Linköping University

'Unionist Nationalism' and the National Museum of Scotland, c. 1847–1866

Linda Andersson Burnett and Andrew G. Newby[*]

School of History & Classics, University of Edinburgh, Scotland

s0092360@sms.ed.ac.uk, andrew.newby@ed.ac.uk

This paper will discuss the campaign for a national museum in Scotland in the mid-nineteenth century, in the context of the theory of Unionist-nationalism. This theory argues that, in spite of being very strongly bound up in notions of union, Britain, and empire, Scotland had a very strong sense of national identity and pride throughout the nineteenth century. Although this paper deals with the period up to the opening of the 'Museum of Science and Art' in 1866, future work will examine the relationship between Scottish nationalism and its national museums up to the present day.[1] It will therefore (i) contribute to a study of nationalism and national museums throughout Europe and the world, in association with other NaMu colleagues, and (ii) add to existing research on Scottish nationalism and its place in Scottish society since the mid-nineteenth century.

---

[1] Contemporary commentaries demonstrate the evolving nomenclature of the museum, which was to be situated on Chambers Street, Edinburgh. The institution under discussion has been known, sequentially, as the Industrial Museum of Scotland, the Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art, the Royal Scottish Museum, and is now part of the National Museums of Scotland.

The Theory of Unionist-nationalism:

Unionist-nationalism is a concept which has gained widespread usage, and acceptance, since the publication in 1999 of Graeme Morton's *Unionist Nationalism: Governing Urban Scotland, 1830-1860*.[2] In this work, Morton argues that the general characterisation of Scottish nationalism as a failed movement / philosophy for much of the nineteenth century ignores the dynamic sense of nationality present within civil society in Scotland at that time.

The Conventional Argument

The conventional argument has been that a British nation-state was established in the eighteenth century following the Union between Scotland and England in 1707 and that Scotland, in the same century, ceased to have a meaningful identity of its own. The Union of 1707 produced therefore not only a structurally integrated British state, but also a culturally unified British nation, inhabited by Britons. This influential discourse is supported by such books as Linda Colley's best-selling *Britons,* which argues that a British Protestant nation was established as a result of a series of wars against Catholic France in this period.[3] The formation of a British nation, she argues, was also helped by changing English attitudes towards Scotland. The Jacobite rebellions that were in part propelled by opposition to the Union drew their core support from Scotland, but after the final defeat of the Stuart 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' in 1746 the Scottish Jacobites accepted the new regime. Former Jacobite soldiers enlisted in the new British Army and were consequently accepted as loyal Britons by the English. As a further consequence, any lingering sense of rebelliousness among the Scottish clans took on a strictly romantic character. By the time the Jacobites were pacified, moreover, aristocratic, intellectual and mercantile Scots were becoming increasingly inclined to anglicise their speech, customs and habits to take full advantage of the commercial and employment opportunities presented by the burgeoning British Empire.[4]

Sharing many of Colley's assumptions about the formation of a unitary British nation-state, cultural historians and political scientists such as the late David Daiches and Tom Nairn have argued that people in Scotland *did* continue to have a Scottish identity but in the form of a sub-national and repressed ethnic consciousness under the skin of a dominant British Unionist nationality.[5] However, in sharing Colley's insistence on a dominant, singular Britishness, such writers have interpreted this duality not as positive co-existence of two identities, but as a problem or a deviance.

This duality of identity, they argue, led to a divided or 'schizophrenic' Scottish psyche caused by attempting to be loyal to both Britain and Scotland. This influential school of thinking about Scottish nationhood, which became the dominant discourse by the 1960s, was reinforced by the fashionable influence of psychoanalytic theories on schizophrenia. It assumed that 'normal' people should hold only a singular national identity such as Scottishness or Britishness.

The interpretation of ongoing Scottishness as a problem either to be ignored, in Colley's view, or explained as a deviance from the 'norm' – as Nairn or Daiches would have it – is influenced by the modernist school of interpreting nations and nationalism. This school adheres to the formula of one state for one nation (the classical nation-state) put forward by such leading modernists as Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, John Breuilly and Benedict

---

2   G. Morton, *Unionist Nationalism: Governing Urban Scotland, 1830-1860* (East Linton, 1999).
3   L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London, 1996).
4   Colley, *Britons*, Ch. 3.
5   D. Daiches, *The Paradox of Scottish Culture: The Eighteenth-Century Experience* (London, 1964); T. Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London, 1977).

