# **Augsburg Honors Review**

Volume 12 Article 2

2019

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#### Recommended Citation

Holsen, Kelton (2019) "Noble Savage, Noble Scotsman: The Act of Union as a Dubious Model for British Colonialism," *Augsburg Honors Review*: Vol. 12, Article 2.

Available at: https://idun.augsburg.edu/honors\_review/vol12/iss1/2

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# Noble Savage, Noble Scotsman: The Act of Union as a Dubious Model for British Colonialism

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#### Introduction

It has become almost a cliché that during the period of intense colonialism by the great powers of Europe 'the sun never set on the British empire'. The reason that this cliché persists is that the idea behind it is true: according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, "[b]y the end of the 19th century, the British Empire comprised nearly one-quarter of the world's land surface and more than one-quarter of its total population" (Britannica). This vast conquest was not done on a whim: it had deep roots in ideas of cultural and economic superiority and, more to the point, the (demonstrably false) idea that the British Empire represented progress and 'civilization', while the rest of the world represented backwardness and so-called 'barbarism'. These ideas arose, developed, and even to some extent occurred in Scotland through the academic works of writers such as Adam Smith, William Robertson,

and James MacPherson, as well as the myths that arose around the Jacobite Rebellion, putting Scotland at the forefront of the horrors that were to come when those myths were exploited by later revisionists.<sup>1</sup>

#### "Civilisation" and "barbarism"

The idea that Europe, specifically Great Britain, represented 'civilization' while the rest of the world was fraught with backwardness arose in the works of the conjectural historians<sup>2</sup>: those who sought to determine how societies develop through comparison of the vast differences among humanity. Chief among these was Adam Smith. In Smith's Four Stages of Society, he stratifies societies into different levels of "progress" based on the means by which they survive and how that affects their respective notions of property (479-487). In order, the four stages are "first, the Age of Hunters; [second], the Age of Shepherds; [third], the Age of

¹ Broadly speaking, historical revisionism is a general term used to refer to any effort to change the narrative about a given historical event. This is not inherently a bad thing: James McPherson (no relation), former president of the American Historical Association, has described revisionism as "the lifeblood of historical scholarship" and gone on to say that "[t]here is no single, eternal, and immutable "truth" about past events and their meaning. The unending quest of historians for understanding the past—that is, "revisionism"—is what makes history vital and meaningful.". However, revisionism is generally seen as bad academic practice when it is performed without solid historical evidence to back it up, as well as when it is used to justify or cover up historical oppression.

Agriculture; and [fourth], the Age of Commerce" (Smith, 479). Smith doesn't stop at simply characterizing what puts a society at one stage or another, however; he gives historical contemporary examples to justify his theory, placing the Native Americans in the first category, the "Tartars and Arabs" in the second, and most of Europe in the fourth (Smith, 479-480). It is important to note that this division is not only ethnocentric, but also historically inaccurate: while Smith dismisses Native American agriculture as "the women plant[ing] a few stalks of Indian corn at the back of their huts" (479), evidence shows that they in fact used their fields to grow crops like corn, beans, and squash (the "Three Sisters") and even developed irrigation systems for the purposes of agriculture (Park). Furthermore, Smith misses the obvious deduction that it would be significantly more difficult and less practical to develop agriculture in the dry climates where the "Tartars and Arabs" lived. This theory did something very important for justifications of the British Empire: it created a hierarchy of civilizations in which the Empire was conveniently on top and everyone else was somewhere below.

The field of conjectural history is shot through with the concept of a

hierarchy of societal development. In William Robertson's essay "Comparative History", he makes similar claims to Smith, drawing comparisons between the ancient Germans encountered by the Roman historian Tacitus and the modern-day Native Americans-although like Smith, he also asserts that "[m]ost of the American tribes subsist by hunting, and are in a ruder and more simple state than the ancient Germans" (Robertson, 677-681). Robertson's choice to compare Native Americans to the ancient Germans raises questions: is there also a modern analogue for the Romans that conquered and ruled over the Germanic tribes? By painting a picture of 'barbarism", Robertson and Smith also demonstrate what they consider 'civilization': the peoples that they describe as 'barbaric' are described in contrast to the 'civilized' empires that seek to conquer them. As the Germanic tribes were to Rome, went the logic, so were the Native Americans to Britain. Thus, like Rome, the British Empire saw itself as poised to bring 'civilization' to the uncivilized regions of the world.

