

# Journal of **Scottish Thought**

Research Articles

‘The fierce urgency of now’: conjecture and the  
limits of Scottish history

Author: Catriona M. M. Macdonald

Volume 8, Issue 1

Pp: 8-18

2016

Published on: 1st Jan 2016

CC Attribution 4.0

1 4 9 5



**ABERDEEN**  
**UNIVERSITY PRESS**

# **‘The fierce urgency of now’: conjecture and the limits of Scottish history**

*Catriona M. M. Macdonald*

---

A month ago, I took a break from work in the archives and wandered for a while around Limerick. On the Sarsfield bridge over the Shannon River there is a statue commemorating the dead of 1916. Ireland is movingly depicted as a maid, released from her bondage by the heroes of the civil war. Had you visited the site during 1916, however, you would have noticed that the same spot then supported a statue to John Viscount FitzGibbon who had been killed at Balaclava in 1854. John FitzGibbon’s grandfather had been ‘Black Jack’ FitzGibbon, the Lord Chancellor at the time of the 1798 rebellion.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the statue to the young FitzGibbon was originally intended to adorn a site in the town’s crescent, but political and religious sensitivities at the end of the nineteenth century meant that particular spot was given over to a statue of the Liberator, Daniel O’Connell, so FitzGibbon began his short residence on the bridge before the statue was ultimately blown up by the IRA in June 1930.

Needless to say, this got me thinking, ‘if’.

*If* FitzGibbon had not been killed, or if his grandfather had not been who *he* was, would John’s life have been worthy of commemoration? *If* Ireland had remained part of the United Kingdom, would Limerick’s Tom Clarke and others have merited more than a footnote in the annals of their country, and would the hero of Balaclava still be reflected in the waters of the Shannon? *If* Irish independence had been secured without the bloodshed, would a more tolerant attitude to the past have allowed FitzGibbon to maintain his occupation of the bridge site, no matter his role in the British empire, or his grandfather’s opposition to Catholic relief?

‘If’: a word that invariably invokes the future is clearly very much in thrall to the past.

We’ll come back to Ireland later, but for the moment, perhaps it’s not surprising that as a historian, it’s the temporal aspect of the ‘if’ question that has both challenged and bemused me as I prepared for today. The habits of a

---

<sup>1</sup> Ann Kavanagh, ‘FitzGibbon, John, first earl of Clare (1748–1802)’, ODNB (Oxford, 2004).

lifetime, however, meant that – instead of reaching for a crystal ball – my first recourse was to seek direction in the works of others, and so I turned to the first professor of Scottish history, Peter Hume Brown (1849–1918), whose approach to politics in a period of crisis gave me cause for confidence. Hume Brown’s good friend, Viscount Haldane, a former secretary of state for war, noted in 1919 how,

In public affairs [Brown] took a deep if detached interest. About the outcome of the Great War he never had the slightest doubt. ‘We historians’, he used to say to me, ‘can judge consequences better than politicians who look at events from too near’.<sup>2</sup>

Before you start planning a trip to the local Ladbrokes after this paper, however, I would suggest that in the current context Brown was wrong. The old patrician order has passed, and with only weeks to go before the referendum, we are *all* encouraged to get ‘too near’.

Somewhat discouraged, I sought direction instead in the work of a more recent popular historian, with the hope that therein lay the insights of someone with a finger on the public pulse. The results were less inspiring than Haldane’s assessment, though perhaps more entertaining. If only to prove that there’s ‘nothing new under the sun’, I discovered that the late Nigel Tranter (1909–2000) had addressed the ‘ifs’ in Scottish history long before us. So, we have the following: *if* Alexander, Duke of Albany had not been killed by a splintered lance at a French tournament in 1485, Tranter claimed we would have had no James IV, no Flodden, no James V, no Mary Queen of Scots, no James VI, no Union of the Crowns and hence, no parliamentary Union. So, yet another depressing story of poor foreign workmanship letting down the Scottish public.

