

## Ian Mitchell's Scotland-related BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

30 – *Being Awkward*  
(28 December 2018)

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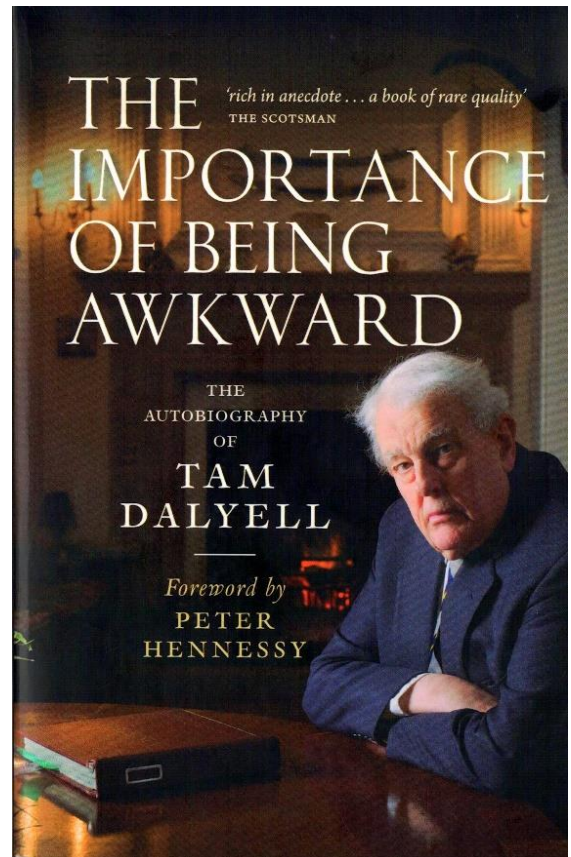
### THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING AWKWARD – The Autobiography of Tam Dalyell

**Author:** Tam Dalyell (Foreword by Peter Hennessy)

**Publisher:** [Birlinn](#), 2012

(available on Amazon, [click on cover image for link](#))

**Descriptor:** Autostory of the ways in which Tam Dalyell, tribune of the people of West Lothian, tried to improve the wider world, accompanied by a catalogue of all the important people who helped or hindered him as he, through no fault of his own, failed to do so.



**Rus&RoL relevance:** *The self-declared equality of bureaucratically organised societies conceals a fundamentally hierarchical relationship between power and the people. When government is used to redistribute wealth rather than create conditions in which the people can generate it, there can be no equality as all power, and therefore STATUS, lies with those who take the redistributive decisions. Without the egalitarianism of a competitive marketplace, in which anyone can offer their product or service for sale freely, STATUS (i.e. hierarchy) rules and free CONTRACT is forbidden.*

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**Reason to read:** I would not normally write about a book like this as it has no obvious relevance to the themes of *Russia and the Rule of Law*. However, there is one aspect which is centrally relevant, namely the connection between socialism and snobbery. Tam Dalyell illustrates this with astonishing clarity, while trying to convey precisely the opposite impression. His text reveals him as, at best, a well-intentioned hypocrite. At worst—and this preserves the “well-intentioned” aspect which would be fair—he could be described as an individual version of the general point made about South Britons by one of Scotland’s foremost legal nationalists, Professor Sir Thomas Smith (see my review of his [book about the Scottish Constitution](#)): “The English are a most amiable, humane and generous race, except when they feel the mission to relieve others of the burden of administering their own affairs.”<sup>1</sup>

If you substitute “advising them on” for “administering”, since he was a man of words not deeds, that would be Tam Dalyell to a tee!

