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Coda: Scotland’s Urban Heritage and National Identity

Clarisse Godard Desmarest and Nora Plesske

1 This coda aims to reflect on the enduring importance of cities in Scotland’s sense of identity, and open up some contemporary issues relating to Scotland’s future as a nation. We also outline here perspectives for further research and study.

2 Cette conclusion vise à réfléchir à la place centrale des villes dans l’identité nationale de l’Écosse et à aborder certaines problématiques actuelles concernant l’avenir du pays en tant que nation. Nous esquissons également ici plusieurs perspectives d’étude.

3 “Culture,” in the words of Scotland’s former First Minister (2014-23), Nicola Sturgeon, “brings people to live, work and do business, and shapes [Scotland’s] reputation as a warm, welcoming, open, progressive nation.” (A Culture Strategy for Scotland 2022: 4)

4 The Scottish Government’s self-conscious articulation of its support for culture, creativity, and its diverse heritages is a reflection of the complex and continuing interactions between the nation’s culture, politics, and identity. In this context, the government’s aims for promoting Scotland’s cultural heritage and creative industries is highly informative, as the quest for greater openness to diverse cultures reflects a changing Scotland in the twenty-first century. Analysing how a country values its many cultures and heritages, then, gives an insight into its wider values. This special issue of the French scholarly journal Angles examines how cities and their cultural heritage have contributed, and continue to contribute, to debates about Scottishness and the shaping of Scottish national identity. In doing so, this publication forms part of a growing trend within Scottish studies that seeks to counter a strong tradition of identifying Scottishness with the rural far more than the urban (Adams 1978; Gordon and Dicks 1983; Smith, Lawson, and Hume 2001; Rodger 2014; Dennison 2018; Petrie 2018; Pittock 2018).

5 The Scottish Literary Renaissance, for example, was a notably anti-urban movement which considered Scotland’s identity to be most authentic when rooted outside of Scotland’s urban centres (McCrone, Morris, Kiely 1999: 61). This, in its turn, reflects the enduring mystique of a particular landscape tradition. Paul Sandby’s pictorial views of...
the mountains and lochs have influenced generations of travellers, and shaped how the
nation was imagined both within and beyond its borders. Moreover, feudal social
structures – connected to rights over the land – in Scotland persisted longer than in
England, becoming part of the nation's defining characteristics. In the later eighteenth
and nineteenth centuries, the influence of the German romantic nationalist Johann
Gottfried Herder disseminated a concept of the nation rooted in topography, language,
and local traditions. In many ways, the tartan and the kilt, and also the unspoiled
nature of the Highlands, have become central features of the identity of Scotland, in
both the Lowlands and the Highlands. Though increasingly central to the identity of
the nation, this sense of place relied on a largely reconstructed image as the forces of
industrialisation and the Highland Clearances deeply transformed the country. The
primitive nature of the Highlands offered a convenient narrative for Romantic writers,
who wished to shape the identity of Scotland in opposition to the deracistating effects
of the city. As hegemonic discourses, tartanry and Kailyardism helped integrate into a
newly urban-industrial culture the natural, rural aspect of Scottishness, and continue
to mobilise political debate to this day (McCrone, Morris, Kiely 1999; Brown 2010;
Blaikie 2013).

As Penny Fielding has commented “[t]he internal division of Scotland into
mountainous Highlands, fertile Lowlands, and newly thriving central cities was a very
broad and schematic simplification of the complex spatial and temporal relations of
Scottish localities” (Fielding 2011: 2). Yet even in the recent past an emphasis on rural
Scotland has been the main focus of heritage production and the tourist industry (Gold
and Gold 1995; McCrone, Morris, and Kiely 1999; Bhandari 2014; Kamm 2021). This is
very clear from representations of Scottishness in John Grierson's documentaries from
the beginning of the twentieth century (see Karl Magee's contribution), which
continued to influence the presentation of Scottish identity for decades afterwards.

