



# Introduction: Scotland, Culture and Empire

ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

This introduction contextualises and summarises the contents of the Special Issue 'Scotland, Culture and Empire'. It argues for the importance of continued research in the field.

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The toppling of the bronze statue of Edward Colston into Bristol Harbor in June 2020 has quickly become one of the defining images of the Black Lives Matter movement in Britain. These scenes, and others like them around the world, have brought conversations about the role of colonial cultural artefacts in modern life into the forefront of public debate. Confronting police brutality against Black Americans, following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, has been a catalyst for the consideration of wider systemic racism around the globe and the role which colonial cultural legacies play in reinforcing these systems.

In both Scotland and Ireland the events of 2020 brought public attention to an ongoing conversation about the cultural legacies of Empire. In Scotland calls for the removal of the statue of Henry Dundas in Edinburgh's St Andrew's Square have amplified existing discourse about the importance of acknowledging Scotland's active role in Britain's Imperial projects.<sup>1</sup> Ireland's reckoning with the Imperial statue came with Irish independence but the aftermath of Black Lives Matter also saw renewed attention to public monuments.<sup>2</sup> These 'statue wars' were perhaps the most publicly visible examples of a wider range of renegotiations of colonial cultural legacies.<sup>3</sup> Both countries have seen an uptick in cultural bodies publicly addressing colonial legacies and a corresponding backlash that draws on ideas of censorship and erasure.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the examination of Scotland and Ireland's part in shaping and consuming cultures of colonialism at home and abroad has assumed an increasing urgency.

The University of Aberdeen's Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies hosted a digital workshop addressing these legacies in September 2021. Titled 'Scotland, Ireland and the Cultural Artefacts of Colonialism' this workshop invited participants to examine the ways in which the cultural artefacts of colonialism have featured in Scottish and Irish life in the past, how they persist today, and how they might be understood in the future. Conceiving of the 'cultural artefact' in its broadest possible sense, to include not just physical artefacts but also music, food cultures, and texts, the event brought graduate students, museum professionals, and scholars from across a wide range of disciplines together. The digital medium meant that participants from a wide range of geographical locations could join sessions and present work. The two days featured keynote lectures by Emily Mark Fitzgerald (University College Dublin) who presented on 'The Irish Workhouse as Postcolonial Artefact: Poverty, Welfare, and Commemoration, 1840s–Present' and Peggy Brunache (University of Glasgow) on 'Reading Against the Grain: Searching for Free Black Women Entrepreneurs in the Slavery Archives'. There was also a Scottish Museums and Collections Roundtable where Neil Curtis (University of Aberdeen), Sheila Asante, (Museums Galleries Scotland) and Zandra Yeaman (Hunterian Museum) discussed addressing colonial legacies within Scottish heritage institutions.

The following special issue of the *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies* represents one of the outputs to emerge from this event. The issue has a particular focus on Scotland, although its origins in a cross-disciplinary event are clear in Matthew Lee's examination of the dialogue between the Scottish-Caribbean author Alison Carmichael and the Irish author Maria Edgeworth. It also turns slightly from the focus on the artefact that characterised the original event. As so often happens when specialists gather, one of the first objects to come under pressure during the workshop was the term 'artefact' itself. Many of the papers presented problematized this mode of understanding their central subjects, preferring instead to think about institutions, narratives and communities. The current issue then seeks to consider the term 'artefact' as just one possible mode of naming these cultural legacies.

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1 See for example Caitlyn Dewar "'We should do everything we can to learn from history": Poll on Removal of Henry Dundas Statue Splits Edinburgh Readers', *Edinburgh News*, 10 June 2020, <https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/news/people/we-should-do-everything-we-can-to-learn-from-history-poll-on-removal-of-henry-dundas-statue-splits-edinburgh-readers-2880113>, accessed 2 April 2023.

2 Cónal Thomas "'Statues don't embody history": The Debate around Ireland's Public Monuments after Colston', *The Journal*, 14 June 2020, <https://www.thejournal.ie/public-statues-ireland-5120999-Jun2020/>, accessed 3 April 2023.

3 Jenny Gregory 'Statue Wars: Collective Memory Reshaping the Past', *History Australia*, 3 (2021), 564–87.

4 See for example *The Scotsman's* 2021 coverage of Scottish Ballet's anti-racism initiatives and discussion of the renaming of Trinity College Dublin's Berkeley Library on *Newstalk*. Brian Ferguson, 'Scottish Ballet rejects Censorship Claims over Changes to *The Nutcracker*', *The Scotsman*, 6 December 2021, <https://www.scotsman.com/whats-on/arts-and-entertainment/scottish-ballet-rejects-censorship-claims-over-changes-to-the-nutcracker-3483847> accessed 30 March 2023. Michael Staines, 'Trinity College may Rename Library Named after Slave-Holding Philosopher', *Newstalk*, 28 November 2022, <https://www.newstalk.com/news/trinity-college-may-rename-library-named-after-slave-owning-philosopher-1406168>, accessed 10 April 2023.