Anderson.[6] The modernist school has had a commanding influence on historical discussions of nation-building and nationalism in the British Isles.

The central tenets of the modernist school are adherence to the formula of one state for one nation within a specific geographic area and, secondly, agreement that nationalism is an elite creed born of modern times which produces or invents nations in order to gain or maintain state power. John Breuilly, for instance, writes: 'The nation must be as independent as possible. This usually requires the attainment of at least political sovereignty.'[7] Looked at through this interpretative lens, Scotland, a nation that existed before nationalism (with a long mediaeval history) yet did not subsequently seek independence in an era of nationalism, becomes a puzzling oddity where it is not considered a blemish merely to be ignored.

However, it is important to point out that Scotland (and consequently Britain) is not unique in bucking the model of the so-called classical nation-state. The assumption of a homogenous relationship between a state and one nation is a paradigm that represents very few real countries. In the early 1970s, Walker Connor estimated that only 10 per cent of states were 'real' nation-states, by which he meant that the total population of the state shared a single ethnic culture and that that the boundaries of the state and the nation coincided.[8] K.R Minogue, likewise, refutes the idea of the nation-state:

> The nation-state of modern Europe is almost entirely a fiction. Its two most celebrated examples are the United Kingdom and France, but a glance at the realities will immediately show how completely unreal it is to describe these states as nations. The United Kingdom contains four obvious nationalities – the English, Scots, Welsh and Irish – without in any way exhausting the plurality of her populations. Inherited from the past are such groups as the inhabitants of the Guernsey, Jersey, Shetland and other islands; Cornwall is a county with claims to nationhood, and history records regions (such as Northumbria) which, given the impulse of economic circumstance and intellectual cultivation, could easily be promoted as independent nationalities.[9]

An alternative to the standard theoretical model of the British nation-state (one-nation-and-its-state) put forward by adherents to the modernist school is presented by Morton. Britain, Morton argues, consists of a British state that has a decentralised relationship with its four nations.[10] Whereas previous works have focused on the apparatus of the British state, Morton claims that the Westminster parliament was 'marginalised' during this period, and that urban Scotland was effectively governed by a self-confident local bourgeoisie. There was the establishment of a series of boards or commissions in Edinburgh to administer Scottish affairs such as the Scottish Court of the Exchequer and the Board of Excise. The Act of Union had also ensured that Scotland could maintain its own national church, education and legal systems.

The British state's decentralised and flexible approach to Scotland was both its strength and its Achilles heel. It prevented the agitation and claims for independence that came from small nations within eastern and central Europe, where states such as Habsburg ruled with an

6   See for example: E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1992); J. Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester, 1982); B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

7   Cited in A. D Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 30.

8   A. Smith, *National Identity* (London, 1991), p. 15.

9   K. R Minogue, 'Nationalism and the Patriotism of the City-States', in A.D. Smith (ed.) *Nationalist Movements* (London, 1976), p. 54.

10   Morton, *Unionist Nationalism*, p. 8.

iron hand of conformity.[11] On the other hand, these institutions prevented a British nation and a shared civil society from emerging, since they helped maintain a distinctive Scottish society. Research done by the British Social Attitudes Survey in January 2007 revealed that after three centuries of the incorporating Union, only fourteen per cent of people living in Scotland regarded themselves as British rather than Scottish when asked to choose between the two.[12]

There is no doubt that eighteenth-century Scots felt loyalty to the Union and a British identity, although it should not be presented as having been their main or sole identity. Instead, they held 'concentric loyalties' to their own Scottish nationality and to the British state in which they had become incorporated via the Union. Eighteenth-century Scots could identify concentrically with their region within Scotland, Scotland as a whole, the British state and its empire. This concentric structure is what Morton describes as Unionist-nationalism.