The reality was, and remains, more complex. As Ann-Marie Akehurst shows in her
article, Scottish cities with their Physic Gardens were an integral part in the Grand
Tour of Europe’s principal medical centres during the early modern period. Focusing
on the contemporary period, Irmina Wawrzyczek’s paper emphasises that Scotland’s
urban areas with their architectural and cultural heritage are also well placed to
capitalise on the recent growth in wellness tourism, by connecting Scotland’s abundant
natural assets with those of its cities. The marketing strategy “Scotland is Now” was
launched in 2018 by key partners including VisitScotland and the Scottish Government;
it capitalises on Scotland’s cities with a view to making Scotland an attractive place to
visit in the face of a highly competitive global tourist industry. The V&A Museum in
Dundee features prominently on an early promotional poster of 2018, four years after
Dundee also became the UK’s first UNESCO City of Design. Even so, Kirsty Hassard, one
of the museum’s curators, remarks in her contribution that the design of this new
urban architectural landmark and modern-day icon of the nation is not only
reminiscent of the city’s industrial past but very intentionally integrates references to
Scotland’s natural environment.

Historically, there can be little doubt that it was through its towns and cities that
Scotland made its greatest contribution to European culture. In contrast to England,
where the national aspiration has traditionally been to own a house, preferably in the
countryside, the Scots have generally preferred living in urban tenements, thus sharing
their pattern of living with most of continental Europe rather than their immediate
neighbours to the south. Urbanisation in Scotland was also singular within the British Isles in its relative lateness and rapidity, with the relatively small traditional burghs becoming substantial settlements only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Scotland consequently moved from being an overwhelmingly rural country to one of the most urbanised societies in Europe. While 9% of the national population resided in towns in 1755, by the beginning of the nineteenth century this had risen to 20%, to 40% by 1861; and 60% by 1911 (MacDougall 2004: 27; Rodger 2014: 455-56). In 2021, 71% of Scotland’s population live in large urban and other urban areas.

The unprecedented changes that urbanisation triggered, and which were connected to the rise of industrialisation and migration from rural areas, led Scotland’s towns and cities to be confronted with similar pressures and challenges, as well as a common sense of new possibilities. This resulted in a stronger sense of shared urban identity in Scotland than in England, reflected in the activities of the Convention of Royal Burghs of Scotland. Since 2011, it has had a contemporary successor in the form of the Scottish Cities Alliance. This collaboration of Scotland’s eight cities, Aberdeen, Dundee, Dunfermline, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness, Perth, Stirling, and the Scottish Government now strives to strengthen Scotland’s economy by attracting capital investment to its urban centres (Scottish Cities Alliance).

Scotland’s urban centres played a central role in a rich tradition of classical learning – which has long been associated with the Scottish educational ethos – and, on its foundations, the subsequent spread of a highly sophisticated Enlightenment culture (Harris and McKean 2014). The development of cities with a dense population, a popular press, local transport networks, and the presence of national institutions offered unique conditions for the spread of Enlightened ideas in urban centres large and small (Edwards and Jenkins 2005; Pittock 2018; Godard Desmarest 2019). These included innovations in the urban form. The World Heritage site of Edinburgh Old and New Towns was specifically granted its designation for “the high quality of its architecture, [which] set standards for Scotland and beyond, and exerted a major influence on the development of urban architecture and town planning throughout Europe, in the 18th and 19th centuries.” (UNESCO 2008) As Edinburgh came to stand for civility, gentility, and improvement (Herman 2001), its “urbane culture” (Mumford quoted in Pleßke 2014: 79), alongside its urban form, was translocated globally with the migration of a large and entrepreneurial Scottish diaspora. In turn, these and other international links, especially through trade, conditioned the cosmopolitan character of the Scottish city itself (McLaren 2001; Devine 2012; Devine 2015; Mullen 2022). The way contemporary discourse in the city is shaped by debates over the legacy of Empire is the subject of Kirsten Carter McKee’s contribution.

