



From Royal to National: The Changing Face of the National Museum of Scotland

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Abstract

Since devolution in 1997 Scotland has been a nation increasingly conscious of its national brand. The Scottish government has undertaken several international partnerships in the fields of culture, education and commerce, and through its rhetoric and policy the government appears to be encouraging a global perception of Scotland as a nation in the throes of a 'New Enlightenment.' The National Museum of Scotland (and former Royal Museum) has benefited from this alleged cultural renaissance, having reopened July 2011 following its second renovation in less than 15 years. Comprised of two separate buildings, the former Royal Museum (1854) and the Museum of Scotland (1998), the National Museum of Scotland's most recent construction program restored and modernised the Royal Museum structure, which had originally been built as an Industrial Museum before receiving Royal status in 1904.

Given the fact that the Royal Museum's origins were in part a testament to Scotland's position in the United Kingdom and British Empire, the current Museum's new form communicates much about the evolution of Scotland's national identity and its relationship with the world. Scotland's evolution from 19th century industrial powerhouse of the British Empire to the increasingly independent 'Enlightened' nation of today has been echoed by the ever-changing form of its national Museum. This paper will explore the evolution of the National Museum of Scotland from its origins as an Industrial Museum to its modern conception and will ultimately seek to show that the National Museum of Scotland fulfils an alternate role as an historic artefact in and of itself, as much a victim of Scotland's evolving identity as the historic relics it houses.

Introduction

Since devolution in 1997 Scotland has been a nation increasingly conscious of its national identity and the ability of cultural institutions to foster it. From the Year of Homecoming in 2009 to the opening of sites such as the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum (2011) and the Culloden Battlefield Visitor Centre (2007), Scotland has utilized its long history and widespread diaspora to stimulate its tourism and business sectors and promote its cultural identity on a national and global scale. The Scottish government has undertaken several international partnerships in the fields of culture, education and commerce, and through its rhetoric and policy the government appears to be encouraging a global perception of Scotland as a nation in the throes of a ‘New Enlightenment’ (Fassey & McIntosh, 2008).

The National Museum of Scotland (formerly the Royal Museum) has benefited from this cultural renaissance (Cooke & McLean, 1999: 362), having reopened in July 2011 following its second renovation in less than 15 years. The Museum complex is located on Chambers Street in Edinburgh, in an area also populated by several prominent University of Edinburgh buildings. The Museum is comprised of two distinct buildings: the first, commonly known as the Royal Museum (1854), is a Victorian-era structure with a Venetian Renaissance façade and soaring internal galleries, and is Grade A heritage listed; the second building, until recently known as the Museum of Scotland (1998), is smaller and of late twentieth century construction. The two buildings are connected to one another through passages and walkways, and have recently been united under one single name, the National Museum of Scotland. This union occurred after the 2008-2011 renovation which returned the Royal Museum to its original nineteenth century appearance but added high-tech installations such as a four-storey ‘Window on the World’ structure, intended to showcase “where the cultures of Scotland and the world meet” (National Museums Scotland, 2011e).

For several years the Museum complex has been regarded as a prominent representation of the achievements and culture of Scotland. Writing in 2008, Scottish historian Tom Devine noted that he viewed “much of the [Museum’s] collection as a metaphor for Scotland: symbolic of a remarkable global role and the impact [that] this small country has achieved” (Devine, 2008: 3). This idea was furthered by Museum Director Gordon Rintoul in 2011, when he suggested that the Museum building had itself become the exhibit (Jamieson, 2011). These statements are congruent with the academic belief that national museums interpret the histories of the communities they represent, thereby reflecting the hegemonies of the period of its creation and later reinterpretations (McLean & Cooke, 2003b). This paper will explore the evolution of the National Museum of Scotland from its origins as an Industrial Museum to its modern conception, paying particular attention to the parallels between events in Scotland’s national history and changes to the Museum’s format. The 2008-2011 renovation will be of specific focus, given its occurrence at a time of increased national awareness and its proximity to present day. This approach will highlight the parallels between the Museum’s development and external political events, thereby demonstrating the role of the Museum as an artefact in and of itself. In doing so, this paper will show that the Museum’s newest form communicates much about the evolution of Scotland’s national identity and its relationship with the United Kingdom and wider world.