Monuments and the Museum

The bourgeois Scottish elite who ruled local government in Scotland, moreover, demonstrated a strong devotion to Scottish history – resulting in a multiplicity of monuments being erected to William Wallace, Robert the Bruce, Robert Burns and Walter Scott. A closer look at these events reveal that these were erected in order to celebrate Scotland's historical greatness, albeit within a Unionist framework. Sir Walter Scott, who had done so much to popularise a Union-friendly image of historic Scotland, was rewarded after his death with a 61-metre-high gothic monument. Its official opening on the 15th of August 1846 attracted hundreds of people.[13] The centenary of Robert Burns' birth also stirred national feelings in 1859.[14] Although Burns was celebrated since he had given the Scottish people, the peasantry in particular, a voice, the same occasions tended to give toasts to Victoria and the British Empire.[15] The rhetoric behind the commemoration of the Scottish national martyr William Wallace – with a monument in Stirling, inaugurated in 1869 – also reveals a Unionist-nationalist agenda. Wallace, who had fought the English in the Wars of Independence, was interpreted as having made sure that Scotland entered the Union with England in 1707 as an independent nation. The devotion to the Scottish past in the mid-eighteenth century was therefore not a means of advocating separation from England, but a celebration of what the Scots perceived as their equal status with England within the Union and within the British imperial enterprise.[16]

The erection of monuments, as Marinell Ash argues, often tell us more about the politics and discourses of those erecting them, and their society than the past: 'The truth was most historical monuments had to do with the present rather than the past.'[17] These monuments, which celebrate a Scottish past, show the importance of historical memories, myths and pre-modern national sentiments for the national consciousness. Although there is, as Smith argues, more to the concept of the nation than myths and memories, they constitute:

---

11   Morton, *Unionist Nationalism*, p. 11-12.
12   *The Scotsman*, 24 Jan. 2007.
13   *The Scotsman*, 19 Aug. 1846.
14   This issue is discussed *in extenso* in *The Scotsman* throughout 1859; *The Burns Centenary: being an account of the proceedings and speeches at the various banquets and meetings throughout the kingdom, with a memoir and portrait of the poet* (Edinburgh, 1859).
15   Morton, *Unionist Nationalism*, p. 174.
16   Morton, *Unionist Nationalism*, p. 155-88.
17   M. Ash, *The Strange Death of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1980) p. 144.

> … a *sine qua non*: there can be no identity without memory (albeit selective), no collective purpose without myth, and identity and purpose or destiny are necessary elements of the very concept of a nation.[18]

For the formation of a single, unified British identity, this historical attachment to myth and collective memory proved problematic. The continuing celebration of Scottish historical figures and events worked as a delimiting factor in the fabrication of a British nation and a strong singular British identity, a situation that was clearly apparent to outsiders. Scotland's predilection for erecting national monuments was commented on with approbation by General Nino Bixio, a former colleague of Garibaldi in the Sicilian campaigns, during a visit to Edinburgh in 1862:

> Edinburgh is one of the most beautiful cities I have ever seen… In general it appears to me that the Scotch abound as much in public monuments as the English are niggardly of them. I dare not say that it may be so everywhere, but it is the impression which the cities of Scotland leave in comparison with London.[19]

It is, perhaps, unsurprising that a man such as Bixio should be attuned to the number of monuments to national heroes in Scotland. Indeed, Garibaldi himself was one of many foreign contributors to the building of the Wallace Monument at Abbey Craig.[20]

Thus, the establishment of a national museum, we contend, can be placed alongside these iconographical events. It embodied the distinct (and, many in contemporary Scotland would have argued, superior) nature of Scottish education (the 'democratic intellect') within Britain, as well as promoting ideals of the Scottish Enlightenment, and the contribution to the Imperial project of Scottish military and missionary activity.

