent of Scottish farmland is considered to be a “less favored area.”³⁵ The category is intended to describe non-arable land with rocky terrains and cold climates that constrains crop productivity across much of the country. While most of this land is used for extensive livestock production, the deficient land quality still requires Scottish farms to be considerably larger than the rest of the United Kingdom to have suitable grass growth for grazing. To compensate for these harsh environmental conditions, it is asserted that Scotland attempts to increase agricultural efficiency by specializing in producing commodities.³⁶ While farmers are able to grow large quantities of monoculture crops, most food is sold abroad.

³³ Nourish Scotland. “Feeding the Five Million.” October, 2013, http://www.nourishscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/AA_Conference-Report-NovemberFINAL.pdf.

³⁴ Anderson Heather, “Feild of Enquiry,” March 2018, PDF file.

³⁵ Robert Barbour, “Scottish Agriculture: A Challenging Sector with an Uncertain Future,” Sustainable Food Trust, October 25, 2019, <https://sustainablefoodtrust.org/articles/scottish-agriculture-a-challenging-sector-with-an-uncertain-future/>.

³⁶ Nourish Scotland, “Feeding the Five Million.”

As a result, Scotland is forced to import cheap food products to feed the local people, causing the health crisis seen today.³⁷

Since economic trends indicate that there is sufficient nutritious food being produced in Scotland, this argument is partially faulty in that unhealthy goods are being imported to meet the culinary *desires* of the people. Despite natural disadvantages, Scotland is ranked one of the best natural leaders in the world for agriculture.³⁸ Trade statistics prove that Scotland exports a large amount of healthy food. The country has been a staple supplier to the United Kingdom — providing 80 percent of the seed potatoes, 70 percent of the fish catch, 40 percent of the soft fruit, 30 percent of the beef herd, and 10 percent of the cereal crop.³⁹ Because of this success, the Scottish food and drink sector has grown to be the largest manufacturing division in the country. Nevertheless, economic accomplishment does not automatically determine the number of calories available to the local people. This is demonstrated by the fact that even though barley comprises 55 percent of the yearly arable crop production, almost all of the harvest is sold abroad for animal feed or malted whiskey.⁴⁰ To help curb these exporting losses, Scotland imports food.

The previously mentioned argument viewed the importation of unhealthy products into Scotland as compensation for food shortages due to environmental infertility. However, this theory fails to explain why food that is specifically un-nutritious is imported. Scotland does not import massive volumes of food, as would be expected from a nation that is not agriculturally sufficient. In fact, Scotland is the only United Kingdom nation that has exported (£5.9 billion) more goods internationally than it has imported (£2.3 billion) every year.⁴¹ Additionally, the

³⁷ Anderson Heather, “Feild of Enquiry,” March 2018, PDF.

³⁸ “Traditional Scottish Food - Brief History of Food in Scotland.” Taste of Scotland, November 27, 2017. <https://www.taste-of-scotland.com/traditional-scottish-food-scotlands-cuisine/>.

³⁹ Taste of Scotland, “Traditional Scottish Food.”

⁴⁰ Anderson Heather, “Feild of Enquiry,” March 2018, PDF.

⁴¹ “Scotland's Exports Increase,” Scottish Government, <https://www.gov.scot/news/scotlands-exports-increase-1/>.

purchase of food does not automatically create a national health crisis. The fourth-largest food and drink importer is Japan, which has a reputation for being one of the healthiest countries in the world.⁴² Instead, the problem within Scotland appears to be the *type* of goods that are being imported. The food that Scottish people consume does not match the fresh ingredients that are being exported. Scotland has a fruit and vegetable retail market that is worth over £1 billion.⁴³ However, it was recently found that 80 percent of adults eat too little vegetables.⁴⁴ It seems improper to speculate that geographic disadvantage makes Scotland unable to healthily support its people when the country is selling £1 billion in produce, and the local people are not eating most of it.

Through a study of the deterioration in Scottish food culture, this paper showed how the industrial revolution established a society that is directly responsible for supporting harmful diets. Scotland is bestowed with the finest natural produce in the world — the tenderest beef, the juiciest lobsters, the fattest mussels, and the sweetest berries.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it is a law of nature that when agriculture becomes a business commodity, heritage will to some degree be destroyed. Not only did Scotland experience a decline of traditional culinary culture, but also of the people that were once sustained by those native foodways. While it is ultimately the choice of individuals to decide what to eat, the social barriers that inform these decisions can not be disregarded. Since the factors that contribute to unhealthy eating have been interwoven into the fabric of lifestyles, the problem of unhealthy eating can not be solved by simply relying on

⁴² Lanessa Cago, “Countries Most Dependent On Others For Food,” WorldAtlas, December 5, 2017, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/the-countries-importing-the-most-food-in-the-world.html>.

⁴³ Anderson Heather, “Feild of Enquiry,” March 2018, PDF.

⁴⁴ Anderson Heather, “Feild of Enquiry,” March 2018, PDF.

⁴⁵ NatureScot. “Food and drink industry.”

<https://www.nature.scot/professional-advice/social-and-economic-benefits-nature/food-and-drink/food-and-drink-industry>.

individuals to change their behavior. By understanding these systematic trends, there is a hopeful future for Scotland ahead.

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