

## **Eighteenth-Century Scottish Drama and the Contestation of National Identities**

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Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun famously wrote:

I said, I knew a very wise man so much of Sir Christopher's sentiment, that he believed if a man were permitted to make all the ballads, he need not care who should make the laws of a nation. (Fletcher 1732)<sup>1</sup>

Very often this is as far as quotation of this passage proceeds and it is cited as if Fletcher were approving the impact of what he calls 'ballads' as in some sense superior to, or at least more effective than, 'laws' with regard to the regulation of government. This article considers the impact on eighteenth-century Scotland of one aspect of what Fletcher calls 'ballads', which, as we shall see in a moment, includes what we would call 'plays'. Before doing this, it is worth considering how far his statement is quite as positive as limited quotation might suggest. The much-cited sentence is followed by another two:

And we find that most of the antient legislators thought they could not well reform the manners of any city without the help of a lyrick, and sometimes of a dramatick poet. But in this city the dramatick poet no less than the ballad-maker has been almost wholly employed to corrupt the people, in which they have had most unspeakable and deplorable success. (Fletcher 1732)

Certainly Fletcher makes a powerful claim for the potential of the ballad-maker – or the lyric or dramatic poet – for 'reforming manners'. He also, however, qualifies what he says by suggesting that, in his time, their role, including implicitly that of drama, was less to be admired. Ballads and drama were places of contestation and for Fletcher in the first decade of the eighteenth century they were corrupting rather than beneficial. Nonetheless, Fletcher is clear that his balladeer, in the form for this article's purposes of 'dramatic poet', might have a real influence on the public and its manners, even if for him in 1703 that was 'unspeakable and deplorable'. This article argues that part of the impact of eighteenth-century Scottish drama on the public and its 'manners' was through contestation of Scottish national identity,

or, rather, versions of Scottish national identities. This, for some of the potential audience, might indeed appear unspeakable and deplorable, but over the course of the century it came to have a particular importance and wide significance.

One aspect of this impact was through what I have called the (Rule) Britannia Project.<sup>2</sup> This, I argue, emerged when Scottish writers very soon after the union of 1707 began to create a conception of 'Britain' and is congruent with Robert Crawford's powerful argument for the Scottish creation of the study of English literature. English writers might not think writing Britain into existence necessary since, for many, the post-Union state based in Westminster could be seen as *Anglia Continuans*. For Unionist Scots, though, it was important that what the Union established was a new political – not just, as before, geographical and possibly cultural – phenomenon: 'Britannia'. John Arbuthnot was quick off the mark after 1707, with his 1712 creation of John Bull and his sister Peggy, the alliance of personifications of England and Scotland. Later, the drama that provides the name I offer for the 'Project' was written by two Scots, David Mallet (dialogue) and James Thomson (lyrics), who collaborated on *The Masque of Alfred*. In this, the Anglo-Saxon hero emerges from disguise to drive out the Danes, on behalf – anachronistically – of 'Britain'. This highly political play was postponed from its scheduled Drury Lane première on 9 February 1740 to be presented by the Prince of Wales's command on 1 and 2 August at his country home, Cliveden. Frederick and his playwrights were anti-Walpole 'Patriots'. That is to say, they saw a future for Britain not focused in the established Hanoverian way on the army and Continental wars, but one centred on the navy and international – and, especially, transatlantic – trade. So in Thomson's concluding song, 'Rule Britannia', set to Thomas Arne's music and sung in duet by Alfred, a wise Patriot paragon (like Frederick), and his queen Eltruda, Alfred's lines order – or at least implore – Britannia to rule the waves. The song claims that 'They rule the balanc'd world, who rule the main'. (Arne 1981: 142ff) In a very explicit way Mallet and Thomson can be seen to contest, though in the privileged context of the Prince of Wales's alternative court to that of George II, the nature of the new

'British' national identity at several levels: military versus naval, transatlantic trading versus defending Hanover's mainland Continental interests, and linguistic – the Scottish authors adopt, as do other (Rule) Britannia writers, English as the language of dramatic and other intellectual discourse. In this case, between the two Jacobite risings, we find two examples of Scottish 'dramatic poet' jointly exploring through their drama the nature of British identity. The rest of this article will address such contestation in the context of conceptions of eighteenth-century Scottish national identity and identities, bearing always in mind that these contestations took place within the overall framework of the newly developing British state.

We have to be careful, of course, not to narrow the conception of 'drama', derived from a Greek word for doing, to 'theatre' derived from a Greek word for viewing, nor to focus unduly on professional manifestations of either. As Michael Newton has forcibly reminded us in his excellent and refreshing chapter in the *Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama* (2011), eighteenth-century Scottish drama included folk dance-drama in the Gaelic language. This, whatever else its social and creative functions, asserted the identity of Gaelic as a language of dramatic discourse, and as a particular element of Scottish national identity existing throughout the eighteenth century within the several versions of Scottish national identities. Those often intertwined in interesting ways, as we shall see towards the end of this article when we consider theatrical plays by the Gaelic-speaking playwright, Archibald Maclaren. Just as we must remain aware of the impact of Gaelic folk drama, we must remain conscious of the existence of community and seasonal drama in folk-plays and folk-revels, performance by people which asserted and reinforced their communities. This form of identity contestation and formation, often related to the seasons, continued to exist after the Reformation, the Kirk having failed, as John McGavin has reminded us,<sup>3</sup> to suppress such activities. Indeed, McGavin argues that the Kirk in fact sought, rather than to suppress such dramatic activity, to control its contexts, unlikely as it was ever to see the inside of a theatre. Certainly a key factor in performing community identity lay in the various annual ceremonies related to marking the marches, or boundaries, of towns, especially in

the Borders. Such a ceremony in Linlithgow, still held on the first Tuesday after the second Thursday in June, actually gave rise to a play, John Finlayson's *The Marches Day*, published in 1771. A further important aspect of eighteenth-century dramatic activity prevalent in Scotland was, as Alasdair Cameron has pointed out, amateur acting which

amongst the upper and professional classes was very widespread in the Lowlands in the eighteenth century. This ranged from the country-house performances of Charles Frank of Dughtrig [...] to benefits for deserving causes in the cities, and village entertainments. (1987: 203)

Drama in eighteenth-century Scotland indeed had many strands.