Early Debates / Justifications for a 'Free Museum' or 'National Museum'

Since the establishment in Edinburgh of the Museum of the Society of Antiquaries in 1780, museums of various types had been established in several Scottish towns, most notably the Marischal Museum in Aberdeen (established 1786), and the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow (established in 1807).[21] Edinburgh was also home to an important collection linked to the University, generally known as the 'College Museum', which contained important biological specimens, and played a large role in the education of natural history to the students. The College Museum was open to the public, but by the 1840s admission was set at one shilling, something which would become a focal point for the campaign for a 'Free Museum' or 'National Museum' in Scotland.[22] The decision by the Town Council to reduce admission from two shillings, made in 1834, had, far from the expected 'twentyfold' increase in visitors, seen numbers rise hardly at all.[23] A 'free day', however, celebrating the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1838, was proclaimed by *The Scotsman* as a huge success, featuring 'immense crowds, no disturbance', and 'no sign of wantonness.'[24]

The Scotsman, which very much saw (and, perhaps, still sees) itself as the national voice, started to print correspondence relating to free museums in the 1840s, and a variety of themes

---

18   A. D. Smith, *Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1986), p. 2.
19   'An Italian General's View of Edinburgh', *The Scotsman*, 24 Nov. 1862; H. Nelson Gay, 'Garibaldi's Sicilian campaigns as reported by an American diplomat', *American Historical Review*, xxvii (1922), p. 219-244.
20   *The Scotsman*, 19 Mar. 1869.
21   L. Keppie, *William Hunter and the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, 1807-2007* (Edinburgh, 2007).
22   *The Scotsman*, 3 Jan. 1818.
23   *The Scotsman*, 13 Dec. 1834.
24   *The Scotsman*, 30 Jun. 1838.

began to emerge in justifying the establishment of such a museum in Edinburgh. In November 1847, 'Arachnophilus' commented that 'we hope to see a national museum in Scotland; a building for such a purpose is yet wanting to make Edinburgh (what most other capitals are) a museum-endowed city.'[25] He also articulated the repeated complaint that there simply was not enough space in the College Museum to do justice to its collections. Whether by coincidence or editorial design, another letter appeared alongside that of 'Arachnophilus', from 'A Workman' in Newcastle-On-Tyne, who complained that working-people could not afford the one shilling entry to the College Museum. He concluded that 'it would be a great blessing to the workmen of Edinburgh to get such a place, and visitors would like to see that if your city was not before, at least it was not behind, others in this matter.'[26]

In the following months and years, the issue of a centralised 'National' institution in Edinburgh was debated in newspapers, other print periodicals, Edinburgh town council, and even the Westminster parliament. In the course of these debates, three main themes emerged on the part of those who would advocate the establishment of the museum. Firstly, we see a concentration on the benefit to society at large, but in particular the Scottish 'working classes' – and especially their drinking habits. The following passage from *The Scotsman* is representative:

> In London on holidays the British Museum is crowded with mechanics, artisans, and other working men, with their wives and children, all admiring the wondrous works of creation. These men go home quietly and respectably, we may believe wiser and better, from their visit. In Edinburgh no such place of intellectual recreation is open to our people, and the result is seen in the drunk and disorderly persons met with in all our principal streets on such days… More drunk men may be seen in a day in Edinburgh than in a month in London. There may be other causes for this state of things, but one cause undoubtedly is the want of such places of public amusement and instruction as those we have now been asking for. Such institutions save the people, not only by withdrawing them for the time from places of dissipation, but more especially by rousing their moral habits and intellectual capacities. It is therefore not for the interest of science alone, or for improving the physical well-being of our countrymen, that we would argue for the establishment of a free National Museum in Edinburgh, but as desirous of preserving the ancient intellectual renown of our city, and as anxious for elevating the moral character and habits of her people.[27]

British social reformers argued that museums, libraries and theatres had the didactic function of promoting sobriety by informally instructing and entertaining the working classes and therefore providing 'distractions' from drinking.[28] As Richard Rodger has noted with respect to Edinburgh:

> Social dislocation [caused by urbanisation etc.] was addressed by clubs, societies, political parties, works activities, and sporting initiatives which provided reference points and social networks in a rapidly changing urban world, and the municipality recognised and fulfilled its civic responsibility with a cultural programme for museums, libraries and galleries, as well as parks, zoos and botanical gardens designed to inform.[29]

---

25   *The Scotsman*, 30 Oct. 1847.
26   *The Scotsman*, 30 Oct. 1847.
27   *The Scotsman*, 15 Jun. 1850.
28   T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London, 1995), p. 20.
29   R. Rodger, *The Transformation of Edinburgh: land, property and trust in the nineteenth century* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 295.

