

Scotland: Nation, Enlightenment and Empire

By Clarisse Godard Desmarest

A new exhibition at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh explores the changes that took place in Scotland in the areas of science, technology and literature over a century (1760-1860). It also offers a nuanced narrative of Scotland's role in the British empire.

Reviewed: The Remaking of Scotland: Nation, Migration, Globalisation 1760-1860, an exhibition presented in Edinburgh at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, 16 June 2018 – 27 June 2021.

A new exhibition entitled *The Remaking of Scotland: Nation, Migration, Globalisation 1760-1860* has just opened at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery (SNPG) in Edinburgh; it is the third such major redisplay of the Gallery's historic permanent collection to have been completed in recent years. As such, it takes place in parallel to *Heroes and Heroines: The Victorian Age*, a display which opened last year and which includes a fine portrait from 1840 of the young Queen Victoria by F. X. Winterhalter (curated by Julie Lawson). *Scots in Italy*, also on show in the Gallery, runs through 3 March 2019 and presents a superb three-quarter-length portrait from 1763 of Robert Adam's younger brother James Adam (1732-94) by Antonio Zucchi while on the grand tour of Italy — this portrait is currently on loan to the Gallery.

The Remaking of Scotland explores the remarkable transformation that took place in Scotland over the period 1760-1860, when the nation's place in the world was

dramatically redefined following the collapse of the Jacobite cause after the Battle of Culloden in 1746. As well as tracing the changes that took place within Scotland in the areas of science, technology and literature, the exhibition looks beyond Scotland's borders to highlight the many Scots who ventured further afield —as soldiers, sailors, administrators, artists, missionaries, and adventurers. Their destinations ranged across the world, and the exhibition showcases work featuring Scots with close relationships to India, the Americas and Arctic, as well as the Caribbean. As with *Scots in Italy* Dr. Lucinda Lax, Senior Curator of Eighteenth-Century Collections, has created a dynamic new exhibition, bringing together a range of fascinating paintings, sculptures and drawings from the National Galleries of Scotland's outstanding collection.

Capturing the Spirit of the Scottish Enlightenment

The opening panel of the exhibition features a portrait from 1769 of James Russell (died 1773) with his son James (1754-1836) by David Martin, the most talented pupil of Scotland's leading portrait painter Allan Ramsay. The two prominent figures in Enlightenment Edinburgh's medical profession (the elder James was head of the Incorporation of Surgeons and later Professor of Natural Philosophy at Edinburgh University) are presented in an exquisite domestic portrait, or conversation piece. Two stock details —an open book and a globe— are placed in the foreground beside the sitters and can be seen to symbolise the intellectual and scientific achievements of the time.

Some of Scotland's most well-known literary and musical figures are also shown, including Robert Burns (1759-96), represented here in a portrait by Alexander Nasmyth; Niel Gow (1727-1807) by Sir Henry Raeburn; Lady Nairne (1766-1845) by Sir John Watson Gordon; James Macpherson (1736-96), shown in a portrait after Sir Joshua Reynolds; and Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) by Andrew Geddes. Portraits of internationally celebrated Scottish thinkers and innovators, including the geologist James Hutton (1726-97), portrayed by Sir Henry Raeburn; the chemist Joseph Black (1728-99) by David Martin; and the engineer James Watt (1736-1819), depicted by John Partridge, are a reminder of Scotland's central role in European development. These figures laid the foundations for modern science and industry, and their achievements were paralleled in literature by the romanticism of Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott.

Andrew Geddes's portrait, c.1818, of Sir Walter Scott looking to one side offers a more informal view of the novelist than the more classic portrait by Sir Henry Raeburn which was previously on display. Such a choice reflects the curator's effort to include less well-known works from the collection in the exhibition. A portrait from 1806 of James Maitland, 8th Earl of Lauderdale (1759-1839), also on display, reminds us of the importance of this intriguing figure who, despite being born into one of Scotland's greatest aristocratic families, developed progressive political convictions. Although he may be familiar to economic historians —he argued against Adam Smith's theory that an increase in private riches would naturally create an increase in public wealth and welfare— Lauderdale remains somewhat obscure to the lay public. A marble bust of Lauderdale, 1803, in neoclassical style echoes the painting in a section on the Revolutionary Wars. The sculpture creates a good vista down the Gallery and reminds us of the fact that Lauderdale was a fervent supporter of the French Revolution.

