

# Roots of Nationhood

The Archaeology and History of Scotland

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ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD

Summertown Pavilion

18-24 Middle Way

Summertown

Oxford OX2 7LG

[www.archaeopress.com](http://www.archaeopress.com)

ISBN 978-1-78491-982-5

ISBN 978-1-78491-983-2 (e-Pdf)

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Printed in England by Oxuniprint, Oxford

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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
Louisa Campbell and Dene Wright	
Contributor Affiliations .....	6
<b>Reflections on the presentation of Scottish archaeology in British prehistories since Gordon Childe’s <i>Prehistoric Communities</i> (1940)</b> .....	9
Ian Ralston	
<b>Setting the Scene: aspects of the Earliest Prehistory of Northern Britain</b> .....	27
Dene Wright	
<b>Scotland’s Neolithic / Neolithic Scotland</b> .....	35
Kenneth Brophy	
<b>Regional and local identities in the later Neolithic of Scotland as reflected in the ceramic record</b> .....	55
Ann MacSween	
<b>Culture contact and the maintenance of cultural identity in Roman Scotland: A theoretical approach</b> .....	75
Louisa Campbell	
<b>The origins of ‘Scotland’</b> .....	93
Dauvit Broun	
<b>Merchants and craftsmen: a survey of the evidence for a Scandinavian presence in eastern Scotland in the eleventh to fourteenth centuries</b> .....	103
Elizabeth Pierce	
<b>Local and foreign clergy: the provision of clergy in the late mediaeval diocese of Sodor</b> .....	123
Sarah Thomas	
<b>Pictish, Celtic, Scottish: The Longing for Belonging</b> .....	139
Steven Timoney	
<b>‘The Different Fruits of all the World’ - The Early Colonial Connections of Glasgow (c.1660-1740)</b> .....	155
Stuart Nisbet	
<b>Celebrating the end of Scottish history? National identity and the Scottish Historical Exhibition, Glasgow 1911</b> .....	179
Neil G.W. Curtis	
<b>Scotland Then for Scotland Now: Scottish political party uses of history, image and myth</b> .....	195
Murray Stewart Leith	



# Introduction

Louisa Campbell and Dene Wright

As Scotland celebrated the Homecoming in 2009, we saw many claims made on Scotland's archaeology and history in support of discourses of national identity and distinctiveness. The failed referendum on independence on 18 September 2014, coinciding with another Homecoming, Year of Creative Scotland and Year of Natural Scotland combined with the hosting of major international sporting events, including the 20th Commonwealth Games, 40th Ryder Cup, and the Scottish Government's designation of 2017 as the Year of History, Heritage and Archaeology looked set to continue this trend. As did the deluge of political dialogue either supporting the SNP Government's drive for an independent Scotland by promoting a sense of Scottish national identity on the one hand, and unionist attempts to dampen a perceived swell of support for separatism on the other.

Such sentiments were roundly expected to cease at 7.00am on the morning of 19 September when the Prime Minister, David Cameron, delivered a now infamous speech outside 10 Downing Street after it became clear the 'Better Together' campaign had maintained the political status quo by a majority of 55%-45%. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the speech was not well received by pro-independence supporters in Scotland, many of whom immediately responded by formally joining the ranks of SNP membership and continue to confound most political commentators by successfully maintaining an independence movement that reinvigorated a latent grassroots-led campaign that appears unlikely to abate any time soon. Indeed, the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, has recently made it clear that a second independence referendum was very much 'on the table' in order to protect Scotland's position within the European Union (EU) following an historic result on the so-called 'Brexit' referendum on 23 June 2016 in which the UK electorate voted by a small margin (52%-48%) to exit the EU. The political, economic and cultural ramifications of that result have yet to be fully revealed, but the overall result was very much at odds with the Scottish electorate who returned a resounding vote to remain in the EU (62%-38%), thus potentially sparking the break-up of both historic unions and signalling a growing divergence in the political leanings, sense of identity and nationhood between the Scottish electorate and other parts of the United Kingdom.

The political situation in the UK and other European nations is in a state of flux to the extent it is impossible here to provide a running commentary of the current state of government that appears to alter daily, the ramifications of which have yet to be felt. Indeed, the very concept of 'nationalism' is being manipulated by all sides with the governing class of larger constituent parts driving it as a vehicle to promote stability, strength and cohesive united identities while simultaneously deriding the 'nationalism' as identity of smaller constituent nations as a dirty word that spreads insularity, negativity and division.