By mingling with people from 'higher echelons' of society, the working men and women would also learn how to improve their behaviour. Although some doubted these arguments for self-improvement and feared that the behaviour of working-class people presented a threat to exhibitions, the Great Exhibition of 1851 was held up as proof that the working-classes could 'behave'.[30]

Secondly, the economic benefits conferred through an increased practical knowledge of industrial processes were stressed – hence the eventual establishment (or 'branding') of the museum as an 'Industrial' museum in 1861.[31] A greater knowledge of geology, and Scottish avifauna, or of physics, for example, would help Scotland realise its full economic potential. The new museum should therefore not only store information, but also inspire learning.[32] For the 'national' wellbeing of the Scottish nation, having a museum of industry was believed to be essential. Again, in the words of *The Scotsman*:

> What we have stated now and formerly is sufficient to prove the importance of a National Museum as a means of developing the intelligence, industry, and resources of the country. The waste and want which ignorance of the natural productions of the land and waters produces in many districts is very remarkable.[33]

The role of narrating the past and the early history of the Scottish nation was to remain with the Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.

Related to this general economic argument for an industrial museum was an assertion that Edinburgh's eminent position as a seat of learning helped to attract 'wealthy strangers', who spent their money in the city's shops. A lack of a national museum would endanger this lofty position, and as a result the economic life of the city would also be threatened.

The third major theme to be observed is that of the basic 'right' of Scotland, and in particular Edinburgh as its capital, to have a national museum. This theme is the most important in examining the Unionist-nationalist mindset of many Scots during this period, and will be examined in more detail in the following section.

A strong indication that a national museum for Scotland could be a possibility was given in 1849, when Edinburgh Town Council received a supportive letter from Adam White, of the British Museum, intimating that if suitable accommodation could be found in the city, the British Museum would be able to provide specimens and, indeed, entire collections, 'which would form the nucleus of a national museum of much interest and value.'[34] Council members discussed the advantages that would 'accrue, morally and intellectually' from the establishment of the museum, but remained divided on whether it should be funded from central (London) taxation, or locally from Edinburgh. At a meeting of the Royal Physical Society a year later, Professor Goodsir spoke of the need for the various collections in Edinburgh to be consolidated into a National Museum, adding that 'if these various collections could be brought together and rendered available for consultation, we should have a museum in Edinburgh rivalling that of the metropolis.'[35]

As part of the ever-increasing discussion within Edinburgh on the subject, *The Scotsman* contributed strident editorials on the subject. Its arguments can indubitably be placed within a Unionist-nationalist framework, complaining of the lack of a museum in Edinburgh, and stating it should have a claim 'in like manner with London and Dublin, had to the assistance

---

30   Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, p. 72.
31   The success of the Museum of Industrial Art and Science in London also added weight to the campaign.
32   G. Swinney, 'Reconstructed visions: The Philosophies that shaped part of the Scottish national collections', in *Museums Management and Curatorship* 21 (2006), p. 132.
33   *The Scotsman*, 15 Jun. 1850, 28 Aug. 1850.
34   *The Scotsman*, 17 Jan. 1849.
35   *The Scotsman*, 16 Jan. 1850.

of the Government in founding and maintaining such an institution.' Thus, the Westminster government, and its treatment of Scotland, came in for severe criticism:

> For Scotland such a grant is especially difficult. Routine in such matters is all-powerful with those in authority, and we have been so long accustomed to ask nothing for purely national objects that our rulers quietly assume that we have no right to do so…[36]

At a debate in the House of Commons soon afterwards, John Bright, MP for Manchester, demonstrated some of the resistance bemoaned by *The Scotsman*, a unionist mindset that failed to distinguish Scotland as a distinct nation within the United Kingdom, and by extension deny Edinburgh its place as a national capital:

> On the vote of L. 10,000 towards the expense of erecting in the city of Edinburgh buildings for a national gallery, and other purposes, connected therewith, and for the promotion of fine arts in Scotland. Mr BRIGHT said he could not see why this sum should be granted to Edinburgh, while such towns as Manchester and Leeds did not enjoy similar votes. He protested against the principle of the vote, for he thought it was wrong to make such grants, whether to Edinburgh, or Dublin, or any other place.[37]