Commerce, Empire and Slavery

The new challenges that arose from a changing social reality, the development of industrialisation and the erosion of religious values —which could easily be hidden by a form of romantic escapism— were nowhere more apparent than in Scotland's involvement in the growing British empire. A small landscape "On the Quay at Leith" by painter David Octavius Hill, one of the longest serving and most successful secretaries of the Royal Scottish Academy (RSA), gives a vivid sense of Leith's trading importance prior to the growth of Glasgow in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This painting which evokes the east coast's participation in the empire was purchased by the Royal Scottish Academy in 1826, the year when this institution was formed, before it was transferred to the Scottish National Gallery in 1859.

At the same time as able colonial administrators sought to apply 'enlightened' principles to their work, the 'triangular trade' was taking thousands of slaves across the Atlantic from Africa to North America and the Caribbean, where an array of commodities —including sugar, rum and tobacco— were then transported from the plantations in which they were being produced to the British Isles.

Able colonial administrators sought to apply "enlightened" principles to their work. A newly acquired portrait, c.1810, of the lawyer Sir Thomas Strange (1756-1841),

by the fashionable London painter John Hoppner, offers an insight into this fascinating character who spent his entire career abroad, first in Nova Scotia, Canada, and then in India. While in Nova Scotia he used his position as Chief Justice to protect runaway slaves from their masters. In India, he helped create the fusion between British Common Law and Hindu traditions that would be the foundation of the modern Indian legal system. Hoppner's expressive portrait gives a sense of the rigour and intelligence of the sitter.

Scotland's relationship with India at this time is highlighted in a number of other works. A full-length portrait from 1777 of Mohamed Ali Khan Waledjah, Nawab of Arcot (1717-95), in native dress, yet in a distinctive European setting, reflects the complex and sometimes fraught relations between India, and its different cultures, and the powerful British colonists. This portrait forms part of George Willison's numerous commissions in India and contrasts with a better-known portrait from 1765 of James Boswell (1740-95), the biographer of Samuel Johnson, by the same Edinburgh-born artist and also in the Scottish National Gallery's collection. A portrait, c.1812, of leading novelist and philanthropist Elizabeth Hamilton (1757-1816) by Sir Henry Raeburn recalls Hamilton's criticism of the absurdities of contemporary British society, and its failed attempt to understand Indian life and values. Meanwhile, another portrait, c.1775, this time of David Scott (1746-1805) by Tilly Kettle, the first prominent British artist to work in India, exemplifies Scottish involvement in Britain's commercial empire. David Scott exploited the opportunities brought by the British East India Company's growing power to establish his own private trading company, Scott, Tate and Adamson. Its success brought Scott wealth and recognition.

The enormous wealth that many Scottish merchants connected with the slave trade accrued through their lifetimes enabled them to buy both land and property (often in large numbers) back home in Scotland. Sir Henry Raeburn's portrait, c.1794, of Robert Cunninghame Graham of Gartmore (1735-97), who owned estates in Perthshire and Renfrewshire, shows a gentleman conscious of his status as a landowner and politician, but gives no hint of his Jamaican connections — whereas the sitter's first fortune was made in the slave economy. A forceful full-length portrait from 1798 of William Forbes of Callendar (1743-1815) by Sir Henry Raeburn reflects the immense wealth of those Scots who seized the opportunities offered by Britain's growing involvement in the Atlantic trading system. A native of Aberdeen, William Forbes made a fortune by supplying high-quality copper pans for sugar plantations in the Caribbean. On his return to Scotland, he was able to pay for his country estate, Callendar, with a single, specially printed £100,000 banknote.