Set against this political background, during the intervening years since the Scottish Archaeological Forum (SAF) first broached the subject of *Nationalism and Archaeology* (Atkinson *et al.* 1996) the debate has moved on apace, particularly within the context of a pro-independence party dominating the current political landscape. As discussed in Curtis' contribution to this volume, this situation is not unprecedented as there was significant movement in support of Scottish independence in 1911 which was interrupted by the First World War. It also finds a wider resonance outwith the UK. For example, regional elections in Catalan where the *Convergència i Unió* party, which advocates independence from Spain, gained power (though not the majority) to rule the autonomous Catalan government in 2012, culminating in a non-binding vote on Catalonian self-determination on 9 November 2014 and another on 1 October 2017 instigating a constitutional backlash from the Spanish Government through the Constitutional Court of Spain and the arrest of prominent leaders of the pro-independence movement. Thus, political, social and cultural conditions are ripe for an innovative and cross-disciplinary exploration of archaeology and history within this political milieu.

In a break away from the traditional mono-disciplinary scope of academic enquiry, this volume sets forth a challenge for practitioners within and outwith archaeology to develop multi-disciplinary approaches in the study of identity in general and aspects in the formation of national identity in particular. The entanglement of identity and nationhood is explored from the prehistory of northern Britain; the establishment of a proto-Scottish identity in the early Middle Ages; facets of Scottish identity at home and in the wider diaspora of Empire; and the more recent heralding of Scottish identity as a multi-ethnic construction. Set against the background of a groundswell change in the Scottish political landscape and the unprecedented, and largely unexpected, energised and proactive politicisation of the Scottish electorate in the lead up to and aftermath of the 2014 Independence Referendum, the volume is a timely and relevant contribution to discussions of national identities. By bringing together specialists covering a wide array of time periods and subject areas, we go beyond problematising the concept of identity. This is achieved by exploring the links of nationhood and Scottish identity in the early 20th and 21st Centuries in the ongoing quest for independence demonstrating the political manipulation of history, imagery and mythology entangled in political propaganda (Rowlands 1994; Meskell 2002).

The contributors to the volume seek to transcend previous approaches to this subject (e.g. Atkinson *et al.* 1996) and transform discourse from the search for national identities to the dynamic processes of identity formation, negotiation and adaptation by exploring multi-disciplinary approaches to the study of identity. Some contributors explore material culture in its archaeological, historical and political contexts and its role in the formulation of identity. Collectively, the contributions highlight new ideas emerging from ongoing multi-disciplinary research on aspects of identity and nationhood and deliver a comparative approach, applying studies of identity to chronologically, materially and thematically disparate case studies.

Despite a growing literature on the subject of identity (e.g. Meskell and Preucel 2004; Schwartz et al 2011; Diaz-Andreu and Champion 2014, Pierce et al 2016), much of the research dealing with nationalism is cast within temporal and cultural epochs and generally restricted to academics working in the same discipline. This volume broadens academic enquiry by considering difference (Insoll 2007), crossing culturally constructed divisions of time and considering the fluidity and multifarious character of identities as well as the means by which they were made to appear fixed (Gardner 2011).

### **Themes and agendas**

Since the prime function of SAF is to arrange events to promote the study of archaeology in Scotland, the editors took the opportunity to organise a very well attended symposium with the remit of sparking interdisciplinary academic discourse on the topic of archaeology, history, identity, politics and nationalism. We posed several questions and invited established academics to contribute a series of papers investigating how the issue of nationalism and identity are currently being explored. Topics put forward for discussion included: how have accounts of Scotland's past informed the ongoing political debate over devolution and independence? Does archaeology reveal the roots of nationhood or are other themes of diversity, discontinuity and far-flung connections and allegiances just as compelling? These developed into distinctive themes, explained below, which attracted the participation of eminent scholars as session chairs, namely Professors Julian Thomas from the University of Manchester, Siân Jones from the University of Stirling, Simon James, University of Leicester and Dauvit Broun, University of Glasgow.