Early History

The symbolic foundations of the National Museum of Scotland were laid many years before the first incarnation of the actual building (construction began in 1854), when in 1780 the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland was founded by the 11th Earl of Erskine. The oldest of its kind in Scotland, the Society's focus since instigation has been the study of Scottish history and archaeology, commonly through the collection of artefacts and data. By the mid-nineteenth century the Society had amassed a substantial collection and welcomed thousands of visitors to its museum annually; public interest in antiquities had been slowly increasing since the turn of the century. In 1851 the Society signed an agreement with the British Government which designated the Society's collections as National Property, ensuring the preservation of the Society's goals and nationally important artefacts (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2012). This agreement coincided with the Government's plans to build a new industrial museum in Edinburgh (later to become the Royal Museum), indicating a period of strong Government support for Scottish antiquities. It is possible the British Prime Minister of the period, John Russell, the 1st Earl Russell, had a fondness for Scotland having studied at Edinburgh University for ten years (Prest, 1972: 11-13). Although much of the Society of Antiquaries' collection was subsequently kept at a different location from the Royal Museum, the work of the Society and its sizable collection of artefacts serve to highlight the Enlightenment-era, Government-patronized beginnings of museology in Scotland.

As previously mentioned, at the same time that the Government was assuming control of the Society of Antiquaries' collection in the 1850s, work was also underway on designs for a new industrial museum in Edinburgh. The museum was planned from the outset for public use and was intended to showcase a range of artefacts and curiosities in keeping with the museum's industrial era origin. This was in keeping with the fashion of the time – the Great Exhibition had opened in London in 1851 to widespread acclaim and also championed industry and technology. Designs for the new museum in Edinburgh, initially named the Industrial Museum of Scotland, were begun in 1854 by Captain Francis Fowke of the Royal Engineers and his assistant Robert Matheson, a local Scottish architect. Fowke was a well-regarded architect with several large projects to his name: at the time of beginning work on the museum in Edinburgh, Fowke had just finalised his designs for the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin (1854), and would in a few short years complete the designs for the Royal Albert Hall in London (1865). Fowke was well versed in the Victorian Neo-Classical architecture often used for large exhibition spaces, such as that of Sir Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace (Great Exhibition) in London. Fowke's design for the museum in Edinburgh resembles the Crystal Palace in many ways, particularly in its use of airy iron-columned galleries and glass ceilings. The exterior of the museum is in a Venetian Renaissance style, suitable for highlighting the important public nature of the structure without being out of place in the Neo-Classical surrounds of Chambers Street.

The scale of Fowke's design required the Museum to be completed in stages, the first between 1861 and 1866 and the second between 1885 and 1889. The beginning of construction was marked by a foundation stone laying ceremony on 23 October 1861, attended by Prince Albert, the Royal Consort of Queen Victoria (Historic Scotland, 1970). Prince Albert had also been the driving force behind the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, so his appearance at the foundation ceremony in Edinburgh was significant. By the time of the completion of

construction on the Museum's east-wing five years later, however, many things had changed. Prince Albert, seen by many as a Royal patron of the Museum, had died only weeks after attending the Museum's foundation ceremony in 1861, while the Museum's architect Fowke had passed in 1865. The Museum had also been renamed in the intervening years of construction, the first of many such occurrences. At the opening ceremony in 1866, it was Prince Alfred (son of Prince Albert) that led the proceedings, declaring the newly renamed Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art open to the public. It would keep this name for forty years, changing in 1904 to the Royal Scottish Museum. This connection with the British monarchy, clear from the Museum's outset, has been regularly renewed by Royal visits: the Queen officially opened the Museum of Scotland in 1998, for instance.

Despite its Royal patronage, the early decades of the twentieth century saw significant changes for the Museum, and the disruption was not just limited to construction. Several extensions were undertaken, the first two from 1910-1914 and 1934-1937. Shortly after this second renovation the Museum was repurposed for World War II, with exhibits packed away and the available space being used as a medical supply store. This unorthodox assumption of the building did not last long – the semi-regular pattern of renovation and expansion started again post-War (Summerhayes, 2008). The Brighton Street Extension in the 1950s reflected the changing philosophy of museum exhibitions, with the new extension including a lecture theatre, tea-room and education centre. Later additions, such as the inclusion of the fishponds on the floor of the Gallery, further enhanced the conception of the Museum as a place for interaction, entertainment and showcasing modern technology. These improvements were in keeping with the general modernizing processes at play in Scotland and Britain as a whole during this time.