Accompanying these, as I have suggested in *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama and Scottish Theatre: Diversity, Language, Continuity*, Scottish schools – at least across the length and breadth of Scots/English-speaking Scotland – regularly performed plays. As was common across much of Europe within what was still at this time the humanist education tradition, these plays came from the classical repertoire or were occasional pieces by their masters for festive occasions. George Buchanan's plays, written around 1540 in Bordeaux, were, of course, an earlier example of this tradition, if of a far higher order of achievement and influence than any other examples. Intended ostensibly to develop oratorical and rhetorical skills in pupils who might go on to university and then into the professions, these were played for the end of school years or for visitations by magistrates, ministers and gentry. They were in no way surreptitious dramatic activities: in 1711, for example, Aberdeen Town Council required a public theatre to 'be erected in some publict place of the toune, as the counsell shall think fit and there some publict action to be acted by the schollars of the said school'. (McKenzie 1955: 104) Whatever the publicly defined purpose of these performances, it seems clear that often they were more than didactic exercises. Rather, they were part of a performance culture. While they supported the education of young males who in time would become lawyers, politicians and ministers, this culture developed skills and interests which at the very least would service the amateur

theatrical performance to which Cameron has referred and stimulate interest in drama as an art form.

Certainly, engagement among educated young men with drama did not cease when they left school. In 1720 Glasgow university authorities tried to stop their students' playing *Tamerlane*, objecting to, *inter alia*, men performing in women's clothes. The students, supported by some of the staff, refused to cancel their production. In the end a compromise was reached and permission given to go ahead, as long as it was not on university premises. When the play was presented on 30 December, it happened in, arguably, its nursery, the Grammar School. (McKenzie 1955: 106-7) The Kirk-inflected management of the university had not been able to suppress this performance and indeed here the contestation as to whether the play should go ahead or not, whether or not it was appropriate for the community, developed within the very faculty of the university. Drama, then, was a site not only of contestations of national political and diplomatic identity in the way *Alfred* can be seen to be at several levels, it was also a site of cultural contestation, about what kind of nation would constitute any asserted national identity. Gaelic-language, folk, amateur, community-based, school and university drama all in their way form part of a broader range of contestations, some of them engaged in compulsorily by young people in the process of becoming the next educated elite.

This article will later address the impact of that elite of lawyers, ministers and intellectuals on what we might now recognise as fully professional theatre, but now it considers school drama's wider influence. This could extend beyond the school into aspects of professional or quasi-professional theatrical provision. Perhaps the most prominent example of just how important that wider effect might be relates to Allan Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd*, first published in 1725. The master at Haddington Grammar School from 1720 to 1731 was John Leslie, a friend of Ramsay, who revised *The Gentle Shepherd* as a ballad-opera for performance by Leslie's pupils. On 22 January 1729, this took place in

Edinburgh's Taylor's Hall, then – significantly – Scotland's leading professional theatre venue. As already observed, school performances might be of new plays written by masters themselves. In this case, the version of the script which we now recognise as a key eighteenth-century Scottish theatre text appears to have arisen from the friendship of the schoolmaster, Leslie with the leading Scottish playwright of the time, Ramsay. That Leslie was aware of contemporary theatre trends and a lively promoter of theatre performance is highlighted by the fact that in 1731, the year he became schoolmaster at Dalkeith, Vanbrugh's *The Provok'd Husband* was performed there, only three years after its Drury Lane première and two after the Taylor's Hall production of *The Gentle Shepherd*.

The ways in which *The Gentle Shepherd* contests, from Ramsay's avowedly Jacobite perspective, the nature of national identity in terms of governance are well-known: it explores concepts of forgiveness and societal reconciliation, and the retrieval of lost familial, so implying national, harmony. Yet, beyond its characterisation and plot, the fact of its being written in Scots is also a key dimension of contestation of Scottish national identity, in this instance linguistic identity. Ramsay, of course, wrote poetry in Scots and in the period 1724-27 produced collections of Scots-language poetry: *The Tea-Table Miscellany* ('A Collection of Choice Songs Scots and English') which included some of his own work as well as that of friends and some well-known ballads, songs and poems, and *The Ever Green* ('A Collection of Scots Poems wrote by the Ingenious before 1600') which contained older poems mostly from the Bannatyne Manuscript. Ramsay in these collections sought to re-engage interest in older Scots poetry and language. In this activity, so soon after the Treaty of Union, Ramsay has been seen as a leader of the eighteenth-century 'vernacular revival' of Scots language. In the 1720s, then, it is as important that *The Gentle Shepherd* was written in Scots as that, in the version handed down to us, it emerged from the tradition of Scottish school drama. One might return to Katja Lenz's lucid, succinct and insightful 1999 observation:

The decision to write a play in Scots is still a political step. With some authors, the choice of Scots is clearly a statement of national and cultural politics. In less radical

cases, Scots serves to transmit a feeling of specifically Scottish identity. (Lenz 1999: 352)

Lenz is talking very much about twentieth-century practice, but what she says can be seen to apply here. Ramsay is making a statement of cultural and social identity in choosing to write his play (and poems) in Scots, especially at a time when much professional drama in Edinburgh was performed in English. Fiona M. Douglas reinforces Lenz's point when in 2002 she writes something about more recent practice that can again also be seen to apply to earlier practice:

Language can act as a strong cultural identifier and can function as a rallying point, an emblem of in-group solidarity, or a linguistic totem. By using Scottish words, a speaker signals that they are part of the wider discourse community that is Scotland. (Douglas 2002: 2)

It is of course not a simple equation: writing in Scots equals support for a separate Scottish identity; writing in English equals support for the Union and the (Rule) Britannia Project. A Unionist like Grisel Baillie might – and did – write in Scots, asserting a form of Unionist Nationalism *avant la lettre*. Yet, it is surely indisputable that the eighteenth-century vernacular revival – what Jeremy Smith has called 'vernacular re-invention'<sup>4</sup> – was part of the assertion of a Scottish national identity even within a Unionist value system. Smith argues that '[a]n old text, in an old form, has a modern meaning'. (2013: 65) His specific examples concern the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century publication record of Barbour's *The Bruce* and Hary's *The Wallace* at a later phase of the vernacular revival where he highlights the iconography involved:

The title-page of Jamieson's edition of *The Bruce* (1820) has an illustration of various weapons and coats of arms, while the title-page of *The Wallace* has a fallen warrior, in re-created Highland dress, with his broadsword and targe prominently in view. (2013:50)

The production of *The Gentle Shepherd* in the language and with the content it has was an early part of a larger and long-running process of contesting the nature of Scottish national

identity. This included, as Lenz, Douglas and Smith from their complementary perspectives make clear, the nature of post-1707 Scottish linguistic identities.

The impact of the linguistic identity embedded in *The Gentle Shepherd* was particularly meaningful, given the way that, since the professional stage in Edinburgh from the mid-1720s was primarily anglophone, its practitioners were able to offer lessons in speaking English to the Edinburgh middle classes very soon after the Union. The professional theatre, as opposed to other forms of drama, in Scotland was actually for many years in the eighteenth century, both in terms of content and language, part of a process of post-Union anglicisation: Samuel Johnson disliked Mallet because, when he spoke, there was no hint of a Scots accent. In the context of linguistic contestation within the larger context of contestation of national identities, professional theatre might seem an alien form in an alien language, set apart from native forms like folk, school or Gaelic-language drama. Even as late as 1821, in his novel *Annals of the Parish*, John Galt can observe an attitude, dated in his fiction to 1789, to English-language speech:

the elderly people thought his language rather too Englified, which I though likewise, for I could never abide that the plain auld Kirk of Scotland, with her sober presbyterian simplicity, should borrow, either in word or deed, from the language of the prelatic hierarchy of England. (2001: 102-3)

Galt's use of the words 'prelatic hierarchy' highlights another area of national identity contestation, that of religion. One may remember that late seventeenth-century theatre in Edinburgh was fostered by post-Restoration nobility and gentry in Holyrood Palace's Tennis Court Theatre when the Restoration establishment were supporting, and imposing, an Episcopalian form of governance on the Church of Scotland. Indeed, the theatre was at its most lively in this period during the stay as Lord High Commissioner of Scotland of the Duke of York, later James VII, in the early 1680s. Then, his Stuart court was in charge of heading the anti-Presbyterian forces in suppressing Covenanters during the 'Killing Time' following

Covenanters' 1679 assassination of James Sharp, Archbishop of St Andrews. The 'prelatic' James had supported anti-Presbyterian oppression and, simultaneously, the theatre as an exclusive and expensive practice. Given this earlier context, it is not hard to see that theatre for some members of the eighteenth-century Scottish community might be seen as dubious in religious contexts, not only for the reasons it had been condemned by English Puritans in the seventeenth century, but also for its link to High Church oppression of Presbyterianism. This specific context may offer a part explanation for eighteenth-century Presbyterian hostility to theatre when, arguably, there was less substantial opposition to dancing and music. Ramsay himself was Presbyterian, but his milieu was of genteel Presbyterianism, which was perhaps a bridge between the Episcopalian-influenced Kirk of the 1670s and 1680s and the Moderate movement in the Kirk of the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> His theatrical entrepreneurship reflects a pattern in which, to quote Murray Pittock,

In Edinburgh genteel Presbyterians tended to support the theatre, magistrates and ministers against it. Strangely, dancing and music – though they were opposed by the Kirk – were less vigorously so. There was a strong link between the Archers, Freemasonry, the theatre and (of course) Jacobitism. (email from Pittock 13 May 2015)

Related, then, to the contestation of national religious identity through attitudes to drama and professional theatre, there were also contestations related to social status and bonding and, so, power.