The cosmopolitan culture of the city in some ways reached its apogee in the late nineteenth century, when imperial power and international trade shaped every aspect of the economy and society. Yet paradoxically it was this very situation that led some progressives to reassert local and regional urban identities. Patrick Geddes’s thinking was deeply shaped by his adherence to Comtean positivism, a universalising ‘religion of humanity’; yet in that very cause of creating a more humane world his approach to urban planning—epitomised in his work in the Lawnmarket (Edinburgh)—emphasised the necessity of connecting the citizens to their physical environment. This included the preservation of historic buildings to develop a city worthy of civic pride, locally and nationally. Likewise, the origins of the City Heritage Trust in Stirling (see Lindsay
Lennie and Rachael Purse’s contribution), show how the institutions which promote the heritage and care of the built environment of Scottish cities initially emerged from the social reformist movement at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century in order to offer sanitary housing for the working-classes.

The complex interactions between national identity, cosmopolitanism and the legacies of Empire are particularly topical at the present moment of increasing polarisation between liberal progressive and right-wing nationalist movements. Reflecting on the future of urban culture at a time of political fragmentation appears essential. In fact, there is an increasing salience of geography in relation to the growing political disagreement between cosmopolitan, highly educated, and socially progressive urbanites, and particularist and socially conservative residents of ‘hinterland’ areas. Significant political events such as the UK 2016 Brexit vote, and the 2018 Gilets Jaunes protests in France have exposed marked political differences between urban and rural places. In the US, also, studies have shown a geographical divide between major cities and rural counties, the former being Democratic strongholds and the latter the bedrock of the Republican party. The divergence between the political outlooks of urban and rural dwellers seems to be significantly more pronounced now than they were, perhaps, in the past. Whereas class belonging, access to wealth and opportunities, attitudes towards redistribution and the role of the state were the major factors that accounted for political differences, at least from the later nineteenth century onwards, social scientists now recognise the importance of place in shaping individuals’ political attitudes. The political fracture between metropolitan and rural (and semi-urban) dwellers is becoming increasingly salient in both Europe and the US, with attitudes to immigration and globalisation seeming to be particularly reflective of this geography. This topic is therefore highly relevant for policy makers as they seek to address political disenchantment and economic deprivation.

In this context, the ‘exceptional’ nature of contemporary Scottish nationalism, with its overtly cosmopolitan, urban quality, is of special interest. Scotland’s nationalist party, which has now been in power for fifteen years, frames an independentist agenda out of a socially liberal, multicultural, urban, and pro-European approach to national identity. The party’s ethos is consequently strikingly different from the more chauvinistic nationalisms that tend to predominate in England and elsewhere in Europe. Yet this is not obviously reflective of the geography of the SNP membership: while more than two thirds of Scots live in urban areas, either in cities or in their outskirts, less than one in three SNP members live in urban Scotland (Mitchell, Bennie, and Johns 2012: 67). Thus, the SNP’s membership is disproportionately from the rural and semi-rural areas. At the same time, it is also notably cosmopolitan: half of its members were either born outside Scotland or have spent a significant part of their lives outside the country. The complex pattern of social, cultural, and demographic factors that have shaped and continue to shape Scottish nationalism makes the relationship between cities, politics, and culture ripe for further exploration.

There is also a special relevance to these topics at a time when the campaign for a second independence referendum has once again thrown up critically important constitutional issues. On 23 November 2022, the UK Supreme Court gave its decision on a case brought by the Scottish government to establish whether the Scottish Parliament has the competence to enact an independence referendum Bill. In a unanimous judgement the Court ruled that if the UK Government and Parliament were
unwilling to modify those reserved powers under the Scotland Act 1998 (as they did before the 2014 independence referendum) then “the Scottish Parliament does not have the power to legislate for a referendum on Scottish independence” (UK Supreme Court 23 November 2022).