The introductory paper is from Professor Ian Ralston, Abercromby Chair of Prehistoric Archaeology and Head of the School of History, Classics and Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh. Professor Ralston is an internationally renowned scholar who firmly sets the scene for an exciting, temporally and geographically diverse collection of papers, each of which takes a unique and innovative approach to the study of nationhood and identity in the past and present, including a codicil outlining developments since the 2014 Referendum on Scottish Independence. Each section thereafter explores these issues in a thematic manner drawing out the distinctive stands covered by each author's particular area of expertise. Wright sets the scene by exploring the earliest prehistory of northern Britain to trace the 'incipient seed' that distinguishes the inhabitants of this region from its closest neighbours as manifest in the archaeological record. As archaeologists we have to 'presence the past' to give meaning to the past. Political science provides insight into how politicians 'future the past' to claim authority and justify political agendas. Archaeology is entangled with and not immune from the political domain and as such must operate in and engage with changing political ideologies. Therefore, the concluding paper by Dr. Murray Stewart Leith, a leading specialist in the field of political science, provides a contemporary perspective to the topics covered in the volume.

The unprecedented recent success of a Scottish National Party elected into Government across the last 3 Scottish elections and installation of 56 Nationalist MPs out of 59 seats representing Scotland at Westminster cannot be dismissed as a political blip, despite a subsequent reduction in a snap election in 2017. But rather, it speaks to a groundswell movement, a seismic shifting of long-standing political affiliations by a Scottish electorate now awakened to the potential for independence within reach in a way that has not been conceivable since the passing of the Act of Union in 1707. As Leith demonstrates, the Scottish electorate has long been acknowledged as more politically engaged and mature than other constituent parts of the United Kingdom. The roots of this engagement are long-standing and first formally recorded through the Declaration of Arbroath, arguably the earliest document to express the idea of the nation state, which epitomises the Scottish tradition of drawing on history and myth to nurture a sense of national identity. Thus, Scotland serves as an exemplary model to investigate the roots of nationhood and this volume is published at a unique and opportune moment against a political milieu where Scottish history, heritage and archaeology is being actively appropriated to varying degrees by a political class across party divides at the level of local, national and UK government seeking to 'future the past'.

Despite the ambitious scale of these contributions, the book is structured by the reoccurrence of specific themes linking the various papers. Each represents a process by which the concepts of nationhood and/or identities are created, mediated or transformed across time and space, including *Before Scotland: Cores, Peripheries and the Construction of Identities of Northern Britain*; *Origins of Alba and Scotland*; and *Forging Scotland's Identities at Home and Abroad*.

Within these broad themes several emergent recurring commonalities can be highlighted. These include, but are not restricted to:

**Place:** going beyond archaeologies of landscape, place is explored as an integral component of the human experience. Whether we are discussing 'home' or 'abroad' (Nisbet) or 'core' and 'periphery' (Brophy, Campbell and Pierce), people establish roots and linkages to place (Broun) and these connections can be inclusive or exclusive, depending on the perspective of the observer.

**Material culture:** moving beyond visual observations, the material culture people use can evoke a range of social responses, all of which are culturally conditioned and situationally relevant (Knapp and van Dommelen 2010; Tilley 2011). We recognise that objects absorb meanings through use and they are central to the construction, reinforcement and transformation of identities (Campbell, MacSween and Wright).

**Ideologies:** a synthesis of the prehistory of northern Britain confirms that identity is forged as regionalities having moved away from the unsustainable concepts of dominant and enduring 'metropolitan' cores (Ralston). Regionalities are also evident in the Late Medieval period. For example, the significance of the First Estate in the almost

exclusive patronage and appointment of Scots as clergy to maintain a sense of Gaeldom distinguishable from, although integral to, the wider Scottish identity (Thomas).

**Engaging with Cultural Heritage:** ranging from a qualitative study into the public presentation of archaeological sites (Timoney), to the presentation of artefacts at the Glasgow Exhibition of 1911 set within an underlying political discourse for Union (Curtis), i.e. British identity, to the appropriation of cultural heritage to advance the political agenda for an independent Scotland, i.e. Scottish identity (Leith).

### **Acknowledgements**

The editors would like to express sincere thanks to Historic Environment Scotland and the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland for their support in exploring these concepts. We also extend our sincere thanks to Professors Siân Jones (University of Stirling), Dauvit Broun (University of Glasgow), Simon James (University of Leicester), and Julian Thomas (University of Manchester) for their contributions in chairing the workshop sessions that shaped the themes explored herein.

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