An attitude such as that demonstrated by Bright, naturally, enraged Unionist-nationalist opinion in Scotland, as did the apparently inequitable distribution of public money between London, Dublin, and Edinburgh:

> Why our country and city have not received such grants, whilst they have been liberally given both to London and Dublin, is a curious proof that the theory and practice are not so widely disjoined as some persons may imagine. When Mr Charteris[38] – who in this as in many other instances has manifested an honourable regard for the interests of his native land – lately asked the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether it was intended to make any grant for a National Museum in Edinburgh, he received what we may regard as the regular *official* reply to such questions. No grant could be made to Edinburgh, because other places would make a like demand. Here, then, is the official theory and its practical result. Edinburgh, in official estimation, is merely a provincial town, and no special Government grant can be made to it, because other provincial towns would make like demands and with equal justice. London and Dublin are regarded as capital cities, and their wants can be attended to, their tastes and wishes gratified without fear or hesitation; they have a clear and undoubted claim on the national funds, but Scotland is only a province, Edinburgh only a county town, and therefore no national grant for public purposes shall be made to her, lest Coventry or Campbelton [*sic*] should make a like demand on the Treasury. How long our countrymen will submit to this official theory and its practical consequences remains to be seen.[39]

A contributor to *Blackwood's Magazine* made a similar point, musing that:

> When we look at the large sums devoted every year as a matter of course to London and Dublin, while Edinburgh is passed over without notice, we have a right to know for what offence on our part we experience such insulting neglect. This is, moreover, a matter which ought not to be lightly dismissed, inasmuch as, if Edinburgh is still to be regarded

---

36 *The Scotsman*, 15 Jun. 1850.
37 *The Scotsman*, 3 Aug. 1850.
38 Francis Charteris, 10th Earl of Wemyss, was MP for Haddingtonshire.
39 *The Scotsman*, 28 Aug. 1852.

as a capital city, she is entitled to fair consideration and support in all things relating to the diffusion of arts and science.[40]

The role of Ireland within the union was a further catalyst in promoting Scots' sense of Unionist-nationalism. The famous visit of George IV to Edinburgh in 1822 was given extra piquancy by the fact that he had visited Dublin in 1821.[41] Scottish opinion was aghast that such an apparently disloyal and violent people as the Irish should be rewarded by Royal visits, and therefore tried to demonstrate their own loyalty during the 'King's jaunt' to Edinburgh.[42] This sense of disadvantage in spite of their playing a major role in the success of the British Imperial enterprise, can be seen in discourse on the need to establish a national Industrial museum in Edinburgh. The laying of a foundation stone for a new museum at Dublin in 1856 gave additional urgency to Edinburgh's claims, but also allowed proponents of the Scottish museum to present their eventual success as inevitable.[43]

The calls for Scotland to be considered as an equal nation to England in cultural matters were part of widespread concern that Scotland was treated as an inferior partner to England in the Union. The National Association for the Vindication of Scottish Rights, also known as the Scottish Rights Society, was founded in 1853 in order to demand a fairer treatment of Scotland by the Exchequer. There was also the demand for better administration, and better government; this was focused on the re-establishment of the post of Secretary of State for Scotland (lost in 1746.)[44] Adhering to a Unionist-nationalist discourse, they wanted greater representation rather than a break-up of the Union. The chair of its first public meeting made this clear:

> I am not wrong headed enough to wish that the Union, which has been established so happily for the peace and tranquillity of both should be interfered with. I am not foolish enough to imagine that, if such were my wishes, any efforts of mine to sever those, I trust, indissolubly united (cheering). I can only say that if I thought the result of this Association could lead to such a misfortune, I would not remain in it for a moment.[45]

Their opinions resonated with Scottish people from all echelons of the political and religious sections. There were Whigs, Conservatives, Radicals, Free Traders and Protectionists among the members.[46]

The Establishment of the Museum

After several years of debate, therefore, 1854 saw the government agree to the establishment of an 'Industrial Museum' for Scotland, with George Wilson being appointed as its future director.[47] In stressing the practical benefits of this museum to the Scottish economy, and its close ties with the natural history collections of the College Museum, the confident assertion was made that:

---

40   Anon., 'Scotland since the Union', *Blackwood's Magazine*, lxxiv (1853), p. 280.
41   *The Scotsman*, 18 Aug., 25 Aug. 1821.
42   J. Prebble, *The King's Jaunt* (London, 1988); *The Scotsman*, 17 Aug. 1822 & seq.
43   *Illustrated London News*, 15 Mar. 1856.
44   Morton, *Unionist Nationalism*, p. 140.
45   *Justice to Scotland. Report of the First Public Meeting of the National Association for the Vindication of Scottish Rights, held in the Music Hall, Edinburgh, on the evening of November 2, 1853* (Edinburgh, 1853), p. 4; Morton, *Unionist Nationalism*, p. 138.
46   J. Grant, *Nemo Me Imusse Lacesset* (n.p., n.d..), p. 170; Morton, *Unionist Nationalism*, p. 136.
47   J. A. Wilson, *Memoir of George Wilson* (Edinburgh, 1860), p. 448-49; *The Scotsman*, 8 Mar., 15 Jul. 1854, 28 Feb. 1855.

> No such happy combination of science and its applications are to be found in London or Dublin. In the collections of the Highland Society, most liberally placed at the disposal of the Government, an important nucleus is already provided for the New Museum, and we doubt not that the energetic cooperation of the landowners and manufacturers of this country, who, by their frequent memorials to Government for its establishment, have shown themselves fully alive to its importance, will enable the new directors to convince the Board of Trade that a Museum may be founded in Edinburgh worthy of the nation, and worthy of the singular advantages offered by this city of including abstract science and its application in one common building.[48]

The Commissioners of Her Majesty's Works and Public Buildings were to provide land near Edinburgh University, and the Town Council of Edinburgh was to transfer all their right and property in, and management of, the College Museum.[49] In subsequent years, various donations arrived, from Chinese industrial art and Egyptian antiquaries to selections of armaments and munitions from the Crimean War, from such luminaries as the Secretary of State for India, to Queen Victoria herself, and interested individuals from various parts of the globe.[50] Thus, the announcement in 1861 that the inaugural stone of the national 'industrial museum' would be laid in Edinburgh by Albert, Prince Consort, was long-anticipated.[51] The Unionist-nationalist tone of *The Scotsman* presaged the similar feelings which pervaded the stone-laying ceremonial itself:

> Scotland may at length congratulate herself on having immediate prospect or receiving a too-long delayed boon, or rather right; the equivalent of which England has for years enjoyed. And Edinburgh, as the capital of our northern kingdom, the central seat of intellectual industry, may also rejoice in having added to the many noble institutions she can already boast an Industrial Museum, externally not unworthy of a place among the most picturesque city in the world, and internally enriched with specimens of the varied natural and industrial specimens of the varied natural and industrial resources of not only our own, but of many lands. It is fully twenty years since the idea of an industrial museum was popularised amongst us; our own columns through which its value, practicability, and necessity, were urged earliest and most frequently, the subject having been taken up and developed by *The Scotsman* long before the establishment of a chair of technology gave evidence to the Government being prepared to do its part in the matter…[52]

Although there were to be five years between the ceremonial laying of the foundation-stone in October 1861, and the museum's official opening in 1866, the Prince Consort's visit to Edinburgh, one of his final public events before his death in December, demonstrated genuine public excitement for the instigation of such a national institution. It was noted that 'flags of all descriptions and sizes were hung from windows and house-tops, especially along the South and North Bridges, Princes' Street, Leith Street, Waterloo Place, and their vicinities… The flags, as already hinted, were of all varieties. Some were national, other represented societies and trades.'[53]

Alongside the patriotic fervour instilled by a Royal visit, the Prince Consort was made keenly aware of the history of Scotland as an independent nation. Representative of the huge interest in Scotland's past which had developed during the nineteenth century, he was shown

