

It's not just the Economy, Stupid!

Brexit and the Cultural Sector

Edited by Gesa Stedman and Sandra van Lente



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Claire Squires: Haud Oan to Europe

There is a library in Scotland far from the bustle of Edinburgh and Glasgow. From the late 17th century, some decades before the Acts of Union of 1707 brought Scotland and England together, it was willed by the local aristocrat that his family library should be made available to anyone who came to visit. And so they came, over the fields of rural Perthshire, down the river, along tracks well trod by human, horse and cart, until well into the 20th century. From the library's extant Borrowers' Ledgers we can trace the pathways that men and women, adults and children, aristocrats and farm workers, took to arrive at Innerpefferay.¹ Informed by these documents, we can imagine they'd stay a while, looking at the leather-bound books up on the shelves, their eyes running over the gold of the titles on their spines. They'd then ask the Keeper of the Books to take one or two volumes down for them. After the Keeper has completed the record of their borrowing, including details of the fine if they failed to return the book, they'd place it carefully in their bag and take it to their home.

You could track the pathways that these borrowers took on their journey from home to library and back again; each a slim thread recording a journey, this remote library providing a nexus of routes to and fro, back and forth, again and again, as individuals took advantage of Scotland's first public lending library. If you were to investigate further into the library's catalogue, you could also start to map the pathways that the books had taken to arrive in this rural location, from Edinburgh, yes, and Glasgow too. But also from down south, from London, Oxford, Cambridge. From across the Channel: Paris, and Amsterdam, and Geneva, and from across the Atlantic, New York, and Philadelphia. The library's books contain rich ideas connecting its thinking from Europe and beyond, and each of the collection's books also provides a thread: from the library back to its place of printing, to its author, and to the milieu in which it was written.

Now the library is quiet, its visitor books more active than its Borrowers' Ledgers. Tourists come from Scotland and beyond: keen bibliographers, local historians, North American and other overseas visitors with Scottish heritage, trying to find a clue that their ancestor borrowed a book from the library shelves for a few weeks. The river meanders through the landscape, picturesque bridges above it, taking us into our past, carrying us over into the future.

On Friday 24 June 2016, we awoke to find ourselves catapulted into a new and unexpected future; one voted for by the 52% of the British population who wanted leave the EU. But in Scotland the percentage was different, with 62% of those based voting to remain, and every single council, urban or rural, Central Belt, Highland or Island, voting to stay. The reasons were various: a sense of civic nationalism rendered through the vote for Scottish devolution in 1999 and before, perhaps; a conception of Scotland as a small nation existing within a much larger political unit; a populace whose political engagement with constitutional matters, multiple referenda and various local, national, UK, and European elections made it super-enfranchised, rather than seeking a continental bogeyman to blame for its ills. And perhaps, some kind of centuries-old feeling of Scotland's place in Europe, cleaving to the Enlightenment, to Scotland's place in the wider world.

And yet the referendum result saw Scotland at variance with England, and Wales, and the more substantial population of England swayed the overall verdict. The shock across the UK was seismic, but in Scotland it was particularly hard felt, as both city and island, the metropolitan and the rural, impoverished and wealthy regions, had declared that they wanted to stay.

The textile artist Jane Hunter, like many, felt this to her core. She followed the fallout on the news and on social media, distracted from her commissions by the events of the day. And then, as artists will do, she started to work on a piece that would communicate her response to the political events metaphorically. This work, 'Haud Oan' (Scots for 'Hold On'), shows the UK represented in Harris Tweed, a traditional fabric woven in the Outer Hebrides. She stitched the colours that each area of the UK had voted to remain in yellow; and to leave in blue. Northern Ireland showed a strong yellow, as did the metropolitan regions of England. But Scotland was the yellowest of all, with a set of threads leading from its landmass south-eastwards, out of the picture frame, to continental Europe. England and Wales' threads are cut, hanging downwards.²

The metaphor is clear: the threads of the geography literalising political affiliations, with Scotland hanging on by threads, hauding tight. As Jane Hunter says of the title of her work, it is 'open to your own interpretation, from initial shock and surprise, fear and unsettled feelings, to a rally cry or call for patience.' The disparity between the Scottish and English votes in the EU referendum has led to calls for a second Scottish independence referendum, although the 2017 General Election results have put these on temporary political hold. In much longer geological time, Scotland, and the rest of the UK, are long severed by a cataclysmic meltwater channel from mainland Europe. (Scotland north of the Great Glen hefted to Newfoundland, though; a complicated Palaeozoic geology that some of Jane Hunter's other artworks explore.)



@Jane Hunter

Artists' responses to the national have always been fraught: we may construct national canons, create university curricula based on Scottish Literature, collect paintings from a period in Scottish history. States are imagined, cultural entities as well as political or military ones. But artists work across national boundaries, seeking ideas, inspiration, and sometimes refuge in other countries. Ideas flow, and artistic techniques hop magpie-like across borderlines, resistant to the idea of passports, visas, or intellectual constraint. Artists' work can also be profoundly local, focused on delicate and detailed portraits of local environment; a minutiae of observation that build meaning and feeling: Amy Liptrot's recent hymning of her native Orkneys in *The Outrun* is one such written example.

And yet, now, the accidents of our geographies tie us to specific locations, to a collective will which says that the UK must leave Europe. As I write, the uncertain political situation in Westminster means it is still far from settled what the position of non-UK Europeans currently resident in the UK will be after Brexit; nor has it been answered whether UK citizens living elsewhere in Europe will be able to remain without significant levels of additional bureaucracy and cost. Universities across the UK have large staffing bases, substantial numbers of students, and high financial investment for its research from the EU. There is no doubt that universities will suffer from the UK leaving the EU. An opinion poll of academics in the lead-up to the EU referendum showed nine out of ten supporting remaining in the larger political, economic, social and cultural unit of Europe.

By October 2017 (current post-General Election results and Government-pending), the UK should be well engaged with negotiations to leave the EU. In this month, publishers will gather a short river trip distance from Mainz, where printing was developed from existing technologies (including those established for many centuries in China) by Johannes Gutenberg. The Frankfurt Book Fair is the world's largest publishing trade event, an extraordinary gathering for face-to-face meetings to make business out of culture in the age of the digital. It enables the circulation of books around Europe and the world, a much larger, substantially accelerated version of the cultural economy that brought books to Innerpeffray Library in the 1600s. And yet to ponder on that quiet, rural location of centuries ago, and the enormous wealth of learning, communication, and shared cultural worth it housed (and still houses), might enable us to pick up some of those threads again: walk the footpaths quietly; entwine our future routes once more; holding on, lending out, and taking back in again, and again.

Notes:

1. A research project focused on Innerpeffray Library is currently underway at the University of Stirling, in collaboration with the Library and the University of Dundee, and I am grateful to PhD researcher Jill Dye for knowledge. More on the project can be found at: http://www.sgsah.ac.uk/about/students/arcstudentprofiles2015-16/headline_498570_en.html.
2. Jane Hunter describes in greater detail her process of creating 'Haud Oan' on her website: <https://www.janehunterart.com/pages/haud-oan>.