The Museum of Scotland

The final years of the twentieth century marked significant changes for Scotland, and for the Museum complex. Discussion had been underway since the 1950s about the need to create a museum that marked out Scotland's place as a nation through the exhibition of important Scottish artefacts and the outlining of Scotland's national history (Cooke & McLean, 199b: 13). The Royal Museum building, for years the home of a wide array of Scottish items, was felt insufficient to address the aims of this 'national' museum, as the Royal Museum was driven by an Enlightenment-based philosophy of scientific research and discovery that extended to international artefacts. This left Scotland without a dedicated museum of national history, the desire for which may have had some correlation with the growth of nationalist politics in Scotland from the 1930s onwards, a movement which gained strength in the 1990s. The push for a new Scottish museum resulted in Government funding in 1989 for a building intended to exhibit the narrative of Scotland through history, culture and archaeology (*Building*, 1997).

The site selected for the new Museum of Scotland was next door to the Royal Museum building, with the architectural firm Benson & Forsyth winning the international design competition in 1991. Although their design beat 371 other entries it was not universally popular – Prince Charles resigned from the judging panel on the day Benson & Forsyth's building was declared the winner ("30M GBP Museum extension to go ahead soon," *The Scotsman*, 1 April 1993). The design includes a sandstone exterior, a cylindrical turret on the front corner of the façade, a roof-top terrace and windows of varying shapes and sizes, evoking aspects of the

surrounding landscape, which includes the nearby Edinburgh Castle. The Museum of Scotland's interior was designed to encourage visitors to take a path that follows the chronological and thematic stages in Scotland's history. The first sections of the Museum focus on Scotland's beginnings and early people, and these exhibitions progress upwards through several floors. Sections of the museum are dedicated to 'the Kingdom of the Scots,' 'Scotland Transformed,' 'Industry and Empire' and the most recent exhibition entitled 'Scotland: A Changing Nation' which is located on the top floor. The interior design also encourages subtle changes in mood as visitors progress through the Museum. The lower levels, which are associated with earlier periods in Scotland's history, are darker and somewhat crypt-like; the upper levels, however, are noticeably brighter with higher ceilings. This provides a subtle alteration in visual experience as visitors move towards the present day collections, perhaps symbolising the move of a nation towards greater cultural and social awareness.

Another design feature of relevance is the placement of windows to provide views that are relevant to the artefacts nearby. These design decisions often highlight moments of Scottish history when the nation was at odds with its English neighbour. The window next to the National Covenant – a document signed in 1638 by Scottish patriots who fought to uphold the Presbyterian doctrine under threat by Charles I of England – for instance looks out over Greyfriars Churchyard, the location in Edinburgh where the Covenant was signed.

The Museum of Scotland's role as the keeper of Scotland's national story makes it a natural location for the display of many notable artefacts of particular significance to the nation, such as the Scottish-owned portion (11 pieces) of the Lewis chessmen and Prince Charles Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie)'s travelling canteen. The Lewis chessmen are of particular interest, as they are the subject of an ongoing debate between the Scottish Government and British authorities over the rightful ownership and display of the artefacts, which were found in 1831 on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland (Milne, 2008). The remaining 67 pieces are on display in the British Museum.

Another important inclusion in the Museum is a quote from the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath, which is displayed on one of the interior walls in large painted script. The Declaration, one of the earliest known forms of a declaration of independence, came after the Scottish defeat of English forces at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. Sent to Pope John XXII, the Declaration outlined the Scottish right to exist as an independent state free from English rule. The section of the Declaration displayed on the wall of the Museum reads: 'For we fight not for glory, nor riches, nor honours, but for freedom alone, which no good man gives up except with his life.'

Despite the inclusion in the Museum of this popular symbol of Scottish independence, other nationalist icons do not feature prominently. William Wallace, for instance, who fought in the Scottish Wars of Independence and has become somewhat of a Scottish folk hero, is noticeably under-represented. In the ensuing discontent that occurred when Wallace's absence was noticed, Museum staff explained their decision to leave out certain traditional elements of Scottish history as both a result of the limitations of the artefacts available, and an attempt by the Museum to address the stereotypical elements of Scotland's history (Cooke & McLean, 1999b: 20). This is in part an acknowledgement of Wallace's recently popularized persona as portrayed in the Hollywood movie *Braveheart* (1995). This attempt to redress inaccuracies also explains the

inclusion in the Museum of an exhibit entitled 'Images and Realities,' which tries to highlight and correct false assumptions regarding Scottish history and identity through exhibiting stereotypes and their realities (McLean & Cooke, 2003a: 156).

