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Europe, Scotland and the Celts (Part 1 of 2)

Alan Riach and Alexander Moffat (Friday 24 June 2016)

In the immediate aftermath of the referendum on whether or not the United Kingdom should remain a part of the European Union, it's pertinent to consider what information our cultural history might give us about this question. Nobody on either side said much about this but we believe that the major exhibition, "Celts: art and identity" currently running at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh until 26 September 2016 still has a lot to tell us.

Scotland has always been in Europe in a way that distinguishes the nation from the cultural politics of the British Empire. That Empire claimed a "superior" position. It defined itself as a dominant force in global politics, taking the Roman Empire as its most significant precedent. The contrast was with the idea of a number of distinctive national states made of a diversity of regions, languages and forms of cultural production, constituting a broader, more co-operative, unity-in-diversity. To oversimplify, the imperial model is contesting and competitive. The greater the ferocity of the competition, the more bullish the soundbite rhetoric and the more proximate the violence. What we have recently witnessed regarding the EU referendum was an exaggeration of this condition propounded by mass media. The viability of culture as generating distinctive national identity has been unmentionable in the rhetoric of the recent campaigners for "leave". The cultural dimensions of this idea have barely been noted by the "remain" people, although they constitute precisely the same arguments for Scottish independence.

So what we're considering here is the political structure of Europe, the matter of national cultural identities and the international reach of artistic provenance. Despite the alarmist predictions of the "out" campaign, today's EU is the opposite of a homogeneous super-state – neither a state nor an empire but a union of states and peoples whose policies were arrived at through consensus-seeking and compromise.

It's significant that the Edinburgh exhibition is subtitled: "art and identity" because how identity is expressed and delivered through works of art is at its heart. What it presents is a vast range of material that confirms not merely "Celtic" identities scattered around the "British periphery" but multiple

centres thriving throughout northern Europe across centuries. There are many artefacts from Scotland, but if we go along with the exhibition, travelling from the Black Sea, following the course of the Danube, through Rumania, into Switzerland and northern France, to Denmark, and along the Rhine, the first distinction that appears is geographical: this is a multi-faceted but evidently North European tribal world, to be distinguished from the South European, Mediterranean-based cultures of Greece and Rome, and most clearly contrasted against the Roman Empire. In fact, what defines the art and identity of the Celts is perhaps not any unifying character but a sense of difference from Empire and imperialism. There are many centres. There is no single dominating one, no Rome, no Madrid, no London. There is a world changing in time, of tribal territories, of languages, forms of music, religion, literary and visual arts. What gives this world coherence are its human priorities, the relations it presents across geographies and through generations.

Contrast this pluralism with recent political history. The Labour government of the 1940s and early 1950s is generally understood to have initiated the NHS and demonstrated a sense of social value, a prioritisation of good things – but the same rule was also consolidating the Tory-established authority of Churchill’s Second World War government. Particularly in foreign policy, it could be argued that both Attlee and Churchill were singing from the same song-sheet. In a similar way, it seemed to many people in the 1990s that Tony Blair was re-establishing Labour priorities when he was in fact consolidating Thatcherism as “New Labour”. In the 40s and 50s, the development of centralised capital-based power was an imperial project intended to retain, develop and deepen the legitimacy of London that was not to be challenged. The “Home Rule” movement for Scotland, which had been present from the very beginning of Labour in the late 19th century with Keir Hardy and Cunninghame Graham, was dropped from the Party’s constitution and as we know from recent years, its status for Labour remains in contention.

Empire replicates its own authority. Or attempts to, and fails in the attempt, just as the Labour and Conservative parties in Britain today implode into factions in their contest to maintain superior imperial authority.

The example set by the Celts is different. Let’s call it a panorama of European tribal-regional identities extending in different forms through many nations, formed and reformed over millennia.

If you see the 19th-century rise of nationalism as leading to imperial contests and world wars, ultimately “uber-nationalism” and Nazism, the antidote is already there in the Celts: the proper corrective to unitary, conformist nationalism’s urge towards imperialism is state regionalism. Which is why Scotland’s independence should explicitly and vigorously favour the constituent identities of the island archipelagos, all the points of the compass, the diversities of language and culture, overlaps and contrasts, all the territories of the nation.

And the only way this emphasis can be fully delivered is through the arts. Every other priority devalues what the arts are created to give.

This is not utopian. Nobody could say that the artefacts in the Celts exhibition don’t exemplify practices of conflict and violence, or that the priorities of decorative art don’t decidedly imply wealth and authority. Yet the quality of such ancient artefacts speaks of cultural values from which 21st-century tabloid gutter-mongering and the garish exhibits of bling fashion and catchphrase politics are surely a long descent.

Nor are the artefacts of the Celts totally resistant to coercive application in such assertions of power as British nationalism. From the 17th century onwards attempts to reconstruct a British Celtic past multiplied, often according to specific national agendas. In England the Celtic past was used frequently for propaganda purposes, to promote and celebrate the British Empire. The exhibition catalogue edited by Julia Farley and Fraser Hunter illustrates a work by the English sculptor Thomas Thorneycroft, commissioned by Prince Albert to make a larger-than-life equestrian statue “Boadicea and her Daughters” for the 1851 Great Exhibition. It was cast in 1902 and stands on the Thames Embankment, “remaining to this day an enduring example of British imperial propaganda.”