Note that the Scottish academics likely did not intend to create a justification for colonialism: they all had their own academic reasons for the works which they created. Instead, Smith and Robertson, as well as other

<sup>2</sup> The conjectural historians were a specific group of historians during the Scottish Enlightenment period whose work focused on a theory of societal development based on the comparison of contemporary European society to "rude tribes' (whether of the past or the present)." (Hopfl, 1). Key figures among them were Dugald Stewart, Adam Smith, and William Robertson. Hopfl goes on to describe how "conjectural history traces a 'process' or 'progress' between a *terminus a quo*, namely 'the first simple efforts of uncultivated nature,' and a *terminus ad quem*, the 'wonderfully and artificially complicated condition' in which we find ourselves." (Hopfl, 2). Conjectural history often involved theories of societal development coming in stages, and also featured a strong tendency to favor European societies when it came time to analyze what societies had reached what stages at any given point.



figures whose writings inadvertently justified colonialism, fell victim to the law of unintended consequences--a concept ironically conceived in part by Adam Smith which states that "[the] actions of people...always have effects that are unanticipated or unintended" (Norton). Whether or not the conjectural historians meant to line up their definitions of 'barbarous' or 'backwards' societies with the very peoples that the British Empire was looking at colonizing is irrelevant; what matters is that this stratification of societies between perceptions of 'barbarism' and 'civilization' provided justification for the centuries of imperialism and colonialism that would follow.

With the theories of Smith and Robertson, the foundations had been laid for the idea of Empire. When the propagandists of the British Empire went to build upon these foundations, however, they realized that theory would not be enough: to show that the British Empire was representative of the 'civilization' which, as demonstrated by Smith's logic, needed to spread to the rest of the world, the revisionists would need to find a model that would show the British Empire's ability to bring civilization to an area once thought of as 'barbaric'. A cursory examination of the Empire's history up to that point revealed one example which the revisionists could easily turn to their advantage: the now-completely integrated country of Scotland.

### The Birth of the Highland Myth

In order to learn how Scotland was used to demonstrate the British imperial myth, we must first examine the circumstances under which Scotland entered the British Empire.<sup>3</sup> In 1707, the Act of Union came into effect, formally uniting Scotland and England in what would eventually become the British Empire (Emerson, 11). This union was not entirely peaceful: the Jacobite rebels, supporters of the line of the exiled pretender king James II and more broadly of an independent Scotland, rose up several times in rebellion against the throne, most notably in 1745 when they were finally crushed at the Battle of Culloden, after which most of the key figures of the rebellion were killed or exiled and the claimant, "Bonnie Prince Charlie" (Charles Edward) was forced to flee to the mainland (Morrill). The Jacobites claimed to represent Scottish heritage and independence, and thus even after their defeat, "the king over the water' gained a certain sentimental appeal, especially in the Scottish Highlands, and a whole body of Jacobite songs came into being." (Morrill).

At first glance, the Jacobites might seem like the forces of Scottish nationalism acting in resistance to British imperialism. Oddly enough, this picture of the Jacobite Rebellion is exactly what the proponents of the British Empire were working to create. In 2016, University of Glasgow historian Professor Murray Pittock argued that "[f]ar from claymore wielding Highland

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Note that Scotland was not the beginning of the English expansionism that would lead into the British expansionism that was the Empire. This arguably began with the Acts of Plantation in the 17th century (Canny).



savages (sic.) being routed [by] muskets and cannon fire...the battle was a clash of modern armies with the outnumbered Jacobites defeated by their opponents use of cavalry and swords" (Braiden). Pittock went on to say that the popular image of the Jacobites being traditional Highland warriors complete with kilt and sword is the product of the Jacobite rebellions having been "strongly and misremembered systematically emphasise a secure framework for the development of 'Britishness' and the British imperial state" (Braiden). This propaganda both served the immediate interests of the British Empire with respects to Scotland (by delegitimizing the Jacobites as "savages") and, later on, its long-term interests with respects to the rest of the world (by painting a picture of the Empire having defeated representatives of the 'barbaric' past).