The cost of theatre-going fell throughout the century, but one still required significant disposable income to attend professional theatre frequently. When Ramsay opened the Carrubber's Close Theatre in 1736, tickets for the best seats would cost half a crown, in 2013 terms, according the Measuring Worth calculations (Brown 2013) and based on labour value, about £350, rather more than the highest 2013 price for opera at Covent Garden (£175). (Brown 2013: 97) Phelps-Brown multiples would produce a modern value of about half of Measuring Worth's, around £150-200, still at the top end of current Covent Garden or

West End prices. The cheapest seat might be bought for around £42 according to Measuring Worth (or around half that according to Phelps-Brown multiples), significantly more expensive on either measure than the lowest prices in either the West End of London or, indeed, present-day Edinburgh theatres. The cost of going to professional theatre in Edinburgh soon after the Restoration had been exorbitant for the general public, (Brown 2013: 96-7) but eighty years later, it was still very costly. At these prices it is no surprise that often first nights were not very well-attended, but that, when word of mouth said a play was worth being seen, second nights were full of merchants and their wives. Often the reluctance to attend has been construed as evidence of relative poverty in mid-century Edinburgh, a point argued by Hugo Arnot in his 1779 *History of Edinburgh*:

The fact is that Edinburgh does not give encouragement to the stage proportionable to the populousness of the city. This does not proceed as much from the remaining leaven of fanaticism, as from the pooriness of Scots' fortunes [...]. These do not admit of ordinary gentlewomen, or the wives and daughters of shop-keepers and mechanics going often to the playhouse; therefore they keep their penny till some occasion, (no matter what), makes it reported that the house is to be throng, then everyone crowds the theatre, while, without such report the walls would be desolate. (Arnot in Scullion 1998: 131)

Yet, when one analyses the real value of prices involved, a different picture emerges, one of judicious prosperity. The pattern of attendance is not unlike that for more expensive commercial shows today: audiences want to know that their expenditure will be rewarded by a 'high-quality experience', to quote current marketing jargon. Given this economic and social context and seen against the more accessible dramatic forms of folk, school and amateur drama, professional drama in Ramsay's time and for some decades after was exclusive, by and large anglicised, and, in general, focused in the capital city. In this context, opposition to theatre in Edinburgh might be seen to arise not only from opposition to theatre by powerful cliques in the Kirk, but against the background of other factors like cost of theatre-going, class bias and, perhaps, cultural and linguistic resistance to anglicisation.

Ramsay's Carrubber's Close Theatre, meantime, opened in 1736 with Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, marking the interest in Restoration drama on the eighteenth-century Edinburgh stage. Its closure in the next year resulted from forces quite outside the context of Scottish theatre rather than pressure from Edinburgh magistrates and ministers. The 1737 Licensing Act, introduced in response to Henry Fielding's theatrical attacks on Walpole's government, rigorously suppressed dramatic theatre outside the two London patent theatres. Despite attempts by Ramsay's actors in each of the two following years to re-open the theatre, after a brief re-opening on 5-23 Jan 1739 the new Act finally closed it down. Nonetheless, the desire for theatre led to an elegant subversion of the Act through a legal fiction. In 1741 Thomas Este relaunched theatrical performances in Taylor's Hall under the guise of offering music concerts for which a charge was made, alongside plays which were 'free of charge'. This stratagem was effective and on 16 November 1747, to complement Taylor's Hall, the Canongate Concert Hall (in fact, a theatre, a name it soon assumed) opened. Professional theatre, however brazenly, was still to some extent nominally a hole-in-corner business.

For professional theatre's wider impact, indeed, the breakthrough came not so much with Ramsay's opening of the Carrubber's Close Theatre in 1736 or the stratagems of the 1740s as with the opening in the Canongate Theatre on 14 December 1756 of John Home's *Douglas*. Even here, though, the programme, as playbills make clear, involved 'A Concert of Music', while the much more prominently billed play was still 'gratis'. (Findlay 1998:102) Home was a member of the Kirk's cosmopolitan Moderate wing, alongside church, university and Enlightenment luminaries like William Robertson, Hugh Blair and Alexander 'Jupiter' Carlyle, all Kirk ministers. As Richard B. Sher has observed, 'Fiction and antiquarianism were perhaps the only important fields of polite literature in which the Scottish clergy had little to say'. (Sher in Hook 1987: 264) With *Douglas*, arguably – while it is surely false to be too rigid about the significance of one play's performance – the theatre had clearly become a

dynamo for cultural shift, supported by senior and influential members of the Kirk, which, as Margo Todd has shown, (2002) was already highly theatrical in its practices.

*Douglas* was politically timely: written in the aftermath of and performed a decade after Culloden, it explored the tragic results of civil conflict and secret identity. Beyond the (Rule) Britannia Project, it explored the nature of post-Culloden Scotland and its contested national identity as it portrayed the human costs of civil war and internecine conflict. Questions of loyalty to old and new orders underlie the play's conflict as the villainous Glenalvon, even if he meets his come-uppance, sets Scots against one another, rather like a unionist government agent. Meanwhile, the Randolph family are torn: Lady Randolph ends by killing herself after her long-lost son's untimely death, which arises out of misunderstandings about the true nature of relationships, while her husband in what appears a marriage of convenience leaves at the play's end to wander in search of welcome death. As Megan Stoner Morgan observes,

*Douglas's* often conflicted narrative symbolism and its shifting stage presentations reflect the deep sense of division inherent in much Scottish literature from [its] era [...]

