

# “To no one Nation has been given the monopoly of genius”<sup>1</sup>

## Multiple Nationalisms at the National Museum of Scotland, a Director’s View

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In 1857, George Wilson, Regius Professor of Science and Technology at the University of Edinburgh, laid out a vision for a new museum under his directorship, the Industrial Museum (today the National Museum) of Scotland. Though formed in the context of Britain’s imperial ambitions, the institution Wilson envisaged also seemed to speak against them, in a double bind that perhaps expresses Scotland’s unique place in the complex history of colonialism and culture:

The Museum which I have been commending to you, is not a Museum of Scottish history, but a Museum of the world in relation to Scotland. It cannot be less than this [...]. There is not a single invention or discovery [...] which we as a people can claim more than the lion’s share; and seeing that in our veins runs the mingled blood of I know not how many unlike races, it would be very strange if it were otherwise. To no one nation has been given the monopoly of genius, constructive skill or practical sagacity.<sup>2</sup>

Wilson’s words continue to echo with some contemporary relevance in the spectacular building he helped to install on Edinburgh’s Chambers Street. The foundation stone of its first wing was laid by the prince consort Albert in 1861, and the construction project was completed in 1866. Though Wilson held his post from 1855 to 1859 and sadly never saw it open, he established a lasting philosophical rationale for the institution. Even today, we continue to reference his ideas as we come to terms with the history and future of the National Museum of Scotland: we must both acknowledge the role of the museum in the international project of the British Empire and situate its collection and approach to interpretation within Scotland’s own contested national history. Overlaying these national

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2 Lidchi 2016, ix.

debates are the more generic questions encountered by any museum in which the various emphases on the research, educational, commercial, and leisure functions of the organization, as well as its disciplinary biases, influence its purpose at different times and in different ways. It is a complicated negotiation, and in this short essay I will attempt to outline the museological threads and directorial positions that have brought us to our multifaceted present, using as an anchor the voices of those who have influenced the museum's development.

Most histories of our organization commence with the foundation of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1780. As essential components of the public national museum that was emerging as a collective desideratum, at its inaugural meeting Lord Buchan argued for the importance of a secure physical site, patronage, and a degree of professional and scholarly competence:

I suspect that [earlier Societies] [...] instituted for the study and collection of Antiquities and the objects of Natural History failed on account of their having no house in property, nor any private interests to care for their books, museum and other necessary appurtenances and that having met in taverns, their meetings degenerated into convivial and anomalous conversations. All these hazards I mean with your approbation to guard against and ever to exclude.<sup>3</sup>

Buchan's promise is characteristic of that shift from an amateur, often aristocratic dilettantism – still in itself scholarly and serious – towards a scientific and methodological rigour, newly established in the public realm of universities, scholarly societies, and public institutions, that informed the culture of the so-called Scottish Enlightenment. It is also a practical plea for strong management of Scotland's material and intellectual heritage during a moment when the idea of a United Kingdom – in which a post-Jacobite Scotland played a crucial part – was giving rise to a concept of 'Britishness' that would prove essential to the formation of a global empire. The Society of Antiquaries of Scotland did indeed find a home (or successive homes) and a system for presenting and interpreting Scotland's national artefacts, but the path was marked by several starts and stops and an underlying sense of uncertainty. Its first location, established in 1781, was in Edinburgh's Cowgate. In 1826, the society moved its holdings to the Royal Institution (today the Royal Scottish Academy) at the foot of the Mound, and in 1851 it transferred ownership to the British state, in effect confirming the legal status of these holdings as 'national'. But it was not until 1891 that the collection found a purpose-built home in the Findlay building, on Queen Street (now the site of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, with which it once shared the premises). [▸ Roberts] Though it had already, in 1858, taken on the formal title 'National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland', it was only at the turn of the twentieth century, in 1902, that the society's president Sir Arthur Mitchell felt confident enough to state a vision for the collection and its uses that was truly nationalist in spirit:

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3 Bell 1981, 31.

I have pressed the importance of regarding the Museum as National. It is so in the sense of being the property of the Nation. This makes its preservation secure. But it is National in another sense. It is very largely a collection of objects illustrating our Nation's pre-history. Indeed, if taken with local collections, it supplies nearly all the material for this study which we possess [...]. There are persons perhaps to whom Scotland is nothing but 'that garret of the world – that knuckle of England', but to us Scotland is the special field of our studies, as well as the land we love; and it seems to me that the very reason of our existence as a Society is to make additions to the knowledge of its unwritten history.<sup>4</sup>