This deception neither began nor ended with Culloden. In order to reframe the Act of Union as the triumph of 'civilization' over barbarism and thus to convince the Scots to accept it, the culture of Scotland had to be reframed in a way that presented it as distinctly 'barbaric' and in dire need of progress. At the same time, however, the imperialists knew that they had to create this picture in a way that would appeal to the residents of Scotland: being told that one's fellow citizens are backward 'savages' doesn't tend to make one very enthusiastic about participating in an Empire run by the very people telling one these things. Thus, the myth of the Scots as "savages" had to be infused with a certain degree of pride and nobility; thus, the myth of the noble savage was born.

As Hugh Trevor-Roper points

out in his essay "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland", "[b]efore the later years of the seventeenth century, the Highlanders of Scotland did not form a distinct people. They were simply the overflow of Ireland." (Trevor-Roper, 15). Although in the present, the figure of the Scot dressed in a kilt and tam o' shanter and, perhaps, playing the bagpipe is ubiquitous with the image of Scotland, most of the aspects of that figure and the "Highland culture" that goes with him were fabricated in the pursuit of reshaping the image of Scotland's past into one that better fit the noble savage myth. Although there may have been people like this living in the Highlands, most of the country distrusted them. In 1850, Lord Macauley noted with irony that when the king wore a ceremonial kilt as a part of his visits to Scotland, he was "show[ing] his respect for the historical Scottish nation 'by disguising himself in what, before the union, was considered by nine Scotchmen out of ten as the dress of a thief" (Devine, 355-356). Indeed, the kilt had briefly been banned in the wake of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1715; when it returned, Trevor-Roper notes, the garment had fallen out of fashion with the working class, who had grown accustomed to trousers, but was adopted "with enthusiasm" by the upper classes as a sign of national pride (24). As the Highlander became a romanticised figure, the kilt became more than just a garment: it became an important cultural symbol (Trevor-Roper, 24).

The figure of the Highlander was particularly useful territory for imperialist revisionism because of the relative void that surrounded him. Trevor-Roper describes the Celtic



Highlanders as "culturally depressed"--cut off from their Irish roots and regarded poorly by the rest of Scottish society, they were easy targets for historical revisionism that would create a new sense of Scottish national identity that was more fitting to the narrative of Empire (16). The Highlander was already considered a barbarian. The next step in the process was to give the Highlander an aspect of nobility; once the myth of the Highlander as noble savage had been fully ingrained in the Scottish (and even the English) psyche, the resulting narrative could be reshaped: the Act of Union could be rewritten as the merge of the best parts of old and new into a glorious future, one that would spread the so-called light of Empire to the rest of the previously 'darkened' world.

Rewriting History: MacPherson's Ossian

Although the Act of Union was not turned into a symbol of imperialism until decades after the fact, writers during the time unintentionally created material that would go on to serve as the foundations upon which the later propagandists would build the myth of Empire. It is important to point out that at this point Scotland was undergoing a national identity crisis: the Act of Union and the Jacobite wars had thrown their national sovereignty into question, the economy had been steadily worsening for decades, and the Kirk was in disarray as a result of differences between Scottish and English theology (Emerson, 11-14). This confusion of identity meant that much of Scotland at the time was looking for something that would define who they were as a people: something

inherently Scottish at a time when the meaning of the word was becoming unclear.

