A-Z of Scottish History - T is for Thistle!

A common site throughout Scotland, this pretty, purple weed has been Scotland's national flower for centuries and stirs a deep sense of patriotism and sentiment in all who have Scots in their blood. No one really knows why the thistle, or *Cirsium vulgare,* was chosen to represent Scotland out of all of Scotland's plant life, but one legend seems to reign tall as the leading reason.

It all began back in 1263, during a time when parts of Scotland were still under Norwegian rule. Enter King Alexander III - yes, the same king who famously died after falling off his horse during a storm while rushing back to see his new wife. That accident sparked a full-blown succession crisis and eventually led to the Wars of Scottish Independence. (Cue William Wallace and Robert the Bruce!). But long before all of that, Alexander had grown tired of Norway's grip on what he believed should be Scottish land - namely the Western Isles and Kintyre. So, he made a diplomatic move, offering to buy the territories back from the Norse king, Haakon IV. Unimpressed (and probably a bit insulted), Haakon responded the Norse way - by sending a fleet of fearsome longships across the North Sea to remind the Scots who was in charge. Legend has it that the Norse troops landed under cover of darkness, abandoning their ships to sneak inland and ambush the unsuspecting clansmen. To maintain silence, the invaders even removed their boots. It was the perfect plan - until it wasn't! One unlucky Norse soldier stepped squarely on a Scottish thistle and let out a scream of pain, instantly alerting the sleeping Scots. The clansmen sprang into action, grabbed their weapons and routed the invaders. Fact or folklore? Who knows - but it's one hell of a story.

The thistle has appeared on many silver coins throughout the years, in Scotland and later Britain. The earliest coins featuring the thistle were issued by King James III way back in 1474. In 1687, King James VII and II founded the Order of the Thistle, an order of chivalry which to this day is the highest honour Scotland can bestow on an individual. The latin motto for the Order of the Thistle is 'Nemo Me Impune Lacessit' meaning 'No One Attacks Me With Impunity' - a fitting tribute to the thistle, which cannot be easily plucked without the culprit receiving a sare finger!

There are many different varieties of thistle that grow across the UK, but the most common is the spear thistle which is the one used as the national emblem. Others include the creeping thistle, the marsh thistle and the 'Scotch thistle' or cotton thistle (which bizarrely enough, is non-native and is most abundant in the US and Australia).

You will also find the thistle in poetry, artwork and songs. Hugh McDiarmid's masterpiece 'A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle' (1926) speaks of the wonders of the prickly weed:

"Rootit on gressless peaks, whar its erect / And jaggy leaves, Austerely cauld and dumb / Haud the slow scaly serpent in respect /
The Gothic thistle, whar the insects hum"

The thistle is an intrinsic part of Scotland's cultural identity and can be seen on the logo of our national rugby and football teams, the proud insignia emblem from small local businesses to large organisations and can even be seen on the uniform of our national police force.