A large canvas “The Slave Market, Constantinople” by Sir William Allan forms the focal point of another key theme in the exhibition: artists abroad. Scottish painters ventured further than ever in this period, as exemplified by Sir William Allan, who journeyed to Russia, the Caucasus, and Turkey in 1805. The painting, which signalled the painter’s opposition to slavery, was exhibited in London on its completion in 1838, the year the last slaves in the British empire finally received their freedom – abolition of the apprenticeship clause. The sympathy for the Greeks that was felt by Scots during the Greek War of Independence (1821-32) is also reflected in the painting. Lord Byron’s support for the Greeks is commemorated in a marble statue, c.1816, of the poet.

The debate over the abolition of slavery is exemplified in two bust portraits in white marble, Sir Archibald Alison (1792-1867) by Patric Park c.1850 and Henry Brougham (1778-1868) by John Adams Acton made in 1867. Revd Archibald Alison, a successful conservative Edinburgh lawyer, was a regular contributor to the *Blackwood’s Magazine*. In 1833, he received compensation as a trustee for his brother-in-law’s plantation in St Vincent and, at the time of the American Civil Wars, he became a prominent defender of slave-holding in the American South. By contrast, Henry Brougham, also from Edinburgh and a co-founder of the liberal *Edinburgh Review*, led the campaign against the slave trade for many years. The highlights of Brougham’s tenure as Lord Chancellor were the passing of the 1832 Reform Act, of which he was a staunch supporter, and the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833.

In one of the exhibition cases, an engraving depicting a Mediterranean landscape by the Scottish landscape painter Hugh William Williams (1773-1829) reflects the importance of the artist in the popularisation of the Athenian identity of Edinburgh. His journal *Travels in Italy, Greece and the Ionian Islands in a Series of Letters* (1820) had an immense impact in Edinburgh where his watercolours went on display in 1822 before they were published in twelve parts as *Select Views of Greece* between 1823 and 1829. Williams’s role in the general enthusiasm for all things Greek in the Scottish capital earned him the nickname “Grecian Williams” and the phrase “Athens of the North” was reputedly coined in 1824 by the painter. In *Blackwood’s Magazine* (1819), Archibald Alison argued that Scotland should have its own national monument to sustain its status in the British empire and that the Parthenon of Athens offered the finest model for the national monument to be raised in Edinburgh.

The Scottish participation in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars is underlined in several large-scale paintings including a portrait of Admiral Duncan (1731-1804), a distinguished officer in the Navy, by Henri-Pierre Danloux, a French

artist who found refuge in London in 1792. Although the iconic “Rev. Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch” was once attributed by Stephen Lloyd, former curator at the SNPG, to the talented portrait-painter, the official line at the Galleries is now that this is undoubtedly the work of Raeburn. Some of the most severe episodes of the wars against Revolutionary France are recollected (Battles of Aboukir and Alexandria, both in 1801) as well as the prominent role of senior officers in the Army and Navy (Lt General Sir John Hope, Major Hugh Montgomerie and John McArthur).

By showing the different strands that were coming into play at the turn of the nineteenth century, the exhibition brings together the revolutionary spirit and the spirit of *romanticism*. Wars and human exploitation formed part of a reality which is too often obscured by the mythic image of Scotland expressed by romantic writers. The extraordinary enterprising spirit of the Scots is signalled in the two world maps of 1747 and 1831 reproduced in the display. Scotland’s relation with far-away territories, and the Arctic, is encapsulated in a small, powerful portrait of John Sakeouse (1797?-1819) by Alexander Nasmyth. The sitter was the first arctic Inuit to travel to Scotland, and arrived in Leith in 1816 where he became a local celebrity. Fittingly, Sakeouse is shown alongside a portrait of Sir John Ross, one of the great explorers of his time, and one who led the first North-West Passage expedition in 1818.

The yellow walls in the exhibition work well with the paintings and sculptures and offer a fitting presentation for this nuanced narrative of Scotland’s role in the British empire. The exhibition shows that the intersection between the Enlightenment and the problem of slavery remains a fruitful area of inquiry, and such a display is particularly timely given the contemporary context both in Scotland and in the wider world.

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