Thus, it was no surprise that even the academics of Scotland readily accepted the somewhat dubious words of scholar James MacPherson when he claimed to have found and translated the works of the ancient Scottish bard Ossian--a national epic that told tales of an ancient Scottish people who had settled in the Highlands four centuries before the Irish, and from whom the Irish had stolen most of their mythology (Trevor-Roper, 17). The irony of this, Trevor-Roper points out, is that not only was the work a complete fabrication, it was also plagiarized from Irish myth:

James Macpherson picked up Irish ballads in Scotland, wrote an 'epic' in which he transferred the whole scenario from Ireland to Scotland, and then dismissed the genuine ballads thus maltreated as debased modern compositions and the real Irish literature which they reflected as a mere reflection of them" (17).

Through this clever fabrication, which received praise from academics from Walter Scott to Hugh Blair, MacPherson created a new national identity for Scotland: in Ossian, he created a figure that at once represented the nobility and the 'barbarism' of the ancient Scots (Trevor-Roper 18).

A key figure in these 'recovered' writings was Fingal, the father of Ossian who fought a war against ancient Rome and ruled Caledonia in antiquity (MacPherson, 28-29, 38) MacPherson's depiction of Fingal portrayed him as almost the idealized picture of a noble savage. While in his dissertation



Macpherson describes Europe at the time of Fingal as "overspread" by "a cloud of ignorance and barbarism", he also writes that "if we have placed Fingal in his proper period, we do honor to the manners of barbarous times" (MacPherson, 29, 32). In other words, MacPherson does not deny the 'barbarism' of his protagonist; instead, he imbues that 'barbarism' with an innate nobility. MacPherson goes on to echo Smith's ideas of societal progress:

There are three stages in human society. The first is the result of consanguinity, and the natural affection of the members of a family to one another. The second begins when property is established, and men enter into associations for mutual defence, against the invasions and injustice of neighbors. Mankind submit, in the third, to certain laws and subordinations of government, to which they trust the safety of their persons and property. (38).

MacPherson later notes that "[t]he middle state is the region of complete barbarism and ignorance", the middle state being the stage in which Fingal's society exists (38). Just as Smith had done before him, MacPherson stratified society into different levels of progress. The key difference is that, in this case, MacPherson put the idealized version of his own society--that is, the fictionalized 'Highland culture'--into a lower strata than the newly formed British Empire. Fingal's fight against the Romans, then, parallels with the Jacobite rising to some extent: the key difference is that in MacPherson's fictionalized history, the wise, yet barbarous Fingal was able to keep the

forces of 'civilization' and Empire at bay, whereas at Culloden, as the propaganda tells it, the noble savage fell at the hands of the forces of progress and modernity, bringing Scotland firmly into the present and, as the later revisionists would tell, into the Empire's mission of spreading that progress to the rest of the world.

It is important to note that MacPherson's goal was probably not to reframe Union as the triumph of socalled 'civilization, or even to praise Union at all. In this case, MacPherson also fell victim to the law of unintended consequences. MacPherson was a native son of Scotland and part of an ancient clan: at best, he would have wanted to create something for his country to be proud of. At worst, he was simply a charlatan in search of wealth and fame. Either way, however, *Ossian* became the linchpin of the Scottish noble savage myth: the more that it gained fame as a national text, the more the narrative of Union as the triumph of 'civilization' over 'barbarism' spread (although its effects were not felt to their full extent until later in the 18th century), and the stronger the case for spreading that 'civilization' became in the hands of the revisionists.