Though Home presents himself as a supporter of the Union in his *History* and elsewhere, ultimately there is no one way to read Home's Scotland, just as there is no one way to read his *Douglas*. (2012: 36-37)

Indeed, the ways in which the play was developed for the stage embodied the diverse and contested nature of drama and theatre at the time of its production, and correspond with the play's own contestation of national identity. In this production is seen, for example, a striking link between large house amateur drama, as mentioned by Alasdair Cameron, the reading of closet drama, the family of Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, whose famous animadversion this article began with, and the mid-century development of professional playhouse drama in Scotland. When Home was working on *Douglas*, he circulated drafts in 1754 to literary sympathisers for comment, asking for their 'corrections'. He sought Hugh Blair's and William

Robertson's view on his 'judgement' and the view of Lord Elibank and several women friends, including Andrew Fletcher's nieces and great-nieces, on 'taste'. Katherine Glover talks of 'a specifically gendered role for the Fletcher women as arbiters of taste' for Home. (2005: 17) Presumably they would help head off the kind of 'unspeakable and deplorable' impact on the public and its manners their predecessor Andrew felt the theatre could have. Certainly the play had cultural and intellectual impact. Famously, it was read before its première in some form of try-out by a cast that included William Robertson, Adam Ferguson, David Hume, Hugh Blair and 'Jupiter' Carlyle. The example of this play shows that amateur drama, closet drama, professional theatre and Enlightenment luminaries were all involved here in the process of contesting mid-century Scottish national identities.

The performance of *Douglas* is, one might suggest, in fact a crux in the development of professional drama as national contestation in eighteenth-century Scotland. One has only to contemplate the multiple interconnections in the play's development and production just outlined, Kirk politics – it was performed in the winter of the year in which an attempt to excommunicate David Hume had been seen off in the General Assembly – and the engagement of leading Enlightenment thinkers to see that it marks a key point in playhouse theatre's assuming an important role, complementing long-established native forms of drama, in contesting eighteenth-century Scottish cultural identities. Indeed, the involvement of progressive Moderate clergy and leading thinkers in its development and production mark its place in larger debates about the nature of Scottish society and social values.

As is well-known, the local Presbytery responded to *Douglas* by censuring ministers who attended the play. On 5 January 1757 it uttered an *Admonition and Exhortation*. This followed the kind of conservative Evangelical line that had been heard before and declared playhouses immoral. Yet, those ministers who were condemned for attending were not removed from their posts nor, though the minister of Liberton was suspended for a few weeks, suffered any general loss of standing in their congregations or communities, after, by

and large, apologies were made. Despite its minatory tone, the *Admonition* had small actual effect with regard to drama; rather it appears as a last hurrah for the anti-Moderate Evangelicals. Attempts at disciplinary proceedings against the playwright minister, John Home, were thwarted when he resigned his post in June and went off to London. There, Garrick presented *Douglas* and Home went on to be a reasonably successful playwright. *Douglas* was a recurrent success in theatres for the next century. After this point, the Kirk's views on theatre and drama, although it continued to have influence for a time in pockets of the country, became, as the Arnot quotation cited above hints, increasingly irrelevant, however much it postured.

The change being undergone is marked by the fact that when in 1739 Lord Glenorchy had introduced a bill to establish a patent theatre in Edinburgh, the resistance of the Kirk, university and magistracy had obliged him to withdraw. Now, in 1756, less than twenty years later, Robertson, minister and future Principal of the university (from 1762) and Moderator of the Kirk (1763), had supported the theatre. In fact it was now only a matter of time before an Edinburgh patent theatre was approved. When Edinburgh's New Town was planned, it was seen as logical and appropriate that the newly-aggrandised city should have its Theatre Royal. The 1767 Act granting Edinburgh Corporation powers to build the New Town included a clause 'to enable His Majesty to grant Letters Patent for establishing a Theatre in the City of Edinburgh, or suburbs thereof'. (Quoted in Mackenzie 1963: 8)

In the interim between *Douglas* in 1756 and the 1767 Act, professional theatre seems to have become established in Edinburgh life. The employment of drama in schools had been intended, H. G. Graham notes, to impart learning, but

not to pander to any sinful love of playing; and indeed, the pieces selected were admirably gifted to extinguish utterly all fondness for the stage in juvenile breasts throughout their natural life. (Graham 1937:439; quoted in McKenzie 1955: 104)

Yet, the fact is that the development of theatre seems to have been supported by just those young men who would have experienced 'playing' in their juvenile years. It appears that the 'sinful love of playing' infiltrated the educated circles of law, education and the Kirk. It is generally accepted that the young lawyer, James Boswell, wrote *A View of the Edinburgh Theatre during the Summer Season, 1759*. (Scullion in Findlay 1998: 107-8) According to this, in a season running in 1759 from Wednesday June 20 till Monday August 20, there were each week three professional performances in changing bills of a full-length and a one-act play. The rise of theatrical activity in Edinburgh was paralleled by similar interest in Glasgow where in 1762 the Alston Street Theatre was opened, immediately set on fire by religious fanatics and at once re-opened with the help of costumes provided by the Glasgow bourgeoisie. (Scullion in Findlay 1998: 111) Within this theatrical activity, new plays by Scots were written and performed. John (James?) Baillie, an advocate, one of the lawyerly class educated as we have discussed, wrote a political farce, *Patriotism* (1763). This supported his fellow Scot, the embattled Prime Minister, Lord Bute. Other new plays were social comedies or farces about love entanglements like *She's Not Him, and He's Not Her* (1764) by Andrew Erskine. Scottish history was explored to produce dramatic plots and contemporary relevance as in John Wilson's *Earl Douglas; or, Generosity Betray'd* (1764). Wilson's dramatisation of the motives and events surrounding the 1440 Black Dinner exposes his view of the culpability of the politically devious advisers Crichton and Livingstone in misleading the young king. Perhaps with personal knowledge of this lively theatre scene in Scotland's metropolis, the Scottish novelist and playwright Jean Marishall included repeated theatre-going by the leading characters in her 1766 novel *The History of Miss Clarinda Cathcart and Miss Fanny Renton*. Marishall appears to take it for granted that going to the theatre, and regularly, was by the time she was writing her novel well-developed for the Edinburgh élite, as distinguished from the merchant class to whose theatre-going habits Arnot refers. Almost as soon as her leading character reaches Edinburgh, she notes: 'Wednesday we were at the play' (2:162). Four pages later she is again attending the theatre. Eighteenth-century contestation of national identity was not simply about the old

Jacobite versus the new Hanoverian Scotland of which Murray Pittcock has often written with such insight, but a Scotland developing new identities in emerging politico-economic cultural settlements as the eighteenth century progressed.