Let’s try another. Tranter’s gaze moves forward into the sixteenth century, and this time, it’s a plumbing job that holds the fate of the nation in the balance. Tranter claimed that if the mother of James Stewart, second Earl of Moray, hadn’t installed a new fangled drainage scheme at Donibristle Castle which fed the fire in 1592 that was ignited by Huntly’s troops, her son could have sat out the siege in safety and thus, presumably, Scottish folk artists would have had to find another track to fill the spaces currently occupied by countless versions of the ballad named after the ‘Bonnie Earl’. Tranter was

---

<sup>2</sup> Viscount Haldane, ‘Preface’, in P. Hume Brown, *Surveys of Scottish History* (Glasgow, 1919), ix.

also not averse to loading these conjectures with political weight. Had Charles Edward won the '45, but failed to hold England, Tranter paints the picture of a very different Scotland:

A resident monarchy in Scotland, with all that implies, no Union parliament at Westminster, so no need for self-government agitation, Scotland a potent force in Europe almost certainly... There would have been no Highland Clearances, for the clan chiefs would not have lost their lands, and so the North would have probably remained more populous, no legacy of Victoria and of absentee lairdship. A Scottish parliament, typically would be quite the most squabblesome in existence, with the monarch presiding in person, as required. And there would be no Scottish National Party!<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, there is great scope in this approach for imagining a Scotland that might have been – one that perhaps suits one's own preferences more than the reality of 'now'. Tranter was a life-long devolutionist and a Liberal whose sympathies for an alliance with the SNP were repeatedly thwarted. That might just explain the last line. But where would this approach get us?

The focus of this conference rests on a very particular 'what if': what if a majority of Scots vote 'yes' or 'no' to independence in September. It's a very different conundrum: we are not blessed with hindsight to distinguish between the most likely outcomes, to rank the possibilities, or trace the future with the confidence of having lived through it. We cannot necessarily say what is likely or what is mere fancy. Before going any further, then, it pays to be a little pedantic and to elicit just what history can legitimately bring to the debate.

Like the most desperate undergraduate, I start by probing definitions. What do 'yes' and 'no' actually mean? It's not as silly as it might at first sound, because the question in this instance is pregnant with contextual and environmental challenges. What if the global political environment makes defence more important in the debate than it has been to date? What if George Osborne miraculously finds that the money he stored under the bed since the banking crisis might be best spent in Scotland? What if it rains on 18 September? Certainly, the vote will be recorded in the bland format of a digital spreadsheet, presenting turnout and the proportionate share of the vote for each response and the number of spoilt papers. I can just see the revolving pie charts and

---

<sup>3</sup> Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Acc 13160/12.

multi-hued bar graphs on the BBC evolving as the night of 18 September becomes the morning of the 19th. But the statistical result does not answer the question of *meaning*, nor does it necessarily suggest the most likely consequences arising from a particular outcome at either a regional or national level. What will matter is how the result will be interpreted – not what yes and no mean for the individual voter, but how the meaning of the aggregated statistics will be judged, and thence how that might or might not inform policy going forward.

Let's make an imaginative leap. If an almost unanimous vote for independence is taken to mean a vote for a very different Scotland, ought we really to expect a brave new Nordic Scotia,<sup>4</sup> or might it be more likely that the inevitable compromise will be made between parties established in the pre-independence years, resulting in a less radical alternative? If a convincing yes vote is recorded, will the interpretation of politicians and the public coincide? Will Cameron and Salmond's interpretations of the Edinburgh Agreement in the end prove compatible? Will a convincing majority be taken as evidence of a uniformity of will on policy issues about which voters perhaps scarcely thought when they entered the polling booth? After all, we know that voters are recording a spectrum of motives when they are asked to tick just one box, and a yes vote is hardly a clear affirmation of the white paper, far less anything else. Similarly, will a no vote be taken simply as the endorsement of the Union, or acclaim for the status quo, or support for a devolutionary process that already promises to add new powers to the parliament? Alternatively, one can envisage how – if rather awkwardly – a 'no' vote might be spinned as reflecting a desire for 'devo max', thus touching on the question that *wasn't* asked back in September 2014. In sum, it's hardly news to point out that what you want when you tick 'yes' or 'no' might not be what you get.

Equally, as a historian, one can envisage events in the future being blamed – legitimately or otherwise – on a 'yes' or 'no' vote, even though (in truth) the vote has limited predictive capacity at this remove when it comes to events that happen *after* 18 September. So, one can imagine a scenario in which, in the case of a yes vote, Ed Miliband's failure to secure victory at the next UK general election in 2015 may be blamed less on years of rather lacklustre leadership than on the 'betrayal' of Scottish Labour stalwarts the year before. And in the event of a 'no' vote, one can imagine that in the year 2065, following fifty years of unbroken rule by UKIP, some English Tories might just blame the

---

<sup>4</sup> See Lesley Riddoch, *Blossom: what Scotland needs to flourish* (Edinburgh, 2013).