Half a century earlier, in April 1854, Lyon Playfair, Secretary of State for Science in the Department of Science and Art, Westminster, London, had effectively launched a very different and practical approach to nation-building through museums in supporting the Treasury minute endorsing the establishment of the Industrial Museum of Scotland. The minute stated emphatically, and with undisguised ambition, that "Competition in Industry is competition in intellect, and the Nation which most quickly promotes the intellectual development of its artisans must by inevitable law of nature advance".<sup>5</sup> And though it is George Wilson's idea of an equitable museum of the world that we remember most fondly today, other statements he made are rather more representative of imperial attitudes, including notions of evolutionary competitiveness. They fit squarely with the transactional and patriotic approach enshrined at the South Kensington Museum (today the Victoria and Albert Museum) in London, an approach that was pedagogic in seeking to address poor British skills, that harnessed the cultures and materials of Britain's colonial dominions to the advantage of Britain's manufacturers, and that promoted the superiority of British 'civilization' over not only 'subordinate' nations but also those, like the German Reich and the United States of America, whose scientific prowess, and industrial and military heft, represented a threat. Wilson predicted that the new museum would "largely help us to hold recovered India, and to diminish the recurrence of American panics, if we can imbue the whole community with such instruction as industrial museums are pre-eminently fitted to afford".<sup>6</sup>

In 1858, he was explicit in promoting an imperial mission when he stated that the Industrial Museum of Scotland should be "a museum of the industry of the world in relation to Scotland [...] and as this it will increase our civilization and add to our power to civilize the rest of the world". Wilson's aim would be achieved via three interrelated functions, namely, "a systematic collection of industrial raw materials, manufactured products, tools and machinery; a laboratory and workshop; [and] a library".<sup>7</sup> Here was the modern museum: a site for the storage, dissemination, and creation of knowledge in the service of 'progress'.

Wilson's successor, Thomas Archer, appointed by Henry Cole at the South Kensington Museum in 1860, refined that sense of purpose with a focus on the need to inspire

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4 Cheape 2009, 13.

5 Swinney 2006, 130.

6 Ibid., 131.

7 Ibid., 131.

through observation and craft. In 1861, he recommended the use of “specimens of superior design and workmanship in various branches of manufacturing art which may serve to stimulate others engaged in similar workmanship”.<sup>8</sup> This marked a shift towards the application of art and design for the improvement of industry, as reflected both in the museum’s redesignation in 1864 as the Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art and in a tightening of its direct governance by the Department of Science and Art. By replacing ‘Scotland’ with ‘Edinburgh’, the museum momentarily positioned itself as a northern British institution. Similarly, its new building, designed by the British government architects Frances Fowke and Robert Matheson, adopted the specifications and characteristics of the South Kensington Museum: modern materials, a cast-iron structure, and plate glass, as well as gas lighting for the late-night openings to accommodate the working man and woman from local shops, trades, and factories after their clocking-off time.

The transition may have seemed at first glance as smooth and polished as the building’s surfaces, but tensions simmered concerning differing interpretations of the collection’s uses. Archer’s belief in the transformative possibilities of art and design, and the role of the patterns and materials in nature to inspire these, was challenged by Charles Wyville Thomson, Keeper of Natural History and Professor of Natural Sciences, who cleaved to traditional Enlightenment principles in his belief that the museum’s holdings were there to further pure scientific research and to unlock new academic knowledge of a higher order. In the end the applied educational purposes advocated by Archer won out, and by 1900 this formal didactic function was enshrined in the new strategy of the institution – what four years later would be renamed the Royal Scottish Museum, serving once again both imperial and national aims. Administered by the Scottish Education Department in London under the leadership first of Frances Grant Ogilvie and then James J. Dobbie, the museum was conceived less as a laboratory in the service of great thinkers than as a grand and inclusive classroom in which to cultivate a better-informed citizenry. The *Scotsman* reported on

the appropriation of one gallery to the exhibition of appliances illustrative of science teaching in schools, but too costly to be found in school collections; the extension of the collection by type and diagrammatic models, with full descriptive labels; an additional education section in the reference library in the museum; [and] Encouragement to science and art classes to take advantage of the facilities for instruction.<sup>9</sup>

The reorganized installations ushered in the rationalizing, unifying principles of twentieth-century social and educational reform and produced an experience that would become familiar to generations of museum visitors through to today. This included working models; brightly illustrated didactic panels; and naturalistically painted dioramas featuring taxidermy and mounted skeletons of prehistoric ‘monsters’. So far as its ‘national’ role was concerned, the Royal Scottish Museum’s perspective was perhaps now a more insular one, wherein Scotland’s industrial modernization and status as a burgeoning welfare state dictated a focus on the nation’s needs rather than those either of the

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8 *Ibid.*, 132.

9 *Ibid.*, 133–4.

world or of an empire that was simultaneously shrinking and transforming into a commonwealth. Certainly, in the latter half of the century the museum's development prioritized the successive incorporation of collections relating to the country's armed forces, home-produced goods (particularly textiles and crafts), and rural traditions. In 1970, it took over the administration of the Scottish United Services Museum (today the National War Museum, situated in Edinburgh Castle), along with the National Museum of Flight, founded in 1975 on a decommissioned World War Two airfield in East Lothian. These additions were complemented by the 1982 establishment of the Museum of Costume and the Scottish Agricultural Museum, first on a site near Edinburgh Airport and then, from 2001, at a rural site near East Kilbride, where it is currently called the National Museum of Rural Life.