Royal becomes National: twenty-first century renovations

When the Museum of Scotland building was completed in 1998, a section of stone between the old Royal Museum and the new Museum of Scotland was engraved with the phrase, 'Scotland to the World, the World to Scotland.' This quote was an attempt to unite the Royal Museum's scientific and natural world collections ('the World to Scotland') with the Museum of Scotland's national historical and archaeological collections ('Scotland to the World'). An unintended consequence of this linking of institutions was the highlighting of the aging appearance of the Royal Museum building. By the time of the Museum of Scotland's opening the Royal Museum had undergone seven significant refurbishments and extensions, four name changes and two amalgamations with external entities. The result was a Victorian-era structure cluttered with artefacts and confused by layers of building additions.

Accepting the need to refurbish the Royal Museum, the Museum management initiated a fifteen year master plan which included a significant structural overhaul intended to bring the Victorian building up to the standards of its new neighbour, the Museum of Scotland. Gareth Hoskins Architects, a Scottish firm, won the contract to develop a new design and direction for the Royal Museum. The design aimed to remove as much of the twentieth century additions as possible, including the destruction of partitions and the lowering of the ground floor by 1.4 metres to accommodate a new Entrance Hall (Macmillan, 2009). Sixteen new galleries were added to cover several broad themes, including Discoveries, World Cultures, Natural World and Adventure Planet. A new feature, the Window on the World installation, was also added. This installation reaches four storeys (18 metres) high and provides space for 800 objects that might not otherwise have a logical place in the Museum's exhibitions. With the design in place and awards of £17.8mil by the Heritage Lottery Fund and £16mil from the Scottish Government, the Royal Museum building was closed and emptied of its artefacts in 2008 and construction began (National Museums Scotland, 2011c).

The renovation of the Royal Museum had several benefits, not least the creation of 50% more public space (Ferguson, 2011). Many of the Museum staff, as well as the exhibition designer Ralph Appelbaum, have suggested that the new design allows for a cohesive presentation of Scotland's contributions in the world. The Discoveries gallery, for instance, features items that are "filled with tales of remarkable Scots, and people influenced by Scotland, who have made their mark in the fields of invention, exploration and adventure" (National Museums Scotland, 2011a). Appelbaum noted in July 2011 that, "visitors will see afresh how Scots have influenced the world and brought its influences back home. The aura of the Scottish Enlightenment and the stories of the adventurous and innovative Scots who gifted this Museum with an extraordinary collection now permeate its public spaces. The proud intellectual tradition for which this Museum has long been a symbol has been given a new voice" (National Museums Scotland, 2011a).

The Museum, now united with the Museum of Scotland under the single title of 'National Museum of Scotland,' opened on time and on budget in July 2011. In the week after reopening

100,000 people visited the Museum, with people ranging over all of the floors – an achievement of note considering only 5% of visitors made it above the ground floor prior to the renovation (Jamieson, 2011). The renovation is only one part of the fifteen year Master Plan, however, and Museum staff have initiated the next stages. One part of this Plan is the promotion of the reopened venue for after-hours events and functions, a program that has already been taken up by the Royal Bank of Scotland with its Museum Lates series. Further improvements to the Museum will be made over the next three to four years, with another renovation pending. These works, estimated at £10mil, will include the redevelopment of the pedestrian area on Chambers Street, and a public piazza at the rear of the Museum building near the Edinburgh University Old Quad (Ferguson, 2010). These plans will see the Museum become one of, if not the largest museum in the United Kingdom and can in part be interpreted as aiding the Scottish Government's aim to bring about their so-called new Scottish Enlightenment (Christie, 2011; Lawrence, 2011: 58; Fassey & McIntosh, 2008).

The National Museum: Artefact of the Nation?

Writing in 1998 about what was then the new Museum of Scotland building, Fiona McLean noted that “the growth of Scottish museums has far outpaced the growth of museums throughout the rest of the UK, reflecting Scotland's reassertion of its national identity, which has come to a head with the devolution referendum and the re-creation of Scotland's own parliament” (McLean, 1998: 245). Her observation has been echoed several times since, and not just by academics: just prior to the reopening of the Museum in July this year, the organisers were quoted as saying the renovation was “a defining moment in the re-affirmation of the Scottish identity” (Miller, 2011). Scottish politicians also supported this view, with Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs Fiona Hyslop noting at the reopening that “the new National Museum of Scotland promotes the best of Scotland and [Scottish] contributions to the world” (National Museums Scotland, 2011c).