Scots for not teaching Farage a lesson in September 2014 and thus failing to secure for them the traditional bolt hole in the north from high London house prices, the commercialisation of public services, and the expense of care for the elderly. Jersey will be able to sustain only so many well-heeled refugees. In much the same way, we can identify some things that will happen in the future *regardless* of a yes or no vote that will be influential factors in what will unfold for Scots. North Sea oil, for example, is a finite resource, and its exploitation will continue to shape our future, no matter who gets the tax revenue.

So, having offered these caveats, what *can* history contribute, if anything at all, to the question of ‘if’?

Two options are usually available to the historian when asked about the likelihood of a certain outcome: we are permitted to call on precedent, or – with less certainty – we can offer a hypothesis based on what has gone before. In this instance, we can discount the first quite quickly, there simply is no convincing precedent for what happens after September either in the history of the British Isles or elsewhere. If for no other reason, the time gap between now and the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922 makes that comparator problematic; the creation of the new eastern European states following a period of bloodshed and ethnic tension at the end of the twentieth century was so strongly influenced by World War and Cold War consequences as to make comparison there quite ridiculous; and we do our Commonwealth partners (and potential partners) a disservice by comparing the liberation of former colonies from British rule to internal power brokerage within the former imperial state. For me at least, what we are left with is speculation, deduction, inference, conjecture. For those of you who like your history served neat – single malt empiricism – be prepared to be disappointed.

Conjecture is the hidden thread in most historical scholarship. Having gutted one archive, we speculate on where to go next; having identified competing perspectives on the past, we deduce which is most convincing; having read one half of a correspondence we often infer the rest; and it’s conjecture that allows us to build up chains of cause and effect which are essential to historical narrative. By necessity, historians in sketching what *has* happened must also consider why other alternatives didn’t. So, asking why the SNP won a majority at Holyrood in 2011 inevitably means answering why Labour failed to do so. We might not always think in these terms, but historians always hold in their heads a past that didn’t happen and the prospect of alternative futures. Edinburgh without trams; a Scotland with the best health record in Europe: some versions of ‘now’ are easier to imagine than others.

Now, this is hardly rocket science, and nor is it news. The Scottish enlightenment scholar Dugald Stewart (1753–1828) identified conjectural history as a method of legitimate social scientific analysis in his attempts to explain important political and sociological phenomena.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, by this means Stewart distinguished between ‘instinctive’ and ‘rational’ patriotisms which map relatively easily on to the dichotomy of ‘ethnic’ and ‘civic’ nationalisms of which we have heard much of late. Interestingly, Stewart considered acquiring a good knowledge of history as being essential for the cultivation of the latter, but let’s leave that to one side for the moment. In similar fashion, John Galt (1779-1839) – the Greenock-born novelist – claimed that his novels were likewise forms of conjectural history: stories that were to all intents and purposes as legitimate expressions of the history of his times as any chronicle. Yet, here we hit on two dilemmas. When does conjecture become fancy? If we have to open history’s door to the imagination to deliver these necessary deductive leaps and create a narrative, how do we defend against claims of invention and, perhaps worse, impartiality? Secondly, how do such models take account of the unexpected? The philosophical and fictional worlds of Stewart and Galt presumed a stability that historians cannot afford to take for granted: Stewart’s Scots existed in the abstract, while Galt’s could be controlled by the pen of their creator.

The significance of this in the context of the current debate is easily illustrated by the fate of the 1913 Home Rule Scotland Bill: no amount of conjecture could have anticipated the global conflict on which that legislation ran aground a year later. Similarly, we might point to other events that impacted upon the governance of Scotland in an earlier age: the death of the Maid of Norway in 1290, for example, or the death of Francis II (the first husband of Mary Queen of Scots) in 1560. The basic fact I’m trying to make here is that you cannot use deductive reasoning on something that is yet to happen without denying the power of the unexpected and thus without compromising the limits of history itself. My conclusion, as the first speaker at this conference, therefore, is a bleak one: history can offer very little in answer to ‘if’ *and still claim to be history*.

The only route forward is, then, to stand the premise of this weekend’s conference on its head and ask not what history suggests a future Scotland might be like, but how a future Scotland might impact on the way we write history – our historiography. Will a certain vote next month make us justified

---

<sup>5</sup> Catriona M.M. Macdonald, ‘History and the Heritage Aesthetic’, in *NationLive* (Scottish National Portrait Gallery, 2013), 11–16.

in seeing our past in one way more than another? It's at this point that we return to Ireland.