On 9 January 1769, twelve years to the month since the Edinburgh Presbytery's *Admonition and Exhortation* condemned the theatre, the Theatre Royal's new building opened at the north end of the North Bridge. This, of course, led across the Nor' Loch ravine to the newly developing Edinburgh New Town with its Scottish/Hanoverian street names, 'Thistle' and 'Rose' streets – ending in the two western corners of Scotland's patron saint's square – and abutting streets with royal names. The theatre itself fronted onto what was then called Shakespeare Square: the 'royal' building was located in a square named after a putative Unionist national bard. In the year of its opening David Garrick's Stratford Jubilee marked his growing initiative to reassert the value of Shakespeare's plays and claim him as a national Bard, though whether English or British – in a contestation of national identity of another kind – is a matter for another debate. In Edinburgh, Shakespeare was appropriated and embedded in the context of late eighteenth-century Scottish theatre, a patent house which itself, as its opening prologue proclaims, could be seen as part of a Scottish strand of a pan-British settlement. The actor John Jackson, who was later to manage the Theatre Royal, identified Boswell as the author of that prologue:

This night lov'd GEORGE's free enlighten'd age,  
Bids *Royal Favour* shield the SCOTTISH STAGE;  
His Royal Favour ev'ry bosom cheers;

The Drama now with dignity appears. (Jackson 1793: 77)

The text loyally applauds Hanoverianism, Enlightenment Edinburgh and the new royal standing of the Scottish stage and its drama's dignity.

The opening of the Edinburgh Theatre Royal marked a staging post on the wider and wider spread of professional and legitimate – that is to say officially accepted under statute –

theatre throughout Lowland Scotland. While the process in starting of this spread of professional drama may have been slow and somewhat trepidatious, by the end of the century it extended from Aberdeen to Dumfries. As Alasdair Cameron puts it, professional theatre

in Scotland [in 1662] was limited to short seasons at the Tennis Court Theatre in Edinburgh; there it was patronised only by the aristocracy, dominated by English plays and players, and under frequent attack from the Church. By 1800, there were nine permanent theatres [Edinburgh (2), Aberdeen, Glasgow, Dundee, Dumfries, Paisley, Ayr, Greenock] spread throughout Scotland, the theatre was becoming the most popular form of organised entertainment in the country and there were the beginnings of an indigenous tradition of playwriting, acting and management, which paved the way for the 'National Theatre' at the Theatre Royal Edinburgh in the early nineteenth century. (Cameron in Hook 1987: 191)

Cameron's list, however, only hints at another important dimension of this reaching out of professional theatre. The career of the actor-playwright Archibald Maclaren (1755-1826) offers insight into the way this spread was providing the foundations on which a wider range of touring professional theatre, which had beginnings in strolling companies earlier in the century for which records are hard to find, was reaching out from these centres.

The earliest source we have for Maclaren's career is an anonymous *Memoir*, published in 1835 in Edinburgh, whose author may have been a collector of dramatic works, a Mr Field. This tells us Maclaren was of Highland extraction, a soldier who began writing in service with the encouragement of his officers and whose first play was *The Conjurer; or, the Scotsman in London*, performed in 1781, possibly in Dundee where it was printed. (Tobin 1974: 64) At this time, of course, Dundee and such nearby towns as Montrose formed part of a touring circuit out of Aberdeen and Edinburgh. The link between touring and the major city houses is made clear when the *Memoir* notes that Maclaren's 'farce of the "Coup de Main"

was performed by Mr Jackson's company at Edinburgh in 1783'. (Anon 1835: 2) In that year Maclaren left the army and, according to the *Memoir*,

proceeded to Dundee, where the Edinburgh *corps dramatique* happened to be, and Mr McLaren was prevailed upon by Mr Sutherland, one of the performers, to accompany him to join Mr Ward's itinerant troop at Montrose, where he was allowed some merit in the performance of Scotch, Irish and French characters; but his own 'Highland Drover' was the part in which he was inimitable. (Anon 1835: 2)

Here it is clear that by the mid-1780s the city theatres were interacting with the rural areas and that the personnel of the companies could be interchangeable. Meantime, the circuit for touring had developed substantially beyond the permanent theatres Cameron identifies. Maclaren's 1790 play, *The Highland Drover*, for example, according to the title page of its published text 'was repeatedly performed at Inverness, Aberdeen, Perth, Dundee and Greenock, with universal approbation'. (Maclaren 1790) So, in addition to Cameron's list, Inverness and Perth had venues capable of presenting professional productions in addition to Montrose, already mentioned as a touring venue and Arbroath, cited by Adrienne Scullion. (Scullion in Findlay 1998: 131) The role and reach of professional theatre was expanding considerably.