Although they are written in a period of particular public interest in questions of colonial cultural legacy, the articles included draw upon a sustained tradition of reckoning with the Imperial past in many areas of Scottish cultural research. Since its advent, postcolonial theory has operated as a catalyst for research within Scottish Studies. Postcolonial theory has offered the concepts and vocabulary needed to acknowledge Scotland's participation in the expansion of British Imperial power, and to consider the relationship between Scotland and the British nation state. Graeme Macdonald notes 'a body of cross-disciplinary studies building on foundational texts of the 70s, 80s and 90s' that have enshrined the use of postcolonial frameworks in Scottish research, arguing in 2006 that 'the task now is surely less to quibble over the formal applicability of postcolonial studies to the Scottish context than to consider its most appropriate mode there'.<sup>5</sup>

As Macdonald's acknowledgement of the search for an 'appropriate mode' indicates, to engage with the colonial in the context of Scotland is to grapple with a complicated form of history. In the context of Ireland, Eoin Flannery notes the twin narratives of 'collusion and subjugation' that underwrite much of the discourse around Ireland and Empire.<sup>6</sup> Despite differences in national experience, a similar concern with ideas of 'collusion' and 'subjugation' has also been apparent in Scottish responses to the colonial. Scotland's relationship with Britain has been understood through the prism of 'internal colonialism' in studies such as those of Michael Hechter.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile a concern with understanding and documenting Scottish 'collusion' in Empire has shown an increasing momentum. As Andrew Bull explains in the opening of his article, recent work in Scottish history has particularly sought to explore 'Scottish participation' in Empire. This blossoming of Scottish colonial history, as Bull notes, creates opportunities for cultural studies fields to further explore their objects of study in relation to colonialism.

The papers in this issue take on this challenge from a wide range of fields and perspectives. The two opening articles focus on heritage institutions and their collections. Alison Clark offers a focused and detailed study of the Australian Aboriginal breastplates that feature in the collections of the National Museum of Scotland. She suggests that these under-researched objects, which have previously been considered in terms of their Scottishness, offer an 'opportunity to tell more nuanced stories about colonialism'. Carissa Chew's article draws upon her time as Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Intern at the National Library of Scotland and gives a practical and contextual account of the work needed to enshrine inclusive description work in Scottish collections.

This desire to light the path ahead is one that Chew's article shares with Andrew Bull's account of Scottish music and empire. Bull paints what he terms a 'suggestive picture' of the potential avenues of research that would more fully elucidate the relationship between the development of Scottish music and empire. Matthew Lee's article gives an account of a lesser known literary figure, Alison Carmichael, and her pro-slavery writing. He uses the exchange between Alison Carmichael and Maria Edgeworth to make a nuanced argument about the complicated relationship between Irish landlordism and abolitionism. L.M. Ratnapalan's article also centres an author of the nineteenth century's engagement with Empire. Ratnapalan considers Robert Louis Stevenson's extensive engagement with Samoa and the Pacific in the context of contemporary missionary culture. This sensitivity to the role of religion in colonial imagining is shared by Iain Watson's article which offers a revisionist reading of the Waipu migration and its memorialization in New Zealand's cultural self-fashioning.

This issue does not claim to offer a complete answer to the questions and problems that provoked the 2021 workshop. Nor does it imagine itself as a first step into an uncharted field, a moniker often inappropriately applied to this type of work, seemingly oblivious of the colonial connotations of its core metaphor. Instead the issue is a contribution that aims to continue and develop conversations. The key work for scholars of colonial legacies in Scottish Studies is arguably ensuring these areas of study do not slowly fall off the agenda as the events of 2020 stop making headlines, and media backlash to 'woke' culture places scholars and institutions under increasing pressure to stay silent. We must resist the boom and bust of the culture wars for the continued building of a mature and dynamic field where questions of race and empire are always within our sightline. Like the India Rug amongst the jumble of domestic objects

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5 Graeme MacDonald, 'Postcolonialism and Scottish Studies', *New Formations*, 59 (Autumn 2006), 117.

6 Eoin Flannery, 'Irish Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Theory', *Postcolonial Text*, 3 (2007), 1.

7 Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development 1536-1966* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975).

in the cover image for this issue, Anne Redpath's 'The India Rug (or Red Slippers)' (1942), the cultural legacies of Empire in Scotland are part of the fabric of Scottish society and life. The legacies this issue highlights are not problems that can be solved and forgotten but indelible realities to be better accommodated within our collective understanding of Scotland's historic and contemporary culture. Let's keep the conversation going.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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