This is not the place to get in to the debate about revisionism in Irish history: I boast neither the knowledge nor the diplomatic skills requisite for that task, save to lay out some of its characteristics that may give us clues to what could/might/should happen to our past in the future.<sup>6</sup> With the Irish model in mind, then, what implications might a 'yes' vote in September have for our history?

In Ireland, the national project after 1922 involved the state-sponsored endorsement of a certain vision of an authentic Ireland which sought to reaffirm wholeness and distinctiveness. This was to be met in 1938 by the foundation of the journal *Irish Historical Studies* by T.W. Moody and R. D. Edwards in an attempt to energise historical studies as a more scientific enterprise, with an emphasis on primary source scholarship and robust methodologies very much in line with contemporary British models. As it turned out, however, many have suggested that what was *actually* effected by such endeavours was the institutionalisation of conservative historical tendencies in Ireland that held at one remove more radical approaches evident elsewhere in Europe. What happened was the silencing of alternative voices in Ireland's past that did not fit the revisionist project which itself shared British scholarship's obsession with constitutional – one might say 'elite' – histories. Not surprisingly, then, the next generation of historians would turn the spotlight on the very institutions such conservatism appeared to sustain, in particular the Catholic Church and the Irish state itself (which, encouraged by the Moody/Edwards generation, had sponsored a multi-volume New History of Ireland intended to offer a synthesis of the best work in the discipline).

So, what of it? It's quite simple: if the end of the pantomime of the British state changes, we have to review the plot and the characters. If there is to be no happily *together* ever after, Scotia will have to be seen to be sufficiently 'gallus' to go it alone without the prince, without the wedding, and without the catchy panto sing-a-long. If independence is to be the end of our nation's story for my generation of historians, a 'yes' vote will make more likely histories that will usurp or at least reset many conventional turning points, some chains of cause and consequence, and a periodisation that has been established in the Union years.

---

<sup>6</sup> For insightful comment on Irish revisionism, see C. Brady (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History: the debate on historical revisionism* (Dublin, 2006).



The Scottish History Society was established in 1886 – a year after the Scottish Office – and for some time had at its head the Liberal, Lord Rosebery – one of the earliest architects of administrative devolution within the Union state. Similarly, the *Scottish Historical Review* emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century – the high point of Empire – and at much the same time as the first chair in Scottish history was founded at Edinburgh University. It's hardly surprising, then, that these historical institutions (given that they rely on the support of individuals in state-funded higher education) still bear the marks of their origins in a confident unionist Scotland. Equally, it's hardly controversial to suggest that in an independent Scotland the profession may wish to revise some of its conventions.

The new histories that may emerge, however, will not necessarily be more 'true' than those that have gone before – that, in a sense, was the illusion of Moody and Edwards – but they will be different, and they will not all point in the same direction – that has been the lesson in Ireland since the 1960s. In what ways different remains to be seen, but there is scope to infer where the pressure points may be.

A 'yes' vote *might* make it more likely that our historic relationship with England will be seen in terms of oppression – the deliberate curtailing of a legitimate and distinctive voice. Alternatively, we might simply try harder to identify evidence of how that voice was maintained over the years, and see our history in more empowering (but no less distorting) terms. A 'yes' vote may, in part, neutralise research which has brought to the fore the contested ethnic roots of Scotland. Alternatively, it might empower such scholars who might come to see in our past the origins of a multi-ethnic present. A 'yes' vote may also encourage more historians to view the period between 1707 and 2014 as an unfortunate aberration, resting on the dynastic accident of 1603. This would be a position that would, perhaps, become more likely if Scotland ultimately becomes a republic, but less likely if we remain beguiled by the House of Windsor.

More perverse consequences are also possible: will we no longer see the welfare state as the twentieth century's greatest achievement, but as yet another example of UK state centralisation – an attack on native traditions? Will nationalisation after 1945 be seen as a curb on Scottish entrepreneurship rather than as an attempt to save heavy industry? I could go on.

Finally, we might start to re-people our narratives with alternative heroes. Liberal values and public health reforms have already destroyed a lineage of imperial 'Boys Own' figures who once appeared on cigarette cards; but

independence may entice us to write new biographies more in keeping with a story that ends in ‘yes’. We might also think about changing our statues too.