Maclaren's plays themselves also offer a perspective on the concerns of the drama of the end of the eighteenth-century and the varieties of contestation of identity it might be concerned with. Indeed, when one reviews the themes of Maclaren's work, it seems that at least in part he has developed ideas from such earlier plays concerned with Scottish history and identity as Home's *Douglas* and Wilson's *Earl Douglas; or Generosity Betray'd*. In this, he can arguably be seen to be a fore-runner of Scott's National Drama, something Gioia Angeletti and I have explored. (Brown and Angeletti 2015: 48ff) Later he would go on to produce plays with titles like *Bessy Bell and Mary Gray, or Love in the Highlands* (1808), *Private Theatre or the Highland Funeral* (1809), *The Highland Chiefs; or the Castle of Dunstaffnage* (1815), and *Highland Robbers; or, Such Things Were* (1817). The very titles of

these plays, mainly with musical content, suggest his work can be seen as a bridge between earlier eighteenth-century historical drama and dramatisations of Scott within the National Drama. Indeed, given Scott's interest in theatre and closeness to the management of the Theatre Royal and Maclaren's work with members of the company in the period from 1781 to 1794 (when Scott was in his early twenties and Maclaren re-enlisted and moved to Guernsey), it is even likely they knew one another and that Scott would be aware of Maclaren and his work.

A particular aspect of that work, as suggested by the titles just outlined, was a concern with a national identity that included the Gàidhealtachd of which Maclaren was a native. Indeed, famously, he employed Gaelic in the dialogue of *The Humours of Greenock Fair* (1789) and *The Highland Drover* (1790) in which he played the title role. While the former play has relatively few lines in Gaelic, ones which are quickly construed either by action or repetition in English, the latter has substantial untranslated Gaelic in its dialogue, something I have discussed in some detail. (Brown 2013: 111-112) Perhaps Maclaren was following up in his own way the interests in Celtic roots and in the Highlands arising from the cult of Ossian. Certainly he complicates any simple version of national identity. As Brown and Angeletti observe, 'His dramatisation of national themes, therefore, because it emerges from Gaelic culture itself, achieves a more culturally complex and nuanced National Drama even than that based on Scott's work'. (Brown and Angeletti 2015: 49) Like Mallet and Thomson before him and Scott after, Maclaren has an interest not only in a Scottish, but in a more complex British identity, sometimes within an imperial context. *The Negro Slaves* (1799) shows McSympathy as an enlightened Highlander treating slaves with humanity in the West Indies against the brutality of the Englishman Captain Racoon, but, at the same time, perceiving the native people of the islands as Other. (And, of course, his version of a Scot sympathetic to slaves runs counter to the actual role of many Scots in sustaining and profiting from slavery in the West Indies of his time.)

Just as Maclaren employs Gaelic in his plays, contesting issues of national identity, so, like Ramsay, he uses Scots, though not to same extent. At the end of *The Negro Slaves*, he appears to accept a Scottish version of Britishness, though not, it seems – as he employs Scots in dialogue – quite that of the (Rule) Britannia Project. There, McSympathy sings in Scots about ‘our ain British nation’. Maclaren regularly, indeed, uses Scots or Gaelic as a counterpoint to English, so imagining theatrically a Scoto-British identity that might assimilate, but would not drive out, at least in his plays, the linguistic, and so social and cultural, identity of his own Gàidhealtachd. While arguably he prefigures Scott in seeking to demonstrate a distinct Scottish identity within the still relatively new ‘Britain’, he does so treating the Highlands not as a quaint other, but as an integral part of the national community. Brown and Angeletti summarise aspects of the complexity of Maclaren’s dramaturgy when they say:

If we combine [...] the language split in *The Highland Drover* with the final image in *The Negro Slaves* of a Britishness which welcomes racial, ethnic and cultural differences, Maclaren’s theatre can first and foremost be read as one posing rather than answering crucial questions: how to preserve Scottishness and Gaeldom within the discourse of Britishness; how to define Scotland’s identity within the Union; and how to cross the Highland line, to look beyond it, without erasing it from Britain’s cultural geography. (2015: 53)

Indeed, a key part of the process of defining Scottish identity within the British state performatively had become the wearing in one form or another of tartan, something dealt with in considerable detail in *From Tartan to Tartanry* (2012), a volume refuting Hugh Trevor-Roper’s inaccurate suggestions that somehow tartan was inauthentic. One of the ways in which Scottishness might be asserted, therefore, became the costuming of characters. The great actor Henry Erskine Johnston embodied this in a particular way in the mid 1790s when he debuted as Young Norval in Home’s *Douglas*. Then, he drew together a number of strands of expression of Scottish national identity in one performative act, which Walter

Baynham reports, as 'a radical change with regard to costume'. (Baynham 1892: 55-56) Baynham sets the context by noting that such parts as Macbeth, which had been played 'in a Court suit of scarlet and gold lace [...] was now being costumed as a tobacconist's dummy Highlander' so that it came to be 'held to be unquestionable that the correct costume of nearly every Scotch character (if serious) should be that of the Highlander of the snuff shop [... while] Young Norval had always been dressed in the trews and Scotch jacket'. Appearing in *Douglas* with all that play implied for national identity at the Edinburgh Theatre Royal, with all that that building implied, Baynham<sup>6</sup> writes:

Johnstone [sic] appeared in the character in full Highland costume – in kilt, breast-plate, shield, claymore and bonnet. There was a momentary pause of astonishment on the part of the audience; then an approving murmur; then, one burst of plaudits, which swelled into an ovation. The whole house rose, and 'such a reception', writes his biographer, 'was never witnessed in the halls of a theatre before'. (1892: 55-56)

That 'pause of astonishment' must surely – at least in part – arise from the fact that for most of the lives of most of those attending the theatre, following the post-Culloden 1746 Disarming Act, repealed only as recently as 1782, what Johnston was wearing was forbidden, except to serving soldiers, under pain on first offence of six months imprisonment and on a second seven years transportation. While within two years of repeal Edinburgh had a Highland Society promoting Highland dress, nonetheless, that dress carried both the implication of an ancient Scotland, which was supposed to have disappeared with the Union, and the taint of having been associated with a highly dangerous Rising which some in the audience will have witnessed occupying Edinburgh. Yet again, eighteenth-century Scottish drama and its practitioners were contesting aspects of the existence and expression of Scottish national identity, and in this case to tumultuous applause.