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<sup>1</sup> *Studies Critical and Comparative*, T.B. Smith (1962), p. 28

**Main talking points:**

1. Dalyell was clearly a charming man: we have his own authority for that. On innumerable occasions, he replies “courteously” to letters, deals “politely” with questions and makes points like: “I was scrupulously polite in my exchanges with the Speakers.” (p. 219)
2. He was also important. “My ancestors had payed a significant part in the 1603 Union of the Crowns.” (p. 182) Their descendent is regularly provided with commendations like this: the economist, **Nicky Kaldor**, told Dalyell that that it was a suggestion of *his* that produced the Regional Employment Premium in the 1960s as a way of addressing unemployment. (p. 63) More importantly, he got **Enoch Powell** into the Cabinet in 1962 (p. 87), and **Selwyn Lloyd**, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, out of it. (p. 88) The new Labour MP was a *Tory* kingmaker.
3. He was right, too. **Denis Healey** told him late in life that Edna once said: “On every issue on which you and Tam have disagreed, Tam was right and you, Denis, were wrong.” (p. 94)
4. He knew *everybody* worth knowing. The list here is so long it cannot even be summarised. It starts from a family connection with **President Harry Truman** and goes on through innumerable Nobel Prize winners, influential economists, famous historians, eminent world leaders and politicians—as well, of course, the movers and shakers in the Linlithgow Constituency Association. There are also Law Lords, scientists, trade union barons, writers, NGO bosses and even the occasional world-famous sportsman. His teachers were world class too, from **Sir Robert Birley** at Eton, through **Sir Geoffrey Elton** and **Sir Jack Plumb** at Cambridge, and on to **Pipe-Major William Ross** at Edinburgh Castle. The man who vainly tried to teach Dalyell the chanter was, as you’d expect, “the greatest pipe-major of his generation.” (p. 30) Even the family home, the **House of the Binns** near Edinburgh, had the right connections. It was the *first* in Scotland to be gifted to the National Trust, and the first regular tourist guide there was “the son of the Minister of St Michael’s in Linlithgow and a distinguished future Moderator, the Rev. David Steel. The guide was therefore the future leader of the Liberal Party, the *first* Presiding Officer of the Scottish parliament and much else, **Lord Steel of Aikwood.**” (p. 35; the word “first” is another sure indication of STATUS claimed)
5. The Laird of the Binns was also a kind of loonie: “One of the pleasures of being an MP are factory visits in the constituency.” (p. 220) Before he entered parliament, Dalyell taught for three years at Bo’ness Academy. Despite the passage of time, his former pupils still “reckon that I was an excellent teacher... 50 years later, they have treasured memories of cycle rides to the Kincardine Power Station and of visits down the coalmine and to local factories.” (pp. 71, 72) Such pleasures should be considered in the context of Dalyell’s account of his own schooldays during which he fagged for **Nicholas Ridley** (who later “closed down the Upper Clyde shipyards” for **Ted Heath**). Dalyell’s “main duty was to go and hold Ridley’s box of paints while he was doing beautiful watercolours in Luxmore’s Garden on the Thames at Eton.” (p. 185)
6. For all his exalted education, Dalyell displays a curious lack of self-awareness. For example, he needs to tell the reader that “I, like every politician, am a man of some vanity.” (p. 183) And the man who was so sure on about so many things writes: “An MP is unwise to attempt to become a ‘universal expert’.” (p. 175—see further below)

7. He sometimes relapses into a breathless enthusiasm which occasionally gets the better of his vocabulary. Before a trip to the Brazilian jungle Dalyell had a “*cacophony* of inoculations” (p. 230) “**Albert Reynolds** [ex-Irish Taoiseach] and I shared one *huge* quality...” (p. 257: how can a quality have a quantitative aspect?)

**Thought(s) provoked:** Dalyell’s extraordinary obsession with his own and other people’s importance conveys, cumulatively, the impression of a man who respects hierarchy, and who is conscious of his own STATUS as a person with privileged access to the highest reaches of that hierarchy. The 11<sup>th</sup> Baronet makes a point of never using his title, despite describing himself as a member of the “lairdry”. But he operates very lairdishly to the extent that he never does deals, never compromises, and always tries to take his problems straight to the top. He prefers to with the “head man”. However, as a self-conscious socialist, Dalyell tries to do so on equal terms. He comes across as a curious, conflicted and therefore interesting mix of hierophant and “hieroclast”.