Some statues are perhaps already at the top of the demolition list: the statue to the Duke of Sutherland atop Ben Bhraggie near Golspie, for example. But others are not so easy to distinguish. Do we keep the Scott monument to celebrate our literary heritage; do we take down this confection that celebrates a Unionist wordsmith; or do we simply undertake a little cosmetic surgery to make the wizard of Abbotsford look more like Hugh MacDiarmid? Alternatively, should a Conservative resurgence result in a Tory majority in an independent Scottish parliament, will we at last commission a statue to Scottish Tory Prime Minister Arthur Balfour (1848–1930), who currently boasts no likeness in his native Scotland, although he *is* remembered in Whitehall. Maybe Donald Dewar – architect of what will then be seen as the discredited devolution debacle – could make way for him on Buchanan Street?

Clearly, a yes vote might influence our history in both radicalising and conservative ways, some of them more unsettling than others. But, what of a ‘no’ vote?

Will James VI be seen as a man ahead of his time – a man with special insights of the future in much the same way as the witches that were executed during his reign? Will Victorian perspectives that emphasised the disinterested statesmanship of the Scottish commissioners in 1707 become once more *de rigueur*? Will a ‘no’ vote make historians more likely to view the SNP once more in the guise of Wendy Wood than John Swinney? Will we come to see 2014 as the year that the SNP members over-reached themselves and reverted to type: dwellers in a Celtic twilight where few could be enticed to join them? Will the Thatcher years be recast as an unfortunate ‘blip’ in the otherwise smooth working of the Union, reaffirmed by the majority of 2014? Will we be more inclined to credit the Scottish Conservatives with being more in touch with the public than we have to date, and perhaps reluctantly (if more honestly) identify *other* aspects of this apparent popular connection in policy areas such as immigration controls and public spending cuts? Or will the result simply reaffirm the ‘Scottish crisis of confidence’ touted by our middle classes, and take its place after the Darien Disaster, Culloden and the 1978 world cup as evidence of the nation’s historic vanquished status and its current under-performance? And what, then, of our statues?

Despite his rather uninspiring physique, the case for a statue to Balfour would still remain – he, like many others, was a Scot whose fame in a British

context leaves his claim to commemoration unaffected by the vote. We tend to admire successful London Scots even if we don't like them. But should we rob Dewar of his towering presence over Glasgow's Buchanan Street? Certainly, Dewar might be lauded in the future as the man who saved the Union by offering sufficient concessions when it mattered. Alternatively, he might also be charged with having given away too much, thus preparing the way for the folly of 2014, although even at that, I doubt his pedestal will ever support a statue to Alastair Darling or Ruth Davidson.

From this distance, a 'no' vote does not promise to have the same transformative effect on our historiography as a 'yes' vote. The Scottish princess will remain in her marriage of convenience, and – while we might forget this year's panto song, as we usually do after leaving the theatre – we will still have the national anthem to remind us that very little has changed.

## Conclusion

I said in my introduction that it has been the temporal aspect of the 'if' question that has exercised me in recent weeks: past/future, now/ then. With the vote only 26 days away, however, I'm struck by how indulgent this may seem. As many of you will have guessed, I took my title for this paper from Martin Luther King's Lincoln Memorial speech in 1963,(and that may seem indulgent too). In it he noted:

We have ...come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy...It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment... Nineteen sixty-three is not an end, but a beginning.<sup>7</sup>

The speech, of course, is more famous for the lines, each starting, 'I have a dream'. In contrast to my title, *those* lines are aspirational and as such they are timeless, and perhaps that's why they are better remembered. But the

---

<sup>7</sup> Atlanta, GA (USA), The King Center, 'I have a dream', a speech by Dr Martin Luther King Jr. at the historic 'March on Washington', Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963, 1–2, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/i-have-dream-1>, accessed 29 March 2015.

contemporary emphasis, the ‘now’, the urgency of the lines I have just read is more relevant here.

Over the last year, when asked how I intended to vote, my most honest answer, although the one I never gave, was that I wished there was a third box that said ‘not yet’. (I wouldn’t read too much into that: it points in many ways!) Instead, I said – just as truthfully – that I didn’t know. But now the urgency of the question and the urgency of the times coincide and offer us all a powerful and potent prospect that can no longer be postponed. At this distance, time – the temporal – remains important, but it’s the now and *only* the now that matters, making this conference more than simply timely.