---

48   *The Scotsman*, 28 Feb. 1855.
49   *The Times*, 21 Apr. 1855. See also *The Scotsman*, 25 Apr. 1855.
50   *The Scotsman*, 9 Jan. 1858; *The Times*, 26 Dec. 1859; G. Swinney, 'Partying in the Museum', *History Scotland*, Sep. / Oct. 2004.
51   *The Times*, 5 Sep. 1861.
52   *The Scotsman*, 15 Feb. 1861.
53   *The Scotsman*, 24 Oct. 1861.

a display of documents in various glass cases at the General Register House.[54] Among the display were original copies of the Declaration of Arbroath of 1320, a letter to Pope John XXII with its clarion call that 'as long as one hundred' Scots should remain alive, they would never submit to English overlordship; state papers of Robert the Bruce and Mary, Queen of Scots; treaties between Haakon V and Robert the Bruce in relation to Orkney and Shetland; signed letters of James VI / I, the first man to unite the crowns of England and Scotland; and, vitally, the Articles of Union of 1706-1707, which precipitated the union considered by most onlookers – in *The Scotsman*'s words – to be 'an unmixed benefit.'[55]

After several delays, the official opening of the – now renamed – 'National Museum of Science and Art', on Saturday 19 May, 1866, was an event which showcased the material culture of Scotland and the Empire. Prince Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh, was the main guest of honour, and over three thousand were invited to the opening ceremony.[56] In future sessions, the museum building, exhibits, and its changing identity / nomenclature in its early years will also be examined. The building was designed by Captain Francis Fowke, who was also responsible for the Royal Irish Gallery, the Grand Exhibition of 1862, parts of the Victoria and Albert Museum and, perhaps most famously, the Royal Albert Hall. Again, this architecture located the Museum in a British / Imperial context, and an examination of what exhibits were chosen takes on even more importance.

Moving Forward: Overall Themes for Discussion, 2007-8

Issues of national identity have continued to surround the museum of Science and Art, which changed its name to the Royal Museum in 1904. In 1998 the museum was internally linked to the new Museum of Scotland, which contained artefacts from the National Museum of Antiquities and Scottish objects from the Royal Museum. This development prompted a debate on the nature of Scottish history almost unprecedented in modern times. In the aftermath of the devolution referendum in 1997, which led to the reconvening of the Scottish Parliament after nearly 300 years, public interest in the museums, and other aspects of Scottish history, increased hugely. The merging of the Museum of Scotland and the Royal Museum into the National Museum of Scotland and the re-branding of seven of Scotland's museum as national, together with a logo in the shape of the Scottish St Andrews flag in 2006, are signs of an increasingly confident Scottish identity. The desire to highlight a Scottish identity can be seen in the museum's press release at the time:

> More consistent names have been adopted for each of the sites, which clearly identify them as being national. A new corporate logo replaces six museum logos. The new logo highlights Scottish identity, the wonderful objects in the Museum collections and the revealing stories behind them.[57]

This re-branding of the museums raises the question whether Unionist nationalism is still the dominant discourse of 21st century Scotland. There is also a great deal of material relevant to the National Museums of Scotland which can be covered in the subsequent NaMu sessions, with respect to the architecture and nomenclature of the new National Museum building. In our postgraduate classes at University of Edinburgh we have already collaborated with NMS staff in discussing whether exhibits be led by ephemeral public expectations, or by the artefacts, and issues relating to the external / internal architecture of the building – we would

---

54   Ash, *The Strange Death of Scottish History*; C. Kidd, '"The Strange Death of Scottish History" revisited: constructions of the Past in Scotland, c. 1790–1914', *Scottish Historical Review* liivi (1997).

55   *The Scotsman*, 2 Jan. 1868.

56   *The Scotsman*, 18 May 1866; *Illustrated London News*, 2 Jun. 1866.

57   *New Identity for National Museums of Scotland*, http://www.nms.ac.uk/ournewlook.aspx. Accessed 13 Oct. 2006.

very much welcome the chance to discuss these issues on a Europe-wide basis. In particular, we are interested in examining the collections and exhibits of Victorian Edinburgh, and the discourses they represent. We hypothesise that this may shed light on the Unionist-nationalist concentric Scottish identities, alongside the tension between 'Celtic' and 'Norse' dichotomy which characterised images of Highland and Lowland Scotland.