While this has undoubtedly placed a barrier in the constitutional path to independence, politically it has allowed the Scottish Government to claim that Westminster’s refusal to consent to a referendum “exposes as myth any notion of the UK as a voluntary partnership” (Nicola Sturgeon 2022). Since 1707, Scotland has maintained its own separate civic institutions, legal system, and cultural heritage – all factors which, the SNP claims, point to the Union as a continuing agreement between two distinct and fundamentally autonomous nations. Should its people no longer wish to continue the Union, the SNP has argued, then Scotland has the right to terminate this agreement. The continued unfolding of the constitutional, legal, and political challenges posed by the devolution settlement promises to be both important and fascinating as Scotland’s nationalist government seeks to promote the principles of self-determination and democracy and the unionist parties continue to make the case for the status quo. Cultural heritage will surely be used on both sides, by the SNP and by the UK Government. Indeed, the British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, when he recently announced he would seek to work constructively with the Scottish Government for the interests of the people of Scotland, cited the V&A Dundee as an example of fruitful partnership between the UK’s Government and Scotland (UK Parliament 2022). Bringing the prestige of the V&A to Dundee is part of a national political agenda of sharing the cultural riches concentrated at the centre with Scotland.

Dundee epitomizes the challenges posed by postindustrial urban decline. From the late 1970s onwards, urban planning projects have tended to focus on the conversion of historical buildings and the redevelopment of new urban spaces for leisure, business, housing, culture, and recreation (Tallon 2009). These reconstruction processes supply cities with their own heritage culture but do so instrumentally in the cause of economic regeneration (McCrone, Morris, and Kiely 1999: 18, 37). Scotland’s only metropolitan area, Glasgow, has thus seen a transition from heavy engineering to the first European City of Culture in the UK in 1990 and the UK’s first UNESCO City of Music in 2008. As cities today communicate their specific urban culture by marketing their own brand through slogans, festivals, fairs, or singular labels, this has led to an economisation of urban identity. In this new ‘symbolic economy’ of the post-industrial city, cultural symbols intertwine with entrepreneurial capital and the commodification of identity has come to dominate cultural memory (Pleßke 2014: 132-34). James Legard’s contribution, for example, assesses the National Trust for Scotland’s transformation in the 1970s of 6 Charlotte Square, Edinburgh, to serve both as the residence of the Moderator of the Kirk and as a museum of eighteenth-century urban life. Such phenomena point towards centrally important socio-cultural problems with the contemporary “heritage explosion” that have been vividly, if sometimes polemically, explored by authors such as David Lowenthal, Robert Hewison, and Raphael Samuel: sanitisation of history, commodification, spectacularisation as well as displacement, gentrification, and the creation of semi-public spaces.

The difficulty of negotiating contemporary tensions between cultural identity, urban heritage and economics are discussed in James Loxley and Tara Thompson’s interview about Edinburgh’s planned Literature House. To be located just off the Royal Mile in
Edinburgh’s Old Town, the Literature House is intended to represent the wealth of both the city’s and the nation’s literary story. But this is a story fraught with complex questions related to the character and values implicit in Scotland’s literary tradition, as Edinburgh’s built heritage testifies. Just across the old Nor’ Loch, today’s Princes Street Gardens, stands the Scott Monument (1848), a traditional Scottish heroic memorial to its greatest nineteenth-century novelist. A founding document of the formation of Scotland’s romantic-era national identity (Ehland 2017: 233-36), its implicit national agenda is continued by nearby Waverley Station, named after the author’s first historical novel. On the one hand, Waverley revolutionised the writing of past and present, but in doing so it created a fictive and tendentious image of the Scottish past that was to deeply shape its future. Although overt in their reference to a now problematic legacy, such memorialisation has continued, albeit in a different vein. The Canongate Wall of the new Scottish Parliament (2004), the Makar’s Court adjacent to the Writers’ Museum (1997), and the bronze busts of twelve twentieth- and twenty-first century Scottish writers in Edinburgh Business Park (2002) are all linked by the way they intervene in the (urban) landscape to define canons and shape national cultural identity (Mergenthal 2016: 15). Silvia Mergenthal’s present contribution not only uncovers the rich intertext of the city but underlines the role of ‘Tartan Noir’ in defining not only Scottish urban fiction but a specific vision of national character (Reitemeier and Sandrock 2015; Verrier 2016).