## Applications of the Scottish model

It should here be noted that the introduction of Scotland into the British Empire was nothing like the Empire's subsequent conquests. In terms of implementation, the 'conquest' of Scotland was much more of an annexation: although Devine notes that the annexation was partly imposed via economic force from England, the Union was based in the traditions of both

countries, and the Jacobites who resisted the cause of Union were considered dangerous by the English and Scottish governments alike even before union (Devine, 49-55). By contrast, the British imperial conquests involved significant use of force and often ignored the sovereignty of the people living in the conquered area. In general, the Act of Union and what followed from it do not even come close to the bloodshed and human tragedy that resulted from centuries of rule by the British Empire, and its acquisition, as previously noted, also occurred via completely different methods than those which Britannia chose to use abroad. Nevertheless, the Scottish model served the interests of historical revisionists who chose to reframe the Act of Union from an economic annexation to an exemplar of imperial "progress".4

Not only did the Scots serve as the face of the British Empire's purported ability to advance a society from 'barbarism' to 'civilization', but they also served as the face of its colonial efforts overseas. During the later parts of the 18th and earlier parts of the 19th centuries, Britain fought colonial wars across the globe, to the point that historian T.M. Devine remarks that Britain "effectively became an armed nation in this period" (293). Scots were "grossly overrepresented" among the soldiers that fought in these wars--in 1787, 31.5% of the British army in North America was Scottish, and despite comprising only 15% of the British population, Scotland "provided

36 per cent of volunteers in 1797, 22 per cent in 1801, and 17 per cent in 1804" (Devine, 297). Furthermore, Scottish regiments were distinctly Scottish in their appearance and structure: the soldiers wore the 'traditional' "Highland dress" and were "encouraged to develop their own particular esprit de corps " based around their Scottish identity (Devine, 309). This, as Devine points out, was particularly curious against the background of the Jacobite rebellions, in response to which Britain had taken actions such as banning Highland dress and other symbols of Scottish patriotism (309).

Devine argues that the Scots were allowed to show this national and cultural pride as a way of letting off steam, and that the Highland regiments were a way for the British Empire to channel the "disaffection" of the Scottish people into the service of Empire (310). Taking this argument a step further, the Scotland which the Highland regiments took pride in was no longer the old Scotland that the Jacobites had longed for a return to--rather, the Highland regiments fought for a new Scotland: a Scotland which had advanced into the modern era and was now a part of the British Empire, while still keeping its sense of cultural identity. Putting the Highland regiments at the forefront of their colonial endeavors fed the myth at the core of the British Empire: that colonization was a transformative process designed to bring societies into the light of a modern era.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Note that the Scottish imperial myth did not arise in and of itself during the time of the Act of Union; rather, later historians used the Act of Union and work by previous revisionists such as MacPherson in order to incorporate the Act of Union into imperial mythos.



### **Enlightened Trusteeship**

This new model of colonialism signalled a significant shift in the rhetoric used to justify colonialism. One of the original moral justifications for colonialism came from John Locke, who wrote that our right to own land is based on our "duty to God" to cultivate it, from which followed that the Native Americans, who he accused of being "parasitic on the land" due to previously mentioned misconceptions about their agriculture, were failing their duty of care and thus liable for conquest by the more 'civilised' Europeans (Boisen). Early colonialism had been often justified in part via the concept of terra nullius, or "nobody's land"--that because the areas of the world colonized by the Empire were home to people who, according to the British, had not sufficiently developed them, they could not truly stake a claim to the land. Therefore, the reasoning went, it was acceptable for European countries to lay claim to an area of land where a tribe had lived for centuries, send settlers to live there, and then use military force against the natives if they tried to prevent their land from being stolen (Boisen).<sup>5</sup> This logic, extrapolated from Locke's writings, was used to justify the colonial doctrine of terra nullius, and thus to justify the right of European settlers to take land that had previously belonged to native peoples and set up European-style farms

(Boisen). Boisen argues that Locke's theory created "a universal theory of property without somehow conceding that the Indians owned their land by introducing a limited definition of labour and making it a moral obligation to engage in that particular type of labour", essentially "setting the Natives up for failure in fulfilling their duty to God."