“‘Boudica’ was said to mean ‘victory’, providing a symbolic semantic link between Queen Victoria and the Celtic Queen.” The authority embodied in the sculpture, British nationalism, the legacy of imperialism, comes to us in the 21st century through contemporary mass media every day and evening, rolling along in the “national” news, unassailable, but devastatingly satirised by James Robertson, in his 365-word satire “The News Where You Are”: check it out in his book, *365 Stories*, and online:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZhL57cjN8xY>

That sculpture has its date and place. Yet all the finest art in this exhibition is modern – from prehistoric stone sculptures and cave paintings to the design of bronze-age musical instruments, from pre-Christian figurative art to the paintings of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries: everything speaks of, and to, Modernism. Compare, for example, the two-sided sandstone statue from south-west Germany (500-400 BC) with Picasso's sculptures of the early 1950s: the affinities are startling.

When the Celtic Revival moves from the late 19th century into Modernism, it drives forward into real political effect. Expressionism, cubism, surrealism, all the modern movements in the visual arts make the ancient arts of the Celts familiar to us today. No longer are they merely inexplicable: magic, mysterious, mystical depictions of gods and monsters. To anyone well-read in Modernism, they are immediately comprehensible human expressions of aspects and identities people created in a world defined by seasons and geographies, family and tribal relations, languages, festivities, ceremonial occasions and rites of passage. They have their local provenance and human applications, just as surely as they have their resonance and example carrying across millennia. They are as continually immediate as Stravinsky, Picasso, MacDiarmid, J.D. Fergusson and Erik Chisholm.

This is the key thing: what artists can do is different from what historical accuracy and painstaking archaeological reconstruction can do. Their practices overlap, but the arts (visual, literary, musical, all of them) re-imagine and rejuvenate. And, carefully and accurately noted in the exhibition, this is what, in very different ways, James MacPherson in the late 18th century and Patrick Geddes in the late 19th century set out to do. For MacDiarmid, Geddes was the key figure, his influence essential.

This is what MacDiarmid drew attention to in his Open Letter to a Glasgow Undergraduate (1946), published in *The National* (May 20, 2016). He quoted Geddes: "To avoid the Scylla of paleotechnic peace and the Charybdis of War, the leaders of this coming polity will steer a bold course for Eutopia [sic]. They will aim at the development of every region, its folk, work, and place, in terms of the *genius loci*, of every nation, according to the best of its tradition and spirit; but in such wise that each region, each nation, makes its unique contribution to the rich pattern of our ever-evolving Western civilisation". And then MacDiarmid confirmed the continuity of his own efforts in the 20th century: "That was why Geddes in the '90s started the Scottish

Renaissance. That was why after the 1914-18 War I restarted it (with Geddes's approval and help). That is why I am asking you now to throw all your weight in with us in this great cause. Other countries may be left to their own students, who know them; Scotland is our job."

Chapter 1 of the exhibition catalogue states that most books on Celtic art seek to show a continuity from prehistory to medieval or even modern times, tracing "a thread of development": but, we are told, "This is not our story. We see not one style, but several; not one history, but many. There were links, but also dissimilarities. These Celtic arts – plural – need to be placed into their own histories."

Noting widespread similarities and regional variations, there is not a single tradition but different arts in different times and places: "These different Celtic arts were people's way of marking beliefs and expressing power, understanding their own heritage and their place in the world." The first chapter ends by emphasising the "relations and connections" between people never completely unified by language, geography or genetics, but reinventing themselves at times of contact and change, as worlds and cultures make contact or collide, trade, take their parts in a truly common market, a human universe. The focus in the exhibition is "on the period from c.500 BC to AD 800" but extends "almost to the present day."

That "almost" is where we would pick up the traces and bring things to bear upon where we are now.

Among the foremost contemporary Celtic poets, Aonghas MacNeacail (b.1942), in his poem, "not history but memory" in *A Proper Schooling* (1997), emphasises this point: "when i was young / it wasn't history but memory". A monoglot Gael on the Isle of Skye till the age of five, his education was equally monoglot in English, although most of his teachers were also Gaelic speakers. The damage had been done long before. The 1872 Education (Scotland) Act, which introduced compulsory education, did not even acknowledge the existence of Gaelic.

This is the long-term cultural legacy of MacDiarmid's opposition to what he called "the English ethos": not simply a racist, xenophobic, reactionary response to Empire, but a detailed, nuanced, sensitised journey of understanding those components of human identity that distinguished Scotland, and connected the Scots and Irish peoples and many others in a Celtic European cultural

history that had been neglected, co-opted, or deliberately suppressed by the British Empire. Writers and artists in Scotland especially since MacDiarmid have explored and confirmed the multifaceted Celtic identities this exhibition displays so wonderfully.

This should alert us to a much more complex and comprehensive world of relations, influences and interconnections, in all the arts in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Cornwall, and emphatically throughout Europe, as this exhibition demonstrates, since prehistoric times.

What we can find in this exhibition, if we look closely, are continuing affirmations of ancient ideas of “renaissance” meaning simply rebirth, decided acts of cultural rejuvenation, a healthy appetite for regeneration, all across Northern Europe, in opposition to reactionary ideals of imperial authority and the foreclosures of conservatism – of either the Cameron-Osborne or the Johnson-Gove varieties. Or any other.

It's time our politicians learnt a bit more about this.