Conversely, postmodern writings on the Scottish city have engaged critically with issues of history, mythification, nationalism, and economisation. Irvine Welsh’s popular Edinburgh novels emphasise the social segregation embedded in the spatial structure of the historic city, while Alasdair Gray, whose literary imagining of the city is connected with his reimagining of the Scottish nation as a whole, is sceptical of Glasgow’s reinvention as cultural capital (Burgess 1998; Neubauer 1999; Motz 2000; Böhnke 2004; Neveling 2006). Moreover, Gray’s novel Lanark (1981) had already begun to problematise Scotland’s collective amnesia about its imperial history (Sassi 2012), long before the recent growth in awareness of the ways that interconnected transnational networks, both today and in the past, have created legacies of interrelated and often conflicting memories in different groups (Mullen 2009).

Now that such concerns have become more widespread, there is an increasing political imperative—especially in Scotland’s nationalist but progressive government—to find ways of putting inclusivity and diversity at the heart of identity. The Culture Strategy for Scotland as well as the strategies mapped out for Scotland’s cities fit into this new inclusive agenda, which promotes the view that Scotland’s culture and creativity are inspired by people and place, in all their variety, rather than by allegedly autochthonous traditions and common ethnic origins. The transition is exemplified by the perspectives on Stirling’s collective poem for the bid to become UK city of culture. A similarly inclusive approach to cultural heritage is the defining feature of the new interdisciplinary approach of heritage urbanism, which seeks to integrate town planning with ecological, cultural, social concerns in order to create active spaces that are rooted yet integrated into modern life (Ščitaroci, Mladen, Obad Ščitaroci, and Ana Mrda 2019). Contemporary architecture and urban planning are once again informed by a self-conscious respect for place and tradition, even (re)creating places of memory in order to produce communities and cater to the enthusiasm for locality (Harvey 1990: 82).
Scottish cities, then, continue to be a critical point of intersection between history, culture and politics. By opening up diverse new perspectives on the Scottish urban experience, both historical and contemporary, the essays collected here bring new insight into perennial debates over the relationship between urban heritage, cultural identity and the quest for political self-determination. As several of the papers in this issue suggest, when politicians lend their support to cultural life, there often seems to be an underlying assumption that cultural activities can have political effects: “In the quest for national (as opposed to state) identity, heritage is a vital source of legitimacy” (McCrone, Morris, and Kiely 1999: 7). The extent to which the Scottish Government uses and promotes Scotland’s heritage and culture epitomises this assumed interconnection between cultural distinctiveness and political autonomy (Kamm 2021: 207-14). Yet the examples discussed also suggest that there may be reason to doubt how real the effects of this assumed correlation actually are, by showing the sheer complexity and unpredictability of the relationships between culture and politics. In spite of the political dimension of so much cultural activity, there seems to be no direct equation between cultural self-expression and levels of support for independence from the UK. It could even be argued that the intentional contrast between the chauvinistic, right-wing ‘little Englander’ politics of Brexit Britain and the Scottish government’s support of inclusive, pluralistic forms of cultural expression should be considered a performance of a certain kind of politics, a reassuringly reified embodiment of an imagined political future whose concrete political expression remains elusive. In this complex, and still evolving situation, it will be of great interest to see how the dialogue between cosmopolitanism and particularism, past and future, and the urban and the rural, continues to evolve.

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NOTES

1. The Kailyard School (1880-1914) was a proposed literary movement which grouped Scottish authors who offered a sentimental and idyllic representation of rural life.
2. The Convention of the Royal Burghs of Scotland was a representative assembly which protected the privileges and promoted the interests of Scotland’s principal trading towns, the royal burghs, from the middle of the sixteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century.
3. There are six World Heritage sites in Scotland – two urban – for which the Scottish Government bears responsibility.

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Mots-clés: Écosse, identité nationale, villes, Lumières, patrimoine, tourisme, croissance économique, régénération urbaine, diaspora, UNESCO, patrimoine mondial
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