The ever-expanding remit of the Royal Scottish Museum and the concurrent realization that the Queen Street premises of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland had outlived their purpose necessitated the establishment of the 'National Museums Scotland' by an act of parliament in 1985, which set in motion a more material reconsideration of the future of the institution with which this essay commenced, as well as a review of Scotland's ancient history and heritage. Now joined with its scientific, technological, and artistic counterparts under the same board of trustees and director (Robert Anderson from the Science Museum in London), the collection of the former National Museum of Antiquities demanded a setting adjacent to the Royal Scottish Museum site and better suited to the museological, architectural, and political fashions of the late twentieth century.

Following complex planning, patronage, logistical, curatorial, and philosophical deliberations – which from 1992 were led by the new director Mark Jones, formerly Keeper of the Department of Coins and Medals at the British Museum – Benson + Forsyth's iconic building to house Scotland's historic heritage came into physical being on 30 April 1993, when Ian Lang, Secretary of State for Scotland, put spade into soil at the western end of the Chambers Street site. It was opened by Queen Elizabeth II (r. 1952–2022) on St Andrew's Day 1998: a millennial moment that coincided with Scotland's new self-image as political devolution from the Westminster government and the founding of a Scottish parliament also gathered pace. The building itself, and the way its collections were corralled to tell Scotland's story, produced a timely sense of the museum as 'narrative architecture', embodying the nation's character and soul. Its dramatic meaning and associations were well described by the architectural critic John Allan:

'Scotland in miniature' was, as I recall, the tourist tag used to describe the representative scenic completeness of Arran [...]. 'Scotland in essence' might serve as the equivalent sobriquet to be applied to Benson + Forsyth's new Museum of Scotland to suggest the range and authenticity of this educational and architectural experience. For even a day spent exploring this enthralling building and its contents will vouchsafe more insights and understanding of Scotland's story than might be gained in weeks of well-intentioned sightseeing [...]. The museum is one of the defining buildings of our age. This ancient institution, once needed to protect totemic objects and valuable relics from pillage or dispersal and later overlaid by ideals of education, entertainment and cultural ambition, has come to epitomise modern society's ambivalence about its

past, a focus for debate over the role and meaning of ‘heritage’ [...]. [Its] role in augmenting Scotland’s self-knowledge and emergent sense of national identity is clearly paramount – if also unquantifiable.<sup>10</sup>

Mark Jones moved on to become director of the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2001, and his successor, Gordon Rintoul (formerly Chief Executive of Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust and a graduate of the University of Edinburgh, in Physics), turned once more to the original Chambers Street museum of Fowke and Matheson. In an £80 million transformation of its much altered and outdated interiors, his ‘Royal Museum Project’, driven by a Wilsonian strategic vision of “Inspiring People, connecting Scotland to the world and the world to Scotland”,<sup>11</sup> revealed the soaring Victorian framework of the building, bathed in light, providing new interactive, interconnected, and visitor-centred spaces for the display of international collections relating to the natural world, world cultures, decorative art, design and fashion, and science and technology. Complementing all of this, and essential in a logistical sense to subsequent developments, the museum’s storage facilities at Granton in north Edinburgh were renamed the National Museums Collection Centre Scotland in 2006, and a continuing programme of investment in environmental standards and research infrastructure have ensured widened access to and care for the museum’s extensive and diverse study collections.

The Royal Museum Project succeeded in broadening the National Museum of Scotland’s status as a ‘world museum’, doubling the number of visitors from 1,420,000 in 2007 to 2,410,000 in 2016, many of them international. In some ways, it represents in microcosm a historical moment – not dissimilar from that which characterized the 2012 London Olympics – of global connection, post-disciplinary freedom, and technological and social optimism, since called into question by continuing debates around Scottish political independence, Brexit, the financial and climate crisis, the so-called culture wars, and the pandemic.

At the time of writing, in 2022, we remain optimistic for our museums. Gordon stepped down, and I took on the directorship as COVID-19 closed our doors to the public in spring 2020. The pause has allowed us to regroup and refocus. We have a new strategy whose vision retains the core duty of a museum to inspire but also resurrects that earlier mid-nineteenth-century liberal view that a national museum should aim to ‘address the challenges of our age’ through its collections and programmes. What makes us national now is a shared sense that our collections, programmes, sites, and people have the power to reveal new things about ourselves through our shared heritage – local and international – providing an important civic space where everyone, wherever they were born, can consider the world as it has been, as it is, and crucially, as we would wish it to be; and all from our base in Scotland. Museums, however, are also like that other local monument to optimism, the Forth Bridge: they require constant attention. Our Scotland galleries are now a quarter of a century old, and the national stories Benson + Forsyth and the curators of the last generation told require rethinking for new audiences and a new century. In the legacy we inherit from Lord Buchan onwards, we have much

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10 Allan 1999, 120.

11 Lidchi 2016, ix.

raw material and history to draw on and a sense that our national role and context will continue to evolve in interesting ways.

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