**Incidental interest:** Occasionally Dalyell gets something important really right. Perhaps the best example is his marrow-deep loathing of **Tony Blair** and all he stood for in politics. “As a member of the National Executive of the Labour Party, I had been told that he had won the last-minute nomination [to succeed **John Smith**] by being anti-EEC, to the extent of pulling out of Europe and suggesting that he was extreme CND, ending British nuclear weapons. Very different from New Labour.... A friend of mine, a teacher at Fettes, had told me, ‘Be careful of Blair – he’s a superb actor, he’s good at getting others into trouble but avoiding it himself. In fact, he’s a shit and, take it from me, your Labour Party will come to regret it if you choose him.’” (p. 246)

**Surprising points:**

1. Dalyell’s surname would, in normal circumstances, have been “Loch” as that was his father’s name. It was his mother, **Eleanor Dalyell**, who inherited the House of the Binns. She was a descendent of **Tam Dalyell (1615-85)**, a Royalist soldier of fortune who commanded forces for **Tsar Alexis** against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the Battle of Smolensk in 1665. (He returned from Russia with twelve waggon-loads of treasure.) Dalyell’s father was **Gordon Loch**. He was descended from the brother of **James Loch of Drylaw**, the economist and lawyer who was responsible for the early clearances in Sutherland at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, though the 11<sup>th</sup> Baronet does not mention this fact.
2. At Cambridge, Dalyell was Chairman of the University *Conservative* Association! He later joined the Labour Party for two main reasons, he says: “Suez and unemployment” (p. 64). He downplays his early Tory affiliation by saying that “at Eton, I had socialist sympathies.” He justifies his switch to Toryism by claiming that “if I joined the Labour Club at Cambridge, many of my contemporaries would ascribe it to ‘sour grapes’ at not becoming an officer during National Service.” (p. 64)
3. At school he attended a talk given by a future Prime Minister who, at the time, called himself “**Leonard J. Callaghan**.” (p. 43)

**Negative issue(s):** Dalyell’s desperation to be seen to be what he was not resulted in a life-time of hair-trigger virtue signalling. He was quick to take sides in a conflict—and then to stick to his choice, through thick and thin, much to the irritation of people who knew more about the subject than he did. There are usually two sides to any story—Blair being perhaps the exception—but Dalyell rarely saw more than one. He wanted to improve the world, and his failure to do so was partly due to the mistrust he engendered. **Harold Wilson** appears to have sensed this early on, as he commented cryptically to our hero: “In Labour politics, no good deed goes unpunished.” (p. 163)

To give a few examples of Dalyell’s monocular fixation on what *he* saw as the right side of issues on which he was not an expert: nuclear power, the EU, the Moscow Olympics, Clive Ponting, Lockerbie, devolution, Bosnia, Peru, Bolivia, corncrakes, Diego Garcia, China, northern Ireland, science policy and the benefits of ocean cruises for schoolchildren (that was one of his few practical successes). Dalyell was in public life for nearly half a century, but that is not long enough to master even a few of these complex subjects.

He got into the habit of taking snap decisions long before he entered the House of Common. As early as 1956, when he had just left Cambridge, Dalyell committed himself to a life-long attitude to Uzbeks simply because, after he got bee stings on his genitals due to wearing a kilt on a visit to the hives on a Ukrainian collective farm, the father of the nurse who extracted the stings in a Kiev hospital, “with complete sangfroid”, came from “near the ancient city of Bokhara”. (p. 66) So that was Uzbekistan sorted!

Likewise, on the same trip he formed “an indelible impression of a society different from our but which had its merits”. This was on the basis of a visit to a Young Pioneers camp in the Crimea where the children wore “red scarves round their necks and immaculately clean skirts and shorts”. (p. 66) That was it, nothing more. Astonishingly, the man who displayed that attitude to evidence had just graduated with a 2:1 in *history*.

