Emma Bond & Michael Morris (eds.), Scotland’s Transnational Heritage: Legacies of Empire and Slavery

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Emma Bond & Michael Morris (eds.), *Scotland’s Transnational Heritage: Legacies of Empire and Slavery*

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REFERENCES

This edited volume by Emma Bond and Michael Morris originates from the works of the “Transnational Scotland: Reconnecting Heritage Stories through Museum Object Collections” network that ran between 2019 and 2020. Funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh and set up by the two editors, this network gathered professionals from a group of Scottish museums who wished to start a conversation on the imperial legacy of Scotland. The avowed purpose was to explore the nation’s role within global networks of exchange and its effects (past and present) on peoples and spaces from a transnational perspective. Members of the project acknowledged the responsibility of heritage sites in (re)connecting people(s) with their past and the need for museums to reframe their collections within the context of empire and trade. Using a transnational lens enabled them to structure their research along different scales of activity (be it local, national and/or global). Building on this impetus, this volume aims at going further by including findings from members of the network as well as other inputs from a diverse range of contributors (individuals, collectives and institutions). Examining the transnational history of Scotland is admittedly a difficult task, and the editors readily acknowledge that offering a comprehensive analysis would be impossible. As such, Emma Bonds states that the volume is meant to provide a “snapshot” (p. 16) of some of the elements of this history, with the intent to point out the gaps and silences in existing narratives.

This 272-page volume includes a foreword by the artist Alberta Whittle, an introduction (chapter 1) by Emma Bond, three main sections divided into four chapters each, and an afterword by Amy Parent (Noxs Ts’aawit) and William Moore (Sim’oogit Duuk). The short but powerful foreword spells out the ambitious but necessary objective of the volume: to denounce the collective amnesia in Scotland surrounding colonialism and to offer counter narratives to the accepted discourses that have concealed racialised trauma. Taking inspiration from three of Whittle’s artworks that were presented at the Transparency exhibition in 2019 in Edinburgh — the pieces are called Grave Liners for the
Dispossessed, Exodus – Behind God’s Back and Hindsight is a Luxury I can’t Afford—, the three sections of the book are entitled: “Transnational Sites”, “Transnational Things” and “Transnational Time(s)”. While there is an internal logic within each section, Emma Bond encourages the readers to read the chapters in any order of their choice, as there are indeed multiple common themes (such as the colonial legacy of the textile industry in Dundee, the issue of slavery in Scottish museums...) and methodological and ideological debates (institutional responsibility, researcher positionality...) that run across the volume.

One of the strengths of this book is the conscious choice to make room for voices that do not all follow the same modes of expression or entirely fit into the academic mould. The guiding principle of the volume is that there exist many ways of sharing knowledge and engaging with the public, and that perspectives from a wide array of contributors from different backgrounds (academics, curators, artists,...) can be a fertile ground for new interpretations. Thus, some chapters are formal and academic in nature with a large body of references (such as chapters 3 and 8) while others adopt a looser and perhaps more creative format (for example, chapter 9 which is an edited transcript of a conversation between a curator and a researcher) or strive to present a more personal take on the issue at hand (chapters 4 and 5 are first-person accounts on the legacy of slavery while chapter 12 presents the findings of UncoverEd, a student-led research project, through multiple first-person inputs).