This line of thinking, however, began to weaken as the Enlightenment movement spread across Europe and ideas of conjectural history caught on: if native peoples were simply behind in their "development", then taking their land away would be like stealing from a child; instead, a notion of "trusteeship" to guide the "facilitation of civilising" would be necessary in the new "enlightened empire" (Boisen). Furthermore, the methods of colonizing themselves had changed: as Gallagher and Robinson point out, in the latter part of the British colonial period, the British socio-economic sphere began to expand to countries over which it did not even formally rule in what the authors refer to as an "informal empire" through "the combination of commercial penetration and political influence [which] allowed the United Kingdom to best command those economies which could be made to fit best into her own" (1, 5-11). Thus, the obligation to 'civilize' as a pretext for colonialism became much more appealing in the latter part of the 18th

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> This was not the only justification given for colonialism, or cause of the British Empire: religious proselytism, the desire for economic expansion, and the desire to hold locations of strategic importance often drove empires of the time to colonize, and technological factors as well as the intentional exploitation of infectious diseases allowed for the easy facilitation of colonialism (Aybar). It was, however, a significant justification, as it allowed for many of the potential concerns about the natives' right to their own land to be hand-waved away.



century. It should be noted that both the *terra nullius* doctrine and this new notion of trusteeship had roots in intentionally false ideas about Native societies; these justifications functioned as mere tools to smooth over the process of displacing and exploiting indigenous people worldwide.

In this context, it becomes clear why the Act of Union and Scotland as a whole became the centerpiece of the British Empire myth: if the Act of Union is the gold standard for the British Empire's ability to civilise, the British Empire becomes the gold standard for 'good colonialism'. The formation of the Scottish regiments and for the rewriting of Union as the 'civilization' of Scotland helped to sell the myth of trusteeship: that Britain's track record involved 'civilizing' a people so thoroughly that they could go on to 'civilize' others. The fact that, even by British standards, Scotland was already a 'civilized' nation before the Act of Union had by this point been covered up with enough historical revisionism that it could be safely ignored.

Indeed, historical revisionism became more and more prevalent as the justifications for Empire evolved. For instance, although his work was highly unfair to the Native Americans and paved the way for the notion of trusteeship, Adam Smith was generally Empire, opposed to the British devoting an entire chapter in the Wealth of Nations to "a comprehensive inventory of the economic and moral aberrations of empire" (Ince). After Smith's death, however, the mostly anti-colonialist positions he had held in life were misconstrued to support the British Empire in its mission

so-called trusteeship. Although Smith's main proposal for the fate of the British colonies was an eventual "decolonization" in which the Empire released their former colonies on good terms and subsequently set up military and trade partnerships, alliances his readers in the 19th century set that proposal aside in favor of his alternative proposal: that the British Empire merge with its colonies directly instead of continuing the earlier system of imperial federation (Palen). Palen points out that this theory was taken to such lengths that, by the end of the century, Smith was being used to justify the nationalism and imperialism which he had previously criticized.

The consequences of the lie of British trusteeship still echo today. In 2016, a poll revealed that 44% of British respondents were "proud of Britain's history of colonialism" (Osborne). The propaganda surrounding the Empire as a civilizing force was evidently effective, as it still persists even in an era where information is freely accessible about what the British Empire actually did. Imperial 'civilizing' included methods that were horrific and inhumane, including the use of concentration camps against the Boer population at the turn of the 20th century and the Kenyan people during the Mau Mau uprising of the 1950s, as well as the massacres, famines, and religious violence incited by British negligence in India and Pakistan (Osborne). Even if these atrocities had not occurred, the sheer fact that for nearly three centuries Britain took over almost a quarter of the world and exploited it for resources is morally reprehensible.

Ultimately, the British Empire



was a systemic moral failure. The reason for this, when analyzed from a historical perspective, is simple: the moral justification of trusteeship that was used to rationalize the British Empire was based on a series of lies, misinterpretations, and historical revisionism. Scotland had the misfortune of being the spawning bed of this deceit, and some of its most

esteemed academics inadvertently contributed to the revisionism that would be used to justify the atrocities that were to come. Although they may have been victims of the law of unintended consequences, the work of these scholars is nevertheless a key part of how the British imperial myth came about.

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