At the other end of his career, Dalyell sorted out his views about the war in Iraq with a self-righteous certainty that made him enemies among his more thoughtful colleagues. He confesses his difficulty with those who doubted his wisdom in words that almost defy belief. “Time and again, Downing Street, ministers and parliamentary colleagues, many personal friends of mine among them, have reiterated the refrain, ‘Why does Tam Dalyell suppose that he knows better than the rest of us about Iraq, and the threat it poses to the world?’ The answer was, I thought, quite simple – *because I had been to Iraq twice*, had studied the situation and talked deeply and at length to Iraqis...” (p.269) Been to Iraq TWICE! Who could match that?<sup>2</sup>

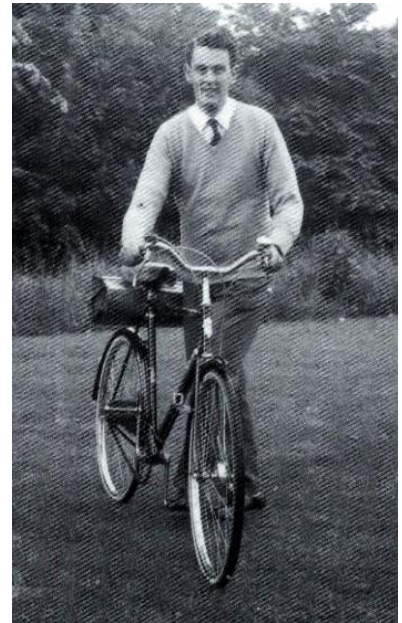
**Smile(s):** Dalyell gives an unconscious illustration of STATUS while making a point about Saddam Hussein. After the devastation of the Iran-Iraq he requested assistance from the Kuwaitis to help rebuild

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<sup>2</sup> After drafting this, I came across one example of the damage Dalyell could do by his blundering interventions that is not mentioned in this book. It concerned the so-called “Fettesgate” affair, which peripherally involved allegations by a muck-raking journalist (which were later proved false) of judicial corruption by means of gay-related blackmail in Edinburgh. The reference is in a book I shall be reviewing soon, *Lord President, 1989-96: Lord Hope’s Diaries*, vol 3 (2018—see my review of [Vol. 1](#)). Dalyell wrote to Lord Hope suggesting he institute a public inquiry, which he had no power to do. His letter “was based on the complete misconception of what had occurred” in an affair that was becoming “a bit hysterical”. Dalyell’s argument was described by the Lord Advocate at the time, Alan Rodger (arguably the most distinguished holder of that post in the twentieth century—see my review of his book [The Courts, The Church and the Constitution](#)), as “utter nonsense”. (p. 74) But the damage to the reputation of the judiciary was considerable.

his own country. He justified his approach by saying he had protected the Kuwaitis from fanatical Iranian-style Islamic fundamentalism. But the Sheiks responded in terms which Dalyell says contributed to the outbreak of the first Gulf War, in 1991. In this he might be right as societies which depend on prestige, as all STATUS-orientated ones do, take insults almost as badly as overt violence. “The [Kuwaiti] ruling elite replied with disdain. In particular, they suggested that Saddam Hussein should go back to the drains where his mother was a whore and that they would reduce the value of the Iraq currency, the dinar, to the value of lavatory paper.” (p. 248)

**Author:** Tam Dalyell of the Binns was MP for West Lothian/Linlithgow from 1962 to 2005 and Lord Rector of Edinburgh University, 2003-6. He died in 2017. The picture on the right is of him canvassing, by bicycle, throughout the Borders during his first election contest in 1959. He came a surprising and creditable second for Labour in a very unLabour constituency. Some might detect a resemblance to Peter Capaldi, of *Local Hero* fame.



**Link(s):** See review 21, of his [The Question of Scotland](#)

**Overall recommendation level:** MODERATE, but illuminating on the snobbery-socialism nexus

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**About the reviewer:** Ian Mitchell is the author of four books, including [Isles of the West](#) and [The Justice Factory](#). He is writing a comparative study of Russian and Western constitutional history to be called *Russia and the Rule of Law*—hence the “Rus&RoL Relevance” section at the top. He can be contacted at: [ianbookrec@gmail.com](mailto:ianbookrec@gmail.com). For other reviews in this series, see [Ian Mitchell’s Book Recommendations](#).