The first section, entitled “Transnational Sites” (pp. 21-86), dwells on the interconnected stories of people(s) with specific Scottish sites and places, and weaves narratives on multiple scales, from the global (chapters 2 and 3) to the more local/personal (chapters 4 and 5). In Chapter 2, Teleica Kirkland recounts how Tartan: Its Journey through the African Diaspora, a project curated in 2014 by her organisation, the Costume Institute of the African Diaspora, researched the legacies of tartan in Southern India, the Caribbean, Kenya and South Africa. An essential part of the uniforms of the soldiers of the Scottish Highland Regiments, who were employed by the East India Company, tartan slowly permeated the material culture of Southern India; and from the 19th century onwards, the traditional madras cloth (made in the Indian city of the same name, now known as Chennai) started to feature colourful plaid patterns reminiscent of the Scottish ones. This chapter examines how a visual remnant of Scotland’s colonial oppression became gradually questioned, adapted and reappropriated by peoples who had formerly been colonised by the British. Chapter 3, written by Sally Tuckett and Christopher A. Whatley, dwells on Dundee’s linen and jute industries and the city’s imperial networks and markets. In the 18th century, Dundee produced osnaburg, a coarse fabric made from flax, which was used to clothe enslaved people in the Caribbean. The city manufactures transitioned to jute by the mid-19th century (the fiber was produced in Bengal) and jute bagging became an essential component of British imperial exports. Chapter 4 is a personal account by the visual artist Jeni Reid of her creative process during a college photography project (Undiscovered Angus) that she begun after discovering the involvement of Angus, her hometown, in the transatlantic slave trade. In 2018, she started to create postcards featuring a beautiful local landscape and a short text addressing the place’s colonial legacy. Leaving them in various places for the public to find them, she wanted people to reconnect with the forgotten (or hidden?) history of this part of Scotland. This form of collective remembrance is grounded in the very local (Angus) but endeavours to reconnect with the global (imperial). Chapter 5 recounts the personal experiences of
Lisa Williams as a walking tour guide tour on Edinburgh’s Black history. Her work is educational and strives to combat ignorance with facts about enslaved people of African descent who were part of Scotland’s history but have been erased. While acknowledging that Scotland’s colonial engagement has started to be addressed in recent years, Williams regrets that historical knowledge and information remain largely inaccessible to the general public (either because of paywall journal articles or institutional archives not open to the public) and sees her tours as a means to reach a wider audience and raise public awareness.

5 The second section, “Transnational Things” (pp. 87-154), explores Scotland’s transnational history by examining the role of cultural institutions and heritage sites in creating narratives through the display of material objects. In Chapter 6, Bashabi Fraser stresses the need to investigate the origin and acquisition context of museum objects and explains her role in the V&A Dundee decolonisation project, which led to re-labelling several objects. She also examines the role of the East India Company in the British Empire, advocating for a postcolonial repositioning of Scotland’s role in it. In chapter 7, Sarah Laurenson explores the involvement of Scotland in the transatlantic slave trade by discussing the logic behind the display of a few objects at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, namely a contemporary tea set made for the Empire Café exhibition held during the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow and two antique silver cups and a silver brand. The cups were donated by a very wealthy Scottish slave-owner from Jamaica and the tea set acts as a signifier for the sugar trade that relied on enslaved labour. Laurenson highlights how the colonial past of Scotland is embedded in these seemingly unassuming objects, inviting the audience to look further than the material nature of objects and to apprehend their symbolical value as well. As one of the curators of the short-term project “The Matter of Slavery in Scotland” (2018-2019), she also investigated how public collections could tell the stories of Scotland’s involvement in slavery. In chapter 8, Joel Fagan examines the colonial legacy of the Paisley Museum and Art Gallery, a provincial museum which was founded in 1871 by Peter Coats, a wealthy cotton manufacturer with strong imperial interests. Considering that this “peripheral project” (the creation of the museum was an individual initiative) was nonetheless an imperial tool that glorified the British Empire, Fagan’s work – as part of the “Paisley Museum Re-Imagined” project – seeks to re-evaluate the nature of the museum’s collections. Chapter 9 is the transcript of a conversation between Rosie Spooner (a researcher) and Meredith More (curator at V&A Dundee) that took place in 2020 as a follow-up to a workshop paper given by Spooner on the new Scottish Design Galleries at the V&A Dundee the year before. The format and content of this particular chapter are quite a departure from the volume’s other contributions as Spooner does not shy away from giving harsh but fair criticism regarding the lack of acknowledgment of the colonial legacy of the objects displayed in the Galleries. She regrets that the curators failed to address the more global (imperial) context of creation of many of the objects, sensing a reluctance to do so. Broaching on many sensitive and complex issues such as the inability of museums to address their own complicity in imperialism, Spooner and More discuss the need for institutional humility, the influence of the museum voice through labels, and the importance of inclusivity and plurality of voices in order to successfully change the institution for the better.