In the renovated Royal Museum, which had its beginnings in the industrial era and took its inspiration directly from the Enlightenment pursuit of antiquarian investigation, a diverse collection of artefacts has now been intentionally united by Museum organisers by presenting a “Scottish narrative [that is] given context and interest by the Scottish adventurers and scientists who collected or invented them” (Cornwell, 2011). When this Scottish narrative is encountered within the newly-united Royal Museum and Museum of Scotland buildings, both of which are themselves historical artefacts of Scotland's history, it has, in the words of Museum management, the effect of “raising the nation's cultural identity and [reflection of] the self-confidence of a modern and ambitious Scotland” (National Museums Scotland, 2011b).

The strong sense of national representation that is now evident in the united Museum complex should be considered in the context of broader cultural and political events that are currently underway in Scotland. In the last fifteen years Scotland has regained its National Parliament following a Referendum for Devolution; has elected its primary nationalist party, the Scottish National Party, to a majority government, and is now in the early stages of planning a Referendum for Independence from the United Kingdom in 2014. In purely cultural terms, major Government funding has been given to numerous events and heritage sites of national significance. The Robert Burns Birthplace Museum and the Culloden Battlefield Visitor Centre,

for instance, which are two locations with a significant impact on Scottish national identity, have recently been completed with Government assistance and further high profile projects are planned (Battle of Bannockburn visitor centre). Scottish national awareness is high, and this is apparent in both political and cultural arenas.

When considered side-by-side, therefore, the evolution of the National Museum of Scotland bares some similarities with that of its homeland. Scotland was a highly industrialised nation in the Victorian period, with a general belief in the value of the United Kingdom and British Empire. The British Royal family were regular patrons of Scottish institutions and Queen Victoria's fondness for the Scottish countryside and tartan fabric can be seen as being partially responsible for the 'tartanisation' of Scotland in this period. The Museum, first the Industrial Museum of Edinburgh before changing its name to the Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art and then the Royal Scottish Museum, echoed the attitudes of the era it came from. First the Museum assumed an industrial focus that was echoed in a design reliant on iron and a collection of Victorian technologies. This focus evolved at the turn of the century to take on a Royal element, when in the early years of King Edward VII's reign the Museum received official patronage (1904). This might be interpreted as the act of a newly crowned King seeking favour with his subjects in Scotland, or simply the attempt to preserve the values of the Victorian-era Museum in the rapidly modernising early twentieth century period.

Subsequent twentieth century renovations are also congruent with historical events. Extensions to the Museum in the 1950s came at a time of relative prosperity following the close of World War II, and in a climate of improving technology. This was the last significant renovation to take place until the construction of the Museum of Scotland in 1998. The intervening period of nearly fifty years of inactivity at the Museum can in part be understood through the turbulent nature of British politics and economics in the same period. In the 1970s and 1980s Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government was in power, and Scotland experienced a period of significant deindustrialisation followed by a recession in the 1980s. It was not until 1989 that, during a period of improving economic fortunes, the British Government pledged funding to the construction of a new Museum of Scotland. By the Museum of Scotland's completion in 1998 the Referendum for Devolution (1997) had seen the reinstatement of the Scottish Parliament and nationalist sentiment was growing steadily. In this light it is not surprising that aspects of the Museum's design and exhibits follow a distinctly nationalist vein.

The mindset of the present-day National Museum, which is openly national and actively seeks to present Scotland and her achievements to the world, both complements and contrasts with its Victorian origins. While the building's design has been renovated and modernised it has retained its Victorian-era shell and has in some respects has revived the original structure through the removal of twentieth century built elements. The Museum's collections have been reorganised to correlate with its Museum of Scotland neighbour, but are still true to the Museum's Victorian origins, focusing on science and the natural world. These contradictions can also be seen in the present Scottish nation, which in 2011 elected a majority Scottish National Party Government yet firmly retains connections to the British Royal Family, for instance. Much like the nation to which it belongs, the National Museum of Scotland therefore finds itself straddling two identities, the former Royal and the increasingly prominent National. Given the Museum's tendency to

reflect the attitudes and allegiances of the Scottish nation, it will therefore be interesting to see the direction of future renovations in light of Scotland's journey towards Referendum in 2014.

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