This article began with Fletcher of Saltoun's famous dictum concerning the influence of 'ballad-making', which he glossed to include drama. He observed of that impact, however, that it might not always be positive. Indeed, he condemned the effects of the drama and

related arts in 1703 in London, of which and from which he was writing, when he observed that 'in this city the dramattick poet no less than the ballad-maker has been almost wholly employed to corrupt the people, in which they have had most unspeakable and deplorable success'. (Fletcher 1732) Given his views in 1703, it is piquant to understand that young female relatives of his in the 1750s formed part of the team of friends John Home used to sound out reactions to drafts of his *Douglas*. Yet, there is also a certain aptness in the Fletcher women's involvement in the development of that play, assisting the playwright to a success that was, surely, neither unspeakable nor deplorable, but concerned, as the older Fletcher was, with contesting Scottish national identity. In setting a context for the production of Home's *Douglas* and for subsequent eighteenth-century theatrical activity in Scotland, this article has sought to show the complex ways in which, as the eighteenth century progressed, professional theatre came to be established, alongside the other forms of theatre we have considered, as a forum for contestation of issues of national identity. These include aspects of religious, social, cultural, linguistic, political and sartorial identity – and this list of aspects of national identity and identities is, as we have seen, not comprehensive. The nineteenth-century National Drama, so explicitly concerned with contestation of identity, did not emerge suddenly, like Athene fully-armed from Zeus's forehead, but from a complicated history of eighteenth-century theatrical activity which provided it with a sound basis for its development and success.

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Endnotes.

<sup>1</sup> 'An ACCOUNT of A CONVERSATION concerning A RIGHT REGULATION of GOVERNMENTS For the common Good of Mankind: In A LETTER to the Marquiss of Montrose , the Earls of Rothes, Roxburg and Haddington, From London the first of December, 1703' in *The Political Works of Andrew Fletcher Esq;* (London: Bettesworth and Hitch, 1732), pp. 372-3.

<sup>2</sup> I first discussed this term in *Our Multiform, Our Infinite Scotland: Scottish Literature as 'Scottish', 'English' and 'World' Literature* (Glasgow: ASLS, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, John McGavin, 'Drama in Sixteenth-Century Haddington', *European Medieval Drama 1* (1997), pp. 147-59, and *Theatricality and Narrative in Medieval and Early Modern Scotland* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> Smith introduced this term in presenting his paper 'The Survival of Older Scots' in *Scottish Language: Bridging the Past and the Present?*, a round-table session, at the first World Congress of Scottish Literatures, University of Glasgow, 3 July 2014.

<sup>5</sup> The author is indebted to Professor Pittock for informing me that his current project, *Edinburgh in the First Age of Enlightenment*, is finding increasing evidence that Moderatism in the Kirk in the eighteenth century may be the legacy of late Stuart regime attempts to build a bridge in the capital between moderate Presbyterian and Episcopalian opinion.

<sup>6</sup> The passage on Henry Johnston from which this quotation and those that follow is taken is significant and here quoted in full. I am grateful to Dr Paul Maloney for reminding me of its importance: 'The name of Harry Johnston was, with Glasgow playgoers as recently even as 1861, a "household word." He was born at Lanark and reared in London. As an amateur he had won the golden opinions of his confreres, and at the age of eighteen he made his first appearance as an actor. The tragedy of "Douglas" being then the rage, Johnston (who was a godson of Lord Erskine) selected "Young Norval" for his appearance in Edinburgh. "His youthful appearance," writes his biographer, "graceful form and handsome expressive countenance, won for him the universal approbation of his countrymen." It was about this time that the stage was undergoing a radical change with regard to costume. Macbeth, which used to be played in a Court suit of scarlet and gold lace, surmounted by a wig "as large as any now worn by the gravest of our Barons of the Exchequer," was now being costumed as a tobacconist's dummy Highlander. Subsequently it was held to be unquestionable that the correct costume of nearly every Scotch character (if serious) should be that of the Highlander of the snuff shop. It was Sir Walter Scott himself who induced Kemble to substitute for the shuttlecock head dress of ostrich feathers, which he wore as the ambitious Thane, the eagle's father. Young Norval had always been dressed in the trows and Scotch jacket. Johnston appeared in the character in full Highland costume – in kilt, breast-plate, shield, claymore and bonnet. There was a momentary pause of astonishment on the part of the audience; then an approving murmur; then, one burst of plaudits, which swelled into an ovation. The whole house rose, and "such a reception," writes his biographer, "was never witnessed in the halls of a theatre before." The reverend author, Mr. Home, was present, and at the conclusion publicly pronounced Johnston the Beau ideal of his hero – a compliment, however, which he had lavished on Master Betty a short time before.'