6 The third section, “Transnational Time(s)” (pp. 155-217), starts with chapter 10, in which Mona Bozdog explains how the design framework of “storywalking” (immersive
and mixed-reality experiences and games) offers an innovative methodology to engage with heritage sites and the archive. She takes the example of the 2018 *Generation ZX(X)* project, which led to the organisation of a 4-part public event. This was intended as a collective and dynamic lived experience to revisit and reinterpret the history of Dundee in a specific location, from the whaling industry, the linen and jute manufactures to the more recent technological and digital industry, and it weaved together narrative threads of female labour, imperial history and exploitative industries. In chapter 11, Nicôle Meehan discusses the value, materiality, and authenticity of digital museum objects. Because they can be easily accessed, shared, tagged, or commented, they can help create transnational networks and then lead to fresh interpretations, adding new meanings to the objects. However, Meehan points out the inherent biases in the selection of the objects that are digitised and the information displayed (in the form of metadata rather than labels) that could become obstacles to potential new interpretations. Chapter 12 is a polyvocal contribution as it features a conversation between twelve graduate and postgraduate students – the team behind *UncoverED*, a student-led archival project set up to examine the colonial legacy of their own university (University of Edinburgh) and to locate in the archives the hidden stories of African, Asian and Caribbean students at Edinburgh. Their findings were published on a website and they held an exhibition during the summer of 2019. In this chapter, the students discuss various issues related to their research process, such as the need to contextualise race along class in decolonising projects, the reluctance of institutions to fully address their colonial legacy as well as their fear of seeing their project co-opted by their university as a PR stunt. The issue of biases in the archives appeared as one particular challenge to them — they realised that the archives are not representational enough and that they only provide a white perspective, prompting one of them to call them a “racist product”. Chapter 13, written by Michael Morris, suggests that the notion of collective amnesia that has often been invoked to talk about Scotland’s legacy of slavery is becoming quite inaccurate, as it describes a rather unconscious process, when it should be called a disavowal, being a very deliberate attempt at burying a problematic past. Morris then dwells on four artworks (a tapestry, a short film, an audiowalk and one sculpture) that engage their audience with a representation of Scotland’s past so as to analyse how they manage to either perpetuate skewed narratives or confront uncomfortable truths.

The volume ends with an afterword (pp. 218-234) by Amy Parent (Noxs Ts’aawit, her Nisga’a name) and William Moore (Sim’oogit Duuk, his Nisga’a name), evoking the debate surrounding the repatriation of a Ni’isjooth totem pole (that belongs to the Nisga’a people) to British Columbia in Canada. It was taken by colonial ethnographer Marius Barbeau in 1929 at the request of the Royal Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh (now the National Museum). Moore points out the absurdity of the situation, that the “burden of proof of ownership” (p. 229) lies with the Nisga’a People, as it is their responsibility to prove that their pole was stolen, and not the museum’s duty to show legitimate proof of ownership. An essential element of pride and self-governance for the Nisga’a people, the pole connects them with their past, but its display in a Scottish museum also acts as a reminder of the cultural institution’s as well as the nation’s colonial legacy. (This volume was published before the pole was returned to the Nisga’a Nation in September 2023).

This volume is a rich and complex piece of work, which offers very different perspectives and formats as well as a myriad of thought-provoking arguments. This
diversity, which takes the reader by surprise, is both a strength and a weakness in the volume. While some chapters are self-reflective contributions and sometimes verge on the personal and emotional, others are more academic in nature; and because the volume’s goal is to reach readers from various backgrounds, including members of the public (p. 16), some may perhaps appear too academic and classic in form. When it comes to methodology and positionality, a chasm also seems to gradually emerge between the different authors, as some of them deplore how the framework of academic publishing and knowledge-sharing can be constraining and limiting, not reaching a wider audience and perpetuating a Eurocentric vision while using Western methodology informed by exclusive/excluding codes. Yet, with the avowed purpose of addressing some of the narratives of Scotland’s colonial heritage, this volume actually goes beyond its initial goal in encouraging the reader to reflect on a range of interconnected issues such as research methodology, researcher positionality, institutional responsibility, and the limits of diversity and inclusivity policies. To conclude, Scotland’s Transnational Heritage: Legacies of Empire and Slavery is a courageous contribution to existing scholarship in that it does not shy away from addressing uncomfortable facts, while questioning research methods and promoting quite a radical and welcome change in how to confront problematic legacies.

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Keywords: Scotland, transnational perspective, decolonisation, memorialisation process, colonial heritage, British empire, slavery, museum collections, East India Company

Mots-clés: Écosse, perspective transnationale, décolonisation, mémorialisation, héritage colonial, empire britannique, esclavage, collections muséales, Compagnie des Indes Orientales

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